

IT ISN'T JUST THE MUSIC: A PCP VIEW OF THE COMPLEXITIES, PERPLEXITIES AND JOYS OF CHORAL SINGING

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Choral singing offers the chorister many opportunities to elaborate his or her construct system musically and socially, and to experience the elation and joy that come from successful rehearsals and performances. The necessity to concentrate on the music and other elements allows the singer to remove him/herself from the everyday world for a few hours during rehearsal and performance and allows the chorister to live in a small world of music where he/she has learned to construe, predict and control with a high degree of accuracy which gives rise to a feeling of mastery and delight while still providing a stimulating variety of experience.

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INTRODUCTION

The poster in the college bookstore invited community members to join the Kenyon Community Chorus to sing the Mozart Requiem with the Knox County Symphony. I was intrigued by the idea but I hesitated. I asked myself the Proufrockian question: Do I *dare* to construe myself as one who can sing Mozart?

The word *construe* had become an important part of my vocabulary at that time, for I was then writing articles for and preparing to publish *Constructive Criticism: A Journal of Construct Psychology and the Arts* (Whitehead, 1991) and was immersed in George A. Kelly's *Psychology of Personal Constructs* (1955). My primary goal was – and still is – to convince the practitioners of academic psychological literary criticism that all modern personality theories – not just the Freudian and neo-Freudian views that have dominated the field for far too long – are relevant to that discipline. Through my investigation of modern personality theories, I had found that I had a personal preference for the personality theory of George A. Kelly. It made sense to me; it was aesthetically pleasing to me; and it worked beautifully in probing the works of the many writers whose implicit informal personality theories were congruent with it. And so I was thinking in Kellyan terms when I asked: Do I *dare* to construe myself as one who can sing Mozart?

My answer came in Kellyan terms as well. Thinking of Kelly's *Choice Corollary* (Kelly, 1955, pp. 64-68), I told myself that clearly the elaborative choice would be to answer, yes, I do dare to construe myself as one who can sing Mozart. After all, I had been singing in one group or another since early childhood; I could read music; I could sing on key. Why not sing Mozart?

I arrived at the first rehearsal on the first Wednesday of September, hot, hurried and crotchety because I had had difficulty finding a parking space. Inside the performance hall, I found myself at the end of a queue. As I advanced along the aisle toward the stage, I saw that the purpose of the line-up was to procure a bundle of music and a black leatherette binder in which to place it. Once I had my music, I looked around the hall and noticed that folding chairs had been set up on the stage in a shallow arc four or five rows deep. Many people stood about on the floor of the auditorium, chatting animatedly to each other, but I didn't know anyone and so eyed the folding chairs on the stage. A few people had begun to find seats there and, relying on my past choral experience, I guessed that the alto section would be in the front two rows, stage left. A pleasant-looking woman, perhaps ten years my senior, was seated in the second row from the front and so I approached her and asked if that was the alto section. She affirmed my guess and

invited me to sit beside her. I began looking through the bundle of music I had been given. "I thought we were to sing the Mozart *Requiem*," I said. "Oh, we are," she replied, "but not until the spring concert. This music is for the December concert. The Mozart scores aren't available yet, and we won't begin serious work on that until January." Already my main prediction about what this first rehearsal would be like had been invalidated. I had more surprises to come.

In the few minutes remaining before the rehearsal was to begin, I shuffled through the music I had been given. There were seven pieces: one that I didn't hold much enthusiasm for was William Byrd's "Terra tremuit." But then there was a "Libera me, Domine" by Anton Bruckner, "Hallelujah, Amen" by Händel, two Negro Spirituals, and finally the two that looked most interesting to me: a tricky little piece by Aaron Copland called "Ching-A-Ring Chaw," and "Modern Music" by William Billings, that quaintly quirky early American singing master who deserves more recognition than he gets. Well, it wasn't Mozart, but it looked like fun.

