

Addressing Racial and Cultural Challenges in Choirs

Baruch Whitehead

Ithaca College

Ithaca, New York

(Used with permission of the author)



As the director of a community chorus, I recently had the pleasure of collaborating with a local high school choir. Those young singers joined with the Dorothy Cotton Jubilee Singers, a multiracial, intergenerational choir of college and community singers that I direct. Our mission is to preserve Negro spirituals and build bridges for social justice through the performance of African American sacred music.

Our namesake, Dorothy Cotton, was an icon in the civil rights movement, a person who worked directly with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a member of his executive staff and entourage who had traveled to Oslo, Norway, where he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. She served as the vice president of field operations for the Dr. M.L.K. Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta. I was honored to name the group after her in 2010, the same year that she was recognized nationally for her life's work by the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee. She passed away in June 2018, but the legacy of her work will live on for generations to come.

The director of the high school choir and I spoke about the music we should program for our virtual performance in early October 2020. I was excited to share that I had just commissioned a work by Stan Spottswood, an African American composer and colleague. Spottswood's "Good Trouble" pays homage to civil rights icons Rosa Parks and

John Lewis. My choir, which is predominantly white, had been learning the music and recording the piece for several weeks. Our plan was to have the high school choir members join with the Dorothy Cotton Jubilee Singers for a virtual celebration during Martin Luther King Jr. Week. Later, the director contacted me to say that some of her students did not want to sing the work because of its use of first-person pronouns like "our" and "I." The predominantly white high school choir did not believe that it was their place to tell the story of Rosa Parks. Several of them took issue with the following line in the music:

Our mistreatment is just not right and I got tried.
No more sittin' in the back of the bus,
It's time to rise up and make a fuss,
Get in trouble, good trouble.

We quickly had a conversation about how to best handle this situation and arranged for certain Dorothy Cotton Jubilee Singers and composer Stan Spottswood to help the students through their difficulties. I explained to the students that the black soloist would be telling the story of Rosa Parks, and the choir was backing her up, much like the call-and-response often heard in music of the African diaspora.

Mr. Spottswood also told the students how he had always

envisioned a large group of singers for his song, regardless of race. However, some of the more vocal students still resisted, saying, “This isn’t our story to tell.” One student of color in the choir spoke up to share her discomfort about her white peers singing the pronouns. I asked her if she would feel the same way if the majority of the choir was black, to which she replied “no.” I then asked if she would discourage the minority of white students from singing with the majority of black singers, and she answered “no” once more.

This conversation prompted me to reflect on whether the students were misguided and wanted to be good “woke” allies or if I was just not understanding their generation. Why would they have a problem with singing first-person pronouns in a civil rights song because they were white? For years, the same students had been singing songs from the classical canon that tell the stories of many ethnic groups in Europe. Are only Germans allowed to sing Bach? I think most people would find that absurd.

I reflected on my research over the years in the book, *Music and Conflict Transformation Harmonies and Dissonances in Geopolitics*. In the chapter, “We Shall Overcome: The Role of Music in the US Civil Rights Movement” (Urbain, 2007, pp. 78-100), I discussed how music was used in the civil rights movements to bring people together and to unite all races. I intentionally mentioned the Highlander Folk School founded in 1932 by Myles and Zilphia Horton, a white couple who were musicians and community organizers in Monteage, Tennessee.

Many believe that Mr. Horton was the father of the civil rights movement because of his leadership and influence on civil rights leaders, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, Rosa Parks (who attended a workshop at the school), and John Lewis. One student of the Highlander Folk School was a white folk singer named Guy Carawan, who was instrumental in teaching other white musicians (e.g., Peter Seeger) protest songs for the civil rights movement that they spread throughout the country. The most famous song was “We Shall Overcome,” which became a rallying cry for all kinds of protesters. Mr. Carawan wrote a book describing the plight of black lives on Johns Island, South Carolina, titled *Ain’t You Got the Right to the Tree of Life?* In the preface, Charles Joyner commented:

In the 1960s, Guy and his wife Candie lived and worked among black people on Johns Island for two years. They wrote a book about the people

of Johns Island. But they are more than just the chroniclers of the story. They are part of the story, too. They came to learn about Gullah culture, but they also made a great contribution to the people of Johns Island, and, through them, to the civil rights movement and to all of us. (Carawan, 1966 pp. 7)

I believe that these musicians and community organizers helped tell the story of black oppression through songs and action.

I also reflected on John Lewis’s life and legacy as I was reading Jon Meacham’s book titled *His Truth Is Marching On: John Lewis and The Power of Hope*. Here it was, in plain view, a white man literally telling the story of black oppression with the blessings of the Congressman Lewis. When he was asked to reflect on the civil rights movement, Congressman Lewis stated:

The way of the civil rights movement was the way of love, of respect, of the dignity of every person. Not just black, not just white, not just male, not just female, but of every person. (Meacham, 2020, p. 252)

Mr. Lewis also articulated a national call to action for all people in the afterward of the book. Like past leaders such as Dr. King and Gandhi, he stated that he too could “get in trouble for the greater good” (Lewis, 2020, p. 248).

I had a realization that Mr. Meacham, a white man, could tell the story of this great American hero as I continued to reflect on the students’ concerns about white people singing about black oppression. I noted how Rep. Lewis illuminated the nature of the struggle being for all people, not just those who experienced black oppression. How else could one explain his collaboration with a white author? I believe that Mr. Meacham wrote the book from a place of solidarity and knew what it meant to be an ally to people of color. Meacham described the tragedies and victories of this great civil rights icon (Lewis) with honor and dignity.

