PRACTICAL METHODS IN CHORAL SPEAKING

M. E. DeWitt & Others

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By

MARGUERITE E. DeWITT

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The Quarterly Journal of Speech
Theatre and School
The English Journal
The Emerson Quarterly
The Harvard Teachers' Record
Progressive Education
The Journal of Expression
Mount Holyoke Alumnae Quarterly
The English Leaflet
Good Speech

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*Shall We Recite As Groups?**

An informal consideration of various aspects of a modern community activity, the specific suggestions and examples being founded primarily upon personal experience. This section is offered for whatever it may be worth to the less experienced conductor, not as a guide or text, but as a possibly helpful supplement to any material used. Suggestions should be regarded as possibilities only if they happen to be in keeping with individual requirements. Since the interpretation of revered text is a controversial subject, printed examples herein will not be limited to material of literary value [1]

by

M. E. DeWITT

WE ARE familiar with the Greek idea of using a chorus to heighten the effect or to supplement the unfolding of a story in drama. The theatre, and schools of oral art and craft have ever kept alive an interest in Greek drama, thus bringing an uninterrupted influence to the more modern work within and apart from the theatre.[2]

1. There were several reasons for having to present the material in a personalized form:

(a) The publisher desired material based primarily upon personal experience.

(b) The only possible contribution on the part of the writer was to indicate ways and means of work; to indicate the chance, or other, trials and discoveries, and the experimental application of results obtained thereby; to indicate some elements of gradually developed technique, showing its relation to technique not limited by choric work.

(c) The writer did not wish to give the impression of presenting an inflexible or fixed proprietary method of choric work, because her work never has been and never will be thus limited. She did not wish to present theories, techniques or suggestions impersonally, thereby giving the impression that they might be necessarily basic for all group work in all sections of all countries. She especially desired not to interfere with possible opposing opinions of other workers by making, invariable, impersonal generalizations.

(d) Some forms of national or foreign work are universal, related, overlapping, or otherwise akin. Whereas the writer's theoretical

We are accustomed to the integral and also incidental use of group or mass speech in later periods of drama. Of course we realize that the strength of Shakespeare's drama was not dependent upon an organized choir; however, a director may well take into consideration, especially in modern productions, the rhythmic support and amplification obtainable through design of group sound-movement. In a Lope de Vega (1562) play such as *Fuente Ovejuna*,[3] the fact that the play has neither hero nor heroine accentuates the possibility of organized mass effects. The writer understands that plays of Pedro Calderon (1600) offer choric possibilities and for a later example, Goethe's *Faust* might be cited. Most of us are acquainted with E. Toller's *Man and the Masses;* T. S. Eliot's *The*

interests are sympathetically international, her practical interests are in universal and other conditions as they exist in America. Her national angle of interest is neither local nor scholastic. Her terminology does not profess to be tied within the limiting enclosures of institutional catalogues.

Readers who desire other information relating to the writer's theories or suggestions, or her texts written for choric recitation are referred to her books, *How to Share "Fancy That!" Lilts for Fun* (herein referred to as Book I), *Let Us Recite Together* (herein referred to as Book II), *Dramaticules for Choric Recitation With Group Movement* (herein referred to as Book III), in the dramatized forms of *Tales for Telling* (forthcoming), and also the charts adaptable for mechanical recording and for directing charting: *Oral English Record Chart* 1, *Oral English Text-Record Chart* 2, *Oral English Shakespeare-Record Chart* 3.

At present there is no detailed history or bibliography of choric work, therefore readers must turn to the classified though not comprehensive bibliography in this book, to bibliographies given in several of the more complete textbooks, *e.g.*, C. deBanke's forthcoming book, M. Gullan's, E. Keppie's, and M. Swann's books, etc.

2. There follow the names of but three centers among the many modern sources for training in Greek drama: The Bennett School—Edith Wynne Matthison, Margaret Gage (U. S. A.): The Central School of Speech—Elsie Fogerty, Ruby Ginner, Irene Mawer (England); center in Delphi, Greece—Eva Sikelianos.