After rehearsal schedules were distributed, we began our warm-up when the conductor asked us to stand and then said, "Hiss at me!" Like everyone else, I began exhaling slowly between my teeth. We then went through some breathing exercises and finally began to vocalize. The warm-up lasted at least twice as long as any choral warm-up I had ever experienced, and our director paused to tell us that he thought that warm-ups were very important and that as we progressed through the music for the first concert and then began rehearsing the *Requiem* he would use warm up exercises to help us to tackle and solve problems that we would encounter in the musical scores. By the time we turned to our music, I was feeling energized and focused, and enjoyed every minute of the time we spent sight reading through several of the pieces. Rehearsal ended far too soon, and by the time we stashed our music into our folders and prepared to leave, I realized that I had replaced invalidated constructs and the predictions based on them with new or elaborated constructs. I would be singing the Mozart *Requiem* at some point, but in preparing for the intervening concert which was to be

accompanied, not by orchestra, but by piano, I would be preparing for the longer and more difficult *Requiem*. In the brief two hours of the first rehearsal I had come to construe our director as one who really cared about his singers and their voices and who would guide us with intelligence, wit, energy and respect. "Oh," I said to myself as I walked to my car – no longer hot, hurried and crotchety, "You have indeed made an elaborative choice."

The December concert was a huge success, performed before an appreciative and enthusiastic audience. The last two numbers of the Community Chorus half of the program were my favorites "Ching-A-Ring Chaw" and William Billings' "Modern Music." Thanks to our director's coaching, our delivery of "Ching-A-Ring Chaw" was crisp, accurate and spirited. Now, nearly twenty years later, listening to the recording of the performance of it and "Modern Music," I am pleased at our musicality and especially at our diction (for if the audience couldn't understand the words, the impact of both pieces would be lost). Diction is especially important in "Modern Music," for this amusing little piece is really its own sung program note which cleverly tells the audience how to construe it and its technicalities of key in which we singers are singing (the composer's darling key being E), meter (6/4 being the meter that we love the best), and, after some lessons in ascending and descending scales and dynamics, ending with the adjuration to the audience that, we singers having delivered our work competently, it was now the duty of the audience to clap their applause. I loved the impudent reflexivity of the song and evidently the audience did too. We reveled in their chuckles when they applauded wholeheartedly.

Looking back on this concert, sung nearly two decades ago, I find I am still learning from it – still forming constructs about it. While playing the recording of the concert I begin to wonder why those last two selections – Copland's 20th-century treatment of the old minstrel song "Ching-A-Ring Chaw" and the 18th-century "Modern Music" – go so well together. Well, just as there is poetry about poetry, there is music about music. The words *Ching-A-Ring Chaw* are of course intended to suggest the sound of a

banjo, and so in a sense the song is music about making music. The Billings piece is even more directly music about making music, the lyrics detailing each musical technique as the singers sing it. And so now, all these years later, I see the answer to the very Kellyan question: How are these two pieces alike and different from the rest of the program? Clearly these two are alike in being music mirroring music while the others are simply (but wonderfully) just music.

I am now wondering if our conductor, who chose the pieces and their place in the program, had this construct in mind. If so he did not verbalize it to us. But perhaps it was in the realm of preverbal constructs for him as well as for me. I was too much taken up with the necessity to sing well at the time to psychologize or philosophize about the constructs. Perhaps reflection over time is sometimes necessary for us to verbalize some of our constructs about music, art and life in general. Construct formation is not necessarily a rapid process.

Immediately after the performance, however, I found my head whirling with dozens of constructs which I could and did verbalize, and with anticipations – trying to construe the music we had performed, our conductor and our wonderful accompanist, the other singers, the audience, and predicting what it would be like to sing the Mozart *Requiem*. Somehow I needed to find a way to order and prioritize all these sensations. Maybe through Personal Construct Psychology I would find a way.