I have searched the recesses of my mind to find ways to help white students be allies of their black peers. This conflict is nothing new; people have been questioning who has the right to express certain ideas for a long time, especially due to the cross-pollination of musical cultures. In “Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?” Joel Rudinow explores the complexity of whites

singing black music without having an authentic black cultural experience. Although the article uses examples from blues singers, I think students can still benefit from reading it.

When Professor Rudinow posed the question of whites singing the blues, most of his students expressed no concern because they already knew many white artists who sang the blues. Rudinow stated the following:

In an age of renewed and heightened racial and cultural sensitivity, the critical stance [of white artists singing the blues] seems paradoxically to be both progressive and reactionary and to stand in need of both clarification and critique. It seems to embody, as well as any, the problem of political correctness. (1994, p. 127)

Professor Rudinow wrote this article over twenty years ago, and the racial divide in this country has grown exponentially, with tribalism at its peak. One can understand why the notion of offending black musicians might give students pause. However, if white students continue to abstain from performing black music, Eurocentric music education will lack composers of color who tell stories of black oppression. They will remain the norm.

It is my opinion that one must seek out the greater good to educate and be educated by others. I believe the students are coming from a good place, but perhaps they can consider another perspective. I recalled that my choir performed *Rent* a few years ago, and none of the students said that only a gay person should sing “Will I Lose My Dignity?” (a song sung in the musical as a support group for people living with HIV/AIDS). One does not have to be a member of the LGBTQIA community to tell this important story; we all need allies.

I believe it will take time and energy to work through the students’ concerns. As a black man in a predominantly white city and workplace, I often call upon my white colleagues to help me tell stories of the black experience and become allies.

One such ally has been Dr. Janet Galván. We have worked together for many years to program music of black composers. As a white woman, Dr. Galván understands the difficulties that white allies must navigate to avoid being dismissive. In recent times, Emily Preston, a white music educator and associate director of the Dorothy Cotton Jubilee

Singers, has also answered the call to collaboration and is a strong ally in the preparation of negro spirituals and other African-American sacred music for the group.

I started to do more research on the topic of whether one should sing about another person’s experience (outside of his or her culture) and discovered some very helpful resources. One was an article from *The New Yorker* titled “The Politics of Fiction: Who Gave You the Right to Tell that Story?” Ten individuals describe how they came to write from other perspectives—e.g., the voice of someone from a different race or culture (Shapiro, 2019).

However, the one source that aligned the most with my thinking was a 2019 article titled “Singing Down the Barriers: Encouraging Singers of All Racial Backgrounds to Perform Music” by African American composers Caroline Helton and Emery Stephens. They took a deep dive into the question of white singers singing black music. Based on insights from the majority of students they surveyed, they raised the following point:

Singers of all racial backgrounds must actively work to connect to the literature they sing. They said that it may be easier for some African American singers who have had certain experiences to connect to the repertoire, but that does not rule out the responsibility borne by any singer to create an authentic and committed performance. (Stephens, 2019, p. 76)

Importantly, they also stressed the fact that it is the singer’s responsibility to pursue proper research to understand songs in their cultural context. I believe music educators should prepare students to sing outside their comfort zones by becoming culturally aware in cultures that are not their own. A person’s race does not automatically give him or her the proper tools to sing with authenticity. One must work to understand and appreciate the cultural framework of the music. Said one African American student in Helton and Stephens’ survey:

It is my duty, and the duty of other African Americans, to continue performing the songs of our past for others. I believe that that is very important; however, when people of other races sing these wonderful songs, the message of continuing the story is extended to a greater family of people, be-

yond race. I do not believe that music has a soul, but it does leave the imprints of peoples' spirit and communicates on a deeper level than our verbal language can ever begin to communicate. (p. 76)

This takes me back to the original question: should white students sing stories about black oppression? My answer is a resounding yes, but as educators, we must do the work and help students understand why and how to sing these songs in a respectful manner. Educators must be willing to have difficult conversations with their students, I believe.

As a conductor, I was once asked to participate in a Holocaust remembrance ceremony. I gladly accepted the invitation and asked my Jewish choir members what we should sing. One person suggested "Ani Ma' a Min," which translates into "I believe with complete faith in the coming of the Messiah." When I prepared the choir to sing this work, I asked one Jewish person to speak about the song and what it meant to her to have Jews and Gentiles sing it in solidarity. After she finished speaking, I could see tears running down the faces of many choir members. In that moment, we understand how music afforded us the opportunity to be allies. An ally is able to commiserate with one's neighbors regardless of skin color.

I applaud the high school teacher with whom I started this collaboration. I hope our journey will help her students find ways to perform songs that recount black oppression so that they too can empathize with their black peers and sing with pride, conviction, and joy in solidarity with all people. **CT**

⁵ L. Shapiro, "The Politics of Fiction: Who Gave you the Right to Tell the Story?" in *The New Yorker* (October 2019): 59-62.

⁶ Olivier Urbain, *Music and Conflict Transformation: Harmonies and Dissonances in Geopolitics* (I.B. Tauris, 2007).

NOTES

¹ Guy Carawan, *Ain't You Got a Right to the Tree of Life? The People of Johns Island, South Carolina—Their Faces, Their Words and Their Songs* (Brown Thrasher Books, 1966).

² Caroline Helton and Emery Stephens, "Singing down the barriers: encouraging singers of all racial backgrounds to perform music" by African American composers. *Scholarship of Multicultural Teaching and Learning*, 111 (2007): 73-80.

³ John Meacham and John Lewis, *His Truth is Marching On: John Lewis and the Power of Hope* (Random House 2020).

⁴ Joel Rudinow, "Race, Ethnicity, Expressive Authenticity: Can White People Sing the Blues?" in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 52 (1) (1994): 127-137.