

Singers wearing lion skins

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Plenary Address

There was a time when people were only exposed to the music composed during their own lives. But today we listen to music from many time periods because we have become intensely aware of the musical history which has shaped the music of our own times.

There was a time when people only heard music that was composed in their native country. But today the world in which we live has shrunk so much that every other citizen of the world is now our nextdoor neighbour. With the touch of a button or the click of a mouse, we can hear a huge variety of styles from different time periods and from musical cultures around the world. Every day our singers hear an incredibly rich diversity of sound and style broadcast on television and radio. And many of our singers also have an opportunity to perform some of these different styles.

When a singer tries out a new piece of music, it is like a child putting on a lion skin and pretending to be a lion. When a child dons a lion skin, that child starts taking on some of the characteristics of the lion. He or she may proudly prowl through the room and let out a powerful roar. When the child feels the courage of the lion and sees how people react to the fierce lion head, the child begins to understand in some small way what it is like to be a lion.

When a singer tries a new piece of music, that singer begins to understand what it is like to live in a different world, to see life through someone else's eyes.

What happens when a singer first opens a new piece of music? Each singer reacts in a different way to the music just as each child reacts differently when they first approach a lion skin.

- Some children may be hesitant to even touch the lion skin; they need to look the lion skin over well before reaching out a hand; (you know how some singers hesitate to open a new piece of music!)
- Other children may carefully place the lion skin around the body and gradually sink into the idea of what it is like to be a lion; (some singers don't make friends with a new piece of music until they have had enough time to see how the music fits with their previous musical experiences)
- Other children may hold the lion skin high above the head and never actually wear the lion skin; (some singers just "sing along" with new music but do not

personally identify with the new sounds)

- Other children may race to the lion skin, joyously pull it on and immediately start acting like a lion; (some singers enjoy new experiences so much that they embrace a new piece of music as the highlight of the day)

When the lionskin is stretched out on the floor, the magic is only in the mind of the observer. When the child puts on the lion skin and starts to experience what it is like to be a lion, the magic weaves its spell around the child just as the magic of music can surround a singer during a performance. It becomes a total experience, a total artform.

There are many advantages to exploring music from different musical cultures and time periods but, in general, they can be summed up by one statement. Each culture and time period has its own special strengths which can not be equaled by any other culture or any other time period.

A lion heart is much stronger than a human heart. When the child dons the lion skin, the child's heart expands and the child's courage grows. The child feels brave enough to accomplish anything. The lion's experience becomes the child's experience. When a singer rehearses Handel's Messiah, the incredible treasures of Handel's experience become the singer's treasures. When a singer from Canada sings an African folk song, some of the African people's experiences become the Canadian singer's experiences.

When we first listen to music outside of our own culture, it may sound like agonizing wails or blips and beeps or a confusion of unrelated, out of tune pitches with absolutely dreadful tone quality. But we know that this music is highly valued by the finest musicians of cultures which, in some cases, are older than our own culture and much more highly developed. How can we begin to fathom the meaning of the profusion of treasures from other cultures? As a starting place, I think that we must recognize that North American conductors have been steadily working at this problem with their choirs since the days of the pioneers.

Each choir has its own ethnic background from which it draws its initial experiences. Most North American choirs are mixed race choirs just as most voice studios have singers from a variety of racial backgrounds. For example, in some situations, singers with English, Irish, Italian and German ancestral backgrounds join together to form a choir. Because all the skin is the same colour, it is not normally called a mixed race choir but that is exactly what it is. Each of the ancestral ethnic backgrounds provides its singers with different physical characteristics: mouths, teeth, lips and tongues of a certain shape and size. Each race produces resonance according to the size and shape of the vocal tract. Each race uses vocal placement which was originally created by the way their ancestors used a particular area of the head to speak the words of their own language and then this vocal placement was passed down through the generations to these singers of today.

Singers with different ethnic backgrounds, different physical attributes, different tone colour: North American conductors have been experienced at working out vocal problems with mixed race situations since the beginning. These conductors are so accustomed to working with mixed race choirs that they are not always consciously aware that, even though the skin colour may be all the same, their choirs are actually multi-cultural.

Even the first African-American choirs were multi-cultural because they consisted of singers whose ancestors came from a number of different African tribes. I have seen the same situation in the choirs of many other countries around the world.