We resumed rehearsals in January and by the time we performed the Mozart *Requiem* in April I knew that I had found my musical home. I dwelt in that home for the next fourteen years, singing with my fellow choristers everything from Bach, Beethoven and Brahms to Britten, Barber and Kodaly, as well as American spirituals and even a Tsonga folk song. During that time I was so immersed in the actuality of doing and making music, that I hardly recognized the complexities and the challenges that the variety of music, the rehearsals and the performances presented, but now, more than five years after leaving the chorus that will always be *my* chorus – although I have sung in others in the interim – I begin to construe and re-construe the expe-

rience and try to understand why it was such a significant and memorable part of my life.

What was the super-ordinate construct under which all the others had to be ordered? – or was it a construct? – maybe I should ask, what is the most important element? – no, the language isn't quite right. So, what was the pre-eminent factor that I, as a chorister, had to make sense of? The answer seems obvious: THE MUSIC. But then, what about the conductor? Does he come after the music or before? He chooses the music and places it in the program; he helps us interpret it. He commands the accompaniment and the orchestra. But without the music, there could be nothing else, and so I must start with the music.

CONSTRUING MUSIC

One doesn't stand and look at music as at a painting. As Eric Button has pointed out (2006), music must exist by moving through time. George Kelly wrote about the importance of time, stating that the universe exists by happening and it can happen only because of the dimension of time in which events can unfold (Kelly, 1955, Vol. I, pp. 7-8). It is the same with music as with the other lively arts such as drama and fiction which require time in order to happen, i.e., extend their plots or narratives from the beginning, through the middle, and to the end. Obvious! Or is it? We could indulge in an ontological argument that music of course does exist as black notes on white paper when it is stored in the music drawer, but in order to read or think about the music or perform it, we must move through time. As black notes on white paper, music is a kind of language which we must learn to read and speak. Unfortunately some of us speak it with a prose accent. Construing my own musical facility, I realized that I was not truly happy with it and so I found a voice coach and began piano instruction again after a hiatus of many years. A bravura soloist I would never be, but being a better chorister was certainly, I predicted, within my grasp.

But putting philosophical and metaphysical speculation about the ontology of music aside, let us consider just what it is that the choral sing-

er must construe and predict as he/she works through a choral work. There are the technicalities of key, pitch (and just where do I find my note for the entrance at 3 after 200? Ah, yes, there it is in the tenor line.) There are also time signature and tempo (and just how fast are we going to take this passage?), intervals and dynamics. How do I master this interval exactly? I spent many hours at the piano, playing through the alto line to be sure of intervals, playing the harmonies and learning to fight for my note against the other parts, and checking entrances.

And then there are the words that were the warp to the weft of the music in the fabric of the piece. Because we often sang settings of the Catholic Mass, how are the members of the chorus who happen to be Jewish or Hindu or Muslim or Buddhist, or agnostic or atheist to deal with the text? The answer seems to be, as music. If we regard the words as a part of form – as one attempt of all possible attempts to find the spirit of the world through art – we should be able to enunciate the Latin words and listen primarily to the music which knows nothing but a yearning for something beyond the everyday world, however and wherever it is construed to exist.

Most of our musical questions were resolved by our conductor. He had construed many choruses before ours and had predicted where we would find problems. I doubt that he knew anything of Personal Construct Psychology, but if that psychology really does describe the way we think, it should be no surprise to find our conductor anticipating our hesitations, doubts and questions and predicting the solutions he needed to offer us.

One thing that often happens in rehearsals that operates in opposition to the movement of music through time and the construing of phrases, themes, and melodies which allow us to predict the musical outcome that is normally so satisfying, is the need to go over and over certain passages until they are right. Often a rehearsal consists of an attempt to perfect two bars here, four bars there and eight bars further on or even further back, so that the chronological flow of the whole piece is lost. We were very fortunate in that our conductor realized that this could become frustrating, and he would often permit us

to sing the whole song or the whole section of a longer work so that we could once again place brief, much-rehearsed passages in the context of the whole and restore the progression through time with its attendant construction and predictive processes.

