

Emotion in Choral Singing

Reading Between the Notes

Jameson Marvin



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my esteemed teachers and mentors with my life-long gratitude for traveling with them over my 50-year choral life:

to George Houle—a brilliant teacher who inspired me with his insights and enthusiasm for the performing practices of early music, and from whom I was profoundly enriched by his knowledge that especially deepened my love for Renaissance choral performance

to Robert Shaw, for his uniquely meaningful rehearsal techniques and the quality of energy in pursuit of his goal to bring a score to inspired aural life, and his clarity of thought in establishing the foundation of choral ensemble music-making that has stayed with me throughout my conducting career

to Helmuth Rilling, for his penetrating insights into sacred masterworks, often those on biblical texts, especially Bach's, his mastery (and teaching) of choral-orchestral conducting, and his gift of confirming in me the importance of word/music relationships and how they are a catalyst for meaningful, expressive choral performance, offering a deep emotional connection

and to my student singers of Harvard University for giving me the opportunity to teach, rehearse, and conduct you, for 32 years reenergizing a community of kindred spirits, by working hard to give meaningful and communicative aural life to seven centuries of choral music we sang.

Acknowledgments

One of my goals in retirement from Harvard University was to write a book. Above all, I wanted to write a book based on the core values that I had acquired over fifty years of experience in rehearsing and conducting choirs.

At an ACDA Conference I mentioned my idea of writing a book to Alec Harris, President of GIA Publications. Alec responded immediately to this idea and his reaction galvanized my efforts to begin to write. Alec, thank you very much for your continued support throughout my journey.

I am very grateful to Kirin Nielsen, Associate Editor of GIA Publications. Her superior knowledge of choral literature and choral topics have guided my book with authority and with deep editorial insight. Throughout the editorial progress of my book, Kirin's insight towards completion combined with teamwork throughout have meant a great deal to me.

Simon Carrington has written the Foreword to my book. I am profoundly grateful to Simon for his breadth of insight and erudite thoughts. His knowledge of our profession and esteemed musicianship offer my book a rich perspective. Simon and I have known each other for more than forty years. We share common philosophies and insights into the topics explored in my book and a kinship of spirit about choral music-making. I am so thankful for Simon's engaging thoughtfulness in writing the Foreword.

Emotion in Choral Singing: Reading Between the Notes is my first book. Given my predisposition for verbosity, I knew I would need considerable guidance and editing skill. I cannot imagine writing this book without the expertise, experience, and thoughtfulness of my friend Dr. David Wilson, Choral Professor Emeritus, University of Southern California. For more than a year and a half, David read each chapter with considerable grace, and ongoing wide-ranged editorial expertise.

I first met David at the University of Illinois. He and I were graduate students pursuing DMA degrees in choral music during the late 1960s. We have enjoyed our friendship for over 50 years, and especially appreciate the musical perspectives and complementary choral expertise we share. Three years ago I realized that David was also an excellent writer. He asked me to read his new book on "The Dresden Manuscripts," and if I **might write a review** . . . (I would **might** writing) a review of it for the ACDA Choral Journal; I was happy to do so. I mentioned to Dave that I too had been thinking of writing a book, and asked if he might be willing to read a chapter or two of some preliminary drafts I had made. He immediately responded that he would be happy to help.

I am deeply grateful to David Wilson for his thoughts, time, musicianship, and choral expertise in helping me to edit all sixteen chapters. As we emailed back and forth for nearly two years, David's edits became an integral part of my progress in helping me to bring to life the drafts of my book, in anticipation of submitting it to GIA for publication. His experience, wisdom, and insightful edits gave clarity, specificity and power to my thoughts. David's editorial expertise was offered to me with uncommon patience and generosity.

Polly Marvin, my wife, knows well my range of emotions concerning attainment of good rehearsals and performances. She is also quite familiar with my unharnessed verbosity in speaking and in writing. Polly is a master at expressing thoughts succinctly and she is also *an experienced and excellent choral singer*. She attended every concert I have conducted over the past 35 years, and has offered me continued support as I toiled away, trying to form a good sentence. In the past, Polly has helped edit my speeches, short articles, and

lecture demonstrations. As an administrator in the healthcare profession for many years she has worked with physicians, peers, and patients in editing their writing to gain their desired communicative effect.

