Singing Polyphony Today— Why Have All the Flowers Gone?

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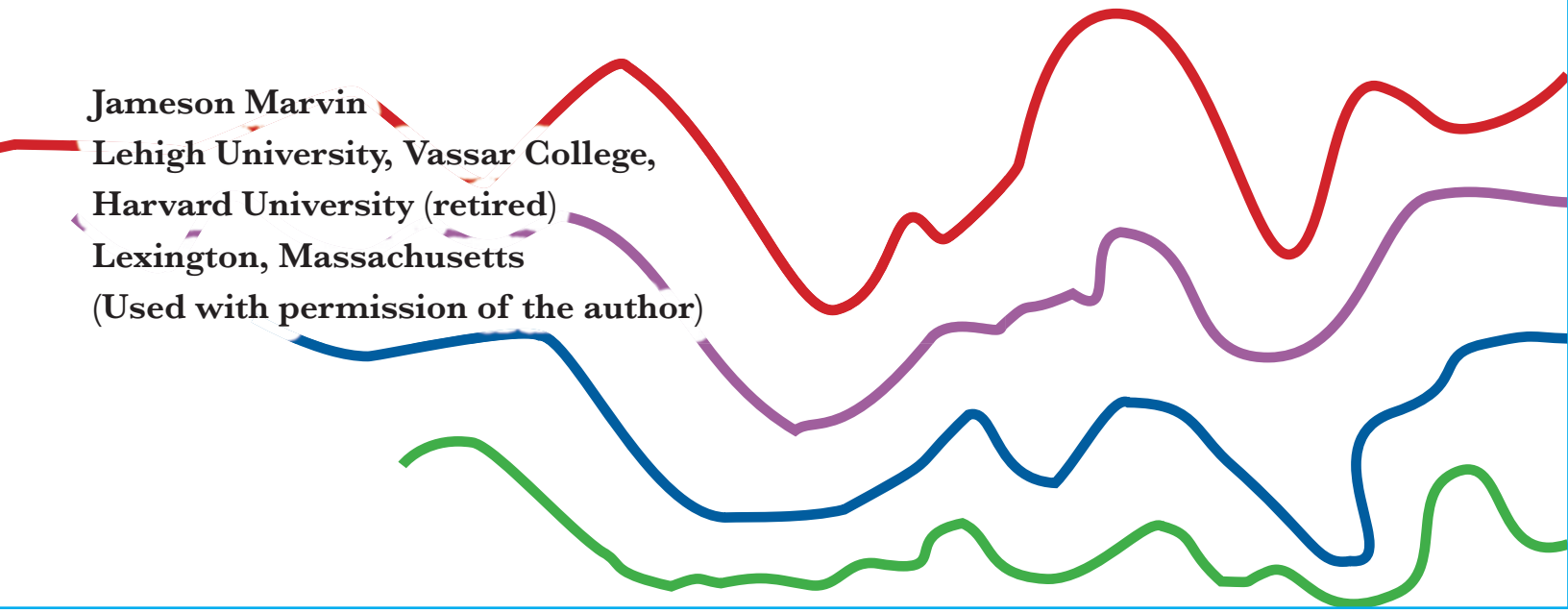

In the beginning, first came melody (chant), then many melodies, polyphony. Harmony was a by-product of simultaneous independent melodies, creating chords of three or four notes. The harmony produced was suspended between well-crafted vocal lines. Throughout history, composers have expressed text meaning through changes in harmony, melody, rhythm, and texture by creating a rich vocabulary of expression, and a mellifluous balance of homophony and polyphony. Special texts required vertical textures to directly serve the text and allow listeners to clearly hear the words.

Today, these historical trends are important to keep in mind because many of us realize that for more than two generations, choral conductors have been raised almost entirely on vertical sonorities. Our central concern is that choruses found in secondary schools, colleges, universities, communities, and churches rarely sing polyphony at this time. This profound realization mirrors my own experience of attending National Conventions of ACDA since 1965, seminars of IMC since 1978, NCCO National Conferences since 2004, and starting in 2010, Chorus America National Conferences.