CONSTRUING THE CONDUCTOR

After – no actually while – construing the music, the chorister must construe the conductor or rehearsal director. One of the first questions that pop into a choral singer's head is: can the conductor distinguish my voice from all the others? And following that question, the next arises: If he can distinguish my voice, will he embarrass me before all the rest of the chorus by pointing out my errors? What does he want from me as a singer?

Some conductors approach the chorus with a dictatorial attitude, an accusatory stance and a technique of singling out individual singers for scathing criticism. The unlucky chorister who finds him/herself facing such a tyrant is likely to form constructs which predict musical failure. I have even known some disgruntled singers who deliberately sabotaged a performance in order to retaliate against a conductor whom they construed as an autocrat, knowing that the conductor could not scold them in performance as he had done in rehearsal. Fortunately the curmudgeonly type of conductor seems less common these days.

When the singer finds him/herself under the direction of a conductor who is more inclined to ask the choristers to cooperate with him or her in achieving the conductor's vision of a choral work rather than wresting it from them, the singers will likely construe the conductor as one to be consulted, listened to and respected both as musician and as guide. Even though he/she can indeed often distinguish individual voices, the conductor who does not single out choristers for individual criticism but addresses his comments to the voice section to whom the individual belongs will earn eternal gratitude from the singer and a resolve to correct the problem of which the singer is no doubt very well aware. Under the

direction of a conductor who uses intelligence, wit and tact to achieve the results he wants, chorus members will come to predict that they will be well prepared for performances and will be able to approach performances with assurance, enthusiasm and joy.

The conductor who is willing to take a few minutes of rehearsal time to discuss relevant points of music theory will be construed by most singers as a mentor as well as a director. The Devil's Tritone for instance can be devilishly hard to sing, and a few minutes discussion about the *diabolus in musica* along with a brief history of it and its recent use in choral works can be invaluable to novice singers.

A problem can arise for a choral singer when he/she becomes accustomed to working with one conductor for a long period of time and occasionally sings with another chorus. I became very aware of this, because I frequently joined other choruses to sing a variety of works and found that the constructs I held of my home chorus and conductor did not always serve me well in the new venue, leaving me with my musical predictions invalidated. This experience has given me new respect for touring musical artists who must constantly perform with different orchestras and conductors, construe and predict musical and other elements which will affect their performance.

CONSTRUING THE PIANO ACCOMPANIST

The rehearsal pianist is a very important person in the chorister's life. A really excellent rehearsal pianist not only knows and can perform the music to the conductor's specifications but anticipates problems and is ready to help the conductor by discreetly furnishing key notes to voice sections and by playing in tempo and with no errors one, two, three or four voice parts to allow the singers to hear the melodies and harmonies of the parts. When the pianist is also the concert accompanist a bond forms between the singers and the pianist in which they construe her as a reliable anchor, and learn to depend on her.

THE CHORUS AS A SOCIETY

As I tried to construe the music and the other musicians who were also trying to construe the music and each other, I began to feel that I was, metaphorically speaking, in a hall of mirrors in which the reflections of constructs bounced off all the shiny surfaces and collided with each other in a confusing barrage of light without form. How to make sense of it all? Then I remembered Kelly's Sociality Corollary (1955, pp. 95-102) and began to sort out my constructions: The conductor, I decided, very likely believed that he construed his orchestra, chorus and rehearsal pianist at a higher level of generality than they construed him, and could therefore construe, anticipate, and control their behavior better than they could construe, anticipate, and control his, thereby bolstering his confidence that he was truly in control of his musical world. It would probably have come as a surprise to him that at least some of those ranged hierarchically below him viewed themselves as higher level construers who had a better understanding of the music and the conductor than he himself had, setting the stage for, at the best, challenges to interpretation, and at the worst, musical mutiny. This leads us to an examination of the social milieu of the chorus.

