CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

From Culture Stealing to Culture Sharing

How can choruses explore music from cultures other than their own in a respectful way? Rollo Dilworth's research provides a framework for thinking about cultural appropriation and its intersection with choral music.

BY EUGENE HOLLEY JR.

In more than two decades as a choral conductor and educator, Rollo Dilworth has heard his share of false notes. Among the most disturbing to him are "choral performances where it's very clear the choir is performing a piece of music that's outside of the cultural identity and cultural understanding of the conductor." To him, telltale signs that the performers don't truly get the music include use of language or dialect that is off the mark, or movement added to the performance that is not consistent with the music's cultural origins. Impressions like these leave him with the overall feeling that "there was not much sensitivity and care in trying to study or fully understand and embrace the music in a way that honors it."

Defining Cultural Appropriation

We've come to know this kind of performance as "cultural appropriation" or, as Dilworth *(pictured)* would put it in this case, "objectionable cultural appropriation." Dilworth, who is a professor at Temple University in Philadelphia, says he's been researching the issue for the past decade or so. Borrowing a definition from Canadian philosopher James Young, Dilworth says cultural appropriation occurs when members of one culture ("outsiders") take for their own, or their own use, creations belonging to members of another culture ("insiders").

"As a choral composer of music that reflects the African American experience, I had been getting lots of questions in the last decade about cultural appropriation," Dilworth says. He gets the queries from choral conductors who are interested in exploring diverse cultural traditions but also feel uncomfortable or even fearful, and wary of pushback from singers and audience members. "The fear really comes from not wanting to offend, feeling like the outsider, feeling that maybe I don't have a right, as an outsider, to participate in a musical tradition that does not reflect my own," Dilworth says.

During a gifting ceremony, conductor Daniel Paulson presents a young member of California's Nisenan Tribe with a T-shirt from his chorus, Vox Musica of Sacramento.

His research and experiences have culminated in a Chorus America webinar and a breakout session at the 2019 Chorus America Conference, both titled "Exploring Cultural Appropriation in Choral Music."

In his webinar, Dilworth lists three types of cultural appropriation (again citing Young). In the first, "subject appropriation," an outsider uses people or elements of a different culture as the subject of a story, painting, etc. In music, the other two types may be more common. Performing songs or adopting styles from different cultures would be considered "content appropriation." And a chorus giving a concert performance that features a Native American drum would be engaging in "object appropriation."

Conductor Jackie Hawley *(pictured)*, who listened to the webinar when it was first streamed in March, has experienced the outsider's fear of causing offense. About 25 years ago, she wanted to work with a First Nations reserve in the small Canadian town where she lived at the time but, she recalls, "I just avoided it, I was a chicken, because honestly, I didn't know how to approach it." Since then she's gained extensive ▶

experience in collaborations with Canada's Inuit population, but one thing that was new for her in the webinar is the notion that, despite the common assumption, cultural appropriation is not necessarily a negative term.

In Dilworth's definition, the term "cultural appropriation" does not involve a value judgment. There's a "flip side" to its negative connotation, notes VocalEssence associate conductor Phillip Shoultz *(pictured)*: "There's a positive attribute to sharing culture, right? And you can't separate us artificially because now we are so intertwined together, thanks to social media and technology." Helping to lead "Witness," the Minneapolis-based chorus's longstanding showcase for music from the African American tradition, Shoultz says he struggles with those who take "the hard line that if white people are singing spirituals that's appropriation. Because for me, as

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–Rollo Dilworth

an African American who has spent a significant amount of time studying in Germany, with German scholars, that's telling me that I shouldn't be singing Bach cantatas and B minor Masses, right?"

That's why Dilworth distinguishes between acceptable and objectionable cultural appropriation. "I feel that it's so important that my singers not just have a one-dimensional choral experience," he says. "They need to learn about how music in other countries and other traditions is performed." Acceptable appropriation can be manifested in three ways, as outlined in the webinar. "Cultural exchange" is the first, defined by Northern Arizona University com-

munications professor Richard A. Rogers as "the reciprocal exchange of symbols, artifacts, rituals, genres, and and/or technologies between cultures with roughly equal levels of cultural power." The second, according to writer Brianna Fragoso, is "cultural appreciation," which occurs "when elements of culture are used while honoring the source they came from." The last is Dilworth's own concept, "cultural consumption," occurring in instances where we harmlessly (and sometimes unwittingly) interact with a culture outside of our own, as often happens when we listen to music or watch a movie.

