

TOWARD A CHORAL PEDAGOGY FOR COMPOSERS

DAVID CONTE, STEVEN SAMETZ, AND ROBERT KYR

The impulse for this article grew organically out of the “Symposium for American Choral Music” held in Washington DC in June 2012 and sponsored by ACDA and the Library of Congress. Three composer/teachers who direct sustained programs connected to conservatories or universities where young composers have the opportunity to compose choral pieces were asked to share their experiences and points of view about the issues contained within the following sixteen questions. Several of the more general questions about “American Music” represent a continuation of issues explored at the Symposium. You will find here many practical suggestions and more philosophical and aesthetic musings on these important topics.

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Sedit an

Sclus in

sta aram tēpli habens

tambulum aureum in

manu sua. ps. **S**icut. a.

Decorative flourish in red ink.

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What are you currently doing to educate young composers in the art of choral composition?

DAVID CONTE: The San Francisco Conservatory Composition Department offers highly structured opportunities for our student composers to write vocal music. My own pedagogical approach is to emphasize that the most durable rhetorical conventions of instrumental composition derive from vocal music, meaning that a mastery of writing for the voice is what sustains and nurtures compositional activity for all other mediums (chamber music, orchestral music, etc.). An examination of the catalogues of the great composers throughout history reveals how many of them composed a large amount of vocal music, especially choral music. For example, people are sometimes surprised to learn that over half of Stravinsky's 128 works are vocal.

Since 2000, I have supervised the San Francisco Conservatory Choral Composition Competition, a biennial competition that alternates art song and unaccompanied choral pieces. Our students have composed over one hundred choral pieces for this project.

A half-dozen compositions have been published by major companies, thus providing an entry for young composers into the world of publishing. In addition, every summer I mentor the composing of choral pieces at the European American Musical Alliance held at the Schola Cantorum in Paris. This program, directed by Dr. Philip Lasser of the Juilliard School, offers instruction for composers, conductors, and chamber musicians in the teaching methods of Nadia Boulanger; my own teacher from 1975 to '78. All sixty-five students sing in the Chorale, led by Dr. Mark Shapiro, Music Director of Cantori New York and the Cecilia Chorus of New York. All composers have the opportunity to compose choral pieces within the first ten days of the program and to have them read and performed by the EAMA Chorale under the direction of Dr. Shapiro or student conductors under his supervision. Student composers typically derive substantial benefit from their interaction with student conductors and vice versa.

The inspiration for this project came from my undergraduate experience at Bowling Green State University in the early 1970s. The Religious Arts Compe-

tition under the supervision of Dr. Wallace DePue featured choral pieces by twenty undergraduate theory students, which were performed by the University ensembles and awarded prizes by a panel of judges. My first published composition, "Cantate Domino," was written for this project.

STEVEN SAMETZ: My own path to teaching composition has been indirect. While I began composing at an early age, my advanced degrees are in conducting. At the end of my DMA exams, I asked the head of the theory department what he thought about my somewhat irregular training as a composer. His response was that as a conductor, I was trained in score analysis, orchestration and instrumental techniques, and how to shape musical architecture in performance. This conductor training, combined with an impulse to write, was, in his view, an ideal practicum for composition.

When advising young composers, I pass along this received wisdom that *practical involvement in performance is essential*. It is so important to be in the experience: hearing crossing lines, getting the "feel" of a singing line in your body, understanding the internal resonance of a choir. It is very likely why so few academic teachers encourage choral writing: they are not singers, and they don't understand what it is to sing in a choir—they haven't experienced that triple-punch of harmony, great text, and communal emotion that is delivered in singing. And if you're at all inclined toward composition, you find the experience of singing in a choir inspires you to write for choir.

I have taught composers at Lehigh University for over thirty-five years as part of our bachelor's in music program and our specific bachelor's in composition program. No student composer has ever written a piece that has not been

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performed, and often they conduct their own pieces.

In 2000, I founded the Lehigh University Summer Choral Composers Forum. Now co-sponsored by ACDA, the biennial Choral Composers Forum is an intensive, weeklong workshop dedicated to the exploration of the compositional process and the mentoring of aspiring composers to find their own voices. There are several unique features in the design of the Forum. Participating composers are instructed to not bring any sketches made beforehand. The week is dedicated to creating a new piece. In the process, participants develop a greater awareness of their individual starting points, where they might get stuck, and consider new ways of prolonging musical ideas. In private lessons and group seminars, the composers explore text setting, voicing, and structure with mentor teachers and myself.

Most importantly, through daily rehearsals with our professional lab choir in residence, The Princeton Singers, participants hear what they've written each day and have a chance to develop the work further for the next day's reading. By writing each night, discussing the work in morning seminars, and developing the work in daily lessons and rehearsals, composers get feedback and shape their pieces over the course of a week's study. Experimentation and risk-taking are encouraged, as is "borrowing" from other participating composers' compositional procedures. By week's end, all participants have their pieces recorded in a concert by The Princeton Singers. The result is what one participant called "fantasy camp for composers."

ROBERT KYR: The composition program at the University of Oregon School of Music and Dance is committed to a pedagogical approach that encourages the composing of vocal and

instrumental music in equal measure. At all degree levels, our composers create music in a wide range of vocal genres, including both unaccompanied and accompanied choral music. In regard to choral pedagogy, our program combines a rigorous approach to technical training with a wide array of performance opportunities. Our philosophy is that all of our composers should sing and conduct their choral music during the course

IF YOU'RE AT ALL INCLINED TOWARD COMPOSITION, YOU FIND THE EXPERIENCE OF SINGING IN A CHOIR INSPIRES YOU TO WRITE FOR CHOIR.

of their studies, while completing an intensive academic curriculum that offers studies in counterpoint (preferably a yearlong sequence), harmony, theory, and music history (including ethnomusicology). Furthermore, all of our degree recitals, theses, and dissertations in the vocal genre are publicly presented in professionally recorded concerts. Students are responsible for organizing and coordinating these presentations, which provide a set of opportunities for significantly furthering their artistic and professional development.

In our program, there is a performance requirement and most of the composers sing in our university choruses, as well as perform in instrumental ensembles. There are numerous opportunities for students to perform in their own vocal compositions and to hear them performed: through the Oregon Composers Forum Concert Series; through two of our six student-run contemporary music groups, which are vocal ensembles (*Sospiro* and *Ambrosia*, two chamber choirs); and through the

Vanguard Concert and Workshop Series, which gives students an opportunity to compose for eminent guest artists, who read their music in seminar sessions or present it in public concerts. Our students also participate in the Oregon Bach Festival Composers Symposium, which I founded in 1994. Currently the symposium has a strong choral component that enables each composer to have an extensive and complete

experience of his or her own music—as both creator and interpreter—which is essential for the creation of inspired and well-composed choral works.

What are the most essential pedagogical elements of a choral composition program?

CONTE: In our project, the student composers are led through a series of steps to prepare for composing a choral piece. This takes place within the context of a weekly two-hour class over a period of about seven weeks. It is proposed that the task of composing for unaccompanied chorus can reveal more immediately than any other medium the composer's strengths and areas to be strengthened. We analyze unaccompanied choral pieces from all style periods, beginning with the Renaissance, and with special emphasis on twentieth-century repertory, including pieces by our faculty and by past student winners.

