

Restoring Our Idealism: Determining Repertoire Quality

by Drew Collins

When it comes to repertoire selection, there are many ways we can comfortably kid ourselves. Have you ever heard a colleague say, "I wouldn't want my college conductor to know I chose this piece, but my students will love it!" Or my personal favorite, "This piece really has no educational value, but you have to give the audience something pretty." Perhaps at one time or another, each of us has compromised our artistic and pedagogical integrity with rationalizations such as these. For many of us, our idealism seems to fade with every passing year, and we find ourselves programming music below the standard we had in mind when we entered the profession.

Doesn't this kind of compromise rob our singers of the best experience we can provide them? Did we really become music educators to teach our students how to be entertainers rather than artists? Spending day after day in the trenches can make it difficult to remember this simple fact: *Music is art in time*.

I am convinced that 90% of the sorrow or happiness we (and our singers) experience in the rehearsal hall is a direct result of programming. On the practical side, choosing music that suits your choir will result in fewer discipline problems, higher morale, improved motivation, and increased learning. On the musical side, you will notice singers taking responsibility for their own phrasing, text stress, syllabic stress, intonation, dynamics, articulations, *et al.* The bottom line: If students appreciate the music and feel that it's worth working on, they will!

Successful and experienced teachers already know the power inherent in the selection of repertoire. Even new teachers – fresh from the ivory tower - believe it. The challenge is finding an effective method for determining the inherent worth of a piece of music. Fortunately quality, unlike beauty and taste, is not entirely subjective.

The following ideas are presented for your consideration. You may not agree with every viewpoint expressed here. My hope is to stimulate an internal dialog that might impact future programming decisions.

DEFINING QUALITY USING EXISTING METHODS

There are several tried-and-true music education methods that can help us create a checklist for determining quality. My version of this checklist is on the opposite page. Feel free to photocopy it to use as part of your repertoire selection process, or create your own.

Comprehensive Musicianship Through Performance (CMP) -- This philosophy offers several guidelines for the selection of performance literature. In the CMP document "Performing with Understanding," there is a list called "Characteristics of Well-Written Music." Here is a simplified version:

- 1) A good composition is inventive/innovative/fresh.
- 2) The form/structure of the piece balances repetition and contrast, tension and release.
- 3) Is this piece unpredictable? Does it contain surprising harmonic or tonal shifts?
- 4) Does the piece have depth? Is it easily understood after a single hearing, or would an audience/ensemble experience new things upon additional hearings?
- 5) The piece has a consistent style. There may be some surprises or twists, but nothing seems out of place.
- 6) Is the writing idiomatic, or does it seem like the composer wrote the vocal parts sitting at the piano?
- 7) Does the text provoke insight on its own, apart from its musical setting? Is there a happy "marriage" of text and music, or did the composer miss the poet's intent?

The National Standards for Arts Education (NSAE) -- The National Standards can be a helpful guide for unifying our country's educational system while still allowing substantial freedom for each district, school and teacher to design and implement their own curriculum. Though the focus of the NSAE is on aiding the development of a curriculum, they begin with some important reminders about achieving variety in one's repertoire selection.

Manhattanville Music Curriculum Project (MMCP) -- The focus of the MMCP is on "the development of sensitive people who have the breadth of insight and skill proficiency to use music for its intrinsic meaning and value." According to the principles of MMCP, this is best done when fusing our musical heritage to contemporary music.

One of the people who helped develop this methodology, Ronald B. Thomas, wrote in 1979 about the concerns that sparked the MMCP:

In the primary grades, student enthusiasm for music is boundless. ... By the junior high/middle school years, music classes are often problem classes, where music is required and there is often resentment. At the high school level, only a small percentage of students elect music, and the classes are mainly large performing groups. Most often in these large performing organizations the course content does not represent either the historical qualities of music or the viable art of today.

