



Forests of Song: Building Environmental Stewardship through Choral Singing

Mark Petty
University of Washington
Seattle, Washington
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A choir is a lot like a forest. In the woods, trees work together to build beauty and give breath to the greater world. They create sanctuaries for animals and provide solace for visitors who pass beneath their branches. Through their interconnected root systems, they share nutrients and send strength to struggling trees. Likewise, choirs offer refuge to listeners and singers and add beauty to the world around them. Creating music in an ensemble strengthens and nourishes each singer along with the entire choir. Our interconnected choral communities are also healing resources for many.

It is no surprise that the natural world carries so many parallels to the musical one. Beethoven famously sought solace among the birds in the countryside, Grieg in his native mountains, and Vaughan Williams out at sea. With the earth now at a tipping point for ecological action and awareness, can our relationship with nature as singers make a difference? As both a choir conductor and wilderness instructor, I believe that it can. In many ways, caring for the earth can make us better singers, and singing can make us better stewards of the environment.

This is not particularly a new idea. In the 1920s, innovative educator Satis Coleman presented her Creative Music method, which, among other things, offered nature as a

source of inspiration for classroom music activities. She believed and taught that music existed beyond just intentional human creation and appeared all around in nature. She felt that students could hone their listening skills by spending time outside exploring the music of animals and the woods.¹

During the ecological revolution of the 1970s, Rachel Carson called for a return to a childlike awe for the outdoors, getting our hands dirty in the soil and reinvigorating those natural connections. She felt that children in nature can develop “a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life as an unflinching antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength.”² This sense of wonder translates well to music making and relates to how we experience beauty in sound.

Modern ecomusicologists recognize the powerful ties between music and the natural world. Importantly, these connections can help us establish a sense of place and root us in our own landscapes and culture, a critical component of stewardship. Environmental ethics specialist Lisa Sideris explains that “people will often defend places they know and love, but first they must become attached. They must

become native to the places they already inhabit.”³

It turns out that music is a potent tool in defining place for individuals. Whether conscious or not, you cannot help but feel rooted in the western American frontier when listening to Copland’s *Rodeo*, or sense the vast glacial expanse of Iceland with Sigur Rós’ music in your ears. It is more than just place and protection though.

Music and nature cross over in meaningful ways that help us perceive beauty more deeply, connect with greater compassion, and live more thoughtfully. As choir directors, we can create opportunities in the natural world that will both help the environment and enrich singers’ lives. Here are a few ideas to get you started.

Five Ways to Help Choirs Connect with the Earth

1) Place

Music tells the stories of our homes, both in the folk tradition and through modern invention. In some forms these are literal tales; our folk songs tell local stories that root us in communities and place. Performing these songs helps develop a cultural identity woven around natural areas that feel like home.

Other forms are more abstract, as when modern composers paint sonic images of landscapes and light. Nordic composers have set especially excellent examples here with an apt musical language for natural expression. Expanded, static harmonic movement overlaid with simple melodies often represents our movement through wild spaces. Ola Gjeilo’s *Tundra* is a beautiful example, transporting listeners to the Hardangervidda mountain plateau of his native Norway. Iceland’s Jón Leifs similarly depicts a drawn-out sunset in *Sólsetursljóð* with patient descending triads weaving their way around barren pedal points thus evoking the open regions of the North.

These are simple ways to help your choir develop a more intentional sense of place. Providing background and imagery while rehearsing or in concert can also help singers and audience members connect to the landscape. Are there local songs that are native to you, or could you commission one? Could your choir write one together?

2) Poetry

Good poetry is, of course, often the root of our repertoire choices. For ecological writing, the early transcendentalists helped us conceptualize place and being. Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and others helped reform the nature paradigm as haven rather than hazard. They inspired a cultural embrace of wilderness as a refuge—in German, *Zuflucht*—literally a place we flee to.

Pioneering conservationist E.O. Wilson taught that “mankind...is the poetic species. The symbols of art, music, and language freight power well beyond their outward and literal meanings.”⁴ This power ignites the wonder we feel at the confluence of music and words. Thoughtfully selected texts can help choirs connect to nature and capture its energy.

Which nature poems inspire you or ground you to a place? Ēriks Ešņvalds’ *Stars* is a particularly moving setting of Sara Teasdale’s descriptive work with wonderful starlight sonorities coming from singing bowls or crystal glasses. One of my recent favorites is Jake Runestad’s *Come to the Woods*, which deftly tells the story of John Muir’s adventure taking in a Yosemite windstorm atop a towering Douglas fir tree.

