

Authentic and Socially Relevant, Transformative Performance Practice:
Multidimensional Presentation in Choral Music
by Janine Dexter

When considered as a singular whole, the range of investment in the choral arts is breathtaking. The reach of choral activities is prodigious: the individual singer working with a voice teacher to become a stronger singer (times thousands); the choral group working in the local community (times thousands); the large choral association providing support and camaraderie (times hundreds); the university providing professional training in the choral arts (times thousands). Around the world, choral activities are a constant with untold amounts of time and money investments. As a worldwide community, these musicians are deeply committed to the art and craft of choral presentation. This paper proposes an equal commitment to authenticity *and* to social relevance in choral programming and presentation to positively impact a broader and more diverse audience. Definitions will be proposed and examples of current practice will be examined.

Prior to delving into these ideas, questions must be asked: Why do choral musicians expend time and treasure on the aforementioned choral arts activities? Why deploy so much effort on audience building? What is their *raison d'être*? The presupposition upon which this paper stands is that choral organizations exist to be transformative agents of individuals, the local community, and perhaps even the global community of people. Every action must flow through this filter. How does one program? How does one build an audience? What type of audience does one build? Where does one perform? How does one position oneself figuratively in the community as well as literally in the performance space? How does one accomplish transformational work—life-changing experiences—in a post-modern world that is shifting, splintering, globalizing, and changing at the speed of electrons flowing through the Internet?

In 1917, John Cotton Dana, the Vermont-born librarian and museum designer/critic, found himself in a similar time when the entire world was shifting (Haeuser). The "war to end all wars" was in its third year and in full rage. Emerging from its isolationism, the United States was starting to send men to the European war fronts. Uncertainty was everywhere. The long-held belief that Progress was the undeniable fate of humanity was coming apart (Leppard 21). The old orders were breaking down. Old forms of authority, religion, and art were all melting away. It was in this context that Mr. Dana wrote a series of books entitled *The New Museum Series*, in which he presented a case for a radical departure from business as usual. He referred to the current state of museums at that time as "gloomily beautiful," "temples and palaces," places of "religious gloom," and replicas of "Old Europe" (Dana 10–13). Museums had no purpose beyond presenting collections of the rare and the old without any reference to the life of the current community. Dana wryly comments:

Surely a function of a public art museum is the making of life more interesting, joyful and wholesome; and surely a museum can not very well exercise that function unless it relates itself quite closely to the life it should be influencing, and surely it can thus relate itself unless it comes in close contact with the material adornment of that life—its applied arts. (22)

He too, realized that the old order of things could not continue to deliver, even in the venerable museums of those times. He comprehended that for the museum to be viable it must

reach out to the community within which it exists. Referring to the "curators, experts, directors, and trustees" of museums of that time, Dana writes:

They become enamoured of rarity, of history . . . They become lost in their specialties and forget their museums. They become lost in the idea of a museum and forget its purpose. They become lost in working out their idea of a museum and forget their public. And soon, not being brought constantly in touch with the life of their community . . . they become entirely separated from it and go on making beautifully complete and expensive collections, but never construct a living, active and effective institution. (23)

In essence, he is arguing a negative variation on the thesis of this paper, that is, that the commitment to the presentation of objects, without a relevant connection to the life of the community within which the display takes place, leaves the institution irrelevant and impotent as an agent of transformation. Where does Dana find inspiration for an institution that has made itself relevant to the life of the community within which it exists? He turns to what a modern-day individual would call "the shopping mall":

A great city department store of the first class is perhaps more like a good museum of art than are any of the museums we have yet established. It is centrally located; it is easily reached; it is open to all at all hours when patrons wish to visit it; it receives all courteously and gives information freely; it displays its most attractive and interesting objects and shows countless others on request; its collections are classified according to the knowledge and needs of its patrons; it is well lighted; it has convenient and inexpensive restrooms; it supplies guides free of charge; it advertises itself widely and continuously; and it changes its exhibits to meet daily changes in subjects of interest, changes in taste in art, and the progress of invention and discovery. (23–24)