In our current choral culture, singing homophony seems to be the norm; composers, recognizing this trend, compose vertical music. Publishers publish it. Are singers, conductors, composers, and publishers no longer interested in polyphony? Has singing polyphony become too difficult? Are choral singers no longer experiencing both melodic and independent vocal lines? What I almost never hear at professinal conferences are performances of polyphonic music from the past six centuries. I do hear a great deal of new music. Some of it may be good; virtually all of it is vertical. Are conductors afraid to break the homophonic security of easy-access learning? I think they, and we, are!

Information appeared in the May 2017 issue of the *Choral Journal* written by Robert J. Ward and Leila Heil that offered statistical documentation of choral works performed at National Conferences of the American Choral Directors Association between 1961, the year ACDA was formed, and 2017.[1] Ward and Heil's study divided the styles and genre performed by ACDA choruses at these biennial conferences into twelve categories. The repertoire performed over fifty years, 1961–2017, is listed in ten-year periods by numbers and percentages. The result is stunning! From 1990 to 1999, for example, out of 771 compositions performed, 56 were from the Renaissance, 6.8 percent.

As the authors point out, of all the works performed at these biennial conferences over the fifty-year period, 26% of the choral repertoire was drawn from six centuries: Medieval through the Romantic eras. Their survey also confirms that the repertoire of modern composers (from the early twentieth century up to 2017) makes up 51 percent of the whole, including Ethnic/Multicultural (now changed to World Musics and Cultures), Folk Songs, Spirituals/Gospel, and Hymns/Carols. I believe that about 90 percent of

the compositions written and performed over the past fifty years, 1970-2020, would be almost entirely homophonic.

Ward and Heil especially confirm my innate concern that polyphonic works composed over the three centuries before Bach are rarely performed. Thus, for many years, our students have had only a limited view of the styles, genre, and profoundly expressive compositions written between 1400 and 1700. In my opinion, they also have had little insight into the performance practices of these eras and now lack the musicianship required to sing polyphonic gems and masterworks from Josquin (c. 1450-1521) to Schütz (1585-1672), let alone the grand polyphonic motets of Mendelsohn (1805-1847) and Brahms (1833-1897).

I believe conductors have been strongly influenced by CD recordings of early music ensembles that espouse informed performance, and many conductors have become afraid to be wrong. Conductors are also concerned about performing early music with their relatively large high school, college, community, and church choirs. They ask, "how can my large choral group sound like those ensembles that espouse informed performance?" I think conductors are somewhat intimidated by the concept of informed performance. I do not believe we have to feel intimidated!

I also believe that the loss of performances of polyphony that has occurred over the past fifty years is actually a generational experience or response. I believe many choral conductors today have been reliving the educational premises and values of their predecessors. By the 1970s, CDs of informed performance were in full swing, often by professional small ensembles heard singing choral music from about 1350-1750. Informed means the way it ought to be done, or the way it was done.

As knowledge of performance practices grew, many conductors did not have the opportunity to take courses with specialists in Renaissance and Baroque performance practices. Beginning about 1970, I believe intimidation truly set in. It was not long before conductors began to feel that they might be wrong. The next generation of their students, the 1990s, mirrored that inclination and lack of confidence of their teachers and choral conductors from the 1970s. They felt unprepared to conduct polyphonic choral music from 1400-1700. That also led to a significant loss of performances of polyphonic motets of the nineteenth century. With today's generation some conductors still lack experience in conducting polyphonic music, thus undermining their confidence in performing Renaissance choral music and polyphonic works of the last two centuries.

Based on my observations above, I offer this summary. It has been a rich confluence and a combination of perspectives that:

• informed performance and the lack of training in early music performance practices that began in the 1960s

• resulted in the 1970s when conductors became intimidated and did not teach or conduct early choral music. Consequentially,

• students lost the ability to sing polyphony, so

• composers did not compose polyphony; therefore,

• publishers did not publish it!

By the 1980s, the habit of not conducting and singing polyphony became confirmed. As a result, I believe we are losing the western choral tradition! Singers have lost self-confidence in singing polyphony.