This statement cuts right to the heart, doesn't it? How many of our country's music classrooms does this statement describe? What Thomas writes next drives the point home with a taste of harsh reality:

The substance of these classes is often only remotely related to music as an art or a cultural force. Materials of instruction have largely been manufactured to satisfy pragmatic demands and plebeian tastes. Very few students in high school are involved in classes which are singularly conceived to deal with the concepts of music as an art and a significant area of knowledge and experience.

When one admits that these statements may be at least partly true, it becomes a little easier to understand the perspective of administrators who are so quick to cut music budgets.

ART VS. ENTERTAINMENT

The answer to the question "What is the difference between art and entertainment?" is different for everyone. One opinion is that it depends on the intent of the artist. Another opinion is that such a determination may only be made by the listener. Some might say something esoteric like, "Entertainment makes life fun, Art makes life complete." Entertainment might be classified as art with a commercial agenda. Some may even surmise that there is no difference at all. The distinction may be different for each of us. Regardless of one's conclusion, exploring this dichotomy can change the way we view music.

Although there may be no way to clearly differentiate between art and entertainment, the important thing is to make sure we have each answered the question for ourselves. The act of thinking through this can yield valuable insights. You might even consider having this discussion with your choir. You may be surprised what they come up with!

PRIORITY #1: TEXT

When encountering an unfamiliar score, reading through the text first often can save a lot of time. No matter how great the music seems to be, performing a text that is of questionable quality degrades us as teachers of the Fine Arts. Luckily, a plethora of great poetry is available. Think about the poets who have impacted our world: Dickinson, Sandburg, Rosetti, Frost, Shakespeare, Millay, Longfellow, Whitman, Brönte, Yeats, Emerson, Shelley, Thoreau, Paz, and Rilke to name just a few. Performing settings of such poets' works has the added benefit of being inter-disciplinary.

Side note: Whenever I see "Words & Music by..." it sends up a red flag. It is uncommon to find a brilliant and worthy composer who is also a brilliant and worthy poet. It happens, but it's extremely rare (in my opinion). I tend to avoid such scores, and as a result feel much better about the texts to which my singers are exposed. In turn, my students have begun to think more deeply about the texts we sing, and they perform them with greater sensitivity.

METHOD OF COMPOSITION

Did the composer just write what sounded good? Art is defined as "...the expressive arrangement of elements within a medium." That is, beauty *and* form. Much of the music being written today is "melody driven:" it's a pretty melody and a pretty accompaniment, with a pretty harmonization. But, all too often, the most you can say about such a piece's structural integrity is that it is "through composed" or "strophic."

What unifying elements and/or compositional techniques did the composer employ? Is the piece thematic, motivic, both or neither? What ideas get developed? Is the fabric of the piece tightly woven and intricately designed? Or does it seem as if the composer's only goal was to tug at your singers' heart-strings?

Compositions should feel and sound free and unrestrained, but should still maintain unity beyond just 'ABACABA'. Brahms, Stravinsky, Bach, Josquin, Britten and Copland are just a few of the composers whose works have withstood the test of time because they refused to compromise quality, and still managed to create music that musicians love to delve into and audiences appreciate hearing.

CHESTNUTS AND WAR HORSES

There are thousands of new choral publications coming into print every year. With so much new music being produced, it is easy to forget those pieces upon which our art was built. There is a reason standard repertoire became standard: something about it that caused it to withstand the test of time. If an English teacher had students only read modern authors and never touched on Shakespeare, Salinger and Woolfe, wouldn't that teacher be criticized by colleagues, administrators and parents? Though music educators often feel immune to this same amount of oversight, the principle remains. Yes, it is important to introduce our students to modern techniques and current trends of composition. But without any historical perspective, how deep can their understanding of contemporary music really be?

COMPARISON TO OTHER DISCIPLINES

If you encounter a piece of music and are having trouble determining its quality, try this exercise. Comparing music to other fields of study may not always work, but sometimes it can clear up an issue in our minds.

