



MY BEST SHOT

by Lisa Ross

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ANDIDOTE TO THE CULTURE OF MEAN: POLLY CAMPBELL REMEMBERED

Last week, a real-life San Diego Pied Piper died—the same week that The Recording Academy’s cultural cretins announced their Grammy Award adulation for the misogynistic and Gay-baiting crooner, Eminem.

Polly Campbell invented the San Diego Children’s Choir a decade ago in an era when school music programs fell to myopic administrative budget cutting and over-stuffed graduation requirements that squeezed the heart out of education curriculums. It was a time when adults gave up on classical music and surrendered to Dr. Dre.

Undaunted, Polly Campbell went head-to-head with a popular culture driven by entertainment industry grown-ups vying for our kids’ attention using smut and hate. She challenged the conventional wisdom that juvenile rebellion needed an intravenous feeding of street mean by insisting on performing classic children’s choir repertoire so quaint and sweet that you could catch diabetes from sitting in the audience too long.

Despite the unabashed “unhipness” of this choir dressed in non-natural fibered navy, white and red, thousands of kids over the past ten years have spent their prepubescent and adolescent after-school hours developing an ear and eye for melody, rhythm and harmony—and self-respect for a lifetime.

They may have come to rehearsals with their Walkmen tuned to shock-meister Marilyn Manson, but once inside the Children’s Choir world, they heard themselves sing like a herd of angels. More familiar with straining to understand the garbage language that posed for avant garde rock, pronouncing the King’s English to the level of perfection demanded by the choir must have seemed like learning Greek.

The last time I saw Polly Campbell lead her kids was at a glorious Copley Symphony Hall concert several years ago. They were singing

Carl Orff’s Carmina Burana with the doomed San Diego Symphony under maestro Yoav Talmi. The symphony, ironically at its artistic peak, would go under several weeks later from debt burden and sluggish fundraising—never a problem for the likes of the Eminem factory.

Orff, like Polly Campbell, was a music educator, and so he included in this popular mystical and strangely accessible piece a juicy section for a boy’s choir. Polly’s boys and girls sang exquisitely inside the stately Symphony Hall along side the San Diego Master Chorale and the hottest drum corps in memory. The Carmina Burana is full of erotic undertones, but you have to know Latin to get that.

While the symphony sank and later reassembled in a compacted version, the San Diego Children’s Choir continued on, uninterrupted and growing into four choirs that rehearse in four locations around the county, and today plays to packed audiences at Symphony Hall, around the country and in Europe.

San Diego is blessed with many quality youth music programs that counter the chic chic notion emanating from people who really do know better that emptying an unfettered violent psyche into a CD burner is art. Yet, in spite of Boards of Directors and dedicated parent volunteers that any large cultural institution would kill for, these arts programs struggle to meet yearly budgets that seem miniscule compared with a day’s sales for the venomous Eminem. And, a quality music education, a real antidote to the culture of crude, remains unavailable to the vast majority San Diego’s public school students.

I am told that Polly Campbell, knowing that time was running out for her, spent her last month making sure that her San Diego Children’s Choir would continue to provide a cultural safe harbor for San Diego’s kids aged 8 to 18. And, I’ll lay odds that her sweet legacy will outlive the dark Hamelin embraced by Eminem and the culture of hate in spite of the best efforts of the pandering misanthropes running the recording industry.