3. Première performance in English presented by the Experimental Theatre of Vassar College, May 1936. (Translator, J. G. Underhill)

Rock and *Murder in the Cathedral*,[4] M. Connelly's *The Green Pastures;* Heywood-Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess.* Each of these offers at least several unusual opportunities for organized modern group utterance which, though it differs from the Greek chorus, is certainly capable of adding power to drama.

Those who have been interested in the development of various forms of narrative poetry know that group participation—especially in refrain speaking—has not been unusual in the past. During and after the days of oral tradition many entertaining bards, minstrels, minnesingers or troubadours found responsive and co-operative audiences in the highways and byways of our nations. In China, as early as the second century, small groups participated in the oral recitation of poetry.

The World War naturally accentuated interest in group or mass work and this in turn accelerated the development of experience programs in all fields of education, especially through the arts and crafts. Within the arts there was strikingly brought to the fore oral art and craft, always including integrally related movement. In the new as well as in the old world, within or apart from the theatre, representations of or actual labor groups, or youth-movement groups clamored for attention by means of group or mass recitation. During the past decades there has appeared this revitalized community activity through clubs, organizations, and

4. In *Murder in the Cathedral* some professionals regretted the frequent breaking up and individualizing of portions of sound and movement which might have been presented in stricter choric form, especially since the text was written for choruses. This writer felt that the breaking of the solid patterns added the necessary variety otherwise unobtainable by a group not trained in choric technique over a period of years. In America this device made the story both telling and comprehensible to the simplest member of a large and mixed audience.

public and private educational institutions or centers.

Our interest in the community should not make us blind to the needs of the individual, nor should our interest in the latter render us indifferent to community rights. There should be a universal desire to further an individually developing experience through and within concerted activity. Such an activity is recognizable in the various forms and degrees of community, group, choric, or mass recitation of prose and poetry.

A Few Recent Developments

An old-fashioned spirit of absolutism is peculiarly out of place in a newly, or differently developing, formative period of any given field. Each article and short book of text cannot cover satisfactorily historical or bibliographical detail, and even a fairly comprehensive technical textbook has its natural limitations and boundaries of interest, according to its national and other requirements. Because this section of *Practical Methods in Choral Speaking* must of necessity present the author's personal points of view it is important to urge that readers consider the opinion of many other authors and workers representing many nations. It is well for each individual to glean from many sources what is most needed for his own special requirements.[1]

Even though it is quite unnecessary for natives to leave their own shores in order to obtain training in group recitation or in other forms of oral interpretation, an international student and lecturer exchange will and should remain a socially invalu-

[1] Please refer to footnote on page 1.

able experience. Therefore every effort should be made to have the privilege put upon a completely reciprocal basis.[5] In America, Vassar College is at least one outstanding example in the hospitality and the privileges extended annually to its group of foreign students, and Vassar students themselves are well known to innumerable educational institutions overseas.

For the moment it is unimportant for us to know who started certain choric movements, when they were started and where. It is, however, important for us to realize that—perhaps simultaneously—modern forms of choric movements or group experiments have been in progress in many parts of the world, the local leaders at times being unfamiliar with developing techniques elsewhere.

America—Modern choric or group recitation is an extension or a readaptation of similar or related older activities. This has made it comparatively easy for people to develop individual, or to adapt other, techniques to meet their own needs. People who have an adequate technique for oral interpretation, including if possible a knowledge of the singer's technique; who have a choric sense through interest in ensemble or other group work of musicians, or in unison and antiphonal speech or song of religious services, or in choric work of Greek or other drama—these people will find themselves naturally impelled to experiment with modern applications of this group or community work.

Since *Practical Methods in Choral Speaking* is a compilation containing articles from many sources

5. As American Visiting Staff-member of Dr. Ripman's *Holiday Course*, London University (1925), the writer knows how valuable and delightful such an experience can be.

and covering a wide field, it seems unnecessary in this section to duplicate such information in detail.

Let us begin with a poet. Before, during, and after the World War Vachel Lindsay, with his interest in communal art, was reciting and chanting his poetry and obtaining an intensive group or mass form of responsive speaking under his vitalizing, always temporary, leadership. His leadership may have tempted less gifted group leaders to mistake their forms of noise for tone, and their outlets of brute force for strength. Nevertheless, this leadership may have helped many to realize the possibility of variously regulated oral art forms of community activity.

