

The DLSU Chorale: A Stirring Experience
Written by JP Paredes, Seattle, Washington, USA

[Note: The DLSU Chorale was in Olympia on May 12-18, 2004 where they mesmerized the various audiences with their singing. The FACSPS sponsored their visit. They performed at Pierce College in Puyallup, at River Ridge High School, and at Olympia High School Theater for their gala show, and sang during the Mass at Sacred Heart Church. After their Olympia sojourn the Chorale proceeded to Seattle for a series of engagements. It is from Seattle that this article was written.]

In these dark times, what better way than for the Philippines to send out into the world its ambassadors of love and goodwill; and what better way than to send the message of love than through songs? It is therefore no mere coincidence that the DLSU Chorale teamed up with the Greater Washington Alpha Phi Omega and the U.P. Alpha Phi Omega Foundation to bring to Seattle on May 18-24 the message of peace and love that appeal to the spirit through beautiful songs. The Seattle sojourn of the De La Salle University (DLSU) Chorale was a rousing success. It showed that a solid group of Alpha Phi Omegas can marshal meager resources in leadership to shake the Seattle arts community; that the fractious Filipino groups can, at least for the duration of the performances, unite in friendship to appreciate the arts - a sublime spectacle of young people interacting on a high plane of culture, arts and music with their peers, other chorales, seniors, Filipinos and the mainstream; that service can be rendered in the process - old folks being entertained by good live music performance, suddenly regaining their "ear" for music...scampering with their canes and walkers to get money to buy CDs so that they would have a more permanent memento of their experience and to call upon the lovely songs at will.

On May 19 the DLSU Chorale visited the prestigious Jesuit-run Seattle University (SU) to engage in musical cultural interchange, wherein the SU Chorale (66 members) sang songs to demonstrate their wares to the visiting Filipinos. The DLSU Chorale (17 members including its musical director Professor. Rodolfo Delarmente) then sang their songs. Only the last song When Will I See You Again was in English.

This was the SU Chorale's first time to engage in cultural interchange and, being themselves knowledgeable about singing, were amazed that a very small group of diminutive Pinoys could possibly produce such rich variation of notes and tone, exquisitely rendered yet powerful, the universal language of song. Never mind that DLSU sang Tagalog and Ilocano songs. They were treated to a private world-class performance, and were so impressed that the SU's musical directress requested for the arrangement of the Ama Namin, as an addition to her own chorale's future repertoire.

The next day's agenda was a cultural interchange, this time with the Ballard High School, and an evening performance at the University House.

The prestigious Ballard High School (BHS) is more than century-old. The cultural interchange followed the same pattern with the directress of the host chorale (50 members) briefing the guests about her program, after which ensued a demonstration of their wares. The BHS Chorale was itself busy the past months performing in various prominent venues like the Meany Hall for the Performing Arts in the University of Washington, the Benaroya Hall in downtown Seattle and other centers of culture and arts in Washington. The BHS kids were very good, very professional and truly impressive.

And then the DLSU Chorale sang...

Filipino renditions of The Lord is my Shepherd (Panginoon ang Aking Pastol by Maestro Lucio San Pedro) and The Lord's Prayer, among several other songs by DLSU produced more of the same effect - mouths agape, eyes glazed in absolute wonderment, the private audience totally immersed in pleasurable rapture. According to my son Ian, a senior at Ballard High "The Ballard Chorale is VERY good, but the DLSU is perfection." Need I say more?

Next came the evening session with retired faculty and staff of the University of Washington (UW). It was a sight to behold. With their trademark green blazers, my respect for the instincts of Professor Delarmente as a complete professional was only heightened. He had his heart in the right place as he honored his audience with a more formal attire than the previous casual cultural exchanges.

The UW seniors ambled silently, some with walkers and some with canes; some were unaided but all were bent from, I can only imagine, the cares of their long years; many wore hearing aids and thick eyeglasses; one even wheeled her oxygen bottle. During the performance, I could practically hear the soft hiss of the oxygen keeping tempo with the songs. It might have been my imagination, who knows, but the magic was truly in the air.

And then the DLSU Chorale sang. I became selfish - no longer did I notice the seniors; I cared only for me as I immersed myself completely enveloped in the familiar yet rare rapturous feeling of heavenly voices permeating the depths of my spirit. I experienced a profound joy that one experiences through the renditions of these geniuses of song as the spirit soars with the tunes. I could not take in enough of their voices no matter how many times I hear the same songs. Take for example their version of the Shenandoah. It is just a river here in the United States, right? I haven't seen it, not even in pictures. But when the kids sang the song of this river, it was all I could do to avoid crying for joy at the images evoked - DLSU took me on a journey, floating on the Shenandoah, the powerful river that moves with calm determination, languorously cradling me on a raft of clouds, then rushing through a fork in the river that ironically maintains me in a safe bosom, leading me on through its highway of water through meaningful history. The beat, the highs and lows of the song, made Shenandoah all too real and tangible.

I would confess that I am not a creature of culture yet, listening to the voices of these kids, angelic would not sufficiently describe their voices. I never thought I could swoon like a hormonal teenager, but I did.

During the whole performance, I turned my attention to the hands of the master, Professor Delarmente, which were as one with the voices and the song. They produced clear images of wispy ropes pulling tones and tunes, each length exposing exquisite audible beauty. Where I thought the last tune was perfect, the tones conjured by his hand movements pull out yet more ropes of ever increasing perfection, if that was even possible.

