

# A Letter from the American Choral Directors Association

I first heard the outstanding singing of Zamir at the Washington, D.C. American Choral Director's Association 1995 National Convention [as part of the National Jewish Chorale]. It isn't often that I am moved to tears during a convention performance in the middle of a day, but Zamir did just that with their passionate, committed singing. Their conductor, Joshua Jacobson, an outstanding scholar, gifted conductor and advocate for Jewish music, presented a fascinatingly diverse program illustrating some of the many facets of Jewish musics.

As a member of the Planning Committee for the ACDA North Central Division Convention held in Madison, WI, March 1--4, 2000, there was never any question in my mind that Zamir should be invited to appear as the lead headlining performing ensemble. The quality and musicianship of the group is unmatched, the repertoire and presentation mind-opening. Unfortunately, ACDA's North Central Division is a somewhat "un-diverse" division: one need only look at the demographics of the divisional membership, who live in North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota and Wisconsin.

In Madison, Prof. Jacobson spoke to 650 convention participants, all of whom were music teachers, conductors, and church and temple musicians. He said "We teach music, we listen to music, we perform music, for its own sake, certainly. Music has its own intrinsic meaning and its own intrinsic rewards. But we also use music as a means of broadening our horizons, of experiencing new emotions.... The wider we cast our net, the broader we become as human beings, the more capable we are of far-reaching empathy." For me personally, in this day and age of school children killing each other, the importance of "far-reaching empathy" cannot be underscored enough, especially if, in that process, one reaches out across cultures, across countries, across religions. In the end, people learn that they are more like than unlike.

In the last fifteen years or so, there has been a strong movement in the American Choral Directors Association to be more inclusive of music of other cultures and languages in the curriculum, that programming should include not only Bach and Beethoven, but also music from diverse cultures worldwide. About this, Prof. Jacobson also made an excellent point:

- Do you have to be Jewish to perform Jewish choral music?
- Do you have to be Lutheran to conduct a Bach cantata?
- Do you have to be a Catholic to conduct a Bruckner mass?
- Do you have to be deaf to conduct Beethoven's "Missa Solemnis"?
- Do you have to be white to conduct Stravinsky?
- Do you have to be black to conduct spirituals?
- Do you have to be Italian to conduct Monteverdi?
- Is December the only time to consider programming Jewish choral music?

Why do we program music of another culture---because of pressure from the school board or the parents? Because it's "politically correct?" Out of a sense of "white guilt?" Or, perhaps, because we think it is good music, because it has something to say to us? Am I suggesting that we stop performing Handel and Haydn and replace the Western classical repertoire with African-American spirituals and synagogue music? Not at all. What I am suggesting is that from time to time you vary your diet of white bread with an occasional bagel.

For all these reasons, it was important that the North Central Division of the American Choral Directors Association begin its journey into the 21st century with the words and music of Joshua Jacobson and Zamir. To experience another culture is the first step in understanding. Prof. Jacobson said that Zamir had been to the "Middle East," but never to the Middle West! I sincerely hope that this visit will not be their last.

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