

TROUBADOUR

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Nathan Zullinger



A MATCH OF INTELLECT AND SPIRIT: An Interview with Richard M. Coffey

Part I

by Nathan Zullinger

Richard Coffey



Richard M. Coffey has reason to celebrate. Not only is Coffey about to begin his 34th year as conductor of the Connecticut Choral Artists (CONCORA), the professional choir that he founded in 1974, he is also celebrating his fourth year as music director of the Hartford Chorale, and his 36th year as Minister of Music at South Congregational-First Baptist Church (South Church) in New Britain, Connecticut. His peers in the community are celebrating as well: the New Britain Arts Council recently awarded Coffey its Lifetime Achievement Award for his contributions to the arts, and the Hartford Symphony Orchestra presented him with a "Major Achievement" award for his choral work with the organization.

Keith Burris of the Manchester (CT) Journal Inquirer says that Coffey is a musician "whose intellect and spirit are evenly matched and who exists to serve the music." Those who make music with Rick Coffey are aware of his deep spiritual commitment and his attention to detail in his personal preparations and in the music itself.

NZ: Tell me about the musical influences you had when you were growing up in North Carolina.

RC: I think that the strongest influence would be the church . . . and by "the church" I mean the English Street Baptist Church in High Point, North Carolina. I became the organist when I was twelve years old and was paid \$10 a week. The church was really the heart of our family, and I was in church three, actually four, times a week. This included Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night "prayer meeting," and then choir rehearsal or a youth activity. I was strongly impacted by the music there, by the whole thing of singing (which was accompanied by a Hammond organ). I loved going to church. Maybe it was genetic, as both of my sisters are musicians, and both still have jobs in the church. On Sunday afternoons during my early teens, my parents and I drove 40 miles to be with the older sister and her family. As a church music director, she had a stack of anthems on her piano, and we would play and sing anthems. This was in the rural South, and there were anthems! We sang pieces by Luboff and Christiansen, also Jennings' "Springs in the Desert" (I still perform that piece at South Church). My sister's collection was definitely high-level. I thought that it was the greatest collection of music I had ever seen.

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EASTERN DIVISION IS GOING GREEN!

The December 2008 issue of Troubadour will be the final printed issue. In addition, it will also be posted in its entirety on the division website at <http://www.acdaeast.org>. Beginning with the April 2009 issue, Troubadour will be available on the website only. You will receive a postcard in the mail, notifying you of the posting. Please assist us by notifying webmaster Rick Lueth - rlueth7931@comcast.net - of any changes in your e-mail address, as this will be vital in maintaining contact with you.

HELP US GO GREEN!



REPORT ON THE IFCM 8th WORLD SYMPOSIUM

by Thomas Lloyd
R&S Chair, Community Choirs

Copenhagen, Denmark was the location from July 19-26 for the 8th World Symposium on Choral Music. This event is held on a different continent every three years by the International Federation of Choral Musicians (IFCM), which was founded in 1982 in an effort to support the development of choral music worldwide, both for its artistic and social benefits.

There were many familiar Eastern Division faces among the over 1100 choral directors attending the symposium. While it would be hard to summarize such a whirlwind of performances, master classes, and workshops, my last day at the symposium (Friday) presented a full sampling of the depth and breadth of the week's offerings.

The day began with a master class with English conductor Simon Halsey and the young professional voices of the one of Denmark's top chamber choirs, Ars Nova. With grace, wit, and sharp perception, Halsey coached an impressive quartet of young conductors from far flung corners of the world: Malaysia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Australia.

Following this intensive session, focused on Western high art music, we witnessed performances by two very different, yet equally remarkable children's choirs. The first was the Indonesian Youth Choir of Cordana, founded in 1992 by Westminster Choir College graduate Aida Swenson. The children presented a program representing music and choreography from three of their country's major cultural traditions: the Hinduism of Bali, Christianity of Papua New Guinea, and Islam of the Aceh region. The musical arrangements were primarily drawn from the unison singing, complex rhythms and counterpoint of local sources, with the occasional application of Western harmony. While the costumes and choreography were simply dazzling, the children's bold and forthright singing managed to more than hold its own.

Following this group, which had performed at prior IFCM symposia, came a choir that had only been rehearsing since February, the Mwamba Uganda Childrens Choir, part of an ecumenical "non-missionary" Danish NGO DanChurchAid's outreach program to AIDS orphans. Under the completely unobtrusive guidance of their director, Jemimah Nsanga, these children, ranging widely in age and height, radiated an infectious joy of dancing and singing, mostly Christian-themed music in the popular African "high-life" style. Some

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MUSIC AND MOVEMENT?

by Lisa Larsen
R&S Chair, Show Choirs

"We start at the very beginning (a very good place to start) . . ."

