

The Voice Of Community: A Choral Model for Social Justice Engagement

by Michael Bussewitz-Quarm

Michael Bussewitz-Quarm composes music designed to unite and heal communities in productive response to tragedy. Via his website, any choir may join a consortium of ensembles interested in performing any of his featured pieces. The fee a choir pays on joining compensates Michael for his composing and benefits the designated entities whose work addresses the music's subject. Michael workshops his compositions with Long Island Voices, which he founded and conducts.

Long Island Voices is a choir based in Port Jefferson, New York. Our members have sung together now for five seasons. This choral community formed as a group bound not only by mutual love of music but also by the altruistic drive to use time and talent in benefit of others. Long Island Voices singers

are Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians, Socialists, and unaffiliated; Christian, Jewish, Bahá'í, atheist, and agnostic; gay and straight, cis- and trans-identifying. Our unifying identity is that we are musicians who care deeply about the causes that have brought us together through the years.

I also belong to a vast community of composers making a difference in the world. Beyond creating pleasure and joy, our works give a voice to marginalized communities. Consider Andrea Ramsey's "But a Flint Holds Fire" (2016), her humanitarian response to the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, commissioned for a Chorus America project; or Rollo Dilworth's "When Dreams Take Flight," commissioned by Delaware ACDA through David Lockart for the Choir School of Delaware in

Wilmington as part of ACDA's Fund for Tomorrow.

The potential of these works extends well past providing entertainment and into fertilizing the ground for social justice work.

The arts are prominent among the human processes that shape and influence the development of the habits, values, knowledge, and skills relevant to people's membership in communities. They are not mere entities for contemplative gratification; or, more accurately, taking them as such dramatically underestimates their potential and compromises their efficacy. To construe arts as purveyors of aesthetic (receptive) experience contributes



Long Island Voices, 2014: Choristers in the concert of Johannes Brahms's Ein deutsches Requiem to benefit 9-1-1 Veterans, Inc.

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to dispositions that make for undesirable kinds of communities—hierarchical arrangements that separate artist-producers from appreciative consumers, and privilege the former. Such regimes consist of “doers” and those who are “done for” (whose appreciative/receptive role supports the creative agency of those presumed capable of such productive acts). Because art has tremendous power both to effect social good and to subvert it—to shape healthy, vibrant modes of human collectivity and to undermine them—I submit that artistic citizenship involves both remarkable privilege and tremendous responsibility.¹

Long Island Voices has spearheaded recent social justice projects to benefit child refugees, PTSD-afflicted military veterans, and families affected by opioid addiction—communities that are often voiceless. Projects in process bring attention to the ravages of climate change and gun violence. May the following examples provide a model for musicians’ engagement in social justice within our communities.

Lamiya and the Child Refugee Awareness Choral Project

Lamiya Safarova lost her home and her village in the Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988-1994) when she was only nine, eventually settling with her family in a cardboard shack on the shore of the Caspian Sea. The

loss of her home and her village had a profound impact on her. So did being classified as a “refugee” by her classmates in school. She began writing poems to express her feelings. Lamiya has a name, and her poem is her story. On the power of story, Janet Mock writes: “I believe that telling our stories, first to ourselves and then to one another and the world, is a revolutionary act. It is an act that can be met with hostility, exclusion, and violence. It can also lead to love, understanding, transcendence, and community.”²

Our initial Child Refugee Aware-

ness Commissioning Consortium formed in 2017 and consisted of nineteen choirs. Two choirs were major commissioners, thirteen were participating choirs, and four were sponsored choirs—ensembles with no budget whose involvement was ensured by the donations of individuals.

Participating choirs represented a range of levels from grade school singers to collegiate performers. Member groups came from across the United States and one each from the United Kingdom, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates. Respond-

Don’t Call Me “Refugee”

by Lamiya Safarova, age 9

My life, my destiny
Has been so painful, so don’t call me “refugee.”
My heart aches, my eyes cry,
I beg of you, please don’t call me “refugee.”
It feels like I don’t even exist in the world,
As if I’m a migrant bird far away from my land
Turning back to look at my village.
I beg of you, please don’t call me “refugee.”