Polly has bettered the clarity and meaning of countless sentences throughout the many chapters of my book. Not only do I thank Polly for helping me with editorial suggestions, but for having unbelievable patience about the number of hours I spent in my home office, hooked to my computer.

Polly Marvin, I am grateful beyond words for your support and appreciation for what I have been trying to do for the past two years, for your understanding of my drive to pursue this goal, and for your endless love and ongoing support. The content of the book contains familiar knowledge which Polly had heard many times at home, and the *title* of the book is a marriage of both of our ideas.

Jameson Marvin

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CH Foreword **draft**

by Simon Carrington

I first read the manuscript of this wonderful book on a train to Birmingham (UK) on my way to a choir rehearsal. I was so excited and stimulated by what I was reading that, by the time I arrived that evening in the university choral room, I had changed my entire rehearsal plan and re-evaluated my approach to choir training! Jameson Marvin has filled this book with essential techniques, suggestions, and recommendation from the bottom of his warm heart. He provides an invaluable and inspired lexicon for all of us whose passion it is to gather individuals together, be they students, keen amateurs, or seasoned professionals, and to fashion them into a choral ensemble ready to share their love of music and words with those around them.

As I was reading, I remembered how I had invested in a small library of what were considered essential guides for the choral director when I began my teaching career. I dutifully assembled several worthy tomes on the shelves of my studio and eagerly prepared to use them as references for my graduate conducting students. I have to admit now that, after some initial probing, these books remained forever where they were, gathering dust. Had Jameson's book been available I would have been a happier man, as I would have found myself in the company of someone who feels deeply about the "expressive gestures hidden behind the notation," who champions so eloquently my own belief that polyphony is an essential ingredient in the recipes we use to encourage and train choirs small and large, and who emphasizes constantly that subtle dynamic nuance wedded with rubato is as important for choirs as it is for orchestras and instrumental chamber ensembles.

As I sat in that train I was constantly brought up short by the realization that I had forgotten this or that aspect of the rehearsal process, that I had been ignoring this or that key element in my score preparation, or that I had been overlooking the importance of this or that dissonance and had therefore discounted a vital tool in the composer's expressive vocabulary. We all need constant reminders to consider what nuances our choirs can apply to clarify the composer's thinking.

I have known the author ever since we met many years ago after a King's Singers concert in Boston Symphony Hall. We discovered then that we shared many of the same ideas about choirs and choral music and have remained firm friends. His book distills with engaging and infectious excitement the value and importance of the teaching of polyphony in all its forms and provides an important reminder to us all that "compositions of unrelieved homophony diminish the chance for students to take on the responsibility of crafting their own separate parts as polyphony shapes and challenges the musicianship of singers." He writes, "when rhythms and melodies are separated from one another, choral singers are freed from the relentless experience of harmonizing the principal melody" and again "maintaining and projecting expressive nuances in a contrapuntal fabric of multiple voices is challenging but stunningly rewarding." My lifetime of music making includes a quarter century of concerts around the world as co-founder and director of The King's Singers and a decade of symphony and chamber orchestra concerts with some of the world's great maestri during my double bass playing days, yet one of the memories that still moves me the most is of my University of Kansas chamber choir standing under the fourteenth-century spire of Salisbury Cathedral, singing Tallis's peerless forty-part polyphony in his motet "Spem in Alium."

During my first year conducting the choirs of The New England Conservatory in Boston I attended a performance of the Bach *St. Matthew Passion* conducted by Jameson at Harvard University which I have

never forgotten. It wasn't just the matchless singing of William Hite's Evangelist and the other fine soloists, or the stylish playing of the period orchestra, or the accuracy of the articulation and the impeccable intonation, but rather the commitment and the dedication to the story-telling of the student chorus which made such an impression. No-one in the theatre that night could have doubted the belief stated so often in these pages that just reproducing harmonies, rhythms, melodies, and textures in performance may not necessarily mean the choir is singing music.

Jim Marvin encapsulates and expresses the key ingredients which distinguish choirs and choral ensembles that move us by the way they communicate to their listeners an understanding of the composer's intent. Quoting multiple sources, he ensures that we conductors base our interpretative decisions on sound scholarship and that we always remember that medieval chant (and chant-style singing) is one of the most important sources of expressivity in the performance not only of Renaissance polyphony but of all the choral music that follows. He includes valuable and detailed analyses of significant choral works from a range of styles and periods and leaves us in no doubt that giving the singers the responsibility of perceiving the relationship of text to music, of grading the internal balance, and judging the refinements of the tuning under the conductor's guidance are essential components of a unified musical concept.

