

If Congress Were a Choir

Written by Margaret Evans



By Margaret Evans, Editor

I got a press release a few weeks ago about auditions for an upcoming performance of Handel's 'Messiah.' In late November, the Sea Island Chamber Singers, accompanied by the Beaufort Symphony Orchestra, will sing the Christmas portion of this great, beloved oratorio, under the direction of Charles Frost. Swoon!

I'm as giddy about this as my 12-year-old was about the new Justin Bieber song released last Sunday at midnight. Were I a woman with her act together, I'd have auditioned myself, but being in the audience will be ecstasy enough. I get chills just thinking about it.

Y'all know I'm a choirgirl, right? Not only do I adore choral music, but I sing every Sunday at First Presbyterian, downtown. It is my joy, my spiritual discipline, and frankly, my weekly therapy session. I don't do yoga or tai chi or any of that stuff everybody's into these days, but in a weird way, I think choir practice has the same effect. While it doesn't tone muscles – unless vocals cords are muscles? – it leaves me feeling peaceful, calm, inspired, and – forgive the cliché – "at one with the universe." It's so different from anything else I do in my life – so far removed, both in practice and theory, from the way we Americans live . . . and from the values we say we care about. Values like liberty, individuality, self-reliance, personal rights.

A choir is not a Democracy. It's not even a Republic. You might call it a dictatorship. But it's a voluntary dictatorship, and it works just fine, because our dictator – er, director – is truly a servant-leader. He's in service to The Music. We are all in service to The Music.

After choir practice the other night, I sat down to watch a little cable news. It was all the same ol'

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stuff – "stuff" being a euphemism, in case there are children reading – with the government shutdown adding an extra dash of agitating drama. Still in my post-practice state of euphoric tranquility, I started wondering how our country might be served if Congress – and, by extension, American politics – operated a bit more like a choir. A ridiculous analogy, I know. But humor me. Let's have a little fun with this...

At choir practice, we get a great deal accomplished in a very short time. We work hard toward a common goal, we genuinely enjoy each other's company, and we create something beautiful together that we could never have created separately.

Sound familiar, political junkies? I didn't think so . . .

At choir practice, we are not concerned with our individual rights. ("I demand a solo!") We are not concerned with our group rights. ("Power to sopranos!") No one is grasping for the spotlight. ("Hear me, hear me!") In fact, we are typically suppressing ourselves in deference to The Music. Here, we must temper our vocal idiosyncrasies and tamp down our egos. We must listen to ourselves – and each other – intently, for the express purpose of squelching any competitive impulse to out-sing one another. Unless you've been given a solo – which is a privilege, not a right – your voice should never stand out. It's all about the blend.

There is a strange, inexpressible joy in blending. There's a joy in lending your own small, imperfect voice to something much greater than the sum of its parts. There is a joy in submitting to your director, to your choir mates, and – most important – to the needs of The Music. The joy of voluntary submission is not something we Americans know much about. We're too busy trying to stand out . . . demanding our rights . . . pursuing our freedoms . . .

Now, don't hear me saying ambition and rights and freedoms are bad. I'm not. Just let me run with my little metaphor, here. I think I can bring it home.

Consider, if you will, the office of Choir Director. Our director, though he hails from one side of the choir aisle (he's a baritone) is completely focused on making the *whole* choir sound good. What does it matter if the altos are dead on, when the sopranos sound like a cat with its tail caught in a door? If one section of the choir sounds good and another doesn't, the whole choir sounds bad. And that reflects upon our director. But more significantly, it doesn't serve The

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Music. We must all be serving The Music. Always.

(By the time you read this, Congress may have managed to achieve some semblance of harmony; perhaps the country has been served. As of this writing, Congress was still in dire need of a good choir director.)

But we all have a responsibility to The Music; not just the director. What happens if I, a second soprano, can't hit a particularly high, first-sop note? It is incumbent upon me to recognize my own flatness and either fix it . . . or drop out. If I do not recognize said flatness, my director will kindly say, "Somebody's flat" – without singling me out (or sending out a tweet about it) – and instead of being hurt or insulted, I will listen harder, hopefully hear my own nails-on-chalkboard serenade, and humbly back off. I don't always have to sing every note. I don't always have to be heard. If I can't cut it, I shut it. For the sake of The Music.

Sometimes, I find that the person sitting next to me is singing a passage one way, while I'm singing it another. Instead of getting angry and jumping to the conclusion that my choir mate is stupid or hateful or trying to bring down The Music, I simply assume one of two things: either she is misreading the notes . . . or I am. We usually have a brief, whispered discussion – our director doesn't like that – and one of us brings the other around. In the occasional instance that we can't agree on how the music should be sung, we defer to the director. He *does* like that. (As long as we do it during "question time.") Our director is our leader. We trust him because he *earns our* trust – by knowing his stuff, by communicating with us, by treating us with respect. He's there to inspire us, to guide us, to make us better as a group than we are as individuals, to help our very different voices find unity and harmony. Like us, he's there to serve The Music.

Every now and then, I don't like something about a song we're rehearsing. Either we're singing it too fast for my taste, or too slow, or it's not the arrangement I learned as a child, or it's not my "style." Something like that. And I grumble in my head. Maybe even out loud. (Under my breath, so the director can't hear me.) But then I pull myself together and move forward. I follow directions. I learn my part. Then the altos throw in their part, then the guys, then the pianist . . . and you know what? It usually sounds pretty darn good. It isn't what I had in mind, but it's something else. Something new. And often something wonderful.

There's no "my way or the highway" when you're singing in a choir. If that's your attitude, you'll soon find yourself on the highway. If you truly love to sing – if you're dedicated to choral singing

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– then you learn to cooperate. You learn to watch, to listen, to harmonize, to blend. Because it's not about you; it's about The Music.

Okay, I've taken this conceit as far as it can go. America is not a dictatorship. Congress is not a choir, and the idea that it could operate like one is pretty silly. But if its members brought some of the aforementioned "choral" qualities to the table – humility, deference, submission, cooperation, service – who knows? They might just make some beautiful music together.

I'm not holding my breath. See y'all at 'Messiah' in November.

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