

choirs, where tuning can be a challenge because of the close harmonic structure. “We can shake the walls with sound as opposed to peel the paint,” he quips. While acknowledging the distinct qualities of tenor-bass choruses, he maintains that the fundamental techniques for good singing are universal. “I don’t think there’s anything particularly unique about one choir to another. The key is listening.” He also advocates for clear communication, efficient rehearsal pacing, and a strong emphasis on outer voice tuning.

Music and Mission

Dr. Tim Seelig’s legacy in choral music is inseparable from his lifelong commitment to advocacy, particularly through the lens of LGBTQ+ visibility, inclusion, and empowerment in the arts. His work has consistently embodied what he describes as the “twins of music and mission ... I’ve tried to feed them both every single day,” he says. For Seelig, a choir is not just a group of people singing together; it is a vehicle for social change.

Since retiring from the San Francisco Gay Men’s Chorus in 2022, Seelig moved to Portland, Oregon. Aside from the occasional honor choir, guest lecture and a TedxTalk (available on YouTube), he has been

enjoying his retirement and spending lots of time volunteering at the Oregon Humane Society. In the fall of 2024 he came out of retirement to found the Portland Sage Singers, a community-based choral ensemble for older LGBTQ+ singers. “Who starts a choir when they’re seventy-four?” he jokes. The group’s motto—“singing for the rest of our lives”—was gifted to the ensemble by activist and songwriter Holly Near, who wrote the LGBTQ+ social justice anthem, “Singing for Our Lives.”

As Seelig reflects on his career, he returns to this truth: “Lives are changed in rehearsal, not performance.” This belief underscores his commitment to preparation, presence, and purpose. Whether conducting a world premiere, mentoring an emerging conductor, or building a new ensemble from the ground up, Seelig remains focused on creating meaningful human connection through music. “I try to make sure that every single person I meet feels full and whole just the way they are.”

His legacy, however, is not measured in accolades or performance, but in impact. “At the end of the day, it’s the same for all of us who are music educators or conductors. I’m most proud of the people whose lives have been changed.”

World Musics and Cultures



Madlen Batchvarova
National Chair, World Musics and Cultures
batchvarova@hanover.edu

Bridging Centuries, Crossing Borders: An Introduction to Dutch Choral Music

by Michel Hogenes and Madlen Batchvarova

From Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck’s polyphonic masterworks to Calliope Tsoupaki’s avant-garde vocal landscapes, Dutch choral music exhibits a remarkable convergence of tradition, experiment, and cultural expression. Because of its rich historical heritage and constant sensitivity to modern artistic trends, the

Netherlands is frequently referred to as a *Korenland*,¹ literally “a choir country.” This article offers a brief synopsis of the Dutch choral tradition, examining its historical roots, variety of repertory, and distinct sociocultural character. By doing this, we intend to offer information that will be helpful to choral conductors and educators worldwide, but especially in the United States of America.

A Nation of Choirs

The Netherlands boasts one of the highest per capita densities of choirs in the world. The term *Nederland* *Korenland* reflects a strong national self-image: that of a singing society in which amateur and professional



choirs alike flourish. The spectrum is broad, encompassing classical chamber choirs, church and community choirs, shanty choirs, gospel ensembles, and innovative contemporary vocal groups. This high level of civic participation in choral singing makes it a cornerstone of Dutch cultural life.²

Crucially, this participation transcends demographic boundaries. Though recent shifts, such as an ageing membership base, pose challenges for the amateur choral sector, the foundational infrastructure remains strong. More than half of Dutch choirs say that the majority of their members are over the age of fifty, according to the 2024 VerenigingsMonitor.³ There is less youth involvement, particularly in contrast to the United States, where school and religious choirs offer young singers strong platforms. Nonetheless, the Dutch model demonstrates the possibility of a choral culture that transcends institutional boundaries and lasts a lifetime.

The Professional Sector

In addition to this strong amateur history, the Netherlands is home to several professionally recognized choirs that enjoy international recognition. The Laurens Collegium, Cappella Amsterdam, and the Netherlands Chamber Choir are known for their innovative programming, technical mastery, and dedication to old and new music. These ensembles often collaborate with renowned composers and multidisciplinary artists, which shows that the choral art is very much alive.⁴

Dutch conductors such as Peter Dijkstra, Jos van Veldhoven, and the late Reinbert de Leeuw have become known throughout the world for their creative interpretations and historically informed performance techniques.⁵ In addition to influencing Dutch choral music, their work has had a lasting impact on how people around the world view both old and contemporary music.

