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Tom Bridges

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## Singing Locally; Thinking Globally: Why Community Choirs Matter

### Abstract

As a community choir director of nearly twenty years experience I frequently and inevitably come into contact with attitudes and beliefs about music as it is practised, experienced and observed in this culture held by people who regard themselves as nonmusicians. If I were to paraphrase most people's considered description of music and its place in society, it would go something like this: Music is a commodity or service that is produced and sold by experts, to be consumed by the population when they buy concert tickets, purchase recordings, or turn on the radio or TV. These experts are skilled artisans whose craft or trade is that of a performing and/or recording musician. They are credentialed as such from a combination – in proportions that vary enormously and idiosyncratically – of a genetically bestowed 'gift' or 'talent', and specialist training, both formal and informal.

## Singing Locally; Thinking Globally: Why Community Choirs Matter

Tom Bridges

'To make music is the essential thing — to listen to it is accessory' – Charles Seeger.<sup>1</sup>

### Singing Locally

As a community choir director of nearly twenty years experience I frequently and inevitably come into contact with attitudes and beliefs about music as it is practised, experienced and observed in this culture held by people who regard themselves as non-musicians. If I were to paraphrase most people's considered description of music and its place in society, it would go something like this:

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Thus seen as one of many goods-and-services panels in the social and economic quilt, any notion of music and music-making having an alternative contemporary social definition and function is rarely adumbrated. When one is suggested, invariably it comes as a surprise. In an article in the first issue of *The Musical Quarterly* Percy Grainger pointed to just such an alternative:

With regard to music, our modern Western civilization produces, broadly speaking, two main types of educated men. On the one hand the professional musician or leisured amateur-enthusiast who spends the bulk of his waking hours making music, and on the other hand all those many millions of men and women whose lives are far too overworked and arduous, or too completely immersed in the ambitions and labyrinths of our material civilization, to be able to devote any reasonable proportion of their time to music or artistic expression of any kind at all. *How different from either of these types is the bulk of uneducated and 'uncivilized' humanity of every race and colour, with whom natural musical expression may be said to be a universal, highly prized habit that seldom, if ever, degenerates into the drudgery of a mere means of livelihood. [TB's emphasis]*<sup>2</sup>

Had Grainger been able to observe his own Western culture one hundred years on, many things – obviously – would have astonished him. He would have been confronted by massive changes in the 'ambitions and labyrinths of our material civilization'. Because they were directly connected to his observations in 1915, particularly conspicuous might have been firstly, the commodification and mass consumption of music to previously unimaginable levels; secondly, the almost universal unpreparedness of the population to use uninhibitedly their natural singing voices, if at all; and thirdly, in the popular ideology the discounting of tradition and reproduction in favour of the new in the general estimation of musical value.

Today, the vast bulk of the population consumes an unprecedented volume of music as a commodity. Electronic reproduction of music lends it universal accessibility. We today recognise electronically reproduced commercial music as a multifaceted cardinal pillar of popular culture. In approximate historical sequence its technological development might be itemised thus: wax cylinders, radio, 33 rpm records, long-playing vinyl records, television, cassette tapes (and their outgrowth, Walkman-type portability), CDs, DVDs, and now in the early 21st century MP3 devices and file exchange on the internet. Finally, there is one that needs special mention because it is easily overlooked – amplification. Amplification, by spatially and aurally quarantining performers from their

audience, musters them ineluctably into physically separate camps – and never the twain shall be the other. In enabling performers to be heard farther and farther away by a larger and larger audience, a plethora of microphones, speakers and attendant paraphernalia erects a wall between the two groups. Moreover, as it becomes necessary to compete with and defeat ever louder other sounds – like conversation – louder and louder amplification becomes gratuitous noise, antisocial in both essence and effect. How many long-term patrons have been permanently driven out of their local pub – and the social hub it has long provided – by the unnecessarily loud jukebox that has been installed without consultation and played without the offer or availability of an alternative?

