



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

A Christmas Cantata

Preface

Some of you who are reading this preface have read “A Christmas Cantata” numerous times. I am happy to report that I’ve not had anyone asking me to stop posting it on my blog during the Christmas season. Perhaps it’s something like “Jingle Bells.” You know it, but you do not mind being reminded that you know it, if only for a short time.

“A Christmas Cantata” is about a specific time and place in America. But it rings true about many times and places in this nation. Times and places that perhaps you once knew.

For the young and old readers, we take a short journey back to the middle of the twentieth-century. For the old, perhaps it will be a journey of re-discovery. For the young, perhaps it will be a journey of discovery.

A Christmas Cantata

*We often feel sad in the presence of music without words;
and often more than that in the presence of music without music.*

---Mark Twain

During the Christmas season, I put away my Credence albums, along with my favorite rappers, and break out the Christmas CDs. Mr. Twain's quote notwithstanding, it pains me to part with Eminem, the idol of crabby kids, but it is important to attempt to be well rounded.

During these holidays, Handel's *Messiah* is my first selection, followed by Joan Baez's *Noel* album. Pleasantly sedated by these yuletide carols, I then play lighter fare. But I continue to return to the *Messiah* and Joan's songs. My reason for replaying this music is because, for a brief time in my life, I was exposed to some "serious" Christmas music, songs beyond "Jingle Bell Rock" and "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer." Early in my life, I developed a love for Handel and the songs in Joan's album.

Origins of My Love for Christmas Music

When I entered school in Lovington, New Mexico, in the 1940s, the student population was small. One music teacher was sufficient to handle grades one through twelve at Lovington's schools. As I made my way from the first grade to grade twelve, and as the population of Lovington's schools increased, my first grade music teacher remained my teacher until the end of my high school years. Florence Anderson and several of my classmates made their way together through all twelve grades. As told shortly, I was dropped from this fine assemblage my sophomore year.

With the gift of hindsight, I have come to understand that Florence was an extraordinary teacher. Consider this: By the third grade her students were familiar with *Peter and the Wolf*. Is that not an awesome accomplishment? Perhaps, but I have also come to understand that *Peter and the Wolf* is no great shakes for third graders. My friends tell me their children learn it before they are in kindergarten.

Fine then, forget *Peter and the Wolf*. Consider this: In junior high, Florence's music class students knew each score to Greig's *Peer Gynt*, and some of the symphonies of Beethoven. She had us listen to the music. She watched us as we listened. She made sure if we weren't listening, we were executing a convincing emulation. She interspersed comments to have us focus on what was happening with the music at that time.

I recall we students gave *Peer Gynt* mixed reviews, but most of us were fond of Beethoven. But who could not like his music? He was the precursor to our modern fixation on repetitive scores. I wager some of Beethoven's critics accused him of being a modern day's rap artist. ...That was a hard sentence to write, even in parody.

Anyway, during our later grade school years, Mrs. Anderson had us reading and writing musical scores, including the nuances of flats, sharps, the treble and bass clefs.

EGBDF and FACE became part of our musical repertoire. I can still hear her, "EGBDF!....FACE!....EGBDF!....FACE!" At times I thought of the typing class cadence, "FDSA space!....JKL semi-colon space!" Nonetheless, repetition instills learning. There is rarely a short-cut to competence. Florence was a master of repetition, and she molded many of us into fine singers.

The Christmas Cantata

Florence became a Lovington celebrity because of her creation, direction, and production of the annual Christmas Cantata. The performance was a big event in our community, and the evening performance for the public was highly attended by Lovington's citizens.

Mrs. Anderson recruited her concert choir from her music classes and the high school athletes. Unlike some schools, the Lovington High School culture did not consider it wimpy to sing in a chorale, and singing athletes became a fixture of the Cantata. In fact, some of the best athletes in our school were members of Florence's tenor and bass sections.

Based on my vast musical experience (Hank Williams, Jimmie Rogers, as examples), I thought the Cantata performance to be an impressive feat by a bunch of high school kids. After the audience was seated, about 150 singers marched into the west-side bleachers of the high school gymnasium. Wearing choral robes, and singing Christmas songs, we gradually filled-up the middle bleachers, from the top row on down to the bottom.

