



Proposal – Sacred Music Concerts: A Balm for Healing Old Wounds

We are a duo of nationally exhibited artists who want to affect healing in the Southern white and black communities that we live in. One of us is a Southerner by birth, and the other grew up on an Appalachian farm. We feel that the roots of so much conflict and disaffection in the South is the institution of slavery, an enterprise that dehumanized people on both sides of the equation. We asked ourselves how can we start a movement of healing and extend a gesture that may inspire others to do the same?

We turned to the landscape of the South, its monuments and memorials. In the city of Lewisburg, West Virginia, one of our adopted hometowns, several old cemeteries are within walking distance of each other. One is a Confederate burial ground made in the shape of a cross and another is a resting place for the formerly enslaved called the Dick Pointer Cemetery. Dick Pointer was a slave in 1788, later eventually freed, a hero who saved many white settlers in Fort Donnelly, near Lewisburg, by warning them of an early morning Indian uprising.

Both resting places represent wounds that beg for healing for various groups in Lewisburg: African Americans, faith-based community members, social Justice proponents, Whites who are not necessarily proud of all aspects of the Confederate legacy. African Americans in Lewisburg do not visit the Confederate Cemetery for obvious reasons. It evokes a miasma of past ills and insults in a town where the mood is now progressive and forward-looking. Lewisburg is an oasis of racial cooperation in a county that is adamantly politically red. Our group once hoped that two concerts of sacred music might take place at each location, together with ceremonies to elicit healing and reconciliation, but a concert at the Confederate cemetery is not possible currently due to safety concerns. We now propose that a concert at The Dick Pointer Cemetery take place involving both black and white churches in the area, as well as the community chorale which is a diverse group in terms of race. We recognize that historically blacks have sung for whites in a variety of situations over the centuries, but rarely if ever have whites sung for blacks in a sacred music capacity, to ease their souls to rest. This project is meant to begin to remedy that glaring disparity. Blessings for the unknown resting places of the enslaved will also be incorporated into our ceremony.

We propose to facilitate community organizing to secure grassroots support for the project. Emphasizing a common Christian language including important and relevant words and phrases such as fellowship, communion, sacred community building and forgiveness will be central to this project. We believe that church groups do work at forgiveness, sacred community building, fellowship, and communion, and most effectively do so within their discrete groups. This project is meant to build bridges across those communities. The project will also include a healing element in the form of Appalachian healing balms and modalities in order to further build bridges across communities. We also propose that there will be a walking meditation to Bolling Cemetery on Court Street and a potluck meal representing the best of each community in need of healing. The food will be served after the walk.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS/ORGANIZERS

In October, 2022, Tricia Townes and Jess Levine envisioned this project in a class exercise for “Art and the Social/All the World’s a Stage,” an art class offered by The Alternative Art School. As well as deep ties to the Appalachian region, Tricia and Jess both have a compelling interest and strong background in leading arts-based activities that emphasize wide-spectrum community engagement.