

The Touring Church Choir: Sharing the Gospel through Song

By Clayton J. Schmit

It was on a pleasant July evening that our bus pulled up in front of St. Peter's Lutheran Church in St. Petersburg, Russia. We were scheduled to sing a concert for members of the small Lutheran community in that city. Like most of the large buildings in St. Petersburg, the facade of the church building was in need of paint and repair. But, its imposing size and architecture suggested to us that it had once been an important worship center for thousands of Russian Lutherans. As members of the Elim Chorale, a small church choir from a small city in Northern California, we looked forward to presenting our concert of sacred music in this magnificent structure.

Upon entering the church, however, the choir fell silent, stunned by what we saw. The immense worship space had been stripped bare. There were no sacred artifacts: pews, altar, pipe organ, leaded windows, statues, crosses, and art work all were removed. Ringing the large empty space were huge concrete bleachers which surrounded the object of the building's most recent use. Where once there had been a Nave containing pews to accommodate several thousand worshipers, now there was an enormous concrete hole: a swimming pool. Actually, as indicated by the presence of a sixty-foot high, three-tiered diving platform, the pool was used for diving competitions during the last decades of the Soviet reign. As we were to discover, the once magnificent church had been closed by the Soviet government in the 1930's. As part of its attempt to suppress the Christian faith, the pastor of St. Peter's Lutheran church was executed in the middle of the night and the church elders were exiled to Siberia. In the early 1950's, the city government decided that the church building was too valuable a structure to abandon, so its beautiful altar, pipe organ and other appointments were destroyed to make room for an Olympic size diving platform and pool. Over the years, the pool had fallen into serious disrepair and no longer held water. In 1991, as the Soviet system teetered on the verge of collapse, the city gave the building back to the people of the church. It is, once again, their place of worship. It was there, beneath the ominous diving platform, that we

sang for and shared the Gospel with the Lutherans of St. Petersburg.

The site of this concert was far from ideal. As is the case with most indoor swimming pools, the hard-surfaced interiors of this space created an echo chamber unsuited for musical performance. With the sounds reverberating for as long as ten seconds, the music of the chorale was muddled and indistinct. Yet, the response by the audience was overwhelming. Barely fifty in number, they indicated their appreciation for our music by the rhythmic clapping of their applause. It thundered and multiplied in that strange, vast space, sounding like the ovation of thousands. They also indicated an appreciation for our visit by their attention, their tears, and the gift of flowers given to each member of the chorus following our performance. It had been our hope, on this tour, to experience some sense of the struggle encountered by Christian brothers and sisters in Eastern Europe and to offer an indication of the oneness in Christ we felt toward them. In this unlikely place, our mission was surprisingly and wholeheartedly fulfilled. We could not have selected a more pitiful site for a concert; yet, we could not have been more powerfully moved by the stark symbols of suppression nor the passion of such grateful people.

This was the Elim Chorale's second European tour in four years. By traveling to cities and villages in Russia, Latvia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Austria, the members of the choir have had many experiences similar to this episode. As director of the chorale, I have come to appreciate the importance of taking one's church choir on tour. It is a ministry to the participants, the audiences, and the home congregation as well. I have also gained insight into the choral benefits, the procedure, and the pitfalls associated with such a trip. I share this information with the readers of *Cross Accent* and the members of ALCM in the hope that other church choirs will consider expanding their ministry beyond the local congregation.

Music: The Handmaid of the Gospel

As Luther rightly observed, music is a powerful medium by which to share the gospel message. Though music is nothing more than sounds in time, it is nothing less than the symbol of the complex feelings that are associated with human experience. Whereas words tend to be poor vehicles for the expression of the depth and range of human emotion, music, like all art, is an

especially useful vehicle. Art gives expression to those feelings and associations that are otherwise ineffable. Because faith is more a matter of the heart than the mind, it is difficult to express the meaning of one's faith or the depth of feelings associated with it. But, through music--singing hymns in worship, listening to the masterpieces of great sacred composers, hearing a well-trained choir--Christians can express and share with others something of the feelings associated with their faith. Music creates a resonance between composers, performers, and listeners so that what is known by one can be experienced by many. It is this quality of music that makes it ideal for worship. It is this quality that also makes music ideal for sharing the gospel with people of other cultures and other languages.