Oh, the things I’ve seen during these painful years,
The most beautiful days I’ve seen in my land,
I’ve dreamed only about our house.
I beg of you, please don’t call me “refugee.”
The reason why I write these sad things
Is that living a meaningless life is like hell.
What I really want to say is:
I beg of you, please don’t call me “refugee.”³



a photograph of Lamiya (at age 9), while living in the makeshift shack in Azerbaijan.
© Azerbaijan International

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ing to the interest in this project from choirs serving such a wide range of age groups and abilities, I composed a more accessible option—“Lamiya’s Song”—in addition to the more driven, percussive (and “angry,” as described by many singers) “My Name is Lamiya: Don’t Call Me ‘Refugee.’”

In the end, I arranged “Lamiya’s Song” in five textures ranging from unison to SATB. “My Name is Lamiya: Don’t Call Me ‘Refugee’” has three voicings, including a two-part, mixed voicing with optional splits into four parts.

I had found Lamiya’s poem in the online magazine *Azerbaijan International*. When I contacted its publisher, Betty Blair, to describe my intended project, I indicated my desire to split the commission fee with Lamiya. Giving me permission to use the poem, Blair set out to locate Lamiya, to share with her not only *Azerbaijani International’s* portion of the commission fee but also the news that her poem was going to reach an international audience of thousands, raising awareness of the plight of the child refugee.

A few months later, Betty had found Lamiya, who is now a teacher, married with two children of her own. Lamiya is thrilled about the project and the attention the refugee crisis is getting from the hundreds of singers participating and the thousands of people who hear them sing her poem.

Anya Singh, a seventeen-year-old singer at the American School of Dubai, describes her experience with the song:



Michael Bussewitz-Quarm works with a commissioning group, The Metropolitan Youth Orchestra Suffolk Symphonic Choir (conductor, Shoshana Hershkowitz), in preparing “My Name is Lamiya: Don’t Call Me ‘Refugee’” for performance.

Lamiya’s poem is an anthem for a floating tribe—people who belong nowhere and everywhere. They belong to and are at the mercy of the world. As I sing her words, I can start to understand what real pain is, and I cry from gratitude. I’ve often felt bad for feeling privileged and helpless, but singing this song has allowed me to realise that sometimes acknowledgement and empathy is enough to raise awareness of her pain and spark change.⁴

The most recent choir to join the Child Refugee Awareness Choral Project is the Tacoma Refugee Choir. The group’s conductor, Erin Guinup, says:

I feel like this is so important for my group, and it has a deeper meaning now. One of my members is a refugee. He told me at the last rehearsal that he was thinking

of leaving the group because he can no longer emotionally withstand the stigma of being a refugee. My group is made up of refugees and those who support refugees. I encouraged him to stay. I think this song will speak to him personally.⁵

The Tacoma Refugee Choir presented their first performance of “Lamiya’s Song” for a group of International Foster Care youth—all of whom had come to the United States as unaccompanied minors—and their foster families. In view of its stirring yet sad poetry, Guinup programmed an uplifting piece to follow “Lamiya’s Song” and to emphasize for the children that despair is not permanent.

A few months later, Guinup related:

The song has been an important spark for conversation within the choir. Last fall one of our refugees was

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concerned by the name of our choir because he didn't always want to be seen as a refugee. We've talked about what it means to be labeled and how those labels can hold us back. As one refugee named Nathalie said, "I love this song because I want to be seen for who I am now, not what I've experienced. I want people to know my name and to look me in the eyes, not look away and pretend I don't exist." One of our community members pointed out that these words apply equally to

all of us. She noted that the phrase "living a meaningless life is such misery" applies to all of us. We all need to be needed and loved and to be able to dream and hope. Having no hope for the future is one of the most devastating outcomes of being a refugee.

