

## Reactions to *Torchbearers* in 2000, 2002, and 2003

**NB: I offer the following report at the request of Kim Bruce, chair of the College Songs Committee, as items of information only; no inferences should be made regarding my personal views on this issue one way or another. – dmd**

In my eleven-year tenure as Asst./Assoc. Professor and Conductor of the Pomona College Choir and Glee Club, I can honestly say I have rarely seen such pride in the eyes of Pomona College alumni as when they sing *Torchbearers*. However, there have been several occasions when the song has caused a few students, and at least one Native American apparently unassociated with the College who knew about the song, to be uncomfortable with it because of its words and musical content. Of particular concern from a musical perspective is the passage of “chanted” fifths heard at the beginning of the piece (“drumbeats”) and subsequently between each verse (“terra toma, ne terra toma”). This musical gesture is not unlike the infamous (and for many, offensive) “Tomahawk chop” and accompanying chant used by fans of the Atlanta Braves, though in *Torchbearers*’ case it is the sound and rhythm of these passages, rather than an actual physical gesture, that sets the tone of the work.

To the best of my recollection, the occasions for which concerns about *Torchbearers* have been raised are as follows:

- In Spring 2000, a student from the class of 2000 who was a member of the Glee Club and who was part Native American refused to sing *Torchbearers* on campus—during our Alumni Weekend concerts—and at the end of each performance on our annual tour. He was offended by both the lyrics and the music.
- In May 2002, a member of the local media on Bainbridge Island, Washington (where the Glee Club was about to tour that year) contacted me and voiced grave concern about how disrespectful *Torchbearers* is to Native Americans. A Native American herself, she had read the story written about the song in the Winter 2001 issue of the *Pomona College Magazine*. She was especially concerned because she (and others) considers the Ghost Dance to be a sacred ritual, one that had been appropriated by Professor Brackett and Mr. Barrows for their/the College’s own entertainment purposes. Moreover, she contended that the Cahuilla language reported to be quoted in the song (“He ne terra toma”) is not Native American, but rather a series of nonsense syllables that were chosen because they sounded like what Brackett and Barrow overheard. (On this point I clearly remember her to be especially insulted).

Upon learning of her concerns and of her expressed intention to organize a protest at the concert, I contacted President Stanley and filled him in on the situation. We agreed by mutual consent not to sing *Torchbearers* at any of that year’s tour concerts; we also concluded that in the future, it might be best to reserve the singing of *Torchbearers* to on-campus events only. At the time, I urged him to consider the issues surrounding the song and, in making a decision about its appropriateness (or lack thereof), to make a clear statement to the campus community and alumni about it.

- The concerns raised in May 2002 also caused the students of the 2003 Glee Club to question whether we should or shouldn’t be singing *Torchbearers*. We decided that it was in the best interest of the College, the Music Department, and the Glee Club for this question to be addressed and settled by the administration. In the meantime, we agreed to sing the song on Alumni Weekend, but to be very selective about singing it off campus. As a result, *Torchbearers* has been heard on subsequent concert tours very infrequently.

To be honest, this situation continues to put our students (and me) in a tough spot, as those who treasure the song and those who are offended by it both have valid concerns. When we sing *Torchbearers*, some students inevitably raise questions about its appropriateness as a song that is supposed to represent our school. When we don’t sing it, alumni and many others in our on-campus community are deeply disappointed and wonder aloud why “the Glee Club” decided to omit it.

Respectfully submitted,

Donna M. Di Grazia  
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