When does cultural appropriation become objectionable? Dilworth points to three more definitions from Young. When an outsider takes, without permission, property that belongs to another culture, that's "cultural appropriation as theft." If, for example, he were to incorporate a digeridoo part into a piece of music without permission from the indigenous Australian community that developed the instrument, Dilworth says he would be committing theft, even if his intent were respectful. If he published the piece and made money from it, the ▶

Cultural Appropriation: Terms to Know

Here are some of the terms that Rollo Dilworth draws on in his work.

Three Types of Cultural Appropriation in the Arts

Canadian philosopher James Young defines three types of cultural appropriation in the arts.

- **Subject appropriation:** When artists represent members or aspects of another culture in their own art, for example, using them as the subject of a painting or song.
- **Content appropriation:** When artists use the cultural products of another culture in their own art, for example, performing a song from a culture that is not their own.
- **Object appropriation:** When the possession of a tangible object (such as a work of art, or a musical instrument) is transferred from members of the culture that produced it to outsiders.

Acceptable Cultural Appropriation

- **Cultural exchange** is defined by professor Richard A. Rogers as "the reciprocal exchange of symbols, artifacts, rituals, genres, and/or technologies between cultures with roughly equal levels of cultural power."
- **Cultural appreciation** is defined by writer Brianna Fragoso as "when elements of a culture are used while honoring the source they came from. It is important to note that appreciation involves respect and value."
- **Cultural consumption** is defined by Dilworth as "instances in which we harmlessly (and sometimes unknowingly) interact with a culture that is not our own" by, for example, watching a movie or eating a particular type of food.

Objectionable Cultural Appropriation

(all three terms defined by Young)

- **Cultural appropriation as theft** is when an outsider takes, without permission, property that belongs to another culture.
- **Cultural appropriation as assault** happens when the act causes harm to the insider culture or its members.
- **Cultural appropriation becomes a profound offense** when the act offends a person's moral sensibilities.

For more information, Dilworth's webinar "Exploring Cultural Appropriation in Choral Music" is available on demand to members at *bit.ly/CACulturalAppropriation.*

offense level would rise to "cultural appropriation as assault," because the act would cause harm to the insider culture or its members. Cultural appropriation becomes a "profound offense" when the act offends a person's moral sensibilities, provoking a gut reaction.

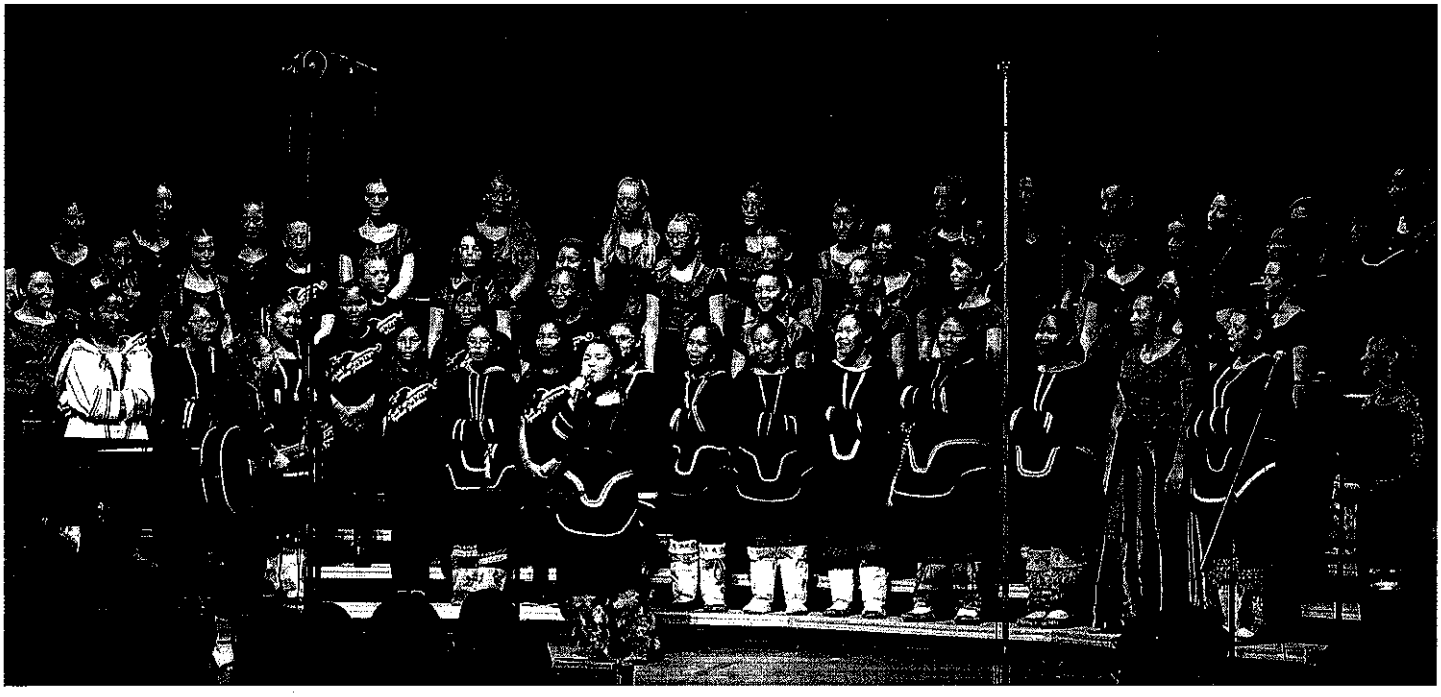
Deciding How to Approach Cultural Appropriation

