

**A Vision for Choral Music Education:  
The Imagination and Influence of  
Master Teacher and Conductor Doreen Rao**

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Children and singing share a history that stretches back to the singing schools of the eighteenth century. Then 1838, Lowell Mason convinced the Boston School Board that all children can sing, and that singing instruction should be included in the public school curriculum. Throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, various educators wrote manuals and texts which encouraged singing, vocal instruction and vocal technique for children. By the 1930s a new development, the *song approach*, gained favor. This approach fostered a singing-for-art's-sake philosophy. Children learned to sing by singing songs. By the mid-twentieth century, elementary music classes became primarily singing classes where the learning of musical skills and vocal technique gave way to rote teaching (Phillips, 1992, p. 7).

In the 1950s there was a quest for advances in science and math education prompted in part by the international events following WWII, the Cold War, *Sputnik* and the dawning of technology. “This resulted in the need for music educators to redefine their profession in order to identify their place in the emerging technological society” (Mark, 1982, p. 5). Concurrently, music educators such as Kodaly, Orff and Dalcroze sparked American interest in music literacy, but as Phillips (1992, p. 12) sums up :

...[V]oice instruction was not a major part of the new music curricula that began to appear in the 1960s. Use of the singing voice seemed to be something that was caught but not taught.... The tradition of child vocal training and early public school music programs was lost to a generation

of vocal music educators and children in the second half of the twentieth century.

In their quest to redefine the profession, many music educators discovered solutions and direction in the philosophy of aesthetic education (Mark, 1999). Championed by Bennett Reimer in his book, *A Philosophy of Music Education* (Reimer, 1970) aesthetic education sought to, among other things, engage students in activities of *perception* of music through acts like listening and describing. McCarty, (McCarthy & Goble, 2002) explains it this way:

Aesthetic philosophies of music education focus on preparing students to perceive and respond appropriately to musical works as forms of art (especially great works or “masterpieces”) in order to educate their feelings and to evoke in them aesthetic experience (i.e., a unique, highly pleasurable state of mind.

It was into this environment that Doreen Rao emerged with a *performance-based music education*, a philosophy whose aim was to, among other things, challenge the philosophy of aesthetic education, reunite music education with singing, and recall and expand upon the pedagogy of vocal technique in the choral and classroom experience. Rao’s philosophy was grounded in the notion that all children could sing and could be taught to perform artistically. The results of her work were enormous, and they excited and energized choral music educators nationwide. As Janet Galvan (personal communication, February 21, 2007) of Ithaca College states, “Doreen was in the right place at the right time, and SHE WAS READY!”

*Background*

Doreen Rao was born in Chicago, Illinois on November, 14, 1950. Her home and her life were filled with music and music-making. In her own words, Rao (personal communication, February 21, 2007) describes her childhood:

There were frequent musicales in my home with art song, chamber music, and plenty of opera. Recordings of Maria Callas, and all forms of opera and symphonies, mostly 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic music, Brahms particularly. [There were] Chicago Symphony concerts with my mother – Fritz Reiner [conductor.] [The concerts were held] on Thursday afternoons. The Sunday evening “Firestone” Opera Series on television [was] mandatory. Leonard Bernstein!!!! On television and in live performances when he came to Chicago. My hero then and now. [I took] piano lessons [from] teachers, mostly friends of my mother, [they were] always exceptional. My brother and I practiced when all the other kids got to play after school.

Rao’s mother was a lyric soprano with a “promising but unfulfilled career” who sang and performed solos with the church choir. Her father worked for Chicago’s famous *Chez Paris* and *London House*, two historic entertainment centers, where Rao and her brother secured the “best seats in the house” to watch the performances and interact with the likes of Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, and others.

As a young school girl, Rao had wonderful experiences with her music teachers:

[My experiences include] elementary school 6<sup>th</sup> grade chorus with Mrs. Paul... [and] a rich choral program in the Chicago Public Schools (Carl Schurz HS) with the opportunity to sing in the very first Chicago All-City

High School Chorus, a program for gifted young singers from public schools across the city (Rao, 2007).

This experience would play a part in Rao's nascent philosophy that all children can and should sing and that all children could be taught to sing musically. Rao explains:

This was especially important because the city was (and still is) segregated and students did not have the opportunity to interact with students from varying economic and racial backgrounds. This experience was very important for me (Rao, 2007).

Rao describes her undergraduate education as exceptional in every way. She was a voice and music education major at the University of Illinois, and she sang regularly in the opera. Two important teachers/mentors stand out. Harold Decker, director of the UI Choir, provided her with a tremendous background in literature and a particular appreciation for works of living composers. Colleen Kirk instilled a keen appreciation for the standards of professional performance in combination with the goals of music education. Both Decker and Kirk were former presidents of the American Choral Directors Association, an organization which was to serve as a catalyst for much of Rao's work with children's choirs.