Although John Cotton Dana was speaking to the museum community in the early twentieth century, he might well have been speaking to the choral arts community in the early twenty-first century. The art form and the choral organizations exist in a world where the post-modern equivalent of the department store is iTunes. In 1982, the National Endowment for the Arts commenced a survey of arts participation among adults in the United States. A second survey was taken in 2002 and again in 2008. The results of the last survey were published in June 2009. When compared to the 1982 study, participation is down in every art event category and across all age ranges. It was found that, in the forty-five to fifty-four age group and among college-educated adults, participation is down sharply. In every category of event, participation was down by double-digit percentage points ranging from minus 10 percent to minus forty-five percent (Iyengar 3–4). This is problematic, as from these two demographics come the primary patrons of the arts. But even more troubling was the lack of participation among eighteen to twenty-four year olds: the same steep decline in participation is seen (Iyengar 5). This demographic is the future audience as well as the future patrons. It is interesting to compare this to iTunes sales as reported in the New York Times, August 11, 2008:

Apple also periodically announces when it sells another 1 billion songs. It announced the 4 billion mark this January, only five and half months after it boasted of 3 billion. Five months later, it announced the fifth billion. Apple also says it is the largest music retailer in the country, edging out Wal-Mart. It boasts 50 million customers. And it says it is selling or renting 50,000 movies a day (a pace of 1.8 million a year, still tiny compared with music). (Hansell)

According to the NEA study, the one area where there is increased participation is in the online space: "Of all adults who downloaded, watched, or listened to music, theater, or dance performances online (30.1 percent), most did those activities at least once a week" (Iyengar 7). Again, this is the future audience of the arts and therefore also the future audience of the choral art. In this writer's opinion, the choral arts community would do well to heed these findings.

If choral artists are to build a sustainable audience, the tension between the two dynamics, authenticity *and* social relevance, must be addressed in a dynamic and ongoing process. Among performers and in academia, there is great concern and attention given to the "authentic" performance of music. The following are the comments of two writers who have struggled with these questions in the context of music performance. First, Raymond Leppard defines authenticity in his book *Authenticity in Music*:

It can only mean one thing: the clearest possible revelation of that music so that its intrinsic qualities, vitality and value are presented again as vividly as they may conceivably ever have been. So will the evidence of its power to transcend the years be strengthened, and the delight and elation that communication with things of the spirit brings be confirmed. (73)

This concept, with the study of the period and performance practice of the composer, seems clear and attainable, but Leppard continues, revealing the complexity the issue:

In dispute, or at least confusion, are how and in what ways the revelation may best be achieved. There are those who believe that only as we come closer to the exact conditions, the precisely duplicated ways and means of the music's first appearance, can its authentic message and content be revealed.

Then there are those who believe that the closer one comes to knowing how and why it was written and performed, the closer one shall come to the inner vitality of the composer's mind, the revelation of which, to present-day audiences, is more important than any other aspect of performance (73).

Juxtaposed to this dilemma is an indirect definition of social relevance by Landon E. Beyer in the introduction to his book *the arts, popular culture, and social change* [lower case intentional]:

Moreover, as we have become aware of in the recent past—and as this book demonstrates—in order to understand the meaning and value of the arts, we must situate them within the cultural, social, political, economic, and ideological contexts out of which they emerge and from which a significant part of their meaning is derived (x).

The tensions found between authenticity and social relevance are layered with complexity—tensions regarding the proper conditions for authenticity juxtaposed against the questions of relevance.

Historically, the various forms of choral music were found integrated into and stemming from the functions of daily life. It was, in its various styles and formats, an essential and palpable mirror of human existence: art as an outgrowth and function of living, rather than art for the sake of art. The following are historical examples of meaningful and relevant choral singing from the arenas of religious and social life.

From the beginning of the Christian era and for fifteen hundred years following, music as an art form was dominated by the church (Mees 20). As a result, the choral canon contains an enormous amount of sacred music—music that had a specific function in the routine and daily experiences of the people. Beginning in the sixteenth century, attention began to shift toward the composition of secular art music; however, most major composers continued to spend a majority

of their time and energy creating works for various uses in the liturgy (Mees 25). Performed within the context of these cultures, the sacred choral works were deeply meaningful and effective as well as aesthetically beautiful. They serve now as an accurate representation of the fundamental principles of the era in which they were written. The influences for the music came directly out of the church and with the church playing a central part of day-to-day life, the people had a personal connection with that music in their lives.

