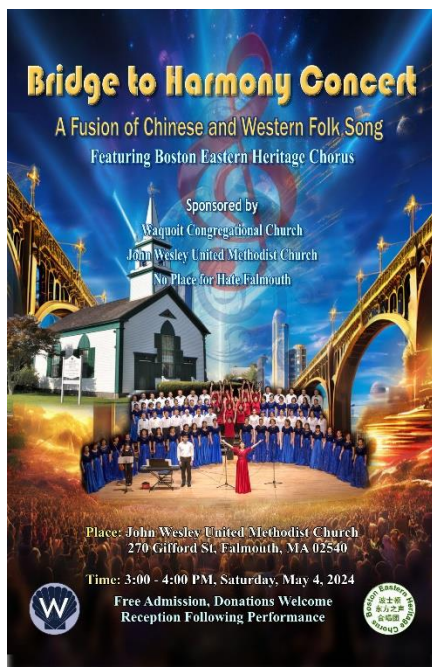


Cross-Cultural Bridge-Building: A Specialty of the Boston Eastern Heritage Chorus and the Waquoit Congregational Church

By Reverend Nell Fields and Stephen McIntosh

If you only paid attention to major media headlines today, you might think America is the land of rancor and division. However, if you pay attention to actual local events, you know there are many examples of harmony and cooperation to be found that don't make the headlines. A Falmouth concert on May 4th, the "Bridge to Harmony Concert" by the Boston Eastern Heritage Chorus and the Waquoit Congregational Church Choir at the John Wesley United Methodist Church, was just such an example of cross-cultural harmony and cooperation.



The Boston Eastern Heritage Chorus (BEHC), based in Newton and the leading Chinese American chorus in the Greater Boston area since 2000, has brought the beauty of Chinese folk music to audiences across the U.S., Europe, and Asia winning awards along the way. This article's co-author, Steve McIntosh, a tenor in both the BEHC and in the Waquoit church choir, and Reverend Nell Fields, Waquoit pastor and the other co-author, both saw an opportunity for cultural bridge-building through music. Sharing that vision, Reverend René Perez opened the doors of John Wesley United Methodist Church to enable a larger event than the Waquoit church could handle.

The concert's mission was to bridge two cultures--Chinese and American—with choral music. Creating a musical event that bridges two cultures requires solid planning and public relations, so we dove right into the basics: marketing plan, press release, event graphic design, poster distribution, community event calendars, and newspaper articles. BEHC's Conductor and Artistic

Director Ling Guo determined the chorus' repertoire and presentation with planning assistance from chorus President Qiang Zhang and VP Haoyuan Liu. For the Waquoit choir, Music Director Betsy West planned and managed their participation. While all this sounds routine for event production, the BEHC and the Waquoit Church Choir would have truly magical, bridge-building results.

The song list contained primarily popular Chinese folk songs with a smattering of Western songs. The Chinese repertoire was *Jasmine Flower*, *The Night-Song of Yao Mountain*, *Mongolian*, *Vineyard Nocturne*, *Missing You*, *By the Shores of Lake Baikal*, and *Good Day*. The Western songs were *You Raise Me Up*, made popular by American singer Josh Groban, and the Italian classic, *O Solo Mio*. But, the magic did not lie in the song selection; it arose from several elements of how the songs were performed: movement or choreography, instrumental accompaniment, and audience participation.

The first element was choral choreography. Before the interruption of their activities caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the chorus typically sang in straight lines, at attention and with little movement. After emerging from the pandemic, the chorus has explored new, creative approaches and, in the "Bridge" concert, they took them to a new height.

For example, at the start of *Vineyard Nocturne*, a beautiful song performed by the women in the chorus, half the women were sitting in a few groups while the other half stood in groups surrounding them. It conveyed a more casual, relaxed, and pleasant atmosphere. Half-way through the song and between verses, the women introduced movement as they rearranged themselves in the traditional straight-line formation to finish the song. Choreographed by Wenqiong Xue, this arrangement succeeded in conveying a relaxed and fun atmosphere to the audience.

Likewise, when the men sang their number, *Mongolian*, they started in two straight lines but with their backs to the audience! This arrangement introduced elements of surprise and anticipation as the audience could not help but wonder if, when, and how they would turn around. As the music began, the men, in four groups, slowly turned around to face the audience, one group at a time from right to left. The song grew in intensity and volume as it progressed. In the last section, the rhythm and lyrics of *Mongolian* are intended to convey the impression of a herdsman riding a horse across the steppe. Conductor Guo, to even the chorus' surprise, reinforced this impression as her arm motions suddenly combined musical direction with holding the reigns of a galloping horse. It was a stroke of conducting brilliance that was not lost on the audience. At that moment, everyone in the room was a Mongolian herdsman riding a steed across the grassland!

The second element was musical creativity, both instrumental and vocal. In addition to the excellent piano by Sharon Liu, Nick Ning then added color to *You Raise Me Up* with the harmonica and to *By the Shores of Lake Baikal* with the accordion. Soloists whose beautiful voices embellished a number of songs were Zhifen Fei, Ping Li, Wenqiong Xue and Qi Lu.

The third magical element, audience participation, brought everyone in John Wesley United Methodist Church together to sing the finale, *Jasmine Flower*. While the concert's "bridging" mission was reflected in other ways such as having both a Chinese American MC and an Irish American MC introduce songs as a "tag team," *Jasmine Flower* was clearly the pièce de résistance of the concert's "bridging" mission. Although it is a relatively simple song, its execution was pure collaborative genius. First, from the American side, Betsy West, Waquoit Music Director, took the mic for the first time and instructed the audience on the proper Chinese pronunciation of the first line of *Jasmine Flower*: "Hao yi duo mei li de mo li hua!" Ling then explained the meaning. The chorus, the choir, and the audience then all joined together to sing the first line. Both choruses and the audience were all "bridging" together! Everyone enjoyed it, everyone participated, and they sang surprisingly well. To quote Conductor Guo Ling's comment to the audience when the song was done, "What took our chorus weeks to learn, you just picked up in seconds!" The audience that had filled the church loved it. It was another stroke of brilliance both in its conception and execution.

To punctuate the success of Falmouth's first Chinese American choral concert, a final bridging gesture came in the form of thank-you gifts. Conductor Ling Guo presented Jasmine plants to the two sponsoring pastors, Nell and René, and to her co-MC, Steve McIntosh.

At a reception following the concert, audience comments were collected in a guest book. One stand-out comment was: "Wonderful! Loved the music and the chance to see and hear this terrific group. Bridge-building is the group's specialty." We are very proud of feedback because bridge-building in the real world overrules rancor and division in headlines.



Rev. Nell Fields, Rev. René Perez, the Boston Eastern Heritage Chorus, and the Waquoit Congregational Church Choir