The power of sacred music to symbolize human emotion and to express the meaning of faith is not dependent upon one's ability to understand the language of a song's text. The text of a hymn or song is only one of the constituent elements of the music and it is not the predominant element. Therefore, though the discursive meaning of a text is important, the musical presentation does not lose its power when the words are not fully understood. One can be deeply moved by a Verdi opera without knowing Italian. Likewise, sacred music which is sung in English will have power to express the breadth and depth of the composer's and performers' feelings about the faith in spite of the fact that an audience may not understand the words. Therefore, when a choir sings in its own language, foreign audiences can be drawn in by the music's symbols and the effect can be as rich and rewarding as the situation described above. The music takes the place of language and allows for an interchange of understanding that builds a bridge between people of different cultures. The bridge connects not minds, but hearts. When church choirs sing concerts for people of other cultures, there is an immediate connection that is made between those performing and those listening. The Gospel is communicated, the unity of faith is experienced, and a solidarity is established that enriches performers and listeners alike.

Why Tour?

There are many reasons for people to travel: adventure, curiosity, to visit friends, to see historically important sights, etc. Members of a church choir may be interested in traveling for

numerous reasons, as well. But, there is one predominant reason for church choirs to visit Christians of other cultures. The reason is to fulfill a sense of Christian mission. This is what makes a choir tour different from an ordinary vacation. It is important for choirs to understand that the tour is not simply a trip to an interesting place, but that they are going to share the Gospel with fellow Christians, to participate jointly in worship and communion, and to learn of the faith experiences and struggles of others. Our local bishop, Lyle Miller, who participated in our last tour both as a representative of the Sierra Pacific Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and as a member of the choir, reflected on the importance of this aspect of a tour: "I do believe that such an experience should be seen as a spiritual event...I think that as choir tours happen on behalf of our churches, they should give witness to the Gospel and expressions of praise to God. Choir members should be aware of this up front."

Having such a mission in mind will help a choir determine where to visit. Touring companies will take your choir anywhere in the world they wish to go. It is up to the choir to determine the nature of its mission and then to discover the areas that would allow for its accomplishment. It is then important to share this information with the prospective participants. People may express a desire for the choir to visit those countries that they have always dreamed to visit. But, understanding the mission will help them to realize that touring in less-traveled areas may provide the greatest opportunity for ministry. This does not mean that places of geographical and historical interest are to be avoided. The original mission for our recent tour was to visit fellow Lutherans in Latvia and to establish with them an ongoing relationship between our synods. Yet, we felt compelled, being so close to St. Petersburg, to take advantage of the opportunity to see this great city, visit its palaces, see the famous collection of art at the Hermitage, and visit the Lutherans there. As noted above, this was a surprising and enriching addition to our tour.

Establishing a sense of mission is the first and most important step in making tour plans. To aid in this, it is recommended that the choir or a representative committee establish a mission statement. Such a statement will give focus to the preparations you make for a trip. It will also be a clear signal to those outside the choir who may want to join you for the tour. Whether as additional

singers or accompanying travelers, the mission statement will help them to understand the nature of the trip and adjust their expectations. The statement should be brief, direct, and should give a clear statement of the expected ministry results. As an example, the mission for our last tour can be stated this way: "The Elim Chorale is touring with the intention to visit fellow Christians, especially Lutherans, in the countries of Russia, Latvia, and the Czech Republic, to share with them the gospel message through song, to gain an understanding of their culture and their faith, and to establish with them a sense of solidarity and oneness in faith."

Another reason to take your church choir on tour is that it builds the musicianship of the ensemble. Church choir directors are often frustrated by the fact that they have limited rehearsal time and weekly performances. This means that there is little time to add polish and nuance to the choir's performances. However, when working on the repertoire for a tour, the choir will have the opportunity to work on a body of music over a period of months. Choir members will not only have time to learn the music, but will also have the chance to feel independent with regard to their parts, listen to the choral blend, and learn to sing musically. Issues such as mood, tone, balance, melodic shape, vowel production, and breathing can be emphasized and rehearsed more completely than when there is an immediate need to get ready to sing each Sunday. A choir of average ability will be surprised at how well they can learn to sing together when given the chance to rehearse adequately. Another benefit that affects a choir's musicianship is the motivation that going on tour engenders. When people invest energy, time, and money in making such a trip happen, they do not want any lack of preparation to mar the dignity and success of the tour. The heightened inspiration and concentration that precede a tour enable the choir to achieve surprising musical results.

