

5-24-78

The

Conductors'

Podium

Illinois State Newsletter of the American Choral Directors Association



Vol. IV, No. 3

April 30, 1978

AGAINST SWING CHOIRS

by Dr. James Wood,
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Morningside College, Sioux City, Iowa

I have the feeling that I might as well be writing an article knocking Mom and apple pie as to be writing one against swing choirs, given their present success and popularity. But unpopular causes are generally, in the end, the only ones worth supporting. My reasons are:

One: Swing choirs are a part of an overall trend in music education to look at musical organizations solely in terms of their entertainment value.

Two: The effect that swing choir singing, as it is generally practiced, has upon the voices which take part in this activity.

There was a time, at least supposedly, when athletic teams' chief reason for being was to build body and character. Gradually the production of a winning record to please the spectators has become the only thing which counts.

There was likewise a time where it was supposed that the purpose of music in public education was to educate and to expose students, both in class and organization, to some of the great works of musical art. Gradually, bit by bit this purpose of music in schools has been eroded by those whose only rule is popularity, until precious little remains of art.

This happened first in the instrumental area following World War I with the development of the marching band. Meredith Wilson has the story quite right in his musical "The Music Man." There was a surplus of band instruments made for the armed forces and following the war a campaign was organized to market these to the schools of the country. It succeeded but too well.

Now I have nothing against marching bands as such, it is simply that they have very nearly killed high school orchestras, and that they exist primarily to satisfy the needs of the athletic departments to serve up some kind of entertainment during the interval when the gladiators retire from the arena for a much needed rest.

But this was to have been about swing choirs. My point is that the swing choir program is having much the same effect upon traditional choirs as the marching band had on orchestras. It is killing them. Where swing choirs exist, which is to say nearly everywhere, both the standards of repertoire, and the execution of the music are in decline or already non-existent. Where they do not, the pressure upon choir directors to form them is overwhelming.

Why should the standards of choral performance deteriorate as a result of swing choir activity? It is largely because so much emphasis is placed upon non-musical factors, i.e., choreography. Secondly, music which is totally associated with "fun" is a very difficult vehicle on which to teach the elements of tone quality, balance, blend, intonation and a host of other factors important to good traditional choral performance. Directors are seldom willing to bear down enough on an activity where the emphasis is on fun, to achieve any excellence in these qualities.

This is not to say that there are not swing choirs which show evidence of work on musical factors. But even where they do, such work seldom seems to show in the traditional choirs of the same schools. In judging contests, I can always tell which choirs are from schools where the swing choir training is predominant. Which brings me to my second thought — one not generally appreciated or understood by instrumentalists.

If a trumpet player plays in a marching band or jazz ensemble, there is little or no effect on either the trumpet or the player. His lip may get tired, but the trumpet remains the same. Moreover, he can, if it wears out, throw away the old horn and purchase a new one.

Such is not the case with the singer. If his voice wears out, it is all too frequently gone for life and no new one can be found to replace it. Why should singing in swing choir have any relationship to wear and tear on a student's voice? For two reasons:

Because of their very popularity, swing choirs are asked to perform an inordinate number of times each year. The sheer number of performances is enough to destroy even a well-trained voice, let alone an untrained one. I have a student who came in as a Freshman with a persistent hoarseness which

is only now during her second year beginning to disappear. It is too early to tell whether the damage is permanent. On questioning her, I found that she had participated in more than 70 performances in swing choir during her last year in high school.

Secondly, because of the nature of the music, students are not encouraged to develop a healthy vocal sound, but rather an imitation of the "pop" style of the 30s, 40s, and 50s which are the time locale of most swing choir shows. This style is and always has been bad for voices, and indeed takes the student on a road both vocally and stylistically, which leads directly in the opposite direction from that in which a voice teacher would take him. The situation is further aggravated by the fact that many swing choir directors themselves have little or no vocal training and do not realize what sort of damage they are doing - lasting, irreparable damage to unique, irreplaceable instruments which, in nearly all cases, will not be discovered until it is too late. As a voice teacher, I do not like having to say to a student, "Sorry, your high school director has used up your instrument."

The real name of the enemy of course is exploitation. And I must lay some of the blame where it properly belongs, upon parents and community leaders who in their misguided zeal encourage the directors to exploit their son's and daughter's talents to bolster either their individual or collective egos.

To the directors of choirs who have resisted and are still resisting the pressure to "go along," my hat is off. To those who have given in, and who know better, my hope is that you can find the courage to resist and turn the tide the other way.

Editors note: During the last few years an abundance of views have been expressed in favor of swing choirs though articles, convention sessions, and workshops. It is only appropriate that an opposite viewpoint be given a voice.

Dear Friends and Fellow ACDA'ers:

Time, as usual, is slipping away, and the end of this school year is pushing us to the brink! I'm already "tuned in," by necessity, to ACDA plans for next year, but I still want to share some of this year's thoughts with you regarding ACDA, choral singing and our future in general.