His chapters are bursting with practical ideas, useful tips, multiple wise observations, and historical references to help us think again about what we do and how we do it. Jim Marvin's fifty years of undying enthusiasm, his effervescent personality, and self-effacing service to the composers he loves pervade these disarming paragraphs. They are permeated by his unflinching belief in the qualities that distinguish performances that "provide uplifting and enriching experiences and embody the ultimate goal of music—transcendence."

Simon Carrington
Yale University Professor of Choral Conducting, Emeritus
Visiting Professor of Conducting, University of Birmingham, UK

CH Preface

L1 Euphoria

In March of 2004, while on spring tour with the Harvard Glee Club, I had the occasion to sit next to a freshman singer. I have always enjoyed spring tours because they offer opportunities to get to know new students. During an engaging conversation, he asked me, “How did you get into choral conducting?”

I thought how shall I best answer this question. There are so many places to begin. So, I began at the beginning and told the young man that when I was a boy I loved to whistle! I was a good whistler. I whistled favorite tunes I heard my grandmother sing and play on the piano, especially Stephen Foster songs, folk songs, Americana, hymns, and Christmas carols. I loved whistling those tunes, and prided myself on my ability to whistle both blowing out and sucking in. That way I could keep a continuous seamless line with or without vibrato. One day, I decided I should take whistling lessons. I was aware of a peculiar affect that whistling had on me; I seemed to slip in and out of a sort of dream world as these melodies issued from my lips. I really liked the sensation.

I asked my mother, who had listened to my astonishing whistling feats from every room in the house, “Mom, can I take whistling lessons?” A big smile came across her face as she answered, “What a good idea, Jim. I know someone who just might give you lessons.” “Great!” I blurted out, with my characteristic enthusiasm.

I told this new freshman, who by now was getting drowsy, that’s how it began! Mom contacted Mrs. Olson, the mother of one of my elementary school friends. We went to her house, rang the doorbell, and Mrs. Olson invited us in. Mom explained that I wanted to take whistling lessons. Mrs. Olson smiled knowingly, took me over to her piano, sat me down, and said, “This is middle C.”

Well, you can guess where this went. Mrs. Olson did not have a clue about how to whistle, but she turned out to be an excellent piano teacher. It was through playing piano and listening to my grandmother sing and play that I was drawn to music.

Unlike most children, I loved to practice. Every morning, I got up early, around 5 a.m., went downstairs, and began to play the piano. Over the years I developed a huge repertoire. I would sit and play to my heart’s content. Why? It was the dream-like state I felt when I played that drew me in. Off to another world I would soar—*euphoria*. That was why I loved to play. In high school and in college I began to realize through performing or listening to music I could experience that ecstasy. While piano was my principal outlet, singing in choirs (junior high, high school, church, college, and graduate school) allowed me to experience that euphoric feeling I so loved.

Continuing my story to the slightly revived Glee Club freshman, I told him that at University of California at Santa Barbara, my undergraduate school, I joined a fraternity. Fraternities, sororities, and dorms competed in what was a marvelous tradition: Spring Sing! Besides first and second place in each division, the top award was Sweepstakes. Since I was one of the few men in my fraternity who had a music background, I was asked to conduct. I loved it! I realized I enjoyed standing in front of a large group, waving my arms, leading them towards something I heard in my head, what I now call my “mental-aural image.”

My experiences in conducting and singing led me in my sophomore year to switch my major to music. There was no conducting degree, so I majored in music theory, history, and composition. During the summers, I formed choirs to sing during services at my home church. At UCSB I sang for four years in the Men’s Glee Club and Chamber Singers. Both were immensely rewarding. In my senior year, I conducted my fraternity, and we won Sweepstakes.