I compile about thirty texts, both

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sacred and secular. We analyze these texts together, marking all stressed syllables, underlining all verbs (which can give a clue to tempo), and observing the punctuation in order to connect it to musical cadences. Special attention is paid to conjunctions, as they often indicate dramatic reversals or changes in tone that provide musical opportunities. The students are then ready to memorize their chosen text and to recite it from memory to the rest of the class. In this way, the students absorb what I would call the “energy curve” of the text. I encourage them to ask: Who is speaking, and to whom? Is there a clear climax? Does the speaker go through any significant change in the course of the text?

Another useful exercise is for the student to compile a list of adjectives that describe with as much refinement as possible the character of the text. For example, if it is sad, is it resignedly sad or nostalgic? Consciousness of these things can guide students in their choices of every aspect of the piece. I find that students enjoy delving into their experience of the poem in this way. Students these days are rarely asked to memorize poetry and recite it aloud with the intention to convey it as an actor would. This experience leaves the words “hanging in the air” in such a way as to draw out music naturally.

SAMETZ: The essential compositional elements—concerns of architecture, harmony, rhythm—are no different than instrumental writing. When we turn to specifics of choral composition, we need to add considerations of effective text setting, balancing voices through *tessitura* and vowel color and how we treat dissonances effectively for the voice. We must understand the strengths and weaknesses of the voice and the complex variety of choral sonorities available in mixed, men’s, and treble choirs.

The ability to handle the sonority and color of a choir—and by that I mean the infinite palette we have from low-voiced *pianissimo* chords to world music shouts to a minimalist’s pulsed repeated syllables—taps the potential of the most versatile instrument on the planet: the human voice. Our responsibility is to understand how the voice has been effectively used by past masters even as we give voice to newer types of vocalism in our latest works.

KYR: I believe the most essential pedagogical elements of a composition program are:

- Studying the art of choral composition with a composer who has substantial experience in composing for the medium and an abiding commitment to the choral art.
- Engaging in an ongoing process of composing for chorus, hearing one’s music performed on a regular basis, performing in one’s own music (as singer and/or conductor), and learning to receive meaningful input from singers and choral directors in order to make judicious revisions as necessary.
- Listening deeply to the greatest works of the choral literature from the Medieval period to the present day, which may serve as models of ideal choral writing for the student, and analyzing the music from both textual and musical perspectives.
- Studying poetry and other forms of literature in ways that help the student to better understand musical texts (which might be a course, seminar, or part of a guided study in private composition lessons).

- Learning to analyze found texts (often by poets who are not necessarily musicians) as “text for music” in order to determine possibilities for musical setting.
- For those who have the basic inclination and ability, learning to write “text for music” through a pedagogical process that is guided by a mentor, preferably a composer who is also a skilled creative writer.
- Singing in a chorus that programs a wide range of significant choral works from the repertoire and contemporary music, especially premieres or commissions with coaching from the composer. Also for those who are interested, learning to conduct a choral ensemble.
- In-depth study of counterpoint with an emphasis on model writing (e.g., canons, fugues) and singing numerous historical examples.
- Developing piano proficiency to the level of performing contrapuntal music, such as Bach’s *Inventions* and selected preludes and fugues from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, as well as perfecting score-reading skills and playing piano-vocal reductions.

In purely practical terms, this comprehensive curriculum might be organized as follows: 1) two-year sequence of undergraduate harmony, aural skills, and keyboard skills; 2) yearlong course in counterpoint that spans the history of Western music from the Medieval period to the present day; 3) a minimum of the following: one year of undergraduate piano study, including the performance of music by contrapuntal composers, such as J. S. Bach; one year singing in a

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university or community chorus; one survey course that covers part or all of the Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque periods; one course in literature that focuses on the analysis and reading of poetry taught through the English department; 4) finally, if available, the student should also take at least one course in choral literature taught through the choral studies department, and one or more courses in choral conducting.

3) What is the relationship of choral musicianship to choral composition?

CONTE: All composers benefit from learning to sing as well as possible and from singing in ensembles. Historically, we know that many of the greatest composers had experience from a very young age as choral singers, and there are many anecdotes about composers singing their own work for others. Mahler played on the piano and sang his symphonies for his wife, Alma, once he had completed them. Beethoven could be heard through the door as he worked and sang his ideas out loud. Britten, Walton, and Vaughan Williams all were boy choristers in the great English tradition; and Brahms, Vaughan Williams, and Webern were active choral conductors.

In our project, composers are advised to not write anything they can't sing themselves. In addition to singing each line alone, they are asked to sing it while playing the other parts, and in tempo, from beginning to end. Composers who have not yet acquired sufficient piano technique to do this can make use of MIDI, muting the part they are singing and singing along with the playback. While this is not ideal, it can also immediately show a composer what it's like to participate as part of a musical whole and to put him or herself in the position

of each and every singer. Experiencing choral music in every role, including as singer, conductor, and even accompanist, creates good choral composers.

SAMETZ: There are many fine composers of instrumental music who do not necessarily write well for the voice. Bach was one, and there have been others. Beethoven comes to mind. But those who come from the choir, as it were, and understand what it is to create a satisfying vocal line, or who know from inside out how to voice a chord on vowels to get the greatest acoustical sonority, have a definite advantage.

Palestrina, Monteverdi, Schütz, and Bach to appreciate composers who were fully active in vocal performance. For the twenty-first-century choral composer, there is no substitute for singing a broad range of choral works—the finest repertoire of the past as well as new music—in an outstanding collegiate, community, semi-professional, and/or professional chorus.

During his or her student years, every serious composer of choral music should strive to become more than proficient in aural skills (as taught in theory class, including sight-singing) and perform in a chorus for at least

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Knowing the rhythm of a cut-off on a final consonant, being aware of what part of a diphthong a choir will sing on, recognizing the joy a bass section has in a final low E—these are all part of our toolboxes and our craft. There is no substitute for singing in a choir as training for writing for choirs.

KYR: Choral musicianship is intimately related to choral composition. Throughout history, one finds that the greatest composers of choral music had considerable experience singing in vocal ensembles. And often, they also led choral ensembles as directors. We only need to consider Dufay, Josquin, Lassus,

one year, which can be augmented by taking voice lessons if the student so chooses. If possible, the student should also take a choral conducting course at the university level in order to learn how to study and rehearse a choral work from the director's perspective. This experience will enhance the composer's understanding of the choral art from a variety of perspectives: as a "theorist" (aural skills); as a vocalist in a chorus (possibly supplemented by vocal lessons); and as a director, all of which will greatly further his or her artistic development as a composer.

In addition, it is crucial that a choral composer studies counterpoint in a

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course that covers music from the Medieval period to the present day. Moreover, the student should attain a level of piano proficiency that enables him or her to play a variety of contrapuntal pieces with some facility. Finally, for a composer, choral “musicianship” must also include the ability to understand text from both the literary and performative perspectives. Choral composers should learn how to physically embody literary text—to read it aloud in a compelling manner—in order to make it one’s own so that the writing of choral music becomes an act of creating the text and music as one organic, unified expression.

4) Why is there a lack of choral pedagogy for composers in American universities?

CONTE: John Adams, a former faculty member at the San Francisco Conservatory and now a frequent guest teacher, told our student composers that when he received the commission to compose *Harmonium*, he realized that in his six years of formal composition studies in American universities, not once did any teacher suggest that he either analyze or compose any choral music. Additionally, Randall Thompson cites the “tyranny of absolute music” in his 1959 article “Writing for the Amateur Chorus” (reprinted in this issue). In the academy, forms such as symphony and string quartet are held up as high models, which indeed they are; but today, many forget how much choral music was written by the great composers of the past who excelled in instrumental music. I often tell my students that choral pieces and songs are the “compost” out of which grow symphonies and other instrumental forms.

