

Lift Your Voice

Richard Dale Sjoerdsma



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Lift every voice and sing
 Till earth and heaven ring,
 Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
 Let our rejoicing rise
 High as the listening skies,
 Let it resound loud as the rolling seas.
 Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
 Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us,
 Facing the rising sun of our new day begun
 Let us march on till victory is won.

John Rosemond Johnson

UPON FIRST BECOMING INFORMED OF the 2022 World Voice Day theme, I must confess to have been taken aback by the lack of the typical adverb. In an overwhelming preponderance of sources that I investigated, biblical and poetic, the phrase included “up,” or, as illustrated above by the lyrics to the song often referred to as the Black National Anthem,¹ determiners such as “every” and “all.” I am certain, however, that the WVD Committee intentionally avoided any qualifiers for the theme, and in so doing, encouraged intriguing possibilities for exploring its implications.

Beginning in 2008—admittedly a little late to the party—in each March/April issue of the *Journal of Singing* I have tried to draw attention to that year’s April 16 World Voice Day commemoration. Since 2011, I have placed the theme on the cover of the periodical, and, upon learning the WVD theme sometime in October of a given year, have asked my regular contributors to consider addressing the theme in their respective columns, if appropriate. On the one hand, that practice lends a certain unity of content to the corresponding issue, while at the same time underscoring the importance of the observation; on the other hand, however, as the reader will determine in the pages of the current issue, my team has covered the topic so well, with perception, and from many diverse aspects, that the editor finds himself with little to add.

Why is it important, even necessary, to lift one’s voice? If the familiar adage that the eyes are windows to the soul is true, perhaps it also may be added that the voice is the expression of the soul.

When the full-grown poet came,
 Out spake pleased Nature (the round impassive globe,
 with all its shows of day and night,) saying, He is mine;

But out spake too the Soul of man, proud, jealous,
and unreconciled,
Nay, he is mine alone;
—Then the full-grown poet stood between the two, and
took each by the hand;
And to-day and ever so stands, as blender, uniter,
tightly holding hands,
And wholly and joyously blends them.²

And if *that* is true, one must exercise the WVD imperative with care and responsibility.

In both singing and speaking, a top priority must be the nurture and care of the voice so that one can engage or “lift” it effectively and efficiently. Voice practitioners need assiduously to concern themselves with matters of vocal and personal health, voice pedagogy, cognition, and many related issues that have been addressed thoroughly by professionals better equipped than I.³ While nodding in the direction of interpretations of the WVD theme that are more appropriate to this periodical, and while acknowledging with gratitude my colleagues’ competent treatment of it, I want to venture on a different path. I do so with some trepidation, hearing the voice of friend and journalistic mentor Richard Miller, when, at the beginning of my tenure as editor, I sought his advice on writing a more or less regular commentary. Richard approved of the idea, but warned against using the column as a “bully pulpit.” I fear I transgress his admonition on this occasion, but we find ourselves in unusual circumstances that warrant unusual responses.

As I write in early December 2021, we have entered a time that inspires—indeed almost demands—lifting the voice, not only for those of faith, but for all. One week before the season of Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace—themes of the four Sundays of Advent—an unspeakable tragedy occurred in Waukesha, Wisconsin, only a few miles from my home, as a driver of a fleeing, careening vehicle plowed into a Christmas parade, killing six and injuring several other parade participants. Shortly thereafter, we learned about another mass shooting, this one at Oxford High School near Detroit. And all the while, Hydra Covid was rearing still another ugly head in the form of Omicron to spread its venom, abetted by an abysmally low vaccination rate.

There happen in the course of time many things on which one must take a stand out of regard for one’s dignity and integrity. Silence in such cases is also a lifting of

the voice. In fact, silence may be louder than phonation; as Dickinson wrote, “Saying nothing sometimes says the most.”⁴ Over the years, during the weeks preceding my many return trips to Germany, as preparation I read a lot in German in order to refresh vocabulary and become reacquainted with the rhythm and music of the language. Among several, one source I reread is *Draussen vor der Tür*, by Wolfgang Borchert. The title work is a poignant antiwar statement couched in a gripping play that I strongly recommend to all readers. But the book also includes several memorable short stories. Among them is “Dann gibt es nur eins,” in which the author, in reaction to the abuses and evils of wartime and postwar Germany, expresses the refrain “Sag nein!” as a powerful ritornello throughout the story. Borchert protests that, valued and necessary as it often may be, silence perhaps equally often is not an option. German theologian, Christian apologist, and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer is credited with saying that silence in the face of evil is itself evil. Martin Luther King went further, warning that our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.⁵

It seems to me that we singing artists who know truth, the truth in beauty, and the beauty of truth, have a special obligation to lift our voices in these challenging times. Lift your voice to say NO—to the presence of rampant hatred, anger, racism, injustice, inequality, inequity, ignorance, apathy, and all guises of evil that surround us. Lift your voice to say YES—to the pursuit of love, peace, harmony, truth, humaneness, understanding, and the cultivation of good in all its guises. That will be our song!

Give me O God to sing that thought,
Give me, give him or her I love this quenchless faith,
In Thy ensemble, whatever else withheld
withhold not from us,
Belief in plan of Thee enclosed in Time and Space,
Health, peace, salvation universal.⁶

NOTES

1. Black Culture Connection; <http://www.pbs.org/black-culture/explore/black-authors-spoken-word-poetry/lift-every-voice-and-sing/> (accessed December 7, 2021). The music was composed by the poet’s brother, James Weldon Johnson. It was performed for the first time by 500 school children in celebration of Lincoln’s birthday on February 15, 1900, in—appropriately—Jacksonville, Florida.

2. Walt Whitman, "When the Full-Grown Poet Came," from *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), 418.
3. As a sidebar, I need to register my continued dismay at the increasing ubiquity of vocal fry among American—especially female—speakers, conversationally and more formally; it is a careless vocal abuse that one finds only rarely, if at all, in European and Asian cultures, and I deplore its burgeoning use within these shores.
4. The Power of No; <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetry-magazine/articles/74605/the-power-of-no> (accessed December 8, 2021).
5. Unitarian Universalist Association, Silent About Things That Matter; <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/quote/silent-about-things-matter> (accessed December 8, 2021). This is actually a paraphrase from a speech delivered in Selma, Alabama, on March 8, 1965: "A man dies when he refuses to stand up for that which is right. A man dies when he refuses

to stand up for justice. A man dies when he refuses to take a stand for that which is true."

6. Whitman, 187.

Erratum

In the review of "Songs for Hopeful Age" ("Music Reviews," *Journal of Singing* 78, no. 3 [January/February 2022]: 418–419), composer and song information were inadvertently omitted from the contents for *Modern Music for New Singers: 21st Century American Art Songs: Tenor*, volume 2. Composer Adam Burnette (b. 1982) wrote the excellent song, "A Quiet Alleluia," which is printed on page 80 of the anthology. The editor regrets the omission.



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