William Dehning offers another perspective. He poignantly wrote in a letter to the editor of the November 2010 *Choral Journal*: "Programming music of the past that others might know could be viewed as a risk because they might not agree with our interpretation." Truth be told, I think this is the real reason some choose not to perform a Brahms motet, for instance, at a convention. We're simply scared silly to put music out there that many may know, not because we think that choral musicians are tired of hearing it.

Today, if a choir and its conductor want to sing polyphony, questions still arise. How can I get my choir to sound stylistically informed when they sing Josquin or Schütz or composers in between? How can I make each melodic line be so expressive? Will my large choir ever be able to perform Renaissance music and all polyphony in a clear, musical, and expressive manner? My answer is a resounding yes!

The question we should ask ourselves is, how can we use our stylistic and analytical insights in an informed way to bring polyphony alive today, regardless of the size of our ensembles or for fear that some colleagues could think we might not be informed concerning details of the style? Do choirs today have to sound like the Tallis Scholars or Voces8? No! Is that how Palestrina's choirs sounded? No! Can I perform Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* with my eighty-voice con-

cert choir? Yes! Can my chamber choir of twenty-five singers perform Monteverdi madrigals written for the virtuoso soloists of the Italian courts? Yes! Can I perform Haydn's *Lord Nelson Mass* with my 250-voice community choir? Very definitely! Today is the time. We must come together on this issue to sing polyphony or face losing our wonderful western choral heritage.

Conductors, just imagine when your choir performs polyphony, and each part learns to maintain rhythmic and melodic independence. Imagine the relief of your altos liberated from their harmonic filler part as they become equal partners with S, T, B colleagues.

In polyphonic textures, imagine how liberated the sopranos might feel imitating the melody initiated by the tenors, or having the new experience of serving as an important harmonic filler in an SATB contrapuntal texture. Tenors singing independent lines no longer have to be the sopranos' duet partner. You can even initiate your own motive. Basses, can you imagine being liberated from always singing the roots of chords and enjoying the independence of your own melody unhinged from the SAT parts and singing your vocal line expressively!

Having heard many excellent choirs performing at ACDA and NCCO conferences, I have witnessed many choral colleagues who are filled with insightful teaching acumen and whose choirs sing with excellent ensemble rhythm, intonation, matched vowels, and with inspired expressivity. These same qualities can also be offered to choirs through the truly important oral conduit of polyphony. Offer your experienced teaching, conducting, and rehearsal skills to your choirs. If they have not performed polyphonic repertoire for a while, tackle a Brahms or a Palestrina motet with them.

In doing so, confirm with your singers in advance that motets can be a new experience when they sing their vocal lines unhooked vertically from another. At first it may feel somewhat intimidating, but it will feel freeing in many cases!

Colleagues, I offer a benign and simple teaching suggestion, totally known to all. Assuming sopranos and tenors sing the same melody and rhythms several times, ask the sopranos and tenors to sing their melody together in parallel octaves to learn the correct notes and rhythms. Then ask them to sing their separate melodic/rhythmic vocal lines separately as written in the score. Consider the same solution with the alto and bass parts. Soon each part will be singing delightful duets as written. Then they will sing their enticing polyphonic quartet unhooked.

In achieving choral confidence, your choir can be weaned from singing homophony exclusively. Remind them of the positives of having experienced the richness of new repertoire that they have rarely or maybe never explored. Your choir by now may have sung two Renaissance motets and an incredible motet by Schütz, as well as one or two by Brahms! The results are that the choir will have become more accomplished polyphonic singers, and the complex contrapuntal (polyphonic) vocal lines of Bach can now be tackled. At the same time, an interesting experience may have dawned on your singers. The contrapuntal style of Brahms is based on the music of Bach and Schütz! Now they have not only the responsibility of singing the right notes at the right time but each part with separate expression! Your singers, rehearsing and performing polyphony, will have developed self-confidence, independence, an awareness of style, and musicianship.