Interestingly, the list begins more or less contemporaneously with the date of Grainger’s article quoted above. The ‘many millions of men and women ... [un]able’ in 1915 ‘to devote any reasonable proportion of their time to music or artistic expression of any kind at all’ would now, with more disposable income and leisure time and an unlimited availability of recorded music, probably identify their musical selves as listeners. With the development of a unique set of personal preferences – taste – comes listening expertise. So today, the typical self-concept around music is that of an educated consumer. Rarely if ever does anyone conceive of him or her self seriously as a practitioner, or of music having a primary social function other than *something to be listened to*.<sup>3</sup>

And music is now everywhere, whether we like it or not. It is even the case that music is used – that is, carefully selected and broadcast – to serve a dedicated purpose unrelated to its creation or appeal as art, and we have become unwitting subscribers to these usually covert agendas.<sup>4</sup> But an unintended effect is that we have learned to switch off our listening. Music is heard everywhere, but listened to ever less and less. It is no longer special or cherished, but part of the background white noise of our routines. One result is that our powers of discrimination have been weakened, and our critical faculties conditioned everywhere to applaud mediocrity dressed up as excellence.

Recorded sound, which artificially preserves the unpreservable, increases the likelihood of hearing without

listening, since it can be listened to at home, in cars, or in aeroplanes, thus allowing us to reduce music to background activity and eliminate the possibility of total concentration – i.e., thought.<sup>5</sup>

When people arrive at a community choir of mine for the first time I will nearly always be told by the recruit that he or she ‘can’t sing’. And when I talk with others about my work, away from it, ‘I can’t sing’ is likewise heard again and again as the first response. From numerous conversations I’ve had with fellow community choir directors, this experience is common to them too. The personal narratives that usually follow are bleakly similar, and draw on a standard catalogue of put-downs and discouragement in formative years by authority figures, often by those who should know better, like school music teachers. ‘I was kicked out of the school choir’ and ‘If I sang at home my parents would get angry, and tell me to shut up’ are typical anecdotes and they are repeated *ad infinitum*. Cruel or fickle circumstance may also play a part, but invariably in the stories the damage is done early. The uniformly silencing effect is commonly accompanied by the view that it is also irreversible. This is reinforced by the subject’s self-credentialed status as an expert listener (to music): ‘you wouldn’t want to listen to me – I wouldn’t’. But this judgement, expressed as jocose self-deprecation, is based on a more serious analysis: ‘I can’t sing, in comparison with, or in a similar fashion to, those who are authorised to sing – that is, professional singers’. American folklorist Alan Lomax noted with dismay that when people turned on the radio, and heard a popular singer, whatever the genre they would assume that that was what singing was – what the human singing voice is supposed to sound like. So of course they (the listener) ‘couldn’t sing’. It would do little good to point out that probably all they really meant was, they couldn’t sing like that. After all, what else – what other singing – is there?<sup>6</sup>

The answer – that singing is as universal a human ability as speaking, and has only relatively recently, and in highly technologised locations, faded from view as such – comes as a shock to many. As Frankie Armstrong puts it:

In pre-industrial communities, singing and chanting are/were an integral part of every tribal and village person’s

life. Many activities from the cradle to the grave were accompanied by the melodic voice – lullabies; collective rhythmic working chants; hollas [sic] to bring in the cows and soothing onomatopoeic croons to milk them by; spinning and weaving songs; ritual and devotional chants; songs to dance to, to walk to the next village to, to while away the hours behind the plough, to amuse and move family and friends of an evening, to tell the stories of the gods and the ancestors, to wail and grieve by the body of a loved one – people sang thus over thousands and thousands of years. ... Throughout most of human history, each child was born into a community that assumed they would sing, as we assume each child will learn to talk.<sup>7</sup>

The Zimbabweans say it neatly with their proverb, 'If you can walk you can dance; if you can talk you can sing'.

Now, the 'I can't sing' story can be countermanded quickly and decisively by asking the subject to sing 'Happy Birthday'. It can be guaranteed that this is the one song in this culture that everyone knows. (In some locations, 'Auld Lang Syne' might qualify as another). In other cultures the list would be uncountably long, and in earlier times in this (Western) culture most individuals would possess a large inventory of songs. It was a natural outgrowth of singing being regarded as a natural activity that one was born into.