The differences among the singers are not just physical. Canadian or American singers with an English heritage bring different cultural experiences to a choir than do the singers with a German or Italian background. They think differently and they learn differently.

When singers are asked to perform music from their own cultural backgrounds, they adjust the style for each musical nationality: they let the lyrics trip off the tongue for English music; they fill their hearts with orderly emotion for German music; they loosen the lips and actively taste the words for Italian music. And then one day a conductor introduces a piece of music that is outside the collective ethnic background of the choir. And the choir's world begins to expand to new horizons.

Even the most basic musical concepts can be expressed quite differently in a foreign culture. Everyone has a heartbeat but everyone does not walk the same way. People from different social classes move differently. A person from one race may walk quite differently from a person of another race. This affects the unique character of the beat in the music of each race. When singers work with new music, it is often helpful for them to physically experience some of the movements of the culture which produced the music. If they replicate the movements of the other culture, they start to feel the beat in the same way.

Malaysian people are small and fine boned. When singers from North America rehearse Malaysian music, they may try moving with small, light steps as they sing to match the gentle steps of the Malaysian people. As they become accustomed to this different way of walking, the music may suddenly start to become suggestive of the delicate pastel features of tropical blossoms. When the singers become involved in some aspect of the overall cultural situation, they often instinctively start to use appropriate vocal technique and expression to sing the music in a more authentic way.

When I worked with singers in Singapore on a piece by Handel, I had each singer walk like a king or a queen with large, stately steps. Suddenly the music took on the majesty of royal music. Through the music of Handel, they could experience what it was like to be royalty during the Baroque Period.

Each culture has a different character for the beat; the character of the beat describes who the people are at some deep, subliminal level. The beat in Malaysian music is gentle and light. Handel's beat is much stronger and has the confidence of English royalty.

It is often easier to define the characteristics of the beat of another culture than it is to describe the beat in your own culture. The beat in Canadian music often pushes slightly forward. Canadians have always had to push forward against the natural elements: the cold winter weather, the untamed land. The tradition of music pushing slightly forward continues today as new waves of immigrants have to push slightly against the existing society to find their place, to survive as new Canadians. Canada has never been a nation that has stood still.

A Russian beat sounds as if the singer is walking through deep snow with heavy boots. The beat in music from the southern United States is like the southern stroll (and the southern drawl) extremely relaxed: no sense of pushing or forward movement. Any

singer can experience those different cultural realities by simply donning the lion skin (by singing the music).

It is interesting to notice how the singers' perspective of music in general is altered by singing music outside of their native experience. Many singers take the beat for granted and have no idea that the beat of each piece of music has its own character until they experience the contrast of the way the beat is used in two pieces of different nationalities. From that time on, they become much more aware of the character of the beat in all music. They begin to hear all music differently.

Each time the singers are stretched by music outside of their native experience, their capacity for musical expression grows. They have more musical flexibility. They can imagine themselves into more details of the music. Their understanding of the basics (beat, rhythm, melody, harmony, texture, dynamics) reaches a higher aesthetic level. They become better and better at being a lion and they find it easier to imagine themselves as other animals, too.

It is risky trying out music from a different culture. It takes sensitivity and some careful thought. I have found that many conductors have more information in their minds about other cultures than they realize. As a conductor struggles to understand Chinese music, he or she may recall having heard authentic Chinese music in a Chinese restaurant.

Think back to your own experiences. Deep in the back of your mind is an impression of Chinese music. What did the music sound like?

- A melody predominates.
- The timbre is quite different from Euro-American music. In fact, there are many unusual timbres in each piece. Variety of timbre is important.
- The music does not sound very difficult. Virtuosity is not as important as the mood or the quality of sound.
 - The music sounds like birds or wind or other aspects of nature. This is very different from most Euro-American music where melodic lines often imitate the human voice.
 - The music sounds simple and yet complicated. Ah, yes, the influence of folk music in a culture you know is thousands of years old.

One trip to a Chinese restaurant and the conductor can gather many of the important characteristics needed to interpret Chinese music. When the singers experience some of these musical "truths" as they rehearse a Chinese piece, the music starts to make sense to them. It fits together in a logical way; it sounds different from familiar music but still "right". The singers can hear the natural beauty of the music. Without these "truths", these essential characteristics of Chinese music, the sound would be a parody of Chinese music. The singers would be superimposing their own culture on music from another culture. The performance would have little value. With some careful thought, there can be a beautiful meeting of different cultures.