At the time of her undergraduate tenure, Harold Decker founded America's first DMA program in choral conducting. Rao (2007) completed all of her coursework for conducting in the first two years of her studies, and was "invited into the doctoral seminars [where she] worked regularly with the doctoral students on their recital projects." It was at that time, too, that she became immersed in the new and experimental contemporary music that was a prominent force in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Of her teachers at the University of Illinois, Rao says, "My

university teachers were exceptional human beings who gave themselves without regret to the development of their students.”

After graduation, Rao sang professionally and began teaching at a junior high school in Bellwood, Illinois. She taught eight general music classes a day and developed a choir of approximately 300 students. Choral rehearsals were not a part of the school day, and students were bussed in and out of school to sing. As Rao (2007) describes, “This was during a period in the early 1970s when singing in choirs was eliminated from [the] public school curriculum in favor of aesthetic education programs.” She describes those programs as “appreciation based.” General music classes, Rao asserts, were “mostly without singing, and almost always without choral experience.” Rao proposed for choral singing to be included in the curriculum of the Bellwood school in which she taught, and when it was denied, she left.

In contrast to her experience with the Bellwood School District, Rao’s childhood experiences and undergraduate studies made no distinction between performance and music education. There was no “contrived academic separation between what was considered music education and what was considered performance” (Rao, 2007). As a result, Rao rejected “from the very beginning” what she perceived to be a “growing separation between performance and music education.”

In 1972, Rao began what was to be an impressive career with a community choir in Chicago, the Glen Ellyn Children’s Chorus. It was there that she began to develop her performance-based music education program. Her curricular concept would take root with this choir and would eventually develop into a nationally respected series of texts, recordings, and music literature for children’s choir education called *Choral Music Experience*.

Graduate study took place at Northwestern University during her years with the Glen Ellyn Children's Chorus where Rao earned a master's degree in Voice Performance and a Ph.D. in Music Education. Having been influenced by Decker and Kirk, and inspired by her own developing ideas about performance-based education, Rao expresses the difficulty of studying with her teacher and advisor, Bennett Reimer:

Bennett and I had a very interesting relationship. It took me eight years to complete the Ph.D.....partly because I was interested in a different view of music education [regarding] the performance perspective... [which was] not a part of the aesthetic education thinking at the time! (Rao, 2007)

Rao (1988) describes her dissertation as a work dedicated to the development of the concept of performance education that:

looked at aesthetic education, analyzed some of its constructs, and acknowledged that performance was a means to aesthetic experience." But, she adds, "[I] developed the thesis that (1) performance is not limited to being only a means to an end; (2) that it is in fact both a means and an end in itself. To develop this thesis, I built a multidimensional view of singing (vocal performance) to show it broadly as an inclusive form of musical experience, as a form of knowledge.

### *Career*

Doreen Rao began her work with the Glen Ellyn Children's Chorus in 1972. By 1976 her choir became the first children's choir to perform at a national ACDA convention (Potter, 2005). From 1976-1988, the Glen Ellyn Children's Chorus, under Rao's direction, performed and recorded regularly with the Chicago Symphony and Chorus, the St. Louis Symphony and as

invited guests of the Oregon Bach Festival. Rao prepared her young singers for concerts, tours and recordings that won four *Grammy* awards and a *Grand Prix du Disque*. “In the late 70s and early 80s, people were astounded by the artistry of her choir... She taught her choir to sing Bach in the Baroque style, jazz in an appropriate style, etc. She was one of the first to understand the complete capability of children’s choirs” (Galvan, 2007).

Conductors were eager to learn Rao’s methods. Publishers, too, encouraged her to put her work into print. Hesitant about writing before she could articulate an approach of performance education, Rao postponed this endeavor until 1986. Says Galvan (2007), “This was the genesis of the 5 booklet series- [*Choral Music Education* which is] beautifully written- amazingly informative, and accessible.”

Encouraged by others and drawing upon her experiences in performance, teaching and research, Rao designed the booklets, a choral music series and a choral textbook, *We Will Sing! Choral Music Experience for Classroom Choirs* (Rao, 1993b), to reinforce and encourage the concept of music performance as music education. The choral text books and the music series, which she advises and edits for Boosey & Hawkes are collectively titled *CME* and serve as the theoretical framework for her philosophy of performance-based education.

#### *American Choral Directors Association*

In 1979, Rao became the first ACDA National Repertoire and Standards Chairperson for Children’s Choirs and was appointed by ACDA to form the first National Committee on Children’s Choirs. By 1981, the committee was formed. The objectives of this committee were ambitious. They included, among other things, increased awareness, representation, and formation of children’s choirs and children’s choir directors among the ACDA community, an increase in the choral consciousness for children’s choirs, an increase in the quality, quantity and



variety of compositions by distinguished composers, and an increase in communication opportunities for children's choir directors.