Architecture: If this piece of music were a building, would its structural integrity cause it to stand or fall over? Is this piece a grand cathedral, or a circus tent?

Culinary arts: Is this piece of music more akin to broccoli, or french fries? New York strip, or ground chuck? Chocolate torte or a cupcake?

Literature: Would you put this piece of music in the same category as a Shakespeare sonnet, or is it more like a comic book?

Art: Is this piece closer to Michaelangelo or one of those airbrushed paintings you can get at the mall? If this piece inspired a painting or sculpture, what would it look like?

Film: Is this piece more like "Casablanca" or "Animal House?" Both have positive attributes, but let's call a spade a spade: one is a great film, the other a fun movie.

Ecology/Biology: Is this a vibrant, interdependent ecosystem, or a polluted swamp?

NEED VS. DESIRE

Most veteran teachers would agree that choosing music which appeals to the singer often yields a better performance than choosing music that your singers have to "learn to love." There is a fear that if we choose music that doesn't instantly jibe with singers, they may drop out of choir. These concerns are perfectly valid.

But surely we can balance these very real concerns with a commitment to quality. Can you think of 10 choral pieces that singers love *and* are of high quality? Of course. (It's almost as easy as naming 100 pieces that singers love and are of poor quality.)

Giving into our students desires is most certainly the path of least resistance. However, as educators we have a larger responsibility to consider: the needs and development of our students (notice I didn't say "...the *wants* of our students"). Giving in to the fickle tastes of our students (and parents, *et al.*) is the same as relinquishing control to them, when what they really need from us is leadership.

Involving your students in the selection process is a terrific way to instill a sense of ownership in your choir. Hand out about twice as many scores as you will need for the next concert. Sing through each piece, and even listen to recordings of the music if you have any available. Then, hand out a ballot and have the students choose one piece in each of several categories. A sample ballot can be viewed in Figure 2. If you try this with your choir, be sure that you present only the finest pieces. In other words, don't even give them the opportunity to select junk.

When choosing music for your next concert, consider trying this: only choose extraordinary music. Not "good" music...not "fine" music...only AMAZING music. With every piece you consider, ask yourself, "What is keeping this piece from being perfect?" Unless the answer is "Almost nothing," don't select it. Being your own worst critic when it comes to repertoire selection requires extra work up front, but the rewards are always worth the effort.

Now, I'm not suggesting that you select high quality music that has no appeal for your choir. But see if you can get the best of both worlds with every piece you choose: quality *and* appeal.

IMAGINARY REVIEW COMMITTEE

Nothing will keep you honest quite like this exercise. When trying to decide whether or not to program a piece, ask yourself this: *If an imaginary review committee made up of Robert Shaw, Dale Warland, and my college choir conductor was present at this upcoming concert, would I be proud to have selected this piece, or would I feel the need to make excuses for having chosen it?*

CONCLUSION

The title of this magazine's new repertoire forum is "Only the Best." You are the only one who can determine what music is "best" for your classroom, ensemble and community. But, the benchmarks we have discussed here can be applied to every piece we encounter. Don't our students deserve the very best? No matter what anyone tells you or what you tell yourself, your ensemble's success is in your hands. With determination and diligence, our country's children can receive the finest arts education imaginable.

Drew Collins recently completed his final year as one of two music education faculty members at Augustana College, Rock Island, IL. This followed several years of teaching public school choral music, grades 6-12. His compositions are published with several prominent publishing companies and he is senior editor of Odhecaton Music Publishing. He is a frequent guest conductor of choral festivals at all levels and for all ages, and is in demand as a clinician and adjudicator. He recently presented a session at the national MENC convention on repertoire for changing voice choirs. He earned the Bachelor of Music in Music Education from Concordia College, Moorhead, MN, and the Master of Music in Choral Conducting from Boston University. He is pursuing the DMA degree at Cincinnati Conservatory in choral conducting and music education. Contact him at DrewCollins@OdhecatonMusic.com.