

Sweet Adelines 2008 International Education Symposium
Keynote Address
Jim Henry

I can't tell you how honored I am to be here tonight. In many ways being invited to speak and teach at Sweet Adelines IES gives me a feeling of really having arrived. Sweet Adelines has been a huge part of my life since my earliest memories. I remember my mom taking me with her to countless rehearsals and Region 5 events. I was practically raised by the entire Kirkwood, MO Chapter (now St. Louis Harmony). I have vivid and cherished memories of sitting in the front row while the Tetrachords sang (Patty Frei singing "Come In From The Rain" still rings in my ears and heart. My mom was a regional quartet champion whose quartet, Most Chordially Yours, competed in London at the Royal Albert Hall, and I used to listen to her practice with her learning tapes. I'm sure I could still sing tenor to all her songs if not for the fact that puberty lowered my voice a couple of octaves. In the fall of 1982, my first semester in college, I saw a notice on the Music Department bulletin board announcing that the local Sweet Adelines chorus was looking for a director. I called the number, met their president (who is a name many of you know—Marcia Bosma), and at 18 years old found myself leading a chorus for the very first time through their charter and first competition. During that time I attended one of the Sweet Adelines Directors Symposia in Denton, TX. I wound up singing in the chorus there that was directed by Jean Barford, a TRULY magical, eye-opening, life-changing experience for me, and one that I'm happy to say has been rekindled as Jean has recently coached my new quartet Crossroads. So Sweet Adelines has been a huge part of my life and education. I learned as much about singing bass from listening to Diane Huber with Ambience as from listening to Rick Staab with the Bluegrass Student Union. A large percentage of the women in my life are or have been Sweet Adelines, including my mom (who sang tenor), my mother-in-law (who sings tenor) and my beautiful wife, Geda, who is sharing this week with me and sings...TENOR. In fact, she sings with two of her sisters in Trademark who will be representing Region 5 in Honolulu in the fall.

And as one with strong ties to both the men's and women's barbershop organizations, I have noticed certain important differences between the two: One: I have never witnessed a chorus of men singing in a hotel lobby at a convention in full costume, makeup, and fuzzy slippers on their feet. Then again, I've never seen a woman walking around with sandals and knee socks, a leather pitch pipe holster attached to her belt, and a "Keep It Barbershop" baseball cap on her head. Men have the monopoly on that look. But the important things, the true magic of barbershop harmony, the insatiable need to ring chords, the friendship and love that develops between singers, the things that bind us to the music and to each other, these things we have in common. They are gender unspecific.

In my career as a college music professor and choral conductor I have many occasions to visit schools and work with their choirs. One day as I was leaving a high school in St. Louis I walked past a small landscaped area just a few yards from the main entrance to the school. In the middle was a plaque with a quote attributed to Mother Teresa. It read, "We can do no great things, only small things with great love." Something about this phrase struck me like a lightning bolt. It was so simple, so eloquent, so true, and so universal to every aspect of life. "We can do no great things, only small things with great love." I have quoted it many times since then, and have used it as an example of how great music is made.

Here are some examples of small things done with great love. In 1945, Edna Mae Anderson traveled from Tulsa to Detroit with her husband Bill to attend the SPEBSQSA National Convention. Inspired by the convention and no longer content to just be an audience member she decided that the time had come to form a women's organization dedicated to barbershop harmony. The first small thing. Upon her return to Tulsa she contacted other barbershop wives to meet and discuss the idea. That meeting took place in her home on July 13th, Friday the 13th as a matter of fact—who says that's an unlucky day! The next small thing. The group decided to have an official kickoff on July 23 at the Hotel Tulsa (the same place the men had formed SPEBSQSA six-and-a-half years earlier) and 150 women showed up. The next small thing. A couple of

weeks later, on August 5, the first meeting of the first chapter of Sweet Adelines took place. And what was the name of this first chapter? The Atomaton Chapter. The Atom. The smallest particle of a chemical element. “We have an atom of energy to start the organization with,” said Edna Mae, “and we will do it to the tune of ‘Sweet Adeline.’” Edna Mae Anderson knew without having had to read Mother Teresa’s quote that this great vision she had would grow out of a series of small things done with great love.

And how it has grown. Nearly 27,000 women representing every state, as well as Australia, Canada, England, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, Scotland, Sweden and the Netherlands now realize Edna Mae’s dream. With prospective choruses in Denmark, Greece and United Arab Emirates. Sweet Adelines boasts more than 1,200 registered quartets and nearly 600 choruses. And within each of these choruses is a collection of individuals doing their small thing in service to a great vision.

