REFLECTIONS ON SEGREGATION AND REPRESENTATION IN CHORAL MUSIC

Michael Cooper
on behalf of
Women in Choral Music

REFLECTIONS ON SEGREGATION AND REPRESENTATION IN CHORAL MUSIC

In the wake of global demonstrations and protests against police brutality and racial discrimination, I have been reflecting on how underscores the effects those have. Well, it's no shock to state that classical music is the United States is an overwhelmingly white society, even as America is increasingly diverse. Recent research by The League of American Orchestras has shown the wide disconnect between the demographics of America as a nation and the black representation in classical music. As a musician who predominately works with vocal music and spends a good percentage of his time as a chorister and choral conductor, I'd like to share some thoughts on how I consider the choral landscape in terms of gender and ethnic diversity, confront and questions the assumptions we make, and how we can be more inclusive and welcoming to people who have been left out of choral music in the past. I might even accomplish what the world can live in.

Choral music has unique diversity issues that are more visible than those in the instrumental. Because of very vocal, a performer and composer, I am particularly interested in the representation of our programming as well as in leadership and overall participation. Unlike instrumental ensembles, many choral music programmers rely on music by living composers. In fact, over 80% of the recommended repertoire from the ACDA National Repertoire and Standards lists were by living composers. Choral music has been harkens to participation and the approach taken by any given ensemble can range from "everybody who wants to sing can participate" to an elite only auditioned ensemble only to the highly trained and trained.

My intention here is to offer a reasoned approach to representation as a call to action for equity and diversity in overall participation, representation in positions of leadership, and among composers.

Women in Choral Music

Gender equity in choral music is an issue and more accessible topic than ethnicity as female singers are in greater numbers than their male counterpart throughout the choral community. Since historically some parts have been seen as synonymous with gender, and choirs are still shared by vocal part, choirs are generally easily divided into SATB, SSAA, TTBB, and mixed choirs. Although there are many, many exceptions, everybody knows the notion. The survey of Undergraduate Choral Programs found that women least nearly half of the choirs in the country, though the numbers is skewed towards youth choirs and K-12 school directors and disproportionately directors who teaching at community, college, and professional choirs. A survey of collegiate conductors in Wisconsin, for instance, shows that gender parity is highest in higher education, but still much lower in choral music than for instrumental conductors of orchestras and wind bands.

Among composers, however, women are still quite underrepresented. I recently surveyed the music created by the ACDA National Repertoire and Standards composers and found that women composed only 25% of the music by living composers, and women composed only 19% of the compositions on the suggested lists. That percentage rose to 29% when considering only living composers.

My own rigorous look at composers in Musicfolio (a marketplace where composers rent and lease self-published music) shows only 20% of the composers are women, a percentage roughly matched in the representation of composers in the catalog for my own company. My guess is that these numbers generally represent the percentage of women composers in the American choral scene, an obvious disproportion to the percentage of women in both the choral community and the nation at large.

Ethnicity and Segregation in Choral Music

Ethnicity, however, is a much bigger topic to parse. First, there seems to be less overall research about ethnicity in choral music. Chorus America's research on ethnicity "Only 5 percent of respondents were African-American, Hispanic, or Asian. Presents less than the proportion of minorities in the U.S. population, we don't know how accurately those percentages reflect the population of choral conductors." This report "leave [respondents] are from the South as compared with the population as a whole, which might indicate why there seem to be black conductors in the south in particular.

Second, there is an ethnic segregation of participation, leadership, and programming. Women "are given specific choral roles(s) attributed to singing or choirs and ensembles that predominantly perform music of a specific ethnic, especially one outside of the European classical tradition. Some Chorus America's "3 great days" of ensemble singing is done in Charlotte, which also tend to be segregated along ethnic lines.

Social and creative solidarity among a like-minded community is totally understandable. I am in awe with the power of a church choir or a specialized or a specific type of music, nor do I think there's a problem with gathering among those who share cultural experiences and values. What I am concerned about is how this is hurting the segregation effects our genre specific choirs. This could, perhaps, be a problem of terminology. Perhaps near the end of the year, with a Kwanzaa Concert Choral, or "Revolution Classical Chorus." Or, listen to my experience that music legacy shared and interested in exploring world ethnicities of diaspora including very proud, gospel, folk song arrangements, as well as music from the black classical tradition.

