

Book Reviews

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***Visions of Excellence: A Dialog with the
Finest Directors from the Barbershop
Harmony Society***

Joe Cerutti
Nashville, Tennessee:
Barbershop Harmony Society
171 pp.
\$19.99
ISBN: Pending (Softcover)

One of our foremost commodities as choral conductors is simple inspiration. Whether that takes the form of a strong bond with our choral students, moving audience members with a particularly powerful setting of poetry, or touching an over-stimulated, media-saturated society with the quiet power of historically valuable music, it is inspiration that keeps the choral art alive and viable year after decade after century.

Inspiration in Joe Cerutti's book, *Visions of Excellence: A Dialogue with the Finest Directors from the Barbershop Harmony Society*, exists on several levels. First is the manner in which Mr. Cerutti was himself inspired as he was crafting the text. In the introduction, he states, "This book is directly modeled after Carole Glenn's *In Quest of Answers: Interviews with American Choral Conductors*, a book that most students of the American choral art have referenced throughout their studies." Like the Glenn work, Cerutti's book is based on the results of an extensive series of interviews with leading choral directors, in this instance within the Barbershop genre.

Each of the book's twenty chapters poses a different question and then shares the answers provided by the

twenty-five directors interviewed. While every question is undoubtedly germane to both the barbershop genre specifically and the choral art in general, Cerutti does not group the questions together through the use of overarching subject areas. This gives the book a warm, organic feel; something far less like a textbook and more like the sort of free-flowing exchange of ideas that commonly take place after hours at an ACDA Conference. While it would be possible to use the book to study a single area of the choral art (such as rehearsal techniques) there is far too much intertwining between the various functions involved in the choral craft for such compartmentalization. Rehearsal strategy is often determined by literature. The literature to be performed informs audition considerations. Singers that are selected through an audition process help to determine rehearsal plans, and so on.

The questions in *Visions of Excellence* explore the choral art from several angles. Cerutti explores the interviewee's thoughts on rehearsal techniques with several questions including, "What general issues are of particular importance in your rehearsal and what techniques do you use to address them?" And, "Describe how your chorus learns new music and what techniques and technologies do you employ to assist your members?" The matter of auditioning singers for an avocational experience can be a challenging matter. Cerutti inquires on that topic asking, "What kind of personal or musical characteristics do you look for in your singers?" Cerutti

also explores issues such as the use of coaches, balancing competition, and trends in barbershop.

Each type of choral music has something of tremendous value to offer the whole of the art form. As such, there is very little in *Visions of Excellence* that is not immediately applicable to every choral conductor. Few among us would not benefit from on-going discussions of blend, rehearsal techniques, audition procedures, ensemble formations, or literature selection. Each of these issues is discussed throughout the text.

Even those few questions that are genre-specific are not exclusionary. In Chapter 18, for instance, the question posed is, "What does barbershop chorus singing offer that you can't get in any other choral or quartet medium?" The answers by the interviewees fell generally into three categories: vertical tuning of chords, ensemble cohesiveness, and life-long avocational singing opportunities. Who in the profession can't identify with that?

While providing useful insights with practicing choral colleagues is obviously the book's intent, offering inspiration to future conductors also appears to be on Cerutti's mind. As in the Glenn text, Cerutti's *Visions of Excellence* poses the question, "What piece of advice would you give aspiring/beginning/struggling directors?" It is perhaps Jim Henry's response that could well serve as a thesis statement for the entire book (or a great dust-jacket quote), "Become a student of the art of music (not just barbershop music), conducting, and leadership. Use every resource to be-

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come skilled in those three areas. Work on conducting like some people work on their golf swing.”

It seems there are two ways that this book could be approached. It could be read vertically, pondering one chapter and one specific choral topic at a time. Using this method, the reader can compare and contrast 25 different opinions related to a single subject. Another approach would be to read the book in a horizontal fashion, reading only the responses of a single interviewee. In that way, the book functions somewhat like a graduate seminar (or perhaps a conference interest session) with the reader gleaning a single director’s opinion on a variety of choral topics, thus gaining insight into that conductor’s overall methodology. It is in this manner that Mr. Cerutti inspires the reader to consider how they want to use the information

and to tailor their reading accordingly.

Visions of Excellence is not solely a book on Barbershop. It is a book on the intricacies, the techniques, and the delights of leading a choral ensemble.

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The Use of the International Phonetic Alphabet in the Choral Rehearsal

Duane Richard Karna (editor),
Lanham, Maryland:
Scarecrow Press, 2010.
342 pp.
\$65.00
ISBN 978-0-8108-8169-3

Scarecrow Press and Duane Richard Karna suggest *The Use of the International Phonetic Alphabet in the Choral*

Rehearsal could revolutionize how conductors teach choirs to master singing foreign repertoire. The volume includes a comprehensive table of contents that boasts covering the diction principles of twenty-seven languages and even more dialects; each chapter is written by an author expert in that language. Though strong in some areas, the volume leaves a number of topics unaddressed, rendering it a useable, though flawed, resource for conductor-teachers.

Conductors will likely be drawn to the book for two things: its overview of many languages and its discourse on how to teach them to singers. In addition to considering languages most common to western choral repertoire, it also covers Romanian, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Brazilian Portuguese, Swahili, Basque, Hawaiian, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Estonian, Dutch, Georgian, Swedish, Finnish, Greek, Norwegian, and Polish. This makes it a very attractive resource for the conductor’s shelf. Most helpful are the chapters on ecclesiastical Latin, Hebrew, Norwegian, Russian, and the Baltic languages. Not only do they offer detailed language and diction information, but they also give easy-to-understand instructions to conductors and singers. The ecclesiastical Latin chapter includes a “common errors” section detailing challenges singers often face. Likewise, the Baltic and Norwegian chapters are very detailed, include approximate comparisons to common English words, and give singer-specific notes. The English, German, Spanish, and Swahili chapters are strong for similar reasons. Readers interested in Japanese, Chinese, Hungarian, and Dutch will find these chapters less helpful as they are either difficult to read and understand or contain significantly less instruction to conductors and singers when compared to other chapters.

The volume’s finest chapters are the Hebrew and Russian chapters,



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