In 1989, ACDA, with Rao serving as guest editor, devoted an entire issue of the *Choral Journal* (Rao, 1989) to the subject of children's choirs- the first thematic unit of its kind to appear in the *Choral Journal*. Rao detailed the success of the committee's prior objectives and outlined new objectives. Recognizing a need to focus more closely on school music programs, this new agenda supported the view that all children whether "gifted or less able" can learn to sing in tune, learn to sing musically, learn a variety of quality choral music, and learn to sing in an ensemble and classroom environment. In addition, the committee recommended, among other things, that the choral ensemble experience be (1) a part of the school music curriculum, (2) held within the school day, and (3) made available to all children.

#### *Rao's Influence on the Children's Choir Community*

The following paragraphs will demonstrate some of the ways in which Doreen Rao set out to accomplish the ACDA National Children's Choir Committee recommendations which she was instrumental in designing:

First, Rao's choral textbooks demonstrate that she reached out to a nation of choral educators to provide instruction in vocal pedagogy and artistry. For example, her choral textbook, *We Will Sing! Choral Music Experience for Classroom Choirs* (Rao, 1993b) was designed to serve as a music curriculum. Intended for use with children ages nine and older, it is a performance-based textbook for music classrooms. It begins with the basics of producing a good singing tone, introduces basic music theory, reading and ear training, and progresses into unison choral singing and easy part-singing.

Second, Rao developed small workshops to share her ideas and techniques with those who were interested. She observed a growing need and desire for music educators to deepen their musical skills. Conductors, too, were interested in enhancing their pedagogical skills. These initial workshops were to mark the beginning of the *Choral Music Education Institute for Choral Teacher Education*. As Galvan (2007) explains,

She realized by 1991 that she needed help. It was about the work, not the autonomy- therefore, she brought in people (CME Associates) whose work she had seen and admired to join her... They met as a group before the institute, joined the faculty, and served as mentors for those attending the classes.

The CME Institute was designed to offer professional development for conductors and teachers interested in improving their skills. The program included opportunities for score study, movement, conducting, vocal technique, choral rehearsal methods, and more. Some of the first people to attend the institute included those already respected as leaders in teaching children's choirs such as Joan Gregoryk and Christine Jordanoff. Other earlier associates- today recognized as exemplary children's choir directors- include Janet Galvan, Henry Leck, Barbara Tagg, and Sandra Snow.

Third, Rao provided opportunities for distinguished composers to create compositions for the children's choir. One way she provided this opportunity was by commissioning pieces for her own choir to sing. Another way she provided this opportunity was by inviting composers-in-residence to be an integral part of the CME Institute. The compositions of the composers-in-residence would be rehearsed and performed by a children's choir-in-residence and conducted by the directors enrolled in the institute. This integrated program provided a platform for composers

to write and teachers to experience new compositions. “Many new compositions were commissioned through these developing relationships. Composers like David Brunner, Stephen Hatfield, Imam Rains, Nick Page, etc, came into the CME Institute as Composers-In-Residence” (Rao, 2007). Today, these composers are nationally recognized and respected.

Three composers shared the following observations. Nick Page (personal communication, February 22, 2007) states:

Doreen Rao has truly changed the face of choral music in the last thirty years... [H]er truly significant contribution has been in the area of repertoire. She has encouraged people who normally might not have written for children's voices to become converts. But more importantly, she created a support mechanism through CME for fostering this creativity.

Stephen Hatfield (personal communication, February 22, 2007) states:

I certainly think that the children's choir movement world-wide has provided composers with a beautiful instrument to write for, and there's no doubt that Doreen's eye for talent has opened the doors for several of the composers now working in that genre.

From David Brunner (personal communication, February 21, 2007):

Regarding the initiation of new music for young voices, I can say without hesitation, that she has fostered a great deal of new music. Her series of publications with Boosey & Hawkes has fostered the creation of many new works for children and encouraged a number of us composers who are represented in that series.

Fourth, Rao provided opportunities for many singers to work with composers. This occurred not only in the context of the CME Institute and the Glen Ellyn Children's Chorus but at national and divisional children's honor choirs in which Rao was involved. The inclusion of the composer in the rehearsal process stems in part from the experience of meeting the jazz greats as a young girl in Chicago and the experience of performing the works of live composers while an undergraduate singing for Harold Decker. Anecdotally speaking, today it is fairly standard for young singers performing in divisional or national honor choirs of ACDA to meet and rehearse with live composers whose works the singers are performing.