Tradition as Cultural Heritage: The Renaissance

The Netherlands has a long history of being a center of musical creativity since the Renaissance era. Choral Franco-Netherlandish tradition in the region was

developed by master composers such as Josquin des Prez, Orlando di Lasso, and Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck. Their polyphonic masses, motets and psalm settings are marked by innovative counterpoint and emotional depth on par with their Italian and German contemporaries. The influence of those composers was not restricted to the Low Countries but also left a mark on German Baroque composers.⁶

Dutch choral music is an excellent example for their ability to create world music that, despite being deeply rooted in regional culture, progressed to achieve worldwide recognition, influencing and eventually being adapted by various choral traditions through time and distance. This is a good example of how local innovation interacts with international culture.

Tradition as Cultural Heritage: The Bach Passion Phenomenon

One of the most distinctive elements of Dutch choral life is its enduring devotion to the Passions of J. S. Bach, particularly the *Matthäus-Passion* and *Johannes-Passion*. Nowhere in the world are these works performed more frequently or more diversely than in the Netherlands. Audiences all over the country attend hundreds of Passion performances every year in the weeks leading up to Easter, which range from elaborate professional concerts to locally inspired amateur versions.⁷

The degree to which these Passions have evolved from merely liturgical observances to cultural events makes the Dutch approach unique. The *Matthäus-Passion*, in particular, is considered a national cultural monument by many. Ensembles such as the Netherlands Bach Society (notably at the Grote Kerk in Naarden) have set the benchmark for scholarly rigour and expressive depth, often combining historically informed instrumentation with modern dramaturgical elements. Some modern Dutch choirs even perform these Passions in multimedia or semi-theatrical settings, adding further levels of interpretation while still honoring the original work. The Dutch Passion tradition serves as an example of how to recontextualize historical material for contemporary audiences at a time when classical concert audiences are dwindling in many regions of the world.

Repertoire Diversity and Contemporary Innovation

The music of Sweelinck is one of the most notable examples of the Netherlands' lasting contributions to Renaissance and Baroque choral traditions, but its choral repertoire also exhibits a vibrant modernism. A wide range of composers from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have created choral works that are distinguished by their daring artistic exploration and cross-cultural interaction.

Rudolph Escher, Ton de Leeuw, and Calliope Tsoupaki are three especially noteworthy authors published by Donemus, the top publisher of contemporary music in the Netherlands.⁸ The reflective poetry of Escher's music is influenced by Impressionism and French Symbolism. His 1953 composition, *Le vrai visage de la paix*, combines contemporary harmonic language with transparent textures to set a pacifist poem by Paul Éluard. His works require delicacy and accuracy, providing choirs with chances to experiment with sophisticated expressiveness.⁹

On the other hand, Ton de Leeuw was influenced by non-Western musical traditions and Gregorian chant. Modal harmonies, drone textures, and reflective pacing are used in his *Car nos vignes sont en fleur* (1970) and *Psaume 122* to transport singers to a peaceful auditory realm.¹⁰ De Leeuw's compositions have influenced the development of choral composition's aural and spiritual potential.

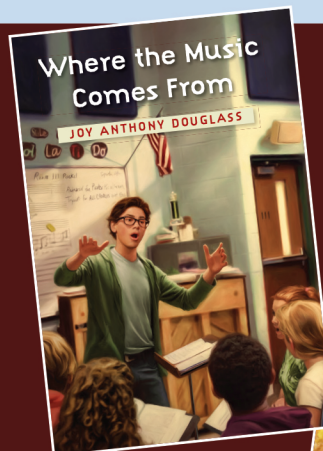
Greek-born composer Calliope Tsoupaki, who has settled in the Netherlands, blends modern methods, modal polyphony, and Byzantine chant.¹¹ Through ethereal voice textures and microtonal inflections, her compositions, including *Ode to the West Wind and Styx*, delve into themes of memory, myth, and spirituality. Her compositions are an excellent example of how modern Dutch choral art incorporates worldviews while retaining its unique voice.