Writing for amateurs is often discouraged in university settings. Because choral music is often the province of

amateurs, it is low on the prestige scale of musical mediums. Thompson points out that many of the greatest works of our most revered composers can be sung by amateurs. Writing choral music keeps a composer honest; one has to hear where the next note is coming

first choral piece.

SAMETZ: There is a lingering sense in the echelons of academia that writing for chorus is less rigorous than writing for instruments. This is probably perpetuated by composers who don’t

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from. For this reason, a chorus is far more vulnerable to being sabotaged by faulty technique. Even a few miscalculations of voice-leading and awkward preparation of dissonance can sink the success of an unaccompanied choral piece in performance. This is often seen as the fault of the singers. And while it’s true that the teaching of ear training and sight-singing may not often be as effective as one might hope, many difficulties in choral pieces are the result of faulty technique on the part of the composer. This is true in instrumental music too but not nearly as obvious or detrimental to the successful realization of new pieces.

Kodály said that the health of a musical culture is built upon the training of the musical young through singing the folk music of that culture. Perhaps partly because of the decline in public school music programs, choral music is simply not a part of the background of many young composers. In thirty years of reviewing composition applications for admission to the SF Conservatory, less than a fourth of the applicants have choral pieces in their portfolio. More than two thirds of the student composers in our project are composing their

regularly write for choir and encourage their students to apply themselves to the complexities of writing for orchestras. There is also the sense that the text will propel the development of the work rather than some more abstract, less programmatic, cell or motive. That Webern, Schoenberg, Berio, Lutosławski, Penderecki, Stravinsky, and Ives all wrote for choir doesn’t seem to be enough of an imprimatur to bring choral music to the mainstream of academic study. Despite the fact that Webern’s *Workers Chorus* sang his twelve-tone cantatas, there is the sense that singers will have a harder time in non-tonal music. As composers and teachers, we should be able to guide students in effective ways of writing non-tonally for choirs if that is part of their compositional voice.

This issue may also be related to the programming of choral repertoire at schools. Offering time for student and faculty pieces to be performed in concert is a great incentive for our composers— aspiring and established—to write more for choirs. Choral directors have a great deal of power both as advocates and performers of new music. If you believe in a new composer, program his or her music! This could change the

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approach of compositional faculties in no time.

KYR: Sadly, there is a deep and persistent prejudice in academia that composing instrumental music is a higher (and more prestigious) art than composing vocal music, especially choral music. From whence this bias originates is anybody's guess, since the Western tradition of notated music began with vocal composition and was dominated by it for at least five hundred years. Probably, it was the advent of non-modal and non-tonal music that finally shifted the balance from vocal to instrumental genres, because choral programming in America tended to favor tonal, homophonic music, while instrumental music was exploring a wider range of more experimental harmonic textures and practices.

Throughout the twentieth century, academic "new music" in the choral and instrumental realms differed greatly. For a relatively long time, university chamber ensembles and orchestras played music that related to developments championed by the modernists and post-modernists, while university choruses often programmed sets of short pieces (2-4 minutes each) that were largely tonal and usually homophonic with filler in the inner voices. During this period, composition professors strongly favored the harmonic direction of instrumental music, and more and more, they encouraged their students to do the same. By the end of the century, the degree portfolios of American university students (including their theses and/or dissertations) were filled almost exclusively with instrumental music. Occasionally, a portfolio might include an art song or maybe a song cycle, but rarely a choral piece.

Recently, the balance of genres in composition programs has begun to change. In part, this is due to the admi-

nable and wise advocacy of American choral directors, who have begun to read and publicly perform more pieces by student composers, and a more diverse range of music by established composers who are truly dedicated to the choral art. In the United States, the combination of an ever higher level of vocal performance with the strong creative leadership of choral directors has brought about an American Choral Renaissance, thus inspiring composers to strive toward creating a significant national repertoire. These conditions have produced an ideal climate in which student composers can compose choral music as a required part of their studies.

5) What is the relevance of the study of traditional harmony and counterpoint to the creation of choral music today?

CONTE: W. H. Auden wrote, "Every technique is a convention, and therefore dangerous, but techniques must be learned and then unlearned. We may get stuck halfway, but there is no other route to greatness." The principles of traditional harmony and counterpoint represent principles that are beyond style and taste. (For example, repeating a bass note over the bar line—which Bach avoids in his hundreds of chorales—tends to obscure the meter. This observation is relevant to any piece of music in any meter from any style period.)

All great composers of the past learned by imitating the masters. Young composers benefit immensely from composing pieces based on historical models. Rimsky instructed Stravinsky to write his early *Symphony in E flat* based on a Glazunov symphony. The smart students understand this; others may balk at modeling as stifling their originality. As Nadia Boulanger said: "One isn't original by choice. True personality in music is

revealed only through the deep knowledge of the personalities of others."

SAMETZ: The art of setting voice against voice—counterpoint—is continually developing. Bach's counterpoint is distinct from, though related to, Palestrina's. Brahms's and Poulenc's counterpoint and harmony expand the vocabulary but still arise as an organic development of historical voice leading. It is certainly possible to write outside of the historical models (Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* and Adams's *Klinghoffer* choruses are good examples of wonderful choral sonorities largely free of traditional counterpoint), but it's useful to encounter the traditions before countering them.

KYR: The greatest glory of choral music is in its independence of parts; that is, in polyphony rather than homophony, which often relegates the inner voices of the chorus to singing "filler." The polyphonic music of composers such as J. S. Bach and Brahms requires every chorister to sing primary material, i.e., the motivic subjects of various forms of imitative writing. Thus, in the truest polyphony, the musical challenges in a piece are shared by all sections of the chorus and do not fall disproportionately on any one of them.

Over the past several decades, American choral music has been dominated by largely homophonic textures. However, in recent years, the trend is toward writing more intricate polyphony, especially given the high level of vocal skills in choral singing. Today, American choral directors program a much wider and more diverse range of choral music than ever before, and often new works strongly favor a more contrapuntal—rather than a predominantly homophonic—approach to part-writing.

In light of the circumstances described above, which characterize the

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American choral scene at present, I recommend that aspiring choral composers complete a comprehensive curriculum of technical courses that focuses on the composition of polyphony (see question 2). Actually, I recommend this curriculum for all composers—both vocal and instrumental—since it is particularly strong in foundational studies that will greatly benefit any serious musician. If a composer is not studying at an institution, he or she should accomplish the equivalent of the aforementioned curriculum through rigorous independent study.

6) What five pieces of advice would you give to a young composer who is preparing to compose one of his or her first choral works?

CONTE:

- 1) Sing in a chorus.
- 2) Memorize at the keyboard a number of short choral works of the masters, drawing from all style periods. Why the keyboard? Because the fingers lead the brain and the ear. The keyboard insures that a musician is experiencing with his or her own body both horizontal and vertical relationships—a true

three-dimensional experience of music.

- 3) Memorize your text and have a clear point of view about the scene you are creating. Composing with text is to compose “character-driven” music. This exercise is also relevant to the composing of opera, solo vocal music, and film music, which can be a great motivator for young composers to write choral music.
- 4) Do not write anything you can't sing yourself while playing all the other parts, in tempo, from beginning to end. In other words, duplicate as completely as possible the experience that every singer will have singing your piece.
- 5) Conduct and teach your own choral music to a chorus.

