

Musical Museums?

It would be a safe bet that most of our clubs state as their reason for existence something about the preservation and furtherance of German cultural traditions. Obviously, for our choirs, that means Germany's *musical* traditions.

But, that is a pretty big topic. So, what exactly are we to *preserve* and *further*? Is it all German musical traditions, or just some of them? Is it only the musical traditions of certain eras, or the music of certain regions of Germany? Is it only the wonderful traditional German folk music, or the fun beer-drinking songs for which Germany is famous? Does it include classical music of the great German composers of the past, or the music of Germany's current composers and arrangers? Since traditions are formed anew from generation to generation, should we be interested also in furthering and celebrating Germany's current musical traditions?

I've asked these questions frequently, and I get varied responses. The most frequent are akin to: "we exist to sing "the music 'I' grew up with", or "the music from 'my' region of Germany", or "the songs that 'we' have always sung because 'we' love singing them" or some similar answer. Some even suggest our role is to sing any songs we like from any other culture too, as long as the words are translated into German.

One particularly interesting answer was that the role of our choirs is to serve as *museums* for the old German songs our club founders and their forefathers loved to sing a century ago. Another club said they were dedicated to preserving the beautiful German Männerchor traditions.

Perhaps our clubs have not existed to preserve *all* of Germany's musical traditions, but only those dear to some of our present and past club members' pasts. This all makes sense. Most of our clubs were founded decades ago by and for German immigrants who came here in numbers enough to fill multiple clubs and choirs in every part of this country. They rightfully wanted, as do many of today's members, a place to celebrate and preserve the beautiful traditions they left behind. But now, with the numbers of German immigrants in our clubs naturally decreasing with the passage of time, what must our clubs and choirs do to be able to continue to preserve the musical artifacts in our museums?

We can't expect any sizeable influx of new German immigrants to fill and sustain our clubs and choirs of the future. Descendants of our club founders, having grown up as true German-Americans, enjoy their own musical traditions from the world in which they have grown and lived. Our communities have become increasingly multi-cultural, adding myriad unique and wonderful traditions to celebrate and enjoy. Faced with a very different world from when our clubs were founded, how can we now manage to preserve and further our beautiful German traditions?

The task of keeping our museums in operation for the next decades will rest with the widely varied populations that make up today's and tomorrow's communities. They will be Germans, Americans, German-Americans, and people of *all* cultural and musical heritages who will, or could, become valued members of our clubs and choirs. Are there ways to get this new population more involved for the future?

I tried explaining to a young German exchange student about the types of music we are told it is our mission to preserve. Her response was clearly that no one in her age group in Germany, nor her parents or relatives, would know any of the songs we sing, and furthermore would never be interested in knowing them, let alone choose to sing them. Does her message have implications for our clubs and choirs in this country?

Is it too much of a stretch to think that maybe other potential new singers of any age group from our local communities might shy away from our choirs because they feel the same as that exchange student does about the types of music that often consume our choir repertoire? If so, how do we plan to get tomorrow's members into our clubs and choirs to keep them vital and alive, so that we can share with them the beauty of the musical artifacts in our museum?

Can we not keep the best of the old German musical traditions alive while also singing music that may be meaningful to and interest today's pool of future singers? That may mean singing more of the exciting music of the past and the present from Germany *and* America, or music of the many other cultures whose people share our communities, or music of our modern eras as well as of the past, or music from popular as well as classical, folk or sacred genres. After all, museums constantly need to expand the artifacts they exhibit so they can attract broader groups of populations, or risk shutting down. Our museums for old German music similarly could cease to exist unless we do the same thing – reach out to today's world and tomorrow's singers through our choices of music to perform.

An esteemed colleague once said that we always must keep German culture and German music as the “backbone” of our clubs and choirs. I couldn't agree more. And to stay alive, the body surrounding that backbone needs a balanced diet that feeds and interests those who could be our future members and singers. If we fear we will lose our German musical traditions *unless* we fill our choir's diet only with our forefathers' songs, consider that we may lose our clubs and choirs completely if we don't balance our musical diets enough to attract singers of varying types of musical interests. Without healthy, vibrant and growing clubs and choirs, we soon may not be there to preserve or further *any* German cultural and musical traditions.

Broadening our music repertoire just might keep our current *and* future singers and audiences more interested, enlivened, enthused, inspired, entertained, challenged, and wanting to come back for more. It could even cause some to choose to join our choirs. Along the way, we just might discover some new musical treasures that all of us could enjoy singing for years to come.

Many decades have passed since our clubs were founded. As generations change, the needs and interests of our societies also change. If we choose only to serve the musical needs of past generations, we may not be here to serve future ones. Doing all that we can do to ensure our clubs and choirs stay vital for decades to come will allow us to continue to preserve and further, and share and enjoy, the German cultural and musical traditions of our founders and forefathers. After all, that is the reason our clubs and choirs were founded.

Ernie Flamm, 1/27/09