Considering the location of the performance---the backwaters of rural New Mexico---I thought our procession into the gym was pretty impressive. For us hicks, it was replete with pageantry. Festooned in frocks, and to the tune of "Angels We Have Heard on High," we executed a grand march into the gym.

As a Southern Baptist, I was pageantry impaired. Truth is, I was probably a repressed Catholic. Thus, the robes and scary music made a big impression on me.

Figure 1 shows our grand chorale after the entry and during our performance. I copied this picture from our school album. I could not locate myself in the photo, and then I remembered I had been banned from performing in the Cantata. Mrs. Anderson threw me out of the music class. For the remainder of the year, I spent this time in Study Hall. It was a sad ending to a ten-year relationship with Florence, but she finally got fed up with my buffoonery.

I didn't care. I was tired of singing. But I did care about an initial visit before my relegation to the Study Hall. It was the principal's office, where I received a paddling from Mr. Crouse. Then, to the Study Hall...where I never studied, but put together some extraordinary tic-tac-toe victory strings against myself.

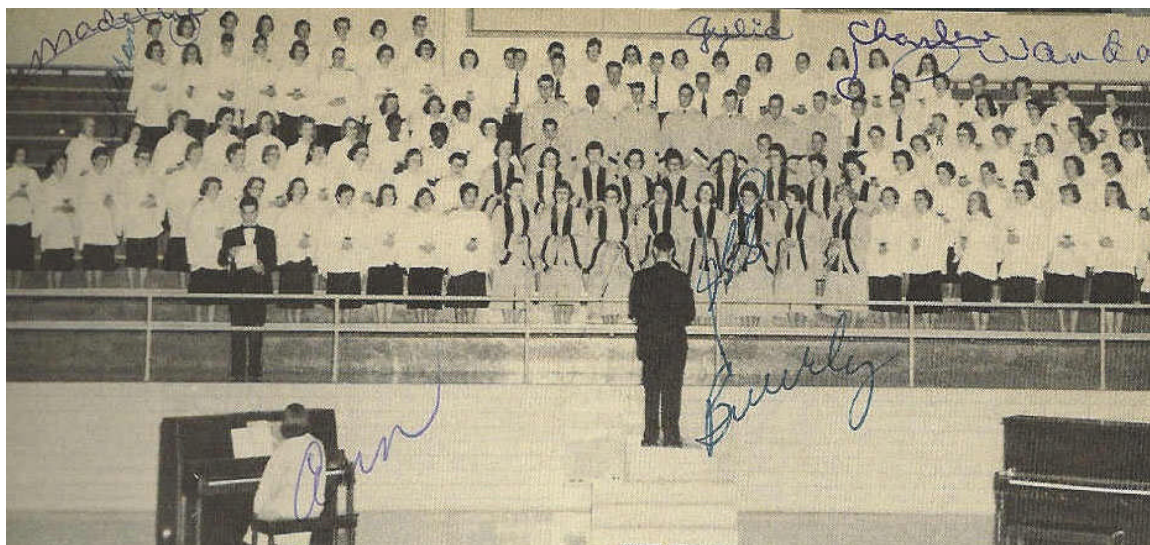


Figure 1. The Christmas Cantata Choir.

In spite of my absence, the choir assembled and sang a fine variety of Christmas music, including several songs from Handel's *Messiah*. Florence interspersed serious pieces, such as, "What Child is This?" with trendy, current songs. One of the popular pieces was, "Twas the Night before Christmas."

Mormon Tabernacle Choir? Stand Aside!

Modesty aside, we sounded like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. (Who can debate my claim? I know of no recordings made of our Cantata). We knew our notes, and we knew how to stay in harmony with them. See any sheet music in the hands of the singers in Figure 1? Mrs. Anderson had drilled verse, tune, and cadence into our heads and vocal cords for several weeks. What is more, she kept a large group of unruly teenagers in line, while at the same time, she taught us music.

