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Prisons and the Power of Performance: Reflections on Vocal Coaching for Men and Women Behind Bars

By John Wesley Wright



John Wesley Wright

I TOOK MY FIRST AND ONLY SABBATICAL in the fall of 2017. I was able to perform, travel, adjudicate competitions, facilitate workshops, and *sleep*. I must confess, however, without the sounds and spirit of daily, often hourly vocal breakthroughs in one on one lessons, I felt a bit lost. Therefore, of all the sabbatical projects I set out to accomplish, the one I looked forward to most was the one that involved students. That project, a joint civic reflection and performance of excerpts from the Broadway musical *Les Misérables* to be performed with Wright Studio vocalists and the UBUNTU Men's Chorus at the London Correctional Institution in London, Ohio, came to fruition in June of 2018.

My work in the prisons is not something I've reflected on or talked much about, and many of my colleagues are unaware of my connection to them at all. So, here is my story.

My first experience with prison was in high school. When I was around 15 years old, I reluctantly took a trip with my father to visit my brother in a South Georgia facility. The memory is somewhat vague, mainly because I've worked hard to suppress it, but the words that come to mind are "surreal" and "sad."

A second exposure to a jail was in graduate school, but this time it was personal. The details of that grossly humiliating tale, which includes spending a couple of hours in a holding cell, would cost you several happy hour cocktails, but for now, I will share three significant take-aways from that encounter: 1) telling the truth does not necessarily set you free; 2) profiling based on race and/or sexual orientation is a real thing; 3) music teachers, especially ones who come to your rescue, are *golden*.

This brings us to my third correctional facility experience—perhaps a divinely manifested outcome of experiences one and two, certainly, one of unexpected longevity and unanticipated rewards, and now, one with a legacy of sorts passed on to my students.

Before speaking about the *Les Mis* project and my connection with the prisons, I have to say a few words about the person who recruited me, my dear friend and graduate school colleague, Dr. Catherine Roma.

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With a core belief that choral singing is a path to justice, inclusion, and love, with the conviction that collective and cooperative power enables singers to inspire, motivate, educate, and heal an ailing world, Dr. Roma founded her first women's choir in 1974 in Madison, Wisconsin. She then founded and directed Anna Crusis Women's Choir in Philadelphia in 1975, and in 1983, *MUSE*, the Cincinnati Women's Choir, which she directed for 30 years. Also, while in Cincinnati, she co-founded and for 22 years co-directed the Martin Luther King, Jr. Chorale. And finally, she is the founder and director of four Ohio prison choirs.

Dr. Roma recently retired from Wilmington College, a small Quaker school in southern Ohio, where she was professor of music for twenty-five years. It was through her association with Wilmington and its dedication to prison education that she founded UMOJA Men's Chorus at Warren Correctional Institution in 1993. Since retirement, she has founded UBUNTU Men's Chorus at Madison Correctional (2012), Hope Thru Harmony Women's Choir at Dayton Correctional (2014), KUJI Men's Chorus at Marion Correctional Institution (2016), and the World House Choir (2012), a 100-voice community choir in Yellow Springs, Ohio, dedicated to fostering peace and justice in its local communities, throughout the nation, and beyond. It is clear that Dr. Roma's persistent and extraordinary efforts are a *tour de force* for inclusion, equality, and social justice. At her behest, I have had the privilege of being vocal coach for dozens of incarcerated men and women over the past twenty-five years.

So, what does vocal coaching look like inside the walls of a prison? Well, once you pass three to four points of security, walk down an extended hallway and/or across a courtyard of piercing stares and arrive at your designated rehearsal space, it kind of looks like a session with voice majors in a typical classroom. But the feeling is different. The stakes are higher. Time is finite. Visits are few. And there is a no "see you at your lesson next week" or even next month. Thus, when visiting, I've tried to hold my brothers and sisters behind bars to the same standard I do my students, intensely addressing the areas of vocal technique, interpretation, diction, and expression, both as a group and individually. What follows is a link to a coaching session from 2015 with the UBUNTU Men's Chorus that was filmed two days prior to the guys



Dr. Catherine Roma with UMOJA Men's Chorus at Warren Correctional Institution. Photo by Phil Groshong.

recording their first CD, *Begin to Love*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1VVYsl8UO8>.

I spent the day with the guys combing through fourteen songs. They were hungry to learn and elevate their level. They wanted everything to be right. Their responses highlight some of that day's work.

[Doug said,] When John Wright came in, he brought with him a bunch of emotional strategies. In the song "Bring Him Home," he gave me a key to unlock the emotions needed to portray the character's feelings for this piece. My background in music is technical so this helped me immensely.

