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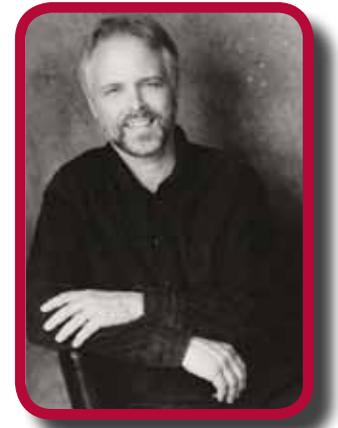
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BRINGING TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATIONS TO LIFE

by Thomas Lloyd



I'm sure most choral directors would agree that among the most satisfying music-making we've experienced has been in shared concerts with other choirs and conductors. The rewards of such collaborations can become transformational in people's lives. Choral collaborations enable us to cross cultural barriers that often separate us from people who see the world through perspectives different from our own. However, arranging these collaborations can also require a much greater degree of patience, persistence, flexibility, and even humility than we normally have to summon then safely within the more familiar confines of our own choral programs.

In many ways the internet has made it easier to connect with others around the world. But the web also allows us to more restrictively self-select content that only reinforces our personal perspectives and prejudices. More importantly, while communication over the web can enable and even at times enhance face-to-face interaction, it can also seduce us into thinking that our emails, texts, and tweets give us anything close to the multi-dimensional experience of a face-to-face interaction.

Furthermore, recent studies¹ confirm what many cultural leaders have long known: that one of the most effective ways to overcome prejudice and misunderstanding is through personal contact between people from different cultures. Music provides a unique and powerful way to begin this personal contact between groups of people who otherwise might never encounter each other in person (or know what to say to each other if they did!).

This article will try to outline briefly some of what I have found to be important ingredients for successful collaborations. Some of these suggestions are directly related to travel abroad, but many can be applied to local collaborations as well. (In the case of community choirs, where it can be more difficult for many singers to participate for financial reasons or because of work and family obligations, planning a combined tour with another community choir in your area can bring all the benefits of collaboration close to home with those of encountering people in an unfamiliar culture abroad.)



*Bucks County Choral Society
combined rehearsal in Budapest*

To begin with, it is important to be clear about what will determine whether or not a collaborative project is successful. For me, there are two essential outcomes:

1. that each person involved comes away with the sense of having at least a glimpse of a perspective on life and the world different from their own (including the insights that can come from "seeing ourselves as others see us");
2. that they come away not only with a sense of the "otherness" of that newly encountered perspective, but with a clearer sense of the "commonness" that all people share, and a deeper sense of what it means to be human.

Of course there are also some dangers lurking in these hopes and expectations, which need to be addressed head on before any collaboration begins. I do believe that the experience of sharing music-making with people from an unfamiliar culture can be truly transformational in a relatively short period of time. But it can also lead

participants to believe that through such an experience, they have genuinely come to "know" another culture, or, worse yet, become an "expert" on that culture to those who haven't had that personal experience.²

With this in mind, there are at least two cautions that can be emphasized to singers at the start:

1. The point of interacting with people in an unfamiliar culture is not to acquire or possess cultural experience like a souvenir or trophy, but to become more fully aware of how much more we *don't* know about the world than we realized before. Awareness of our profound ignorance (which is actually quite hard to acquire in itself) is the beginning of genuine learning.

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2. When sharing your experience with others after your return (another challenge in itself), understand the limits of your exposure and speak specifically of your experience, not globally. That is, avoid the temptation to say, “I recently sang with my choir in Turkey, and so I know that the Turkish people think that.....” Instead, say something like, “I recently sang with my choir in Turkey, and one of the Turkish singers I met there said that in her opinion.....”

So how to go about choosing choirs with whom to seek collaboration? There are usually a number of overlapping considerations. To make sure the musical part of the collaboration can work, it is good to seek out cultures with a vibrant indigenous choral tradition where choirs of your peers (students or community members) are active and available at the time of year you can travel. This will tend to rule out summertime travel to countries in the northern hemisphere, but there are many countries below the equator in South America, South Africa, and Asia that are ripe for choral collaborations when our summer is their winter.



