

That's a Wrap

On October 17th, at Jubilee United Church, I brought a formal close to a conducting career of fifty years. It's been so much fun that I'd like to share a few highlights (I promise not to repeat any of the stories from *The Making of a Choral Conductor*).

Let me begin with church choirs, since that's where I gained my first impressions of the power of choral music. Each Sunday at The Community Church in Mountain Lakes, New Jersey, where I grew up, John Barstow, the director of the Senior Choir, would climb down from the choir loft, raise a hinged music holder attached to the front of the loft, signal the singers to stand, and conduct the anthem. Barstow always gave the impression of being devoted to the music above all else, a principle I have tried to emulate in my own career. I have little patience for conductors who name their choirs after themselves, although that practice at least makes their priorities clear. I have always felt that I was serving Victoria and other composers too long dead to conduct their own choirs.

My second year in San Bernardino, California I was invited to become organist/choirmaster at St. John's Episcopal Church. (I had not yet taken a formal vow against electronic organs.) That the choir numbered only a dozen singers didn't prevent me from recruiting some instrumentalists and performing Bach's Cantata 4, *Christ lag in Todesbanden*, at Easter (in German, of course!) When I left the choir (and the state) at the end of the year, they bade me farewell with an impromptu rendition of Roy Rogers's "Happy Trails."

When I took the job at Aurora United Church in Ontario, I promised myself not to perpetuate the existing Christmas tradition of "Mistletoe Magic" (which was just about what you might expect). But what to put in its place? I tried Lessons and Carols. I tried music for chorus and brass. I tried a program of carols and Messiah choruses. I tried a choral Christmas pageant. All were resounding failures (and it has to be really bad for a Christmas concert to fail).

Finally I thought of Carols by Candlelight. After all, who could resist the experience of hearing Christmas carols in the magic of candlelight? Not surprisingly, the candlelight part posed more problems than the carol part. "I

hope you're not planning to make nail holes in the pews" was the first response. I found an engineer in the congregation who designed a candleholder in the form of a sleeve that could fit over the pews without damaging them. He then organized a small army of men to replicate his prototype some one hundred fifty times.

"What about the fire hazard?" was another refrain. We consulted the local fire department, who sent representatives to the event. We stored blankets in strategic corners and trained several teams who practiced their maneuvers to the point that they could reach and extinguish any potentially flaming audience member in five seconds or less. (We also forbade audience members to stand until the candles had been extinguished.)

You'd think we'd anticipated every possible problem. Not quite. On the evening of the event one of the ushers decided that it would improve matters if he turned on the lights "just a little" for the benefit of those who complained about not being able to read the program. Predictably, it ruined the effect—candles and electricity just don't mix.

Yet Carols by Candlelight was a terrific hit, although it took three years before we really got it right. We printed the programs in 18-point type and had the audience enter the church in near-darkness, so that lighting the candles would *raise* the level of illumination. And we duct-taped the dimmer switches to prevent interference from well-intentioned ushers. I subsequently introduced this tradition in three other churches, each presenting its own challenges (like votive candles behind semi-translucent globes that effectively prevented anyone from reading the program, no matter how big you made the type).

When my musicology career ended, and I turned to teaching calculus in private boys' schools, I ended up forming choirs there as well. Now North American males suffer a tacit fear that singing will emasculate them. One way around this was to compel everyone in the school to participate in the choir, and this is what happened at the Sedbergh School, an institution for troubled boys. (Needless to say, they didn't advertise that fact, especially to new teachers, but I assure you that it was the case.) Music, they say, hath charms to soothe the savage breast, and you would not find ninety more savage breasts than the little brats at Sedbergh. But William Congreve's maxim remains true: after fifteen minutes of ruckus (controlled by other

faculty members, also compelled to be in the choir), the boys really got into it and eventually made some pretty good music.

I had a similar experience at St. Andrew's College in Aurora. Imitating the school's drama teacher, who had attracted as many male students as he needed by offering the opportunity of performing with female actresses, I announced a choir of sopranos, altos and baritones. The ploy failed to overcome the prejudice. The only students to show up were the Asians, happily immune to the North American singing phobia. So we presented a peculiar image of Asian guys and white chicks.