The following comments are my own reflections based on: my own work with my district elementary and junior high schools; observations of the excellent work that many of our colleagues, such as Doreen Rao, Director of the Glen Ellyn Childrens Choir, and Bill Schnell from Glenbrook South High School, are doing in encouraging elementary and junior high singers; Howard Swan's opening remarks at the 1977 ACDA Convention in Dallas, Texas. Howard, in his inimitable style, related some disturbing national statistics revealing that the number of students participating in vocal music was decreasing nationally while the number of students participating in art, drama, instrumental music, etc., was increasing. This may or may not be the case in your particular situation, but the national picture is not optimistic. What irony! At a time when ACDA is increasing and when our choral art is improving in terms of sophistication, performance techniques, choice of literature, etc., we find the number of students in choral music in many good programs is decreasing.

As in most situations, the problems, and certainly the solutions, are complex. I want to address myself to one factor which is the foundation and life-line of all of our programs, regardless of what age level we teach.

The obvious needs to happen: we must individually and collectively give physical, moral and, when appropriate, financial support to choral singing at the elementary and junior high level in the schools, churches, and community! This support needs to be a positive, overt and assertive commitment. Let's face it! If young children don't sing, none of the high school, college, church, and community groups have much of a future. It would be ideal if our American society was fashioned after the singing traditions of countries like Hungary and incorporated the Kodaly techniques through the land. Imagine the sight reading and general singing abilities of your own groups then! The reality is that we, in America, work under totally different circumstances. No two programs are alike, and there is no national continuity.

What can we do? We all need to start somewhere, so do all or at least one of the following before the end of this year:

1. Call several of the elementary and junior high school choral directors in your area and give them your physical support by attending one of their concerts or at least discuss their program and concerns with them.
2. Encourage their membership in ACDA and their attendance at ACDA functions, including the State Convention which will be held at Judson College on Friday and Saturday, October 13 and 14. Remember, there are very few elementary and junior high school choral directors reading this letter now because most of them are not members. You need to contact them.

ACDA STATE CONVENTION III

**October 13 and 14, 1978
Judson College in Elgin**

Plan now to attend this inspiring and valuable convention. Performances will be given in the new chapel (with acoustics far superior to a hotel ballroom), which is equipped with a pipe organ and new grand piano. A major portion of the convention will deal with junior high choral music as the turning point in our quest for students. Sessions will involve the relationship of the junior high to other levels of education. A festival chorus is being planned by Bill Schnell and Doreen Rao. There will also be performances by high school, college and church choirs, and reading sessions. Overnight guests are referred to the Ramada Inn, located next door to Judson College at 500 W. River Rd., Elgin, IL 60120. Their rates are a welcome relief!

Single/1 person/1 bed	\$19.44 (tax incl.)
Double/2 persons/1 bed	\$21.60 (tax incl.)
Double/2 persons/2 beds	\$27.00 (tax incl.)

3. Encourage the directors of elementary and junior high choirs to have their groups perform at the state and national conventions.
4. Offer to have exchange programs between elementary, junior and senior high schools, college and community groups. An excellent incentive for a children's choir is to be invited to a high school, college, or church and to experience an enthusiastic and supportive audience.
5. Support these groups by sending positive letters of support to their administrators, supervisors, ministers, etc., encouraging the continuance of the elementary choral program. Young groups often do not get enough public performance exposure so they need additional forms of support. It's too easy to eliminate elementary programs because no one knows they exist.
6. Solicit ideas from directors of young people about how ACDA can serve them better. We need and want their ideas, membership and support.
7. Finally, insert one of your own ideas here for helping to make it happen at the elementary and junior high level.

Unfortunately ACDA has been stereotyped by many persons as an organization of high school and college choral directors. We are making progress in all other areas; but, in my opinion, the most critical area is where it all starts: children singing. You know that all of our situations would be improved if we spent less time complaining about our choir personnel problems regarding quantity and/or quality and got in there and helped with the solution.

The greatest asset in facing the many difficulties we as choral musicians foresee in the future is to have a great reserve of young people who have learned the job of singing at an early age. Hopefully, they will then continue singing in high school, college, community, and church choirs for the rest of their lives. It all can't be done at once or by one person, but we can try, and I sincerely hope you will start somewhere and do something.

If you feel complacent because you have thought about the problem and have done something . . . try it "Once More With Feeling" until we all get it right!

Sincerely,
 Ted Klinka
 President, ACDA Illinois State Chapter

CHORAL NEWS AROUND THE STATE from the District Chairpersons

District 1

Lynne Bradley and Kathryn Luhning
 Lyons Township High School
 LaGrange, IL 60525 (313) 354-4220

Orchids to **Margaret Hillis** and Chicago Symphony Orchestra chorus on their First Grammy for the Verdi Requiem. Margaret Hillis will be the guest conductor of the Madison Symphony for an April 1 performance of the Verdi Requiem. In July, she will also appear as guest conductor of the Milwaukee Symphony in an all-instrumental program.