For some observers, a notion of white privilege is intrinsic to an understanding of objectionable cultural appropriation—that for the most part the phenomenon involves dominant cultures taking from less-dominant cultures. While he sees truth in that view, Dilworth feels that cultural appropriation is more complicated; it can run in multiple directions. He's more concerned with a subtler kind of disrespect: Sometimes "there isn't as much care taken" with music representing non-dominant cultures—performers regard it as "not as important, not as sophisticated," so they don't need to treat it in the same way as they would treat Bach, for example. "My argument has always been, why wouldn't we put the same amount of time and energy into a Malaysian folk song or an African American spiritual?"

"That was really appreciated—that I came up offering something but also listening and willing to learn something. And I think that's the piece that's often missing."

–Jackie Hawley

In addition to reflecting on how much respect you bring to the music you're considering, be aware of your position in relation to its cultural source, Dilworth says. In other words, if you are an outsider, do your best to realize and acknowledge that, and approach the music accordingly. In the simplest terms, insiders create a culture, and outsiders are foreign to that culture and its cultural products. But determining which side we fall on is not always simple. It depends largely on how we perceive ourselves, Dilworth says, and sometimes our perceptions are clouded. "There are people who



A performance from the final concert of Nipiit Katittut-Voices United 2017 in Ottawa, Ontario, an educational engagement project connecting youth musicians from Ottawa and Iqaluit, Nunavit. Participants included Cantiamo Choir of Ottawa, the Inuksuk Drum Dancers, the Iqaluit Fiddlers, and the Gryphon Trio.

may be so rooted in a cosmopolitan society, they have had contact with so many people from various backgrounds, that they may not even see themselves as an outsider." Others may feel the same way for the opposite reason: "I think that my choral conductor friends who haven't interacted with people from all sorts of cultures and traditions may not see themselves as much of an outsider because in their town, there are very few people that don't look like them.

"I never present myself as an insider, and I never presume that I'm an expert," Dilworth says, which means he looks for support to learn unfamiliar repertoire. For instance, when he taught at North Park University in Chicago more than 10 years ago, he made it a point to find ▶

Cultural Appropriation

experts in the choir—a Romanian or Korean or Swedish student who could introduce the cultural traditions the group was trying to explore. In recent years VocalEssence has launched *¡Cantaré!*, an education initiative that involves Mexican music traditions, as well as Singers Of This Age, a youth chorus that performs popular, diverse contemporary repertoire. For these projects to succeed, Shoultz says he's found it essential "that we have artists in the community who are out in front, leading in some way, the teaching aspect of it, and the representational aspect of it so it's not about stealing someone's culture."