SAMETZ:

- 1) Pick a text that sings to you. Writing to a text that doesn't bring out some interior soundscape makes the going very rough. Then get rights to the text before setting it. Heartache ensues later if permission to set the text is denied.
- 2) Know the choir and the space you are writing for. It's far different writing for a junior high school choir as opposed to a top-tier professional choir. Excellent music can be written at all levels. When possible, find out the acoustic of the hall where the piece will be premiered. Those of us who've been privileged to perform Renaissance masses in European churches know how right that environment is for the work. Your work can also be complemented by and designed for specific acoustical spaces.

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- 3) Find a choir to try things out on, preferably one you sing in. Choral singers are adventurers and generous spirits. They aren't usually on a union clock, and their feedback can be incredibly useful in the process.
- 4) Models can be useful, but try to write what you hear, not what you've heard.
- 5) Be aware that the more clearly you present your work on the page, the faster and easier your singers (or players) will give you what you want. Dynamics, phrasing, and a word or two about character will make your intentions clear and give the singers a chance to realize those intentions.
- 5) During the process of creating your work, sing it and play it at the keyboard (both the full score as well as the piano-vocal reduction) so that you personally embody the counterpoint and physically "become the music" as you continue to compose.

7) How do you advise a student to find an appropriate text for choral music? What makes a great text for choral setting?

CONTE: There is a gradient of difficulty regarding texts. Many ambitious students will want to set poets like e. e. cummings or Gerard Manley Hopkins right away. I advise starting with traditional texts; for example the Kyrie, for which there are many contrasting models and which has a straight-forward, three-part form. Look for vivid imagery. Look for the imperative tense, as it implies a heightened intention, which invites singing. Strong rhyme and meter in more traditional poetry help the student composer connect the grammar of language with musical grammar.

One consistent problem I see with young composers is that the musical rhetoric does not match the arc of the text. Such pieces are more settings *about* a text rather than settings *of* a text. Even if the music is beautiful and idiomatic for chorus, such settings do not serve the text but rather work against it, obscuring the meaning of the text for both the singers and the listeners. I fear that many modern performers and listeners don't pay enough attention to the words. The pronoun "we" is natural for chorus, which is after all a group of people expressing something. But there is also what I call the choral "I," so often seen in Whitman's poetry, which, because of its visionary quality, is ideal for chorus.

SAMETZ: Read poetry. Preferably, more than what is available online, which is often limiting. Find what sings to you off the page. Determine if the text is better suited to a choral or solo setting: great hymns of congregational praise, masses, texts that deliver a universal message are ideally suited to choirs. While it is possible to set an intimate love text for massed voices, it might be more effectively set for solo voice.

I was once asked to set the Bill of Rights. While it has greatness and history behind it, it's not the most singable text. (We ended up finding a different text to set.) Many people will tell you to look for open vowels in the text itself, which can be helpful, particularly in consideration of tessituras (it's nice if the line goes to a high part of the phrase on a user-friendly vowel). English can present particular challenges. Britten and Purcell give us brilliant models for setting English beautifully.

We know when a text sings to us, though this quality may be intangible. That intangibility, that mystery, may be the key to why music is the right language for a certain text. Music highlights what Gerard Manley Hopkins called an "inscape"—that interior landscape that is beyond words. Music is the perfect medium for translating that inscape. What makes for a great choral setting is the amount of heart and mind that is communicated musically and textually. When it works, it's the embodiment of why choral music exists in the first place.

KYR: It is crucial for a vocal composer to learn how to read poetry in an intelligent and imaginative manner. In seeking a text for musical setting, I advise my students to read a very wide variety of poems, both internally and aloud. It is essential to experience the sound dimension of a poem as well as its literary content. After all, great text setting for chorus is an embodiment of the inner life of the text through sound in order to

KYR:

- 1) Sing in a chorus on a regular basis and immerse yourself in the choral art, including conducting if you are interested in it.
- 2) Study the art of counterpoint in great depth and in a rigorous way, especially the music of the Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque periods (particularly, the works of Josquin des Prez and J. S. Bach).
- 3) Study, analyze, and repeatedly listen to the greatest music of the genre that is relevant to your project. Whenever possible, sing through each line within the musical texture while playing the other parts on the piano.
- 4) Know your text "from the inside out"—analyze and read it aloud many times in order to directly experience and internalize the sound of it so that you never separate its inner life from its physical reality.

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convey emotion and meaning through the blended voices of the chorus. This is a profound mode of communal human expression that does not have a parallel in any other art form. In seeking a text, it is important to remember that the chorus is a communal voice (“we”) and does not behave as an individual in the sense of being a soloist (“I”).

It is always advisable to know the community for which you are composing while seeking a text that is immediately relevant to each singer in the chorus. It is wise to choose a text that explores a basic human theme that has true resonance in the lives of those who will be singing your music. Above all, choose a text that reflects your own voice—a text that bears the stamp of your own conviction, even if you are not its author. In this regard, I prefer to write my own “text for music” rather than setting a found text, because it enables me to create the text and music simultaneously.

For those who are primarily interested in setting found text, which is the vast majority of composers, the compositional process demands that one first owns a text as though he or she is the author of it. The more psychological distance that exists between the composer and a chosen text, the less convincing the setting. A vocal composer should strive to create text and music together “in the first person,” as opposed to merely projecting sound at words as though they were static, lifeless objects. Thus, in regard to a found text, the compositional process begins with textual analysis and repeatedly reading it aloud until the composer becomes the author of the text. This is a prelude to co-creating text and music together as a unique sonic expression that is greater than the sum of its parts, thus transcending the written word.

I urge my students to be cautious in setting texts that are not in their first

language. If one is not completely fluent in a language (spoken and written), it is wise to work with a native speaker in order to truly “become the text” through a deep understanding of pronunciation, word stress, and expressive nuance. In particular, English is an especially difficult language to set to music due to

its diphthongs and hard consonants at the ends of syllables and words. Beware when setting English, even if it is your first language, because it is fraught with sonic difficulties in regard to communal word setting! One must take special care to set it with great attention to linguistic detail and vocal nuance so that every word can be clearly understood.

8) What are your criteria for determining a canon of choral works that all composers (especially aspiring choral composers) should know?

CONTE: In great choral music, every decision of the composer regarding melody, harmony, rhythm and tempo, texture, and color grows organically out of the text. When this is the case, the meaning of the words as an expression of the experience of the speaker of the text is intensified by the music and is more alive and vivid than the words alone. For me, this is the only reason to set any text to music: to illuminate the emotional qualities of the text *through* music. Each individual line has its own character and integrity yet fits into the

whole. There is a keen sense of the musical breath as related to the phrasing.

SAMETZ: We should all want to know the major great works, and that is a lifelong pursuit. We are in an age where our bedrock—the glory of Renaissance counterpoint—is heard and performed

ABOVE ALL, CHOOSE A TEXT THAT REFLECTS YOUR OWN VOICE—A TEXT THAT BEARS THE STAMP OF YOUR OWN CONVICTION, EVEN IF YOU ARE NOT ITS AUTHOR.

less and less. Studying Renaissance counterpoint can be quite a trial; experiencing Renaissance counterpoint (preferably as a performer) is to encounter the essential beauty of voices in harmony and motion. When I was an undergraduate, I studied Ockeghem, Obrecht, and Josquin; it meant very little until I was inside it, performing it. Curiosity led me to sixteenth-century Italy and a love for Lassus, Palestrina, Monteverdi, Marenzio, and Cipriano de Rore.

