

Alberta Music Conference- - - November 4/5 2011

Today, ladies and gentlemen, you are going to be present at a rare event – you are going to be present at a simple talk. There are going to be no power point projections or computer – aided gizmos; you are not going to be asked to stand up and engage in singing or doing stretches or warm-ups. Maybe that’s what you were expecting, but I’m sorry to disappoint you. The only thing I would ask is that at the end of our time, I hope that you will react with your own comments and questions of your own. Our teaching experiences and our knowledge add up to a collective wisdom –which I hope we can share, so that we perhaps exit this room a little wiser, a little more knowledgeable than when we entered.

So my topic today is optimism –are there any grounds for thinking that the music education scene, the school scene, the choral scene, the instrumental scene is getting any better? To answer this, I’m going to examine not only some local aspects but then I want to broaden our vision by looking at some things that are happening across Canada and then some developments in the UK, and South America. But I want to begin with a couple of anecdotes –and the first one may have some resonance because you may have had some similar experiences. I have often been in a social situation where people will sometimes ask what job that I do. I respond by saying that I’ve spent the last thirty years teaching music at the University of Calgary. The next question is always predictable –‘so what do you play’. Having settled that one, questions tend to dry up. People seem to safely know what music is – and they happily imagine that I spend my days teaching students on piano to play the latest pop tune, and because of all these assumptions, they will often state ‘you must really enjoy what you do!’ I do indeed enjoy my job – but I am always surprised at the lack of general knowledge of what a basic musical education consists of –whether that takes place in a school or a university. People seem totally unaware that playing music is but one activity and that maybe playing music is less important than thinking about it, analyzing it, understanding its history, and perhaps most important of all, hearing it off the page. I am still waiting for one person to continue the conversation by asking a question that goes beyond ‘what do you play’? If my partner across the dinner table is a lawyer, banker, or oil man I will hit the tennis ball over the net many times asking questions about their particular profession and yet, music for whatever reason elicits little curiosity. I put this down partly to the ‘wallpaper’ syndrome – that is, music is so ubiquitous and such a constant in all of our lives, so that whether you are in an elevator, doctor’s office, supermarket, restaurant, in your car, at the mall or on hold on the telephone it has to be ignored. In other words, it provides such a constant ever-present soundtrack for our lives that it becomes unnoticed, unquestioned and, like the wallpaper in our lives, we never snap it into focus.

The second anecdote is more topical and concerns the recent Conservative leadership race. The Calgary Herald asked each of the candidates some questions relating to policies and their own political views. The last question was seemingly more trivial. Each was asked ‘what are you listening to on your Ipod? The answers are revealing and may relate to my first anecdote.

Ted Morton’s response was that he doesn’t own an Ipod but listens to 1960’s and 70’s rock and roll. Rick Orman’s response was 1960’s and 70’s music –the Beatles and Rolling Stones.

Alison Redford 's response was Johnny Cash and Abba. Doug Griffiths listens to Corb Lund and Eminem. Doug Horner reports that Adele, Clint Black and Led Zeppelin are his favourites while lastly Gary Mar reported that he had 5000-6000 songs on his device ranging from Johnny Cash to Michael Buble. I will tell you honestly, ladies and gentlemen, I found these disclosures to be pretty sad. To assume that a taste in music is somehow on a par with a taste in ice cream is to precisely misunderstand the power of music. Whether one likes chocolate or vanilla has no long term consequences (apart from an expanding waist-line) but it is one of the tragedies of our culture that people see little need to 'grow' musically. Other cultures and other historical eras have long recognized that music can go far beyond 'entertainment', and have realized that it has the capacity to alter the reality of human experience and to go deep into the root of the human condition. Whether the politicians were being canny in knowing that a public declaration of a love for Mozart or Beethoven would immediately erase their chances of capturing the popular vote, I don't know. I doubt it. I think that they were being reasonably open - and furthermore saw no threat in the question.

But we are not here at this session to get depressed –rather the opposite. I am asking in this session 'are there reasons for optimism' –and I believe that there are. I'm going to look at a number of indicators that give us hope –and I'm going to start by focusing mainly on choirs and choral music – for obvious reasons. Let's look first at popular culture and TV. In the last few years we have seen the debut of extremely popular shows such as Glee, American Idol, Canadian Idol, The Voice, and now most recently, The X factor. Whatever you think of the overall quality of all these shows or whether they benefit or detract from your classroom teaching, who in this room would ever have predicted that a show about 12 misfit high school students in a Glee club would become so popular. The fact that the teacher never teaches and the students never actually rehearse, the fact that 25 year olds are playing 17 year olds, the fact that student instrumentalists are always on hand and miraculously play their parts without ever rehearsing, the fact that six part harmony just falls into place (of course, all transformed electronically through Auto Tune), the fact that the kids dance energetically all over the stage while the sound levels never vary is all part of the fantastic unreality of Glee. Maybe it has to be this way – simply because watching a real high school choral rehearsal doesn't make for good prime time television.

