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Singing Along

BY DAN BERGGREN

“Sing lustily and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half-dead or half-asleep; but lift up your voice with strength...”

—John Wesley (1761)

This instruction was one of Methodist leader John Wesley’s “Directions for Singing,” written over 250 years ago. Nothing compares with being in the midst of a group, singing with good courage. From my soprano days in a boys’ choir to leading audiences on choruses, it’s the most fun that I’ve ever had and continues to be so. Daniel Levitin, psychology and behavioral neuroscience professor and author of *This Is Your Brain On Music* reminds us: “For most of human history, people sang together, and it wasn’t seen as a competition or a contest or any kind of a judgment on who was better or who was worse” (NPR 2013). “I believe in singing. I believe in singing together,” said producer/musician Brian Eno when he participated in NPR’s *This I Believe* series. “That’s one of the great feelings—to stop being me for a little while and to become us” (NPR 2008). Exploring that ‘great feeling,’ Stacy Horn, author of *Imperfect Harmony: Finding Happiness Singing with Others*, notes: “. . . when you’re in harmony with a bunch of other people, it’s almost like coming out of a coma or a zombie-like state into this world with many more dimensions” (NPR 2013).

*Let me tell you a little story about some friends
I know,
And a woman who brought the rest of town a
gift from long ago.
Folks who used to sing for fun, alone or in
harmony,
Had fallen out of the habit and now were
watching TV.**

Essex County

There used to be a community chorus in Minerva, my hometown. I sing about it in my song “Alice”—a tribute to Alice Switzer, a retired teacher who was the chorus’s founding director. Two dozen people of all ages gathered weekly for the fun of singing. What a

gift Alice brought to the community. It’s been a while since that chorus met, and I’ve been wondering about opportunities for other upstate New Yorkers to experience this in their own communities.

*Alice came into the town; it was a quiet kind
of day.
Folks went about their business in the usual
sort of way.
“Who’d like to sing in a chorus?” was her ques-
tion to everyone.
“Sopranos, altos, tenors and bass—together we’ll
have some fun.”**

Warren County

In North Creek, Denise Conti conducts the 40-member North Country Singers, formerly the Millennium Chorale. Denise, a retired school choral director, rehearses the group weekly, and they perform two major concerts a year—sometimes with guest musicians, children, dancers, and instrumental groups. Denise says, “Community choirs are important because they bring people together. . . they develop new friendships and an appreciation for a variety of musical styles. Singing makes a person feel good” (Denise Conti, personal email communication, 2015). The North Country Singers have been going strong for 38 years.

*Old and young joined Alice—they formed a com-
munity choir.
They’d rehearse each week and try to reach those
notes, going higher and higher.
After working all day, they’d practice; there was so
much fun in the singing.
Even when they’d reach the end, and Alice said,
“Once more from the beginning.”**

Herkimer, Oneida, and Lewis Counties

Celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2016, the Adirondack Community Chorus is directed by its co-founder, Peggy Nuspliger. Jeannette Nellenback came up with the idea for the group and was its accompanist for the first 25 years. Peggy, a retired music teacher, leads the chorus in three formal concerts a

year. The singers continue their musical education, developing reading and vocal skills, and Peggy adds, “It provides live music for the audience in an age where electronic gadgets have taken over the entertainment industry” (Peggy Nuspliger, personal email communication, 2015). Drawing from a wide geographical area, the singers range in age from 10 to 90. Most performances are in Boonville, but sometimes in Lyons Falls and Lowville.

*Well the music got better and better, and when
they did a show,
They’d all pitch in to make it work, and together
they would grow.
The town was proud of its chorus and moved by
the spirit of song,
But the day that Alice passed away, it was hard
to sing along.**

St. Lawrence County

Paul Siskind is music director of The Any Music Singers. For the past three years, its members have come from various towns around the county, and the chorus’s two concerts a year have been presented in Canton. As a composer, arranger, and teacher, Paul’s broad range of musical experience makes him very aware of the roles a community chorus can play, giving opportunities to participate in a communal activity, forge new friendships, and take on new challenges. He points out that participation in music, as in any art form, creates new ways of viewing the world and that making music collaboratively with other people is a different experience than making music by oneself.

*Now folks go about their business in the usual
sort of way,
But once in a while a tune makes them smile,
and they still hear a voice say
“Who’d like to sing in a chorus?” was her ques-
tion to everyone.
“Sopranos, altos, tenors and bass—together we’ll
have some fun.”
Who’d like to sing in a chorus? That’s a question
to you from me.
Sopranos, altos, tenors and bass—together in
harmony.**

Last Chorus

Paul's thoughts on group singing sends me back to Professor Levitin's words: "...when we sing, it brings us outside ourselves. . . . [It] activates a part of the frontal cortex that's responsible for how you see yourself in the world, and whether you see yourself as part of a group or alone" (NPR 2013). So on top of all the enjoyment that group singing can give individuals (and the audience, when there is one), there is this very powerful result—in Brian Eno's words: "to stop being me for a little while and to become us" (NPR 2008).

Soon after Pete Seeger's death, NPR commentator Linda Holmes said that Pete "understood something fundamental about humans and music, which is that many people can't sing on key, but all crowds can.... And he believed that . . . people should retain the ability to get in a room and sing, because it was good for you, and because it taught people to pitch in and be brave" (Holmes 2014).

How about a community chorus in your area?

*We can still sing along
Whether our voices are weak or they're strong,
The spirit of Alice lives on in song,
And we will still sing along **

* "Alice," ©1995 Dan Berggren (BMI) ▼

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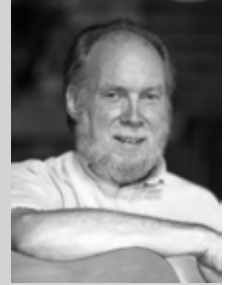
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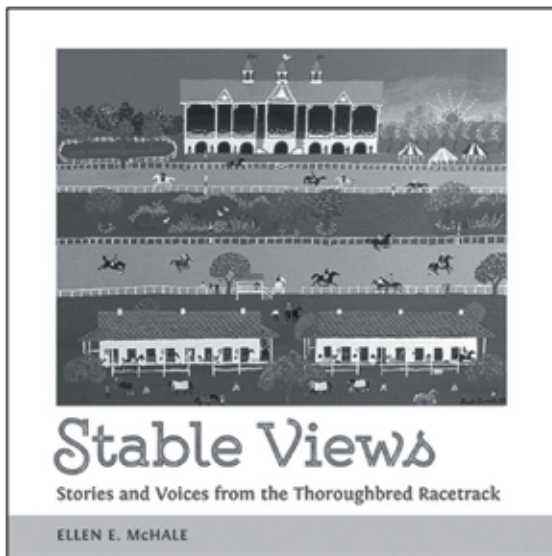
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Dan Berggren's roots are firmly in the Adirondacks, but his music has taken him throughout the US and abroad. Dan has worked in the woods with a forest ranger and surveyor, was a radio producer in Europe, professor of audio and radio studies at SUNY Fredonia, and owner of Sleeping Giant Records. An award-winning musician and educator, Dan is also a tradition-based songsmith who writes with honesty, humor, and a strong sense of place. Visit www.berggrenfolk.com to learn more about Dan and his music. Photo by Jessica Riehl.



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