

Anyone Can Sing?

by
Jerry Hayes

Every good boy deserves fun was the mnemonic that I learned in elementary school to remember the names of the lines in the music scale. At least, I believe that's what it is, but my knowledge is shaky. It is one of the very few technical things I know about music. I also know that if the notes go up on the scale, the pitch goes up somehow. And, notes that look like Os are whole notes, which last longer than the filled-in ones. (Just the opposite of what it should be, it seems to me.) That's it folks. I don't even remember what the little flags signify. I marvel at people who can look at a page of music and hear it in their heads. But, then again as an engineering student I learned what

$$\int x^n dx = x^{n+1}/(n+1); n=1,2,3,\dots$$

means. So, I guess everyone has a different skill set.

I have encountered musical notation since joining the Gettin Higher Choir (www.gettinhigherchoir.ca). This is the first choir that I've been in since third grade. My tenure among that juvenile ensemble was unceremoniously ended when it was discovered that I sing woefully out of tune. Groucho Marx said that he would never join a club that would have him as a member. I never thought that I would want to listen to any choir that would have me as a member. I'm putting the motto of the GHC, *Anyone can sing*, it to its severest test.

The whole idea of the GHC is to have fun singing while raising money for good causes. We sing an eclectic mixture of contemporary folk, African freedom songs, Negro spirituals and pop music. Funds raised by the twice-yearly concerts support an organization for at-risk youth and a village in Mozambique. We also do SWATs (Sing When Asked To). For example, we were invited to sing at the Christmas dinner given by the Mustard Seed Food Bank.

As a retired teacher, I admire the skill of the directors, Dennis and Shivon who mold a diverse group of 300 people with a wide range of musical background into a cohesive whole. There are so many singers that we need to rehearse in separate groups on three different nights. The dress rehearsal is the only time that we are all together before concerts. It works for me. With so many fine voices raised in glorious song, my tin ear and I can hide within the thickets of the bass section.

Despite my self-admitted lack of musical ability, I dearly love to sing. And what wonderful songs do we sing. Our songs range over all that is noble in the human experience—love, peace, freedom and our ties to one another and to the earth we live in. After Barack Obama was elected President, I was moved to tears as we sang, “We Shall Overcome.” At a recent concert, we sang these poignant lyrics from the song “Rich from the Journey” by Kimmie Rhodes:

*So sail away sweet soul in peace.
Hoist your sails into the breeze.
Beneath these stars so hard to read,
Godspeed the winds that carry me*

*And tell my friends to look for me for soon I'll be returning,
Rich from the Journey.*

Preparation for the concerts never overshadows the pure joy of singing. Our rehearsals are a bit like a good church service—more like therapy than work. We always close with a meditation and this old creaky-voiced baritone departs refreshed and renewed. A poem by Longfellow that I learned in school captures the experience:

*And the night shall be filled with music,
And the cares that infest the day
Shall fold their tents like the Arabs,
And as silently steal away.*