

The Higgsion of Operosity
[hi-GAY-on] [oper-AH-sity]
(The Resounding Music of Painstaking Effort or Work)
Keynote Address by Jerold Ottley
AGO Super Saturday
Salt Lake Chapter
January 9, 2010

The beloved poet Anonymous has complained that:
There once was an Old Person of Tring
Who, when somebody asked her to sing,
Replied, "Isn't it odd? I can never tell
"God Save the Weasel" from "Pop Goes the King."

Another unwitting proponent of vocal art, Ulysses S. Grant, opined that:
"I only know two tunes. One is "Yankee Doodle" and the other isn't."

These rustic confessions suggest that even the musically unwashed sense there is value in singing. That may explain the presence of two singer types on the roster of presenters at an AGO gathering. It does not, however, explain the title of the keynote address. This is the fifth time I have been a presenter at AGO functions in Salt Lake. Consequently I've wondered what I could do or say that would have any new relevance to the occasion. So I stacked the cards by selecting a title so obscure that I could follow it in the direction of my choice and most of you would not know the difference.

"Where did I get the title?" you ask. Among my several idiosyncrasies is a penchant for playing with words. My favorite vehicles are puns, much to the dismay of those who spend much time with me. In my arsenal I have a book called The Endangered English Dictionary subtitled Bodacious Words Your Dictionary Forgot. Well, what does Higgsion Operosity mean? For that you have to listen to the rest of my ramblings without any guarantee that I can put it all together.

Let's begin with some realities. First, last, and forever, in most of life's relationships, to be a musician is to be constantly misunderstood. This thought was underscored by a local leader who, while thanking those who had provided music for an important occasion, observed that it is necessary to handle the musicians with care because they are temperamental--often more temper than mental. Or, as this fictional letter to Ann Landers complains:

"I have a problem. I have two brothers. One is a musician. The other is to be put to death in the electric chair for murder. My mother died from insanity when I was three years old. My two sisters are both ladies of the night, and my father sells narcotics to high school students. Recently I met a girl from a reformatory where she served time for smothering her unwanted child. I'm really in love with this girl and I want to marry her. My problem is this. If I propose to her, how do I tell her about my brother who is the musician?"

The fictional answer to this conundrum was:

"Dear name withheld, Good Luck!"

Unfortunately, our mixed reputation is a product of our own foolishness. Some of us are perfectionists who have been unreasonable in our defense of 'the art', whatever that is. Some of us have been exhibitionists whose greatest concern has been how we look in the eyes of the public. Some of us have been protectionists who guard our turf regardless of needs or circumstances. And some of us just haven't tried hard enough to understand the arenas in which we work.

How can we gain and maintain a more fortuitous reputation? Simply by understanding who, what, and why we are in relation to the arena in which we are making our music. Without this understanding we are likely to be dissatisfied with any musical activity in which we participate. And our dissatisfaction causes us to do things that give us a negative reputation. It behooves us, then, to develop understanding, patience, forbearance and a thick skin, but not one that is impenetrable.

Now let's get down to the nuts and bolts. You, who are organists and/or accompanist types, whether you like it or not, have or will be brought into proximity with choral people, specifically choral directors who tend to be a breed unto themselves. One cold reality of this proximity is that volunteerism likely will play a large part in the equation, both among leadership and participants. Listen to these descriptions to see if you identify with one or more of these scenarios:

You, the organist and the choral director with whom you are working are equals, musically, pedagogically, and in your ability to work with people. An ideal scenario, but one that is seldom a reality.

You are a better musician than the choral director, but you know less about singing. This is a common pairing.

You understand both your medium of performance and the choral director's better than he or she does. Not an unknown circumstance.

The director understands singing, but has less understanding of your performing medium. Often the case.

The director understands singing, but has less ability than you to marshal his or her resources to enthruse the singers. All too often, especially in volunteer circumstances.

You are the organist and the choral director. This may be both the best and worst scenario. The advantages and drawbacks are fairly obvious.

And in the final pairing, neither you nor the choral director have a clue. No comment necessary.

The variations in these scenarios are unlimited, but I would set forth this proposition as the crux of the discussion:

Because of the rigors of your keyboard performance training, you are likely to be among the best of the musicians with whom you work, especially in community or church activities that are volunteer in nature.

This means that your services will likely be well sought after. This doesn't mean you should react as if you have a corner on the market. It means simply that you have the opportunity to lead the process with support, advice, careful suggestion, and yes, even by judicious covert activity, if that activity is designed to make everyone concerned a winner. I've had the privilege of working with some of the best organists in the world, not only because of their artistry, but because they are also best at both supporting and leading the musical experience. But that's a topic for another time.

Singers and conductors of singers are dealing with some intangibles that you may not have experienced. I know, organs are fickle beasts. But they don't come close to the physical and emotional

nuances of the singing instrument. The organ builder can dictate certain of the characteristics of an instrument. The organ technician can readily adjust the mechanics of the instrument. And the organist, if well schooled and judicious in decisions can draw out the potential of the instrument without the influence of too many uncontrollable variables.

But the mechanics of the singing voice are not so easily created, identified and adjusted. The singer is subject to every stratum of the human experience on a minute to minute basis. What one eats, feels, senses, sees, hears and internalizes has a direct effect on the singing mechanism. There are no stops to set, no keys to push, no pedals to adjust. The psychomotor mechanism of the singer is required to correlate pitch, rhythm, harmony, style, breath, tone, vowel colors, articulation, and by the way, language and meaning all at the same time. And the singer's instrument, the body, must provide energy to facilitate the triangulation of all these elements instantaneously. If and when all of this comes together, the singer also has to add and deliver the emotional content of the music as well. That's not say that organists don't have some of the same problems. But because of the mechanics of your instrument, you have the luxury of more objectivity in your training and preparation.