"There's a positive attribute to sharing culture, right? And you can't separate us artificially because now we are so intertwined together, thanks to social media and technology."

—Phillip Shoultz

As Dilworth points out in the webinar, learning also comes through collaboration and exchange. Hawley says she was happy to hear him say that because it's worked well for her ensemble, the Cantiamo Girls Choir of Ottawa. In 2017, she arranged a trip to Iqaluit, the capital of Nunavut, "to have my students develop their own views of the world by going to that place and communicating with other students their age," she says. Hawley's students facilitated singing workshops—"I taught them to teach, so that it was kids teaching kids," she says—and in exchange the Inuit students demonstrated Arctic games and the syllabics of their native language. At one point during the exchange, Hawley says an Iqaluit resident gave her a great compliment. The woman told her, "'You're coming up here, and you're not just trying to take over. You're listening to us.' That was really appreciated—that I came up offering something but also listening and willing to learn something. And I think that's the piece that's often missing."

The understanding that cultural appropriation can be a two-way street has fostered a growing relationship between the Sacramento

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VocalEssence's ¡Cantaré! *program brings composers from Mexico into elementary schools, high schools, colleges, and community organizations as artists-in-residence.*

women's chorus Vox Musica and the Nisenan people from the Nevada City Rancheria, a Native American tribe in nearby Nevada City. It began almost three years ago when music director Daniel Paulson initiated conversations with the tribal spokesperson. Paulson says the Nisenan lost their tribal recognition in the 1950s as a result of the federal government's "Indian termination" policy, intended to encourage assimilation. "So they're in this fight to preserve their culture, legacy, and language." Vox Musica's goal was to support the tribe by sharing its music and message.

In their initial collaboration, Paulson *(pictured)* says he was given a drum song created by the Nisenan spokesperson, which he "reimagined" for women's voices and looping violin. As a result of the trust they established, the tribe gifted Vox Musica with nine other tribal songs, which the ensemble presented in their original form in a concert that also included a libretto telling the tribe's story, which Paulson researched, wrote, and set to music. "At every step of the way," he says, "we always were in conversation with them, asking, 'Is this appropriate?'" In the end, they were impressed by the result, he says, "and could see how art and music can make a difference as a vehicle for educating and exposing people to their history and their traditions."

For conductor Connaitre Miller *(pictured)*, positive attention from outsiders shifted the way she views the music that's become the focus of her career. Miller teaches jazz studies at Howard University in Washington DC and leads the school's a cappella jazz ensemble, Afro Blue. She says she was the only black student in the music departments at Kansas State ▶

Cultural Appropriation

University and the University of Northern Colorado. They provided her first exposure to jazz but didn't help her appreciate its particular significance to her culture. After graduation she went to Australia to teach at a conservatory, "and it was there that I really began to see the importance of jazz as an African American art form," she says, "because [my Australian colleagues] saw it that way. I began to see my art form through their eyes, and it changed the way I view myself, and the art form."

Even with the best of intentions and the most respectful exchange, cultural appropriation will create challenges. For her project, Nipiit Katittut-Voices United, Hawley brought together an Inuit songwriter from Iqaluit with a composer from Ottawa to create a piece. "The challenge is the publication of the piece," she says. At first the songwriter wasn't sure she wanted that. "The [indigenous] culture is not familiar with publishing music," Hawley says. "How do we write it down? How do we preserve the richness of this cultural collaboration in a venue that does really not allow for the oral tradition?" But when the songwriter heard the choirs perform it, she was convinced. "The thought of other people somewhere in the world singing in Inuktitut is so important to her." Publication of the piece is still pending.

"This is a transitional time," says Hawley. "Transitional times are messy, but somebody has to go through the mess so that we can get to the other side of it." We may express things differently, depending on the culture we belong to, "but we have the same basic emotions," Hawley believes. "We are still expressing the same things." That's where education comes in, says Dilworth. "We need to train our young conductors, and our current conductors, to understand how important cultural appropriation is, that it exists, and to know that it is unavoidable and inevitable, given the global framework we are in the 21st century. And to know their job is not to run away from it, but to minimize the potential of offense, and to engage in the exploration of these cultural pieces of music." ■

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