

THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

CANADA

Wednesday, September 29th, 1999

By Ron Corbett

The inspiring power of music

It started with a newspaper story. Little more than a review, really. There had been a choir performance at the Perth Concert Hall in Australia to mark the 75th anniversary of the South Australian Red Cross Society. The date was Aug. 14, 1990.

The performance --- by the Perth Girls' Choir, under the direction of Colin Curtis --- was covered by The Australian newspaper. A small review was published the next day. That story was read by Martin Meader, a recently graduated film student from Melbourne.

"The story just leapt off the page at me," remembers Mr. Meader. "I read the story, then I read it again and I thought, 'this is a beautiful story.' Right away, I needed to know more."

That small review, and the quest to "know more," set off a sequence of events that culminated in 1997 with the release of *Paradise Road*, a movie starring Glenn Close and Frances McDormand.

It has also brought Mr. Meader to Ottawa this week, where he will be leading a community singing workshop at the Cartier Place Hotel on Sunday.

What the audience in Perth heard that night was the first public performance of songs written in a Japanese PoW camp during the Second World War.

The prisoners in the camp were women. Most were nurses. Many were held captive for nearly four years under brutal conditions, and under such conditions --- with their Japanese guards violently opposed to what they were doing at the outset --- they formed a choir.

The women rehearsed in the camp kitchen while doing chores, and late at night while pretending to sleep in their bunks. Their musical scores were copied from memory into children's workbooks, the workbooks then hidden away.

The choir consisted of 32 members and was set up with a four-part vocal structure. It was classical in both song selection and temperament. Because there were many nationalities in the camp, there were no spoken words.

The effect of all that --- unless you've already seen the movie or heard the score --- is unlike anything you've heard before. Mr. Meader wonders about the effect of the music to this day.

"When I was trying to raise money for the film, I always made sure I had a tape of the Perth concert with me," he says. "Whenever I played the tape, people just started to open up."

"I have seen bankers break down in tears after listening to the tape. There is something cathartic about the music the women created. It might actually be divine. I think that's a possibility."

The story of how that music came to be --- and it is more or less truthfully told in the movie *Paradise Road* --- is, once again, unlike anything you have heard before.

It all began on Feb.12, 1942, on the day the Japanese navy broke through the British naval defences around Singapore.

For all practical purposes, Singapore fell once the British defences were breached. Immediately, there was an attempted mass evacuation of all civilians, many of whom were either European refugees or British residents.

Women and children were herded onto ships and sent away. Many of those ships --- and it remains one of the worst atrocities committed in the war --- were shelled and shot at by the Japanese navy and air-force.

Ships were sunk. Thousands of people drowned. Those who didn't drown either swam or were swept ashore at places like Sumatra or Bangka Island.

SONG OF SURVIVAL Women's Choir of Harlem, Leny van Schaik, Conductor



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The lucky ones were then sent to prisoner of war camps. The unlucky ones were gunned down on beaches as soon as they landed.

The PoW camps were designed, and functioned, to break the spirit of the women who survived. The prisoners were poorly fed, continually beaten and deprived of all rights to associate. Their children could not receive any formal school instruction. Prayer was banned. Any sort of meeting or public gathering was forbidden.

And yet, the women rebelled against all that. Not by planning an escape, or trying to overpower their captors, or by some other grand and aggressive gesture.

They simply formed a choir.

"It is quite inspiring the solution they came up with to survive life in the prison camp," says Cara Kelson, a concert pianist from Australia who has written extensively on the PoW choir. "It was such a graceful solution. Yet so strong."

Initially, and this is shown quite well in *Paradise Road*, the Japanese guards were adamantly opposed to the choir. The women were beaten whenever they tried to sing. They had their food rations cut. They were harassed and humiliated.

The woman who formed and conducted the choir, Norah Chambers (played by Glenn Close in the movie) even had to beat a dog to death once, for refusing to disband the choir.

After nearly a year of this, however, a strange and unexpected thing happened.

