

Transcript of Mansfield University Concert Choir Goes Gold - Episode 2

Aired - August 6, 2008

Running Time: 23:32

CHRISTIE MARTIN: Welcome to part two of Mansfield University Concert Choir Goes Gold. In this episode Dr. Peggy Dettwiler, Director of the Mansfield University Concert Choir, discusses the World Choir Games in Austria. She talks about capturing the gold, friends made in Austria and the bonds of music.

DENNIS MILLER: Music is, it's melody, it's lyrics, it's rhythm, it's mathematics, but mostly it's emotion. How do you combine all those things among 57 people?

DR. PEGGY DETTWILER: It's a really good question, and I talked to the choir about singing with both sides of the brain because I mean, you work on the technical, you work on the tone production, you work on the pitch and the rhythm and it's very, almost aside from the feeling of the music.

I read an article in the Spring about a basketball star who said, "You drill the basics. You drill the basics so you get your technique so good, so correct that when you come to the game you just play the game and the technique carries you through." And I sense that's the same with music.

And so I said when they go into the concert they've got to be working right brain, left brain but they've got to more than anything be emoting and feeling it. And that's what really happened in Graz almost 100 percent. You see the pictures of the choir singing and everyone has this magnificent emotive look on their face. They were really feeling it and that makes a huge difference in the performance, that communicates, it really does.

I told them before we went into the competition, "We are there to win the hearts of the audience, not necessarily to win first place." And when we walked off the stage after for example, the mixed youth choir category competition, I mean they knew they had never sung those phrases any better. And we were crying outside and we felt "This is what we came for." This was the emotional high, what I call the mountain-top experience that we've been striving for. And we accomplished our goal right then.

[Choir Singing]

DENNIS MILLER: So from everything I have heard you guys really connected with the audience and the judges.

DR. PEGGY DETTWILER: Yes. In the qualifying round there were five judges and three of them hardly even looked at the music. They just kind of sat back and listened and nodded and even applauded at the end of these pieces. And one of them gave us a thumbs up sign after "Sleep," after "A Year's Sleep." And that judge, a German judge, came up to us at the championship and pulled me aside and said, "You know, your choir is just wonderful. It's just a pleasure, it's such hard work judging all these choirs and it was just a joy to listen to you." And he said, "I have never heard an American choir sing with better German diction."

DENNIS MILLER: Really?

DR. PEGGY DETTWILER: Yeah. Of course, that's Jorgen, my husband, he helped coach us on our diction.

DENNIS MILLER: Oh, your secret weapon.

DR. PEGGY DETTWILER: Yes, but he just said, "I gave you perfect scores, 3 out of 4 pieces." He gave us 30 points and I thank to him.

DENNIS MILLER: That must have made your day.

DR. PEGGY DETTWILER: It did.

DENNIS MILLER: What was the highlight for you?

DR. PEGGY DETTWILER: I don't know if I can pick one, I mean one of them was definitely after we walked off the stage and gathered in one of the patios outside and we were all crying after our performance of the Mixed Youth Choir category, so we just knew that this is the artistic high we waited for.

The other one is when they announced the championship for Gospel and Spiritual because when we didn't win, when we were second in the Mixed Youth Choir category, I thought that was the one we might win, because of the reaction of the judges and everything. I couldn't imagine how somebody could top that performance, I mean it was just so moving for us anyway. And then we got second and I thought, "Oh, I don't know if we're going to be able to win the Gospel and Spiritual," because I knew that competition there was really strong with South African choir and Young People's Chorus in New York City.

And so I had myself setup to be third, second, fourth, something like that and when you're sitting there they go from the bottom up. They got to start with the bronze then the silver, still in a very supportive way because each choir is acknowledged and the conductor comes out, well all the conductors are on stage, they come forward and receive their medal and so you don't want to hear your name announced. And there, I think there were like 30 choirs in this category so we had to wait and wait and wait.

DENNIS MILLER: Must have been a long moment.