When considering group or choric developments here, as elsewhere, readers are urged to remember the theatre and the groups interested therein. In referring to a single example we may turn to the Neighborhood Playhouse of New York where even before the war experiments with unusual forms of group work were carried on. One wonders whether there was a related development of forms in some ways akin to the polyphonic and simultanéisme types of work in the French theatre. The supporting and supplementing of expressed ideas by voices of invisible speakers left a vivid impression of the striking work accomplished by the experimenting directors, the Misses A. and I. Lewisohn.

When comparing favorable possibilities for experimentation in the new world with those in, *e.g.*, France, we must remember that French groups are far more willing to work through the throes of fundamental techniques in sound, movement and other subtle means of thought projection, and that

therefore seven years of training would not alarm a serious student at a French training center.

Given a good structural base to work upon, extreme forms of experimentation even in the early stages will not give the effect of an unduly crass burlesque. The innate American flair for showmanship has a valid place in our art when tempered by taste and the willingness to face the hardships of groundwork. Given also the willingness to work from the ground up rather than from the vaguely cloudy skies downward there is no reason why we should not develop, through widely divergent experiments, results which may differ even greatly from more traditional or set forms used here and elsewhere. By means of a series of exchange opportunities we must keep our international doors of welcome open to techniques as developed in other parts of the world, for however different may be our individual, national or personal goals, each group will be able to learn something of value from another group. We may validly offer in any place our individual experience of technique even in the broadest or narrowest, the most set or freest of forms so long as we do not run the risk of closing doors of local interest upon local effort or development within a given region. This is an important consideration when a new form of an old activity is attempting—whether timidly or strenuously—to take root.

And now, let us turn to the door of philosophy. The understanding of Dr. H. A. Overstreet, philosopher and psychologist, of the value of the oral arts and crafts has long been greatly encouraging to the workers in those fields. It is noteworthy to point out that Dr. Overstreet again has come to meet the specialists more than half way by re-

terring to choric recitation in his book *A Guide to Civilized Loafing.*

In the East there has been choric and group activity through dramatic, historic and other pageantry, and through individual experimentation and interest over a period of years. Though the writer is not certain about actual priority conditions, from some opinions it would seem that there was an earlier, more generally organized interest in the specific field of choric speaking in the West than in the East. As early as 1922-23 students of Mrs. A. Mills—then of the State Universtiy of Iowa—gave a choric speech program at the time of the Convention of Teachers of Latin and Greek (choruses from Euripides' *The Trojan Women.*) This is noteworthy because the work was in no sense part of a dramatic performance. To confine mention to but three widely known Eastern verse-speaking groups or choirs established possibly before or soon after 1929, we may note the one at Mount Holyoke College (under Mrs. A. Mills, '32, credited as course in '35–'36), the one at Pennsylvania Women's College (under Miss V. Kerst, 19—?, course credit —?) and the one at Wellesley College (under Miss C. deBanke, '29?–'30, credited as course in '36–'37).

The educational institution has long been moving toward a curriculum upheaval. This may have retarded the earlier and more general establishment of courses in group or choric recitation within already burdened departments of English, many of which were forced into a retraction rather than an expansion policy.

Interest as such has been extensive, ranging from that of the individual or his center to that of the private or public school, college, and univer-

sity; from that of the social or religious organization to that of the little theatre, the stage, screen, and radio.

One may find a variety of attitudes in the new world. There are unimaginative people who are unable to visualize the possibilities of, to them, new applications of work. There are the inevitable imitators who lack a sense of originality but who earnestly try to apply letter-for-letter what they manage to learn whether it does or does not fit in with other valuable perhaps previously acquired techniques. There are the importation-phobes who are certain that each one of the fifty-seven nondutiable techniques and methods, imported from as many lands, will undermine the Constitution.

Through it all, America offers a fresh, vital, often overpowering enthusiasm. This is stirred by the honest conviction that a community or group activity which develops individual experience through a living and personal art form is worthy of attention, promotion, and trial.

One may find groups reciting lyric poetry with a simple dignity acceptable to the most conservative leaders in our English-speaking or other nations. This form will have a permanent place wherever poetry lives, for though it may be identical in degree of interpretation it may still bear the stamp of individuality so far as national or special group rhythms are concerned.

