

Music and Choral Education in the United Arab Emirates

Michael Griffin M.Ed Studies; B.Ed (Music); A.Mus.A
Leader of the Arts Faculty/Head of Music
Dubai British School

The Middle East. Images surface of a war-torn landscape, immense suffering, extremism, time-locked. Yet in the mix is a federation of little over 4.1 million (census 2002), a haven of peace surrounded by turmoil –the United Arab Emirates. Tiny in comparison to the land mass of neighbouring Saudi Arabia, the seven Emirates of the UAE federated in 1971 following British withdrawal from the Gulf. Despite pessimistic predictions for its future, it has been remarkably stable and a symbol of hope and tolerance for the region.

I teach at a British school in Dubai, one of a growing number of expatriates embarking on an international schooling adventure promising cultural enlightenment, personal growth and adventure –not to mention tax free salaries, accommodation and other benefits.

Education is booming here. The fact is that over 78% of the population are non-nationals, and this land of seemingly endless double-digit economic growth fuels the need for world-wide professionals who only come on the condition of appropriate education for their children.

Schools, all under the watchful eye of the Ministry of Education, offer mainly British, American and IB programs, with a smattering of German, French, Australian, Japanese and of course Indian schools. Many of these are profit making companies set up by local businessman. Some have little or no idea about education, creating friction between school administration and shareholder management. School fees are too high, but recruiting companies usually pay the costs.

As in all parts of the world, most of the international schools use music to promote a perception of their quality, but in reality the turnover of students and staff add to the difficulties of sustaining high standard musical ensembles. One must also understand local tradition and sensitivity. This is a Muslim country, and although more moderate than some of her neighbours, the UAE does not permit external religions to express faith in schools. Don't bring your sacred choral music here -you won't be able to use it. Christmas can also be a difficult time. I know of one school last year that 3-weeks before celebrations, was issued with a management decree that any Christmas preparation involving paraphernalia such as reindeers and so on must cease in school time. To get around this, Christmas trees now had to be called Festive trees (images of Kramer's 'Happy Festivus' appear for Seinfeld fans!) But this not usual as most schools do tolerate a secular Christmas celebration, and you will see it everywhere with massive if overly baroque

trees and decoration in shopping malls and other public places. You might hear 'Jingle Bells' but not 'Once in Royal David's City'.

The situation is different for government schools. Firstly, males and females (teachers and children) are segregated. Some local schools incorporate a music education revolving around traditional instruments and secular celebrations; stricter schools have no music education. The uneasy relationship between Islam and music has its roots in the Quran which refers to music as 'idle talk' that 'misleads men on the path to Allah'. The use of musical instruments has even been linked with the perceived evils of illegal sex and drinking alcohol. Note that the call to prayer is not considered music, as is the vocalising of sacred verse. There is no sacred music in Islam.

Conducting choral music in this environment makes me realise how much I relied upon (and how much I miss) sacred choral music. I used to teach in a secular school in South Australia, but the majority of our choral music then was sacred. I'm not sure how many more secular Christmas celebrations I can take!

It is difficult for me to comment on the quality of choral music at other schools. International schools rarely mix. The education scene here is competitive so there is little interaction or sharing of resources. At my school, I had to recruit 15-20 singers to join my choir. Not many, but considerably more than the 2 members prior to my time. A had a couple of boys, but they soon were teased out of it. The comparison was stark in comparison to my Australian school choirs. The students had had little previous choral background, as evident by tuning, focus and commitment problems. That they only wanted to sing the latest pop songs was probably indicative of lack of exposure to good choral music. This sounds pretty grim, but this is how it was. However, the choir has given some satisfactory performances, and now sings in 3-parts. I have established a staff choir which has proved very popular. Many of our British teachers miss music from their school days and enjoy a good sing to end the week. We always perform for the school and wider staff and don't the students love this!

Speaking to teachers from other schools, I suspect their situation is similar to mine. However, in the community there are some regular choirs (such as Dubai Chamber Choir and the Dubai Harmony Chorus) active in society. Both the above mentioned are of a good standard and undertake serious works. The American University of Sharjah has just established a chamber choir, the only university choir to my knowledge. Dubai is ready for someone to establish a major youth choir, involving students from many schools and many backgrounds.

Living here will take some adjustment time, but there is much to enjoy and learn, from a teaching experience in the UAE. Be warned that temperatures soar up to 50°C in summer and make sure you study an employment contract carefully. Speak to someone who knows the ropes first (you may contact me if you like). In the community, there are opportunities for participation and performance. For example, I play in the Dubai Philharmonic Orchestra - a

relatively new ensemble striving to be the first resident professional orchestra in the UAE, and also do solo/small ensemble performances for hotels and corporate functions. The latter pays very well when compared to other countries, and the work is plentiful given the tourism and corporate action. Presently, about US\$360 Billion is being invested in just tourism projects alone in the UAE.

The UAE is undertaking one of the most ambitious economic development plans the world has seen. Education is one of the support industries which grow in tandem with this, and it is an exciting adventure to be involved.

Michael Griffin
Dubai