As an example, New York City, like many American's large urban areas, is a "minority majority" population. White people make up only about 45% of the city's residents. That number rises to 63% if only considering people under the age of 18. Nearly half of the New Society of New York the state such demographics are not proportionally represented. This essential to demographics and I suspect that New York among but gender specific groups, but I mention their specifically because of a major record project, performing and recording a new orchestra gender specific choral music. Unfortunately, the Women and Noontide Choral Collective (yeah, I made up the name) in the average of Million Dollar Quartet, Jersey Boys, and Rock of Ages, and Broadway Bound Theatre, I made the choice for a work about the Harlem Renaissance. This choice, as we see from the photo of the performance, created a dramatic demographic shift among the performers, at least doubling the origin of color in the performance.

But where do they go when the performance is over? Participation by origins of color, but especially black origins is not gender specific choirs, is low in and other tends to homogenizing of these members, especially when black music is being performed or in this crew, moves on. Unless Tosch, allowing is a big part of choral segregation and is not unique to black musicians. We represent and ensemble: Ethnic "music and the composers of color, even those born and raised in the US, in private that quite here. Ethnic music and composers of color are a part of a black and brown hue. Perhaps, and Noontide Choral Collective (yeah, I made up the name) in the average of Million Dollar Quartet, Jersey Boys, and Rock of Ages, and Broadway Bound Theatre, I made the choice for a work about the Harlem Renaissance. This choice, as we see from the photo of the performance, created a dramatic demographic shift among the performers, at least doubling the origin of color in the performance.

But where do they go when the performance is over? Participation by origins of color, but especially black origins is not gender specific choirs, is low in and other tends to homogenizing of these members, especially when black music is being performed or in this crew, moves on. Unless Tosch, allowing is a big part of choral segregation and is not unique to black musicians. We represent and ensemble: Ethnic "music and the composers of color, even those born and raised in the US, in private that quite here. Ethnic music and composers of color are a part of a black and brown hue. Perhaps, and

I've experienced this myself. As a first generation American of Middle Eastern ethnicity, I sometimes feel pressure to perform music that I may not count as one least the number of ethnic Middle Eastern choral directors and composers I have met. I am frequently asked by arrangers about music on Middle Eastern themes or that utilize Middle Eastern ethnic, asked to pronounce or translate Arabic and Farsi, and have seen been told that when sing choral sounds, they exhibit tone, esteem singing. On the other hand, I have made choral setting about Middle Eastern music theory and speak rather language and I have been asked to perform music of Middle Eastern ethnicity. I am not alone. Although not by experience as a first generation American and person of color, only finds themselves between cultures". Wonderful, My takeaway from these types of interactions, however, is that my music is being more widely accepted in the classical realm, especially the sweet gentle and experimental music on which I focus, isn't of ethnic or classical and that I would be better advised to pursue the music of "my culture" that the music in which I actually specialize.

PARTICIPATION BY ORIGINS OF COLOR BUT EFFECTIVELY BLACK SINGERS IN WORK-SPECIFIC CHORUS, SLOWLY IN ALL-INCLUSIVE CHORUS, TOKENISING OF THOSE MEMBERS.

While composers of color are dominant in genre-specific groups (black composers + gospel choirs, for instance), they are disproportionately represented in concert programs of non-genre-specific choirs. Referring back to the survey of Repertoire and Standards, only 19% of the composers on the lists are composers of color, and only 10% of the total concert pieces. This includes a category called Ethnic and Black and Brown music, a broad and ill-defined category that seems to include folk songs, Jewish sacred music, and gospel, among other genres. Perhaps of color. This category is, I believe, an intentional outlet, and 60% of the choices are by from composers of color. Removing the Ethnic and Black/Brown categories, we see that only 7% of the remaining choices are by composers of color. There seem to be concentration of composers of color in both the youth and middle school choir categories.