- apologies to Maria von Trapp

Twenty five years ago I saw an ad for a summer show choir camp in the Midwest and decided to take the leap and see what that show choir thing was all about. What did I find? Over 500 kids and 100 teachers engaged in an intense and exciting week which culminated in an impressive performance. There were workshops in tap, jazz, hip hop, Broadway audition strategies, vocal training, vocal master classes, singing in a jazz group, and many more. There were countless hours of rehearsal perfecting the music and the movement for the show at the end of the week. The kids and the teachers were enthusiastically committed to these experiences and went home exhausted and musically enriched. It was inspiring!

Well, moss didn't grow on me! I immediately started incorporating movement into my middle school choir classes and started a fledgling high school show choir. Fast forward twenty five years to the reunion of my show choir alums where I heard over and over that show choir was the most meaningful experience of their high school years. These kids had been in my other choirs as well, so why was show choir the one that left the lasting impression?

Well, we all know that music is magic and that it takes us places like nothing else. Take that magic, add the dimension of movement and the experience becomes even more meaningful. Now that I think of it...wasn't there some famous guy who believed that movement was integral to learning music for everyone?...oh yeah...Dalcroze! Further examples abound: African musicians never sing without movement, Native Americans combine song and ritualyou get the point. My choir sang a beautiful arrangement of *Kum By Yah* this year. We added simple physical movements and the resulting performance was incredibly moving. The moves helped the kids sing longer lines, draw attention to important words, feel more attached to the music and give the music more life. The feeling of peace the song created will stay with the kids for a long time. And that's what I want them to remember for the long term... not the notes or where to crescendo (even though we did those too), but how it made them FEEL. The magic.

So this is my suggestion: DON'T START A SHOW CHOIR (well, not today anyway!). Just start using movement in your choir rehearsals. Ask the kids to move their arms to

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of my colleagues who saw their performance in the opera house that day were concerned that they might be victims of artistic manipulation for the benefit of our Western heartstrings. But I had also seen them the day before in an outdoor concert where they were more in their element, where they reminded me very much of the children I had seen during a recent choir tour to Ghana. (Go to <http://crawfurd.dk/slideshows/mwamba/index.html> to see some wonderful photos of their outdoor performance at the Tivoli Gardens). Whatever emotional turmoil these children faced off stage, there was no doubt seeing them up close that their love of singing and dancing was for real, and the strong and tender care of their director was palpable.

I was then fortunate to gain admittance to a workshop on Renaissance dance steps by the Spanish dancer Ana Yepes, daughter of the great guitarist Narciso



Yepes (www.anayepes.com). Another era, another culture, a different style altogether. Within a short time, she had a group of about 50 club-footed choral conductors dancing the pavane using the simple step and close that are the basis of the elegant dances at the heart of all Baroque music, even the sacred masterworks of Bach.

From there, I journeyed to the first evening concert by using two of the three most common means of transportation around Denmark, ferry and foot (bicycle being the only way I didn't use to get around, but wish I had!) Copenhagen is a city of canals, much like Venice.

Everyone had said that one choir not to be missed was the EMO Ensemble of Finland and its intense young director, Pasi Hyökki. They certainly lived up to their reputation. With impeccable balance, intonation, and dynamic range they presented a program of the repertoire they have become identified with: Finnish harmonic cluster writing that makes Eric Whitacre's now iconic *Water Night* sound like the simple textures of Erik Satie.

But the best was still yet to come. The final concert of the day, and of the whole festival for me, proved to be one of the most memorable events I have ever attended. It was a performance of Rodion Shchedrin's *The Sealed Angel* by the great Rundfunkchor (Radio Choir) Berlin under the direction of Swedish conductor Stephan Parkman. The music itself, written in 1988 under the last shadows of Soviet communism, was a revelation – a masterpiece in a modern stylistic exten-

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match the phrase, stand when their part has the melody or clap overhead for accents. Make up clapping, snapping, foot stomping to accompany music or fill the rests. Try silly ideas like having the kids sit while singing "piano," stand up for "mezzo forte" and stand on their chair seat for "forte." They might even stay awake and engaged!

Then go to the next step. Teach your kids deaf hand signs, gospel step touches, hand movements or use props! I think you'll find the kids will be more intrigued, excited and quite possibly, sing the song better. Ha! I heard you and yes, those boys are harder to sell, but once you get them interested, they take to it like ducks to water. Give those boys something like *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* and plastic baseball bats or let them camp up *Officer Krupke!* Keep it simple and your chance for success will be much greater. Don't hesitate to make use of the talents of your students to create movement for songs. Remember those kids are young, energetic and need to move!

