

# On the Trail of Beauty and Grace: Some Thoughts on Standards

by Joshua Jacobson

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Editor's Note: The following article is an expanded version of an essay, "Beauty and the Beast," that first appeared in the January 1994 issue of *Choral News*, the state newsletter of Massachusetts ACDA.

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This issue of the *Choral Journal* is devoted to the definition, discussion, and reexamination of one of ACDA's cornerstones—the National Committee on Choral Repertoire and Standards. Before we can identify and answer specific questions regarding how the committee can impact choral music-making, we must consider some underlying philosophical questions. For example, can the national committee impose one set of standards on all ACDA members? Also, might not standards vary from culture to culture? Furthermore, do we regard standards as the *minimum* level of acceptability or the *highest* level of achievement? Is our goal to make money for our programs, to entertain, to educate, to broaden horizons, or to provide a peak aesthetic experience? Once we identify our objectives, how do we go about accomplishing them?

If we seek to help our students achieve a peak aesthetic experience, we will begin by inculcating in them a sense of aesthetic responsibility. We will help them understand the crucial role that the arts play in any civilization. We will show them how, through tremendous effort, diligence, and cooperation, they may be rewarded with one of the most spiritual and intense experiences available to our species.

If artistic excellence is a standard to which we aspire, then we will expose our singers to the finest repertoire. We will not settle

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for performing mediocre music merely because it is easy to learn or because a publisher sent a free copy that conveniently came with a tape. We will not restrict ourselves to that ubiquitous vernacular style that is culturally familiar. Easy music does not have to be of mediocre quality: Mozart's canons, Beethoven's folk-song arrangements, and Ives's unison songs serve as examples of well-crafted music that is not difficult to perform.

Once we have chosen a great piece of music, we will approach that composition with awe. Assuming that its composer was not merely competent but inspired, we will then do our best to reproduce as accurately as possible the musical vision that he or she had in mind. We will find an edition that does not misrepresent the composer's ideas. We will read primary and secondary sources that take us back to the composer's own performance practice.

Another objective we might adopt is broadening our students' awareness of music from diverse cultures. I was asked recently to give a guest lecture on Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*. Not one student in this undergraduate class could define the term "requiem." My first fear is that Western European art music now represents a culture that is alien to most of our students. So we can begin our multicultural education by programming repertoire that is foreign to most Americans—music by composers such as Palestrina, Handel, Bach, Mozart, and Ravel.

But to restrict our repertoire to Western Europe would mean denying ourselves the pleasures of experiencing the aesthetic creations of other cultures. We can rectify this by performing music that blends the familiar forms of Western culture with the unique scales and rhythms of more exotic lands: compositions by Béla Bartók, Paul Ben-Haim, David Fanshawe, William Dawson, and others. We may even re-create the performance practices of non-Western cultures. For such an excursion we will need to avail ourselves of an expert guide—perhaps an

ethnomusicological colleague or a visiting foreign musician.

## Art Reflects Society's Standards

As the R&S Committee sets an agenda for change, it must realistically assess the current state of culture in American society. A colleague recently shared with me a disturbing aspect of her research in writing the biography of the late American composer Ruth Crawford Seeger. During the 1930s, Seeger spent a few years living in Berlin and recorded in her diary the ominous scenes she witnessed. The economy was deteriorating, art was degenerating, society was being torn apart, humanity was becoming debased, and a right-wing radical fringe was becoming bolder and more powerful. My colleague commented that although some of these same problems were evident then in the United States as well, *we* kept our ideals and did not allow them to dissolve into the morass of fascism. When asked if she sees some of

these same ominous signs in America today, she replied that the one thing that concerns her most about contemporary society is its pervasive cynicism.

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craftsmen who,  
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of nature, are capable  
of following the trail of  
true beauty and grace.*

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Plato

To the cynics in ancient Greece, the highest virtue—the only good way of life—was self-sufficiency and suppression of desire. As such, they flaunted their indifference to others and antagonism to

pleasure. In contemporary usage, a cynic is a person who believes all people are motivated by selfishness. He or she is therefore scornful of the motives and the virtue of others, and is bitterly mocking and sneering. The cynic looks at our politicians and sees selfish incompetents unable to formulate a viable economy, unable to control events in Bosnia, more eager to tear down their opponents than to state their own positions. The cynic looks at the citizens of the world and sees people who care more about today's profit or comfort than about the world their children will inhabit. The cynic identifies with the poster that shows Bart Simpson proclaiming, "I'm an underachiever and proud of it." The cynic is not shocked by such cultural icons as Andrew Dice Clay and 2 Live Crew, who derive their popularity from acts that openly promote violence—violence against minorities and sexual violence against women. The cynic asks: "Why should I be honest, why should I aspire to greatness, why should

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I care about tomorrow, why should I obey the law, why should I care about those in need?" Why indeed? What is there to motivate a human being who possesses such a vision?

