

LIFT EVERY VOICE



Voices of Change: Impacting the Communities We Serve (Part 1)

J. Donald Dumpson, Thomas Lloyd, and Wendy K. Moy, editors

The following panel discussion convened by Donald Dumpson, R&R Chair of Lifelong Singing, was presented at the 2022 ACDA Eastern Region Conference in Boston, Massachusetts, as part one of three in the series, “Identity and Inclusion in Choral Spaces: Pathways to Lasting Change.” The purpose of this session was to explore the identity, performance philosophy, and role in society of the choirs represented on the panel in light of a significant national reflection on American racism and inclusivity following the protests in response to the murder of George Floyd and other social justice issues that became particularly resonant during the Covid-19 pandemic. Julia Zavadsky moderated this discussion.

For the second session, “Identity, Inclusion, and Excellence in the ACDA,” Wendy Moy moderated a panel discussion with Penelope Cruz, then Eastern Region President; David Fryling, then-ACDA Vice President; Arreon Harley-Emerson, Diversity Initiatives Committee Chair; and Robyn Hilger, ACDA Executive Director. We discussed how ACDA as an organization addresses issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion with a focus on the changes for the 2022 Eastern Conference and 2023 National Conference. The third session, “Creating Choral Community: Coming Together in

Song” introduced repertoire from the choirs represented on this panel. We will include a list of the pieces at the end of part two, which will be published in the next issue of *Choral Journal*.



J. Donald Dumpson: I have had the privilege of being the founding conductor for the Westminster Choir College Jubilee Singers, the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra Community Chorus, and presently the Philadelphia Heritage Chorale. In each case these choral communities have given voice to music borne of the African diaspora. There are a lot of people who feel that too many doors are still closed. That is why I invited the musicians on this panel to come together and ask ourselves and each other: **Who are you and how does diversity, equality, and inclusion reflect itself in the music you perform?**



Wendy Moy: I am the co-artistic director of Chorosynthesis Singers, a professional chorus. Our mission is to empower voices that have been silenced, and we focus on the performance of new music

on themes of social consciousness. I also serve as an assistant professor of music education at Syracuse University, where I direct the Crouse Chorale, an inclusive treble chorus. I'm also the former artistic director of the Hartford Gay Men's Chorus. My dissertation was an ethnographic study of the Seattle Men's Chorus, the largest gay men's chorus in the world.



Diana Saez: I'm the director of Choral Activities at Towson University, in Maryland, but today I'll talk as the former founder and music director of Coral Cantigas, a chamber choir in the Washington DC area with the mission "to increase an awareness and appreciation of the many rich styles of Latino Choral Music."

Defining the identity of Cantigas was an ongoing challenge during our twenty-five years of existence. The fact that we were in the Washington DC area contributed to our identity. Half of our choir hadn't been born in the United States. We had members born and raised in Argentina, El Salvador, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, etc. The other half were mostly White-Americans, with few international members from Italy, Hungary, and Wales. The problem with the term "Latin America" or "Latino" is that it agglutinates many groups into one, and it is not possible to talk about Latin American music in terms of homogeneity. We are a region of many people, cultures, and languages. Our musical traditions couldn't be more diverse. Our choir became a space for learning about each other's musical traditions.

After reflecting a lot about the identity of Cantigas, I found all the members had these things in common:

- 1) Most singers were college graduate professionals, which at times became a disadvantage because we didn't represent the largest community of Latinos in DC, who were mostly immigrants.
- 2) Everyone came from a strong choral tradition in their respective countries.
- 3) Everyone was curious and enjoyed the challenge of trying new rhythms and songs, and of singing in a different language.



Michael Bussewitz-Quarm: In the nineties, I taught chorus in a public school. Due to my disability and because of my trans identity and because of emphasizing the participatory element as of equal value to the performance element, I was no longer welcomed as a public school choral director. I continued my career as a community choir director. I started my own choirs and worked in churches. I am now speaking to you today mostly as a full-time composer.