As my music teacher Dad used to say, "If it's all vanilla, you're going to get tired of it pretty fast." Every choir at your school should sing a variety of music so the kids will be exposed to more of our huge and diverse musical world. I hope to hear that your concert choir performed *He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother* with deaf hand signs, sang *America the Beautiful* with a DVD of scenic photos, let the drummers go on *Siyahamba* and then performed Mozart's *Ave Verum* with great sensitivity. Remember we want the kids to remember how the music makes them FEEL!

Lisa Larsen has been Choral Director at Coginchaug Regional High School and Strong Middle School in Durham, CT, for 30 years. She directs the Concert Choir, Chamber Choir, Show Choir, 2 a cappella groups, school musicals, 8th Grade Choir and makes really cool posters. Contact: llarsen@rsd13.org

**Deadline for articles for the
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Wednesday, October 1, 2008**

**Deadline for advertisements for
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sion of the tradition of the long suppressed Moscow Synodal School of the early twentieth century. But it was also staged with five dancers, who interacted not only with each other, but the chorus in the middle of the stately sculpture court of the national Glytoteket (sculpture museum), with the composer present in the front row. The combination of great music sung by a magnificent chorus, dancing of such passion and intensity, a very unusual space perfect for the combination, and a hyper-attentive, audience of only a few hundred made for a night to long remember.

Looking back on this overwhelmingly full day of inspired music-making, the strengths and challenges of IFCM and its mission to unite the world through song came into somewhat sharper relief. At select festivals such as this one, the great divide between the high art-music aims of Western music and the passion for inclusivity and social change come to the fore. Most of the black-costumed Western-oriented choirs are models of stillness and concentration when they sing (the *Sealed Angel* concert being the rare, and welcome, exception where the singers moved). On the other hand, the colorfully costumed choirs from all over Latin America, Africa, and Asia find that singing without movement makes no sense at all.

It was especially apparent at this convention how influential the Scandinavian sound remains in the West, going back in the US at least to the origins of the Lutheran colleges in the Midwest and the later landmark recordings of Erik Erickson. This is inspiring in terms of the very high standards that have done so much to raise the level of our profession, but at the same time a little discouraging in terms of the uniformity of sound that has also resulted among most European and American choirs today, and the occasional non-Western choirs (such as one Korean choir here) that aspire to the same ideal.

There is also a discouraging sameness in the harmonic language of new music – Scandinavian choral composition seems to range from the extremes of impressive but expressively limited cluster music on one end to “new-age” easy-listening singing on the other, with most of the music in between being harmonically innocuous and mostly forgettable. The low point of this particular conference for many listeners was the poor craftsmanship and weak imagination of several of the premiers commissioned by the symposium.

And much as Westerners may rejoice at the current abundance of choral music from many cultures which were inaccessible to us in the past, festivals like this remind us of a more complex reality. We so easily forget that “choral” music as it we understand it (vocal harmonization by multiple voices) is primarily a tradition of the Christian West that is not, in



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fact, indigenous to the rest of the world. We are discovering this again in our well-intentioned but misguided attempts to bring Islamic music into the choral fold. There is no need for false guilt here, since the days of “pure” culture preserved by isolated communities is long past, especially in our present internet age. But we still need to be aware of how the large shadow of the missionary past and the international media present still give Western culture a disproportionate influence throughout the world.

While at the symposium, I attended a special meeting for a new IFCM program called Conductors Without Borders. Growing from the remarkable success of Maria Guinand, Alberto Grau, and Latin American leaders in raising the standards and accessibility of choral music at all levels of society in their region, IFCM seeks to replicate this educational process throughout the world, appreciating full well that different regions have different challenges. How do we educate future conductors and develop future choirs without following in the ways of cultural hegemony paved by the Christian missionaries long before us, whose presence is still being felt? How can we encourage and provide otherwise unavailable resources to local conductors to develop new repertoire that is true to their own culture, wherever that may lead? As a sign of the challenges of this disconnect, it was discouraging that there were no black African conductors at the “Conductors without Borders” meeting, or on the steering committee.

These questions have no easy answers, but IFCM has energized a lot of passionate musicians from all over the world who are asking these questions in constructive ways and doing a lot of careful and joyous listening and discovery in the process. We should all seek to be part of this important and visionary conversation. If you are not already a member of IFCM, go to www.ifcm.net to become a part of this important organization and receive its fascinating journal.



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