DR. PEGGY DETTWILER: Wait, wait, wait and then Sheryl said, "I think there's only three left, I see in the pile over there." And I thought, "Oh don't tell me, don't tell me." And then the man that was sitting next to me was the Director of the Young People's Chorus from New York City and they called his name. So I knew we've beaten them. And then I knew Stellenbosch from South Africa was the other one that would really be tough to beat and they called them next and then there was one file left and...

DENNIS MILLER: Did you stop breathing?

DR. PEGGY DETTWILER: I did. I hyperventilated. I just thought, "Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh, oh." And they waited. They make it real dramatic and then so there's silence, then the music fanfare plays. I knew then. And then they dramatically announced the winner and that we had won the qualifying round and then our points, and they don't say your name yet, they say all about you and then "The choir is... Mansfield University." And oh boy. And of course then the kids are just screaming. And we had gotten some fans along in the way, Brooklyn Youth Chorus was in our same hotel. So there was lots of cheering and that was really wonderful.

DENNIS MILLER: Tell me about directing a choir with the three big screens.

DR. PEGGY DETTWILER: Yeah, at the championship concert then when all the winners of every category, and there were 13 in this round of the Olympics, it's so well produced because we are on this huge hall that seats about 10,000 people I think, and they have this huge, huge screen in the center of the hall above you and then two screens on each side, so you can see them. And there are videographers always working. They pick a singer or they pick a section that they show and then on these two side screens you see that. And at one point they had it on me and I could see, I just caught it on the peripheral vision, and because there's video technology working it's a little delayed and so my gesture was behind what I was really doing. So I thought, "Take your eyes off that you're going to get off."

So the kids then, they were facing the audience so they didn't know what's happening which is probably a good thing.

DENNIS MILLER: It's amazing to me too that these kids in the choir, this is a huge, life-changing experience for them, most of them never traveled abroad except for the ones who maybe had gone with you

some years ago. Some of them have never flown. How do they come back different people?

DR. PEGGY DETTWILER: I mean they come back and they just can't stop talking about it, first of all. They have so many stories to tell and they have a poise about them that "I did this," that really translates to those parents and the parents are really grateful. I mean they really see that this is a life-transforming experience. And I think the biggest thing overall that comes out of it is that they go to other countries and they speak, these people speak other languages and yet the music translates beyond that and they speak a common language there. Several of them wrote in the journal about that, that they could relate even though they couldn't understand a word they said in their language. They felt a common bond with these people because of music.

And I think it also makes them realize that people around the world need to be respected or have the right to be respected because they're just like us. I mean in the most of the choirs we saw dress like us, that's what they had their own folklore but they could see they're real people with real human emotions and real intellect and that this is a cause to honor people from other countries. And I think that's probably the biggest thing that I've seen impact the singers when they go abroad like that.

DENNIS MILLER: Where do you go from here?

DR. PEGGY DETTWILER: [Laughs] Yeah, that's exactly what Jorgen and I have been talking. I mean, what you want to have happen, it happened for this group of students so you want to have this to continue to happen for other groups of students that are coming through. So we have to tuck it back in a place of significant memory and then work to make each choir have its own special event, special coming together, I mean the whole goal is the mountain-top musical experience.

I mean there are some people that don't agree with competitions but I read an article in the fall as to why competitions are good for choirs and it's because the kids work, there's a certain work ethic that you really latch on to and a goal, and as result they have this amazing musical experience.

I mean that's why I apply for these conventions. To sing for a large audience of people who love choral music and can honor and respect what you have to offer as a singer, it's the greatest reward because they absolutely connect with you and they respond voluminously if it reaches them. And that's what why I do what I do year after year after year.

I don't want to go back thinking "You did it and now the pressure is on." You have to look at it anew but realize that I want every choir to have some kind of significant musical experience. I think there's things that we can do at Mansfield University, we can make it easier to happen in the future and we'll talk about that in terms of faculty staffing for the music students and funding.