Gregorian chant is a good example of this. It was central and meaningful, both as invocation and as music. In his essay “Whither Gregorian Chant?” Robert Fowells points out:

Because the chant is inextricably both prayer and music, it has been subjected over the centuries to all of the problems of the church, both liturgical and political, as well as the changes of musical style and purpose. The human urge to create gave it constant competition in such forms as tropes, sequences, motets, and polyphonic masses. The general renaissance dislike for art forms that were out of style plus pressures from the new Lutheran chorales and Huguenot psalm tunes caused the chant to be trimmed of all its melismas—barbaric excess. The French revolution threw out the church completely and of course the chant went with it. (51)

In other words, the chant was no longer relevant to a meaningful area of life, therefore it ceased to be appreciated and performed. A question comes to mind: In the present-day United States, with an audience which is found to be generally musically uneducated and school systems that are discontinuing music programs, how is a conductor to present an authentic representation of Gregorian chant that will be meaningful and relevant to the audience?

Music, in its many forms, is representative of a culture, a people group within that culture and their specific value system. This is true whether the culture is religiously centered or secular in nature. Within a secular context, music is a vehicle for the personal expression of the people rather than of the church, an expression that is current, accessible and relevant to the singer, participant or connoisseur present.

Examples of this dynamic are found in the catch clubs, glee clubs and madrigal groups of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English society. These groups were founded with a style and flavor that was immediately accessible and relevant to the participant. The uniting social adhesive was the music. In his article “The Oldest Surviving English Musical Club: Some Historical Notes on the Madrigal Society of London,” Reginald Nettel writes, “[One] finds sympathy in an alehouse, and in consequence the seekers after good company found great pleasure in amateur music clubs, where they made their own music, exercised their lungs, and expressed their opinion on current affairs” (97). These men’s groups occurred throughout all social classes from the wealthy and titled Englishman to the common laborer, and they served to unite the members with their neighbors and peers in their stratum of society in a relational atmosphere. Disagreements or business conflicts were often settled in these good-natured environments (Nettel 97). Although the “glee” was the name of the Anglo-Saxon “glinge” music, the word took on a double entendre due to those tavern and coffee house environments where these types of groups often met (Trame 22).

In his essay, “The Male Chorus, Medium of Art and Entertainment: Its History and Literature,” Richard Trame writes that the beginnings of male choral groups came out of the Masonic organizations of the eighteenth century. These choral groups varied, some advancing serious choral art and others providing entertainment (Trame 20). It is also noted that the trauma of war aided the formation of the male chorus: “The adverse emotional impact of the Napoleonic Wars on Germany led to the establishment of male-chorus singing societies. Their

meetings fostered rambunctious conviviality, drinking, and greater national identity through patriotic and nationalistic songs” (Trame 21). This suggests that the singing groups provided therapeutic value to the singers beyond the joy of singing. These clubs served as a social outlet and lighthearted entertainment for the participants. The songs, taken out of their cultural context, are interesting and amusing but insignificant compared to the power they carried in their original social setting. Perhaps there is value for modern conductors to note that the function of these organizations was relational and the songs were unreservedly connected and relevant to the lives of the participants.

The American glee club, patterned after these English singing clubs, serves as another example of choral singing that was relevant within the context of the social environment. Glee clubs were primarily, but not exclusively, connected to collegiate and secondary schools and were modeled after fraternities. These clubs were dedicated to their own personal entertainment, the performance of light concerts and the promotion of school spirit with the singing of college songs at sporting events. The repertoire covered popular songs, spirituals, sailor songs and work songs and, like their English predecessors, served to unite the members in relationship as well as in euphony (Trame 23). The membership coalesced, again, around performance activities that were meaningful and relevant within the context of their personal lives. Community glee clubs suffered a decline after 1950. Trane cites two reasons, the first being the establishment of music programs at the university level, which tended to drain the community groups of the best singers. Second, after WWII, the development of the feminist movement created a climate where exclusively male activities were scrutinized and considered chauvinistic (Trame 26–27). This writer would add the possibility that the decline in popularity of these types of singing groups after 1950 were a direct result of the changes in the perceptions and lifestyle of individuals within a rapidly shifting culture. The existing structure of choral activities no longer matched the culture of the participants, therefore, the structure of organizations changed. For example, in the past twenty years there have been an increasing number of gay men’s choruses in the larger cities of the United States (Trame 27). These men’s choruses are relevant in a new way and meet the needs of a specific group of people and, therefore, they flourish—regardless of other establishments, university music programs, or the feminist movement.