Becoming involved in a choir tour also creates benefits for the choir's congregation. The congregation will be asked to support the mission of the choir both financially and through prayer and encouragement. As preparations unfold before the tour and as experiences are shared following the tour, the congregation learns of the needs, concerns, and struggles of the Christians visited by the choir. In some circumstances, the tour may open doors for an ongoing relationship with the churches visited by the choir and the mission begun by the choir can be expanded to be a continuing

ministry of the congregation.

Who Should Tour?

When one thinks of international touring choirs, one thinks of the St. Olaf Choir, the Vienna Choir Boys, and the choirs of other universities and famous schools of music. These choirs are known for the high quality of their musicianship and their international audiences expect musical excellence. Typically, they will sing in the great concert halls, churches, and cathedrals of the world.

But, there are appreciative audiences in smaller churches and communities throughout the world that will be enriched by the musical offerings of committed Christians and singers who care enough to visit them. Though a small ensemble of strictly average musicality, our choir has been repeatedly blessed by audiences who loved our music and who were honored that we chose to visit them.

Whether in a small, isolated village in the mountains of Austria or in the Lutheran cathedral in Riga, Latvia, listeners have expressed a deep appreciation for our music and the effort required for us to visit them in their communities. I have become convinced that nearly any church choir of average musical ability can accomplish this kind of ministry if it chooses to make such a mission a priority.

Ten Points to Consider

Experience is often the best teacher. This list of ten considerations has grown out of my experience in planning several international choir tours. For those who wish to consider the possibility of taking their church choir on tour, the following points may prove helpful.

- 1) **Tour Committee**--The director should appoint a tour committee made up of interested members of the choir and others from the congregation who may not wish to sing but who might like to travel with the choir. Included in the group should be someone who can assist the director in the numerous details having to do with registering for the tour, mailing information to participants, and obtaining passports and visas. Another member of the committee should take charge of the trip finances, collecting deposits and installments from participants and sending timely payments to the concert tour agency. There are many details that a director will want to dictate as the musical leader of the group, such as musical repertoire for the trip. But, there are some issues that will be best decided by the wisdom of the Tour Committee.

- 2) **Mission Statement**--As indicated above, establishing a mission statement is a crucial step in determining the reasons for making a tour and establishing where to go.
- 3) **Where To Tour**--Once a mission statement is completed, the Tour Committee can use it to determine the best destinations at which the mission can be accomplished. An additional consideration will be the potential musical quality of your choir. Because American choirs visit other countries by the hundreds each year, you may elect to visit areas and countries that are not frequented by other touring choirs. Churches in these communities will be most appreciative of your visit and your music, even if you do not achieve the musical excellence of the St. Olaf Choir.
- 4) **Finding a Tour Agency**--This is another crucial step in the success of your tour. There are hundreds of travel agencies in this country that regularly take large groups on tours to other countries. But, the needs of a choir are specialized and require the skills of an agency that is experienced in making concert arrangements, publicizing events, and arranging for rehearsal accommodations. A good concert tour agency will do more than book flights, hotels, transportation, and sight-seeing opportunities for your choir. They will also provide you with a guide and translator for each country you visit, make personal contact with churches to set up your concerts or the worship services at which you will sing, publicize your concerts in the local communities, arrange for concert hall engagements, and assist you with details concerning the availability of organs and pianos at your concert sites. Another benefit of using a qualified concert tour agency is that they will make an assessment of the musical quality of your ensemble and arrange concerts in areas where your music will be most appreciated.

There is not a large number of concert tour agencies which can accommodate all of these special needs, but they do exist. Some agencies have experienced contacts in certain parts of the world and specialize in offering tours to those areas.¹

1. Finding a competent concert touring agency can take a bit of research. Typically, these agencies advertise in professional journals like those of the American Choral Directors Association or the Choristers Guild. Another resource would be to contact local high school and college choral directors for recommendations regarding concert tour agencies that they may have used.

5) **Tour Repertoire**--While it is a nice gesture for your choir to learn one or two pieces of music from the culture of the areas you are visiting, it is not only acceptable, but preferable for your choir to offer music from your own culture. This is appropriate for several reasons: First, you are representing your own area and congregation; your audiences will want to get to know something of your culture just as you want to learn of theirs. Second, most American church choirs will be more comfortable singing music with English texts and will find it easier to perform the music well. Third, many peoples are familiar with American culture and appreciate having the chance to hear American music. As with American audiences, African-American Spirituals are especially appreciated. You may want to include several in your repertoire.

