

# Songbridge

## Social Integration and Learning Through Inter-cultural Music Making

*Susan Knight*

*Founder and Artistic Director of Shallaway*

### Introduction

Songbridge is known principally as an international choral project for youth, hallmarked by musical excellence and the creation of new compositions in a shared global context. Those lucky enough to have heard, participated in or organized a Songbridge can attest to the success of those inherent components in this rather remarkable concept. Perhaps less well-known is the value of social and cultural learning intrinsically imbedded in this innovative experience. It is the element of social development in an inter-cultural setting which is the focus of this article.

### Background

Songbridge was founded in 1999 by choral music icon Professor Erkki Pohjola of Finland, founder and conductor of the Tapiola Choir. Sadly, Erkki died earlier this year. Songbridge was one of his great legacies:

- Its philosophy is based on a belief in both the intrinsic and exponential value of meaningful intercultural engagement through choral music making. A Songbridge is created by the invitation of a small group

of culturally diverse international youth choirs of recognized excellence to each commission leading choral composers of their own culture to write interactive works on themes of peace and social justice. The proviso is that the choral work be written in each culture's own musical idiom and must have integral sections embedded in the work for the other choirs to sing. No one culture's song may be sung without including all the others.

- Its process is realized by international distribution of these new Songbridge works, where all the commissions are learned in each choir's home country. These choirs then converge for a week of non-competitive joint effort to 'make' the Songbridge. All the choristers live, work and play together in community, learning about each others' cultures and music and developing friendships and mutual respect, during which time the premieres are jointly rehearsed, culminating in a gala performance.
- Its purpose is to positively affect the understanding, cultural and empathic awareness and musicianship of all involved – from chorister to conductor to composer to audience member.

How the Songbridge experience attempts to realize this philosophy, process and purpose will now be explored through the concepts of growth, community and artistry.

## **Encouraging Growth**

Before examining the growth potential of several choirs working collectively, one has to look at the social and cultural dynamic represented in a single choir. Any choir of any age is an extraordinary human entity. It is a fluid intersection of the individual and the collective in the

context of ongoing creative agency. Therefore, *growth* in a choral context must encompass all these elements. Let's look first at the generic nature of any youthful choir.

The common bond of these young people is usually a love of singing, and through their collective effort, they create something bigger than themselves, and yet composite of all of them:

"It's where ordinary people join together to become one extraordinary being where we can all excel and belong."

Yet these groups are often comprised of mixed gender, age, level of musical development, personality, family background, etc. Even in a fairly homogenous society, there will be a range of social and cultural elements at play within any ensemble. Although they share the common bond of music, these ensembles don't operate as some pre-determined social or cultural fortress. As Freire points out, "the forces from other spheres walk through the school doors with the students." [1] They are agents of their own cultural production, expressed through dress, music, lifestyle, language, etc. The kind of culture that will evolve in the ensemble depends on the atmosphere that permeates the setting – the purpose, implicit or explicit, for the group's existence, the style of leadership, the degree of the inclusion/exclusion of their voices in decision-making, and a host of other factors.

"You truly find yourself in choir. You can be yourself around friends and grow together. We are a family, and we all work together."

The very nature of choral singing makes demands on people to understand each other. While the experience of singing together may produce much satisfaction – even joy – it also requires that people acknowledge and accommodate the other people with whom they are singing. The philosophy of any choir, the degree to which its members have a “voice” in the organization, the atmosphere created in rehearsal, and many other factors, all contribute to the identity and inter-active awareness and sensibility that develop in and amongst members of the group.

“It is being a part of a musical family where you are supported  
and understood.  
It is a place to grow and learn”

## **Developing Community**

When Songbridge choirs converge, they are from diverse cultures, often with different symbol systems as well as languages. So, the creation of community amongst them represents at once the biggest excitement, aim and challenge, and potentially, the biggest achievement. The primary goal is to create the setting and the context in which the humanity, the learning and the expressing can freely and deliberately flourish.

“Living with someone allows for a certain intimacy, respect and insight into an otherwise untouched spectrum of human life.”  
“ The ability to live so close to a culture so different from my own and interact on a day-to-day basis made it impossible not to make friends and admire different lifestyles. “

A community is not a tidy thing, with a “unified set of

patterns”[2] on which everyone is agreed, in order to best get along. It is a living place for the tangled web that our human reality is from day to day.[3] A challenge within our own cultures, it is all the more so in an inter-cultural setting like Songbridge. A way must be found to create a successful and open means of being together, which can be relied on in figuring out the way forward. Concentrating on elements that utilize the similarities and celebrate the differences are key to the success.