Music alone can't change the world, BUT—music changes people and people change the world. It's this coordination between music and human interaction that can be powerful and profound. We are

making an impact because we are consciously following the music making with love and nurturing and because the relationships are more important than the sounds we make. When an audience hears us, they will hopefully hear something beautiful; but more importantly, they will hopefully feel something beautiful that not only inspires them but moves them to action.⁶

Dr. Anne Matlack, conductor of Harmonium Choral Society and president-elect of New Jersey ACDA, shares her community's experience with the project:

After last year's hate-filled political climate, I had begun to doubt—*Does it matter? Do I matter as a choral musician?*—until the 2017 ACDA National Conference showed me our power to inspire, uplift, awaken, and teach both our audiences and our singers. As I set out to program even more intentionally than ever, I found the Child Refugee Awareness Choral Consortium. I actually fit it into my December Harmonium Choral Society Program as part of a set which included carols of the Flight into Egypt—drawing the parallel that "Jesus was a refugee." Michael encouraged us to substitute names of local people, and we included (with permission) Maxi, Lona, and Mo-

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Michael Bussewitz-Quarm conducts a dress rehearsal with Long Island Voices and Sound Symphony for A Concert for Peace to benefit F.I.S.T.

ammed, children in a Syrian family who live in Morris County and are sponsored by RAMP (Refugee Assistance Morris Partners). We also honored Kwadzo from Togo, sponsored by a synagogue in Caldwell, NJ. The audience found the work very powerful. The singers liked hearing the stories of our local families and knowing that some of the commission money went right to Lamiya.⁷

As The Child Refugee Awareness Choral Project enters its second season, new choirs at all ability levels have become involved. Most recently, a run-through with the Metropolitan Youth Orchestra of New York's Suffolk Symphonic Choir preceded a discussion about the young singers' thoughts on the piece. Through the project, choristers are writing new poems on the theme and conducting

interviews with Lamiya. Singers reflect on their own experiences with being pigeon-holed or stigmatized by an unwelcome classification. They practice empathy with other marginalized groups in society. With this developing empathy comes increased empowerment to work for change.

A Concert for Peace: David Aaron and the Hope for Recovery Choral Commission Consortium

In 2017 Long Island Voices teamed up with Sound Symphony in our *Concert for Peace* to benefit Families in Support of Treatment (F.I.S.T.), whose mission is to support families struggling with a member's opioid addiction.

Our text was adapted from a poem by Ira Costell, the uncle of David Aaron, who in 2007 had lost his life to a drug overdose at the age

of twenty-seven. Ira had written his "Pay the Ferryman for David Aaron" to capture images from the day of the strewing of David's ashes at a local beach. He collaborated with me in making a performance adaptation of the poem, which urges the living to celebrate life and love and to seek new hope in recovery. One section of the composition, called the "Honor Page," invites the choir to chant the names of people in their communities who struggle with or who have succumbed to addiction. During our performance we accompanied this section of the music by projecting images of local members lost to this epidemic.

Ira, who is also a member of the F.I.S.T. Advisory Committee, described his impressions of our Concert for Peace:

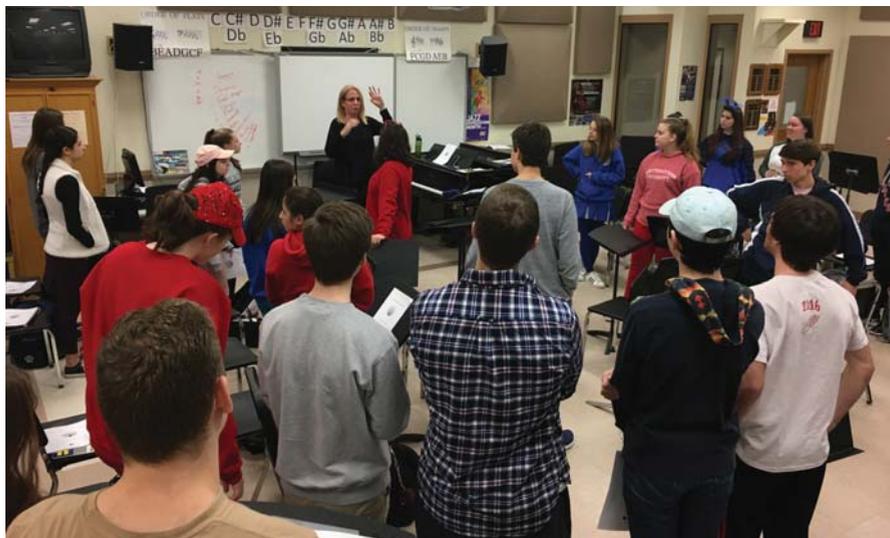
This special performance opened a number of eyes to the creativity and passion musical expression can impart and raised the awareness for the people in the recovery movement to the importance of art in developing a sense of community and shared purpose. Even seven months after the concert, members of our group still express what a wonderful and surprising experience it was and far more memorable for the hope that was spread that afternoon beyond the significant money raised for the group. One mom in particular pointed to the performance of "Pay the Ferryman" as the very first moment in the nine

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months since her daughter passed on Christmas Day of 2016 that she believed she might be okay and find a way through the grief and pain of her tragic loss. For the song sings of hope and freedom. Not merely for those who want to stop using drugs, lose the desire, and find a new way to live, but also for those who support and love them or who have been impacted by the cycle of addiction. The sense is we can connect with one another, celebrate beauty and find strength, love, and support when we share in the spirit only found when we lift our voices in song.⁸

Singing for Private Dwyer and PTSD Awareness

I originally wrote *Requiem Dies Magna* to commemorate the tragic loss of so many First Responders in New York City on 9/11. But its true essence looks to the future. The title refers to a day of great magnitude within human history, one that brought with it far-reaching, tragic consequences. However, the events of that day also inspired a community empathy and generosity that truly attest to the good inherent in the human spirit. This musical cycle traces a pathway leading out of despair toward healing, inviting performers and audiences to move forward together in our shared humanity. The life and death of Long Island native Private First Class Joseph P. Dwyer embodies the intersections and aftermaths of these events.



The composer works with Dr. Doreen Fryling's Rockville Center Southside Chamber Choir in developing the Great American Choral Reef.

Dwyer was one of many who responded to the 9/11 attacks by volunteering for the US invasion of Iraq. While serving in the first troop deployment, he witnessed atrocities that affected him deeply, a trauma from which he would never recover. In 2008, five years after returning home, Pfc. Dwyer died from complications of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. It was his widow's great wish that his death would increase awareness of PTSD.

In 2010, Long Island Voices presented two memorial concerts for Joseph Dwyer. At these events we hosted Chris Delaney from 9-1-1 Veterans, an organization that assists returned veterans during the long process of applying for disability benefits. Delaney spoke to the audience about the injury of PTSD, which, despite having afflicted hundreds of thousands of soldiers over the centuries, often remains unseen. Long Island Voices donated 100 percent of our concert proceeds to

9-1-1 Veterans.

The Great American Choral Reef (2018–2019)

This project is designed to draw attention to the coral-reef devastation being wrought by the rise in temperature and acidification of our ocean waters. At the same time, it welcomes each participating choir's cultivation of a place in a new, creative "ecosystem" via that group's unique investigation of a fascinating geometrical phenomenon.