In terms of Canadian Idol, American Idol and now X Factor, why is the music industry one to which so many millions of our young people aspire? What is it about music –good or bad –that makes it such a compelling medium? Is it because it offers an attractive alternative to those who are already in dead-end 'McJobs'. That indeed may play a part –but to me by far the greatest factor is that popular music is a field to which huge numbers can claim some expertise. Millions consider themselves expert enough to render judgment upon the 'Idol' finalists. Would a similar competition involving doctors even be imaginable?

Math teachers or biology teachers could only wish that their subject were as centrally placed in the minds of teenagers –or maybe not! Certainly many of the young performers are more than motivated if their on camera comments are anything to go by. The majority of them seem to believe that it is their manifest destiny and almost a religious calling to make music and to take part in the show. Certainly one of the conclusions emanating from

these types of shows, is that for millions of our young people, music is an essential core part of their lives. Running through all of their commentaries is the common thread that if you really want something, no matter how much it seems out of reach, you just have to go for it. As a sample of teenage behaviour, the contestants seem to be enormously comfortable around the TV camera and are blessed with sackfuls of positive self - esteem. So with thousands of auditionees, a television audience in the millions, and for the winners guaranteed recording and concert appearances –should we not indeed be heartened to see that young people from across North America are motivated to sing in front of their peers, a judging panel and a mass audience? So this is the one of my questions for our gathering today and it's not a rhetorical question– I would really like to hear of the effects of the Glee phenomenon (good or bad) in your classroom.

If we come closer to home, in the Calgary school system, it is now rare to find a high school without a choral program. This is a huge change from fifteen - twenty years ago. Last year I did a workshop at Centennial High School in the south-east where 160 students were singing an excerpt from the Messiah. To find a choir this large is rare – most are around 40-50 singers – while many schools also offer a specialized ensemble for those singers who want more of a challenge. This growth in high school choral music is very evident in the registrations for Choralfest held in Calgary every March. Every year sees an increase in the number of entries and the total number of choristers. Our own association, the Alberta Choral Federation has seen a similar membership growth since 2007. On the ACF website, there are 99 choirs listed in the choir directory. That number, however, falls far short of the real number as many choirs are not institutional members and therefore are not listed. For example, there are only three church choirs listed –and the number of church choirs in the province must number in the hundreds. Church choirs, in terms of numbers, are a declining musical force –as the main growth in choralism in this province has been in youth and adult recreational choirs. The last ten years then have seen a notable increase in organizations that offer exactly this kind of musical opportunity for adults. In Calgary the Westwinds Music Society offers five concert bands, five jazz bands and four choirs. In Calgary also the Adult Recreational Choir Society offers four choirs –SATB (Up to Something), SSAA (She's up to Something), SSAA (Up to Christmas) and SAB (Something Lite). At the Youth Singers of Calgary, they have a choir for parents who have never sung in their lives before –it's called Second Chants.

In terms of our own association, the Alberta Choral Federation, we can look back with a sense of wonder at our own growth. 1972 was not such a long time ago and the choral federation started out around Madge McCready's kitchen table with no office, very sparse funds for travel and a small membership. Our early conferences were held in churches and in high schools –with delegates sometimes sitting in school desks. The idea of a conference in a large convention centre with many participating groups such as the Alberta Band Association, the Music Education Foundation, the Kodaly Association, the Handbell Ringers etc was a dream that seemed unattainable –yet here we are. Next year, 2012, will be the 40th anniversary of ACF and it is salutary to look back and see how far we have come.

All of these examples further reinforce a study done by Chorus America in 2005 in the United States. The study was statistically valid and based upon randomly selected

members of the general public. Chorus America found that in the U.S. 23.5 million adults had performed publicly in a chorus within the last twelve months. Their conclusion was as follows – ‘Chorus America’s poll confirms that choral singing is America’s performing art of choice. More Americans engage in the public performance of choral singing than in any other art form. In fact, no other form of artistic expression even comes close.’ I wish that I had comparable figures for Canada. I don’t. However, there’s little reason to think that numbers would be radically different.

The poll also found some other interesting results. Choral singers are more likely to engage with their community and to build what the social scientists call ‘social capital’ than their non-singing counterparts – especially so in the following categories – volunteerism and civic leadership, charitable giving, bridging social gaps, being well informed and politically aware, voting behaviour and the final one – that choral singers are joiners and major consumers of the other arts – that is they attend community cultural offerings in much higher percentages than the general public. I think that we always knew that an involvement in choirs had some undefined social benefit – and now we know, that choral singers behave in ways that build strong communities. One other important finding from this research before we leave it – interest in choral singing develops early in life and is influenced by school and family experiences. Sixty nine percent of all chorister respondents had their first choral experience in elementary or middle school. An astonishing ninety-two percent also played a musical instrument at some point in their lives. These findings all underline the importance of early exposure to arts experiences and the fact that we should not de-emphasize music education in favour of the so-called core academic subjects.

