

MUSIC
in a
PRISON
CAMP

A WOMEN'S
VOCAL
ORCHESTRA

Presented by

Peninsula Women's Chorus

Patricia Hennings, Director

INTRODUCTION by prison camp survivor HELEN COLIJN

Try to imagine this situation: 600 women and children imprisoned in a barracks camp not much larger than this building (twice the size of this room).

The barracks are made of crudely cut wood, bamboo poles, and palm frond roofs. Inside stretch long communal bunks, made of slats, on both sides of a narrow dirt aisle. On the bunks each internee has a space of six feet by two feet to call her own--to eat on, to sleep on, to live on, to store her personal belongings. Each prisoner had been allowed to bring into the camp as much as she could carry. For some this actually meant suitcases with a complete wardrobe, for others this meant only the clothes on their backs.

The barracks are built in a square around a compound with a small pavilion in the middle. The pavilion is important to our story.

At the time of World War II that the event took place re-created for you tonight by the Peninsula Women's Chorus, the women have been in this camp for 1½ years. Ultimately, they will be here, or in similar camps, for 3½ years.

The place is a town called Palembang on the island of Sumatra, then a part of the Dutch East Indies, Dutch colony, now in independent Indonesia.

The climate is tropical. Oppressive heat during the dry monsoon. Driving rains during the wet monsoon, rains that go right through the palm frond roofs and turn the compound into a sea of mud. During the dry season the compound is a desert of dust.

The majority of the women and almost all of the children are Dutch. They had lived in South Sumatra with husbands and fathers, or as single, professional women--nurses and teachers, for example. When the Japanese occupied Sumatra, these women and children were herded into the Palembang camp.

Other women are British and Australian - Australian Army nurses. They all fled Singapore on refugee ships which were captured or torpedoed by the Japanese. Some women had to swim, or cling to life rafts for two or three days to reach shore. After weeks of indecision what to do with the shipwreck survivors and the women off the captured ships, the Japanese sent them to join the Dutch women in Palembang.

A few of these Dutch women had also been shipwrecked as they fled from the main island of Java. Their ship was bombed and sunk. They spent a week in lifeboats. My two sisters and I were in this group.

After a year and a half behind the barbed wire the women are all thin and hungry. Food has become minimal. Many have to battle malaria, dysentery, always without the benefit of medication. Many have tropical sores on legs and bare feet that in the damp climate just never seem to want to heal. A few already suffer from beri-beri caused by malnutrition from which many are to die.

What do the women do all day?

They do camp chores--on a volunteer basis, as arranged for by camp committee. The guards don't care how the women manage their internal affairs. So women carry heavy loads of firewood from camp gate to kitchen, or heavy sacks of rice. They chop wood, stoke fires, stir vegetable stew in huge drums black with soot, cook rice in huge drums black with soot, distribute rations, haul water from the well, mend their clothes, wash their clothes--if there is water in the well. During the dry season each internee is allotted one tin of water a day, that is a tin about the size of a two-pound coffee can.

Some women don't have money left, or never had any, and they earn it off the women who still have money, so a few tablespoons of sugar, or a duck egg can be purchased at the black market which is conducted at the risk of severe punishments over the barbed wire fence. It's possible to earn money by doing someone else's chore, for example, like emptying the latrines, or by selling soup made of water and a few beans purchased at the black market.

Periodically, squads of women have to plant potatoes for the guards outside the camp, a kind of yams, and then each day during the season they have to go and water the potatoes. With clean, fresh tap water.. while back in the camp the day's ration is one can of brackish well water.

Twice a day every woman and child have to be counted. The guard blows a whistle, Women run out of the barracks, the kitchen - line up, in blocks, barrack by barrack. They bow to the guard. Actually, they bow to the Emperor of Japan, so they have been told.

When the lines are crooked, or the women don't bow at the correct angle, or have a smirk on their faces, the guard prods them with his bayonet, kicks the culprits, or makes them stand to attention in the broiling sun after the others have been dismissed.

All in all, a dismal existence.

The worst is the lack of privacy--always people around you, in the communal bathroom, on the communal bunks, in the crowded compound.

There is no radio to bring news from the outside world, about how the war is going, There are no letters to bring news from relatives, not even from the men--husbands, fathers , in the men's camp nearby. There are few books to read, no lectures or classes for adults or children any more--no one has the energy. There are no musical instruments to provide cheer, but the women still have their voices.

From the first week of captivity, small choirs sang songs they remembered. A Dutch glee choir sang Dutch folk songs, a British glee choir sang popular English songs and Gilbert and Sullivan. Church choirs sang Dutch or English hymns. Dutch and British sang separately because not all Dutch spoke English, and none of the British spoke Dutch. They conversed in Malay. But eventually the supply of remembered songs was exhausted. Then a wonderful thing happens.

An English woman, Norah Chambers, suggests singing music written for orchestra or piano. Another woman has a marvelous musical memory. She writes down Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy, arranges it for four-part choral singing. She is Margaret Dryburgh, a Presbyterian missionary who spent many years at a mission in Singapore. Music had long been a central force in her life--in her obituary was written, "music was an inspiration, and a way of expressing the joy and glory of the Christian faith."

The vocal orchestra with thirty singers--now British and Dutch combined--start rehearsals in a tiny shed behind the kitchen. The singers want the concert to be a surprise. The voices sing separately at first; then, still in the shed sweltering in the heat, they sing together.

The first concert is presented on December 27, 1943. There is excitement in the air though only few know what the program will be. Word is going around that cookies will be served, and coffee too. No real coffee, of course--but a brown liquid made from toasted rice kernels. The cookies will also be made of rice, cooked rice, formed into patties the size of an American quarter.