One night the Japanese guards broke into the kitchen, where another clandestine choir practice was occurring, but instead of immediately beating the women, they hesitated.

They hesitated, and in a few seconds they started shuffling their feet self-consciously. They lowered their weapons. They listened. Then they left.

The next night the guards returned again. This time they sat on the floor until the end of the rehearsal. Then they left without saying a word.

Although the camp policy against group association never officially changed, the choir was allowed to practice from then on in peace. There were even concerts near the end of the war.

"Think for a moment what these women did," says Mr. Meader. "In the middle of a war, under these hellish conditions, they discovered and found solace from one of the oldest truths we know.

"Music touches everyone. It's as simple as that."

Betty Jeffrey is 91 this year. She lives in Melbourne today, and when contacted by telephone, she says she can spare only a few moments to talk. She's rather busy.

But the choir, of course she remembers the choir. How could she ever forget it?

"It was Norah who came up with the idea, and she was such a grand conductor," says Ms. Jeffrey. "I don't know how we could have survived without the choir. Everytime I was singing in the choir. I completely forgot where I was. I wasn't in the camp any more. I was free and someplace else."

Ms. Jeffrey is one of the last surviving members of that long-ago choir. Her choir "workbook," which contained not only musical scores, but also diary entries, was published in 1952 and became a best-seller in Australia. The book is now on permanent display at Australia's war museum.

Yet it is the choir, and the never-heard-before-on-the-planet vocal arrangements, that she remembers best about the war.

"There were 32 of us in the choir, and many of us could not even communicate,' she remembers. "There were Dutch women and Malaysian women, women from other countries as well.

"For many of us, there were only two things we shared. We were prisoners. And we sang."

In the end, the music was something even the guards shared. Ms. Jeffrey remembers how the guards stopped their harassment of the choir, a change that seemed to occur overnight. In the last year of the war there was even a set, and rather communal, routine to evenings in the camp.

The choir would gather to sing. The guards would gather to listen to the haunting, wordless music. Then everyone, without saying a word, would head off to sleep.

The camp moved frequently during the war --- back and forth from Sumatra to Bangka Island --- before finally being liberated in September 1945. Ms. Jeffrey was so ill at the time of liberation she spent the next two years in hospitals, trying to recover from TB, among other diseases.

The concert in Perth in 1990 was a restaging of the 1944 Christmas concert the choir gave in the PoW camp. The original musical scores were used. Ms. Jeffrey was in attendance.

"I've never experienced anything like that Christmas concert in 1944," says Ms. Jeffrey. "We were all in tears by the end of it, What music, what singing, means to me today, it's almost impossible to describe to you.

"That choir changed my life. It changed a great many people's lives."

Martin Meader is one person whose life was changed by the music that came out of the women's PoW camp.

After hearing an amateur tape of the Perth concert, and then hearing the full story of the choir, he set out to make a movie. He had never made a movie before. Yet somehow the music from the camp opened every door that he needed to have opened.

Australian director Bruce Beresford (Driving Miss Daisy) agreed to direct the movie after Mr. Meader played him the tape from the Perth concert.

A Los Angeles investor, initially skeptical, signed a cheque for \$8 million after hearing the tape.

All the actresses in the movie signed on after hearing the tape.

The movie cost \$26 million to make and garnered glowing reviews. It also gave Mr. Meader a new calling in life.

"I realised that something powerful was at work here," says Mr. Meader. "There is a huge interest nowadays in community singing, a huge interest in choirs in general.

"I think that's because a lot of us spend our days now in front of televisions and computers, staring at all these little boxes. The feeling you have when you're singing with other people --- the feeling those women must have experienced in the PoW camp --- we're missing that from our lives today."

A trained musician (guitar and saxophone) before he ever read that long-ago news story, Mr. Meader has gone on to form two choirs in Australia and now gives community singing workshops around the world.

