Singing in Unison, Singing in Harmony: Civic Mentorship and Choral Communities[1]

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True or false:

1. Singing (or listening to) choral music makes for a better world.
2. Participating in Festival 500 makes us "all grow" (Doyle, 2000, p. vi).
3. Choral culture nurtures the innate goodness of people.

Although I would like to think that singing and music-making in general makes for a better world, I do not believe that singing or music per se nurtures human beings' innate goodness. I begin with this admission not because of a hidden agenda to emphasize a Kodály credo that only the best music should be used in our choral activities (Choksy, 1999, pp. 16-17; Bradley, 2001). I feel no need or obligation to do this, and, am pleased that Festival 500 organizers seem open to a flexible understanding of good music.[2] Rather, my admission of a somewhat guarded enthusiasm for the benefits of fostering choral culture because I want to focus on assumptions that we might be perpetuating in our enthusiasm for the phenomenon of singing. In other words, in what sense do "we all grow" (Doyle, 2000, p. vi) through sharing our voices in song?

The three opening survey-questions remind us that, as much as we might be moved by the joy of singing, and as much as (we believe) we are witness to positive individual and community changes because of singing, we should also be cognizant of the harm perpetuated through choral events, singing practices, and other musical experiences. For example, in her opening address, Libby Larson told Festival 500 participants about an experience that took her, unhappily, "over the edge," because her high school choral director chose to teach a pseudo-Hawaiian War Chant that trivialized what she had learned, from her Hawaiian kindergarten teacher, about the spiritual elements of Hawaiian hula music. Deborah Britzman also reminds us of how the sharing of music and the arts in general do not invariably promise a better world:

> For even the most beautiful object cannot bestow goodness on people's conduct, nor induce us to raise the questions, what is the beautiful? and, Can there still be beauty in our world? One can only think about Nazi Germany, and how some of the most beautiful music was used to march people to their deaths. While this may feel like quite an extreme example, and, while it is the case that the history of the arts also registers profound revolt against inhumanities like genocide, racism, war and son on, it still takes more than an art object to invoke thought. (Britzman, 2001, p. 11)

In response to similar assumptions about the potential for studio and performing arts to afford transformative experiences, dancer and educator Donald Blumenfeld-Jones also cautions "that opening the imagination does not inevitably provide goodness" (p. 168). He explains that "under the spell" of the arts, we become influenced "for good or ill" (p. 169). Because singing is a cultural practice—that is, it is human-made, its merits are only as good, bad, or indifferent as the people who engage in it and the wisdom and vision they bring to it.

Having made my cautionary remarks about uncritical assumptions about the merits of singing, I can now acknowledge that singing and music-making in general have promising pedagogical possibilities for the good. As a human phenomenon, singing helps celebrate life, foster empowerment, and stimulate dialogue. I am particularly interested in its potential to make people more comfortable with the stranger in all of us and with human differences and similarities among all of us if it is used to engage people to explore new ways of being, understanding, and acting. In this sense, I am reiterating Maxine Greene's claims about the educative and social significance of the arts in releasing the imagination:

> It is because I believe that encounters with the arts can awaken us to alternative possibilities of existing, of being human, of relating to others, of being other, that I argue for their centrality in curriculum. I believe they can open new perspectives on what is assumed to be "reality," that they can defamiliarize what has become so familiar it has stopped us from asking questions or protesting or taking action to repair. (Greene, 1993, p. 214)

As a long-time advocate and teacher of how the arts "open new perspectives on what is assumed to be 'reality'," Greene draws almost exclusively upon examples from literature and the visual arts. In *The Dialectic of Freedom*, for example, Greene makes only passing reference to the possibilities of music, simply noting that all

> experiences with art objects—not only literary texts, but music, painting, dance . . . have the capacity, when authentically attended to, to enable persons to hear and to see what they would not ordinarily hear and see, to offer visions of consonance and dissonance that are unfamiliar and indeed abnormal, to disclose the incomplete profiles of the world. As importantly, in this context, they have the capacity to defamiliarize experience: to begin with the overly familiar and transfigure it into something different enough to make those who are awakened hear and see." (Greene, 1988, pp. 128-129)

She concludes with brief and familiar references to the transformative power of jazz, blues, and rap genres of music making. So begins and ends her review of music's capacity to support a conception of education in which students and lovers of music can "make varied sense of their lived worlds" (Greene, 1988, p. 12).