Bucks County Choral Society combined choirs in Timisoara, Romania

It can be a good idea to start by looking within your own choir or community for people from cultures you might want to encounter. The United States is still a nation of immigrants where most areas are home to people from all corners of the world. When my college choir travelled to Ghana, one of our students had grown up there himself. Knowing this student from the start gave us a reality check against our untested projections of what life in Ghana would be like.

In one group conversation about fears of what we might encounter in Ghana (primarily about tropical disease and food-borne illnesses we might encounter, for which everyone was required to get the necessary vaccinations) the Ghanaian student mentioned that when he was considering coming to America to go to college, friends in Ghana warned him to beware of all the guns on our streets – a revealing turn-around of American fears that it’s the rest of the world that is a scary place. We also learned a great deal from him as he examined his own cultural identity both before and after visiting his home country with his American friends.

Many countries also have local cultural organizations in American urban or university areas. Before travelling to Turkey recently, my college students were treated to a home-cooked pot-luck supper offered by the local chapter of the Turkish American Friendship Society. They also gave us a chance to try out our new Turkish songs, practice our Turkish pronunciation, and ask questions about what to expect in modern Turkey. Having a perspective on both their own culture and American culture made them wonderful personal resources both before and after a trip.

In an academic choral program, choosing a region to visit where a faculty colleague has research interest or familial roots can make student preparation for the exchange much richer. This can be especially fruitful in colleges that are small enough to enable collaborative teaching in preparation for a tour. My last three college tours have involved other faculty in teaching, helping to make local arrangements, and going along on the trip itself as a co-leaders and teachers. In addition, these faculty have brought along non-singing students with special academic interest in the culture being visited. These students have *loved* being part of the experience, and become the perfect advocates back home for what makes collaborative choir tours special.



Pre-concert meeting with Young Democrats 3, Poland

The most critical personal connection for a collaborative choir tour to another country is the local point-person in that country, capable of managing all the logistical concerns of hotels, busses, and the setting up and promoting concerts. While having a comfort level with the US representative is important, any tour management company, large or small, is only as good as its local coordinator in the host country. Ask up front who that person would be and what the track record is.

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That information and good references from choirs who have travelled to that country with that local tour coordinator are the best way to make an informed judgment. I have also led several tours where I have worked directly with managers in the host country, such as the parent of a foreign student, an active college alumna, or a faculty colleague on leave. While these arrangements also require thorough testing of the waters, taking time to be sure the source has the experience, contacts, time, and trustworthiness to make all the arrangements, they have been among the most satisfying tours I have done.

I know many directors feel it is important to visit the country and all the prospective venues and hotels in advance of a tour, but this is not something I have done nor regretted not doing (as nice as it might have been if I could have afforded it!). Either way, knowing and trusting the people you're working with to make the arrangements is key, since they should be much better informed than you about local situations unless you have substantial experience living in the country yourself.

Musically, whether close to home or abroad, the most sensitive and important relationships are with your conductor colleagues with whom you hope to collaborate. When contracting with an American tour company, be sure that they will not have a problem with your being in direct contact with collaborating conductors once the initial commitments have been made. If the tour grows from a conductor or choir with whom you already have a connection, all the better. But whether a stranger or a friend, this is where the humility, patience, persistence, and flexibility really come in. In any relationship, one side or the other takes the first initiative. If you are the suitor inviting a colleague to be an equal partner on a tour, you have to accept a number of responsibilities:

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- **humility:** not missing any opportunity to tell the people you hope to collaborate with how grateful you are for their time and consideration;
- **flexibility:** carefully listening to understand their particular interest in collaborating, leaving enough decisions open so the plans can be adapted to meet their ideal of what a collaboration could be;
- **persistence:** knowing that until the project is fully off the ground, and sometimes thereafter as well, you or someone in your organization will need to be the “point person” to make sure things get done that have to be done - if the project was your idea to start with, you’ll need to be the one most responsible for making sure nothing falls through the cracks from beginning to end;
- **patience:** accepting that as the initiator of the collaboration, it will be a while before your sense of urgency about moving things forward is matched by your partner; in particular, if you are of a type of academically trained American conductor to whom your singers might refer to (some with admiration, some maybe not so much!) as a “control freak,” collaborations are a wonderful way to learn that the rest of the world takes a little more time to get things organized, and likes to allow for a little more possibility of spontaneity (this is a good thing, but still a hard lesson to learn!)



