

THE STORY OF THE CHORAL GUIDE : A PERSONAL QUEST

In my first thirty years I had fun learning in school, singing, acting, and writing. When I moved to Vermont in 1961, I thirsted for more information and was ready to know much more about music and singing. I joined the Burlington barbershop chapter, was soon in a quartet and got busy in chapter music education. I went back to college, attended many workshops, taught in our chapter and in the N.E. district as assistant district music educator, made chapter visits to teach and coach singing groups. Later, I set up 'schools' in our district and kept learning about music from those who knew. I enjoyed helping singers. I could pass a test on music 'book learning'; but still was puzzled about *what* it was that made *good* singing performances. I searched for a good book on barbershop quartet singing and found none. Being eager and experienced, I wrote the 126-page *Singing Together*. It sold—helping many singers.

I still hadn't found the answers that satisfied me, so I tried a new tack: I would go to many singing contests and performances for the next few years to listen carefully, to seek out what good singing *really is*. I wondered if performances, as such, were what it was all about. I wondered if a performance, as a sincere exchange of personal ideas and emotions, was a good place to look for answers. Are audience responses a good indicator of singing quality? I listened perceptively and made notes—assessments of performance facts. If I felt the singing was *good*, or *bad*, I would try to rationalize my rating with some reason of *why* I thought so. Skills frequently noted often were candidates for *my* 'rules' to be tested later. I 'validated' these rules by noting how often 'good' performance of these skills swayed my judgment. In time, I had information that became my 'truths' to judge quality singing according to my own listening and responses. People who judge musical contests have their own internal protocols. My aims were a bit different, so I began assessing the audience reactions.

Armed with this information of perception and criteria, I began working with singers to discuss what the song was all about and how best to convey this—the story and emotions of the song. Then, I'd ask them to listen to their rendition, judging for themselves if 'the song' were really there. Their improved musical quality made me sure I was on the right track: Singers need to feel the song and listen to their own rendition!

In time, I found that songs conveying the story helped to make them seem more emotionally honest; and as singers felt the emotions, other aspects of phrasing, tempo and volume dynamics began to fall more easily into place. The singers carried the song, and the song carried them! Now, they sang with purpose and joy and the listeners enjoyed that also. Happily, I heard music and beautiful singing rather than the rote presenting of words with metronomic rhythm and applied 'technique'. The singers found they were within the very human world of joining emotions with the composers, and with their listeners. I found what I had been looking for—this very personal communication—and got singers to appreciate doing the same.

THIS WORKED! I FLEW WITH IT. I LOVED IT—AND SO DID THEY! WE FOUND THE GLEE!

The story continues: In the 80's, I moved to Maine, met Pete Mickelson, an engineer, and started up our little company, NEXTEP, to help solve one of singers' greatest problems, to hear how they really sound to listeners. We invented HearFones,® manufactured and sold them worldwide to singers and teachers. Seeking more knowledge of why HearFones worked so well, I learned that to broaden our knowledge and contacts, we should join the Voice Foundation and other related organizations. We did and deepened our knowledge from many scientists in speech and singing. Then the *speech pathologists* found us!

We had a booth at a speech pathologist convention where teachers, performers and researchers attended continuing education classes. I began writing what Pete and I had learned from the 'big boys' to produce the seminar, *Science Looks at Singing*. Then I started writing the 'game plan'—58 methods that work for singers, gathered from the experience of talented others and my own four decades in the trenches working with singers (and audiences)! We show how to implement these with a practical and scientific rationale, then added a 28-lesson sight-singing course for daily use, told how to make singing sound wonderful and have fun doing all this, to 'discover the song' (very important), learn about ATOS (All The Other Stuff, often overlooked) and how to present a show that makes them glad they came. In four years, the NEXTEP CHORALGUIDE, a book to use every day, was born. And it works!

*Thanks for listening, Ray Miller
with help from Pete Mickelson, Paul Selbst, scientists, teachers, and thousands of singers*