Pedagogical and Structural Innovations

The foundation of Dutch choral education is a dedication to quality and innovation. Conservatories such as the Amsterdam Conservatory and the Royal Conservatory in The Hague provide demanding instruc-

The Perfect Books for Young Music Lovers

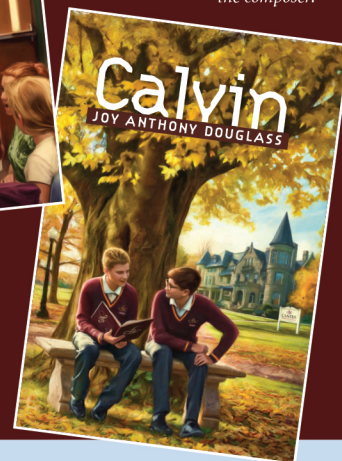
by Joy Anthony Douglass



Scan or click to listen to "WHERE THE MUSIC COMES FROM" by Lee Hoiby, performed by Peter Stewart, baritone; accompanied by the composer.

available at
amazon

Search for "Joy Douglass"



"CALVIN is a captivating story of a boy who loves to sing and thrives in a boy choir of other talented young people.

In the sequel, *WHERE THE MUSIC COMES FROM*, Calvin ponders whether to apply his skills to science or choral conducting.

Written by experienced master teacher and musician, Dr. Joy Anthony Douglass, the books are of special interest to teachers and young people who aspire to explore their artistic values through music."

- Ann Howard Jones

DMA in Choral Conducting, U of Iowa | Professor Emerita- Boston University
Assistant to Robert Shaw and the Atlanta Symphony Chorus



Visit our website:
www.joydouglass.com



tion for vocalists and conductors, emphasizing both modern technique and historical repertoire.¹²

The relative safety and respect given to choir conductors is another structural characteristic of the Dutch choral scene. According to the VerenigingsMonitor, over 90 percent of Dutch choirs engage professional artistic leadership, and most of these roles are compensated at professional rates—an average of €61 per hour.¹³ The Dutch system models a sustainable framework for artistic leadership within the choral sector.

Pronunciation and Language in Dutch Repertoire

The intricacy of the Dutch language, especially its distinct phonetic system, presents a barrier for foreign choirs hoping to perform Dutch music. English speakers are not familiar with a number of vowel sounds and consonants found in Dutch, including the uvular /x/ and the front rounded /y/. Additionally, Dutch is a stress-timed language that necessitates a unique attention to vowel duration and rhythm.¹⁴

Choral directors can handle this by providing International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) transcriptions, modelling with native-speaker recordings, and paying special attention to diphthong articulation and syllabic stress. Comprehensive guides to the Dutch alphabet and pronunciation are available on the CoLanguage website, which also includes examples and thorough descriptions of the sounds that correlate to English. These techniques can significantly improve performance authenticity and diction.

Dutch Music in Concert Programming

Sometimes concert programming feels like opening a window into another era. Mixing historical echoes with modern performance isn't just about singing the right notes—it's a way to connect with a culture's soul. Delving into Dutch Renaissance choral pieces—be it a motet, madrigal, chanson, psalm, or mass—invites choirs and audiences on a unique, immersive journey. Instead of merely rehearsing melodies and rhythms, one begins to notice the rich backdrop of history, social circumstances, and artistic flair that shaped these

works, peeling back layers to reveal the repertoire's deeper roots.

Integrating early Dutch pieces into today's concerts not only expands an ensemble's creative palette but also weaves together threads from different eras. The intricate counterpoint and expressive settings of Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck, Orlando di Lasso, and Josquin des Prez influenced later composers across Europe. Placing Renaissance polyphony alongside modern Dutch choral works highlights a fascinating evolution of national musical identity while giving audiences a performance that feels both rich and wonderfully unpredictable. This is just one of the many ways world musics and cultures repertoire can enter and enrich our choral concert programs.

Platforms like Dutch Culture USA lend a friendly hand in this cultural exploration. As a branch of the Kingdom of the Netherlands' outreach in America, they join forces with top Dutch artistic institutions, offering conductors and educators practical, valuable resources.¹⁵ These platforms help guide repertoire choices and deepen contextual understanding—bridging performance with a more genuine, heartfelt cultural appreciation.

