

WHY WE SING

Address delivered by Herbert Kretzmer, on the occasion of his receiving the degree of Doctor of Letters (Honoris Causa) at the Commencement Ceremony of Richmond College, The American International University in London, held at Church House, Westminster, London on 21 December 1996.

Mr President, when you asked me to address this distinguished audience you may remember that you advocated brevity – "something around 12 or so minutes". We agreed, too, that I should say something about songs, their power and their mystery.

I do not differentiate here between the classic tradition – Schubert Lieder, and so on – and songs generally regarded as light and popular. Noel Coward was right to call our attention to what he famously called the potency of cheap music. (I would argue that a song like the Beatles' She's Leaving Home is as remarkable as any song written in our time).

Allow me, ladies and gentlemen, to introduce myself with three brief, but vivid memories of my childhood in a small town in South Africa.

The first concerns the very first memory of my life, when I was, I suppose, something less than a year old. I remember being spread-eagled across the broad back of a black woman who lived with us and worked for my family – or, rather, she lived apart from us in a small room off our back yard, for such was the South African fashion at the time, and probably still is.

So, there I was, flat on my stomach across this woman's back, held there by her great wrap-around Basutho blanket. She was bent over some task in the yard; probably she was washing clothes in a zinc tub, and she sang as she worked.

Some may dispute whether it is possible to recall an event from so long ago; I can only say to you that the heat of the southern sun on my back, this woman's own scent in my nostrils and her sweet African song in my ears made for a memory so powerful and distinct that it all seems to have happened just the other day.

My second memory sees me sitting on the curbside, with my feet in the gutter, directly outside the front gate of the house in which I was born. I am still too young to be in school. A few feet in front of me, like a chorus line, imagine five or six black convicts from the local jail, dressed in identical prison garb, digging up a section of the street with pick-axes under the eye of a white policeman leaning against a tree.

As the men worked they sang, as only African men seem able to sing. They raised their pick-axes to the blue sky, then smashed them down with a deep, explosive grunt, all with absolute precision. I felt the earth tremble beneath my heels each time their pick-axes bit into the hard ground.

The final memory concerns a time when I was a teenaged Boy Scout in this same small town. With so many adults away at war I was obliged to lead the local Scouts myself at our weekly Friday night meetings in a hall adjoining the Methodist church. It was around this time that I discovered that a separate troop of Scouts existed in our town, and had existed for some years: a troop of black boys who lived in the shanty town – what was called the "location" – beyond the outskirts of our town.

I don't believe I had ever heard these black Boy Scouts talked of. But after we, that is the white boys, discovered their existence we occasionally invited them down to the riverbank where we had our own camp site, called Grey Wolf's Glen, and there we sat under the stars around a camp fire and sang songs together. Such get-togethers were rare in rural South Africa at that time, but it

did not strike us as anything much more than a modest fulfilment of the Boy Scout creed, which claims not to discriminate against any boy on the basis of colour or faith.

What these three memories have in common, among other things, is that they are all concerned with singing, the miracle of song, and the persistence of musical memory.

The black woman who induced in me such a state of bliss as I lay across her back was obeying some timeless urge to ease her labour, to make that particular moment in her life more agreeable, to beautify it with music as she worked.

The convicts who shook the earth beneath my small, sandalled feet were singing together to proclaim something about themselves which they could not have expressed, perhaps, in any other way. The white supervisor probably had little idea of what the prisoners were singing about. But whatever it was, they were also saying "You have taken our freedom, but you cannot take away what remains of our self-respect – cannot take away our song."

And we white and black Scouts sang together because when we did we were beyond the inadequacies of language. Most of us boys of thirteen and fourteen would not have known how to talk easily across the racial divide, or even what to talk about; but in song we were brought pleasantly into a proximity not widely duplicated in the real South Africa out there in the darkness beyond the glow of the camp fire.

I have sometimes wondered why we sing at all. The austere requirements of human survival would not seem to include the capacity to raise our voices in melody. Darwin thought that song had played no role in man's development except perhaps as part of a mating ritual, a form of sexual display. So it remains one of the great mysteries.