This International Education Symposium is a testament to small things done with great love. Here we have classes that deal with every niche of music making in general, and of barbershop harmony in particular: Word Sounds, Tuning, Analytical Listening, Directing Skills, Using Warm-Up Tapes, Getting More Creative, Interpretation, Showmanship, Choosing Music, Vocal Production, Color of Sound; all of which are individual processes, small things, that when brought together yield great, artistic results.

I mean when you think about all the small things that go into a worthy performance of a *single song* by a barbershop chorus, it will boggle your mind. First, we need a composer and lyricist to write the song. We need an arranger to arrange the song. We need the singers to sing the song. We need money to purchase the song. We need a place to rehearse the song. We need administrators to help us raise the money and run the organization. We need at least one person to teach and direct the song. We have to learn the notes. We have to learn the words (yes, even you, leads, have to learn the words!). We have to stand with good posture. We have to manage our breath properly. We have to use the proper amount of diaphragmatic resistance to support the tone. We have to increase our range. We have to build resonance in our voices individually and match our resonances with those of the other singers. Not too much head voice, not too much chest voice. We have to agree on the vowels, form them properly, and match them with the other singers. Of course, as we go higher or lower we might have to modify the vowels, but not too much or they won’t match with the rest of the chorus. Our tone must stay consistent. Of course, in order to give the illusion of a consistent tone, we actually need to sing brighter as we go low and rounder as we go high, but not too much or we won’t blend with the rest of the chorus. We have to articulate the consonants and synchronize those with the other singers. We have to perform diphthongs and match those to the other singers. We have to get all the singers to start and end every phrase at the same time. We have to sing from note to note with accuracy. We have to balance our part in relationship to the other parts, always striving to maintain the blasted cone. We have to stay in the key, not sharpening or flattening. We have to tune the chords as they go by. We have to stay in tempo. We have to incorporate elements of artistry: dynamics, tempo changes, rubato, articulations, forward motion, glissandos, sforzandos, tenutos, staccatos, legato. Our faces and bodies must express the message of the song. We have to learn the choreography. Basses need to sing with beauty but lay down a firm foundation. Baritones need to blend into the sound but they have to be full enough to support the basses and fill out the chorus, being careful, however, to soften up when they’re above the leads so as not to stick out of the aforementioned...blasted cone. Leads have to carry the message, so it is important that they have lots of personality when they sing. But not too much *individual* personality or they won’t blend with the other leads. The tenors have to have clear voices that are light enough to not overpower the leads but strong enough to add sizzle to the sound. Too much vibrato, especially in the tenor voice, will kill us all, but you can’t sing a pure straight tone or you’ll lose the spin in the sound. Sing louder if you’re on the root or the fifth of the chord, softer if you’re on the seventh. Unless, of course, the seventh is sung a step below the root, in which case you should bring it out a little bit. The fifth should be sung higher than the piano would play it, and the seventh should be lower. The third should be lower than the piano plays it, too, but since everybody sings the third way too low anyway, you should imagine singing it higher

than the piano would play it. Sing to the audience, but don't every take your eyes off the director. Keep the energy in your sound and in your visual presentation. Energy, energy, ENERGY. And, oh yeah, LOOK LIKE YOU ENJOY THIS!! We need a place to perform the song. We need an audience for whom we can perform the song. We need tickets, PR, programs, a stage crew, risers, props, costumes, somebody to make sure the all-in-ones fit, shoes, lights, a script, dressing rooms, and somebody to supply the dressing rooms with baskets filled with fruit and water, and nuts, and tic-tacs, and Vaseline so your lips don't stick to your teeth!

How do we ever do it all? More importantly, WHY do we do it all? The answer can be found in the second part of Mother Teresa's quote: We can do no great things, only small things with *great love*. We do it because we LOVE it. We do it because the more details we master, the better we are. And the better we are the more our lives are changed, not to mention the lives of the people we sing with, and sing FOR.

But so many times we get so wrapped up in the small things that we forget the most important part. It's just like people to miss the forest for the trees. Great love should be the foundation of what we're doing. But instead we work on this detail and that detail—match the vowels, more bass, sing this part faster, grow the tag—and forget that every one of those tasks should be driven by the heart. The only purpose they serve is to help to convey the message of the song in a clear, loving, and honest way. But if the heart element, the love, is missing, we just become a collection of robots spouting off this technique and that technique. The love is missing. The heart is missing. The ART is missing. This isn't new. Read the Bible: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity (LOVE), I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal." Is that all we are sometimes? Have you seen choruses and quartets that are outstanding, and yet make you feel like there's something missing?

