

Publishing Choral Music in a Changing World

Aurelio Porfiri

composer, conductor, writer and educator

A few years ago I had a conversation with the owner of a major publishing company specialized in choral and sacred music, a company with quite a long history and well known among musicians. The owner told me that sales of scores were almost zero. I was very surprised because if this publisher, with a catalogue built up over the last hundred years, was unable to sell reasonable quantities of scores, you wonder how minor publishers can survive, and you wonder why this is happening.

Choral music publishers face various problems, but two considerations in particular illustrate the difficulties. First, we need to say with all honesty that in certain parts of Europe and Asia there is not much respect for copyright laws, so very often scores for the choir are not bought but instead are photocopied from someone who already has them. This is common practice in certain countries, and is very difficult to overcome. Other countries respect the copyright and buy a certain number of copies to meet the needs of those who make the score available: the creators (composers) and the distributors (publishers and other entities).

We must understand that every time we obtain a score protected by copyright without paying for it, we are making it even more difficult for composers and publishers to survive, something which is already difficult to begin with. Let us not pretend to be saints: many of us have probably tried to get a score from other composers without paying for it. As I have said, in

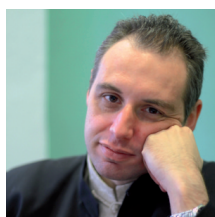
certain parts of the world this is common practice. Consequently, publishers have to spend time, money and resources, and then if a piece they have published becomes successful (and of all the pieces they publish only a few do so), they can be sure that they will nevertheless incur a loss because so many scores are obtained irregularly. Is it possible to overcome this problem? It would be possible if all choir directors and singers began to appreciate the importance of composers and publishers who make available good music for them to perform. Let me tell you what happened to me in a certain Asian city. While there I was able to be present at the choral competition organized yearly for school choirs. I noticed that the composers of the pieces in the program were not announced; the names of the pieces were written down but not the composers' names. I remarked on this to one of the members of the jury, a local person whom I knew. And this person looked quite surprised at my remarks, apparently seeming to think that not giving recognition to the composers was not really important. And this person was also a teacher forming other students to become schoolteachers! You can imagine that if the situation is like this at the level of educators, it will not be any better at other levels. Of course, this does not happen everywhere, but it is quite widespread.

In these conditions, how can publishers survive? They cannot. Today the internet gives great opportunities; you can set up an attractive website and for every piece you can include information, audio sample, text translation, some pages for free perusal ... in this way you can give choir directors many opportunities to evaluate a piece without moving from the chair in their home. Certainly there are, let us say it clearly, many choir conductors who still buy scores according to the number of singers in their choirs. And looking at the situation from the other side, there are also choirs from not very affluent countries who really do not have the money to buy scores.

The second consideration is this: buying scores in digital format has completely changed the landscape of choral publishing. In this case you do not need to pay mailing costs or perhaps wait weeks for the scores to arrive: you will immediately receive a PDF and after payment of a license you can use the score and make the agreed number of copies. This is very convenient, and is certainly where the future is going. Of course, there is also a downside to this; but let us be honest, there are downsides to both formats, digital and printed. This explains why publishers will not allow you to buy just one copy of a score, because they know that this one copy bought at a price that may be between 1 and 3 Euros will then be used by choirs with maybe more than fifty members, representing a huge loss of income for the publisher. This is why you are required to purchase a minimum number of copies; you pay for ten or fifteen copies so the publishers can minimize loss.

And now we have another problem to add to all this: Covid-19. While I am writing these lines, there is a new surge in the number of people infected, and this of course means that restrictions for social gatherings are in force. And choirs, whatever else they are or do, are certainly social gatherings. So not only do some choirs not use scores according to the copyright laws, but because there is very little choral activity at present it is useless to buy scores when you cannot perform or rehearse them. But I think we should not be too pessimistic about this. We know that in time of crisis, such as wars or catastrophes, technology advances faster in response to the emergency of the moment. So I think that when all this is behind us, we will find we have new ways to look at choral music and at the activities that were so familiar to us in certain ways and settings. We have already seen the explosion of video conferences, like those on Zoom (although this platform raises serious questions about security, and some people prefer not to use it). And we also have virtual rehearsals, where people can gather through the internet.

There are still problems with this, because the internet connection is not ideal for everyone and it is not so easy as practicing in person. And, of course, I know that being close to another person is not the same as being some thousand miles away. But perhaps we said the same thing when the telephone was invented: conversation is an art, and it was completely transformed by the invention of phones. So let us believe that technology will improve opportunities for practicing online and will make it as enjoyable as meeting in person, even if in a slightly different way. On the positive side, think of the opportunity of forming stable choral groups with people chosen from all over the world, think of people from countries where music education is not at a very high level who can join a virtual choir conducted by a very good choral educator and so receive an education in their homes that they perhaps never dreamed of. Don't you think this is a great opportunity? There is a lot to be done; technology is not there yet. But we have already seen the possibilities in action. Let me give you my own example: I did live streaming about musical and choral issues on You Tube and Facebook, and the experts were in every part of the world. But we were all there, having a pleasant conversation for over an hour. Occasionally there were some problems with connection, but we can just as easily have problems with microphones in a live conference. I know that meeting in person is different, but we need to accept the challenges of the moment and overcome them, not allow ourselves to be defeated by them. As choral educators we need to be the ones to shape our world, without denying the element of fear that surrounds us, but facing fear with courage.



Aurelio Porfiri is a composer, conductor, writer and educator. He has published over forty books and a thousand articles. Over a hundred of his scores are in print in Italy, Germany, France, the USA and China. Email: aurelioporfiri@hotmail.com

Edited by Gillian Forlivesi Heywood, Italy