I believe then that there is room for cautious optimism in these numbers and in the findings of this major report from Chorus America. More of our politicians seem to be accepting of the idea that the arts and music are partners in a sustainable and livable society. Furthermore, the advocacy efforts at both the local and provincial levels have had a positive effect in getting the performing arts on the political agenda. I am referring particularly to the organization in Calgary with the acronym SOFA – Save Our Fine Arts. It is astonishing what that organization has accomplished by some very savvy marketing, proactive thinking and the union of students with parents and teachers.

I mentioned at the start that I wanted to mention a couple of things happening in other countries – namely Venezuela and the UK. Some people in the room might be aware of the massive initiative begun in Venezuela in 1975 and called El Sistema. El Sistema is a publicly financed music education program with 250,000 children, 90% of them from poor socio-economic backgrounds, attending its music schools. They take part in a nation wide network of 125 youth orchestras as well as choirs, folk ensembles and instrument building workshops. The orchestras are organized in a pyramid structure – as students improve, they move up to a better orchestra. It’s no wonder at the top of the pyramid, the Simon Bolivar orchestra is one of the best youth orchestras in the world. If you want to see what they can do look on Youtube for their appearance at the Proms concert in London. Perhaps the most impressive graduate of El Sistema is Gustavo Dudamel. He entered the program as a small child and took up conducting at 16 and in 2009 he was named the music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Thirty years old this year, he is the youngest conductor of

any major symphony orchestra in North America –and a very convincing advocate for El Sistema.

Venezuela then is in the midst of a massive plan of engineering social development through orchestral music. In 2007 the Inter-American Development Bank announced the granting of \$150 million for the construction of seven regional centres for El Sistema around the country. The bank conducted various studies to investigate the claims that participation in the program leads to improvements in school attendance and declines in juvenile crime. The bank calculated that for every dollar invested in El Sistema Venezuela was reaping about \$1.68 in social dividends. Meanwhile here in Canada, Stephen Harper has just announced a major program of prison building!

Here in Canada, it's New Brunswick which is leading the way. Last year, the New Brunswick Regional Development Corporation announced a commitment of \$1.84 million to the New Brunswick Youth orchestra in support of its El Sistema program. As gestures go, this is the largest government investment in El Sistema in North America - far exceeding typical grants from provincial arts foundations to major professional orchestras. In May of this year there was also a major international symposium held at the University of Western Ontario devoted to the idea of music as an agent of social change and the formation of a national plan was on the agenda.

Of course, it is possible that El Sistema will turn out to be little more than a passing educational fad. But some highly placed musicians (such as Sir Simon Rattle) are hoping that El Sistema could provide the shot in the arm that classical music badly needs. This has already happened in Venezuela. El Sistema has spawned a burgeoning interest in classical music, and orchestras have sprouted all over the country. It is also claimed that even in the barrios, the slums where most of the kids come from, half of the pirated CD's sold by street vendors are classical CDs. So it is interesting to consider what classical music can do for the social justice movement, and what the social justice movement can do for classical music. Perhaps the two goals are complementary rather than contradictory, and this confluence of forces may be just what's needed for El Sistema to accomplish things here in Canada as well as the United States.

Before we come back home to Red Deer, let me briefly describe a similar program in the UK. Sing Up is a government funded national singing program which aims to ensure that all elementary children have high-quality singing activities every day and that, over time, all schools will become 'singing schools'. This was funded to the tune of 40 million pounds by the Department of Education.

Howard Goodall was appointed the National Singing Ambassador in 2007 and he has been leading the program since then. Goodall is a composer and a broadcaster and if you have ever watched any of the Mr Bean episodes you will have heard his music. There is a new national songbook both in hard copy and online. Nearly 90% of state elementary schools and some 78000 teachers are registered with the SingUp organization. Since his appointment, Mr Goodall, has put out a Music Manifesto in which he details some of his initiatives. Let me quote one paragraph:

'the campaign aims to foster a habit and culture of singing throughout schools, so that it becomes natural end everyday, not just an activity that takes up a few hurried minutes once or twice per week. Above all, this means reaching and enthusing school principals. They may not know it yet, but we are going to smother them with the warm embrace of our message – they will see what amazing transformations that good singing brings to schools. We have already begun discussions with media partners for the spread of a universal singing campaign –and we have met with nothing but enthusiasm and a willingness to roll up their sleeves and do their bit.'

In closing, I have a handout for you if you wish. All of the organizations that I have spoken of in this session are detailed here and you can go to their websites and seek out more. So am I optimistic over what I see here and in other countries? Absolutely, I am. Every music teacher has their jaded, cynical days when they wonder whether they are making one iota of difference – but those days for me are far outnumbered by those occasions when I think that I have one of the best jobs in the world. If you are making widgets in a factory from 8 to 5 p.m. every day, you can be excused from never thinking about your job in your off time. But we are in the truly lucky position of our play being our work –and every time we let our pail down into the well of music, we are guaranteed that it will come up full – and that this process will continue until the end of our life.

Thank you very much for your attention and I would like to open the floor to you, the audience.