

SOME TIPS ON THE REPERTOIRE FOR THE AGO CHOIR MASTER EXAM

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SECTION I of the AGO Choir Master exam requires that a candidate for the ChM certificate, in addition to demonstrating basic keyboard proficiency, “rehearse and direct the [examination] choir in the performance of all or any portion” of that year’s chosen repertoire. The three brief choral works selected for the 2008 exam span some 400 years of music history; thus, each one exhibits a different set of technical and stylistic issues that must be addressed to achieve the best possible musical results.

“O Sing Joyfully” by Adrian Batten has appeared on the Choir Master exam several times in years past, and with good reason. It is a delightfully cheerful early 17th-century motet that is fun to sing and not overly difficult. But the work does present some interesting challenges for the unwary singer or the unprepared conductor. First, in the Oxford edition, prepared by Maurice Bevan (and required for use on this exam), editorial brackets are employed to indicate an alternate metrical grouping of the notes in mm. 1 and 2, and again in mm. 9 through 11. For the sake of musical and textual clarity, it is preferable to conduct these measures using Bevan’s brackets instead of the actual bar lines. In other words, at the very beginning of the piece, the first two measures of 4/4 time might be better conducted (and sung) as two measures of 3/4 followed by a measure of 2/4, before settling into common time at m. 3. Shifting between triple and duple meter in this manner emphasizes the characteristic rhythms of the text, while imparting to the music a certain dance-like vitality. (At this point, it may be helpful to recall that music of this style and period predates the use of bar lines. The bar lines in all our modern editions are editorial, not original.)

There are some other things to watch out for as well. At several points in the piece, syllables are assigned to notes and rhythms that may sound awkward to our modern ears. For instance, in m. 8, the tenor part has the word “of” placed on the second half of beat one, and slurred into a quarter note on beat 2. This seems to give undue emphasis to a relatively

unimportant word. But charming syncopations like this are typical of English-language choral music of the period, and should not be “corrected.” Similar situations appear in the soprano line in m. 7, in the tenor part in mm. 19–20 and 31, in the alto at m. 41, and in the soprano at m. 42. It would certainly be wise to call the singers’ attention to these spots and to rehearse them until all are comfortable with the notes, words, and rhythms.

Beyond this, the principles of good choral singing apply. The given dynamics are editorial, but they make good sense, as long as they are observed within the stylistic parameters of music of this period. Fortes should never be shouted, and even the *fortissimo* (mm. 14–15) should not sound forced. Vibrato is to be avoided. The tempo should be sprightly and animated, rather in the style of a madrigal.

Listen carefully to your singers’ vowel formation in this piece: the prominent diphthongs in the words “joyfully,” “noise,” “appointed,” and “Jacob,” can produce some truly unattractive sounds if they are not carefully managed. Remind your choir to sing on the first vowel sound of the diphthong, and to delay the second until just before the next syllable.

The second repertoire selection is “Let This Mind Be in You” by Mrs. H.H.A. (Amy) Beach. The first three pages of this early 20th-century anthem are given over to some fairly challenging soprano and bass solos; the music is highly expressive and extremely chromatic. However worthy these opening pages may be, for examination purposes the ChM candidate need not be concerned with them, for the certification requirements specify that “the candidate will begin at the choral entrance on page 4.” In contrast to the opening solos, the choral portion of this anthem is quite straightforward. It is less chromatic than the preceding material, and its texture is consistently homophonic. Therefore, good choral blend, balance, and intonation are essential to a satisfactory performance. Pages 4 through 6 may be performed a cappella if desired, but only if the singers

can accurately maintain pitch until the re-entry of the accompaniment on page 6.

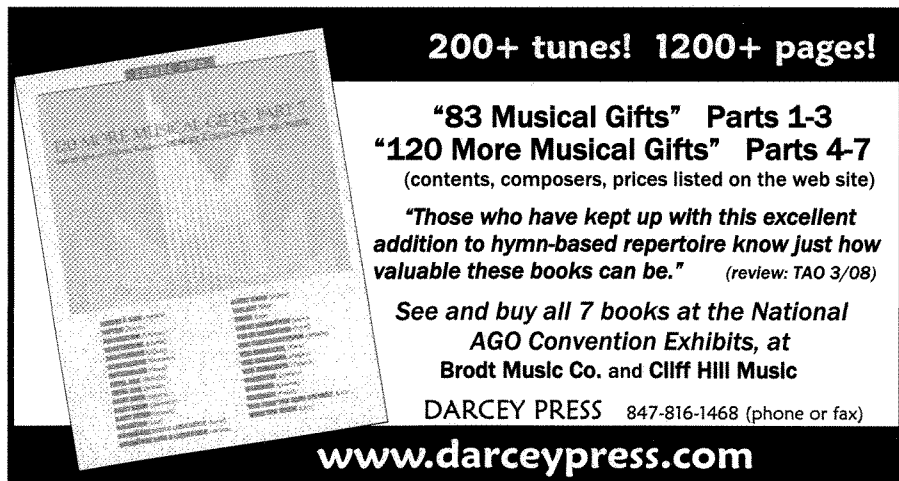
Dynamics here are more extreme than in the Batten: from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*, they should be observed in a dramatic way. The opening measures of page 4 deserve special attention. The choral passage begins with a quarter rest; tempo will have to be conveyed clearly before the first note is sung. Moreover, the first word, “Wherefore,” may prove to be problematic; since it is to be sung very slowly and very quietly, singers may tend to elongate the opening “w.” Encourage them to keep the consonant short, and to reach the vowel immediately. Similarly, the slow tempo may cause some sloppy “r’s” in the same word—a problem easily solved by dropping the r’s altogether. Notice the fermata on the bar line between mm. 2 and 3. Its meaning is somewhat ambiguous: you’ll have to decide for yourself whether it indicates a pause between the bars or an elongation of the previous note.

The third piece in the required repertoire, Knut Nystedt’s “Laudate,” is a late 20th-century unaccompanied Latin motet. Cast in ternary form, its shifting meters and rhythmic energy make it a compelling work. It should be performed crisply and precisely at all dynamic levels. Incidentally, no dynamic marking is given at the start of the piece: a confident *forte* seems called for.

It would be wise to review the pronunciation of the Latin text with your singers, and especially to speak the text in the rhythm of the piece before singing it. The work’s shifting meters and snappy dotted rhythms seem very natural once they become familiar. Be sure to observe the composer’s accent marks, and notice that they have not been applied consistently in treble and bass staves. This seems an oversight; add the missing accents in the bass staff where needed.

Finally, since most examination choirs consist of only four singers, and since this work includes *divisi* passages of up to six parts, it will be necessary at the exam to sing this work with piano accompaniment doubling the voice parts. This will certainly make the piece easier to sing, and the piano’s percussiveness will help reinforce the work’s strong rhythms. But candidates will need to be careful, not casual, about choosing which vocal lines are to be sung and which will be covered by the piano. Certainly, the highest soprano and lowest bass notes should always be sung. But in the inner voices, choices will need to be made. For instance, in m. 13, at the tenor *divisi*, it would be far better to have the tenor sing the upper note (the D) rather than the lower F#. Were the lower note chosen, the triad would lack a third, and parallel fifths with the bass would be created.

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