Perhaps the population of some choruses is not so diverse as that of my beloved home chorus. Numbering from seventy to one hundred voices at various times, our ranks included, first of all, a large group of college students. Ranging from freshmen to seniors, some were music majors, others just liked to sing, or decided to join because a friend had done so. Next there were faculty members of the college from all disciplines – oddly enough, there was only one who was a member of the Department of Music. Then there were several choristers who were music professionals – teachers of music in primary and secondary schools and directors of music at local churches. Many of these singers were choral directors in their own right and therefore had definite ideas about how any given choral work should be performed. Another group was composed of former undergraduate music majors who had chosen to work in other fields. And fi-

nally there were several (including myself) who had varying degrees of training and interest in music, had sung in other choirs, and had joined this one simply because they loved music and loved to sing.

I thought that the conductor surveying us as we stood before him at opening rehearsal must have had some doubts about being able to discipline this motley crew into a cohesive chorus, but as time went on I saw that he did not appear to have any anxieties. Evidently he saw us as singers who were there because we wanted to sing and sing well, and so he predicted success.

In addition to the divisions among us described above, we were necessarily divided into voices: soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. The usual stereotypes surfaced as each voice part construed the other. Altos saw the sopranos as a group of prima donnas whose vocal range was about half an octave less than the high-voiced ones believed it to be, and saw tenors as being as insecure in their range as the sopranos but not quite as bright, while basses were construed as stolid, emotionless but necessary drones. Sopranos, on the other hand, construed altos as wanna-be sopranos who resented their more fortunate sisters who got to sing the melody more often, while they construed the tenors as high-flyers like themselves, and the basses as necessary drones. Tenors construed the sopranos as second in importance only to themselves; barely noticed that the alto section existed, and construed the basses as necessary drones. Basses construed themselves as the foundation of the chorus, saw the altos as nice sensible singers who knew their place (some of whom could even read the bass line). Sopranos and tenors seemed to them to stand by to add an occasional fillip of decoration at the whim of the composer and/or conductor. These stereotypical constructions, when they were voiced, were usually spoken in a humorous manner, with an understanding that they did not really reflect reality in our chorus. Nevertheless, stationed in the alto section I would often hear murmurs of, "The sopranos are screeching again." "The tenors have lost it." Or, "Are the basses asleep?" I'm sure the other sections similarly commented on the faults of the alto section.

Fortunately our conductor was quite capable of handling these murmurings and dissatisfactions. "Not bad," he would say after we had sung a passage. "Now do you think we could try it again with some attention to pitch, tempo and dynamics?" And after we had done so, he would say, "Now, sopranos . . ." And on he would go, hearing each section at a time, then joining soprano and tenor, soprano and alto, alto and bass, tenor and bass, until we began to construe ourselves as one harmony in four, or six, or eight parts, each singing the right notes at the right time at the right volume and with the right spirit.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE CHORAL SINGER'S WORLD

Where one sits or stands in relation to other singers is of some importance to the chorister. I noticed with interest during my student and teaching years, that students entering a classroom, or singers entering a rehearsal room, will almost always choose a seat in the same relative location, and so it was with seating in our rehearsal room. Somehow a person seeking a position within a group construes a particular seat as the one most likely to offer some advantage within the group. During the first few years of my membership in the chorus, we rehearsed in the auditorium where we were to perform, seated on stage on folding chairs which were arranged in several rows arcing across the boards. We would begin our rehearsals standing in front of our chairs during the warm up, then sit for a while and then stand again when we were ready to sing a passage well. Every year, although we were not told where to sit, except that we should sit within our voice section, the same people chose the same seats. After a few years we moved to a new rehearsal hall which had been constructed behind the performance hall. This room was built as an amphitheater with rows of comfortable upholstered theater seats rising up from the stage upon which the conductor and our accompanist at her piano were arranged. It was a very different arrangement from the seats on stage in the performance hall in which the conductor's podium and the pianist at her piano

were at the same level as the singers. Still, in the new rehearsal hall, the singers chose to sit in the same relative locations they had chosen in the earlier situation, sitting beside, in front of, or in back of the same people. We were used to the voices around us and construed the various abilities and faults of those voices and could therefore predict their behavior. Knowing that Alice Ann behind me often was flat in bar x, allowed me to anticipate that and not allow it to throw me. If I got lost in the Hallelujahs, as I sometimes did if I let my mind wander, I knew that Beverly beside me would pick me up by pointing to the right spot in her score.

