

From the Editor

What's in a Name?

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When Greg Brown, Tim Newton, and I began planning the National Collegiate Choral Organization's new online journal nearly two years ago, among our first tasks was to find a name for the publication. It proved to be more challenging than I expected: we explored a variety of options (I originally favored some rather arcane Latinate phrases but was, fortunately, politely overruled), but when someone—I think it may have been Greg—suggested *The Choral Scholar*, it seemed a natural and obvious choice.

In England, choral scholars receive a stipend to sing in the chapels at Oxford, Cambridge, and the smaller schools often associated with cathedrals. The title *The Choral Scholar* carries the implication of the performance that is at the heart of all our work.

But the prominence of the word *scholar* in our name also makes an important statement: all of us who teach and conduct in colleges and universities are, in some sense, choral scholars. Part of the aim of the National Collegiate Choral Organization is to promote and support our scholarly side, and this journal plays an important role in that objective.

The last half-century has seen a needed and welcome growth in musical scholarship, particularly in areas that bear directly on musical performance. It is a natural outgrowth of a trend that began much earlier, with the emergence of the first collected editions and critical scores in the mid-nineteenth century. From its beginnings as a science focused at first primarily on biography and, to a lesser extent, on the creation of reliable scores (the so-called *Urtext*),

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musicology in the last century has embraced all kinds of study—from paper and ink, to gender, to performance and reception history, to the sociology, psychology, and economics of music, to the proper execution of notes, rhythms, articulations, and ornaments, to name only a few. Many of these materially affect our understanding of the music and how we are to rehearse and perform it.

There have been similar expansions of inquiry, knowledge, and understanding in the realms of music theory and vocal science. As the nature of music has changed over time, the vocabulary and methodology of theorists have transformed to keep pace. Advances in technology that give us a clearer idea of what is going on when humans produce vocal sounds have transformed the teaching of singing, both in the studio and the choral rehearsal. For centuries singing was taught—quite successfully, let it be said—through imagery and techniques derived from trial and error. Now, thanks to such technologies as the oscilloscope and the laryngoscope equipped with a videocamera, exercises and imagery can be based on an observable and measurable understanding of physics, anatomy, and physiology. We can watch the human vocal folds in action in living human beings; we are no longer forced to draw conclusions from dissecting cadavers.

Choral conductors—and especially those working in institutions of higher learning—have a unique challenge: our literature is the largest of any performing musician, extending over the greatest range of musical history, from the earliest chants to the music of the

present day. We must be in command of a daunting range of scholarship covering the entire history of music, its ever-changing theory, and the science of the voices that produce that music. For a long time, American choir directors didn't worry too much about all the research and knowledge their musicology, theory, and vocal science colleagues were creating. Skillful motivators of large groups of people, many functioned primarily on their enormous drive and charisma—and created unforgettable performances.

But a new generation of conductors that emerged around the time of the Second World War began to change this thinking. Robert Shaw comes immediately to mind as a pioneer in this regard. His voracious mind and prodigious curiosity led him to seek out the wisdom of the leading Bach scholars of his day, for instance, when he confronted the B-Minor Mass (as you will read in Robin Leaver's article on Bach performance). Shaw, along with many others, began a conversation that continues and grows to this day between scholars and performers.

Why is the marriage of performance and scholarship so important? Why, in short, is it necessary for us to be choral scholars? Isn't it viable to give a performance that expresses our own understanding of the music and uses the composition as a point of departure to address our personal needs and those of our singers and audience? Why be limited by what the composer had in mind? Why, after all, is the composer's creative idea—the one that generated the piece we are rehearsing and performing at the moment—any more important, valuable, or meaningful than our own? These are trenchant questions, and in a world that prizes creativity and originality almost above all else, they require answers. If we seek a performance rooted (however tenuously) in the composer's ideas, do we risk becoming mere parrots, mindlessly echoing the dead voices of the past without understanding? The questions must be answered on many levels.

Musical performance can be inherently creative, even when it is closely bound to that elusive will-o'-the-wisp, the composer's intentions. Though creativity is often connected in the popular imagination with a defiance of rules bordering on anarchy, imaginative minds thrive best when they respond to limits and test them. I still remember a lecture I heard the poet John Ciardi give in the early 1970s. I was just a teenager, but I never forgot his discussion of the way poetry succeeds best when it is orderly. He showed, through a lighthearted poem about a widegeon in a wicopy,¹ that poetry created its own rules, its own limits, and its own expectations as it went along—there can be self-imposed order and boundaries, they don't always need to come from outside. Stephen Sondheim says the same thing another way in his standard bio:

“If you told me to write a love song to-night,” Broadway composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim told Samuel G. Freedman in the *New York Times Magazine*, “I'd have a lot of trouble. But if you tell me to write a love song about a girl with a red dress who goes into a bar and is on her fifth martini and is falling off her chair, that's a lot easier and it makes me free to say anything I want.”²

For the scholarly performer, fealty to the composer's original idea is an important constraint. It provides a direction for the conductor's contemplation of the score—otherwise, the performance risks being shallow and self-

¹ Ciardi apparently gave this lecture a great deal, and you can find a version of it, complete with the poem and the process that created it, here: http://lds.org/ldsorg/v/index.jsp?vnextoid=024644f8f206c010VgnVCM1000004d82620aRCRD&locale=0&sourceId=94ff82178cb9b010VgnVCM1000004d82620a____&hideNav=1

² Samuel G. Freedman, “The Words and Music of Stephen Sondheim,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 1, 1984. Quoted in “Stephen Sondheim” <http://www.musicianguide.com/biographies/1608001475/Stephen-Sondheim.html>

indulgent. When we hear the B-Minor Mass of Bach, we expect to hear Bach's voice. A conductor *might* come along whose genius and imagination are as great as his, and in that case we might be just as interested in that conductor's idea of the Mass as we are in Bach's. We might not even be too concerned about any discord between two such creative minds.

