

Ethnic/Multicultural Choral Music: Thinking Out of the Box

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A major development of the past decade in western world choral singing is the increasing influence of music from a variety of world cultures. This development raises several sets of interesting issues.

From a purely practical standpoint, choral directors, whose schooling typically has not prepared them to engage with such music, want to know where to find it and how to teach it. In one sense, the first concern is easily answered. Most publishers of choral music offer such titles and some even specialize in multicultural/ethnic music. Many publishers also provide online opportunities to see a score and listen to performances.

The other concern, how to teach ethnic/multicultural music, is more problematic depending on the particular background, training, and interest of particular choral conductors. Still, there are useful resources that can assist. For those who are interested, I am providing a web page (<http://falcon.cc.ukans.edu/~jdaugher/mc>) with links to publishers and other web resources, plus a listing of helpful books and articles.

Those concerned solely with such practical matters may stop reading now and go to the web page.

Still here? Then let's think out of the box for a moment. What follows is not a systematic explication, but rather some general musings about two questions: (1) What exactly is "ethnic/multicultural choral music?," and (2) why should we and our choristers be interested in it? Exploring these questions can lead us in some surprising directions. When we ignore such questions, we risk a blind acceptance that multicultural/ethnic choral music is whatever publishers and popular clinicians, those seeking profit financially, say it is.

The official term used by ACDA, "ethnic/multicultural," is not a particularly happy one. In some ways, it reflects both confusion and an implicit value system. Consider, for instance, that from the perspective of many in our world Eurocentric art music is itself a form of "ethnic" music. It is strange. It is not universally practiced or accepted. Indeed, even in the western world some juvenile court judges seek to punish young people by making them listen to it. Ethnomusicologists, such as Bruno Nettl, sociologists of music like Christopher Small, and an increasing number of philosophers of music and music education, including Lydia Goehr, Lucy Green, David Elliott, and Nicholas Cook, all take issue with the contention under which many of us were educated, i.e., that western world art music somehow manages to transcend cultural context and stands alone, timeless, as the epitome of "lasting" or "good" or "worthy" music (see web page for references).

Such absolutism can manifest itself in the way we seek to teach and learn music from different cultural contexts via a notated score. Much so-called ethnic music, of course, comes from oral traditions. Ensoring such music, reifying it in the form of a typical choral

octavo, at best is a symbiosis of two vastly different concepts of music-making; at worst, it represents simply co-opting such music by westernizing it.

Moreover, encoring such music ignores the fact that for much of world music the “music” is not necessarily limited to pitches and rhythms and musical form. It also entails text, movement or dance, and social context—not as “add ons” but as part of the very meaning of music-making. It is difficult, if not impossible, to communicate this multi-dimensional framework within the confines of a typical choral octavo.

As a young high school teacher emboldened by the Tanglewood Declaration, I occasionally purchased an octavo arrangement of a current pop song. Inevitably, students disliked it: “This is not the way it’s ‘supposed’ to sound.” They were right. Not all music lends itself to the confines of a score.

Eurocentric aesthetic philosophy also informs choral performance practices that may not be appropriate for multi-cultural/ethnic music. During the national ACDA convention in Chicago two years ago, I watched a news clip on the local NBC affiliate of Queen Elizabeth visiting a school outside of London. The student body had assembled in the auditorium for a welcoming performance by the school chorus. Choristers, dressed in their robes and packed onto portable risers on the small school stage, sang a South African piece. As the music progressed and despite the director’s intention, many of the choristers began swaying to the rhythm of the music. As they did so, the risers collapsed spilling singers in every direction. The news clip concluded with a look of shock upon the Queen’s face.

Thankfully, no one was injured. Yet, this instance raises some interesting questions. Why was the ensemble trying to perform this piece as if it were a Bach chorale? Why didn’t the choir spread off the risers, or abandon them altogether, so that the singers could move to the music? Why was the music-making limited to the choir, with the audience sitting stiffly in silence?

It would be fruitless, I think, to frame such questions in the context of the “performance practices” debate about early music that so engaged and enraged musicologists in the recent past. The very notion of codified rules for performing certain kinds of choral music assumes that at some point in a musical tradition there exists a golden, perfect moment —the “good ole days, “ which can be identified, isolated, and replicated at will to measure all subsequent performance.

Such “authenticity” is inevitably contextual and therefore relative. Those who advocate strictly authentic performance of nonwestern music by western ensembles are being neither realistic nor musical.

Recently, my choir enjoyed singing traditional Indonesian songs and learning to play in a Javanese gamelan. We quickly discovered that gamelan music was not simply an accompaniment to the singing (indeed, it was more like the reverse), and also that the gamelan was part of certain social and religious practices without which its sound qualities made little sense.

There was no western notation, but rather a series of numbers that did not indicate rhythms. Players had to decide how their parts fit in with other parts. Even more, we learned that there were multiple, equally valid, traditions of gamelan playing, each with its own nuances, and that these traditions were still evolving.

Such evolution does not occur in a vacuum. The Fall 2001 Special Edition of Time magazine was entitled “Music Goes Global.” Although the issue was written largely with respect to popular music, its themes could be applied to ethnic/multicultural choral music as well. With globalization, recording and playback technology, the world wide web, and growing interest in other cultures, musics of the world are cross-pollinating at a rapid rate. Only in isolated pockets of the world does ethnic music today exist in some unaffected form. And those places are becoming increasingly rare.

An example of what the multicultural fusion of the future may look like is the piece “Adiemus” from Karl Jenkins’ “Songs of Sanctuary” (available from Boosey & Hawkes). Described as a “multicultural vocalise,” it merges evocations of the African choral tradition in a Eurocentric format with a text of nonsense syllables meant to sound like Latin. It also incorporates variations in choral tone from the concentration on the fundamental tone characteristic of western choral art singing to the more throaty sound of other world musics, as well as numerous possibilities for choreography and for placing the choir and soloists in various spots of the performing venue. While it can be performed as notated, it virtually invites improvisation, creativity, and expanding the boundaries of accustomed choral practice. In this way, the “music” does not reside exclusively in the score but, rather, in the performing ensemble.

Current focus on ethnic/multicultural choral music invites us to think “out of the box.” It may even lead us to rethink accustomed, inherited notions of what choral music is.

Although choral directors are typically trained at schools of music, choral music itself is rarely “pure” music. It usually has text, and these words ground us in some contextual reality. At the dawn of western civilization as we understand it, the Greeks had a far different concept of music than that bequeathed to us much later by eighteenth century aesthetic philosophy based on music alone. As embodied in the Greek chorus, *mousike* incorporated not only musical sounds, but also poetry, drama, movement, and social purpose. Much of the world’s “popular” and ethnic music still subscribes in large degree to that outlook. Its aim is not simply detached enjoyment, but embodying the relation of music to life.

Perhaps we should be interested in ethnic/multicultural choral music primarily because this larger viewpoint can lead us to reconsider our unilateral, sometimes dogmatic practices of choral music-making. In this way, to borrow a term from Bruno Nettl, we and our students might become “bimusical,” using both western art music and other world musics equally but for different purposes. In so doing, the choices we have for rehearsing and performing choral music are vastly enriched. Some music we may sing for pure enjoyment. Other music we can sing because it enables us to learn about life, our own and that of others.

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