

Angel Song

This is a true story about how I discovered the spiritual dimension of music—about how music manifests higher realities in the material realm, not in subjective terms, but in a very tangible, measureable way.

My success teaching ear-training at Cal State College Dominguez Hills, led to my first paid conducting gig. It turned out that one of the students in my ear-training class was a member of a small Methodist church in Redondo Beach; she saw to it that I was hired as a temporary replacement for their regular choir director who was out sick, recovering from an operation. It was a perfect opportunity for me to try out a lot of the moves I was learning from, Sam Krachmalnik, the new orchestra conductor at U.C.L.A. I was not without some minimal conducting experience, and I had a basic knowledge of vocal technique, having lived with an opera singer, etc., but this was my first regular semi-(quasi)-pro gig running an operational music program. I was pretty nervous about it at first, but my natural talent for zeroing in on the essentials of a performance, not to mention my familiarity with church mentality, made me an instant hit. The gig was supposed to last three months, but I made the choir sound so much better I ended up staying there two and a half years. The choir director whom I had replaced, coming from hardy, enthusiastic, but untrained peasant stock, hated me for that, and stayed away from the choir a good while after she got out of the hospital—but the good ladies in the back row eventually won her over, and she too became one of my enthusiastic supporters, and my lead tenor.

I quickly learned the routine, introit, call to prayer, anthem, benediction, and of course the hymns. I learned how to deal with amateur singers who could just barely read music, who took vacations every other week or so, and whose most elevated musical taste peaked right around the Lawrence Welk level. I learned how to deal with temperamental church organists, and I learned how to work with church pastors, (there were several) some of whom were tone deaf, and some of whom exemplified the principle that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. I learned about the hypocrisy, backbiting, and emotional disharmony which is the cornerstone of church politics, and I learned, in this milieu of tepid spirituality, how to

inspire loyalty among the few principal deacons who knew my work and appreciated my passion for music, even if they didn't understand anything else about me. All in all, this little church choir had never sounded so good, and they knew it and they liked it; and I really got into showing these simple working class folk what the southernmost borders of a high artistic territory looked like. I liked setting a high performance standard for the choir, even if these improvements were barely audible to many people in the congregation. One of the singers often accused me of, "Putting fancy hood ornaments on cars with no motors," referring to my tendency to work details at the same time they hammered out the notes, but eventually I got pretty good at tuning up the motors too.

One Sunday, the choir was not well-prepared, and I was nervous about the performance. I still didn't believe in God, but I did believe in good performances, so I decided to indulge in a little psychological manipulation to try and get the choir's performance energy up to a little higher level. Right before the anthem I turned to the congregation and asked if someone wouldn't be so kind as to offer a prayer of dedication. Of course, I didn't believe in prayer either, but I knew they did, so I figured a little cathartic adrenalin rush wouldn't hurt (a good conductor, like a good psychologist, know it's all in your mind). A woman from the congregation rose, invoked the presence of Jesus, and asked that the choir be inspired to sing with the voices of angels.

I could feel that things were better as I raised my arms to begin the number, but I was not prepared for the surprise in store for me. They opened their mouths and out poured a sound—just like ANGELS! These people whom I had coached and coddled for more than a year had never even remotely approximated the sounds I heard at that moment. It was pure, it was elevated, it was IN TUNE! Not only their voices but their faces were transformed as well—there was something ecstatic, vaguely sexy, infinitely knowing about their eyes as the piece flowed from harmony to harmony. It was by far the peak experience of my infant conducting career.

From that moment I was utterly changed. The religion of music had finally presented me with a sacrament I could endorse, and lo, it had merely pointed back to the theology to which I had devoted the last ten years of my adolescence and early manhood aggressively rejecting. The more I relived this experience the more profound it became for me. The event was deeply

shocking to me and gave me much food for thought; this was more than a parlor trick, this was REAL, this was TRUTH. The heaviest part of it was that it bridged the gap between the fantasy world of creativity, and the real world of people and things. Here was music that not only spoke to me as a musician, but as a person. A person.

The event shook the foundations of my whole world view; I could not assimilate it into the fabric of my otherwise cynical and shallow attitudes. Consequently, I was plunged into a deep depression; I felt everything I had understood about life was being called into question. I should have felt joy at having the clouds thus lifted from my eyes, but instead I just felt insecure. Having to revamp the philosophical underpinning of your existence is a lot of work, and I did not feel quite up to it, what with U.C.L.A. and all. Nevertheless, I could not deny what I had heard—I could deny almost anything else in my life, but not what I had HEARD. It resonated in my memory every day, and twice on Sundays, ha ha, and made me hungry for more. It was no accident, I thought, that the name of the tune, through which the angels had sung to me, was "Open Our Eyes". "Open our eyes, oh loving and compassionate Jeeeeee-sus." I remembered the sound, always, in conjunction with that special look I had seen on my lead soprano's face (Betty, her name was)—peaceful, mindless, yet somehow knowing, and seductive. It was so real—real, and deep, and beautiful, and disturbing.

From this point on, my conducting, indeed my total musicianship, turned a sharp corner, and I began to seek this spiritual experience whenever I could. I began to figure the astral energy into my calculations for how good a performance was going to sound, and I have never ceased, from that day to this, to invoke the presence of Angels into the hall as I raise my baton.