I used to take umbrage at the oft heard phrase "the musicians and the singers" which implies a qualitative differentiation of their musical abilities. Too often that differentiation is right on, but it doesn't account for the fact that organists and most instrumental musicians don't have to build, then live inside the instrument they play. Organists can spend more time dealing with fewer discrete, more controllable techniques than those the singer faces. The singer's task is fraught with many mechanically subjective challenges. So fine, let's differentiate between the musicians and the singers-- because they are different. And let's revel when a total singer/musician emerges from this morass of "God given talents". To be sure, certain characteristics of singers are genetic, thus God given, but like anything of worth, the process of becoming a singer drips in sweat. And it's very complex.

Now, this brings us back to the choral director/conductor who, in addition to some understanding of this singing malaise, should also possess a modicum of musicianship, be an organizer and an entrepreneur, and perhaps most important, own enough charisma to entice people to participate in his or her activity, usually without any material compensation. And more often than not, he or she will also be a music educator which means they are fund raisers, librarians, costume managers and expected do all manner of janitorial work in the bargain. This, my friends, requires a little understanding on your part. If the choral conductor ignores some musical details in musical preparation or rehearsal in favor of emotional imagery or cheerleader-like antics, it may represent his or her understanding that the process is not just musical, but also human and emotional. If the reverse occurs and too much emphasis is placed on musical detail, the conductor may have lost sight, or worse, may have been pushed by you beyond the humanity of the process. These circumstances are worth thinking about.

Ever since I sat as an infant near the organ pedal board while my mother practiced, I have felt that one person is capable of producing more music, in its expanse, volume and significance, at the organ than by any other means. This brings me to a key question for this discussion. When such controllable power can be elicited from one instrument by one person, why do we organize other instruments and voices into groups at such expense of physical and human resource? And a secondary question is, if group singing is such a daunting activity, why does society foster and even yearn for it?

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke said: Truly to sing, that is a different breath.

Jurist-philosopher Oliver Wendell Holmes exclaimed: Alas for those that never sing,/But die with all their music in them!

Religionist Martin Luther declared:

Music is a fair and glorious gift from God. Music makes people kinder, gentler, more staid and reasonable. I am persuaded that after theology there is no art that can be placed on a level with music; for besides theology, music is the only art capable of affording peace and joy of heart.... The devil flees before the sound of music almost as much as before the word of God.

A more contemporary and less fanciful view comes from the choral service organization, Chorus America. In keynoting the AGO Far West and Pacific Northwest Convention here in Salt Lake in June 2003, I referred to a report prepared for Chorus America by professional research firms stating that choral singing is the top choice for participation in the performing arts by both adults and children. Chorus America's 2009 Chorus Impact Study reports that close to 43 million Americans regularly sing in choruses. There are approximately 270,000 choruses nationwide. These figures are considered conservative.

The study also reported the positive social results of corporate singing activity. Chorus members are more avid patrons of the arts in general. They also volunteer more frequently than the general public. They are substantial financial contributors to all philanthropies. Chorus members exhibit greater civic leadership and they appear to be better team players.

The study also reports that children tend to follow their singing parents into choral activity resulting in these facts:
Singing children are receiving better grades in school
Parents consider their singing children to have qualities conducive to their learning and development
Children exhibit more advanced team player and social skills

But it doesn't stop with these extrinsic benefits. Anyone who puts serious effort into singing in a choir is changed. They are changed physically because of the benefits derived from music coursing through the body, the mind, and the spirit. Every element of what makes us human is touched when song originates in and through the body. Science tells us that our bodies are changed at the molecular level by the vibratory, intellectual, emotional and spiritual factors required to produce singing, singly or in a group. Simply, we are enriched and refined physically and spiritually by the process.

We humans seem to know innately that singing together is a good thing. German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in answer to the question, "Why do Christians sing when they are together?" responded:

"The reason is, quite simply, because in singing together it is possible for them to speak and pray the same word at the same time; in other words, because they can unite in the Word.... It is the voice of the church that is heard in singing together. It is not you that sings, it is the church that is singing, and you, as a member of the church, may share in its song. Thus all singing together that is right must serve to widen our spiritual horizon, make us see our little company as a part of the church on earth, and help us willingly and gladly join our singing, be it feeble or good, to the song of the church."

It is not a giant step to extrapolate his thoughts beyond the church and into almost any united activity of society. Place singing into that activity and it can become the binding catalyst that makes it workable and meaningful.

Now finally! What is the meaning of “The Higgsion [hi-GAY-on] of Operosity [oper-AH-sity]”. It is The Resounding Music of Painstaking Effort or Work. Producing resounding music is the challenge, the opportunity, and the privilege of working in the world of music. Working together in a way that maximizes everyone's strengths should be the process. Causing that resounding music to vibrate in the human soul is the purpose and the joy of our work, which purpose may have been summed up best by these pithy thoughts from people who are much wiser than I.

Thomas Carlyle wrote: “See deep enough and you see musically; the heart of nature being everywhere music, if you can only reach it.”

Plato professed that: “The education of heroes shall be gymnastics for the body and music for the soul. Begin the education with music.”

General Coleman DuPont believed that “There is no greater harmonizing influence than music-- particularly choral music.” This is also my bias.

And Casey Stengel, the renowned manager of the New York Yankee baseball team observed: “The secret of managing is to keep the guys who hate you away from the guys who are undecided.”

We would be well advised to become more competent and cooperative referees in this magnificent process.