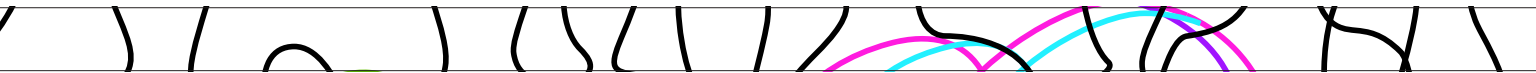


Joshua Jacobson: I recently retired after forty-five years of teaching and conducting at Northeastern University. I'm the founder and director of the Zamir Chorale of Boston, which is an ensemble dedicated to discovering, preserving, creating, disseminating, and performing music from Jewish traditions as well as music in juxtaposition to Jewish traditions. Our repertoire includes classically composed music, as well as arrangements of music from ethnic traditions, idiomatic and non-idiomatic, sacred and secular.

Our latest project is called "A Choral Rainbow,"¹ created in response to the alarming rise in racism, anti-semitism, and other forms of prejudice. We are committed to using our resources to expose our audiences (and ourselves) to music representing different cultures, ethnicities, and ways of thinking. With video performances and conversations between myself and conductors of choruses from diverse and under-represented communities, "A Choral Rainbow" helps to build bridges and open doors of communication.



Rollo Dilworth: I am very fortunate to work with a number of youth choirs in the city of Philadelphia. My main choral position, connected with my job at Temple University, is with a non-auditioned town-and-gown ensemble called the Temple University Singing Owls. We consider ourselves to be an inclusive choral community. We welcome people from all walks of life. We have the entire range in terms of age, background, experience, ethnicity, musical ability, and intellectual ability.



Thomas Lloyd: I'm an emeritus professor of music at Haverford College and currently Canon for Music and the Arts at the Philadelphia Episcopal Cathedral. But for the context of this discussion, I'll

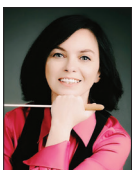
be talking mainly about my community choir, the Bucks County Choral Society, which I've directed since 2000. It's an overwhelmingly white county, which more than doubled in population during the 1970s and 1990s as a result of so-called "white flight" from the other side of the county line with Northeast Philadelphia. Since that time, it's gotten a lot of attention politically as an important "swing district," split right down the middle in most elections. School board meetings there have also gotten a lot of recent press related to the recent culture wars over masking policy and curricular issues related to systemic racism.

“

Our primary way of connecting with others across racial and cultural divides is through collaborations with choirs different than ourselves

”

In this context the Choral Society has an unspoken "don't ask, don't tell" policy about both politics and religion, knowing our singers come from across the full range of perspectives in those two areas. Our weekly rehearsals are something our singers value as a place where we can come together in the same space around artistic expression. We don't pretend that the divisions don't exist, but our primary way of connecting with others across racial and cultural divides is through collaborations with choirs different than ourselves, particularly across the border in Philadelphia.



Julia Zavadsky: I am on the faculty of Temple University and Curtis Institute of Music, but today I am wearing the hat of the artistic director of Nashirah, the Jew-

ish Chorale of Greater Philadelphia. Nashirah is an auditioned community choir, and our mission is maintaining our heritage and history by performing music written by Jewish composers and music that contains Jewish texts.

We're committed to musical excellence and the desire to openly share, enabling all audiences to experience the beauty of the Jewish musical tradition. Like many in this country, I'm an immigrant, and I started my choral conducting journey back in Kyiv, Ukraine, and continued in Jerusalem. In both countries, most of my work was around musical traditions that reflected my own lived experiences, as well as the lived experience of my singers. I found it to be very different here in America.

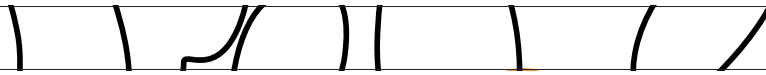
How do we exercise care for rehearsing and performing musical traditions that do not necessarily reflect the lived experience of our singers?



Dilworth: I'm not sure if I have all the answers, but I would like to offer just a quick little acronym that may be of help. The acronym is A.R.T. The letter 'A' stands for attitude. There really has to be

an attitude on not only the director's part, but also on the part of the singers, that is positive and affirming. We must all believe that this music we are about to explore (music that is outside of our own lived experiences) is equally valid and equal in quality to any piece of music from the Western classical tradition. I think that if we don't start with that kind of attitude, then why bother going any further with the work? We must make sure that we dismantle this attitude or belief that repertoire that is different from the Western classical tradition is in some ways "less than" or should be labeled as "other." And I encourage people to look at that music with fresh eyes and not necessarily cast upon that music a Western lens by which we attempt to analyze or make meaning out of it.