Fifth, Doreen's work with ACDA has helped to increase the representation and formation of children's choirs in America. "In 1979, at the beginning of this project, less than 3% of ACDA membership surveyed noted professional involvement with children's choirs. A 1989 tally indicated nearly 18% of the ACDA membership surveyed showed professional involvement with children's choirs" (Rao, 1989, p. 14). Today 24% of all ACDA members in the United States have a professional involvement with children's choirs (D. Yates, personal communication, February 27, 2006.)

Sixth, Rao's work has inspired a high level of artistry in children's choirs nationwide. Page (2007) agrees, "... [H]er contribution is immense [in part because of] her belief in artistry. Galvan (2007) adds, "Today there are many excellent community children's choruses... [T]hat is in large part a tribute to Doreen's work with Glen Ellyn... The major influence of CME is the idea of artist-teacher and the idea that the teacher of children needs to be a fine conductor so that they may teach through the gesture and bring the finest artistry to their children." Christine Jordanoff (personal communication February 21, 2007) concurs. "Doreen inspired a synergy

among talented and enthusiastic conductors who believed in the ability of children to sing in an artistic way...”

Seventh, Rao’s inclusion of contemporary global music allowed for a wide variety of choral literature to be available to children’s choir directors and their singers. Rao encouraged the creation of “authentic arrangements and brilliantly crafted fusion compositions” (Galvan 2007). Her CME series contains a large number of multicultural pieces as can be seen in *Latin Accents* (“Boosey & Hawkes: Doreen Rao,” 2006) and in pieces by composers such as Stephen Hatfield, Francisco Nunez, and many others.

Eighth, Rao helped to create networking opportunities for other children’s choir directors. She did this by initiating a column in the *Choral Journal* called *Children’s Choral Corner* (Potter, 2005). Her work with CME Institute also created natural networking opportunities for children’s choir directors and music educators. Jordanoff (2007) explains,

The CME helped us to know one another, to learn from one another and to be challenged to broaden our horizons. Through this process we became more aware of the international work of children’s choirs, and... connect[ed] to Boosey & Hawkes, one of the first publishers to support quality repertoire and commissioned works for children’s choirs. This enabled us to coalesce, initially through ACDA, and create a much bigger impact throughout the country than if we continued to work independently. As the popularity of children’s honor choirs began to surge, a whole new layer of choral activity started to take hold. Doreen planted the seeds [for] all of this activity and led the movement.

Ninth, Rao's work as series editor for Boosey & Hawkes helped increase the amount of literature available for treble voiced choirs. An advertisement in the *Choral Journal* (1989) lists 21 pieces in her choral music library. Today *CME* boasts 200 pieces from her general series of beginning, intermediate and advanced levels. Recent additions to these categories include *Latin Accents*, *Holiday Lights*, *Celtic Voices*, and *Opera Workshop* ("Boosey & Hawkes: Doreen Rao," 2006) all of which include many selections for children's choirs. The popularity of *CME* also encouraged other publishers to establish high quality series for young voices. Two examples are Janet Galvan's *Roots and Wings Series* with Roger Dean ("The Lorenz Corporation: Janet Galvan," n.d.) and *The Henry Leck Choral Series* ("Colla Voce: Henry Leck Series," 2006).

Tenth, all *CME* music literature includes stylistic, cultural, and/or historical information, and when necessary, translation and pronunciation guides. This information makes the literature accessible to conductors whatever their level of experience and provides them with a resource for developing authentic and meaningful performances for young singers.

The preceding paragraphs are not exhaustive of Doreen Rao's work. Her countless workshops and conducting performances throughout the country, and her extensive international travel have all contributed to her vision for the children's choir. For her contribution to the development of what has been called the children's choir movement, Rao has received numerous awards and accolades. Among those is a quote from Robert Shaw, "The world of choral music owes [Doreen Rao] special thanks. She is preparing our future ("Boosey & Hawkes: Doreen Rao," 2006)"

#### *Classroom Choirs and Elementary Choirs in Schools*

In a 1993 article, Rao (p. 48) said, "Choral singing must return to the heart of American music education. That is where it began in the eighteenth century- that is where it belongs

today.” But, one area that cannot be accounted for in this paper is the influence of Rao’s work on the incidence of elementary general music classrooms using the CME performance-based approach. Another area that can’t be accounted for is whether there is a difference in the number of elementary choir rehearsals being held in the school day rather than before or after school. These would be interesting and worthwhile studies.

### *Rao’s Work Today*

Rao has been at the University of Toronto since 1988. She was awarded the Elmer Iseler Chair in Conducting in 1999. She is the Director of Choral Programs, Artistic Director of the International Bach Festival with Helmuth Rilling, conductor of the MacMillan Singers which she founded in 1994, and conductor of the Bach Festival Singers. She also teaches advanced choral conducting and graduate courses in music education. When asked to share her plans for the future, Doreen Rao (2007) replied, “For me, all activities surround and embody my interests in choral singing, performance teaching, and peace education. I have another chapter left and intend to make the most of it!”

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