The funding, I mean I was so grateful to student activities this year. These kids, all these kids could not have gone if student activities hadn't supported as much as they do. That was really, really helpful, particularly in this climate of high gas prices. Our airfare was \$133 higher than initially we thought it was going to be and the dollar is so weak that you know, that hit us too. But we managed to cover the expenses, the students didn't have to pay more than their \$2,000 that initially was stated to them.

DENNIS MILLER: You do all the fundraising. How much does it cost to take 57 people?

DR. PEGGY DETTWILER: It cost us a quarter of a million dollars. That was with the adults. The adults paid in full. But the budget I was managing was \$256,000 and you wanted to come out in the black, you know. Months before we were still in the red by eight grand.

DENNIS MILLER: That's what I have always appreciated that I think most people don't that while you're up there rehearsing and putting people together and creating beautiful music you're also behind the scenes raising money and planning itineraries and travel plans...

DR. PEGGY DETTWILER: Well, it's one of the reasons that I've kind of made it a three-year cycle,

because it takes a year to plan it at least and it takes about six months or so to unwind and to do all the... making the journal, making the DVD we do, finish paying the bills and just collecting everything after it's done so its like if I did it every year I would be on the floor laughing, I couldn't.

Fortunately by nature I am pretty well organized and I relish in being in control of a schedule. I teach my kids, as a Choral Director you're like spinning plates, you know the magician who spins plates, and you have your things that have to be done today, to be done next week, be done three months, be done in six months, all going at the same time and you have to manage staying on top of all that and that's a challenge.

DENNIS MILLER: So it's every three years which gives every student in the choir a chance to travel abroad and compete and have this international experience.

DR. PEGGY DETTWILER: Yes, and that's why, I mean there aren't that many freshmen that get in their first year. Or you might have the student teacher who is not in at the fourth year. So the three-year cycle seems to pretty well catch everybody and each time we have maybe three or four who have gone the second time, which is kind of fun because they kind of can be the leaders and say, "You know what, when we did at this time, the last time that this, this way and that."

DENNIS MILLER: You know, we're not a Julliard or whatever, we're a small liberal arts university in North Central Pennsylvania, how do you consistently put together the award-winning choirs?

DR. PEGGY DETTWILER: There's something magical about teaching in Mansfield. There's a special kind of student because we're maybe not drawing from economically rich areas, so that our students come with lots of experiences culturally and economically. They also don't have a mindset that they're necessarily in it for themselves.

Some conservatories, I mean they would never commit to this kind of schedule or commitment to singing in a group, they want their solo voice. Pennsylvania has a great music education festival system, the district region and state chorus. These kids have been through that system in many cases and they love singing in a good choir. So the type of student we draw generally loves ensembles, so that's the number one perk.

Recruiting is the answer, or the secret, and I do a lot of work trying to recruit as a guest conductor. And the name itself, because we've been successful. Also there are directors in the state or in the region that just tell our students, "You've got to look at Mansfield, you have to look at them." So the reputation precedes ourself.

The process of learning, I guess I have refined my teaching over the years so I'm pretty confident in the way we learn things in the choir rehearsal and in the type of music I choose and the way I work with the voice. So I really try to manage the selection of music so that it enhances their abilities.

I mean a choir wants to sound good and if they feel in their minds that they sound great, they'll talk about it. They'll tell their friends and so the student is a big advocate of that. And the tours abroad, I mean when the first time I wanted to take a group and somebody said, "You're not going to recruit in Europe. What good is this going to do for Mansfield University, to go to Europe?"

And I said, "Well, the idea that we're going to Europe." And so that's a carrot. And this year what was really funny, we recruited a person from Brooklyn in Graz. And there was another choral director there from there from Georgia, the state of Georgia and she said, "Why did I have to come to Graz, Austria to learn about Mansfield University?"

So I love what I do.

[Choir Singing]

CHRISTIE MARTIN: That's it for part two of Dr. Peggy Dettwiler, Director of Mansfield University

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