



A WORLD OF MUSIC THROUGH COMMUNITY SINGING BY NICK PAGE

What is community singing?

The first humans gathered together at night and sang—a language of emotions, melodies born of the heart. Our digital age cannot diminish the power of people gathering together to sing: a “Happy Birthday” in a noisy restaurant, a sacred anthem in worship, or a rowdy chant at a sports event. I grew up in a church where our choir director, Francis Judd Cooke, would have the congregation come early for the Christmas service to teach them Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus.” I have seen Alice Parker turn to an audience and quietly begin a song. With a calm gesture, she breaks into a round. In her books and workshops,¹ Alice Parker says, “You get what you ask for.” She points out that what we sing as communities can never be repeated and can never be written down. A song is just as alive as a tree and constantly changing. Anthony Leach,² one of ACDA’s authorities on the African American spiritual, will sometimes program an arrangement of a well-known spiritual then turn to his audience and have them sing the spiritual in their own



Members of Nick Page’s Mystic Chorale leading a senior sing

way. Tim McHale brings his *Boston Minstrels*³ to prisons and homeless shelters. The works of Bob Dylan and Billy Joel become prayers of the heart.

Why is community singing important?

I live outside of Boston. In April 2013, the marathon bombings shook us terribly, but something remarkable happened the following week. At the opening game of the Boston Red Sox, everyone stood and sang our national anthem. Usually most of the people stand politely and listen to the anthem, but this day was different. Everyone sang. Why? Because at its core, singing is the vocalization of emotions, the sounding of the heart. Because the Bostonians were emotionally engaged, they sang. Singing brings us together and gives us a sense of belonging.

How do you look at community singing from a multicultural perspective?

While singing in a few cultures of the world is taboo, for most societies joining together in song is central to its identity and being. And in most of these cultures, it is not a few who sing; everyone sings. It brings the people power. It unites them and connects them to their past, living traditions kept alive through this verb we call singing.

I have had a great interest in the singing traditions of black South Africa, songs that fired the anti-apartheid movement and now fire other movements such as HIV awareness. These songs are very much tied to the stories behind them. If I teach “Thuma Mina” (Hear My Prayer),⁴ I tell the singers where it’s from, what it means, and why it’s sung. I do everything I can to create an emotional understanding of the song. Without a

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connection to the heart, a song is simply a series of beautiful sounds. Empathy gives the song power, but more importantly it provides us with a purpose to sing. We become connected with the people of another geography, another age, creating another expression of the human experience.

Community singing also brings the world into our own small communities. The world begins at home, whether that home is our schools, our places of worship, our clubs, or our families. I strongly believe that our schools need to be singing communities. I witnessed the late Bob Kidd lead one of his daily all-school sings at his elementary school in Norman, Oklahoma. To his students, their identity was certain. They were students; they were there to work hard, to learn, to work together to achieve greatness. His students had a fire, and I believe the source of that fire was the daily all-school sings. This sense of belonging, of community, is no different than what the singers of South Africa experience. While the reasons for singing may be different, the results are the same: the music brings us together.

Our communities are constantly expanding. In her Vocal Communities workshops, Dr. Ysaye Maria Barnwell,⁵ longtime member of Sweet Honey in the Rock, invites singers into the deep well of African American song, from Civil Rights chants to rousing spirituals. Through this singing, the worlds of those involved expands. Joey Weisenberg does something similar by reinventing the Chassidic Nigun tradition—wordless songs of great spiritual elation. Singers repeat the chants as Joey helps them connect to a powerful spirituality. Like Alice Parker's book *Creative Hymn Singing*⁶, Joey's book *Building Singing Communities*⁷ has great meaning for those outside of the faith, once again showing that the message is universal.

My world expanded several years



Joyful Noise singing at Harvard University

ago when I heard New Jersey's Joyful Noise perform at an ACDA conference. Joyful Noise is an adult chorus of singers with physical and intellectual disabilities. These singers broadened my musical world to embrace the community of the heart and soul. At a national ACDA conference in Chicago, the chorus sang a work I wrote for them, "You Have a Heart"⁸ (self-published). Founder Allison Fromm and choral leaders including Alice Parker, Doreen Rao, and Sharon Gratto joined us on stage. Many amazing choirs performed at that conference, but none, in my opinion, had the emotional force of Joyful Noise.

Where do we find repertoire for audience sing-alongs?