Of course, humans would have, from earliest times, raised their voices in specific circumstances – to alert others to approaching danger or to express anything carrying a heightened emotional charge. The Swiss created the yodel because it was the most efficient way of communicating directly across a mountainous landscape, even at dead of night.

But the act of singing itself, apparently purposeless in evolutionary terms, must surely have been born of something else, something that proclaimed a deeper longing for symmetry and harmony and order – in other words, a yearning for what is beautiful. We sing, we respond to song, because we are spiritual beings.

In every opera and musical comedy there are key moments when what needs to be stated is too significant or profound or elusive to be captured in everyday terms -- and then we must enter into the higher language of song.

When I was working on the English lyrics of the musical *Les Misérables* in 1985, one of the anthems in the original 1980 French libretto called on the citizens of Paris to rise and fight against the social injustices of the time. That stirring call to arms was titled *A La Volonte Du Peuple*. At the will of the people. My own version of the song was somewhat different and I chose the metaphor of song as its central driving idea.

Do you hear the people sing
Singing the song of angry men?
It is the music of a people
Who will not be slaves again
When the beating of your heart
Echoes the beating of the drums
There is a world about to start
When tomorrow comes

When Dorothy in the movie musical *The Wizard Of Oz* needs to express her longing for a better world, all talking stops in this talking picture, and she finds she can only do so in song. Something better for her, for us all, is waiting somewhere ... over the rainbow.

When Hamlet is slain Horatio intuitively fastens on the idea of song to grace the final journey of his dear friend: " Goodnight sweet prince; and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest. "

Sing thee to thy rest. For all tribes, for all peoples, song is ever present to comfort us at the peak moments of our time on earth, and at its end. From lullaby to graveside lamentation.

Do you know that there has never existed a race on earth that did not sing ? The Oxford Companion to Music opens its section on Song with the stark declaration: "No songless people has ever been discovered." And it goes on to say that even among aboriginal tribes which had no musical instruments of any kind there was always a tradition of song, sometimes fairly advanced.

You don't need an instrument to be able to sing. You are the instrument. You carry it with you, the most portable musical instrument there has been, and the cheapest.

Song seems to be instinctive among human beings. It comes naturally to children. Indeed, it is no longer disputed that even a human foetus is capable of hearing music, and of responding to it.

A recent paper on the psychology of infancy described how a certain child, much given to crying, could almost invariably be calmed by playing to it the signature tune of *Coronation Street*. The mother, it turned out, was a dedicated follower of the television programme, and the foetus had learned that the playing of the title music coincided with periods when the mother was quiet and at rest ; she was probably sitting with her feet up, to watch her favourite TV soap. After its birth the infant continued to associate the melody with repose and relaxation, and so became quiet itself.

The foetus lives almost entirely in a world of sound; and what it hears, above all, is the beat of the mother's heart, the rhythm of her breathing -- the rhythms of life. Thus it is born with an elementary sense or experience of rhythm, which is echoed and advanced by the rocking motion of cradle, pram, and mother's arms.

I am running out of my promised time so let me begin to close with what is at the heart of these words. John Mortimer describes opera as something that provides a subtext of human existence - – what is sung is what we all feel beneath the flat, controlled surface of our lives.

In other words, music, song, drama are not indulgences a civilised society might deign to support from time to time They are crucial to that society's health and identity. The fact that we sing, and dance and make music is proof that we do not, after all, live by bread alone. Deprived of that self-expression, that self-declaration, we will atrophy and die as surely as we would without food and water.

We need theatres and concert halls as we need hospitals. There must be space for both Hillaire Belloc thought it " the best of all trades to make songs -- and the second best to sing them." Let me end by quoting an eminent Scottish parliamentarian, Andrew Fletcher, who proclaimed in the year 1703 " Let me make the songs of a nation and I care not who makes its laws."

Some 300 years later may I, a humble toiler in the vineyard of song, say Amen to that.