

## Out of the Mouths...

By Sam Martinborough

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In the 1990 Winter issue of *Independent School*, Peggy McIntosh wrote an article entitled “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” In the article she writes, “As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage. I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege.” In the article she takes a deeper look at all of the advantages that she has and voices them in simple statements such as number 15, “I am never asked to speak for all of the people of my racial group.” Some of these statements are profound and others appear profoundly simple.

Even though my family was rather poor, my father’s status as a Seventh-day Adventist minister and my mother’s status as a former headmistress placed us solidly within the mores of the upper-middle class. So when I began teaching at Boston Arts Academy I found I would say what appeared to be the most naive things. For example, it was late November and an increasing number of students were continually absent from classes at doctor’s appointments so I jumped on my soap-box and declared, “In my twelve years of teaching I have NEVER had so many students out sick at the same time. As vocalists your body is your instrument so you MUST take care of it. That means you might need to change what you eat for breakfast, fruits are good...blah-dee-blah...”

After a year of living in Grove Hall where one could stand outside waiting on the bus for 15 maybe 30 minutes to find it jam packed with sniffing, sneezing folks, not to talk about the disparity in the temperatures inside and outside the bus which adds another dimension to “What should I wear today”, I find that its a wonder some kids even get to school. I look back now and know that I would probably say the same speech but with a deeper understanding of the situation and providing slightly different solutions. Neither did I take into consideration the fact that some of them couldn’t have breakfast because they were saving their 3 dollars to buy the bottle of water required for my class, which opened a whole new set of issues.

At our last ACDA Chairperson’s meeting one of the issues that surfaced was how to attract minority students (and boys) to our vocal ensembles AND keep them. I have heard the same questions voiced in various musical organizations so, with the assistance of Chrysalis members, and following the format that Peggy McIntosh used, here is:

Singing in the Music Department: The World of Classical music through Urban Hearts.

(Disclaimer: the term Urban is as nebulous as the word hard. The thoughts expressed are those of African-Americans and West Indian Americans from working-class families.)

1. When I go home to my family I have to be strong enough to defend my actions against comments and un verbalized emotions such as:  
    “Black people don’t sing that kind of music”  
    “You can’t come with us because you got what?”
2. When I sit in rehearsals and perform in a concert, regardless of how good I am or how comfortable I feel with you, I KNOW I stick out.
3. Because I’m black I have to answer all of these dumb-ass questions about Gospel music, Rap, Hip-Hop and Negro spirituals. You got ears and a brain and you didn’t pop outta yo mamma’s belly singin’ no Bach and Buxtehude - go buy some cd’s and do the research. I’m supposed to be the student here, not you.
4. When I go home to the people who birthed me, I not only have to be strong enough to defend my actions and decisions, I also have to defend you and yours, (and sometimes I don’t even like you or the music I’m defending).
5. When I sit in choir and don’t know something — that from all appearances everybody else knows, not only do I feel dumb, I feel black, ghetto AND dumb. And no amount of your telling me not to feel that way will make me feel any less dumb.
6. When we leave rehearsal and you get into your car, even if you got a two-hour commute and you got a raggedy car with only a cassette player, at least you GOT a car and don’t have to run to catch the subway, then fight to get into the packed bus with some loud-mouth lady talkin on her cellphone and “oh my word, all those kids listening to some loud music on they cellphone...that is so annoying”, then stand up waitin for the next bus and then walk the 5 blocks to get home.
7. I have to deal with spending 90% of the time learning music by dead white guys and, if I’m lucky, spend 10% learning music by dead black folk and then put up with the slight change in the tone of your voice when we do.
8. When I feel lonely, I can’t pretend that I’m not alone.
9. The closer we get to a concert the lower my heart sinks because I know that I will have to deal with my own feelings about having none of my friends and family attend the concert AND smile up in your face and pretend I’m ok with it when I stand chit-chatting with you and your family after the concert.
10. When my folks, or my friends in school see me up in that choir (or hear about me singing in your choir), nothing you do or say will affect the stuff running through their heads:  
    “All of a sudden she ain’t good enough fuh us”  
    “Look how he playin’ ‘white’”  
    “Jes cause you hang wid dem white folk and sing they opera stuff, you

know you still black”  
“Why you wanna sing that stuff anyways?”