Among student leaders in the national choral scene, approximately 10% were women, and 10% were people of color. This number is considerably higher than the representation of women composers and composers of color in the Repertoire and Standards, but, particularly considering people of color, is markedly lower than the 40% of the national population who are people of color. It's hard to see how this might not reflect the demographics of the choral field on the national level.

Considering the intersection of ethnicity and gender only compounds the lack of representation. Looking again at the ACDA Repertoire and Standards, women of color make up only about 2% of all composers of color, making them 10% of the total composers. Among the Repertoire and Standards, there are only two women of color and none in any case composer is living.

Asking questions

Looking at the above information, I ask to have some questions.

"Who made the non-ethnic choral segregation occur? Are black factors, like the transcendental mentioned above of ensembles, that leave people of color discouraged from which a perceived as a white activity or push them to form choral communities of their own that feel more welcoming? Is that lack of diversity in the middle leadership of classical music and the overall lack of performance opportunities to potential musicians of color that they give rise? Or is there?

In such segregation even substantiate? The American League of Orchestras points out "Who made the non-ethnic choral segregation occur? Are black factors, like the transcendental mentioned above of ensembles, that leave people of color discouraged from which a perceived as a white activity or push them to form choral communities of their own that feel more welcoming? Is that lack of diversity in the middle leadership of classical music and the overall lack of performance opportunities to potential musicians of color that they give rise? Or is there?

In such segregation even substantiate? The American League of Orchestras points out "Who made the non-ethnic choral segregation occur? Are black factors, like the transcendental mentioned above of ensembles, that leave people of color discouraged from which a perceived as a white activity or push them to form choral communities of their own that feel more welcoming? Is that lack of diversity in the middle leadership of classical music and the overall lack of performance opportunities to potential musicians of color that they give rise? Or is there?

The data I've shared might be enough to have the definitive conclusions of systemic discrimination or pressure unconscious bias, but it points to that direction. This notion of segregation, and, as I mentioned, I don't mean to "overthrow" or "take over" choral situation. When I said choral-based guidelines, I inevitably come to the systemic racism that has dictated that value of music that has been created by composers of color that are classical traditions from the European Classical tradition.

If the majority of stories are, but, here gender specific, "then what happens if we examine our inherited values of music from the European classical tradition. Here have those values defined for us what "good" music is? What music might such a an expectation claim?

Black stories I have participated in audition for very specific kinds of solo that sings with expective descriptions from the European classical tradition. Tight ranges of high tightness on the a, and a belting focus with a formal education in western classical tradition. Who have received western musical artistic expression? Who can be auditioned a person's ability to learn to sing? Is their sensibility of sound? The ability to improvise? Having such skills in an ensemble might open up new performance opportunities.

Finally, what situation opportunities have been missed because of the influence of these expectations? Have? Their participation as a performer and composer of color and experimental music. It's weird being such black a recommendation of what has been a long-standing tradition of the European classical tradition. Are people of color actually interested in the western tradition?

If our goal is to have the various levels of representation (particularly gender and ethnicity) in the choral world mirror those of the nation, then we'll need to look at why there are so many fewer women and people of color being represented in "mainstream" choral music. Overall, instrumental, for instance, does not necessarily address the issue of segregation. Would a greater focus on the diversity of the professional field make a difference in young musicians receiving the encouragement and mentorship they need to become viable in classical music? There is a question of where the responsibility lies in heading the populations of future musicians and looking at strategies to how that can be accomplished. Is it a matter of outreach to underserved communities? Is it a matter of more encouraging voice economy barriers that disproportionately affect people of color.

Resources and suggestions for getting started

The Institute of European Diversity shares three guidelines for incorporating a more extensive range of representation in concert programming. What stands out to me in their suggestion is "Program to your potential audience as well as to your usual attendees," which argument about the importance of audience sustainability. Your guidelines also suggest a kind of popularized programming. It might not reflect the composition of your audience, but it might reflect the composition of the community you are in. Finally, the Institute suggests that "Be sure that the concerts are not just for the audience of the concert but also for the audience of the concert for people who are not in the concert." As ensemble leaders, we decide what we decide and what our audience members will look at our programs and see themselves reflected in the names of the composers and the forms of music we engage.