Our art is grounded in an era when the voice was the primary instrument. If we lose this connection, we lose our treasure. Knowing Schütz, Schein, Scheidt, and Buxtehude allows us to more fully understand the roots of Bach’s amazing contrapuntal versatility. The major works of the eighteenth and twentieth centuries are a living history of the growth of the choral art to the symphonic level. The small bands that accompanied Haydn masses expanded over time to the symphonic proportions of a Mahler orchestra, and choirs grew accordingly. Tracing the history of major works from Mozart’s *Requiem* to *Daphnis and Chloë* to the *War Requiem* provides a roadmap of the organic de-

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velopment of the choral art.

KYR: Whenever it might prove to be beneficial, I ask my students to trace their “musical-spiritual” lineage beginning with Hildegard von Bingen and proceeding to the present day. First, I ask the student to write down the lineage as he or she perceives it at present. Then I ask him or her to imagine an expanded lineage that extends over the past ten centuries of musical creation. Next, I give numerous listening assignments so that the student’s perceived lineage becomes a fuller and more expansive one through a process of extensive listening and in-depth score analysis.

My own perceived ten-century (1000-2000) lineage is: Hildegard von Bingen—Léonin—Pérotin—Machaut—Dufay—Josquin—Lassus—Monteverdi—Schütz—Bach—Haydn—Mozart—Beethoven—Schubert—Schumann—Brahms—Mahler—Schoenberg—Webern—Berg—Stravinsky—Bartok—Messiaen. I’m always striving to “fill in the gaps” and learn as much new music from both the past and present as I can.

Following are select examples of my primary criteria for determining my own musical-spiritual lineage: the spiritual depth and quality of the text; the effectiveness of text setting in regard to the inner meaning of the text, and its technical demands in both linguistic and sonic terms; the clarity and audibility of the words in text setting, as appropriate to the intention and aesthetic of the composer; basically favorable reception of the work over time within its own culture and across the boundaries of all cultures (transcultural, universal).

Please note that these examples are *highly personal*, and I am not suggesting that they are a universal set of standards for determining the supposed “greatness” or inherent value of a work. A student can also learn by studying music that does not succeed in certain regards; the process of getting to know

a work and criticizing it in a substantial way is often an important part of the learning process.

9) Name ten choral works that you believe must be included in a choral repertoire that all aspiring choral composers must know well.

CONTE: I would expand this list somewhat to include groups of composers associated with a single genre. Also, many of the choral/orchestral works on my list include significant passages of unaccompanied writing.

- Examples of Gregorian Chant, for example *Victimae Paschali Laudes*
- Selected motets of Palestrina, Byrd, and Victoria (including Archibald Davison’s SSAA and TTBB arrangements of these works)
- Monteverdi madrigals; other selected madrigals (*The A Cappella Singer*, first published in 1935, remains a fine collection)
- Handel—*Messiah*
- Bach—*B minor Mass*
- Brahms—*Requiem*
- Vaughan Williams—*Dona Nobis Pacem*
- Boulanger—*Du Fond de L’Abime*
- Stravinsky—*Symphony of Psalms*
- Susa—*Six Joyce Songs: Volume Two*

SAMETZ:

- Gregorian chant—*Victimae paschali laudes*

- Josquin des Prez—*Missa Pange lingua*
- Monteverdi—*Vespers of 1610*
- Bach—*H-moll Messe, Matthäuspassion*
- Fauré—*Requiem*
- Beethoven—*Missa solemnis*
- Bruckner—*Mass in e minor*
- Stravinsky—*Symphony of Psalms*
- Britten—*War Requiem*
- Lutosławski—*Trois poems d’Henri Michaux*

KYR: I have put my list in chronological order with some of the ten entries consisting of two more works to study and compare:

- Hildegard von Bingen: Choose at least three of her chants that were intended to be sung by a community (as opposed to chants that were created for a soloist)
- Dufay—Select at least two of his thirteen isorhythmic motets (recommended: *Ecclesiae militantis* and *Nuper rosarum flores*)
- Johannes Ockeghem and Josquin des Prez (teacher and student) —Study and compare a “l’homme armé” mass by each composer
- Monteverdi—*Vespers of 1610*
- Bach—*Mass in B Minor*
- Haydn—*Die Schöpfung (The Creation)*
- Mozart—*Requiem* (study and compare the Süssmayr and Levin versions)

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- Beethoven—*Missa Solemnis*
- Brahms—*Ein deutsches Requiem*
(*A German Requiem*)
- Verdi—*Messa da Requiem*

10) Choose 2–3 examples of choral works from your list above and tell us what a young composer can learn from these particular works.

CONTE: Brahms's *Requiem* is an inexhaustible resource for the aspiring choral composer. An in-depth analysis of the opening unaccompanied passage from the first movement (*Selig sind*) represents the perfect poise between harmony and counterpoint. Each line is independent and has its own shape and character and high and low points yet fits into a harmonic syntactical whole.

Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* is a great example of expert choral writing using twentieth-century idioms. The language is fresh and original but also contains many thirds and sixths, which is one of the secrets of choral writing, as it grounds the harmony with the overtone series and is natural and gratifying to sing. This work can be effectively sung by amateur choruses.

Conrad Susa's *Six Joyce Songs* has many deft and felicitous touches of what I would call "chorestration," meaning he often inverts and crosses voices to get a particular color on a single word or poetic phrase. For example, the altos may sing below the tenors, much in the same way that in some skillful orchestration the violas may be placed below the cellos. More ordinary choral music simply will place the voices in conventional order. Susa's musical choices are at all times driven completely by the text and express a wide range of color within a fairly straightforward musical vocabulary.

SAMETZ: Chant: pure melodic vocal line and rhythmic impulse; Josquin: motivic development/variation of a given melody, contrapuntal mastery; Bach: infinite variety of contrapuntal styles and textures in Bach's lexicon, color and orchestration in the Baroque era, harmonic invention through figured bass; Faure: lyricism, voicing, modal harmonic treatment; Bruckner: sonority in the romantic era; Stravinsky: orchestration, choral stasis, declamation of text; Beethoven: overstraining the vocal technique to the greater glory of God and man; Britten: text setting, architecture, rhythmic impulse; Lutosławski: extended vocal techniques.

Young composers should be encouraged to hear choral music of all kinds. The list points toward a variety of styles, but if young composers discover pieces they find compelling, they should study those closely to find out why that is so.

KYR: Hildegard von Bingen (communal chants): melodic contour and flow; use of breath to create melodic shape and design; phrase structure—inventive and varied, symmetry and asymmetry; implied harmony in a monadic genre; economy of means in regard to melody and phrase; embodiment of the inner life of the text through sound; simplicity, clarity, and elegance of line; spiritual immediacy of the textural/musical expression.

Johann Sebastian Bach (*Mass in B Minor*): masterful use of contrapuntal devices in service of the inner meaning and life of the text; variety of texture within complex yet clear polyphony; embodiment of the inner life of the text through abstract yet emotionally compelling sonic architecture; perfect balance of all compositional elements within a convincing musical/rhetorical argument; interweaving of voices and instruments in a right relationship to each other, especially in regard to blend;

polyphonically motivated harmony that is inventive and clear in design; dynamic, rhythmically energized ("charged") textures; revelation and epiphany through sound, transcendent sonic architecture (a "living musical cathedral").