But when we moved to the risers on the performance stage during the last several rehearsals before performance, our cozy relationships were often disrupted. Now our conductor would survey the assembled chorus and arrange us within each section according to height as well as voice. This meant that we often found ourselves surrounded by voices that were strange to us, and for the few rehearsals before performance we would feel some anxiety, even though we were well rehearsed and knew that our physical or geographical location in the chorus should not matter. We had to construe those strange voices and get comfortable with them.

And when the concert was to be accompanied by the orchestra, there were more adjustments to make. We had become accustomed to rehearsing with piano accompaniment. Now we found ourselves on the risers, crowded together under hot lights, with the orchestra arrayed in front of us, distancing us physically, and we feared, psychologically and musically, from the director. It always seemed to us, that we needed to sing louder in order to be heard above the orchestra which had now elbowed its way between us and the audience. The earnest assurances of our conductor that this was not so did not relieve our anxiety until trusted musical scouts were placed strategically around the auditorium, seated in audience seats, and reported that the chorus was coming through clearly.

The chorus could then relax and enjoy the excitement and elation that resulted from our few rehearsals with the orchestra. The sense of high energy began with the orchestra's tuning up so

that by the time we were ready to sing in rehearsal and in performance our adrenalin levels were sky high.

EMOTION AND MUSIC

It has always seemed to me that music is the epitome of emotion. Eric Button (2006) has recently discussed a construct view of emotion and music upon which I shall build here.

Some of my strong minded modern musical friends pooh-pooh the idea of emotion in music and believe that musical structure and the intellectual understanding of it is the basis for music appreciation (music as a kind of tonal sudoku?) and opine that emotion should be left out of it – well, largely anyhow. I think they mistake sentimentality for emotion. *Viennese schmaltz*, my father called it. When, at the age of ten, I begged to be taken to a Fritz Kreisler concert, my father snorted “*Viennese schmaltz*.” Nevertheless my mother took me to the concert (the first I had ever attended). It was a sold-out house, and the only seats available were on the stage. How lucky can you get! There I was, two feet from the great violinist, totally enraptured by him and his music. I can still remember the intense joy and sadness and longing I felt at that concert. I am happy to say that the modern assessment of Kreisler's playing and his music does not include anything like the evaluation, *Viennese schmaltz*.

I am being so personal about this subject because our emotional response to music is intensely personal. Of course we share constructs of what is happy or sad or angry in music and we share understanding of the musical techniques – key (major or minor), tempo, dynamics, etc. – which help composers and performers create those emotional effects, but beyond that there is something that is hard to analyze. It seems to hinge on personal experience and memories and, I believe, to get back to Personal Construct Psychology, on preverbal and perhaps nonverbal constructs.

One of my most intense personal emotional experiences of music happened when our chorus began to rehearse Brahms' *Ein deutsches Re-*

quiem. I had of course heard the *Requiem* many times, but when we came to the fourth section “Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen,” something strange happened. As I sang the words *Wie lieblich* an intense memory seemed to explode in my mind, transporting me back to our family rose garden on what seemed to be a June afternoon. I was three or four years old and saw the garden from my child’s perspective. I could feel the sun on my head and shoulders and hear the humming of insects. I became aware that my German grandmother was walking beside me, holding my hand as we admired the rose bushes in full bloom, and I heard her melodious voice which is the main thing I can remember about her, for she died when I was only six. Did she really say the words *wie lieblich*? Admiring the roses, she might well have done. Did she prompt me to say those words? Is that why the physical act of singing those words brought about this intense memory? I had listened to the phrase before and had never experienced this memory until I actually sang it.