The repertoire of the Chamber Singers led me to Renaissance music. Singing the rich polyphonic sacred works of the Renaissance brought me again to that euphoric state I remembered so well. I began graduate studies at Stanford University where I received an enriching education in the performance practice of Renaissance, Baroque, and Classic music. For me the revelation was experienced through the masterful teaching of George Houle. At Stanford, I was also the assistant conductor of the Memorial Church Choir and majored in choral conducting with a specialty in Early Music Performance. **My experiences at Stanford were enormously enriching.** *I took out the comma before “in”*

After completing my Master of Arts degree at Stanford **in the summer of 1965**, I was accepted to the new DMA Choral Program at the University of Illinois. The faculty included renowned choral directors, musicologists, theorists, and early music specialists. Harold Decker was the Chair of the Choral Division and became a wonderful mentor. He was a highly skilled conductor with a vast knowledge of choral literature spanning the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries.

The combination of my early experiences at Santa Barbara singing with and assisting the Glee Club and the Chamber Singers, the inspiring education I received at Stanford in the performance practice of Renaissance and Baroque music, and the deep grounding in choral literature at the University of Illinois formed an important foundation in pursuing my choral career.

By now, the Harvard freshman was asleep, but I rambled on.

My first job was a one-year sabbatical-leave position at Lehigh University, an all men’s engineering school at that time with an outstanding Glee Club. My experience singing with the Glee Club at Santa Barbara was an invaluable preparation for the conducting position at Lehigh. Each year the Glee Club joined a number of women’s choirs to perform major works. One of them was Vassar College, and during my year we combined to perform Bach’s *Magnificat*. The Vassar College conductor, who appreciated my work with the Lehigh Glee Club, asked if I would conduct his choir while he was on sabbatical leave. When Vassar became a coed college, the music department asked me to form a new mixed choir and to continue to conduct the excellent 100-voice women’s choir.

Nine years at Vassar led me to Harvard, primarily through my experience of working with men’s and women’s choirs, coupled with my knowledge of Renaissance choral performance, ten years of experience conducting major works, and my expertise in women’s, men’s, and mixed choral literature.

My thirty-two years at Harvard University as Director of Choral Activities and Senior Lecturer on Music was a life-changing experience, one that I loved, and one that fit well with my background, experience, musicianship, and personality. It is to these students who taught me, inspired me, and allowed me to develop *choral ensemble music making*, that I dedicate this book.

For over forty years there has been a constant: the search for *euphoria*. It is this experience I consistently want to share with my singers. The heart of this book therefore is concerned with emotions. Understanding the emotional content of notation and the symbolic representation of pitch and duration is the Leitmotif that permeates this book. Developing the insight and ability to lead choruses in rehearsals to experience this sublime state, the collective ecstasy of “euphoria,” has been my goal.

I believe choral music has the power to draw us into a spiritual realm, a transcendence that allows a fleeting moment of peace. In today’s world, and in fact throughout time we have sought feelings of transcendence. To be able to absorb and reflect upon humanity’s greatest source of strength, the contemplation of an essence impossible to understand but made manifest by the incomprehensible mystery of life gives us strength, enriches our souls; and it reconfirms humanities’ greatest gift: the capacity to love.

CH Introduction

As I approached retirement from Harvard University in 2010, I began to think about writing a book on many fields of interest and expertise. My intension was to offer a new perspective for experienced choral professionals, teachers, advanced students, and conductors just entering the field. I believe what is often missing today in choral performance is the subject of this book: *the emotional connection*.

Musically, technically, and substantially, this book provides insights into six complementary fields:

1. Musical Gesture and Emotion: A Guide to Teaching and Performing
2. The Historical Roots of Singing: Notation and Expression
3. Performing Polyphony in the Twenty-first Century
4. Style and Expression in Renaissance Choral Performance
5. The Conductor's Process
6. Mastery of Choral Ensemble

L1 Symbols, Gestures, Emotions

The historical *raison d'être* for singing is to express emotion. In *Music: Physician for Times to Come*, Don Campbell uniquely describes music as “an organization created to dictate feelings to the listener. The composer is an unrelenting dictator, and we choose to subject ourselves to him when we listen to his music. This means, of course, that there are two kinds of musical experiences: music being thought and organized—the world of the composer—and music listened to, subjecting oneself to another’s musical thought. That the two worlds have something in common is testimony to the universal qualities of human experience . . . the most intimate is unmasked as the most universal.”¹