In the pavilion, in the center of the compound, the internees sit tightly together on the ground--about one third of the floorspace is left free for the choir. Many women stand outside.

A mother has whetted down a boy's tousled hair and put a ribbon in a girl's braids. Several women wear their "going away dresses," wrinkled, mildewed from the humidity, dresses saved for liberation day. Some women even wear lipstick--either their own, or shared by a friend, also being saved for liberation day. One woman wears a glorious yellow flower behind her ear which she snatched from a plant near the guardhouse. But most women wear the only clothes they own--faded, patched dresses or self-styled camp uniforms of shorts and sunhalters.

The choir is dressed in the same manner. Thirty of them file in carrying crude stools on which they will sit to sing. It will be too tiring for them to sing standing.

Just as the conductor lifts her hands to begin, the guard comes running from the guardhouse, bayonet in the ready, crying, "Huu, huu." Large gatherings are not permitted--the women know this. The choir director ignores the guard. He becomes so entranced by the music that he stops ranting and quietly listens through the entire concert.

What the guard's private thoughts were we'll never know. The impact of the concert on the internees was enormous. It renewed a sense of human dignity of being stronger than the enemy, of being able to stay on top of it all.

The vocal orchestra gave concerts all through 1944, and the beginning of 1945 until 19 of the 30 choir members had died. And each time again, it seemed a miracle that among the bedbugs, the cockroaches, the rats, among the smells of the latrines, the fever, and the boils, the pangs of hunger.. women's voices could create so much beauty.

The program that you will hear tonight is almost the same as that first concert in December 1943.

The music will not sound quite the same, of course. The acoustics here are better than in the prison camp. Today's chorus has almost twice as many members as did the original vocal orchestra. Today's singers are in excellent health. They can stand up to sing, and if they have to hold a note through several measures they don't get out of the breath. They will, as did their counterparts in 1943, use sco^{tes}es--Peninsula Women's Chorus usually sing without.

Not all of the syllables used, dynamic changes, tempi may be sung in exactly the same way as they were that first time.

Patricia Hennings, director of the Peninsula Women's Chorus did speak with Norah Chambers, conductor of the original concerts, on the telephone. They discussed how to sing certain measures of some of the pieces, but did not go through all the measures of every piece. This was not necessary. Though each conductor brings his or her own interpretation of a work of music to a concert it's still the same music.

The Peninsula Women's Chorus discussed trying to create a sense of authenticity by appearing in camp clothing--those faded, patched dresses, shorts and halter tops--but thought that this would not really look authentic unless they could suddenly become much, much thinner.

Instead, the singers will be wearing their springtime concert gowns in pastel colors, which seems appropriate for a concert which is a tribute--a tribute to Margaret Dryburgh who remembered the music, to Norah Chambers who conducted the original vocal orchestra, to the singers of that orchestra, to the other women in the South Sumatra camp, to all women and men imprisoned in past war, and still, for political reasons, today.

Finally, the concert is a tribute to music, and its power to sustain the human spirit.

After the chorus has taken its place on the risers, I'll read to you from Miss Dryburgh's introduction to the 1943 concert, part of which is reproduced in her own handwriting on your program, in the back. On the front you probably noticed a map to give you an idea where Sumatra is located.

(Enters the chorus)

Here is Miss Dryburgh's introduction. In my place, imagine that you see Miss Dryburgh, a woman in her fifties, 5 feet 2 inches, bare feet, thin legs with bandages around them, washed-out cotton dress hanging loosely from knobby shoulder bones, a friendly face--once round and chubby, now drawn, sallow--metal-rimmed glasses with thick lenses, straight mouse-grey hair pulled tight in a bun at the back of her head, and in her hands two pieces of paper similar to the ones I'm holding now--photocopies of the original introduction that's in the Stanford Music Library now.

"This evening we are asking you to listen to something quite new, we are sure-- a choir of women's voices trying to reproduce some of the well-known music usually given by an orchestra or a pianist. The idea of making ourselves into a vocal orchestra came to us when songs were difficult to find and remember, and we longed to hear again some of the wonderful melodies, and harmonies that uplifted our souls in days gone by.

So we make our humble attempt to let you hear some of the masterpieces of the musical world as well as we can remember them: Handel's Pastoral Symphony from the Messiah with its note of expectancy, one of Brahms' sprightly waltzes and Mendelssohn's Songs without Words, Dvorak's Largo from his New World Symphony with its haunting negro melody, Chopin's Raindrop Prelude with its persistent dropping accompaniment (so like what we hear every day and night!). Everyone will recognize the Londonderry Air and Beethoven's dainty minuet, and we include the delicate music of MacDowell's "To a Wild Rose", and most ambitious of all, Debussy's Reverie, which, we hope will soothe away all worries and vexations.

We do not profess to reproduce the effects or quality of stringed or reed instruments, but as the lovely melodies and harmonies of the great masters greet your ears, you may imagine you hear them. The choir will remain sitting, as does an orchestra, to conserve their energies.

So close your eyes, and try to imagine you are in a concert hall, hearing Toscanini or Sir Thomas Beecham conduct his world-famous orchestra.

(Pause)

Now, I would like to suggest to you, close your eyes and imagine that you are an internee in a prison camp. The heat is stifling. You haven't had a square meal for months. You are weak from hunger, and from the last bout of malaria or dysentery. You have been a prisoner for a year and a half. It's Christmas season -- your second one in captivity. And you are asking yourself - will the war ever end.

(Chorus starts singing the Largo from Dvorak's New World Symphony).

February 26 1982 - Foothill College, Los Altos, California

March 10, 1982 - Annenberg Auditorium, Stanford University, Palo Alto, California

March 14, 1982 - St. Bede's Episcopal Church, Menlo Park, California

All performances at 8 P.M.