Franz Josef Haydn (*Die Schöpfung/The Creation*): economy of means on all levels of musical structure; compelling drama and pacing balanced with impeccable musical craft; brilliant use of motives within inventive, clearly articulated musical structures; flow, fluidity and fluency of melodic phrases and structures; melodic, motivic, and harmonic invention in quick, energized music; the art of accompanying voices with textures that are never too dense or overwritten; clarity of form within elegant, effectively articulated sonic architectures; "less is more" (much more).

11) If a young composer writes several choral works, how will it affect his or her compositions in other media?

CONTE: Again, writing choral music keeps a composer honest; one must hear and be able to realize everything one is writing. It protects against being seduced by an over-reliance on abstract musical systems. Writing character-driven music develops a composer's imagination and resourcefulness and attunes them to the exact "affect" of every note, chord, and rhythm. The greatest instrumental music can be said to "sing;" to have the vocal impulse behind it. In this age of technology, where the electricity of MIDI is replacing the actual physical mastery of performing skills, composing choral music keeps the composer connected to the breath.

SAMETZ: A composer may find that writing choral music lends color and character to instrumental writing. Com-

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binning music and words affords us two luxuries: we have a starting point for the imagination (the character of the lines will match the text) as well as a starting point for compositional parameters that arise from the text (rhythm, harmony, orchestration or voicings, even overall length of the piece will grow from textual considerations).

Writing idiomatically for voices creates a “singing line,” which instrumentalists throughout history have sought to emulate. There is a naturalness in writing for the voice, a connection to the body

that come with needing to breathe. Young composers writing choral music may find that their instrumental music starts to breathe more.

KYR: There can be no doubt that if a young composer is involved in vocal and instrumental music—as performer, theorist, and composer—it will have a positive effect on both genres of music. However, it greatly depends on what kind of music we are talking about within each genre.

For example, if one composes vocal

a layering of static lines or textures at the expense of clearly articulated counterpoint. Composers can greatly benefit from studying and composing polyphonic choral music that transcends these limitations. In creating vocal and/or instrumental music in any harmonic style, beware the all-too-frequent “default mechanisms”: endless ostinato; aimless drones; non-functional pedal points; harmony that is merely textual and without linear integrity; and excessive layering of musical filler (the so-called “choral/orchestral lasagna”).

FOR MANY YEARS, DRIVEN BY INCREASING TECHNOLOGY AND AN UPTICK IN THE SPEED OF LIFE IN GENERAL, THERE HAS BEEN A DEVALUATION OF THE LYRICAL.

and breath that creates a type of line that most wind, string, and keyboard players are grateful to play. For many years, driven by increasing technology and an uptick in the speed of life in general, there has been a devaluation of the lyrical. Writing for choirs (which often love slower, richer harmonies) has value in grounding us, bringing us back to a less mechanized sense of time. Machines don't breathe; people do. If we want our music to reach people, it has to breathe. As composers, it is essential to have access to this longer, broader sense of human time. It is not that choirs can't sing fast music (although we're seeing this less and less); but even in “active” music, there is usually a slower harmonic rhythm in vocal music than in fast instrumental music. There is a breadth of musical line that matches the breath of the singers. Much new instrumental music doesn't “breathe”: there is almost a fear of silence or of the ebb and flow

or instrumental music that is primarily homophonic in nature, in which most parts are filler in support of one or two principal voices, then probably the way that one composes in one genre will not greatly affect the other. However, if one composes polyphonic music in which all parts are playing primary thematic material, then composing in either genre will significantly enhance the other.

It is not enough to compose for the voice and expect musical miracles to happen. Mostly, one needs to compose vocal music that is *truly* polyphonic that results in dynamic, energized harmonic motion. If a young composer is encouraged to follow this path, his or her instrumental music will improve exponentially in regard to musical substance, clarity of line, and harmonic vitality, regardless of style or aesthetic.

The standard instrumental fare of our times—whether it be chamber or orchestral music—generally favors

12) What criteria do you use to evaluate a new work by an aspiring choral composer?

CONTE: An experienced choral composer can see in a younger composer's work whether it is “chorally minded,” meaning that it takes into account the unique psychology of the choral singer. Composers like Handel, Mendelssohn, and Brahms seem especially canny in giving each singer exactly the next note they want to sing! Choral music that enters the repertory gives back to each singer more than they put in; the piece doesn't have to be negotiated but is simply “sung.”

SAMETZ: I take a long time to try to get to know a student's work and language. Mostly, I am trying to determine if the work arises organically. Most young composers fall into the trap of continuous exposition: a great two-bar idea followed by another (maybe equally great) two-bar idea that doesn't necessarily arise from or relate to the first. Development is frequently harder than exposition. And, while it's great to stretch the limits of choral technique, there are considerations of idiomatic choral writing: *does it work for choir?*

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KYR: In general (and noting that there will be exceptions), I start by asking if the fundamental musical material of the work is truly memorable. Then I look at whether or not the music breathes both rhythmically, melodically, and harmonically. Is the text set in a way that allows the most significant words of it (so-called “key words”) to be fully experienced? The text should be brought to life in a way that is more than mere “highlighting”; it should be but rather it is infused with a deepened expressive meaning through the musical setting. Is the form of the text effectively conveyed through the form of the music? Are the dynamics carefully marked in a way that is helpful to the singer? Is the work harmonically alive, favoring energized harmonic phrases with linear integrity (regardless of harmonic style or aesthetic)? Are the inner voices in the work more than mere filler? Is the melodic and harmonic profile of the music such that the vocalist will want to sing it throughout the rehearsal process and for repeated concerts?

13) What are the greatest challenges that face young choral composers today?

CONTE: Composers interested in writing choral music are in some ways luckier than those interested in writing orchestral music. It is much easier to get both readings and performances of choral pieces. Choral conductors are often vigorous champions of commissioning, and there are many wonderful opportunities: competitions, residencies, etc. To broaden the question to include young composers in general, I find the greatest challenge lies in how to acquire the kind of technique that enables a composer to write in all genres with fluency. The development of any composer’s style is built upon the interplay of

mysterious habits, intuitions, and choices, all influenced by the context of one’s individual background and general culture. For example, when Debussy auditioned at the Paris Conservatory at the age of ten, he played from memory the Chopin *G minor Ballade*.

We can ask ourselves: What kind of musician is this ten-year-old? One might say: “Well, Debussy was one of the greatest geniuses of music; he is a

sing without hesitation the modal and tonal syntax of any pitch combination, and then switch to Fixed Do in order to relate pitches to their written representation on a line or a space of all of the seven clefs. All other activities, such as the study of harmony, counterpoint, orchestration, and analysis, will be informed by this foundation.