Donald Blumenfeld-Jones observes, however, that, when Greene writes about pursuing social-justice through arts education, she "tend[s] to do so through the literary arts rather than the studio and performing arts" (p. 170). This bias for literary art-works is perhaps no more than what most artists and art-lovers admit: a preference for their own art form and a lack of experience in (and appreciation for) other art forms. Another reason for Greene's apparent neglect of the performing arts might be the result of her enculturation into the visual hegemony of Western culture—that is, Western society's preoccupation with text and images. For example, in contrast to her relatively superficial discussion of transformative musical genres, Greene recalls the work of women unionists singing in Chicago, offering a more substantive discussion not of music per se but of song lyrics:

Shall song and music be forgot
When workers shall combine?
With love united may they not
Have power almost divine?
Shall idle drones still live like queens
On labor not their own?
Shall women starve while thieves and kings
Reap where they have not sown?
        (Wertheimer, 1977, p. 198 in Greene, 1988, p. 73)

Finally, as pointed out in my opening true-false survey, Greene's lack of attention to the performing arts as a socio-political vehicle for transformative education is perhaps indicative of the lack of interest or commitment among performing artists and teachers (including musicians, choral directors, and music educators) to articulate or "find a way of developing a praxis of educational consequence that opens the spaces necessary for the remaking of a democratic community" (Greene, 1988, p. 126). I think , however, that Festival 500 is ready to burst with the possibilities for developing such a praxis. Two members from the Vesnivka Choir (Ontario) explain that

> Sharing the Voices has been a chance to let people hear what we have to offer and to be able to listen to their music—to their culture; and I think it opens up everybody's minds and everybody's hearts to other peoples and how close we really are and how small the world really is. . . . [and]
> I come here and I feel excited to be amongst people who, around the world, speak the same language: we all sing; we all have something to offer and a glimpse into our own culture. (Rock Choral, 1998)

To take full advantage of these "glimpses" into different cultures which may offer singers new ways to "make varied sense of their lived worlds" (Greene, 1988, p. 12), I respectfully suggest that organizers and participants articulate the significance of developing civic sensibilities[3] in addition to the more familiar focus on musical growth and mentorship. My challenge for choral directors, festival organizers, and music educators is to encourage and promote musical and civic growth as equally significant learning outcomes. Understanding ways in which singing communities work toward "the remaking of a democratic community" (Greene, 1988, p. 126), we can then claim that "we all grow" (Doyle, 2000, p. vi). To help develop this understanding, I propose that our goals address civic as well as artistic sensibilities. This paper will begin in these terms by exploring one aspect of civic mentorship—the development of community. When we talk about "relationship between the singer and the rest of the choir, relationships between choir and its singing venue, the choir and its audience, . . . [and] relationships among audience members" (Daugherty, 2000, p. 85), we are talking about relationships that denote different kinds of community. The next two sections will examine the merit of therapeutic and civic models of choral communities in fostering civic sensibilities.

Singing in Unison: The Therapeutic Model of Community

Parker Palmer (1998) believes that most educators view *community* as therapeutic because of a belief that community is or should be built on intimacy. He explains that, because intimacy is so highly valued in human relationship, educators often adopt the therapeutic model of community as the ideal. Characteristic of this model are psycho-social rewards, both intrapersonal and interpersonal.[4] A feeling of intimacy through kinship is often transferred to other choral groups during choir exchange programs or choral festivals through the physical, emotional, and intellectual work of making music together. At these events, one's choral kinship is absorbed or, in a different sense, extended, becoming larger, like the dynamic of the holiday family reunion. Finally, a degree of intimacy can quickly develop, however briefly, between ensemble and audience.