The All-City Chorus of Chicago, directed by **Venores Cates**, will appear at MENC on April 15. They also are performing for the Principal's Association meeting on March 30. Their own concert on June 11 will be televised on WTTW and simulcast on WBEZ-FM.

Choirs from the Chicago Public Schools will be participating in a Choir Festival on April 4, 5, 6 and 7. Over 2000 students in 75 groups are expected to participate in the festival, held in four different sites to accommodate everyone, according to **Irving Bunton**, Music Co-ordinator of Chicago Schools.

Over 300 students from Chicago schools participated in an Ensemble Festival at Jones Commercial High School on Sunday, March 12. Ensembles performed for clinicians in each of three performance rooms. At the conclusion, an Honors Recital featured the seven outstanding ensembles.

Cooper, Holmes and Lincoln Junior High Schools sponsored a choral festival on Saturday, February 25th. Seventh and eighth grade choirs sang for three clinicians who worked with them on the music which had been presented. The Male Select Choir of LTHS, directed by **Katie Luhning**, was the guest choir.

On February 23rd, 1978, twenty high schools from The South Intersuburban Conference Association participated in exchange choral concerts at three different sites.

The SICA North Division was held at Thornton Township High School in Harvey, **Dick Campbell**, host director, the SICA West Division concerts were held at Argo High School, **Don Peterson**, host director, SICA South and East Divisions met at Rich Central— host director, **Art Yergler**.

The Second Annual Eisenhower Curriculum Cooperative Choral Festival was held at Richards High School, Dale Lawn, March 9th. Guest clinician was **Walter Rodby**.

District 2

Calvin B. Hedegaard
 Moline Senior High School
 Moline, IL 61265 (309) 762-9411

District 3

Dr. Paul E. Clark
 Community Unit Schools
 Donovan, IL 60931 (815) 486-7398

Joe Noble, choral conductor at Olivet College in Kankakee will conduct the combined high school choirs from Long Island, New York, in performances of the Faure Requiem on April 8 and 9. He will also serve as the clinician for the LTHS Choral Clinic on May 10 and will return as a

new!  **new!**

A MORAVIAN LOVEFEAST, Salli Terri
 (A Moravian Hymn Service)
 FULL FADOM FIVE, Michael Fink (SATB)
 AMEN, PRAISE AND HONOR, Telemann (SAB)
 GLORIA, Marvin Curtis (SATB Spiritual)

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guest conductor to be featured at the Spring Festival, a concert featuring all of the choral groups at LT on Tuesday, May 23rd.

At Olivet, Joe's Oratorio chorus performed Elijah on March 18. The Treble Clef Choir, which he also conducts, toured Washington, D.C., from March 24th to April 3rd.

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Douglas Reeve
Quincy College
Quincy, IL 62301 (217) 222-8020

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Richard Hoffland
Millikin University
Decatur, IL 62526 (217) 424-6304

District 6

Dr. James Wilson
Greenville College
Greenville, IL 62246 (217) 664-1840

District 7

Dr. William E. Schnell
Glenbrook South High School
Glenview, IL 60025 (312) 729-2000

David Larson will conduct the first American performance of selected movements of Baldassare Galuppi's "Laudate Pueri" (Psalm 112) at the opening session of the M.E.N.C. National Convention at the Conrad Hilton Hotel in Chicago, April 12, 1978. The work is scored for double women's chorus, soloists and double orchestra. Participating in the performance will be the women of the Roosevelt University Chorus and Concert Choir, the Roosevelt University Symphony Orchestra, and the Lyons Township Treble Choir, **Lynne Bradley**, conductor. Full performances of the Galuppi work will be given on April 20, 8:00 p.m. at Lyons Township High School, LaGrange, and on April 21, 8:00 p.m. at Roosevelt University in Chicago.

Lloyd Pfautsch will lead a Summer Choral Workshop at Roosevelt University, 430 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60605, June 26-30, 1978. The Workshop Chorus is open to qualified high school students and the Choral Conducting

Techniques class is offered for conductors. For information write or phone David Larson at Roosevelt University. (312-341-3780)

District 8

Jim Wiltz
Dixon High School
Dixon, IL 61021 (815) 284-7722

DATES TO REMEMBER

October 13 - 14 - ACDA State Convention, Judson College, Elgin
March 8 - 10, 1979 - ACDA National Convention, Kansas City

SEND YOUR TAPES . . .

If you would like your group selected to perform at the state convention next fall, send tapes by May 8th to Ted Klinka. Tapes should be 10.15 minutes in length and include selections from the last three years.

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