How can we recapture this intrinsic truth today when confronted with notational symbols written by composers from diverse historical eras representing individual languages of expression? What do symbols of pitch and duration actually mean? Does notation mask the intentions of the composer? What may the composer be trying to express that cannot be represented in the notation? Can our imaginations illuminate the unseen feelings within the notation? What keys help unlock the composer’s emotional vocabulary? Campbell remarked, “Music of Beethoven, Mozart, and Bach is not just a remarkable organization of sounds ... it is capable of giving meaning to life, to place man in a hierarchy within which he can look up, and the energies associated with such a view.”²

We know that singing flourished in the centuries long before signs of notation occurred; in fact, research reveals that the origins of singing began with the earliest *Homo* lineages. The consensus confirms that singing developed during the development of speech. Countless centuries later, symbols began to appear, written down by scribes as hints of the aural tradition of chant. The symbols were in essence mnemonic devices to remind singers of the melodies sung for over eight centuries

These first symbols looked like squiggles written above the sacred text to remind the singer of the melodic contour and how the melody was sung. While scholars do not know the precise meaning of all these signs, they do know they carry reminders of expressive nuances, such as dynamics, stresses, motion, and duration. As Richard Hudson writes in his insightful book, *Stolen Time: The History of Tempo Rubato*, “in

¹ Don Campbell, *Music: Physician for Times to Come* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2006), 125, 126

² *ibid.*, 126

the ninth century before the staff had been invented to identify pitches precisely, letters sometimes appeared above the *neumes* to indicate a special method of performance . . . the letter *c*, for example, refers to Latin words such as *cito* or *celeriter* which means ‘rapid’; *t* to *trahere* or *tenere* means to ‘drag out or hold’.”³ For eight centuries chant was an aural tradition. When notation began to appear in the ninth century, the purpose of the symbols placed above the words was to convey how the chant was sung, not to provide the notes and rhythms. The symbols became guidelines for expressivity.

By the thirteenth century, chant symbols evolved into neumatic notation with neumes written on a four-line staff. Neumes representing notes and rhythms were often connected in groups of two, three, four, or five notes. In the fourteenth century, more florid melodies ornamented the syllables or words. This style evolved into the early polyphonic motet. The motet became the foundation upon which Western choral music was based, flowering into the rich polyphonic tradition of the Renaissance. The development of this flowering can be seen in the motet, mass, chanson, and lieder. Beginning with fifteenth-century master composers Dufay, Ockeghem, and Josquin, continuing with sixteenth-century successors Lassus, Palestrina, and Byrd, and culminating in the sacred genres, madrigals, and concerted works of Monteverdi and Schütz, polyphony flourished.

L1 Polyphony

“Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” The question refers not only to the neglect of singing Renaissance music but also the neglect of the magnificent polyphony of the seventeenth through the twenty-first centuries. Performing polyphony seems rarely considered today.

To our traditional multi-voiced, multi-sized choirs directed by conductors in churches, schools, communities, and colleges, I ask, “how can we bring to life the profoundly enriching panoply of styles of the fifteenth through the early seventeenth centuries? How can we project the expressive power and beauty of Renaissance music so that it offers a wellspring of emotion to our singers and audiences?”

L1 The Conductor’s Process and Mastery of Choral Ensemble

My essay titled “The Conductor’s Process”⁴ (chapter 2) seeks to make conscious what we do as choral conductors. In essence, it is an overview of our responsibilities, from choosing repertoire to training choirs for performance. “Mastery of Choral Ensemble”⁵ (chapter 7) serves as a practical guide, offering valuable and specific advice about how to teach and rehearse choirs to sing at their highest level. The underlying premise of both articles offers a complementary and comprehensive perspective on four major topics: 1) score study and the development of the mind’s ear (our mental-aural image); 2) internalizing and reflecting our mental-aural image of the music to our choir as we seek to attain the eventual goal; 3) rehearsing: the core of the choral art; how we teach this fundamental process to the choir, and what methods can be taught in rehearsals to lead choirs towards achieving matching conceptualizations; and 4) preparing the score for listening and the ear for hearing—the conduit through which sound information passes in order to make the rehearsal process work.

³ Richard Hudson, *Stolen Time: The History of Tempo Rubato*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 5

⁴ *Five Centuries of Choral Music*, ch. 1.

⁵ *Up Front!*, ch. 8