The therapeutic model, however, is not without flaws. Psycho-social reasons often distract from the energy needed for musical or civic development in a choir, indicating an important pedagogical necessity to articulate and balance organizational, musical, and psycho-social goals (Attinello, 1994, p. 334; Guise, 2000, p. 114). In the context of the classroom, Parker Palmer (1998) explains that

> conventional applications of therapeutic community to education are neither as subtle nor as apt as that motto. On the contrary, they threaten teaching and learning with the assumption that intimacy is the best and most important thing that can happen between people—an assumption that sometimes becomes shrill and insistent, manifesting itself in the pseudo-communal ethos of "share or die!" . . . .
>
> Most of us will achieve genuine intimacy with only a handful of people in a lifetime. If being in community equals being intimate, a vast range of others and otherness falls beyond our reach. When intimacy becomes the norm, we lose our capacity for connectedness with the strange and the stranger that is at the heart of being educated. We lose our capacity to entertain people and ideas that are alien to what we think and who we are. The therapeutic model exploits our fear of otherness by reducing community to whatever can take familial or friendly form. (pp. 90-91)

Here, Palmer's analysis exposes a polite facade of the therapeutic model. Cris Mayo (2001) speaks in similar terms in her examination of *civility* as a barrier to anti-racism education. She explains that it is a "mark of a cultured and civil person to get to know marginalized groups," perhaps through the sharing of stories or common interests—perhaps, I add, through singing at choral festivals. Yet the sharing of stories (and music), while appearing to build bridges, maintains a polite distance between parties and does little to encourage people to move beyond the familiar and safe context of making music.

Without wanting to diminish the benefits of therapeutic communities and the psycho-social need to belong in general, an emphasis on "bonding" in order to build the musical and psycho-social foundations of choral communities can diminish the potential for "developing a *praxis* of educational consequence that opens the spaces necessary for the remaking of a democratic community" (Greene, 1988, p. 126). For example, I am reminded of Mary A. Naddeo's honest re-evaluation of her choral program in a rehabilitation centre for street kids. In her concluding remarks, Naddeo (1993) states that she feels

obliged to raise the possibility that for an extreme population such as recovering homeless or runaway youth, a program such as this may present positive results (i.e., increased self-esteem, peak experiences) when evaluated within the limited context of the choir; but when evaluated within the broader context of rehabilitation, negative results may be noted.
(p. 34)

Furthermore, Patricia O'Toole (2001) notes that it is often difficult to facilitate anything but music-making as so many succumb to and demand the pleasure of aesthetic and affective experience not otherwise achievable as individuals singers. She explains that, "this pleasure-desire quotient is so intensified that ensemble members often resist directors who offer a more comprehensive experience" (p. 67). I too admit that I am often distracted by the pleasure-desire quotient of musical engagement and thereby ignore other important extra-musical messages. A recent personal example stems from a choral performance at Indian River, Prince Edward Island (Canada) by the Hallgrim's Church Motet Choir (Iceland). One of the last selections in the concert was a maternal love song. As explained by a Choir member, the mother portrayed in the folk song was an outlaw hunted by those seeking justice or revenge; and, when the mother was about to be captured, she threw her child into the ocean to drown because . . . And here, the audience could not make out the last part of the introduction. Immediately, the place was a-buzz with audience members turning to those beside them, asking, "What did she say? Why did the mother throw her child into the water?" Perhaps people were asking these questions because of a common understanding that this was a shocking if not immoral decision for the mother to make. But I also think that the audience sincerely wanted to know why the mother would do this—not to judge but to understand and learn from something strange to us. Unfortunately, the teachable moment was lost because the song was sung along with several encores, and we all became lost in musical delights of the ear. Thus, I—along with many others, no doubt—forgot to ask a choir member for more details about the curious ending to this "love song."

Like my experience with the Hallgrim's Church Motet Choir, Festival 500 "opens up everybody's minds and everybody's hearts to other peoples," developing bridges among strangers while feeding our pleasure-desire quotient. In this sense, we develop a therapeutic model of community, bonding during what Susan Knight describes as "moments of collective 'Ahhhh!'" (Rock Choral, 1998). However, problems of the therapeutic model, especially in large communal settings (in contrast to private studio work), include its propensity to service familial or friendly venues and to neglect investigations of the strange and probing themes of conflict. In short, we could do better with a model that develops civic mentorship.