“Continual close contact provides one with the platform to learn about and adjust to specific cultural and individual differences”

Young people are extraordinarily powerful, insightful and able. Building a communal trust with them, sharing a clear understanding of the foundational principles of the Songbridge community, can provide true leadership opportunities. By creating and offering them easily accessed mechanisms whereby they may work in concert with their conductors/composers and other adults (administrators, chaperons, etc) to shape their community, not only enhances their learning, but can mark their life for the future. As a form of lived democracy, of relocated and distributed power, this sharing of the process of building community is one of its strongest learning mechanisms of Songbridge, opening the possibilities for empowerment and transformation.

“Everyone accepted you and your opinions were always encouraged.”

Giroux[4] remarks that not only does such a setting provide the conditions for students to become agents in their own

learning process, it also provides the basis for collective learning, civic action and ethical responsibility. It also brings to consciousness their awareness of the social and cultural elements of their lives individually and together, and the inextricable nature of these in the making of their music. They are not just crossing the borders of each other's cultures, but are actually blurring those boundaries. They are learning to think relationally, and to live in all these places openly, freely and responsibly. Songbridge, as a social and cultural event, helps encourage in them a real appreciation of cultural difference rather than "falling into the trap of merely romanticizing the experience of Otherness." [5]

## **Creating Artistry**

Songbridge attempts to create true artistry, and therefore, it is helpful here to reflect on what art may really be. "Art", says Clar Doyle, "exists in part to help people speak for themselves. It is not an escape from daily living, but a means to place understanding and control within that reality." [6] Greene comments that "Art in its various forms has the audacity to challenge attitudes and institutions within society." [7]

It is with such a conception that the artistic aim of Songbridge goes beyond performance and means to enter that fluid realm where high artistry melts into expressed life, where the young musicians are vehicles of communicating and lifting a glimpse of humanity to that rare point of profundity that only art can create, deeply affecting the minds and hearts of all involved.

# Conclusion

Songbridge as a concept offers a new and intensive model in social integration, with choral music being the medium and inter-cultural experience being the context. It attempts to create bonds as well as build bridges, not only between young musicians of different cultures, but also amongst their ideas, their energy and their commitment. It immerses them for a week in an empathic experience that, beyond improving their musicianship, offers them opportunities for new ways of thinking, acting and feeling, both in their own communities and as global citizens in a world that is much in need of understanding and compassion. The social and cultural thrust of Songbridge provides young people with both the challenge and the facility to embrace an inclusive, inter-dependent and empowering way of being alive and active in the world.

"The passions of different people melding together throughout our stay motivated and inspired me not only musically but personally. While they were friendships cut short by geographical constraints, they were experiences and memories that will last forever, and what I consider to be one of the most vital aspects of my growing process as a young person."

A great debt of gratitude is owed to Erkki Pohjola for his extraordinary vision of enhanced humanity through the collective voices of the world's children singing together. His death marked a huge loss, reverberating around the world. Songbridge is an important part of his profound legacy. In his lifetime, sixteen Songbridges took place. Because of his imagination, energy, generosity and foresight, Erkki's intellect and spirit will continue to mentor down the generations through all the Songbridges to come.

## Notes

[1] Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education*, (New York: Continuum, 1985): 6.

[2] Richard A. Quantz and Terence W. O'Connor, Writing Critical Ethnography: Dialogue, Multivoicedness and Carnival in Cultural Texts. *Educational Theory* 38, no.1 (Winter 1988): 95-109.

[3] Clar Doyle, *Raising Curtains on Education: Drama as a Site for Critical Pedagogy*, (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1993): 5.

[4] Henry A. Giroux, *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope: Theory, Culture and Schooling*, (Oxford: Westview Press, 1997): 267.

[5] Ibid., 267

[6] See Doyle, note 3 above, 28

[7] Maxine Greene. Breaking Through the Ordinary: The Arts and Future Possibility, *Journal of Education* 162(3) (Summer 1980): 8-26.

*Quoted reflections are from SHALLAWAY choristers (formerly the Newfoundland Symphony Youth Choir) from Vancouver Songbridge, World Symposium of Children's Choirs, 2001- participating choirs from Japan, South Africa, Israel and Canada.*