Composing, like any human activity, ends up being an expression of one’s

TODAY, ONE OF THE GREATEST CHALLENGES FOR YOUNG CHORAL COMPOSERS IS TO FIND OR WRITE COMPELLING TEXTS THAT ARE IDEAL FOR MUSICAL SETTING WHILE BEING RELEVANT TO THE LIVES OF THE SINGERS AND LISTENERS.

special case and proves nothing.” But I encourage my students to have the highest role models possible. I tell all aspiring composers that they should ideally learn to play the piano as well as possible and work to memorize as many pieces as possible; and sing as much as possible, which connects one to the breath, which is in fact the source of all human activity. I worry greatly that the new technology available to many composers can separate them from the breath and can lead to what I would call “assembling” rather than composing. A composer’s music is a direct reflection of what kind of musician they are. Young composers often fall into two categories: those who need to listen less and imagine more, or those who need to imagine less and listen more. I find that today there are many more in the second category. Imagination without a trained and grounded ear easily becomes abstract. To that end, I believe that all composers should master first Moveable Do until they can hear and

character and one’s level of commitment. Boulanger famously said: “Either devote your entire life to music, or abandon it now. Not to do this is like marrying someone you don’t love. I myself have never been married, but I don’t think it’s a good idea.” I love both the rigor and the humor and humanity in her words. In order to be worthy of the greatest heights of what music can give us, we must devote ourselves to a kind of discipline that is the very definition of character. This is relevant to the composing of a piece for any medium.

SAMETZ: Choral composers have it easier in many ways than instrumental composers (or opera composers!). There is almost always a guinea pig choir, usually quite willing and excited to try something new. Do not be afraid to approach a choir and ask if they will read a piece. The collaborative process is alive and well in America. Once the piece has had a trial run, there is the question of

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getting it out into the world. We are currently at a crossroads in terms of how we bring our music to a wider audience. It's essential to have an online presence at this point, and it's hard to predict what will receive attention.

The economic practicalities today are such that there are very few full-time choral composers. It is useful to be able to conduct our own music. We are frequently our own editors and marketers; as such, we need working proficiency with both music engraving and website software. And it is not unusual for our compositional careers to be supported by other vocations. The model of Charles Ives, who made his living in insurance while still composing, is perhaps more valid than ever. At Lehigh University, we encourage double majors whenever possible; both passion and practicality must be served.

KYR: Today, one of the greatest challenges for young choral composers is to find or write compelling texts that are ideal for musical setting while being relevant to the lives of the singers and listeners. Although it is not so difficult to find texts that are interesting or moving, they are often more literary than they are singable. In short, good literature does not necessarily make superb "text for music." Likewise, it can be challenging to find or write texts that address contemporary issues that are important to an entire chorus as a community. Frequently, such texts can be too abstract, too discursive, or too verbose for musical setting.

Another challenge facing young choral composers is how to form an ongoing artistic and professional relationship with a choral director and his or her community of singers. In order for the composer to develop a relationship of this kind, he or she must be willing to devote a substantial amount of time and energy to becoming part of the community. It is ideal if a student can bond with

his or her high school or college chorus as both a singer and a composer so that the director asks him or her to create a new work for the ensemble. This will enable the student to be fully involved in the entire rehearsal period and the concert performance. This same philosophy of engagement holds true for student composers who are making a transition from the academy to professional life.

In addition, there are a number of other professional challenges that composers face: acquiring permission to set published texts that are under copyright; cultivating professional relationships that result in the commissioning of new works; deciding on a form of publishing scores and parts that works best for you; obtaining opportunities that lead to the recording of one's choral music on compact discs that are distributed nationally, internationally, and/or via the internet (as downloads); and developing a far-reaching online presence.

14) How would you define an American school of choral composition?

CONTE: One thinks immediately of Virgil Thomson's answer to the question: how does one compose "American" music? His answer: simply be an American and write whatever music you wish. There is a simple truth to this. For me, however, an important line of inquiry begins with the question: "What is a school?" Randall Thompson wrote in 1959 that America had yet to produce a school of choral composers equal to any of the great civilizations of Europe over the previous several hundred years. One may ask if fifty years later this is still true. I believe that the creation of a school is built on a country's unified sense of itself. Our country was never more unified than during and for a time after the end of World War II. This enabled Thompson to create a work like *The Testament of*

Freedom and Copland a work like *A Lincoln Portrait*. I don't experience our country as having this kind of unity at present. I would add that not all artists today see the establishing of a school as important. It is my own desire to connect to the great traditions of the past that causes me to continue to hope that schools may be established in all genres of American music.

KYR: Simply put, it's the music created by composers who are either American by birth, naturalized citizens, or self-identified Americans on the way to becoming citizens. Kidding aside, I think that the intent of the question is to encourage the respondent to maintain that there is a group of more-or-less "famous" American composers who form a readily identifiable and relatively cohesive American school of choral composition. Of course, this forces one to ask, "Famous or noteworthy according to which American(s) and according to whose criteria?"

The jury is still out on all of this. Our country is too diverse, too multicultural, too intercultural, too impossible to accurately categorize. It is not helpful to try to fit the teeming reality of American musical life into any one box. Moreover, I love the fact that we are currently in a period of cultural development in which we have a multitude of superb choruses of all types that extend from sea to shining sea. Since there is enough choral music of quality being written in all genres, we don't need to create a class system for composers (i.e., a limited "in group" and "out group"), which will only restrict the access of listeners to a diverse range of musical expression.

Ultimately, the direction of American choral music is continually being determined by choral directors and their choruses who are either performing the music or not, and by listeners who are either partaking of it or not. The tastes

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and sensibilities of artists and listeners will continue to shift according to the greater changing of life within and around us; from this, American musical culture will continue to evolve—ever diverse and always defying simple categorization. In many ways, this indeterminacy is a national attribute, not just of the people themselves, but of the music that has arisen from us during our brief and somewhat illustrious history.

15) Do we have a fully developed American school of choral composition in the United States today?

CONTE: I think not, even though many fine choral pieces have been composed by Americans. The ever-present strain of “American Exceptionalism” has led in many cases to reluctance of Americans to submit themselves to certain age-old disciplines of learning. It also has led to a paucity of suitable contemporary texts for serious and sustained choral utterance. In light of this, one might ask: “Where are the extended works for chorus and orchestra composed by Americans that are in the repertoire?” Has our country produced a work equal to, say, Brahms’s *Requiem*? This is a compelling question. Brahms had composed over sixty works for chorus, many of them unaccompanied, before composing his *Requiem*. Even if one can’t exactly define what a masterpiece is, one can say that there are conditions without which masterpieces cannot be created. These conditions need to be nurtured and developed; this remains our task!

Also, as I posited earlier, choral music remains lower in prestige than symphonic and chamber music. This peculiar status has led to choral groups, clamoring for the kind of media attention that orchestras routinely receive, to court composers established in instrumental music to write choral music who have

little or limited experience doing so. John Adams’s remark about never having been offered the opportunity to compose choral music in his education points to this.

Randall Thompson was correct when he diagnosed the “problem” of choral composition: many twentieth-century compositional techniques do not lend themselves a priori to chorus. The further away from the vocal impulse one gets in composing, the more quickly music can lose its connection to our basic humanity. I often ask myself the question: “Has the human voice and the human ear really changed significantly over the centuries?” In certain fundamental ways, it has not.

Yet, there is a profound truth in Kodály’s statement quoted earlier about folk music. We do indeed have a major body of folk music, which could be said to extend to our many forms of popular music. Ahmet Ertegun, founder of Atlantic Records, said: “Black Music became the music of the world... There’s beautiful music in every country, but there is only one music that travels everywhere and that’s Black American Music.” If this is true, one might say that the closer our choral music is to the influences of our popular music, the more “American” it is, and we can start to see the emergence of a true school. Again, many people may think that having a school is irrelevant. My own belief is that only a society that has some kind of unified view of itself is capable of producing a school of anything. I find this to be a virtue. As Auden said: “Only in rites can we renounce our oddities and be truly entired.” (“Entired” here is an archaic but very poetic synonym for “whole.”)