Chorus America’s publication, *The Voice*, featured an article in its Spring 2009 issue entitled “A Different Kind of Chorus.” In this article, writer Kelsey Menehan introduces the professional chamber group *Conspirare*, based in Austin, Texas, directed by Craig Hella Johnson, and brings to the reader’s attention that perhaps it is time to consider a different presentation model for choral music:

Say the word *chorus*, and what images come to mind? A group of singers dressed in black? Holding black folders? Standing in sections in rows on risers? Singing all the standards with another piece thrown in for variety? “Tradition is a good thing,” says Ann Meier Baker, president and CEO of Chorus America. “But in today’s changing environment, with varying appetites for music and entertainment, from different generations of people who have new expectations, we have to step back periodically and ask, ‘What else could we do, what could be different, what new idea could we try to stay fresh and relevant?’” (15)

Johnson chose the name *Conspirare*, meaning to breathe with or breathe together, to represent the singers, the ensemble and their mission. There is concern that the world of choral music speaks only to a very select audience and that there is often a disconnect between the music and the listeners. Pam Elrod, an alto in *Conspirare*, muses, “[W]ouldn’t it be

great if choral music could become something that was able to speak to more than just a select audience? We have to realize that in order to do that, we have to be inclusive and creative, but not pander” (Menehan 16). In his programming, Johnson carefully and “seamlessly interweaves popular songs, classical repertoire, and new commissions in a thought-provoking and moving musical journey” to try to bring meaning, connection and relevance to the music for the listener (Menehan 15). This began over a decade ago with a concert of *The Tears of St. Peter*, by Renaissance composer Orlando de Lassus, which is “an intimate dialogue in twenty-one movements, in which Jesus and Peter explore the impact of betrayal on their friendship” (Menehan 15). In order to bring connection from the work to an audience that may not have the musical foundation to understand the deeper meaning, Johnson wove strains of a Beatles’ melody between the movements:

“Renaissance music can be like choral wallpaper,” says Johnson, “like what you might hear walking in a cathedral in Europe. It’s nice atmosphere but we have no real connection to the music itself.” So he decided to try an experiment. He asked . . . a frequent collaborator with Conspirare to sing interpolations between movements. “So, just before we start, [she] stands up and sings, ‘He’s a real nowhere man, sitting in his nowhere land,’ and we bolted right into the first madrigal,” Johnson recalls.

“Something behind me suddenly felt different—that the audience got it”. (Menehan 15)

This blending together of styles has been referred to as the “collage” concerts and is especially present during the *Christmas at the Carillon* performances each year. The merge of sacred and secular, “art music with popular song, is intended to bring audiences together in a spirit of unity, peace and hope” (Sterick). In a radio interview Johnson explained his thoughts behind the collage Christmas concerts:

I believe, so much, in choral music as an art form. It’s this incredible, beautiful symbol of how it is that people of diverse backgrounds can live together and can be a human community. I think that, in a musical way, we paint that picture every time we get up to sing. Any choir does that. I was interested in something that could feel inspiring and stimulating and new for the season . . . creating concerts that somehow could really speak to the heart of the season. We all talk about it, this season of love and of joy and of compassion for one another and I thought, how could we play with this music in a way that could really create a vehicle for communicating that love and that respect and compassion for one another . . . It gives Conspirare an opportunity to explore the deeper meanings of the season, in a way that is welcoming to all people, no matter their musical tastes, or religious or spiritual orientation. (Sterick)

In addition to the innovative programming, Johnson adds movement, full wall screen images and creative instrumentation to bring a multidimensional effect to the presentations. The programs look somewhat like a collage also, with smatterings of poetry, quotes and ideas that singers or audience members share during the year, all in an effort to bring understanding and meaning to the music and to share the creating experience with the group and the audience (Menehan 21). As Director of Choral Activities at the University of Texas in Austin from 1990–2001, he challenged his conducting students to “explore musical relationships laterally as opposed to hierarchically” and implements this in his group, clearly communicating to the singers that their “voice and point of view” are a valuable part of the process (Romey 83). He believes and teaches that “the collaborative nature of the music-making experience must be cultivated in every relationship and with every musical selection” (Romey 83).