In most cases, however, we tread on dangerous quicksand when we depart (wittingly or unwittingly) from the music the composer gave us. A rendition in which the aims of the composer and the performer are at odds is likely to be strained and full of unresolved tension, the emotional equivalent of a square peg thrust single-mindedly into a round hole. The musical process is a bit like the children's game of telephone, where a sentence is whispered from one player to another and the final message—usually terribly garbled—is compared to the original saying with often hilarious results. There is already a compromise when the composer puts a musical idea to paper: notation can never fully capture what the composer heard in the imagination. We, as performers, often at a great remove of time and space, must try to reconstruct the original message and convey that first to an ensemble and eventually to an audience. At each stage of the process, some information is lost. Unless we at least strive to maintain the integrity of the original message, we risk producing something as laughable as the confused outcome of the telephone game.

This is where scholarship comes in. As choral scholars, we seek to fill the gaps between the composer's idea, the notation, and our own ideas and understanding, all in the hopes of arriving at a kind of musical truth. We do this in part because it provides welcome boundaries to our creativity and a direction for our energies. We do it to honor the composers whose creativity we need in order to begin our own work. And we do it because the message that comes through is, we hope, less distorted, less mangled by static, and therefore more compelling and powerful.

For scholarship to enrich our performances with a deeper understanding, it needs a place to thrive. We need a place to share our pursuit of an accurate text from which to work, our desire to understand the context of the music we perform and the conditions in which it was created, our need to know what musical notation meant to the people who wrote it down and first executed it, our zeal to comprehend how each part of a piece relates to each other part, and our wish to help our singers produce the sounds the music demands beautifully, free of tension, struggle, and injury.

The National Collegiate Choral Organization and the founding editors of the journal fervently hope that *The Choral Scholar* will be such a place. We hope, through the dynamic medium of the internet, to provide a forum in which scholars and performers can meet. By making the space for the conversation, we hope to encourage more and livelier inquiry into choral music: scholars can be confident of a thoughtful, interested audience, and readers will find tools to spur greater knowledge and creativity. Through this symbiosis, we seek to deepen the dialogue between those engaged in the academic study of music and those pursuing its living practice.

The editors are especially proud that this first issue covers so many facets of choral scholarship in just four articles. Robin Leaver's essay provides an excellent summary of one facet of performance practice, namely, the number of singers required to perform Bach's concerted vocal music. Stephen Sieck writes a biographical and theoretical essay that explores the influences on Benjamin Britten's early compositional style. Duane Cottrell discusses a controversial aspect of voice teaching—the so-called *glottal attack*—and applies modern vocal science to vindicate a technique developed by the great voice teacher Manuel Garcia. Finally, Mark Porcaro looks at how the world of commercial recording shaped the fundamental nature of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir in its golden age. We thus touch on performance, the function

of the human voice and productive ways to address it in rehearsal, history, cultural studies, and theory all in one volume.

You can read these articles knowing that they have been thoroughly vetted through a peer-review process: scholars both within and outside the Editorial Board and Editorial Staff have read and commented on each article. Those comments have been shared with the authors and appropriate revisions made. All of this happens anonymously: the readers do not know who the author is, and the author does not know who reviewed the paper. This is the same kind of blind peer review that happens in other scholarly fields. Like journals in musicology, music theory, the humanities, social sciences, and pure and applied science, *The Choral Scholar* engages in a process that seeks outside expertise from recognized specialists in the topic of the article to ensure that the essays meet several standards: they should be current in both material and methodology, they must be well-argued and well-constructed, and they should present something new. The editorial staff thanks the readers who worked so diligently on the articles in this inaugural volume of *The Choral Scholar*.

Finally, we hope that you will be inspired by what you read here in a variety of ways. Naturally, we hope that these essays will have an impact on the music you study, rehearse, and perform. We hope you will find things here to discuss and debate in the online forums that allow a kind of ongoing letter-to-the-editor conversation. These will be moderated, and those taking part in the conversation will be named and their credentials given. We seek to promote open scholarly inquiry rather than the kind of casual conversation and airing of quick reactions that happens elsewhere on the internet. And, most of all, we hope that you will share your own scholarship with us so that we can publish it in these pages and therefore keep the conversation going.

So, what's in a name? Much. We hope, by asserting our identities as choral scholars, to affirm the fundamental union of performance and

learning. We hope this name captures nothing less than the very future of academic inquiry, research, and study into the vast realm of the music we love so much—the primal sound of the human voices combining in sublime, effable harmony.

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