At times, Mrs. Anderson reminded me of a good-looking, talented, female musical drill sergeant. And she had the best looking set of legs I have ever had the pleasure to see...maybe with the exception of Juliet Prouse. I probably kept enrolling in her music class because of her legs. I've never been one for music classes, but I am a student of female legs.

Florence was also a shrewd showman. If a student possessed an exceptional voice, she made sure this boy or girl was given opportunities to perform solos, sometimes singing an entire song for the Cantata. For several years, two classmates, Linda Earnest and Wayne Pruitt, sang solos at the Christmas Cantata. Wayne sang "I Wonder as I Wander" and Linda sang the lead to "Oh Holy Night."

Linda and Wayne possessed astonishing voices. Their interpretations of these songs were of such beauty, of such clarity, they became Florence's show-stoppers. To this day, well over five decades after my last Christmas Cantata performance, I can still hear the voices of Linda and Wayne---as if they were singing now.

To give you an idea of the crystalline beauty of Linda's voice, think Joan Baez. Linda was that good. A few moments ago, I listened to Joan sing "Oh Holy Night." It could have been Linda singing the song, and I would not have noticed much difference.¹

Wandering and Wondering...eh, Wondering and Wandering

I recall one rehearsal where Wayne was admonished by Florence. She claimed he was singing, "I wander as I wonder" when he should have been singing "I wonder as I wander." Mrs. Anderson was a stickler for diction and pronunciation, a significant challenge for students who spoke Southern New Mexican. Of course, Wayne's interpretation put a different spin on the meaning of the song. Anyway, with Wayne's Southwestern drawl, no one (*except* Mrs. Anderson) had any clue whatsoever whether Wayne was singing "I wander as I wonder", "I wonder as I wander", "I wonder as I wonder", or "I wander as I wander." I suspect interesting verses could have been composed for any of these four song titles.

Wayne's "I Wonder as I Wander" was sung without choir support or musical instruments. Just Wayne. There he stood, all 5 feet 8 inches of him, singing this simple verse with beautiful harmony to the notes. I recall one of the afternoon concerts of our Cantata---performed for schoolmates before the big revue in front of Lovington's citizens. After Wayne had finished his solo, a moment of complete silence pervaded the gym. Not a silence of, "What's next?" A silence of, "Oh my God, what a voice."

¹ You want a few thrills this Christmas, and some accompanying chills down your back? Play track 10 on *Noel*, Joan's interpretation of "Ave Maria."

If you know the lyrics to this song, you will remember their messages are a bit of a downer. They speak about we humans being "poor ornery people" and so on. Whatever our opinions may be about the song, Wayne's beautiful voice never failed to leave the audience spellbound.

Singing Jocks

About the jocks in the chorus. I am still amazed how Mrs. Anderson was able to corral Lovington High School's male athletes for about four weeks, during the lunch hour, place them in a choral setting, and persuade them to learn at least fifteen complex Christmas songs---all without Hank's guitar or Jimmie's yodel. On the night of the performance, we boys knew (and knew well) the verse and tunes to "And the Glory," "O Thou that Tellest Good Tidings from Zion," "For Unto Us a Child is Born," "Glory to God," and of course, "Hallelujah Chorus."

We also sang other Christmas songs, such as "Adeste Fideles," "The First Noel," and acted as the backup chorus to Linda's solo of "Oh Holy Night."

Part of Florence's success came from her toughness. The noon-time rehearsal was not an easy affair for Mrs. Anderson. We males often kidded around and made wise cracks, sometimes disrupting the rehearsal---but only to a point. If matters started to get out of hand, our music teacher would walk to the offending party, pull him up from his chair by his shirt collar, and banish him from the rehearsal. The banishment was not the end of the punishment because the boy was sent to the principal's office to deal with Mr. Crouse and the possibility of a butt whipping with a very big paddle.

In today's coddled culture, paddling, however soft, will likely earn the paddler an exit visa out of the teaching profession. I'll wager Ms. Anderson's pulling up a student from his chair by his shirt collar would land her in hot water in today's environment---or even in jail, if she left a mar on the boy's skin.

