The Choir Issue, Part Two

Scott McCoy

It’s hard to believe that a full year has passed since the first installment of this series. During that time, it has been my pleasure to serve as a panelist for several presentations on the topic of voice teacher/choir conductor interactions. Two such sessions were on the program at the American Choral Directors Association national conference last March in Chicago, moderated by Allen Henderson, Executive Director of NATS. Another took place at the Phenomenon of Singing international symposium in St. John’s, Newfoundland (part of Festival 500), moderated by Caroline Schiller, a NATS member who serves on the voice faculty of Memorial University. Additional panel presentations are scheduled for several regional ACDA conferences in the coming year, and I’m sure the issue will be broached again in Orlando at the upcoming national NATS conference.

Clearly, this is a hot topic. Each of the panels I’ve cited included a mix of singing teachers and conductors, who spoke to capacity crowds. We panelists acknowledged strong differences of opinion and ongoing conflicts that exist between our two disciplines; curiously, however, there were no significant disagreements among those of us sharing the dais. Perhaps we all were on our best behavior? I think not. An honest exchange of ideas occurred, demonstrating that we share more common ground than might often be perceived. As I noted in this column a year ago, the key to cooperation is communication. The better we understand the concerns, ideas, and vocal expectations of our colleagues on both sides of the aisle, the more our students will benefit. The remainder of this article will focus primarily on choral and solo singing in colleges and universities, but many of the ideas are equally applicable to other situations.

WHAT WE SING

How do you select the repertoire you assign to your voice students? Many of us in the academy work under the umbrella of a jury system, which often includes explicit requirements that direct our choices. Dr. Christopher Arneson, Associate Professor of Voice at Westminster Choir College in Princeton, New Jersey, presented a marvelous session on the topic of repertoire selection from a developmental perspective at the 2011 NATS Intern Program. As he noted, the repertoire we select is of vital importance; it becomes the voice teacher when the student is in the practice room, away from our direct oversight. Chosen wisely, repertoire encourages healthy vocal development. But inappropriate repertoire will inhibit development and easily can become injurious.
Of course, a major consideration in the assignment of repertoire relates to the issue of Fach. In spite of all that has been written on this topic over the years, I'm still perplexed when I hear young singers performing literature that clearly is beyond their present level of vocal development. More unfortunate, the errors usually push younger singers into repertoire that is too heavy. A young tenor whose voice is suited to sing Des Grieux's lovely “Dream” aria from Massenet's Manon will not grow into the character with the same name in Puccini's version of the story by singing “Donna non vidi mai”—but he might well hurt himself. (One could also speak to the merit—or folly—of assigning “La rêve” to a tenor who cannot also survive “Ah, fuyez, douce image,” but that will be left for another discussion.)

In the professional world, casting choices are dominated by Fach. With few exceptions, singers are cast in roles that best suit their voices. Brünnhilde is unlikely to be offered a contract to sing Bach’s Matthäuspassion, just as the Evangelist in that work probably will never sing Cavaradossi. Of course, there always are examples of singers who are successful singing outside their expected comfort zone, as when Placido Domingo sang the title role of Simon Boccanegra as a baritone. We, along with our students, must remember that this type of exceptional casting is outside the norm. Most careers are better facilitated by remaining true to type.

Fach also exists in the choral world, whether or not it is labeled as such, especially at the professional level. Harry Christophers’s splendid ensemble, The Sixteen, is renowned for its interpretation of early music, but is unlikely ever to be the featured choir for a performance of Verdi’s Requiem. The chorus of the Metropolitan Opera might well take on that Verdi work with great success, but is unlikely to be equally adept at Monteverdi’s Vespers. The differences between these two ensembles go well beyond the style of music that is sung, or even the numbers of singers employed; ensemble members are selected based on very different criteria, including the size and timbre of individual voices and each singer’s personal Fach.

Many professional ensembles routinely sing with little or no vibrato. A colleague recently asked me about this in the context of the group Chanticleer. He posed the following question: If the members of that ensemble are able to sing safely and healthily without vibrato, shouldn't the members of the choir I conduct be able to do the same? My answer was a resounding cry, “NOT NECESSARILY!” The men who audition for Chanticleer do so with full knowledge and love of the kind of singing they will do. Through a rigorous audition process, anyone who cannot comfortably—and beautifully—produce the timbre required by the ensemble is eliminated from consideration.

This model of self-selection by the singer, confirmed through audition by the ensemble, sometimes occurs in the collegiate setting as well. This is true primarily for those choirs that specialize in specific genres, ranging from contemporary a cappella to madrigals. But most institutions also have one or more ensembles that routinely perform a wide range of repertoire using singers with diverse backgrounds and abilities. Some of these singers will have voices ideally suited to historically informed performances of Bach; others will be appropriate to Mendelssohn, Lauridsen, or Schönberg. But in the typical college, amateur, or even church choir, everyone is expected to sing everything with equal ability. And at the college level, participation generally is a required part of the curriculum.