By one degree of separation, *The Great American Choral Reef* draws on the work of Dr. Daina Taimina of the Cornell University Department of Mathematics, an expert in the hyperbolic paraboloid. The purely theoretical discovery of hyperbolic shapes in the nineteenth century challenged and eventually superseded Euclidean geometry; the hyperbolic paraboloid has since been

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discovered to exist naturally in marine organisms, most notably coral. More recently, Taimina became the first mathematician to succeed in manufacturing the shape, which she achieved via the “feminine handicraft” of crochet. Inspired by Taimina’s work, Dr. Wertheim of the Institute for Figuring inaugurated her *Crochet Coral Reef*, inviting handcrafters around the world to contribute their own crocheted “corals:”

To our astonishment, every contributor who comes to this brings new innovations and new forms and new twists on old themes that we

couldn’t have imagined. In the process, it has become a global, practical, communal experiment in evolution.⁹

The Great American Choral Reef is designed to foster citizenship through participation in the creation—through both music and message—of “choral reefs.” At a micro level, participating choirs will build *The Great American Choral Reef* by creating their own local choral reefs. Each choir is charged to determine the message (also serving as its reef’s title) that it wishes to cultivate and share with the world through creative decision making

and improvisation. The score uses graphic notation representing the hyperbolic paraboloid, accompanied by instructions for each choir’s aleatoric interpretation of the graphics. Common time parameters imposed on the score align all ensembles’ contributions so that when participating groups come together—whether digitally or in real space-time—their own choral-reef microsystems can be simultaneously sounded as part of a shared macro-system.

Dr. Wertheim observed that her *Crochet Coral Reef* “draws attention to the fact that the reef ecologies are being devastated by global warm-



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In April 2018, the USC Thornton Chamber Singers collaborated with composer Craig Hella Johnson on a moving performance of “Considering Matthew Shepard.”

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ing the world over.”¹⁰ As choirs join the consortium for *The Great American Choral Reef*, proceeds from the registration fee will be shared with the Coral Restoration Foundation.

Avielle, Sandy Hook, and the *Mass for the Unarmed Child* (2019–2020)

“There’s really no way to appropriately recognize your lost child’s birthday,” Jeremy Richman said as he and Jennifer Hensel talked about what life has been like for their family since the 2012 mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School took the lives of twenty children and six educators.¹¹ Following the 2018 mass shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School, finding I could no longer accept my feelings of helplessness, I resolved to become part of the solution. My *Mass for the Unarmed Child* is born out of that frustration and ensuing resolve. I was further inspired by Richman and Hensel’s action to establish the Avielle Foundation, a memorial to the daughter they lost.

Jeremy Richman is a neuroscientist. The mission of his Avielle Foundation is to build peace through better understanding of brain health. The Foundation’s home page states:

“We need a paradigm shift in the way society views the health of the brain. The brain is the organ responsible for our memories, feelings, and behaviors, yet brain science continues to be the least explored of all our sciences.

Your support will ultimately help us to prevent violence and build compassion.”¹²

Jeremy and Jennifer gave me their permission to honor Avielle and their family by dedicating one of the movements of *Mass for the Unarmed Child* to them and to pursue a benefit concert in the summer of 2019 for the Avielle Foundation with *Mass for the Unarmed Child* as the featured work.

Tips for Starting a Benefit Concert

Long Island Voices has an interesting foundation. It exists only in the summer, pulling singers from local choirs on annual hiatus who wish to continue singing year round. It also draws people who want to produce a concert for a cause. Long Island Voices has been a powerful outlet for choristers from various area choirs to connect with one another and with different communities on Long Island that may never have experienced a choral concert. For example, 9-1-1 Veterans’ typical fundraising events are motorcycle runs and hockey games. A classical concert was a completely new experience for most, if not all, of them. The same goes for F.I.S.T. (Families in Support of Treatment). In fact, a symphonic choral concert was so new to them that several on the board, not knowing the power of our group, had reservations about even approving our concert as a fundraiser! They are the “clap-after-every-movement” audience, and they hooted and hollered

after the aria of any singer connected to their organization. It was beautiful.