[D. Malcolm wrote,] Was an immeasurable event in which he taught us how to tell the story through the song. He taught us how to sing with feeling & emotion & how to use control of the breath. To live in the piece & not be afraid to put a little oomph into pronunciations.

[Mr. Coleman offered the following:] John, Thank you for your professional help. The way you taught us was pleasant, inspiring, & exciting. The way in which you allowed us to first sing, then you complimented us, then critiqued us. I especially enjoyed the way you showed us how to keep the essence of the sound, but to soften it up. Thanks again!

P. S. I believe you could teach me how to become a professional singer :)

[Mr. Boyd said,] He was able in a short time to fine tune our skills in diction and enunciation of words enabling us to use less air yet more volume. He also gave us regal and elegant consonants in our presentation and delivery so that the audience will be able to



Post *Les Misérables* excerpts performance at London Correctional Institution in London, OH, June 2018. Dr. John Wesley Wright with conductor Catherine Roma, UBUNTU Men's Chorus, dramaturge Jessie Glover, and voice students from Salisbury University. Photo by Becca Schall.

feel our zeal and intent in expanding the lyric of any given song as we performed approximately 14 songs on the 17th of December for him to fine tune and critique every aspect of our delivery for taping and recording for UBUNTU's first CD.

[And, my personal favorite, Popcorn declared,] If I was to describe John Wright, I would say he's like a poem. And all the pieces add up to something special because he knows how to bring out the best in us. In short, he's a teacher and a leader.

In my years of teaching, I've been called a lot of things, but never a *poem*. Ego boost aside, responses such as these are primary sources for measuring the impact of singing in prisons. I can tell you firsthand, however, that the immense joy, pride, discipline, focus, and enthusiasm gleaned by the men from various performance projects throughout the years is immeasurable.

For UMOJA, the flagship choir, projects have included singing for MLK services, sometimes being skyped in for the annual Cincinnati Music Hall celebration; competing in the Spiritual and Gospel categories at the 7th World Choir Games, held in Cincinnati 2012, and where three international judges agreed to come *to* the prison, the guys winning two gold medals; and more recently, UBUNTU and KUJI participating in a unique operatic venture with four other prison choirs across the country, each making a recording in German of Beethoven's Prisoner's Chorus to be melded together and rendered

during Heartbeat Opera's 2018 production of *Fidelio* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J_ipFPVLUS8).

But the CD recordings are what really excite the guys. Former UMOJA member Derek, who has served his time, best describes the reasons for this. His words are printed on the cover of the first CD recording, *Feel Like Going On*, released in 1997.

We created this project with very specific goals. First, we wanted to find a way to generate revenues for some nonprofit organizations that work to serve the people in the communities where we had support, nurture, and succor in our lives. We sought a way to give back to these communities while simultaneously living in an area cordoned [sic] by concertine [sic] wire and guards with weapons outside the parameters. Second, we wanted to remind you that we are connected to you as you are connected to each other. It is only by recognizing the importance and dignity of all the nameless people that you see each day . . . that you are genuinely empowered . . .

UMOJA means "UNITY." We invite you to join in the unity by tearing down the walls that separate black from white from yellow, homosexual from heterosexual from lesbian, adult from teenager from infant, man from woman, capitalist from communist, Christian from Muslim from Hebrew. Tear down the walls, and the space which seek to create will be there in your hearts, your minds, and your lives.

Hope Thru Harmony Women's Chorus at Dayton Correctional Institution was founded in 2014. With little or no experience with singing or reading music, the women have evolved quickly. Imagine a vocal master class on the series *Orange is the New Black*—folks sitting in a circle, observing and listening intently, waiting their turn to shine, wanting to learn something new; willing to be positioned and repositioned and made aware of how their bodies make good sound; uttering sounds that are bold, clear, and free of impediment for the very first time; allowing themselves be vulnerable, letting themselves feel, trust, and show emotion; cheering each other on, commenting constructively, passionately, spontaneously—creating an atmosphere like no other. A video clip, also from December 2015, illustrates that scene beautifully; it features facilitator Rosephanye Powell, acclaimed American choral composer, professor, and NATS member, coaching her arrangement of the spiritual, "I Wanna Be Ready" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4DmQqB6Gd0Y>).

Given that Hope Thru Harmony has been together only since 2014, most of my work has been with the men—UMOJA from 1993 till it ended in 2015; UBUNTU since 2012; and KUJI Men's Chorus since its inception in 2016. As an African American male among a sea of incarcerated African American men, my visits with them inevitably begin and end with emotional highs and lows. They evoke memories of my brother and me and how lucky we are, provoke thoughts about the viscerally positive effect singing seems to have, and spark visions of performance projects that could heal, examine, and seek to understand the divide between those on the outside and those on the inside. These visits were the inspiration for my sabbatical project. The idea of presenting excerpts from *Les Misérables* with its themes of compassion, love, redemption, and social injustice, performed together with students and the men of UBUNTU, seemed like a no-brainer after a while.