This was well known to Percy Grainger a hundred years ago. To watch it rapidly vanishing in his own culture caused him great dismay, undoubtedly compounded by the vantage afforded by his own musically educated milieu. It was logical, then, that one of his lifelong enthusiasms as a musician and scholar should be the pursuit and study of folksong. After all, not very far back in the history of his society, there existed a musically active general populace engaged in creating and reproducing their own lively musical culture. Unlike the idealised and artificial expression of human experience typically found in art music, or the glamorised and packaged representations of 'life' usually delivered by pop music, this 'folk' culture was protean, authentic and accessible. Using song as a natural medium, the things that were on people's minds in their everyday lives were given musical form and shared, not primarily or necessarily for an audience, but for their own reward as an activity. Whether

to ameliorate the harshness of life, to understand as well as generate relief from their circumstances, or to make bearable and more efficient strenuous work (as in sailors' shanties), this was in essence a community survival resource. The so-called 'folk' tradition with its canon of songs about work, love, sex, play, family, history, songs that told stories true and tall, songs disseminating either the latest news or a web of fantasy and fiction, songs and music to dance to, is a tradition that bespeaks resistance and survival.<sup>8</sup> And repeating, it was a musically *participatory* tradition: any listening, with perhaps one conspicuous exception, was secondary. (That exception is of course the lullaby. Since pre-history sung by mothers to coax their infants to sleep, lullabies are the original and still the most compelling example of music used as propaganda – that is, music performed explicitly to change the attitudes and/or behaviour of its audience.)

### Thinking Globally

A fundamental premise of the foregoing is that the world as we know it is in grave peril and that human civilization is peering into the abyss of extinction by its own hand. Whether the result of conflagration, pestilence, climate change, or any causally linked permutation of the three, this is not extreme or undue pessimistic fatalism; merely an honest assessment of abundant evidence. It is one shared by many people around the globe, from many different backgrounds and locations. The consensus is striking, however, among those of scientific *métier*.<sup>9</sup>

The importance of music in such critical circumstances is suggested eloquently by ethnomusicologist John Blacking in the words that conclude his influential *How Musical is Man?*:

In a world in which authoritarian power is maintained by means of superior technology, and the superior technology is supposed to indicate a monopoly of intellect, it is necessary to show that the real sources of technology, of all culture, are to be found in the human body and in cooperative interaction between human bodies. ... In a world such as ours, in this world of cruelty and exploitation in which the tawdry and the mediocre are proliferated endlessly for the sake of financial profit, it is necessary to understand why a madrigal by Gesualdo or a Bach

Passion, a sitar melody from India or a song from Africa, Berg's *Wozzeck* or Britten's *War Requiem*, a Balinese gamelan or a Cantonese opera, or a symphony by Mozart, Beethoven, or Mahler, may be profoundly necessary for human survival, quite apart from any merit they may have as examples of creativity and technical progress. It is also necessary to explain why, under certain circumstances, a 'simple' 'folk' song may have more human value than a 'complex' symphony.<sup>10</sup>

Working musically can reveal in dramatically new and enlightening ways that 'everything is connected'. This fact is seminal to the peace-mongering work of eminent pianist and maestro, Daniel Barenboim:<sup>11</sup>

In music, there are no independent elements. How often we think, on a personal, social, or political level, that there are certain independent things and that, upon doing them, they will not influence others or that this interconnection will remain hidden. This does not occur in music, because in music everything is interconnected. The character and intention of the simplest melody change drastically with a complex harmony. That is learned through music, not through political life. Thus emerges the impossibility of separating elements, the perception that everything is connected, the need always to unite logical thought and intuitive emotion.<sup>12</sup>

Although expressed here by Barenboim more as a metaphysical than a practical reality, it is not difficult – indeed it is common – for people through their own experience of group music-making to draw direct lessons from and find direct applications of these very insights. This, I have found from working with adults who have never before been a member of a seriously constituted musical ensemble, is particularly true when that experience is new to them.

If music-making is indeed necessary for human survival, it seems reasonable to suppose that what lies at the core of this function is its binding properties, and its ability to be transformative, even in small ways. These properties do not become fully apparent until music is *made*, actively and with others: they are by definition, subjective. It is when the sum of these individual subjectivities aggregate into a single shared

phenomenon that alchemy can happen, and a previously unimagined, exquisite community consciousness arises. Pete Seeger, that exemplary and possibly the twentieth-century's most effective cultural activist,<sup>13</sup> always maintained that this process – which he carefully studied and in his concerts deliberately generated – is unique to music:

The most important thing is to get together...It's this word "share" I keep coming back to in my concerts all the time: I think it's more important than "love". Love has been so misused and so misunderstood – but "share" is a much more simple and direct word. And right now it's very easy to point out to anybody that the resources of the world are not being shared...Music in some strange, mystical way brings people together, in spite of our problems...I have the feeling that music is able to do something that prose and pictures haven't been able to do.<sup>14</sup>