This past year I was judging high school choirs at an all day music festival. With every choir that sang, I found myself writing over and over again, "Communicate, Communicate." Here were these high school singers, all with beautiful voices, the choirs were all very fine, sang with a beautiful tone, well-balanced, in tune, by most every measure they were almost perfect...and practically devoid of a soul. They were sounding brass, tinkling cymbals. One of the pieces that was sung that day was titled, "Sing Me To Heaven."

If you would comfort me, *sing* me a lullaby.
If you would win my heart, *sing* me a love song.
If you would mourn me and bring me to God, *sing* me a requiem,
Sing me to heaven.

A lullaby, the *song* of our birth; a love song, the *song* of our life; a requiem, the *song* of our death: "*Sing* me to heaven."

Is there a more touching lyric, one that speaks to the power of music and singing in our lives than this one? And yet nothing about how these young people looked or sang demonstrated that they really felt it or even understood it. Yes, they displayed superior craftsmanship, and their director had perfect conducting technique. But I found myself not caring in the least. I could imagine what a typical rehearsal for this choir would be like because I've seen such rehearsals by most every chorus—classical, educational, community, and barbershop—that I have worked with or observed. "Move it along a little faster here." "Now slow down." "Hold the MM sound." "Get louder here." *Ad infinitum*. A thousand details and no heart. We forget that the only reason to *do* these things is so the heart and soul of the music will burst forth uninterrupted from the inspiration of the lyricist to the pen of the composer, to the musical sensibilities of the conductor, to the passion of the singers, to the panting souls of the audience. These details are important, critical, as a matter of fact, but not as an end unto themselves. They are the means by which I as a singer can

express the soul of the music, and more profoundly they are the means by which I can express *my soul* through the music.

I am constantly reminded of renowned choral conductor Eph Ehly who I observed tell a high school All-State Honors Choir, “The audience doesn’t want to hear good music; they want to *experience* something.” All the technique in the world can’t give your music real soul. But, conversely, all the heart in the world can’t overcome the distractions caused by poor technique. Both are critical in the effort to change people’s lives through music. Technique and heart—small things with great love—that’s the secret.

All great teachers know that a student will learn material more readily and thoroughly if that student sees the material as something that is relevant to his/her life. Yes, I can stand up in front of a classroom and have the students mindlessly drill a set of facts and figures until they memorize it. But without that heart connection it will be forgotten. Most of us took at least one algebra class in high school. Raise your hand if you know you could pass your high school algebra final exam today?

Now raise your hand if you can remember a song that your mother, or father, or grandparent sang to you as a child. That’s the difference. There’s a heart connection with those songs of our youth. (Cab Driver)

But so many choral directors and coaches teach the music like it’s an algebra class. A lot of do this and don’t do that. And they get frustrated because the singers don’t remember to do every one of the hundreds of instructions they’ve been given. “I TOLD YOU WE’RE SUPPOSED TO GET SOFTER THERE!!” “NO! WE’RE SUPPOSED TO *MOVE* THROUGH THIS PHRASE.” “LADIES! HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO TELL YOU NOT TO STRESS THE WORD, ‘THE’; IT’S AN UNIMPORTANT WORD. YOU DON’T STRESS IT WHEN YOU SAY IT; WHY DO YOU STRESS IT WHEN YOU SING IT?!” “WHAT’S THE MATTER WITH YOU?!? WE’VE GONE OVER AND OVER THIS. WHY CAN’T YOU REMEMBER?” (Trust me, chorus singer, if your director hasn’t said these things out loud, they’ve said them in their minds.) I’ll tell you why, directors, your singer can’t remember. Most of your chorus is not like you. They’re *normal*. They don’t all get as excited about a perfectly turned diphthong as you do. If their hearts are invested in that diphthong, however, they will never forget it.

Sing the following lyric from the song “Just the Way You Look Tonight”:

Someday when I’m awfully low,
When the world is cold,
I will feel a glow just thinking of you
Just the way you look tonight.