Singing in Harmony: The Civic Model of Community

In my title and subtitles, I have adopted "singing in unison" and "singing in harmony" as metaphors for two models of choral communities. In the previous section, "singing in unison" is a metaphor built on the notion that choral members have a propensity to maintain familial communities rather than "expand the spaces where deepening and expanding conversation can take place and more and more meanings emerge" (Green, 2000, p. 278) from song texts, performance venues, and even choir politics. "Singing in harmony" is a metaphor that builds on the notion that music is best understood as a collection of harmonic progressions created by

developing and resolving musical tension. In other words, *harmony* is not as *harmonious* as one might think (or hear) as it involves the dialectic relationship between dissonance and consonance. Similarly, in the context of everyday realities, *community* is not as *harmonious* as one might think (or feel). Parker Palmer (1998) explains that

> the norm is not a narrow band of intimate encounters but rather the wide range of relations among strangers that make for a healthy body politic. The community envisioned by the civic model is one of public mutuality rather than personal vulnerability—a community where people who do not and cannot experience intimacy with each other nonetheless learn to share a common territory and common resources, to resolve mutual conflicts and mutual problems. (pp. 91-92)

Thus, in a civic model of choral community, we can grow through an exploration of musical *and* extra-musical interpretations that have the potential "to disclose incomplete profiles of the world . . . [and] to defamiliarize experience" (Greene, 1988, pp. 129).

Festival 500 offers opportunities for choral members from a variety of national, ethnic, economic, and gendered groups to welcome and participate as the strange and the stranger. According to Peter Gardner, Executive Director Festival 500, in the 1998 promotion video *Rock Choral*, "the Choral Festival has managed to unite and bring together people and communities that have traditionally not worked together." But, in what sense did communities, which did not traditionally work together, come together? After watching the video, I assume that the bringing of the Cuban ensemble to Labrador was one example in which two different communities which did not traditionally *sing* together were united in *song*. It was touching to hear a Labrador community member profess, "And the two nations come together— make you feel great inside." But the video did not give me a sense that this musical connection had been used to encourage the sharing of ideas, cultural differences, or any "varied sense of . . . lived worlds" (Greene, 1988, p. 12). As someone new to this choral festival, I admit that my reading of the situation is limited. Nonetheless, I am sceptical because of what I have explained as a propensity for musicians and educators to adopt a therapeutic model of community. My question about how "we all grow" echo similar concerns addressed by Andrea Rose, Co-Chair of Symposium III, in her discussion of the Reflective and Critical Internship Program for teacher education at Memorial University here in Newfoundland. Rose (1998) underlines that in order for (student) music educators to "functio[n] as intellectuals and cultural workers," they should ask how they "might transform [their] practice in a fashion that marks a real difference between being an educator and a trainer" (p. 38).

By attending to and reflecting upon habitual ways of performing, talking, and thinking about music, choral directors as well as music educators can make a difference by creating "ample opportunity to discuss controversial issues . . .and to consider multiple positions and viewpoints" (Hahn, 2001, p. 110). For example, the traditional practice among conductors to over-facilitate ensemble performances, identified by Bruno Nettl in his ethnographic study of schools of music (1995, p. 129) and more recently by Libby Larsen in her symposium keynote address (2001) are indicative of habitual ways of performing choral music. The lack of civic engagement is also apparent among those who remain content attending to their pleasure-desire quotient while being "told what to do and think," and those who find choral experiences oppressive (Patterson, 2000, p. 192) and focussed on "all too much imitation and

conformism" (Botstein, 2000, p. 330). The lack of democratic practice and critical dialogue is no less apparent at academic conferences. Symposium and conference papers are still presented much the same way they have been for decades with little or no time programmed for digesting or critically reviewing old problems or new ideas, let alone, for disseminating information or strategies to a wider audience. In this sense, the civic limitations of staged—literally and figuratively—choral and academic performances are mutual problems manifest in habitual ways of performance practice.