The desire behind these concerts is ultimately, for seasoned music enthusiasts, an increased understanding of the rich music in the choral canon, and, for someone who was completely unacquainted with classical literature, a connecting point to the literature that would initiate an openness to experience some of the other classical music (Menehan 21). The variety of music, particularly in the *Christmas at the Carillon* concerts, not only provides an opportunity for musical education, but also for a broader understanding of the season. Johnson says:

“What are the true, simple core messages . . . that this music is meant to communicate? Certainly the gift of love and care for one another, that connection with our human community. I asked, are we really transmitting that . . . is it indeed an open door? We can say, until we are blue in the face, that this music speaks of love and inclusiveness, but if I am doing everything that is Palestrina, Schutz, Schein and Scheidt, then it’s coming from a very specific Christian tradition, a very strong liturgical tradition, which is not an open door to a large part of the world”. (Menehan 20)

A simple example of the blending of these styles is Craig Hella Johnson’s arrangement of *Lo, How a Rose/The Rose*. Here Johnson opens the arrangement giving the familiar Praetorius chorale melody to the sopranos in unison, and at the end of the first phrase conflates the first line of the timeless melody of Amanda McBroom in a solo voice over the top of the chorale. Immediately the words of the text from “The Rose” bring new meaning to the ancient text of Praetorius. As the conflation proceeds, each text brings significance to the other, the old speaking wisdom to the new, and the new shedding understanding on the ancient. Johnson wrote a piano accompaniment that highlights recognizable motives from both pieces. The piano begins with repeating fifths, the opening motif from the original accompaniment of “The Rose,” but then writes in harmonies and melodic changes that hint of another melody to come.

76
win-ter — far be-neath — the bit-ter snow; — *mp*
From sin and death He

80
rit. Lies the seed that with the sun's love, in the spring be-comes the
rit. saves us *rit.* *molto rit.* *molto rit.*

84
Slower *rit.*
rose. *pp* *rit.*
And light-ens — ev - 'ry load. *rit.*

Slower *pp* *rit.*

LO, HOW A ROSE / THE ROSE

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The chorus sings the Praetorius melody throughout the piece in unison, beginning with only the sopranos, and layered in turn by the other voices—the altos, and later the tenors and basses—adding the texture of their ranges but always in unison. The soloist remains on the McBroom melody throughout. At the end of the piece, the interwoven texts become one thought and the listener has access to a moment of revelation:

*“And you think that love is only for the lucky and the strong;
True Man, yet very God,
Just remember in the winter far beneath the bitter snow;
From sin and death He saves us
Lies the seed that with the sun’s love, in the spring becomes the rose.
And lightens ev’ry load”.* (Praetorius)

The experience of these texts aurally, rather than visually, provides a potential for additional meaning. For example, in this combined context, “sun’s love” could be heard as “son’s love,” therefore bringing a changed message to the popular song “The Rose.”

These types of programming have brought Craig Hella Johnson national and international attention, sold-out concerts in Austin, and a connection with the general public in his community that most often does not exist for choral organizations. Rather than a small acknowledgment in the arts section for the usual select few, The Austin Chronicle embraces *Conspirare* and encourages general public attendance by clearly speaking their language:

Now don’t let the word “choir” throw you. If you’re imagining a horde of black-robed figures belting out endless runs of 16th notes and unintelligible German text that was dusty and tired when Bach was in knee pants, think again. The songs are arranged in such a way that you seem to be listening to . . . a river of voices that run through one another like currents—so fluid, so smooth, and so blended, that they seem to be one thing . . . The music is eminently accessible . . . “Choir.” This is a performance that should forever change what you think of that word. (Faires)

After reading this newspaper article on the upcoming concert, the average reader might have the perception that Johnson isn’t programming classical music, but this is not the case. The artistic combination of styles and multidimensional presentation is evidently so effective that a newspaper reviewer feels confident in promoting a primarily classically based choral group to the general public with the assurance that they won’t be hearing anything “dusty and tired.”

