

# The International Choral Ensembles of Hollywood Film Music

*Micah Bland, Choral Director and Professor, Toledo, Ohio, USA*

Throughout the history of film production, music has played a significant role in the overall aesthetic of a film. Choral singing has regularly been incorporated as an element of film music, appearing in approximately 61% of Hollywood film scores.[1] Initially, the choral music for Hollywood films was produced in Los Angeles utilizing local ensembles and contracted studio singers. As the industry progressed, London emerged as a popular alternative for choral film music production through the extensive contributions of both the Metro Voices and London Voices.

While Los Angeles and London account for much of Hollywood's choral music production, there are also several international ensembles deserving of recognition. The following identifies a selection of choral ensembles from each continent and their contributions to film music.

## European Ensembles

In addition to ensembles from Los Angeles and London, choral ensembles based in Europe are among the most frequently utilized by film composers. The popularity of these ensembles is due, in part, to the many European-born composers that have worked in Hollywood. One such composer is Ennio Morricone (1928–2020). As a composer, Morricone had a great affinity with the voice and regularly contracted the Italian ensemble I Cantori Moderni di Alessandroni for his films.[2] First heard in the score for *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), I Cantori Moderni di Alessandroni went on to perform in thirty-seven films between 1964 and 1973, eighteen of which were with Morricone.

In 2013 the Disney film *Frozen* and its sequel *Frozen 2* (2019)

created a worldwide sensation.[3] In both productions, the opening credits featured the vocal sonorities of the Norwegian choral ensemble, Cantus, performing the song “Vuelie.”[4] While Cantus has only appeared in two films thus far, based on the success of the *Frozen* franchise it is likely that the ensemble will be utilized in future film projects.

Other European ensembles with appearances in film include the Malle Babbe Women’s Choir (*Paradise Road*, 1997), Rundfunkchor Berlin (*Valkyrie*, 2008), Children’s Choir of the Staatsoper Unter Linden Berlin (*The Book Thief*, 2013), and Sofia Session Choir (*Solo: A Star Wars Story*, 2018).



Cantus, Norway © PK foto: Mats Kalland and Camilla Pile Pedersen

### African Ensembles

Internationally recognized South African vocal ensemble Ladysmith Black Mambazo is easily the most notable African choral ensemble to be featured in a Hollywood film score. Interestingly, the ensemble’s inclusion in film has been

exclusively through licensed music.[5] Licensed recordings by Ladysmith Black Mambazo can be heard in seven Hollywood films, the most notable being *Coming to America* (1988).

Since its release, “Circle of Life” from *The Lion King* (1994) has been recognized as one of the most popular choral film works. Originally performed in the film by Lebohang “Lebo” Morake and Carmen Twillie, the film’s opening song, “Nants’ Ingonyama/Circle of Life” is immediately recognizable to film music enthusiasts. A native of South Africa, Morake was hired by composer Hans Zimmer to arrange the choral music for both *The Lion King* and *The Power of One* (1992) to provide these films with a more authentic African soundscape.[6]The ensemble for *The Lion King* was unfortunately never identified. However, references in literature describe the ensemble as a South African choir.[7]

Other African ensembles with appearances in film include the African Children’s Choir (*Blood Diamond*, 2006) and Mshengu White Mambazo (*Blended*, 2014).

### **Eurasian Ensembles**

From the central Asian region, the most frequently utilized ensemble in Hollywood has been the Alexandrov Ensemble (Red Army Choir). Since the Cold War, Russia has often been portrayed as the antagonist in Hollywood films. As an ensemble comprised of Russian military personnel, the Red Army Choir not only musically depicts Russian culture, but also personifies the militaristic activities taking place on-screen. Similar to Ladysmith Black Mambazo, the ensemble’s incorporation in film has been exclusively through licensed recordings and can be heard in fifteen Hollywood film scores.

Apart from the Red Army Choir, no other choral ensembles from central or east Asia are known to have performed in Hollywood film scores. Historically, Asian cultures have been significantly underrepresented in Hollywood, an issue that has recently received increased awareness from the industry.