Next, the letter 'R' stands for relationships. If we are going to venture into musical experiences that are outside the lived experiences of the people within our ensemble, and perhaps outside of our own lived experi-



ences, we absolutely must build relationships—relationships that are not transactional or superficial, but really foundational.

So, let's say I choose a piece of Korean choral music to perform, and I have no one in my choir who can lend a lived experience and expertise (and I don't have the expertise myself). I'm not going to wait until two or three weeks before the performance to engage someone from that culture and invite them to a rehearsal. To do so sends a message that you only value that person's cultural experience within a specific context at a specific period of time. Build relationships over a long period of time, such that when you want someone to be a culture bearer—or I like to use the term “culture sharer”—you have already established a meaningful relationship with the community represented by the music.

“

We must all believe that this music we are about to explore is equally valid and equal in quality to any piece of music from the Western classical tradition.

”

Finally, the letter ‘T’ refers to time. You must allow time for the development of those relationships. Also, one must invest an equal if not double amount of time in researching and rehearsing this music so that you and the singers can attend to the cultural and stylistic nuances inherent in the tradition.



Bussewitz-Quarm: I'm approaching this question of music often arising from very different cultural identities than those of the singers who might later perform the music from the standpoint of a composer. It is important, both to myself and my lyricists, to listen and create a depth of understanding through discussions with authors, speakers, and leaders in the area of focus. I recently completed a com-

mission consortium called “Where We Find Ourselves” inspired by recovered damaged glass plate negatives of the Jim Crow era photographer, Hugh Mangum. The message of the song cycle is that we are all damaged in some way, and sometimes the world seems broken. Yet, even in our brokenness, there is beauty.

My lived experience is different from others' lived experiences. In the commission's panel, I included my lyricist, Shantel Sellers, who is Anishinaabe (Odawan); the curators of the exhibit, Margaret Sartor and Alex Harris of Duke University; and Dr. Sherry Boyd, the Humanities Coordinator for Dallas College and an educator in the history of Black American society. Through our recorded conversations, we realized that the song was going to involve the topic of hair. Dr. Boyd spoke about expectations of Black and Native society to adapt to the dominant part of the society in presentation, clothing, hair, and fashion. We listened and became informed by Dr. Boyd and Shantel, who spoke about her grandparents' experience being forced into boarding schools and having their long hair cut off; these are painful experiences, not only for the previous generations, but for Sherry and Shantel as well. They're not my experiences. As a trans person, my experience is that my long hair is important for safety reasons when entering a restroom. All of these experiences informed me as the composer, as well as being inspired by Ma Rainey, Leadbelly, and Bessie Smith.

What are some of the *tools* for incorporating music outside of your ensemble of established identity?



Dilworth: I believe it is important from the outset to establish a climate of inclusion within your ensemble. If you have a dialogue with your ensemble to make it very clear that all are welcome and that all experiences are appreciated and respected, you have really set the stage for all the work that you will do going forward as it relates to diversity, equity, access, inclusion, and belonging.

And of course, you have to live out those principles as you move through your rehearsals. It's important to know why the repertoire was chosen and have dialogue

with your singers about that. Hopefully, it was for the purpose of expanding knowledge, and the repertoire choices align with the core values or mission of the ensemble. Repertoire decisions should not be made for the purpose of “checking off a box.” As you discuss the music with your singers, acknowledge your own position and perspective. If the majority of your singers have a background different from the culture represented in the repertoire you have chosen, acknowledging positionality and being honest about the learning process will be important. And it’s okay to announce your learning process in your concert or place some information in your program notes.



Saez: In *Cantigas* we soon realized that even though we were a “Latin American group,” we were very diverse. We all came from different traditions, and these traditions were very different from each other. We also had members who were part of the Latinx community but were born in the United States, and Spanish was not their first language. *Cantigas* became the place to share our musical traditions and learn from each other. For example, if we were learning a Venezuelan folk song, we would invite Venezuelan musicians from that community to accompany the choir with their musical instruments. Their knowledge of the music would inform our performance of that piece. We developed a strong relationship with many musicians in the community from these collaborations.