If we look for the authentic "truth" within the music from the perspective of the musical culture or the composer, we can participate in the magical power of the music.

And that is what we, as musicians, live to experience.

There are many different ways to approach the problems of expressing the truth within a piece of music. After a conductor analyses each aspect of the piece and chooses the features which are most important, the conductor must decide how to express those features in the performance.

For example, in African music a "buzzy" timbre is highly valued. This is not a quality which is familiar to most North American choirs. However, the conductor has a choice in what way the choir will create a "buzzy" sound. The choir can imitate the rich, unblended vocal production of an African choir or the choir can sing normally but highlight the voices with unusual or naturally rich timbres by standing in a different formation or the choir can achieve some success by using "buzzy" sounding instruments as an accompaniment; when the instrumental buzz joins with the voices, it seems as if some of the buzz is coming from the singers. Just as there are many ways to help a choir to sing in tune, there are many ways to get a choir to express any other aspect of the music. Each option is a compromise, of course. Only Africans can sing African music in a completely authentic way.

For many generations, Euro-American singers were trained with *bel canto* singing to use the same beautiful tone quality in all parts of the range and for different musical situations. Musical nuances were achieved by phrasing, dynamics and an ebb and flow of intensity but not by adjusting the timbre. In the past twenty years, the aesthetic concept of beauty in vocal tone has changed dramatically. Euro-Americans have begun to recognize that there are an unlimited number of vocal timbres that can be used artistically within one voice. A singer may use a rich, vibrant timbre for one phrase and then a thin, haunting tone in the next to express the mood of the lyrics. Within a single phrase, the timbre may change with the subtleties of the words or the shape of the phrase. Asian and African singers have valued this idea for many centuries as they have constantly moved the placement and resonance to a variety of positions to change the colour of the voice from moment to moment. Now this concept is being used more and more frequently with traditional Euro-American music in recital halls, opera houses and choral concerts throughout North America.

Today there are so many more opportunities to hear diverse music that the way we hear has changed. What was unusual a decade ago is now commonplace. We go through stages in our acceptance of new sounds. As we become more open to unusual sounds and our resistance relaxes, we begin to enjoy the differences and finally we start to hear more deeply into the details of the music. With multi-cultural music, our singers' ears are being intensively trained in new ways. The singers also use these new-found ways of hearing to understand their own traditional music at a deeper level.

When someone looks at art created by a different culture, it makes more sense if they try to look through the eyes of that culture. Euro-Americans know that an artist draws the closer trees larger to add perspective to the picture. In Chinese art, there is no need to draw the closer trees larger because Chinese people know that the objects lower on the scroll are closer. Euro-American art often looks bottom heavy compared to Chinese art because the objects at the bottom of the painting are depicted larger to create the perspective.

Since the Baroque Period, the emphasis on a strong bass line (the bottom pitches) has created a sense of gravity in the music which is often balanced by a high melody. Chinese music is lighter and has no sense of gravity. In Chinese art, the lower objects on the scroll are no larger than the higher objects. In Chinese music, the lower pitches are no stronger than middle or high pitches. Chinese music must be judged and enjoyed by its own values. If we keep listening for a strong bass line, we will be disappointed. Chinese music is beautiful because it does not have a strong bass line; it can be appreciated for the freedom from gravity, for its lightness of being.

If music sounds too foreign to the ears, the mind can not make sense of it. Singers need to feel the connection between new music and their own personal experiences. It is one thing to tell children to be brave. (What does that abstract idea mean?) It is another thing to have those children experience courage while they are imagining they are lions, an animal which is familiar to their imaginations.

It is one thing to compare Baroque ornaments with the intricacy of Baroque architecture. It is another thing to have the singers examine some lace or embroidery on their own trendy clothing to understand the beauty of musical ornaments. They can relate musical concepts much better to their own personal experiences.

Music can be a window into the soul of another person. Our souls touch the soul of the composer as we sing the song. We live the emotions of the composers: we laugh their laughter, we feel their tears, we dance their dances and we express the depth of sorrow, the height of joy and the ecstasy of being just as they have experienced these emotions before us and captured them so beautifully in musical notation.

When we touch souls with a great person, we are the better for it. Our souls become one with the soul of a lion.