*Musical sharing at school,
Turkey*

Thanks to email and Skype, it is *much* easier to share planning with colleagues, even in remote parts of the world, than it used to be (though internet access is still not as fast or available in many parts of the world as it is in the West). Sometimes it is only possible to perform as separate choirs on the same program. But the benefits are so much greater if the choirs also sing at least one piece from each other’s repertoire together, under each other’s conductor.

When I first started doing tours like this, I remember being told not to bother preparing music from the country being visited, the reasons being, “you’ll never sing it as well as the natives of that culture,” and “people want to hear you sing Western music, not their music.” While both of these statements are true up to a point, and points well taken for any proudly ambitious American conductor, I’m glad I never took this advice.

To begin with, struggling to come to some kind of terms with the sounds, rhythms, and inflections of a foreign language are an essential ingredient to engaging with a culture. And music makes that struggle much easier, because the music supplies so much of the sounds, rhythm, and inflection itself. In my experience, going to the trouble of learning music from your host choir’s repertoire is always taken as a sign of respect. While we might not sing this unfamiliar music with much flare before we leave home, we certainly will sing it more idiomatically after we come back.

Audiences in my experience respond the same way – hearing a foreign choir, especially an American one, singing one of their songs with a positive attitude will be received not as presumptuous, but as deeply respectful, and often will bring the most heartfelt response of a concert. Many countries have an unofficial but widely known “national song” (much less stodgy than a national anthem), like “Góralu” in Poland, “Dinpa Sen Ahonya” in many parts of Ghana, or “Te Quiero” in Venezuela – these songs invariably bring an especially warm smile to many faces.

Of course it is also important to share our own music, whether from the Western classical tradition or from America’s greatest contribution to the world choral repertoire, the African-American spiritual. It is interesting to see all the excitement in the US these days about “flash mob” sings, where a group of singers shows up in a public place to suddenly break out in song together. This kind of spontaneous music making is already very common in many parts of the world, and can be a wonderful way to connect with strangers in a public place. Humility does play a role here as well, though, as it is important to always check with your local contacts with you first to make sure the time and the place would be welcome to the people going about their daily business.

The most valuable benefit of sharing repertoire is that it makes it necessary to rehearse together! I have been privileged to witness so many times the electricity that happens when after a period of awkward hellos and eying each other from a distance, a group of young people or community choir singers come together to rehearse. Inevitably, from that moment on, all kinds of spontaneous sharing happen for the next 2-3 days – singing their favorite pop songs, having discussions together or individually about perceptions of each other’s culture, taking over a restaurant into the night with singing and dancing, all capped off by shared performances for

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enthusiastic audiences who become our instant friends because we're singing with their friends.

When I took my college chamber choir to Poland a few years back, I knew that our first rehearsal with our host choir would be at the end of 24 hours of overnight travel, door to door. I feared I was really asking for trouble (and if the singers weren't college students, I would have been!) But the excitement of sitting next to their welcoming peers and singing together after weeks and months of anticipation made immediately pushed away any memories of the fatigue of long hours sitting on planes and busses.

Of course there are also many bumps along the road to meaningful collaboration – nothing involving a significant number of people coming together with highly varied backgrounds and expectations can be done without plenty of things not going as expected. But the singing is always there as the reward, as the ingredient that allows us to let our collective and individual guards down for a few memorable moments – to see the world and ourselves through the eyes of others, and feel a renewed sense of our shared humanity.

ENDNOTES

- 1 See Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (Simon and Schuster, 2010). <http://www.simonandschuster.com/search?term=American+Grace>
- 2 Edward Said's controversial monograph *Orientalism* (Vintage Press, 1978) set off a still ongoing discussion about the misappropriation and misapplication of cross-cultural experience, especially by people coming from the West. <http://www.amazon.com/Orientalism-Edward-W-Said/dp/039474067X>

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