

## words around rounds

I began writing and collecting rounds in mild earnest about 8 years ago (starting with my own *Leave Logs for Frogs*). I had no real idea what I was doing, or why. Some odd alchemical admixture of my own rounds (on tofurkey, Sarah Lloyd texts, and who knows what else), David Mahler's abundant and singular work, Frederic Rzewski's catalytic *No More War!*, Shaker music, and finding Ruth Crawford Seeger's *When Not If* in the Library of Congress somehow coalesced into something I called *A Small Book of Rounds*.

The first handmade edition of about 30 copies had just 16 rounds in it: four by me, seven by David Mahler, one each by Rzewski and Ruth Crawford Seeger, and three Shaker rounds. The most recent (still handmade, but I have no idea what edition it is) has about 250 rounds by over 60 composers. The next, assuming my cheap binding machine holds out, will have around 350. Over the years I've happily given away hundreds of these books. When people asked why I was doing this, I had to invent something. I was never really sure. It just seemed like fun, and the right thing to do. It got people singing, and laughing, and thinking about the ordinary and the profound as equally good things to sing about.

Ordinary people sing, because singing is one the most ordinary things we humans do. We evolved to do it. Over the years these rounds have made musicians and non-musicians into singers. Students, friends, fellow musicians, all kinds of people have sung these rounds together. We've sung about healthy platypi, cows on vacation, tofurkey, ze wudka, ending war, salvia, scarlet tanagers, one more day, and the town of Paradox, New York. We've asked David Mahler's big question about why we sing, and my more practical "what time does the bell ring?" I can't remember a single case of someone regretting having sung. Nobody's ever the worse for having sung with another human being.

A few years ago there was a concert of my music at *the wulf*, a performance space that doubles as a visionary experiment in community. The composer Laura Steenberge organized a large group of musicians in singing many of my rounds. It was the first time that I'd seen so many of them performed, and I was surprised to learn that they remained rounds in the ways that rounds should be rounds: self-teaching, sung recklessly and enthusiastically for fun; about nothing and everything; and able to cross boundaries that, from Billings to Mahler, American music has always crossed with a grin and a confident stride.

This same large group of wonderful composers/performers has come together on this CD to sing, to write their own rounds, and to, well, just come together. In doing so, they joyously reinvigorate a generations-old community of singers that welcomes them, and needs them. I imagine Billings as a somewhat surly old guy, but were he standing alongside everyone else in this beneficent singing congregation, he would smile and sing along. We all should.

Many years ago, my colleague and Shaker music scholar Mary Ann Haagen and I took a group of students from Dartmouth College to Sabbathday Lake, Maine, to spend the weekend with the Shaker family there, singing and eating (two of my favorite things). At one point in an evening of "trading songs," Sister Frances, the community's eldress suggested a very old Shaker tune that I had often sung as a round with my young daughter. I asked Sister Frances, whom I had known for some time and have the greatest affection for, if they sometimes did it as a round. She looked at me quite seriously, and said, in what I hope was not total exasperation: "Larry. We're Shakers. We don't sing rounds."

About a year later, at a weekly rehearsal of the Enfield Shaker Singers, Mary Ann's group in which I sang (and still sing), Mary Ann pulled out "The lord will comfort Zion," which she had found in an archive and transcribed. She said, with a sly smile, "Let's sing this Shaker round."

Larry Polansky

Hanover, 2012

[All the rounds in *A Small Book of Rounds* are at

[http://eamusic.dartmouth.edu/~larry/scores/other\\_peoples\\_scores/rounds/](http://eamusic.dartmouth.edu/~larry/scores/other_peoples_scores/rounds/)

For a copy of the current edition of the round book, just ask.]