Lyrics and chord charts are readily available online.⁹ Will Schmid put together two songbooks when he was president of MENC (now NAfME). *Get America Singing*¹⁰ contains songs that every North American should know. Taking songs in diverse languages like José-Luis Orozco's "Paz Y Libertad"¹¹ and adapting them into simple echo songs makes them accessible for audiences. There are small booklets published by World Around Songs¹² that offer a rich diversity of cultures and very accessible tunes. Mary Goetze and

Jay Fern first broke ground in world music singing by using DVD technology to help song leaders teach songs in the oral/aural tradition with informants from the cultures. Mollie Stone continued the tradition with South African choral music¹³ and has recently collaborated with Patty Cuyler to extend the use of technology for songs from several different cultures.¹⁴ Ysaye Barnwell asked me once never to use the words "by rote" in reference to song leading. She said it implies that the written tradition came first and that the oral tradition, her preferred wording, came later. She reminds us that the oral tradition is the oldest musical tradition and should be treated with great respect.

How do we inspire our audiences to sing along?

We have to rethink what an audience is. This is where multicultural perspectives inform us. When musicians in West Africa play and sing, they are not performing. To them, making music is an act of compassion, and those around them are not an audience; they are all participants and part of the community. My community chorus in Boston, the Mystic Chorale,¹⁵ breaks down the performer/audience hierarchy by bringing in the audience throughout our concerts.



There are many ways to draw in our audiences. My techniques for engaging audiences begin with the belief that we humans are far more capable of magnificence than we suppose.¹⁶ A trick I use often is to bring up audience members to help lead a song. They can help with hand and body motions on a simple echo song like “Do You Shine?”¹⁷ or singing a fun bass line to a pop song like “My Girl.” What happens is that the source of emotional power is no longer coming from me. It is coming from the community itself. The “volunteers” make it safe to express emotions. You must break down the wall that prevents most in our mass cultures from singing. It is an emotional wall, one that does not exist in most other cultures. In order for an audience to sing, they need confidence. Confidence is an emotion. They have to sound good. There is no emotional motivation for singing poorly.

There are many physical singing tips that can help audiences sing better.¹⁸ I find that asking them to sing percussively makes a huge difference. It makes dull singing suddenly come alive. Bobby McFerrin calls it “dynamic singing.” He is quite insistent that we sing well. If we echo him, we have to get it right. The oral tradition must never mean dumbing down. It brings us back to the words of Alice Parker, “You get what you ask for.”

NOTES

- ¹ Melodious Accord: Creating Communities of Sound through Singing <www.melodiousaccord.org>.
- ² Essence of Joy <www.clubs.psu.edu/up/essenceofjoy>.
- ³ Boston Minstrel <www.bostonminstrel.org>.
- ⁴ Anders Nyberg, ed. *Freedom is Coming, Songs of Protest and Praise from South Africa for Mixed Choir* (book & CD), (Walton Music Corporation, 1984) (See

- also *Freedom Is In Your Hand*, 2003).
- ⁵ Ysaye Barnwell, *Singing in the African American Tradition, Choral and Congregational Vocal Music* (CD set). Homespun Tapes, 1989.
- ⁶ Alice Parker, *Creative Hymn Singing* (Hinsshaw Music, 1976).
- ⁷ Joey Weisenberg, *Building Singing Communities: A Practical Guide to Unlocking the Power of Music in Jewish Prayer*, (Mechon Hada, 2011).
- ⁸ “You Have a Heart” commissioned for the Joyful Noise Chorus and composed by Nick Page <<http://vimeo.com/28038030>>.
- ⁹ If printing lyrics in a program, gain permission from publishers. Allow four or five months.
- ¹⁰ Will Schmid, ed. *Get America Singing* Vol. 1 & 2 (Hal Leonard, 1996).
- ¹¹ José-Luis Orozco, ed. *De Colores and Other*

- Latin-American Folk Songs for Children*, (Dutton Children’s Books, 1994). (Also *Diez Deditos*, 1997.)
- ¹² World Around Songs <www.worldaroundsongs.com>.
- ¹³ Mollie Stone’s book and DVD recording, *Vela Vela*, is available at <velavela@molliestone.org>.
- ¹⁴ Mollie Stone and Patty Cuyler’s three volumes of books and DVDs, *Raising the Bar*, are available at <www.thechoralimperative.com>.
- ¹⁵ Mystic Chorale <<http://www.mysticchorale.org>>.
- ¹⁶ Nick Page, *The Sing With Us Songbook, Audience Sing-Alongs For All Ages* (Hal Leonard, 2008).
- ¹⁷ <http://nickmusic.com/?page_id=78>
- ¹⁸ Nick Page, *Sing and Shine On! An Innovative Guide to Leading Multicultural Song* (World Music Press, 1994).



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