Another consideration for repertoire selection has to do with accompanimental needs. If you do not plan to take along your own accompanimental instruments (guitars, electronic keyboards, handbells, etc.), then you may want to select music that can be performed *a capella*. There is often no way to guarantee that a concert site will have an adequate piano or organ for your use.

6) **Number of Singers Needed**--The size of your touring choir will be affected by several factors. The first consideration is the normal size of your choir. Not all of your choir members will be able to participate in the tour, so you may need to do some recruiting in order to achieve a workable choral balance. Second, the type of music you wish to perform will help you to establish your choral personnel needs. Unless your singers are uncommonly gifted, you will need a larger choir for six- and eight-part arrangements than you will need for three- or four-part arrangements. A third consideration has to do with the arrangements made with your concert tour agency regarding complimentary participation. Tour agencies usually offer one free trip (usually for the director) for every 25 or 30 paying participants. Unless the director is willing to pay his or her own way, this minimum may indicate the number of participants that will be required in order for the trip to occur. On the other hand, you may have a large choir and need to consider a fourth issue. Your concert touring agency will assist you in determining the maximum number of participants based on such factors as hotel and transportation availability.

7) **Complimentary Trips**--It is usually understood that the first complimentary trip is for the choir

director. If there are enough participants to earn two complimentary trips, it is suggested that the second be used for the choir's accompanist. This is appropriate especially in the cases where accompanying the choir is a paid position. In such a case, the choir tour is not the accompanist's vacation but a "business trip" and participation is an expectation of employment. If there are not enough participants to earn a second complimentary trip, the tour committee should give serious consideration to making an agreement with the concert tour agency to calculate the trip cost based on the inclusion of two complimentary trips.

8) **Recruiting Tour Participants**--There are two categories of participants that you will want to recruit in addition to regular choir members. The first is non-singing travelers. These may be spouses of choir members, friends of tour participants, or congregational members who love to travel. Having a trip mission statement will help to make these travelers aware of the purpose of the trip and will enable them to plan on how they can advance the mission in non-musical ways.

The second category of participants to recruit are singers from outside your choir. These may be congregational members who cannot regularly commit to choir involvement but who are willing to participate in such a special choral ministry. They may also be people from outside your church who love to sing and who are willing to make a commitment to the mission of your touring choir. The benefit of recruiting good singers from outside your choir is that they will enhance the quality of your choir during the tour and they may elect continue to participate after in your choir's ministry after the tour is completed.

9) **Fundraising**--Asking your congregation and your community to support your tour and your ministry financially may be a good way to involve them in the mission of your tour. However, it should not be expected that the choir will raise enough money through bake sales, car washes, yard sales, and other typical congregational fundraising events to make the trip affordable for participants. With a potential total cost that could run in six figures (40 participants, at \$2500 each, totals \$100,000) it is not realistic to expect that fundraising will significantly advance the mission of the trip. Participants need to see the expenditure of the tour cost as part of their personal benevolence and ministry.

(As is the case with many who give generously, participants will usually find that they are generously blessed by their involvement in such a tour.)

10) **Trip Cancellation and Interruption Insurance**--Directors should encourage all tour participants to purchase trip cancellation and interruption insurance. With a traveling group consisting of thirty, forty, or more participants, it is almost a statistical certainty that someone will need to cancel or curtail their participation in the tour. Insurance can help you to recover payments made for non-refundable deposits and airline tickets, medical expenses incurred during the tour, costs for emergency return flights, and expenses for traveling companions who need to accompany an injured person home.

Go in Peace and Serve the Lord

"For the peace of the whole world, for the well-being of the Church of God, and for the unity of all, let us pray to the Lord."² With these or similar words we so often pray for a greater understanding of the world church and for its unity. Why not encourage your congregation to embark upon a ministry that will involve its choir and other members in being instruments of that prayer for peace and unity. Once you have entered into this kind of communion your prayers will never be the same. The faces, struggles, and situations of Christian sisters and brothers around the world will forever be a part of your experience. The nameless multitudes for which you may once have prayed will become people with names and faces; and you will know first-hand that you share a faith that binds you together.

"The Touring Choir: Sharing the Gospel Through Song," in *Cross Accents*, July, 1995

2.. From "Kyrie," "Holy Communion," *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), p. 100.