Victor Hugo used his novel to denounce an unjust, class-based system, one that often turns good people into criminals. He shined his main light on the unfair and corrupt criminal justice system, as the central character Jean Valjean's petty crime of stealing bread lands him a nineteen year stint on the chain gang. Throughout *Les Misérables*, Hugo also signified areas in need of gross

reform to be education, institutional justice, the treatment of women, and more, frighteningly poignant topics today. Hugo was tackling the modern concept of intersectionality far before its time. There is a video summary of that unforgettable experience with Salisbury University voice students and UBUNTU Men's Chorus at the London Correctional Institution in London, Ohio, which came to fruition on June 13, 2018 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WtAWywGIjeM&feature=youtu.be>).

It was my goal through this project that students, invited community members, prison staff, and imprisoned persons alike would become more aware of the ongoing existence of intersectionality in our society; that the music, literature, and communal nature of such a project afford meaningful dialogue and move us in a better, more unified direction. It is also my hope that those reading this might begin to see how our pedagogic gifts and offerings as musicians can be used in a broader light.

The impact of this work could not have been more personally and eloquently stated than by London Correctional Institution inmate Bryan K. Singleton in a letter to Dr. Roma.

Dr. Roma,

This project we just completed was soul stirring. I can't express enough how valuable the choir and all that I've learned about myself as a human being are.

For the two days that we worked together with the students, nothing else in the world existed. There was only the work that needed to be done. So much to learn in so little time. It took the determination and desire of all of us. It took commitment from everyone to do their own part and fit it in the right way. To be in the spirit of the play itself.

When Dr. Wright sang, "Bring Him Home," before we began as a choir, it set the tone. It was so emotional, so powerful after having witnessed the passion and talent of the students who were to be involved with us. This was a story of "Villain to Virtue." Truly, in my life and in the lives of all those involved. A story that our country is currently living out and the tale has a different ending for everyone. That difference indicates our own power over our own destiny and taking part in this endeavor gives so much hope to all of us involved. Anyone who has taken this to heart has given it a home there.

The students said their lives were forever affected. We are truly blessed.

So many men who were in the packed audience said that they had never experienced anything like this at all. People who have the hardest exterior were moved to tears by the songs and the emotions that filled the air. In all my twenty-one years in prison, never have I seen or felt the heart of so many being affected. The power of the human spirit was on display on that night. Not to be challenged or disrespected. There was harmony and love and unity and learning and vulnerability from, for, and in men and women and those who are incarcerated and those who are free and all were equals and all were human and everyone was accepted every soul present could be inspected. There was a moment where I had to “play dead” on stage and I remember thinking as I was lying there motionless that I have never felt more alive. I could go on forever about this because I feel that the whole thing was guided by the infinite to our infinite space and will be protected there forever in the hearts and minds of all who were privileged to be a part of this process and the eventual expression of all of our work. I loved every minute of it.

I love UBUNTU and all that it means. I am not 2-4-6-0-1.

God bless everyone who was and is a part of what we are doing.

Peace,

I am Bryan K. Singleton (352.353)

Tenor **John Wesley Wright**, DMA, is known for his artistic and soulful interpretations of music from Baroque to Broadway. Holding degrees from Maryville College and the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, his diversity as an artist has afforded him nationally televised concerts for the Belgian Royal Family (Brussels, Belgium) and the Kennedy clan (New Ross, Ireland), as well as tours as a soloist and with professional ensembles throughout the United States, Europe, and Japan.

Wright is a member of the internationally acclaimed American Spiritual Ensemble. His rendition of “Here’s One” is highlighted in the PBS documentary, *The Spirituals: Featuring the American Spiritual Ensemble*, released in 2007.

Many of his concert career experiences have been under the baton of Neal Gittleman and the Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra. In May of 2011, Wright returned to Ohio to perform the role of the Celebrant in Bernstein’s *Mass: A Theatre Piece for Singers, Players, and Dancers*, with reviews praising his “mastery of the oratorio genre” and “impressive acting range and voice.”

John Wesley Wright is the gold medalist and top prizewinner of the *American Traditions Vocal Competition 2000* and has claimed top prizes from the National Federation of Music Clubs, Metropolitan Opera National Council, and the International Schubert Competition.

A native of Rome, Georgia, Dr. Wright is coordinator of the voice area at Salisbury University (Salisbury, Maryland). He is an active clinician, consultant, and leader of workshops on voice production, song interpretation, and African American song tradition.



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