BeroepKunstenaar is a website from the Amsterdam University of the Arts. It maintains a list of institutions dedicated to the collection, archiving, and research of musical heritage in the Netherlands. The Nederlands Muziek Instituut (Netherlands Music Institute) and the Koninklijke Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis (KVNMM, Royal Society for Dutch Music History) could prove to be particularly informative resources for choral conductors.¹⁶


The Choral Public Domain Library offers a rich and varied repertoire of Dutch choral music, both sacred and secular. The collection encourages entrepreneurial conductors to discover a wide variety of works that represent different voicings and degrees of difficulty, both a cappella and with instrumental accompaniment. It should be mentioned that the collection also includes pieces for SAB choir with organ accompaniment and is thus especially suitable for developing or smaller choirs in community, church, and school environments.¹⁷

Cross-cultural and Inclusive Practices

Another aspect of the Dutch choral landscape is the community involvement and accessibility of choir singing. A culture of inclusivity is demonstrated by, for example, participatory performances, which enable aspiring singers to join professionals in singing parts of large choral works. Other groups strengthen the function of choral music as a medium for social cohesion by focusing on working with groups who are, for example, socio-economically marginalised or have a disability.¹⁸

The growing preference of Dutch choirs for multidisciplinary performances is a final element brought forward here. These often combine dance, theatre, and new media components, making the concert experience interesting for new audiences. Although this move toward hybridity is in line with more general European developments in the performing arts, it nevertheless retains a typically Dutch sensibility: inventive, cooperative, and community oriented.¹⁹

Conclusion

Dutch choral music is a powerful example of striking a balance between professionalism and involvement, tradition and creativity. The Netherlands has a plethora of repertoire, performing techniques, and structural ideas that are worth exploring further for American conductors, singers, and academics. Whether it is through the modernist works of De Leeuw and Tsoupaki, the historically rich performances of Bach's Passions, or the general acceptance of chorus singing as a communal act, the Dutch choral tradition speaks with a voice that is both distinct and universal. 

Michel Hogenes, PhD, is principal lecturer at The Hague University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands.

Madlen Batchvarova, DMA, is professor of music, director of choral programs, Hanover College, IN.

NOTES

- ¹ T. Dapôt, "Liever Dua Lipa dan Bach, het popkoor is in trek: 'Zingen werkt voor mij therapeutisch.'" ["I'd rather have Dua Lipa than Bach, the pop choir is popular: 'Singing is therapeutic for me.'"] *Trouw*, January 16, 2025.
- ² Landelijk Kenniscentrum voor Cultuureducatie en Amateurkunst (LKCA). *VerenigingsMonitor* 2024.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Nederlands Kamerkoor, *About Us*, Accessed March 22, 2025. <https://www.nederlandskamerkoor.nl>.
- ⁵ Dutch Bach Society, *Matthäus-Passion at Naarden*. Accessed March 22, 2025. <https://www.bachvereniging.nl>.
- ⁶ Encyclopedia Britannica, "Franco-Netherlandish School." Accessed April 2, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/art/Franco-Netherlandish-school>
- ⁷ "Johan Sebastian Bach PassieBarometer," *ZINGmagazine*, 2025, <https://www.zingmagazine.nl/passiebarometer/>.
- ⁸ www.donemus.nl. Accessed March 22, 2025.
- ⁹ <https://donemus.nl/composer/rudolf-escher/>. Accessed March 22, 2025.
- ¹⁰ <https://tondeleeuw.com>. Accessed March 22, 2025.
- ¹¹ <https://www.calliopetsoupaki.com>. Accessed March 22, 2025.
- ¹² L. Samama, *Dutch Music in the 20th Century* (Amsterdam University Press, 2006).
- ¹³ Landelijk Kenniscentrum voor Cultuureducatie en Amateurkunst (LKCA). *VerenigingsMonitor* 2024.
- ¹⁴ Van den Hout, T. "Dutch Phonetics for Choirs," *ZINGmagazine* 3 (2022): 45–47.
- ¹⁵ Dutch Culture USA, *Your Shortcut to Dutch Arts and Culture in the US*. Accessed April 5, 2025. <https://www.dutchcultureusa.com>.
- ¹⁶ BeroepKunstenaar is a website of the Amsterdam University of the Arts, <https://www.beroepkunstenaar.nl/>
- ¹⁷ Choral Public Domain Library. Works in Dutch. https://www.cpdl.org/wiki/index.php/Category:Works_in_Dutch
- ¹⁸ Hearts in Harmony. Inclusief zingen voor koren zonder beperkingen. [Hearts in Harmony. Including choir singing without limitations.] [Koorenstem.be](https://www.koorenstem.be).
- ¹⁹ Landelijk Kenniscentrum voor Cultuureducatie en Amateurkunst (LKCA). *VerenigingsMonitor* 2024.