Participation: that is what's going to save the human race. Once upon a time, wasn't singing a part of everyday life, as much as talking, physical exercise or religion? Our distant ancestors, wherever they were in this world, sang – while pounding grain, paddling canoes or making long journeys. Can we begin to make our lives once more all of a piece? Finding the right songs and singing them over and over is a way to start. And when one person taps out a beat while another leads into the melody, or when three people discover a harmony they never knew existed, or a crowd joins in on a chorus as though to raise the ceiling a few feet higher, then they also know there is hope for the world.<sup>15</sup>

In Western society, an unconscionable loss has attended our acquisition of unparalleled material affluence: the din of commodified music has silenced our musical selves. This comes at roughly the same historical moment that neuroscience has established beyond doubt that the ability and impetus to express human self through musical means is guaranteed by our hard-wiring.<sup>16</sup> Community choirs can inter alia provide an ideal setting for people to reclaim their birthright as musicians, to learn to use it co-operatively, and to experience its sometimes unexpected rewards. The potential extra-musical ramifications of such rewards should not be underestimated.

## Notes

- 1 Charles Seeger, 'The Purposes of Music' in Pete Seeger, *Where Have All The Flowers Gone: A Singer's Stories, Songs, Seeds, Robberies*, Sing Out Corp: Bethlehem, 1993, p.84.
- 2 Grainger, Percy, 'The Impress of Personality in Unwritten Music' in Balough, Teresa (ed), *A Musical Genius from Australia: Selected Writings by and About Percy Grainger*, CIRCME: Nedlands, 1997, p.66.
- 3 Daniel J. Levitin, *This is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession*, Penguin, London 2007, pp.6–10. 'Given this voracious consumption, I would say that most Americans qualify as expert music listeners.'
- 4 The obvious example is the music one hears in the supermarket aisles whilst shopping – carefully calculated to boost the day's turnover.
- 5 Daniel Barenboim, *Everything is Connected: The Power of Music*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson: London, 2008, p.37.
- 6 'We now have cultural machines so powerful that one singer can reach everybody in the world, and make all the other singers feel inferior because they're not like him. Once that gets started, he gets backed by so much cash and so much power that he becomes a monstrous invader from outer space, crushing the life out of all the other human possibilities. My life has been devoted to opposing that tendency.' Quoted by Jon Pareles in his obituary for Lomax, *New York Times*, July 20, 2002.
- 7 Frankie Armstrong, 'Freeing our Singing Voice', in *The Vocal Vision: Views on Voice*, Applause Books: New York, 1997. Quoted from author's manuscript.
- 8 A.L. Lloyd, *The Singing Englishman: An Introduction to Folksong*, Workers' Music Association, London, 1944. See also Bob Copper, *A Song for every Season*, Paladin: St Albans, 1975; Roy Palmer, *The Sound of History: Songs and Social Comment*, OUP: London, 1988; Oscar Brand, *The Ballad Mongers: The Rise of the Modern Folk Song*, Funk & Wagnalls: New York, 1962.
- 9 Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive*, Allen Lane: Camberwell, 2005.
- 10 John Blacking, *How Musical is Man?*, Faber: London, 1976, p.116.
- 11 Using music-making at the elite level of orchestral concert hall music, Barenboim's West-Eastern Divan Orchestra comprised of young musicians from across the region is a project dedicated to

peace-making in the Middle East. See 'Knowledge is the Beginning: Daniel Barenboim and the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra' documentary film by Paul Smaczny (Warner Classics, 2005).

- 12 Barenboim, op cit, p.159.
- 13 For comprehensive appraisal of Pete Seeger's influence, see David King Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing: Pete Seeger*, Harrap: London, 1985; Alan M. Winkler, *'To Everything There is a Season': Pete Seeger and the Power of Song*, OUP: New York, 2009; Alec Wilkinson, *The Protest Singer: An Intimate Portrait of Pete Seeger*, Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 2009.
- 14 Pete Seeger, in Jo Metcalf Schwartz (ed) *The Incomplete Folksinger*, Simon & Schuster: New York 1972, p.484.
- 15 Quoted from 'Pete Seeger: The Power of Song', documentary film by Jim Brown, The Weinstein Company, 2008.
- 16 Levitin, op. cit. Also, Robert Jourdain, *Music, the Brain, and Ecstasy: How Music Captures our Imagination*, Avon: New York, 1997, and Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Fontana: London, 1993.

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