3) Listening

In a conversation with artist Shon Henderson, he explained that when artists observe nature, they notice the finest details—the mechanics of a wing, the texture of bark. They develop wonder and fascination for it, and come to understand and respect its intricate beauty and inner workings over time as they (artists) strive to reproduce it on a canvas.⁵ This process can be the same for musicians but with our ears instead of our eyes. Learning how to actively listen to natural areas can foster deeper care for and understanding of our surroundings. Take your choir into wild spaces and have them engage in listening activities.

A tracker once taught me a powerful exercise: to find a quiet place and carefully listen in each direction. Sit for a moment to let the environment return to its natural state. Begin listening to the north as you stretch your ears and focus on the details. Do you hear wind rustling the grass or a distant brook? Then listen to the south. Can you hear the deer’s careful footsteps or a hare scampering around? Next, listen to the east. How far can you hear? Can you stretch it farther? Then to the west. Does the wind sound different there, or are there birds calling? Finally, connect the sounds

around you and listen to the whole. Try to hold a sonic image in your mind of your special space. Over time, this practice will sharpen your ears both in nature and in the choir while also connecting you deeply to your area.

Another effective extension is to draw a soundscape map. While listening, sketch a map with pictures of what you hear in different directions, like “sound marks” rather than landmarks. Try journaling about how your hearing changed or improved. Music that incorporates natural sounds can be an exciting way to provide similar experiences for audiences transporting them to specific places and environments. *Kondalillia* is a wonderful Australian work by Stephen Leek about a waterfall spirit, with the choir imitating sounds of the outback. Lydia Adams’s arrangement of *I’ko* from the Mi’kmaq First Nations people incorporates coyote, loon, squirrel, and other animal calls throughout the work and creates a rich atmosphere.⁶

4) Service

Service builds compassion for one another and empathy for those we serve. Conservation projects can be a powerful tool, on many levels, for helping people develop care for the natural world while building community within a group. Getting hands dirty in the soil connects people with the earth while working hard toward a common goal that will bond them together. Consider planning a choir environmental service project. Reach out to a local land management agency and develop a consistent partnership with a park or trail system. Serving together in the outdoors benefits both the choir and our planet.

Imagine offering an outdoor concert in the outdoor space following a day of service, with fellow trail workers, gardeners, and community members for an audience. Place-based compositions like Veljo Tormis’ *Looduspildid* could help celebrate a particular community ecology. Find local composers whose work you could commission and premier that is tied directly to place and the environment.

5) Creating Music

Creating music together is one of the most empowering and unifying experiences a group of people can have. In my first teaching job, I doubled as a music teacher and adventure coordinator for an expeditionary learning school in southeast Idaho. For music class, we would hike out to the greenway behind the school and have a natural materials jam session. Students would make instruments from sticks

and rocks and create their own ostinato patterns in small groups. Some students “played” the water with soft branches as we put all the parts together. Not only were they reinforcing the music fundamentals, they were also engaging with nature and with each other in profound, creative ways. These were memorable days for many of us.

These same activities could happen at a choir retreat or any dedicated rehearsal. A rehearsal can incorporate any level of musicianship nearly any place. Everyone has a voice to offer. Take five minutes, or an hour, and let folks make an instrument out of what they can find. Visit the woods, a beach, or seemingly barren land. Think about sounds inspired by previous listening experiences or involving unique timbres from your locale. Make it meaningful. Be sure not to lose any singers in the river!

Conclusion

The greatest challenge we face in environmental education is the notion that nature is a place we go to separate from where we are. When we can shift our thinking to nature being a part of all that we do and where we exist and find wonder, we can take action. As we sing in a way that connects us to the earth, we begin to carry the natural world more wholly in our hearts. Likewise, as we encounter wonder outside more fully, we transfer that into our music and art.

Sideris says that wonder creates “openness to the world around us, an increased receptivity to beauty and feelings of gratitude for it, a recognition of one’s place in something much more vast. All of it helps to instill a sense of humility and modesty, a sense of caution about our interventions in the natural forces around us.”⁷ As we and our singers engage with the earth through song, service, and creative exploration, we can create music full of beauty and protect an earth brimming with wonder. ■

NOTES

¹ Daniel J. Shevlock, *Eco-literate Music Pedagogy* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 3-6.

² Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1965), 43.

³ Lisa Sideris, “Environmental Literacy and the Lifelong Cultivation of Wonder,” in *Teaching Environmental Literacy:*

Across Campus and Across the Curriculum, ed. Heather L. Reynolds, Eduardo S. Brondizio, and Jennifer Meta Robinson (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 92.

⁴ Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 74.

⁵ Shon Henderson, interview by author, Seattle, March, 2020.

⁶ This work is erroneously published as *Mi'kmaq Honour Song*, which is a different song and sacred to the Mi'kmaq people. Adams's arrangement is actually *I'ko*. Take care when introducing this to choirs and seek good background information; it can be a wonderful jumping off point for discussions about multicultural partnering and appropriation.

⁷ Sideris, 91.