Following are a few tips for starting a summer benefit concert:

1) Involvement in at least one local community choir can provide you with an anchor institution from which to build your summer benefit choir. I sang tenor with a few local groups, including Stony Brook Chorale and Long Island Symphonic Choral Association (LISCA). LISCA showed interest in my composing and programmed some of the movements of my Requiem; the singers’ enjoyment in working on my piece fueled their interest in my summer benefit concert.

2) Plan early. If you are taking on this project as a composer, have all the music complete six months before the performance. And if you are crowdfunding the production of the concert, start promoting the crowdfunding campaign at least six months prior to launch to generate buzz. Secure early commitments from a handful of individuals who agree to be identified at the launch; people feel more confident donating to a crowdfunding campaign if they can see that it has already successfully attracted other donors. Finally, be calm, cool, and collected at the launch.

3) Check to make sure you have all insurance necessary for rehearsal and performance. Execute contracts with every performing individual or group and with the printing company, the recording

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company, and the proprietors of the rehearsal and performance spaces. If your budget is small, musicians and providers of other services invested in your cause may discount their work for the greater allocation of funds to the benefitting organization.

Conclusion

The diverse community of Long Island Voices, my own expression as a composer, and the call to activism for social justice combine into a mighty platform on which to build in giving voice to the voiceless. Addressing musical citizenship in *Music Educators Journal*, David Elliott emphasized that justice-focused choral initiatives must be subject to translation into praxis:

When music education is ethically guided—when we teach not only *in* music (i.e., to do music) and *about* music but also (and crucially) *through* music—we empower people to pursue what many philosophers throughout history consider to be the highest human values: a virtuous life well lived, a life of well-being, flourishing, fulfillment, and constructive happiness for the benefit of oneself and others. In other words, praxial music education includes but goes beyond the preparation of students for lifelong engagement in amateur music making and listening of all kinds. Praxial music education is guided by

an informed and ethical disposition to act musically and educatively with continuous concern for improving human well-being in as many ways as possible: artistic, social, cultural, ethical, political, and so forth.¹³

As choral musicians we can hope to amplify the cases of marginalized groups, shine light upon global issues, and direct material resources where they are needed. Communities sing, communities listen, and communities participate. The power of our social justice impact depends on extending our creative efforts beyond the traditional concert-hall setting. 

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NOTES

¹ Wayne D. Bowman, “Artistry, Ethics, and Citizenship,” in *Artistic Citizenship: Artistry, Social Responsibility, and Ethical Praxis*, ed. David J. Elliott, Marissa Silverman, and Wayne D. Bowman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 59.

² Janet Mock, *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love and So Much More* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 2014), xviii (Introduction).

³ Betty Blair, “Independence in Azerbaijan (1991-present):

Don’t Call me ‘Refugee,’ My Name is Lamiya,” *Azerbaijan International*, no. 7.1 (1999): 78-79, http://www.azer.com/aiweb/categories/magazine/71_folder/71_articles/71_justforkids.html

⁴ Anya Singh’s choir director, Facebook Messenger correspondence with author, January 29, 2018.

⁵ Erin Guinup, Facebook Messenger correspondence, December 31, 2017.

⁶ Erin Guinup, e-mail message to author, April 19, 2018.

⁷ Dr. Anne Matlack, e-mail correspondence with author, January 26, 2018.

⁸ Ira Costell, e-mail correspondence with author, April 27, 2018.

⁹ Maria Elena Buszak, “Crochet and the Cosmos: An Interview with Margaret Wertheim,” in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art* (Durham: NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 281.

¹⁰ Buszak, “Crochet and the Cosmos: An Interview with Margaret Wertheim,” 280.

¹¹ Jeremy Richman, National Public Radio interview, December 12, 2017.

¹² *The Avielle Foundation: Preventing Violence and Building Compassion*, <https://aviellefoundation.org/>.

¹³ David J. Elliott, “Music Education as/for Artistic Musical Citizenship,” *Music Educators Journal*, 99, no. 1 (2012): 21-27, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0027432112452999>.