In Quebec City, in addition to forming La Camerata Vocale, I was recruited to take the place of the music director of the Quebec Arts Company, who had moved to Ottawa. When they said they wanted to produce "The Music Man," I readily accepted. The departing director belonged to the "winning through intimidation" school. When one of the parents asked his daughters how an early rehearsal had gone, they said, "It was really fun. He didn't yell at us."

"The Music Man," you will recall, requires, among other things, a barber-shop quartet. I recruited four members of La Camerata Vocale for the job, but stirred a bit of resentment when the female lead, Marian the Librarian, also came from that group. "But she's one of *them*," people complained, since the Quebec Arts Company represented a bastion of Anglophony in a Francophone city. They were mollified to discover that one of her parents was, in fact, Anglophone.

For safety's sake I insisted on double-casting the leads, which was just as well, since the president of the company, who had insisted on playing Harold Hill, the "music man" of the title, suffered a nervous breakdown just before the performance and couldn't go on.

Toronto enjoys a celebrated Sing-Along Messiah every Christmastime, but fewer Messiahs occur around Easter, even though two-thirds of the oratorio concerns the latter holiday. Four times in my career I was able to mount Sing-Along Messiahs, with orchestra, on Palm Sundays, recruiting soloists from the Royal Conservatory and from the University of Toronto. (By engaging a different singer for each of a dozen solos, I had a solid set of section leaders already in place.)

To my surprise and delight, it turned out in each case that enough singers knew the score well enough that we could actually make music in addition to getting through the piece without falling apart. And the soloists were generally outstanding. I managed to get Robert Pomakov for one Messiah performance early in his career, when he was happy to sing for free just to get the experience with an orchestra. Everybody said, “Nice concert, but who was that *bass*?”

Often combining choirs made possible performances that couldn't have taken place any other way. St. Leonard's Church in Toronto had only eight people in the choir the year that I undertook to perform the Fauré Requiem, but adding three more church choirs brought us to more than forty voices, which sounded great with the Apollo Chamber Orchestra. (It wasn't until I repeated the piece at Jubilee United Church, however, that we actually enjoyed the sound of a harp.)

Let me conclude with two special highpoints. In 2014 the Pittsburgh Camerata, which I founded in 1974 and which miraculously had not only survived but had turned into a professional choir, celebrated its 40th anniversary by inviting alumni singers and conductors for a performance of the Tallis 40-voice motet *Spem in alium*. (And when I say 40-voice, I don't mean the number of singers in the choir but the number of independent vocal lines!) We ended up with some fifty singers for the concert, with four conductors trying to coordinate the Tallis piece (not including the current conductor of the Pittsburgh Camerata, who took the easy way out by playing continuo).

When it became evident that the other conductors were actually cueing on me, I demanded to see the full score (it's a gigantic piece of music) and copied cues into my own little score (covering only eight voices). The experience of casting my eyes around fifty singers and three other conductors before offering huge downbeats at several points in the work remains the greatest moment in my choral career. The next day, when I drove back to Canada, I was disconcerted to find that the rest of the world seemed totally unconscious that I had undergone such a peak experience.

For my final Sunday at Jubilee that same June, I invited as many former members of the Toronto Camerata and Quodlibet as I could locate to join

us in singing “Ain-a That Good News.” The piece came off so well that earlier this year I thought it might be fun to put on an entire concert with these alumni singers. Never mind that I now lived two hours from Toronto and we could only rehearse on the day of the performance. I would send them the scores and they could learn the music on their own. (You may well wonder how one could spend fifty years as a choral conductor and still be so naïve.) But, amazingly, it worked. We spent the day rehearsing and still had voices enough to offer a first-rate performance of folksongs and spirituals in the evening.

To all the hundreds of singers who have performed with me over half a century, I can only offer the words that the Quodlibet alumni sang to me informally after that service in June, “Thanks for all the music.”

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