The importance of attending to habitual ways of thinking, mutual problems, and the stranger in and among us is especially important at international cultural events which can easily mutate into what Pauline Greenhill describes as "McMulticulturalism." In her study of Winnipeg's Folklorama, Greenhill (1999) concludes that, although the music is superb and varied, the presentation "never really fails to conceal a stunning uniformity of service and product" (p. 40). The sounds might be different, and the textures and costumes might change from show to show or country to country, but, in the end, it is just good music packaged a little different for the consumer during each performance. Her analysis of another Manitoba (Canada) music event is more positive but with reservations: "Events like the Winnipeg Folk Festival allow a meeting, and even, at times, a dialogue between different kinds of musics, but too often, the impact, critical or otherwise, is limited to its circumscription in festival time and space" (Greenhill, 1999, p. 44). She recommends plural presentations and variant program structures where musical sources and aesthetics are highly contrasted. Festival 500 offers this kind of contrast with its variety of amateur, professional, local, and international choral groups singing sacred, traditional, and composed music. However, it does not yet offer official program time for singers and academics to explore, question, process, and contrast musical events and their extra-musical meaning(s). Whether acting to challenge habitual performance practice, experimenting with new academic and pedagogical formats, or simply taking time to process shared problems, these are good reasons to examine what can be done to encourage civic as well as musical mentorship.

> I am in the world
> to change the world
> my lifetime
> is to love to endure to suffer the music
> to set its portrait
> up as a sheet of the world.
> (Rukeyser, 1973, p. 374)

Maxine Greene quotes Rukeyser as a means to emphasize the role of the arts—featuring music in this case—as a portrait of the "commonsense constructs" of the world that constitutes not simply the joys but also the suffering manifest in living with the known and the unknown, through good and bad times, and among friends and strangers (Greene, 1988, pp. 57-58). As creators, performers, and viewers of these portraits, we have the opportunity to revisit everyday constructs and thereby "open new perspectives on what is assumed to be 'reality'" (Greene, 1993, p. 214). In this paper, I have tried to model a degree of civic mentorship by revealing assumptions about the phenomenon of singing as commonsense constructs of choral culture. I welcome others to continue the discussion, open other new

perspectives on how "we [might] all grow," and make conscious the pedagogical possibilities of a civic model of community.

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Endnotes

[1.] I would like to thank those who shared their ideas and offered feedback when I presented a shortened
version of this paper at *Festival 500.*

[2.] Artistic Director of the Winnipeg Folk Festival explains his position: "Two years ago we removed the
performers' names entirely from the poster . . . to basically send out as a message . . . 'don't worry. We
pick good music. We have for 23 years. Don't worry about that part. What you have to think about is
that this is a fairly unique context that you can experience' " (Greenhill, 1999, p. 42).

[3.] My understanding of civic sensibilities includes moral dimensions of the changing contemporary notion of
citizenship. Although historically, citizenship did not exist without states, citizenship education in Canada
today includes the study of relationships in and among socio-political groups as well as the fostering of
critical, democratic citizens. See also Portelli & Solomon (2001).

[4.] For example, Paul Guise (2000) explains that social interaction is one of five main reasons why people
join choirs. Similarly, Ki Adams (2000) lists several benefits of choral singing including psychological and
integrative benefits which could be identified as characteristic of the therapeutic model of community. I
think the benefits of this model best apply however to studio singing. For example, Ann Patterson
examines the intrapersonal benefits of singing lessons for women who are dealing with the trauma of
sexual abuse or with depression and anxiety caused by gender norms. She identifies two possible
therapeutic elements: First, singing provided an embodied and expressive vehicle to reconnect with the
body and personal feelings. Second, singing lessons provided an intimate relationship of trust that
supported working with repressed feelings and disconnected awareness of the body (Patterson, 2000, p.
191; see also Joyce, 1993). In this sense, the lessons involve more than learning to sing.