**Cultural Appropriation**

**Wikipedia: Cultural appropriation**, at times also phrased cultural misappropriation, is the adoption of elements of one culture by members of another culture. This can be controversial when members of a dominant culture appropriate from disadvantaged minority cultures.

Is it wrong, is it exploitation, if a chorus of white singers performs an African American gospel song? Is it sacrilege for non-Native Americans to perform a sacred song from the culture of an indigenous nation? Would a Jew be offended if a non-Jewish choir decontextualized a synagogue prayer, performing it in concert?

Should music be performed only by “insiders” from the culture that produced it? There are many “gray” shades of insider and outsider and most of us have a multitude of identities. No one person is identical to another, and each of us brings our own unique life experiences to reading a text or performing music. If I have a deep experience with a text or a tradition, my interpretation will be my own. But that doesn’t mean that someone else should shy away from that piece if their experience is less “deep” or less “inside” than mine. Who “owns” a culture, anyway? Who has the right to say, “It’s my *own* culture.”

What’s the difference between cultural appropriation and acculturation? We are all products of acculturation. That’s inescapable, unless we live in a cultural bubble. Most “ethnic” choral works are cultural hybrids, adapting (acculturating) an “inside” music into a Western concert performance tradition. In some cases, the Western frame seems to be smothering the ethnic material. In some cases, the adaptation (arrangement) feels like a “caricature” of the ethnic material. But in most cases it works.

Much depends on the attitude. Blackface, for the most part, was used as a mockery of African Americans. That’s very different from a Caucasian singing a “Negro spiritual” with love and respect. We’re allowed to tell ethnic jokes if they are of our own ethic group. But if an outsider tells that same joke, it’s considered offensive.

Many years ago, after I had conducted Handel’s *Messiah* for the first time, one of the singers in the choir came up to me and asked me how it was possible for a Jew to faithfully conduct a Christian oratorio. As I recall, after the shock of her question had worn off, I responded that every performer is an actor. While we are performing music we enter into its culture, its personality. In fact, in preparation for our performance we try to discover what the composer had in mind as he was creating this masterwork. Then when we finish the rehearsal or the performance we return to our own personas.

So I do not agree with the assertions by some non-Christians that they should not be performing Christian music. I can understand (and even agree) with the objection if the performance is in the context of a worship service or some other para-liturgical occasion. But performing a work of art in the context of a secular concert is not a problem for me. Not do I have a problem enjoying a classic painting of Madonna and Child in a museum.

Years ago, Dr. Buddy Howard, Choral Director at the University of New Hampshire, was leading fellow choral conductors in a session on African American spirituals. At the end of the workshop, a gray-haired white woman raised her hand and timidly asked Dr. Howard how he felt about white choruses singing these African American spirituals. His response was, “Ma’am, how do you feel about me, an African American conductor, performing Bach?”

Certainly there are challenges facing anyone who performs music outside of his or her cultural experience, but with some hard work and open mindedness, it’s possible. Americans can perform Bach cantatas. Germans can perform Bernstein or Gershwin or Copland. Japanese can perform Mendelssohn. Twenty-first-century Bostonians can perform the anthems of William Billings.

What about composers? There are many cases of non-Jews writing "Jewish music," among them Franz Schubert, Dan Pinkham, Eric Whitacre, John Williams, Nick Page. I welcome it. And many Jews have written Christian music, among them Irving Berlin and Leonard Bernstein. Will their music be as “authentic” as that of someone who was raised and marinated in the tradition? Perhaps not. But what does that matter?

There is one sensitivity that should concern anyone who is performing a Hebrew biblical or liturgical text: the pronunciation of God’s name. For traditional Jews, observing the commandment not to take the name of the Lord “in vain” means not uttering the holy Tetragrammaton, often transliterated (erroneously) as “Jehovah.” They have replaced it with the name “Adonai” (which literally means, “my Lord”). Furthermore, traditional Jews will only utter “Adonai” in an appropriate liturgical context or in any context with the appropriate reverence. Therefore, some choral singers, when singing liturgical or biblical texts in a secular context, will substitute either “Hashem” (meaning “the Name”) or, “Adomai” (which has no meaning but has the same syllabification as “Adonai”). Furthermore, traditional Jews will not pronounce a liturgical or biblical text without wearing a head covering (typically, a small skullcap called a “kippah”). It is prudent for conductors to be aware of these cultural/theological sensitivities.

-Joshua Jacobson

To hear a fascinating webinar by Dr. Rollo Dilworth on the subject of choral cultural appropriation, click <https://www.chorusamerica.org/resource/demand-learning/exploring-cultural-appropriation-choral-music>.