### Beauty Tames the Beast

Is there, however, another vision? Is there a view of the universe that is less egocentric and that inspires a human being to sense that other humans are just as important as the self: one's neighbor across the street, one's neighbor across the world, one's neighbor who will not be born until the next century?

Are there other cultural icons that project images of love, beauty, hope, and faith? Any art form is a reflection of the society that produced it. By studying the great works of Bach, Beethoven, Mahler, Debussy, Rembrandt, Picasso, Dali, Mapplethorpe, Monet, Klimt, Dickens, Hesse, and others, we gain not only aesthetic gratification, but a glimpse into other worlds. We cannot deny that Andrew Dice Clay, 2 Live Crew, and Bart Simpson all reflect some element of contemporary American society. We may not like it, but we cannot deny it.

On the other hand, the expression, "life imitates art" is also true. Society not only expresses itself through its art forms, it can be influenced by them. Twenty-four centuries ago, Plato wrote a formula for an ideal society. He believed that those in power had the responsibility to control a society's environment and that music was an important element of that environment. In his *Republic* he wrote that certain scales and rhythms should be banned because their effect was to make men too lazy or too warlike:

Forms and rhythms in music are never altered without producing changes in the entire fabric of society. . . . These new [musical] forms creep in imperceptibly in the form of a seemingly harmless diversion . . . invading men's dealings with one another, and going on to attack the law and constitution with reckless impudence, until in the end the whole structure of public and private life is overthrown. . . .

[In order to create the proper environment,] we must look for those

craftsmen who, by the felicitous gift of nature, are capable of following the trail of true beauty and grace. Then our young men, dwelling as it were in a salubrious region, will receive benefit from all things about them. The influence that emanates from all works of beauty will waft itself to eye or to ear like a breeze that brings us health from wholesome places. Then from earliest childhood



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[beauty will] subconsciously guide them to grace, to friendship, and to harmony with beautiful reason.<sup>1</sup>

Plato's solution involves surrounding ourselves with beauty. But what is beauty? A famous aphorism by the nineteenth-century Irish novelist Margaret Hungerford states, "Beauty is altogether in the eye of the beholder." Charles Ives, writing

in his *Essays before a Sonata*, cautioned that "beauty in music is too often confused with something that lets the ears lie back in an easy chair."<sup>2</sup> In *The Moon and Sixpence*, Somerset Maugham described beauty as "something wonderful and strange that the artist fashions out of the chaos of the world in the torment of his soul." Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Beauty is that which is simple, which

has no superfluous parts, which exactly answers its end, which stands related to all things, which is the mean of many extremes."<sup>3</sup> Moses Mendelssohn wrote that "each conception of spiritual beauty is a glimpse at God."<sup>4</sup>

Beauty is the key to transcendent harmony—not merely the harmony of polyphonic music, but the larger harmony of the universe. As Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov said, "Beauty is the divine force which permeates the world."<sup>5</sup> Beauty is the key to another vision—a message of hope, a message of affirmation, a message that cannot lie or boast. As Keats expressed in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty."

### To Strive for the Greatest Beauty

In ancient Europe, a "standard" was a banner, a flag identifying a troop as it went into battle or parade. The standard that members of ACDA raise should proclaim that music is not merely a diversion, an entertainment, or an unnecessary frill. We should raise the banner proclaiming that through music we become ennobled, we become aware of who we are, we are put in touch with the deepest stirrings of our humanity, we empathize with our fellow human beings from the four corners of the globe and through the full panorama of history. In all our work as conductors and teachers—repertoire selection, score study, research, rehearsal technique, and performance—our constant standard should be the attainment of the greatest beauty.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, quoted in Oliver Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History*, vol. 1 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), 7–8.
- <sup>2</sup> Charles Ives, *Essays before a Sonata*, ed. Howard Boatwright (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), 97.
- <sup>3</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Conduct of Life*, vol. 7, "Beauty" (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1903; original edition 1860), 48.
- <sup>4</sup> Quoted in Joseph Brown, ed., *A Treasury of Jewish Quotations* (New York: Crown Publications, 1956), 24.
- <sup>5</sup> Israel Baal Shem Tov, *Tsavaat Ribash* (Warsaw: Isaac Reinermann, 1913; original edition 1797), 18.

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