After retirement in 2010, I formed an adult community choir of about sixty singers, some of whom had sung with me at Harvard. We sang a wide variety of genres and styles, among them were some polyphonic works that they seemed to especially enjoy. I decided to ask them why they liked singing polyphony. They wrote to me via email many reasons they enjoyed singing polyphony. In conclusion, I offer nine brief paragraphs from some of those singers.

• I love to sing polyphony. Each singer is responsible for holding his/her own part while remaining closely attuned to the other lines. It makes me happiest to be making music with others. Each of us is responsible for carrying our own part while being exquisitely aware and responsive to the other parts.

• I find working with adults in particular that singing polyphony can act as a metaphor for human understanding, harmony in the spiritual rather than musical sense. *E pluribus Unum*—from many, one—unity, though independently supporting each other, knowing when to take turns.

• I like singing polyphony for several reasons. Each part provides an opportunity for individual expression, which is more satisfying as a singer. With an expert composer like Josquin or Palestrina, you can really appreciate the genius and the special moments from the inside.

• Singing polyphony offers independence and awareness, performing pitches and rhythms correctly, but also creating individual gestures and lines within. We acquire an awareness of function in polyphony that leads to better awareness of function in singing homophonic music.

• Having sung with a wonderful ensemble that performed chant for years, I find this topic [polyphony/homophony] particularly interesting. I had to think a lot about the value and beauty of homophonic music when I was singing it, having all my life taken for granted that beautiful music was polyphonic. I got there, but it took a while.

• I know next to nothing about music theory. My first experience of hearing polyphony was watching the Harvard Glee Club perform. There was such an organic sense of motion in the music. I was immediately captivated by the beauty of how lines of music can be traded off from part to part in a cyclical style. Putting that music together made it come alive for me.

• Singing polyphony enlarges our understanding of western music. Because piano is the entry point for so many musicians (myself included), we all start out with a stunted view of history, i.e., Bach and beyond. That's all wonderful except that there are a good three centuries of music that go before the three centuries we are most familiar with. Polyphony aids in a mastery of all music styles. The connection to the great age of fugue is easy to grasp—shaping the independent vocal lines and finding your place in a texture. In singing polyphony, a choir will not simply park itself on the cadence but will continue to think, listen, and tune accurately.

• From a high school choral conductor: I'm trying to teach the idea that vocal polyphony represents a conversation. Singing homophony is fun and rather easy, two sure ingredients toward success in human beings, but individualism is another important ingredient. People tend to see polyphony as complicated, but it should be furthering an initial point and, in the end, giving voice to more individuals and ideas.

• Polyphonic music offers singers a challenge and an opportunity. It challenges them to know their own part well, to emphasize its important passages, and to de-emphasize its less important parts. It gives singers an opportunity to weave together a rich tapestry of sound. Rehearsing polyphony teaches singers to rely upon one another, to build on each other's strengths, and to unite as a group through hearing their own part. In the end, polyphony gives voice to more individuals and ideas, both separate from yet united with the other parts.

• The author adds one additional comment. "In performing Renaissance polyphony, singers frequently have told me that over time, in rehearsal after rehearsal, this sound-continuum produces in them a mesmerizing, quasi-ethereal, neither here-nor-there feeling. As I often have confirmed with them, these inherent emotions are amplified by the expressive power of the modes. The result is that choral singers, listeners, and I often experience a sense of euphoria with frequent moments of transcendence."

In conclusion, I urge choral conductors whose choirs have not yet sung polyphony to:

• use your twenty-first-century stylistic knowledge based on the wide range of current published information about performance practices for motets.

• employ the musicianship that I have frequently observed over many years of attending conferences. Your in-depth musical insights and rehearsal acumen were projected in a clear manner. Those showed, without a doubt, that all conductors can bring alive polyphony today! In so doing, students in your choirs will automatically develop self-confidence, independence, style, and musicianship. That is powerful music education, and it is informed and obtained by singing polyphony! CT

NOTES

[1] Robert J. Ward and Leila Heil, "Repertoire at ACDA National Conferences: 1960-2017" *Choral Journal* 57 no. 10 (May 2017): 36-42.