Another Study Hall

I was the benefactor of two paddlings in high school. My science teacher, Mr. Wagoman tossed me out of 4th period Science Class (with a resulting F) for mixing a sulfur type substance and setting it ablaze during the class. This ban was an unsettling experience, because:

(a) I was the Parliamentarian of the Science Club, but no longer a scientist. And I had yet to grasp what a Parliamentarian did at the Science Club meetings, because the Science Club never had a meeting.

(b) Flunking Science and failure to get a credit put me on the cusp of not having enough classes to graduate from high school. But the school administrators found a way to get me out of their lives. They did not want me around for another year.

After forfeiting my Science Class visa, I visited Mr. Crouse for another whipping, then spent the remainder of the 4th period in Study Hall. Thus, a fair amount of my school time was spent in a studious location, but not spent in studying. During these times, with the Study Hall monitor checking on me as if I were a felon, I brought to a high art the illusion of studying. I could look at a page of text, seemingly taking in its arcane facts, but actually absorbed in a vast cornucopia of teenage fantasies.

Celebrating each Performance

Mrs. Anderson captivated me. In hindsight, I came to love the woman. She cared and was competent. She was confident and positive about her work. She had a commanding yet

supportive way of teaching. Part of her success was because of her love for her work. Whatever her secret was, the results she obtained from her students made a lasting impression on me. She was a fanciful and fine role model.

Another aspect of Florence's job stuck with me during my career. Time and again, I watched her go through the same repertoire, a recurring inventory of motions and actions. During those days, I was often bored stiff, and I wondered (as my mind wandered) how on earth anyone could be a teacher, with the job description of running the same pedagogical gamut day after day, week after week, year after year. Yet, she never wavered. As far as I could tell, she was never bored or exhausted

Many years later, I listened to a television interview of a famous opera singer, who talked about her "burn out," of singing the same arias night after night. She addressed her problem with what can only be described as an attitude adjustment. She told us (and I paraphrase), "For me, the evening was one of many. For my listeners, it was one of one. After thinking about this idea for a while, I decided to walk onto every stage with this thought, 'Each performance is a personal celebration.' "

I'll bet Florence did this unconsciously. All of us should take this quote to heart. For myself---getting on in years---my take on the idea is, "Each day I wake up and see the sun...which is cause-enough for a personal celebration."

A Lapse into Choirdom

On several occasions, I have watched the Mormon Tabernacle Choir perform the *Messiah* on television. Of course, the group sings several songs that we kids sang during our Christmas Cantata so many years ago. I still remember the words to these songs, as well as the musical score. During the program, I fire up my brittle vocal cords and try to sing along with the Choir. It is pathetic, but my wife doesn't complain, the neighbors remain quiet, and our dog mutes any howl of protest. All in all, I experience a successful, if virtual, return to Choirdom.

During the holiday season, I often think about Florence Anderson and the Christmas Cantata. I reflect about our teacher's gift of teaching. And as I grow older, I reflect on perhaps her greatest gift of all to her students: fond, even joyful memories of past times in a public school.

I thank the Florence Andersons of the world. I thank the teachers of the world. In closing this essay, I would like---for the first time in my life---to also thank my high school teachers and my principal who found a way to let me get on to the next phase of my life.

A Postscript

In 2009, Ms. Anderson was honored by the Lovington community. The music building on the Lovington High School campus was dedicated to her. I made it a point to travel to my home town for this occasion.

So did a number of other people, some who were students of this woman before I was born. They came mostly from Texas and New Mexico. One couple flew-in from New Orleans. Part of this crowd is shown in the picture below. The commemorative plaque that was placed on the building is seen in the middle picture. The man who unveiled the plaque is the son of Ms. Anderson, John Anderson.

After this ceremony, a reception was held nearby. As her former students sipped tea and lemonade, as we looked at a picture of her placed on an easel in the room (the photo on the

right), we reminisced about those times when this fine woman molded our minds and tuned our physical and mental vocal cords. Little did we know that some five decades later, we would still be able to sing the scores to *The Messiah*. And for the fact that we are still around to do so, we can only say, Hallelujah!