I came to myself, realizing that Beverly sitting next to me was looking at me questioningly. I evidently hadn’t been singing for several bars and she was wondering why. I shrugged and she pointed to our place in the score and I began singing again, still a bit overwhelmed by the memory or whatever it was that I had experienced. I only know that, thinking back on it now after many years, the emotion that I experienced and still experience is compounded of grief for the loss of my grandmother so early in my life, joy at the momentary sense of being with her again, and finally consolation – which is what *Ein deutsches Requiem* is all about. Brahms couldn’t have foreseen my idiosyncratic reaction, but he is entitled to my thanks for it.

One emotion that all musical performers experience is performance anxiety (Burr, 2006). It is different for choral singers than for soloists, for each of us knows that the audience is not likely to detect one singer’s flat note or missed entrance. Our anxiety is, as George Kelly would say, that errors would challenge our core constructs of ourselves as musicians (Kelly, 1955, Vol. I, pp. 502-505). We do not want to feel guilt because we have let ourselves down, nor do we

want to let down the team of which we are a part, nor our conductor (and by now, each of us is absolutely convinced that he can distinguish our individual voices) and so each of us worries about whether we have construed our voice – our instrument – well and can rely on our predictions of a successful performance.

There are minor anxieties too: Will I begin coughing during “The Lacrymosa?” Where can I stow my cough drops? The lights are so hot up here on the stage and we are so crowded on the risers that I wonder if I can breathe – will I faint? Once the performance begins, all of these anxieties disappear and we focus on the music. During the performance the emotions we feel are complex. One component of our affect is of course derived from the music. It is a very different experience to sing the Brahms *Schicksalslied* compared to the Borodin *Polvetsian Dances*, but in addition to the emotion characteristic of the particular selection there is the elation that a rush of adrenalin brings. There is a feeling of freedom and of mastery, a feeling of almost palpable energy that arises from us and from the orchestra and is controlled by our focus on our conductor.

CONSTRUING SUCCESS AND FAILURE

Fortunately the applause of the audience and the smiles and congratulations of our conductor after performances reassured us that we had sung a successful concert. And usually we could all relax and enjoy the afterglow. But once in a while we had to admit to a certain degree of failure. In my fifteen years with my home chorus there was only one selection that truly flummoxed us, and that was “Old Joe has Gone Fishing” from Benjamin Britten’s *Peter Grimes*. What was it about “Old Joe” that escaped us? Was it the odd 7/4 time signature? Was it the song being taken out of the context of the opera? Or something else? Looking back on it, I think, that perhaps if I now ask how it was like something else we sang and different from another piece, I can place a construct on it to account for our inability to deal with it. It is somewhat like a folk song, and we sang many folk songs, but of course it isn’t really a folk song. But it *is* about fishing and the sea.

Now let me see, what else did we sing about fishing and the sea? Ah, yes, Beethoven's charming setting of the Scottish song, "Swiftly Glides the Bonny Boat." No, it's not in the least like that! Maybe it's like something else in 7/4 time. I can't think of anything else in 7/4 time. Maybe another opera chorus? Perhaps it is just that it was like nothing else we ever sang. I finally have to come to the conclusion that we just couldn't get the feeling for it without the setting in the opera – the wind and storm outside, the triviality of this song meant to distract the people in the tavern contrasted to the brewing confrontation that foreshadows the doom of the boy and Peter Grimes. That might explain our inability to capture the emotion but doesn't exactly explain why at performance the sopranos, altos and tenors were consistently about two bars ahead of the basses, but it is as close as I can come to an explanation.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the complexities and perplexities that sometimes distanced us from the music – or perhaps because we learned to overcome them – we choral singers experienced elation, a sense of mastery, and a tremendous sense of satisfaction and joy both in rehearsal and in performance. These emotions arose from a complex of factors. That we all loved to sing goes without saying, but I believe that the best part of our multifaceted delight came from our having learned to construe, predict and control in our little world of music. When we came to the rehearsal or performance hall we left behind our everyday worries and the anxieties that plagued us in the real world and for an hour our two could live in a world of music in which we were confident that we were prepared and could foresee the successful outcome of our music making while still finding infinite varieties of musical experience in each rehearsal and performance.

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