Another day arrived, Friday, May 21, for the main event, the gala performance of these geniuses of song at the UW's Kane Hall. All the preparations and the details of the occasion had to be precise, fitting for precise and perfect performers. Even the setting was perfect. The Kane Hall lobby is a huge impressive affair of high doors and a mural suspended about 50 feet high along the main wall. The Roethke Auditorium, site of the concert, is itself a study in architectural beauty and utility, tastefully upholstered seats convertible into classroom desks, sturdy floors gently rising in a theater arrangement as well as an upper balcony, a low three-step high stage, and impeccable acoustics the slightest whisper could be heard from any point within.

And then the chorale started to file out onto the stage, faced the Philippine flag and sang the Philippine national anthem. The tone for the whole evening was set. Nobody in the audience of mostly Filipinos dared sing the anthem for fear of missing the beauty of the song, the heroism it evoked, and the longing it aroused to be once again cradled into the bosom of the motherland – such scenes peeked out from my soul and burst unadorned in full glory in my mind down to the depths of my heart. And then the Star-Spangled Banner – again an evocation of emotions for the adopted motherland, its trials, tribulations and triumph over adversity. The program has just started and culture has already won over the coarseness of my baser nature.

Then the concert began, mostly Filipino songs - folk songs and OPM – as well as popular and foreign songs. The effect was positively astounding, the audience atmosphere was so electric that everybody, even the children, sat rapt and silent, drinking in the sounds and allowing themselves to be enveloped in a pervasive mist of song that gradually turns into a river, then a flood, gradually ebbing into gentle streams. It was an experience that only Carlos Castaneda could fictionalize as a separate reality – almost like a peyote-induced subconsciousness.

After the show, the audience milled about the lobby, everyone vied for signatures, a photo with the kids or just to grab more of that time that they knew they could not hang onto forever. The standing ovations, the peaceful happy faces, the wide smiles, the absolute joy in the faces of the audience said it all.

To summarize the effect on the audience, let me quote a Japanese couple: “The group is really very, very good. Thank you very much for inviting us. They are really good.” Toshi Namiki's facility for the English language was elementary. That statement and the couple's happy faces

regaled me with a thousand words. If this Japanese couple appreciated the songs despite the lyrics being totally strange to their ears, how much more enjoyment could the Filipinos derive? Truly, song is the international language of the spirit, transcending geographic boundaries and ethnicities, a universal expressive medium. The DLSU Chorale is its purveyor.

The day before the DLSU left for the next leg of their tour (Dallas, Texas) they performed at the Holy Family Church in West Seattle. It was such a fitting setting, during mass celebrated in Tagalog. The group sang one communion song. The crowd, though treated to a wonderful piece was too distracted by the shuffling of feet and the motley sounds of voices invoking and responding to the Body of Christ. The subconscious could not be denied, however; deep inside the spirit stirred.

Before the mass ended, Ruffy Ignacio introduced the DLSU to the front altar where they sang their songs - songs that were appropriate, sufficiently solemn but meaningful and ripe with feeling; songs that evoked pride in being a Filipino; songs that appealed to the soul. The churchgoers were absolutely thrilled and moved by the beauty of the voices that sang in praise. Indeed, song is one of the highest forms of praise to the Lord; the perfect blend of beautiful voices is an even higher form. If I might be presumptuous to imagine what God was doing right then, I am sure that He was smiling and weeping with joy and pride at the beauty his children offered up to Him.

My words would not be adequate to describe the passion, the happiness, the welling of spiritual satisfaction and pride upon hearing these kids sing, as well as watching the genius of their musical director whose hands are as one with their voices, pulling ever deeper streams of song that created floods of beauty that can only be understood by the soul.

Ruffy Ignacio and I accompanied the Chorale to the airport Monday. After ensuring that they went through security checks without any hitch, I felt a sense of relief. Physical relief because it was a hectic week from the moment we took responsibility for them at the start of their visit. More than physical relief, however, was the emotional relief. One can only experience so much joy and pride at having a treasure in our midst without being jaded to beauty and perfection if allowed to linger too long. Like all good things, the visit must end, perhaps to intensify the feeling that a beautiful thing descended in our midst; that a blessing is better appreciated when absent. As a parting advice to the kids, as if they were my own children: "Make somebody else happy."

We bade them farewell, an act that my wife, Melanie, could not bring herself to do. She had grown so attached to the kids like her own children leaving the hearth into the unknown. Yet, she realized that we cannot be selfish, that we needed to share them with other communities across the USA.

We bid thee farewell for now, our beloved DLSU Chorale, content in our hearts that for a fleeting moment you brought beauty to our little corner of the world here in Seattle. Share the

blessings of your presence and wonderful voices in song to other parts of the land. We could not unfortunately follow you on to Europe for your competitions but our thoughts accompany you.

[Note: -- From Seattle, the DLSU Chorale proceeded to Dallas, Texas for a series of concerts. And then on to Chicago, and New York and Boston. After the US tour the Chorale will fly to Sweden and Norway and other countries in Europe on a two-month quest of honor and medals in various competitions in the Continent competing against the bests in the world. The Philippines owes these young ambassadors a lot. We wish them good luck and Godspeed. – Rufino Ignacio, President of FACSPS, and Grand Chancellor of the UP Alpha Phi Omega Foundation in North America]