One of the great miracles of our times happens each week in our high schools with our teenage singers. At one moment the singers are in the hallway pounding each other on the shoulders, giving the high five and laughing raucously. A few minutes later they are in rehearsal singing Mozart so graciously that you would find it difficult to recognize them. Even being able to get a man on the moon can not compare with this triumph. Music is a time machine which can take us to any time period to any culture and then whisk us back again.

Music of different time periods prepares singers to be able to fit in with a variety of situations in society. Musical experiences can lift singers from poor financial situations into a different class, into a better life. The reverse situation is also true. Singers who have been sheltered from society because of their wealthy financial status gather rich new emotional experiences from music which helps them to empathize more with people in poorer situations. Music provides a bridge between classes and people can walk over the bridge in either direction: toward the more cultured experiences of an upper class or toward the much greater diversity of strong emotions experienced in the stressful situations of a lower class. Music is a vehicle which can supercede class structures.

Something magical happens when the child dons the lion skin. The child is free to become something else because there is a costume between the child and the rest of the world. Have you ever worn a mask? A mask hides your face; people cannot tell who you are. You can become someone else. The mask frees you to act differently, to express

something deeply buried within yourself. Music outside of the native experience allows the singers to express something they may not have felt before or may not have been able to express within their own society.

When the child dons the lion skin, does the child become a lion? Do we become what we sing? As we rehearse music, do we begin to believe what we are singing? Conductors should choose their music wisely: both sacred and secular. Imagine what will happen to your singers if they integrate the music into their souls. Will it lift them to a higher existence? Will it help them to define who they are? Those are important questions which must be addressed by each conductor.

The more often we become involved with new music, the more comfortable we become. It becomes easier to don the lion skin at a moment's notice.

I remember entering an auditorium well before a concert and seeing a children's choir preparing to do a sound check on the stage. I knew the choir already; it was an outstanding group. As they prepared for the sound check, they looked terrible because they were still wearing their street clothes which were pretty shabby. Some of them did not look too wide awake. None of them had good natural posture. The heads and bodies were turned in all different directions; it looked chaotic. A few other conductors had also entered the auditorium. They looked disappointed when they saw the choir. I waited for the children to begin to sing; I knew what a treat it was going to be. In one split moment, the choir moved into a uniform singing position and the most glorious sound spilled from their mouths. The observers were stunned by the sound. The singers had donned the familiar lion skin so quickly that everyone had been caught completely by surprise.

Music from a different culture allows the singers to be someone different; it allows a pauper to be a queen. It allows a football player to be a hunter. It allows a timid teenager to be in control of the situation. When the costume is removed, the child is no longer a lion but the child still has the resources of a lion. When the music is finished, the singer is no longer a queen or a hunter but the singer's life has been enriched by the experience.

Without the lion skin, I would not be here today. As a child, I was extremely shy. My two brothers and one sister had the same problem. When company arrived at the door, we would all hide; my mother despaired at our behavior which continued through our teenage years. I was always ready on time for a date because I was terrified that if he arrived before I was completely dressed that no one else would answer the door. But when I became involved with music, I could forget about myself and my shyness. I could wrap the music around myself and wear it as a costume. I could be anybody; I could experience anything from any time or place. The music was my ticket to freedom, to a better life. Through music I was to become privileged to explore a huge range of human emotions, to express my innermost feelings, to soar with the eagles.

Musicians learn what is important about their own musical culture when they are exposed to a contrasting culture. They notice the differences and the similarities. They try to understand the value of the unfamiliar music. This helps them to look deeply into their own hearts to find the "truths" therein, to understand their own music at a deeper level, to understand the value of their own musical culture. We know who we are only when we can compare ourselves to the strengths and weaknesses of someone else. We understand our own musical traditions only when we can compare them to the traditions of other people.

The study of other traditions strengthens our own position while it opens us up to the enrichment of new ideas.

Who are the ones wearing the lion skins in our society today? Look around at the other people here. We live in challenging times, exciting times. Right now at this moment, each of you is surrounded by brave voice teachers and conductors who don the lion skin each and every time they stand in front of their singers.

Are there real lions among us? Perhaps. But most of us are just people who have the desire to wear a lion skin to make music together. We are both human and lion. We each keep our own unique humanity shaped by the traditions of our own cultures but we also reach out to experience the unique treasures of traditions in other times and places. We are both human and lion. We give the best that we have within us and we gather the best we can from the rich resources of music wrapped around us.