SAMETZ: I think Europeans view the American school as tonally oriented, melodic, and somewhat conservative. This may be the case: much of the choral music that has attracted a wide audience

in past decades would fall under these descriptors. Current choral composition has certainly found a resting place in chord clusters, slow harmonic development, and lyricism.

We have an authentic Afro-American tradition in spirituals, which is one of our greatest treasures. But sadly, at this time there is no living tradition of folk music in this country (and increasingly across the globe). Minimalism, which has roots to some degree in America (via India and Indonesia and a host of world music sources) was perhaps the last great break in musical forms that shook America. It has taken hold less in the unaccompanied choral repertoire than in the orchestral works with choirs of Glass, Reich, and Adams.

My sense is that we are in a transition period. Audiences were alienated by the post-Darmstadt aesthetic of the academy from 1950 to the end of the twentieth century. There seems to be a historical pendulum swing in progress from more cerebral “Enlightenment” thinking to a more emotional, romantic model. This alternation can be seen at various points in music history, and I think we’re in the middle of a shift. It will be interesting to see where we end up.

KYR: It’s a trick question, of course! If we agree that America is only around 250 years old, then virtually any aspect of our cultural history is still too young to be *fully* developed. However, if there is no easily definable American school of choral composition (see question 14), then one cannot argue that it is fully developed now, although one might argue that it is in the *process* of being developed and will eventually become a coherent, cohesive entity. Collectively, those are big “if’s,” and if they become a reality, an American school of choral composition will most likely need to somehow encompass the vastness and diversity of our entire “rough-and-

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tumble" culture.

What might it take for such a school to come into being? I think ACDA is encouraging the development of an American school of choral composition in the right way. More than ever, composers are welcomed into the organization, especially younger ones who are eager to compose a sizable output of choral music. This is great news and is a significant part of the American Choral Renaissance that I mentioned earlier.

My hope is that composers who are truly dedicated to the choral art will join together to help foster ideal opportunities for the creation and performance of new works, especially by younger composers who are just starting out in the field. For example, it would be helpful to create internships that connect young composers with particular choruses for a yearlong project that features a mentored compositional process and the performance of the resulting new work, perhaps premiered at an ACDA event. This approach will greatly further the development of a cohesive, yet diverse, twenty-first-century American school of choral composition. However, if it is to have a lasting effect, a program of this kind will need to be well funded, well organized, and sustainable over a substantial period of time, probably half a century at the very least. This long-term kind of thinking, planning, and action has eluded Americans in the past and is one reason why we have been unable to identify and sustain a cohesive American school of choral composition.

16) What is your ideal vision for developing a comprehensive choral pedagogy for composers to bring about the further development of an American school of choral composition?

CONTE: Practically speaking, aspiring

choral composers should be encouraged to sing in a chorus, memorize poetry, and compose choral music. All composers should have a certain level of musicianship that enables them to "digest" and learn from the music of others.

To take the broadest possible view, I think there is a strong argument for building composition programs on the foundation of writing vocal music, which will connect the young composer to the breath, to text, to writing character-driven music, and to gaining an understanding of how our musical language has evolved naturally and organically out of vocal music, especially choral music, beginning with chant. The world is both a much bigger and smaller place now, with the entire repository of music readily available to all. While this offers many possibilities for young composers, I would caution that one cannot add on endlessly; there has to be time for true assimilation. A varied diet is great, but the basics of good nutrition have to be there for maximum musical health! Institutions of higher learning have to work to counteract the dominant commercial impulses in the culture now to encourage young artists to see themselves not merely as consumers but as judicious assimilators of what will truly nourish them.

SAMETZ: My ideal vision of choral pedagogy invites composers to *sing* (both in terms of ear-training and performing repertoire), *listen* (to a wide variety of repertoire and to as many types of choirs as possible) and *question deeply* (both how things are constructed and how text and music find expression).

The question of an "American School" of choral composition invites a nationalistic response, and I'm not sure we're living in an age of nationalism. Monteverdi, Mozart, Grieg, Tchaikovsky, or Verdi—they all began writing for local audiences, shaping their works to local

tastes. More importantly, the music being locally produced found a local audience.

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TOWARD A CHORAL PEDAGOGY

rian chant. Our tastes are far flung and instantly gratified, but they are not localized. Musical globalization—for better or worse—is a fact of life. Our young composers are listening to Beyoncé and Beethoven and beyond (and that sentence may be dated by the time of this publication). They are constantly influenced by music and video that are not defined by any given time period or geography. Technology makes us consumers of a thousand years of music from all over the world. (Corollary to this are the dilemmas of a) the daunting task of comparing ourselves to so much history; and b) audiences not confined to live music as they were in the past can ignore contemporary music entirely.)

In light of this global assimilation, it would be hard to say whether there is an “American School” of composition. Like Ives, we may find ourselves wondering why we’re indoctrinated in European common practice and then asking ourselves, “What is American music?” His answer was in that rugged individualism that has come to be identified as an American trait. But uniqueness does not necessarily mean “American.” We export much of our entertainment industry’s music, and this is usually rooted in European traditions and is emulated throughout the world. But is that what we choose to identify as American?

I think it is unlikely we will coalesce into an American School. We see the confluences of cultural migration around us every day. Given this, it’s unlikely that an American School would have any one voice at this time. That may be a strength. Multiculturalism may be chaotic and messy, but it allows for almost any outcome. There is the danger that we will ignore historical pedagogy—which takes time and a prolonged attention span—in favor of flashiness. But I hope that there is something hardwired in us as composers that still asks deeper questions, no matter what the “school” of thought, and that we will continue to make art that seeks to answer those questions.

KYR: Ideally, a choral pedagogy should have the following components: 1) rigorous technical study at the post-baccalaureate level (or the equivalent thereof) in the areas of choral composition as part of an acoustic composition program, music theory, choral history, and choral literature, including extensive listening to repertoire; 2) at least one course in literature that focuses on the reading and analysis of poetry as both a spoken and written art, and if one wishes to write his or her own text, then at least one course in creative writing; 3) extensive experience in choral performance, including singing in a chorus for at least

one year (and preferably longer), and some instruction in the area of choral conducting, including training in score preparation; 4) study in the area of piano performance that will enable the composer to play from a full score and play a piano-vocal reduction as a choral accompanist (in order to rehearse one’s own music with a vocal ensemble); 5) participation in summer festivals, symposiums, and master classes that have a substantial choral component; 6) attendance of a large number of choral rehearsals and concerts, especially those that are performing masterworks from the repertoire and new works that involve some coaching by the composer; 7) internship programs are essential for the development of composers who are devoted to the choral art (see question 15).

Although this comprehensive curriculum is important for the artistic development of the choral composer, the personal development of the individual is equally (or even more) important. At its root, choral singing is a community activity, and a choral composer needs to understand the musical needs of a community that is striving to create a healthy, vibrant, collective sound. The choral composer needs to develop communication skills that are essential for collaborating with a choral director and a community of singers, and for sharing important information and insights about his or her music in a meaningful and inspiring manner.

I am optimistic that an identifiable, cohesive American school of choral composition is beginning to emerge from the energized choral culture that is being fostered. In collaboration with outstanding university programs, ACDA and other such organizations have the potential to bring about the formation of a strong and inclusive American school of choral composition that is grounded in the living art of choral music. ■

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