

June 15, 2002

To the Editor:

Donald Nally's letter in the May 2002 issue of the *Choral Journal* was a bold and welcome effort to urge us to confront more openly the difficult questions related to our roles as conductors since the events of 9/11. He rightly points out that it is all too easy to take on the role of an uncritical cheerleader for a blind patriotism by performing well-intended music that offers false comfort while at the same time obscuring the moral failures that brought us to this moment of fear. This concern is especially well taken at a time when our current national leadership is inclined to question the patriotism of anyone who criticizes our government's policies. Moreover, we are being told we must give up many of the freedoms we aim to defend before any serious examination of how US intelligence and diplomacy failed to use the powers already available. It is truly a time when musicians cannot afford to simply escape into our music or avoid the intensified expectations of our audiences related to the power of music to help guide us through an uncertain time.

However, two of the letter's statements are troubling in the way they distort and oversimplify the dilemmas we face. Saying "Our programming almost always subtly reflects our compliance or defiance of this system [where a "privileged ruling class" propagates the "myth" of a middle class democracy] begs the question of what the criteria would be for deciding on which side of a political line a piece of music falls? Whether it is more "comforting" or "distressing" in tone (say, Brahms' requiem vs. Verdi's?) The relative degree of dissonance or consonance in the harmonic language used? The moral character of the composer and/or the social/political context in which it was written? The political implications or lack of same in the text itself?

Certainly it is possible that one or more of these factors might come into play in considering the potential effect of performing a particular piece for a particular audience. But is there not also a danger that by trying to discern too closely the political implications of the repertoire we perform we risk unnecessarily limiting or even trivializing music and its role in our culture? Music history is littered with forgettable repertoire written to promote a political point of view, whether it be the "socialist realism" of the Soviet era or the more innocuous abundance of American patriotic cantatas performed once and then relegated to the 4<sup>th</sup> of July play-lists of public radio stations. Works with an explicit political message that continue to be performed, such as the operas of Verdi, Weill, and Berg or choral works of Britten and Penderecki have stood the test of time because the music is allowed to speak on its own terms in expressing the contradictions of our human nature (both as individuals and communities). Freed from the determinative nature of words, music can speak with a depth and richness of perspective that go well beyond political ideologies of left or right. While we cannot avoid the challenge to become aware of implicit or explicit political messages in the music we choose to perform, trying to press music into the service of one political point of view or another only serves to diminish its power to transform our lives.

The second statement that raises concern is one that explains the attack on the World Trade Center Towers as “a radical response to American occupation and involvement in Islamic Holy Lands, by people who know little about globalization and are unconcerned with our way of life or our values.” Such a narrow and, in the case of the second clause less than accurate view is little more helpful (or truthful) than the views of those who would demonize the Islamic people and assert that any change in US foreign policy toward the Islamic world would be an unnecessary sign of weakness and capitulation. We are in the middle of an unprecedented situation of global instability, with potentially devastating consequences for all and extreme levels of distrust and mis-understanding on all sides. I have heard of few people who can believably claim to have seen this coming and fewer still who can say with any certainty where it is going.

If so, then, do we need to press our government to redirect what many believe to be its misguided global policies? I would agree most definitely yes, all the more because even with the corrupting influence of campaign contributions in our current electoral system, we still have more capacity to criticize our government and more likelihood of effecting change than most other citizens of the world. On the other hand, is the Islamic world struggling with political and social tensions that come as much or more from internal conflicts than from any influence of the US? Without a doubt. Will all the political change we can muster in the US stop further terrorism from threatening our lives anytime soon without extraordinary improvements in intelligence gathering and law enforcement? Very unlikely. Do we need to be more vigilant than ever in protecting civil liberties at home (including artistic freedom) and protesting excessive military force and human rights violations abroad? Absolutely.

As musicians, we are likely to again face days like those after 9/11 where one moment our work will seem totally irrelevant, and the next day we will find ourselves performing music at the emotional center of a public gathering. We will need all the open discussion and support from each other we can get. Society needs inspired performances of compelling music for *many* reasons: we need music to awaken us, to disturb us, to expose the dark side of the human psyche, to confront our fears. But we also need music to seek the ideal, to dream of what could be, to reveal and embrace the humanity we share with those who seem most alien to us, and yes, even to give comfort. The New Yorkers I know from the years I spent there (working on Wall Street before idealistically returning to grad school and a life in music) are a bold and determined lot. But I can think of few people I knew who would not continue to welcome expressions of comfort that come from the reassurance that it is still worth trying to build anew, to strive to do better the next time, and to seek to understand the unfathomable –that the essential human goodness within each person of every nation will not ultimately be destroyed by the brutality all too commonly found in its place.

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