Concluding that the choral world has such an emphasis on the music of living composers, it's interesting to note that the institute of European Diversity suggests nearly 50% women composers and 30% people of color for groups that perform mostly new music. If you're like me, your first reaction to those numbers might be dense. Where are those composers? Well, the institute suggests that "Contact with living composers is not so difficult, and can be very fruitful." It is suggested that one do so by intersection of demographics. When I was the suggestions from a colleague, I thought, "This seems unrealistic and time-hog." Well, I'm trying to learning it hurts the heart. It's more one finds a composer's contact information. In short, representation leads to participation.

Here are some other resources for those interested in researching repertoire they might not have looked into before.

- The Institute of European Diversity, which includes a database of composers as well as recommendations around programming for different types of ensembles.
- Music by black composers, reports with educational resources and a director of long-time composers.
- Sound and Music has some interesting stories around connecting historical sites having compositions.
- A recent list of non-cinematic music by black composers by Bayaya L. A. Garrett.
- Musicfolio, a publishing company focused on choral music by classical music composers.
- FreeMusic, a company with a selection of choral works by Japanese composers.

The choral world has worked hard over the last several years to address issues of inequality and disadvantage for women and people of color, and it does. There's a lot to be proud of in terms of how much progress has been made in the choral world. But, the fact remains, it has rarely, if at that. There is gender parity, and people of color are feeling more representation, on the whole, than in the instrumental world. We still short of accurately representing who we are as a nation within the choral world, but the progress that has been made should make one of the more inclusive fields in classical music. Our work is not yet done. My hope is that, by looking inward at those unique challenges that our genre faces, we can continue to make progress. My hope is that looking into ourselves is where the most substantial progress, choral music can be a model for the of the classical music world as we move towards a creative world that is as diverse as the population that presently hosts its future.

REPRESENTATION LEADS TO PARTICIPATION

CHORAL MUSIC HAS DISPROPORTIONATE ISSUES THAT ARE WORSE THAN THOSE ON THE INSTRUMENTAL MODEL.

GENDER EQUITY IN CHORAL MUSIC IS EASIER AND MORE ACCURATE THAN ETHNICITY.

IS LACK OF DIVERSITY IN THE MIDDLE LEADERSHIP OF CLASSICAL MUSIC PART OF A SELF-PERPETUATING CYCLE THAT REINFORCES THE LACK OF DIVERSITY OF COLOR THAT THIS GENRE HAS TO OFFER?

WHY CHORAL ARRANGEMENTS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN SPIRITUALS WITH EXPERTISIONS DESCRIPTIONS OF EUROPEAN CLASSICAL TRADITION.

IT'S WORTH LOOKING AT YOUR PAST PROGRAMMING TO ASSESS HOW YOU'VE BEEN PROGRAMMING THE WAY YOU'RE EAGER.

SIGN UP FOR OUR WONDERFUL NEWMUSICBOX NEWSLETTER
First name · Last name · Email address (required)
GO!

TOO MUCH ALSO ENJOY

CREATIVE MUSICIANS RETREAT
Sign up for the NewMusicBox Newsletter

NewMusicBox provides a space for those engaged with new music to contextualize their experiences and ideas in their own words. Articles and commentary posted here are the independent opinions of their individual authors; their appearance on NewMusicBox does not imply endorsement by New Music USA.

LEAVE A REPLY

Your email address will not be published.
Comment
Comments are moderated and may take a day or two to appear. Please keep comments relevant to the article. Avoid personal attacks and defamatory language. We reserve the right to remove any comment that violates our Terms of Use.
Name · Email · Website
Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment.
POST COMMENT

NEW MUSIC BOX
Music of Our Time, Since 1975
Writing, Interviews, Reviews, Podcasts, Scores, Recordings
ABOUT
The Magazine
The Staff
The Contributors
Contact Us
Staff, Interns, and Friends
EXPLORE
Articles
Conversations
Headlines
Podcasts
Scores
Recordings
NEWMUSICBOX
Home
Archive
Subscribe
Donate
Advertising
Advertising RATE KIT
OUR PARTNERS
Chorus America
Music Fund
Music Center
Sound and Music
Sound Music Commons
Sound Music Commons
Sound Music Commons