## Oceania Ensembles

At the turn of the millennium, choral ensembles from Oceania were the recipients of new interest from Hollywood. This sudden interest was partially due to the success of the *Lord of the Rings* (2001–03) film trilogy which were primarily filmed in New Zealand.[8]

For *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), director Peter Jackson and composer Howard Shore wanted a Pacific-island sound for the mines of Moria scene. Supplementing the film's primary ensemble, London Voices, Shore hired Igelese Ete to gather a 60-voice tenor-bass ensemble of regional singers.[9] Over a decade later, Ete was once again approached by Hollywood for the film *Moana* (2016). As the head of the university's performing arts school in Fiji, Ete utilized his university ensemble, Pasifika Voices, for the project.[10]

In Australia, the Sydney Children's Choir and Sydney Philharmonia Choir were both contracted for the films *Happy Feet* (2006) and *Australia* (2008). Interestingly, for the film *Happy Feet*, composer John Powell utilized an unprecedentedly large ensemble of 600 voices.[11]

## South American Ensembles

Choral ensembles from South America are by far the most underrepresented ensembles in Hollywood. Following an extensive search, the only choral ensemble from South America known to have performed in a Hollywood film is the Niños Cantores de Morelia Choral Group (*The Bravados*, 1958). The reason why South American ensembles continue to be underrepresented in Hollywood is unknown. However, it may in part be due to the large number of Latin American immigrants in the United States available to work as contracted studio singers, negating the need for South American choral ensembles.

## Conclusions

As an expression of a country's cultural identity, international choral ensembles have had a vital role in authentically portraying their native cultures in Hollywood films. Unfortunately, however, throughout the history of film production in Hollywood, international ensembles have been significantly marginalized. Hollywood's lack of diversity has been scrutinized by industry leaders throughout the past decade. As a result, many American film companies have recently placed a priority on producing diverse films. Through this increased awareness of diversity, the international choral community may, and hopefully will, observe increased interest from Hollywood in the near future.



**Dr. Micah Bland** is Director of Choral Activities and Visiting Assistant Professor at The University of Toledo where he directs the Chamber Singers and University Chorus and teaches courses in choral music education, conducting, and voice. He is the founder and host of the ChoralEd video podcast which is also a monthly blog feature on ACDA's ChoralNet. Email: [mbland1613@gmail.com](mailto:mbland1613@gmail.com)

*Edited by Laura Massey, UK*

[1] Micah Bland, "Choral Music in Film" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2021).

[2] Charles Leinberger, *Ennio Morricone's The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: A Film Score Guide* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press) 2004.

[3] Maria Konnikova, "How 'Frozen' Took Over the World," *The New Yorker*, June 25, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/science/maria-konnikova/how-frozen-took-over-the-world>.

[4] Josh Weiss, "'Frozen II': How Christophe Beck Carved a More Mature Score Out of the Ice for Disney's Sequel," *Forbes*, December 2, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joshweiss/2019/12/02/frozen-ii-how-christophe-beck-carved-a-more-mature-score-out-of-the-ice-for-disneys-sequel/#21bb9b4771ad>.

[5] Licensed music is the use of previously recorded copyrighted material.

[6] Bland, Ibid.

[7] Atemnkeng, Nkiacha, "The Sound of the Lion King," *Porter House Review*, November 16, 2020, <https://www.porterhousereview.org/articles/the-sound-of-the-lion-king/>.

[8] Carol Pinchefsky, "The Impact (Economic and Otherwise) of Lord of the Rings/The Hobbit on New Zealand," *Forbes*, December 14, 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carolpinchefsky/2012/12/14/the-impact-economic-and-otherwise-of-lord-of-the-ringsthe-hobbit-on-new-zealand/?sh=6ff2685031b6>.

[9] Jennifer Dann, "Twelve Questions with Moana choral composer and Lord of the Rings choir conductor Igelese Ete," *NZ Herald*, May 15, 2017, <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/entertainment/twelve-questions-with-moana-choral-composer-and-lord-of-the-rings-choir-conductor-igelese-ete/VUS26R772LQRRX23HYYZGY427U/>.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Tim Walker, "John Powell interview: 'I sold myself to the Devil, just a bit,'" *Independent*, May 31, 2014, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/classical/news/john-powell-interview-i-sold-myself-to-the-devil-just-a-bit-9466955.html>.