Another pioneer in the change of format in choral music is the Minnesota Chorale. With the “ultimate mission to celebrate the human voice and its power to educate, enrich, unite, and inspire” and under the artistic direction of Kathy Saltzman Romey, connection with the community “through unique artistic partnerships” has been held as a high value in the outward and inner functions of the organization (Romey 77). She explains, in her contributory chapter in “Wit, Wisdom, and Will,” part of her philosophy:

If choral music is to reclaim a position of artistic relevance and significance within our communities, both the work of art (the thing, the object, the noun) and the artists’ work (the craft, the process, the verb) need to play a deep and meaningful role in the lives of the performers, the audience, and the greater community. Have we responded creatively to the evolving conditions in which we live, adapting our traditions to embrace the traditions of others? . . . [W]e must embrace an active relationship with our concert programming following a dynamic, responsive model that does not promote a hierarchical valuation of one music over another, but rather explores and integrates the musicking [sic] of all humanity. (76)

Consequently the organization has established several educational programs addressing various issues. One of these programs, “Bridges,” uses choral music from around the world to create and maintain relationships and to build respect and lateral education opportunities with the multiple ethnic populations of the community. The concert presentations are most often the culmination of a longer-term process, sometimes six to eighteen months, and are usually “interactive and non-traditional in nature” (Romey 78). The sing-a-long concert “Lift Every Voice” for example, was the result of an eighteen-month community outreach and “choral inreach,” a collaboration with the community’s African-American church choirs that included weekly workshops focused on the study and teaching of African-American sacred songs (Romey 78). Romey acknowledges that cultural differences can be challenging, but that “the creation of a level playing field between members offers the potential for more constructive dialogue and

creative exchange” as well as the potential for meaningful and lasting change in the dynamic of community for the future (79). Romey teaches the members of her organization the value of the lateral learning position, of putting oneself in a position of discourse with members of the community, one learning from another in a circular pattern rather than in a “hierarchical relationship” (76).

In 2004, the Bridges program culminated with a concert entitled “Musical Chi: East-West Convergences” focusing on the “connection between music, body, and spirit” (Romey 79). The theme of that year included an educational series in the schools sharing traditional Chinese practices particularly surrounding movement (Romey 79).

“Sing Me a Home” was the 2007 Bridges collaborative, which focused on affordable housing for immigrants in the Twin Cities area. The program, partnering with Habitat for Humanity to meet the housing needs of six families, included several inner-city high school choirs and featured student poetry and new commissions by local composers using the texts from the student work (Romey 80). Romey explains that the singers from the Minnesota Chorale are invited “to serve as advocates for [these] project[s]; carrying songs back to their respective communities; sharing them with friends, students, and colleagues; and performing them at similar events. The ripple effect produced by these many acts of ‘singer advocacy’ can be powerful and sustained, touching many more people than any single chorus could otherwise reach” (81).

Romey makes a strong declaration on the state of affairs in the traditional choral world, expressing to readers that “we must take care when conceiving concert programs—just as we care for the people and relationships in our lives—not to inadvertently serve the enduring hegemony of a singular music heritage and thereby unintentionally marginalize the music or members of any given community” (75–76).

Through this brief survey of the role of music, using representative examples across various eras and settings—the church, secular life, the beginnings of formal community-based choral groups, and current highly organized choral organizations—one finds that music has been relevant within its specific cultural and temporal setting while remaining authentic to the composer’s original intent. There are now successful, innovative choirs that are performing classical choral music in an authentic manner and are simultaneously building relationships within and transforming their communities. They are redefining the meaning for the word “choir.” In the words of Reginald Nettel, as he wrote in 1948, about the resilience of “The Oldest Surviving English Musical Club”:

[L]et us not forget those living traditions which may change their appearance under the influence of new demands, and never in consequence become oldfashioned, curious, or quaint. (97)

In the dedication for *Choral Essays: A Tribute to Roger Wagner*, Paul Salamunovich refers to the “Golden Age of Choral Music in the 40’s, 50’s, and the 60’s” (Belan viii). Does this statement infer that the “Golden Age” began in the 40’s and ended in the 60’s, and therefore is over? With a change of choral presentation style in the direction of relevance with inclusively multidimensional performances, would it be possible to induce a new “Golden Age of Choral Music”?

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