He will give a workshop at the Cartier Place Hotel on Sunday. He will also conduct local choirs (Ashbury and the Ottawa-Carleton Police choir) in rehearsals through the week.

"Anyone can sing," says Mr. Meader. "These workshops are for people who have been told they can never sing. If you can speak, you can sing. It's that simple.

"And the feeling you get from singing, there really is no other experience like it. It gives you freedom. Just like it did for those women during the war."

Ms. Jeffrey, at 91, agrees with that assessment.

"I still sing," she tells me with a laugh. I'm a little croakier than I used to be, but the feeling for me is exactly the same. It has never changed."

I ask her to describe the feeling. She has a one-word answer:

"Joy."

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Saturday, October 2nd, 1999

By Ron Corbett

Working wonders through song

You forget first principles every once in awhile in life.

The reason you set off down one path, and not another, the reason you began a certain endeavour, or made a certain decision --- in the day-to-day mayhem of living on the planet, you sometimes forget why you made those choices.

In this day and age, singing works a lot like that. May even be the best example of that.

The first principle of singing, when you think back upon it, was to bring people together. It was a communal activity.

Today, singing is a professional activity. You hear the word singer and the mind registers it as an occupation. The original intent has been completely forgotten.

Perhaps that's why tomorrow's Sing From the Heart community workshop at the Cartier Place Hotel has sparked so much interest around the city. It's a chance to return to first principles.

"I sang to my mother when she was in a nursing home," says Cynthia Ross, who will be attending tomorrow's workshop. "She had MS and she was dying. I was visiting from out-of-town and I had one week with her and I didn't know what to do. Her mind was almost completely gone.

"I ended up singing to her. I've been told since that music is the last thing people forget. Alzheimer's patients who can no longer remember the faces of their loved ones will remember a hymn from their childhood."



Ms. Ross wants to know why that is. She wants to understand why people get such joy from singing, the way her mother did.

Jean Versteeg, one of the organizers of the workshop, says she has heard many reasons for people wanting to come to the Cartier Place Hotel tomorrow.

"Some of the people coming are ill," she says. "Some I know have cancer. Some are coming for reasons like that.

"Others have always wanted to sing, but were never given the chance. Musicians are coming, professional musicians, who want nothing more than to sing. It's like a life's dream for them."

Betty Jo Barker is a person like that. She's 60, a piano teacher, has accompanied more choirs than most of us will see in a lifetime, but she has never been able to sing.

"When I was younger I joined a couple of choirs but I always ended up accompanying them on the piano," she says. "It wasn't that the choir masters told me not to sing, it wasn't that obvious. Let's just say they were always happier when I was playing the piano."

She can't sing. That's the plain truth of the matter. Around music her entire life and the "greatest instrument there is," the one instrument everyone is born with, is the one instrument she could never master.

Maybe that will change tomorrow. She's honestly hopeful. She figures the seven-hour workshop could be life-changing.

Many will arrive tomorrow with the same hope. Cancer patients looking for solace. Elderly people trying to remember and evoke a time long forgotten, before television and computers, when people never thought of singing for fame or money.

And children. There will be plenty of children as well.

Of all the workshop participants I've spoken with 12-year-old Elena Blain-Ely had the story I liked the best. Elena was born in Romania and spent the first four years of her life in an orphanage. When she and her brother were adopted they had rarely, if ever, been outside the front doors of that institution.

"Everything frightened Elena at first," says her mother, Patricia Ely. "The sound of a car frightened her, people on the street frightened her. Even the wind frightened her."

Today, Elena is a beautiful, outgoing girl with a smile that absolutely dazzles you. She is in Grade 6 at Audrey Moodie Public School, in a special class for students with learning difficulties.

I asked her why she wanted to attend the workshop.

"Singing," she told me in between sips of an ice-cram float, "is practically my favourite thing to do. When I sing I feel happy. I feel rejoice. I never feel put down."

I feel rejoice. This from a 12-year-old child.

Some people, it seems, have never forgotten first principles.