

Bill Rea ? Anthem wasn't mocked, this time

There are some issues that people forget about, and others that die a natural death after time.

And then there are the issues that probably got more attention than they deserved. I think one such issue occurred last Tuesday night, during the baseball All-Star game, and what went on during the singing of O Canada.

I didn't see this particular incident. I had to work late that night, and I didn't regret missing the All-Star game, because I have very little use for the concept. These games get in the way of people like me who are trying to keep track of how a team is doing in its bid to be in the post-season (granted, currently not too encouraging for the Jays).

I'm also not too keen on the trend that developed over the last couple of decades that has seen singers trying to get creative with their performances of various anthems. I recall in the 1970s and '80s, watching various sporting events with singers performing anthems as if they were in a disco. I never liked that. There were times when I would yell "Just sing the damn thing!"

The fact is I have a real problem with national anthems being mocked.

I attended a wedding many years ago, and at the reception, those in charge of the organization came up with an idea that rather than have people clink their glasses to get the bride and groom to kiss, people at various tables were to get up and sing a song with the word "love" in it. Sounded like a cute idea, but the folks at one table caught on to the notion that the word "love" is in O Canada ("true patriot love?"), and they got up and started singing it. The rest of us were, of course, obliged to stand. My patriotic dander has never reached such a height, before or since. The national anthem of my country had been mocked, and there were too many people in the hall who seemed OK with that.

I'm sure that typing that last paragraph, with the memories it resurrected, elevated my blood pressure considerably.

But it is possible to use an anthem for a purpose other than it was intended, and not cross the line to be offensive.

About 15 years ago, my wife and I spent a holiday weekend with some friends a couple of hundred miles to the east. Part of the itinerary included a chamber concert in one of the local churches, and just before one of the numbers, the audience was asked to resist any inclination they might have had to stand. It was a stylish and well performed version of O Canada. I was not too pleased with the anthem being used as entertainment, but its treatment was at least respectful, and I didn't think it was being mocked.

Indeed, I do think it's possible to be respectful to national anthems while putting them to uses other than those for which they were intended.

In the 1960s, the title tune of the musical Hair contained the first couple of bars of the Star-Spangled Banner. I can understand how some might have been offended, but I believe it actually tied in with the message the play was trying to convey.

There have been questions as to whether the tradition of performing anthems before sporting events should continue. Actually, I'm neutral on the question. I see no pressing advantage to continuing the practice, and I see no really good reason for getting rid of it. But it should stay only if it's done respectfully.

Think back about 18 years to when Wayne Gretzky retired. The guy singing O Canada at the start of his last game slightly changed the words to throw in a tribute to the Great One. A lot of people thought it was a nice touch. I thought it was nauseating. It's not the first time I've found myself in a minority.

And then we come to last week's offering by Calgary singer Jocelyn Alice.

Like I stated above, I did not see it on TV, but I heard enough reaction to what went on that my curiosity prompted me to find a

recording of the incident on the internet.

I confess I sometimes get a little impatient with the histrionics that some performers go through, thus I was a little annoyed with some of the movements Alice made.

The problem is I shouldn't be annoyed. Throughout my school days, I sang a lot. I was in choirs just about constantly. It was a major part of my life when I was in high school. And I have sung solo in front of more than 700 people. I know that what can be dismissed as histrionics are contortions resulting from simple efforts to make sure things like lung capacity, voice capacity, tone, etc. are coordinated. Some notes are harder to hit than others.

Then there was the giggle, which made a lot of people angry. I'll admit I was angry at first, but then I heard her explanation. She later said she had seen some fans, evidently from Canada, on one of the big screens, and that prompted the awkward moment.

Is that explanation sufficient to get Alice off the proverbial hot seat? I think it is. It was plausible, and it possibly combined with a certain amount of understandable nervousness. No matter how professional and experienced she might be, performing at a major-league all star game is still a pretty big gig. Besides, each of us make a couple of little goofs every day. Alice's just happened to be more prominent.

Considering how prominent the reaction to the incident was last Wednesday, and how it had died down by Thursday, I think most people have let it pass.

Now if only the Jays can get back to winning.