One may be confronted with fully or strangely dramatized interpretations of poetry or prose not essentially dramatic. Such interpretations may be embellished by costume, movement, or a galaxy of lighting effects, or interpolations of abstract elements of visible or audible design. These are among the experimentations which so perturb

those who cannot fully understand that irrepressible element of our national urge which is so akin to that of France. This urge compels people to mould, tear apart, or combine; it is an urge which does not end in, but which passes through, failures only to arise again in still another form. Whether we choose to take part in such experiments or to feature them in formal programs is but a personal matter so long as we do not abuse our acquired power by condemning or suppressing the legitimate activity springing out of convictions which may differ from, but which may still be as valid as our own convictions. These various experiments should be brought to light and should be forced to stand on trial beside conservative work which has long proved its worth. Opportunities for studying comparatively, older and new forms of work, should be made possible at open-class laboratory evenings and at competitive or other festivals. Fair growth of new forms through honest effort and conviction should not be stunted by snub, jibe, or lack of funds. The challenge should be good fundamental technique for all forms, for this will put the spotlight on clap-trap veneer created but for transient and superficial showoff. Thus and thus only will there come out of our valiant American impulse, forms possibly different from others but forms having worthy and nationally enduring values within a changing age.[6] (see also No. 12: "Festivals" under *Some Possible Admonitions and Suggestions.*)

6. The simple non-competitive privileges offered through the annual *Intercollegiate Poetry Reading* are referred to in the writer's article "Collegiate Verse Speaking in America" in the British *Poetry Review*; reference is also made to the first choric recitation at such a reading in 1935. At the annual New York four-month *Congress of American Poets* it will be possible to discuss interstate and local plans for group recitation. There will also be considered the practices of

There follow but a few names, out of many, of persons living in the United States of America who have been interested—as writers, workers, or both —in these special group, community or choric activities: Miss H. Ashley (N. Y. C.), Mr. S. Bauman (Herman Ridder J. H. S., N. Y. C.), Mrs. R. Bentley (N. Y. C.), Mrs. V. Bonsall (Trinity School, N. Y. C.), Miss A. Branch (Christodora House, N. Y. C.), Miss M. Burdsall (Wellesley), Miss M. Cramer (Hunter H. S.), Miss C. DeBanke (Wellesley), Miss M. DeWitt (Oral Art and Craft Center, N. Y. C.), Mrs. L. Eliot (Neighborhood Playhouse, N. Y. C.), Miss M. Gage (Bennet School, Millbrook), Miss F. Goodfellow (Alviene School, N. Y. C.), Mrs. A. Gordon (Brooklyn Coll.), Mrs. E. Grant-Meader (Russell Sage), Miss L. Gray (State Teachers Coll., San Jose), Mrs. M. Harris (Brooklyn), Miss B. Hawkins (Newark), Miss G. Hicks (Hunter), Mrs. L. Howk (Skidmore), Miss E. Jenks (State Teachers Coll., San Jose), Miss D. Kaucher (State Teachers Coll., San Jose), Miss B. Kennedy (Pasadena Community Playhouse), Miss M. Kramer (Columbia Univ., T. C.), Misses A. and I. Lewisohn (Neighborhood Playhouse, N. Y. C.), Miss G. Loar (Grafton H. S., W. V.), Mrs. E. Lochkart (Poughkeepsie H. S.), Miss L. MacLane (Humboldt State Teachers Coll.), Miss M. McCarthy (Brooklyn Coll.), Mrs. A. Mills (Mount Holyoke),

combining poetry with the arts of music, dance, etc. As a member of the Natl. Advisory Board of the Congress and of the *Natl. Poetry Council* the writer is interested in stimulating discussion which may further not only Festivals, Conferences, etc. but which may promote Federal interest in the support, without regulation or political control of the arts and crafts . (Various related points have been taken up in a survey prepared by the writer as Consultant and Advisor on Oral Art, Craft and Related Science to the *Natl. Recovery Council.* It might be noted here that the use of the word "national" in these activities symbolizes the non-local and inclusive objectives).