Somewhere in the academy, there is a choir that uses singers the way instrumentalists are employed in a symphony orchestra. The symphony changes personnel according to the demands of the score, increasing or decreasing the number of players and distribution of instruments as needed. Why not do the same in a choir? If a nonvibrato sound is desired for a piece of early music, use only those singers who comfortably and beautifully produce that sound. When a large, vibrant, robust sound is called for, allow the smaller voiced singers to stay in their safe zone, not pushing to match their larger voiced colleagues. If a secular motet from the romantic era is performed, expect a fundamentally different vocal timbre than would be used for a motet from the Renaissance. If this is your practice, I’d love to hear from you.

In my thirty-plus years of teaching, I’ve yet to encounter a solo singer who is able to perform the entire gamut of repertoire from Gregorian chant to verismo opera to the standards of the Great American Songbook with equal proficiency and beauty. Some might try, but few, if any, will succeed. But choristers are expected to sing everything. I question whether this is a responsible, realistic, or reasonable goal.
WHY WE SING

Why are music majors required to participate in ensembles? In my previous installment for this series of articles, I cited four reasons why I believe choral experience is vital in the training of all singers. These merit repetition.

• Choir teaches singers to be team players, building essential musicianship skills applicable beyond the choral experience to ensemble work in opera, oratorio, concert, and chamber music.
• Peak musical experiences, those thrilling moments that inspire us to devote our lives to music, almost certainly will be at a higher level as a member of the ensemble than as a fledgling soloist.
• Almost every singer who aspires to a career in classical music will sing in ensembles, whether in the opera chorus at a young artist program, in the church job that helps pay the rent, in the Carmen sextet at the Met, or as a paid member of a professional choir.
• From Palestrina to Penderecki, much of the greatest classical music ever written includes a choir.

Intentionally omitted from the above list is any notion of a student’s obligation to the ensemble. If we examine the history of music curricula in the academy, I expect we would find justification for ensemble requirements in the value they provide toward educating developing musicians. In other words, ensembles exist in the academy to serve the needs of students. But all too often there is the perception, true or not, that music students exist to serve the needs the ensemble. A bassoonist—or lyric tenor—might be recruited with incentives similar to those offered a star running back on the football team; his own educational needs play second chair to the benefits provided the team, which in this case is the orchestra, opera, or choir. Of course, most collegiate ensembles also serve as musical ambassadors for their host institutions while enhancing the artistic life of local communities. In many areas, local schools, secondary and postsecondary, provide the only access to classical music performance. This is a vital service, but should not become a goal unto itself. We must give precedence to educating the developing musicians who comprise the ensemble.

Questions also arise concerning why specific repertoire is chosen for solo and ensemble performance. We’ve all seen examples in the voice studio in which students are assigned advanced repertoire in hopes they will “grow into it,” or because it is a personal favorite of the teacher. This is especially problematic when a potential “star” enters our studio. I have to resist the urge to assign Mahler’s Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen to every promising mezzo and baritone with whom I work; sometimes it is the perfect choice, but can just as easily spell disaster. The old saying, “Dance with the one you brought,” is completely applicable to this situation. Repertoire must be selected because it suits the current needs and abilities of our students, while fostering their continued growth, not because it is the music we love or know best as teachers. Graduate pedagogy programs can take a leading role in improving this situation by offering coursework geared toward how and why repertoire is selected, exploring options beyond what a teacher personally performed in school or on the stage.

The same holds true on the operatic and choral sides of the spectrum. In an ideal world, repertoire always would be chosen in response to auditions and hearings that determine the realistic capabilities of the personnel who will be involved. But in the real world, publicity campaigns and budgets demand planning up to a year in advance, often well before the key players are known. As a result, we find ourselves in situations where operas are cast and choir concerts staged with students singing roles and music well beyond their capabilities. Sometimes they rise to the occasion, but what happens when they don’t? Unfortunately, I can relay the stories of many, many singers who have been dissuaded from pursuing the art by situations in their formative years requiring them to perform too much, too big, too soon. (There are also many stories of singers whose career aspirations were unrealistically inflated by casting in inappropriate roles, only to have their dreams crushed by the competitive reality of the business after graduation.) The opera director might always have dreamt of staging La bohème, but shouldn’t do so merely because he thinks he will have the perfect soprano to sing Mimi. Nor should the choir director perform Carmina Burana just because it’s on his “bucket list” of repertoire to be performed before retirement. And the voice teacher should resist the urge to assign a burgeoning soprano “Der Hölle Rache” just because she squeaked out an F6 at the top of a vocalise once upon a time. The educational and developmental needs of the singers must be paramount.