11. Nothing I do or say can ever make you understand why I do some of the seemingly weird things I do or why I sometimes act in such contrary ways.
12. Not joining your choir has nothing to do with whether I like you or not, it's usually because I don't feel like dealing with #1-11.
13. I still see little evidence that people like me do this stuff or that you care enough to take the risks to really change that.
14. When I sing the music I enjoy it makes me feel, while singing classical music seems like all mental and leaves me feeling cold, I just can't seem to connect with it.
15. At the end of the day, I am more comfortable doing what I know, just as you are more comfortable doing what you know.
16. When you tack on negro spirituals or gospel music at the end of a concert, especially if it has nothing to do with the rest of the concert, I begin to truly believe that you don't take music from my heritage as seriously as you do music from yours.
17. There are so few things that I have control over that sometimes I make decisions not based on how “good” or “bad” they are for me, but rather because I can make a decision.
18. Today is not the day, and music is not the issue I choose to become a martyr for, I prefer not to go the way of M. L. King Jr or Malcolm X, especially when, if I am male, my sexuality could come into question.
19. When we sing something that really touches me, deep down inside, I have no place to go where I feel safe enough to talk about it and/or deal with those emotions.
20. If I really do enjoy this music, what does that make me and what future will I really have?

It has been painfully interesting for me to just sit back and listen to what these urban hearts have to say; like all of us they are scared of change, they don't want to be alone, thinking outside the box is one thing but making life changes based on the new paradigm takes a lot of effort and support, and until there is visual evidence of racial equality, in their own minds, members of the minority will continue to feel out-of-place especially when its as obvious a difference as skin color. So what can we do?

1. When I turn you down the first 10 times, keep asking.
2. Even the issues that appear easy to fix, (“What do you mean the bus was late? Just leave your house earlier”) sometimes aren’t. Sometimes the bus IS late 4 days in a row and on the fifth day its on-time, but so full that it goes whizzing past, forcing me to wait on the later bus. So continue to expect responsible behavior from me but understand that some things are truly out of my control and 90% of the time I am telling you the truth.
3. When you strip away the layers of “stuff”, we all are in need of well-rounded musical experiences, the advantaged ones from suburbia and the disadvantaged ones from urban communities all need to learn about Schoenberg and Undine Smith Moore just as the disadvantaged ones living in suburbia and the advantaged ones living in urban communities need to learn about Rodgers & Hammerstein and Charlie Smalls.
4. I deal with race issues every day, whether I like it or not, so take the time to provide a safe environment for all of us to explore issues in an open and honest way as we explore the musical heritage inherent in the music we perform. I need that from you, as the adults.
5. Any guilt and embarrassment you may feel about the past does not help me in any way.
6. Remember that I have to combat all of the negative stereotypes I hear about you and this music in order to join you, so I need you to work twice as hard to show me how much you want my participation.
7. I am no longer interested in performing music because its “great music” written by a genius, when I don’t see my people represented. The hidden message I receive is that none of my people fall into the category of “genius.” I know that’s not true and unfortunately, on a subconscious level, lose respect for those who give the appearance of promoting that way of thinking.
8. I need you to blow my mind by allowing me to see the passion that you have for the music and show me how that passion can spill over into my understanding and performance of it.
9. It’s a lot of work, so if you choose to let this battle go I will understand, (hey its not like I see millions of people fighting this battle) just be willing to live with the consequences (and if I knew what those are I’d tell you but...).
10. I have to see that you care about me more than you care about my learning Mozart.

11. I'd like to see you in my neck of the woods sometime, even if its to give me a ride home (which may be the round-about way because if I've only taken public transportation I don't pay attention to the route, I just know which stop to take).

12. Remember that just because my skin may give you one impression I could be West Indian, African, Asian, Native American, Hispanic, some, all or none of the above. So when exploring music from my heritage you might have a lot of exploring to do.

13. Did I remind you that this will be very challenging and frustrating? But I hear that a cup of hot chocolate laced with Bailey's Irish Cream can do wonders for the disposition.

14. Its not just the little changes that count, I am also impressed when I see large tangible evidence that I can trust you.

15. I guess what I'm saying is that I'm tired of people talkin the talk with just they mouth, I see that on tv (its called acting). What I really need is for you to create a safe place for me learn about myself through learning about you. A place where I can be challenged, with understanding, without being made to feel any more ignorant than I already am. A place where I can forget that I am different, while exploring the wonders of music. Are you willing to take those kinds of risks?

Namaste

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