Now, think about the setting: the intimacy, the time of evening, the person you’re singing to. You’re looking into the future, knowing you’ll have blue days. You also know, however, that from now on the memory of this perfect night, the image of that person whose eyes you are looking into, will make the rough times easier to bear. Put real emotion into the tone and into the consonants. There is a difference when you’re singing about feeling down in a cold world and when you’re describing the warmth that fills you today. Sing again and put that spirit into the song. Once you’ve experienced that you never want to go back to mindless technical devices again. All the sudden we sing with real purpose. *We want* to perform all the techniques because we are emotionally invested in getting that message across to the audience. And now we’ve created something truly rare and special: ART!

And we become really impatient with people who *don’t* sing with depth and honesty. You’ll listen to quartets and choruses and one of them will let fly with a “when the world is KKold” or “just thinking OF (big glissando) you,” and you’ll want to scream, “I DON’T BELIEVE YOU!” You see, the device though well intentioned takes you out of the message of the song just as much as an out of tune chord does. It is

surface ornamentation. It's melodrama. It gives the impression of emotion, but it's only an inch deep. It's paint by numbers when we're capable of the Mona Lisa.

When love, heart, honesty is at the core of our music making, the techniques take on a whole new value to us. And we develop the heart of an artist. Rather than sing for the contest, we sing for the art. Rather than sing to impress people, we sing to change their lives. Rather than sing for our glory, we sing to heal souls.

A few years ago I had the opportunity to take my college choir to Germany. While there we took a train ride to Cologne. Now, if you ever have the chance to go there, especially by train, *don't pass it up*. After you arrive in Cologne you leave the station, and the very minute you walk outside, you see to your left soaring like a majestic alpine mountain, the Cologne Cathedral. You have to see this cathedral to truly believe it. It is the largest Gothic cathedral in Northern Europe and presents the largest façade of any church in the entire world. Only one church on earth has a taller spire, but the Cologne cathedral has not one spire, but two, identical to one another, each one stretching 515 feet in the air. The first stone was laid in 1248, and 632 years later, in 1880, the structure was finally completed. My students and I stood in front of those two spires speechless and motionless for 20 minutes trying in vain to take it all in. The proportion, the intricacy, the history. We tried so hard to grasp it all. I started studying one of the spires. Embedded among the columns as far up as my eyes could see were hundreds of figures—apostles, saints, angels. And each one was remarkably detailed. I could see fingers, and small folds in the robes, and individual curls of hair. And I just knew that the figures at the top were as detailed as the ones within my sight. Suddenly the thought occurred to me that some person carved each one of those figures. Now, that person had to know that no one would see those angels near the top of those spires, but still, I am sure, he carved out the pupils in every eye with all care he gave the ones close to the ground. Why would he do that? Because he was a craftsman, an artist. He didn't know how to do it any other way. He couldn't build the entire cathedral, but he could carve pupils in the eyes of an angel, and he did that one small thing with everything he had. A while back, Karen Breidert heard me tell this story to my chorus and a few days later sent me a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow titled "The Builders." Here are two stanzas from that poem:

In the elder days of Art,
Builders wrought with greatest care
Each minute and unseen part;
For the Gods see everywhere.

Let us do our work as well,
Both the unseen and the seen'
Make the house, where Gods may dwell,
Beautiful, entire, and clean.

We can do no great things, only small things with great love. Whether we're creating a cathedral, raising a child, preparing a piece of music, or sustaining an organization devoted to music. All great accomplishments are a result of thousands upon thousands of small things done with great love. Edna Mae Anderson called the first chapter of *Sweet Adelines* the Atomaton Chapter. The atom was the smallest particle that a person could imagine in 1945. About fifteen years later smaller particles called quarks came along. Now some physicists and mathematicians propose an even smaller phenomenon, smaller than atoms and quarks. According to Joseph Eger, author of the book "Einstein's Violin," these phenomena are "smaller than any particle known or speculated about. Despite not having internal structures of their own, [they] are the elements from which *everything* is made." What are these elements? Strings. Undulating strings, each one "measuring a billionth of a trillionth of a trillionth of a centimeter." According to string theorists, the entire universe is made up of vibrating strings. MUSIC! Countless tiny musical strings harmonizing with one

another like a microscopic orchestra to create the vastness of the entire universe. Synergy in its purest and most dramatic form.

May this week find us, musical beings ourselves, discovering and building upon those small things that we can do with great love in service to Sweet Adelines, barbershop harmony, and artistic, life-changing music making. Edna Mae Anderson laid the cornerstone. The cathedral is still being built. So let's go carve some pupils in the eyes of angels.