

A Lifetime of Choral Singing

(A Fundraising Letter)

Those of you who have helped me recently cannot know my gratitude. The generosity of old and new friends is quite overwhelming.

I am not a perfect person though because I am going to ask you for one more thing...

You know how devoted I have been to choral singing throughout my life. It began in Bridgehampton where in the public school I received a wonderful music education from Charlie Mockler. I played in the band and attended all the festivals on the East End. Although Charlotte Rogers refused to continue teaching me piano when I began to play by ear, I studied long enough to get the basics. Years later, when I joined the Choral Society of the Hamptons that she founded in 1946, she reminded me one evening when I was feeling insecure that I had a very good ear. She had remembered. I have been enjoying this marvelous community practice in the arts for a long time. It has led me to some amazing experiences. When singing with the Oratorio Society of New York, I performed in Carnegie Hall over 30 times. I have sung in concert halls and cathedrals all over the world. I recently completed a long-held dream to sing in Salisbury Cathedral while on a transatlantic crossing on the Queen Mary 2. A group was rehearsing their Christmas concert and I insinuated myself into the rehearsal. It was delicious.

The bookcase shows that I own close to 200 scores. I am not much of a musicologist and often cannot tell you about the music I am currently rehearsing. Rather I focus on attending rehearsals, do my part at home and show up for concerts. Although I sometimes schedule extra help, particularly with German, I have no singing teacher. I just enjoy ensemble singing and have an ear for harmony.

Choral singing has been around for a long time. The oldest known hymns are the ancient Greeks. The first notation in the West is Gregorian chant, all sung in unison. There are soloists but even they must sing ensemble. The thing that holds it together is text, which consists of everything from Latin masses to Walt Whitman's poetry. There is something about the text that is intrinsic to choral music. We, at St. George's Choral Society are singing Dvorak's Stabat Mater this spring. I have sung it before but just learned of the horrific loss of his children that Dvorak endured and how much of that pain and anguish went into his Stabat Mater.

There are many texts and choral singers come from all walks of life and religions. A choral society is often comprised of Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, atheists, pantheists and Quakers. We are all there for the same reason. We love choral singing as an activity. Although choruses do hire ringers to enhance final performances when needed, most amateur choral singers read music rather well. I have never left a rehearsal feeling unhappy and for a few hours have experienced oneness that is unparalleled.

I have sung with a variety of groups that include Shape Note Singing from the Sacred Harp, an old musical form containing rich history of British poets and camp meeting

songsters. *Pitch of convenience*, indeed! I have spent full days in the Tien Shan Mountains singing with steppe nomads. There have been madrigals, gospel and barbershop as well as folk groups who sing by ear. I have never belonged to a church choir nor have I ever sung a solo.

In reviewing this marvelous part of my history I am impressed with the conductors I have had the good fortune to sing with. As mentioned, I began with the Choral Society of the Hamptons under the baton of legendary Dr. Hugh Ross. My final conductor there was John Goodwin Daly, the famed leader of New York Choral. Charles Dodsley Walker of the Canterbury Choral Society was my first conductor in Manhattan. After that it was Lyndon Woodside and Kent Tritle with Oratorio Society of New York. I enjoyed Susan Glass of the Glass Menagerie. One concert was conducted by de Cormier. I know the Messiah by heart and have made life-long friends through this common interest.

Now, on to the reason I am writing you this letter other than to tell you about a very happy aspect of my life. I am currently singing with St. George's Choral Society, which is the oldest choral society in New York. Our Artistic Director and Conductor, Matthew Lewis, I think is the finest I have worked with throughout this endeavor of pleasure. His authentic personality is perfect and naturally creates respect. His musical skills are impeccable and his sense of humor unsurpassed.

St. George's has reached a milestone, our 200th Anniversary. We are faced with a fund raising challenge in that we have lost some big contributors at a time when sustaining this kind of human activity is most challenging. We shall celebrate the bi-centennial on April 30th at the Church of the Incarnation with Dvorak's Stabat Mater in honor of the connection he had with St. George's during his time in New York where he wrote the New World Symphony. The performance will include full orchestra and soloists.

I am asking you to make a donation to St. George's as a special favor to me.... and to honor the richness this music has given to me and to others. Who knows how long we will be able to continue such activity in the present climate?

See I told you I was going to thank you by asking for one thing more. It's a good request though. Even if you are unable to send in the attached card, give me a buzz and buy a ticket to the Dvorak on April 30th. It promises to be a delicious moment of high-class singing by people who love what they do.

With sincere appreciation,

Reggie Rooney