Eventually we reached out to other communities from other cultural groups that were not Latinos or Latin American. After I read a book named *El Tango: Una historia con judíos* by Jose Judkovski, I became curious about the connections between Jewish and Latin American music. I contacted the music director of Zemer Chai, a Jewish community choir in the Washington DC area, and together we curated a program that celebrated each choir’s traditions but also showed the contributions of each culture in the other. Everyone involved in the concert came out with a deeper understanding and respect for the other’s group culture. For me, the concept of identity keeps evolving.



Zavadsky: I have a strong passion for bringing communities together. One of the biggest tools that I know are collaborations, whether we collaborate with the ensembles that are similar to our own—like for example, I’m looking forward to Nashirah’s upcoming program with Zamir Chorale of Boston. However, I am equally excited for all the programs that are coming up for us in collaboration with the ensembles drastically different from our own.

What factors make collaborations successful?



Moy: There are many levels of collaboration. The simplest and easiest involves different ensembles performing in the same concert. This is not bad, but so much more is possible. The best collaborations involve all parties creating a relationship before the concert. They should come together to share what they do and dream of what is possible (artistically and relationally) through the partnership. There should be a desire to get to know each other and a mutual investment of time and energy. The end “product” should be a strengthening of understanding and relationships.

“

The best collaborations involve all parties creating a relationship before the concert.

”



Lloyd: In response to the relative uniformity of our ethnic and racial identities in the Choral Society, we’ve made collaborative performances a consistent programming thread for over twenty years. These collaborations always involve exchanging repertoire with another choir in advance in order to rehearse and perform under the direction of each

other's conductors. We plan time for informal social interaction around those activities. When possible, we arrange for rehearsals and performances to happen in each other's spaces, not just our own. These collaborations have brought us together with several predominantly Black Philadelphia choirs, with programming including repertoire from both the European and African American traditions, often involving Spirituals and sacred jazz in the tradition of Duke Ellington.

We also recently collaborated with a regional Korean choir whose conductor was an assistant conductor with the Choral Society one time. When we traveled abroad to Eastern Europe and Latin America we also arranged for these kinds of collaborations with local choirs. These tours also required starting the communication process between collaborating conductors and singers well in advance, which is something tour travel companies are not always responsive to.

As to the question of how we define success or excellence in these collaborations, there are a number of questions we ask ourselves. The most basic question is, have we truly formed a collaboration of equals, with mutual respect for different musical and social traditions? Have we stretched our musical and expressive boundaries into unfamiliar musical styles in a way that feels authentic rather than merely imitative? Have we stretched ourselves without pretending to ignore the identities that we start with? Have we provided a way for our *audiences* to connect with people from unfamiliar cultural identities in a way that enables them to question conscious or unconscious bias or misconceptions they may have brought with them to the performance?



Saez: One of the ways that made our collaborations successful was by finding connections. Acknowledging the tensions (historical or cultural) that exist among groups is important, but I've been very successful in finding connections through music. There must be something that we have in common. Let me share an example from one of those collaborations. We partnered with The Heritage Signature Chorale, a well-known African American choir in the DC area. While researching for the program, I

learned that Langston Hughes and Nicolás Guillén, the national poet of Cuba, had been friends. Hughes had greatly influenced the poetry of Guillén, who wrote poetry using the musical forms of Cuba, just as Hughes had done with Black music in the United States. When we presented these facts to the choirs, it created an immediate connection. Both poets have been set to music. During the concert, the choirs performed choral music that had been set to the poetry of both Hughes and Guillén. Finding that connection was a "goosebump moment."

Author's Note: In Part 2 of this article in the next issue of the Choral Journal we will explore the particular challenges and limitations that can get in the way of meaningful choral collaborations.

NOTES

¹ <https://www.joshuaajacobson.org/video-podcasts>

Call for Submissions

Lift Every Voice is a column concerning issues of access, diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and restorative practice (ADEIBR) in choral music. We hope that this column can provide a space to incubate ideas about inclusive practices and provide mentorship for choral practitioners.

For submission information, scan the QR code or email DIC@acda.org

