



Principles of Church Choir Repertoire¹

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As church musicians and members of the American Guild of Organists, we are concerned with the role played by choir repertoire in achieving the purposes set forth by the Guild. Those purposes which are the most pertinent to the topic of church choir repertoire are stated by S. Lewis Elmer as follows, “To advance the cause of worthy religious music; to elevate the status of church musicians, and to increase their appreciation of their responsibilities, duties, and opportunities”.

Especially in relation to church choirs, repertoire must be conceived as being more than the literature used by the choirs in their contribution to the worship service. Indeed, style and interpretation are functional aspects of repertoire and should be dictated by the same principles to which the selection of choral materials is subject.

A primary consideration in the matter of repertoire is the unique situation to be found in each church. Even among churches of the same denomination, and even within the same community, choir repertoire problems are unique as each situation is unique. If we are to give fair examination to any proposed body of principles, we must first accept that such individualized situations will require widely variant methods, choices of materials, interpretations, and even basic purposes of the choirs themselves. Furthermore, those who are concerned with the theory of choral repertoire should develop and organize our proposed principles in a way which recognizes and utilizes these realities of difference.

It would seem from observation, experience, and research that choir repertoire is inevitably based on the following factors, each of which relates specifically to the situation in the individual church and to the goals within that church:

1. The purpose of the choir (or choirs) in the pattern of worship.
2. The understanding and appreciation level of the congregation.
3. The talent available in the church (or available to the church.)
4. The status and budget of the music library in the church.

The Purpose of the Choir in the Pattern of Worship

The frequently-heard compliment, “I surely enjoyed the selections the choir sang this morning”, is one which many choirmasters feel is inappropriate. It is not with the intent of providing an entertaining enjoyment that a church choir is conceived. Only when the choir contributes to the worshiper’s “joy in the Lord” are we achieving a valid objective. Most church musicians would subscribe to this statement: It is the purpose of the choir to add to the atmosphere of worship through the contribution of acceptable music. When a choir provides a choral interlude, a response, a hymn, or other special portion in the course of the service of sacred worship, it should be

¹ Ted Ward. Principles of Church Choir Repertoire. *American Guild of Organists Quarterly*, Vol. 1(3) July 1956: 87-91. Copyright 1956 by the American Guild of Organists. Used by permission.

motivated by nothing less than the intense desire to worship God through the vocal expression of singing, and in so doing, to bring the entire congregation more fully into the spirit of worship.

Another purpose of the church choir is that of complementing the thematic structure of the service through both special selections and short choral renditions giving continuity and direction to the worship. Perhaps nothing is more often neglected in an otherwise well-ordered church than the provision of choral music appropriate to the theme of the service. Frequently the fault is not with the choirmaster, since he or she may rarely know in advance what the topical theme for the service will be. One of the most encouraging trends reported in ecclesiastical circles today is the gradual departure from the compartmentalized service, wherein no one seems concerned about the interrelation of parts, to a unified service wherein the just emphasis is placed on continuity of thought.

In the church choir there rests a hope for the deplorable state into which congregational singing has fallen. Whether or not the church uses a leader for congregational singing, there is no excuse for slow, dragged-out singing. A well-trained choir and an alert organist can combine forces to move the congregation into habits of more pleasing tempo and better phrasing. It is apparent that congregational singing is distasteful in many churches simply because the minister, and, far too often, the church musicians, have the mistaken idea that the slower the tempo the easier the congregation will find it to sing. Any person who works with vocal music realizes that long phrases are a temptation for the untrained voices to break continuity of phrase and thought, and that slow tempi and consequent style encourage listless responses from those who would rather listen than participate.

It is a satisfaction to choirmaster and choir alike to help the congregation toward wider, more enthusiastic participation in congregational singing through the inclusion of properly styled hymns among the repertoire materials. A simple hymn sung by the choir can be a magnificent addition to the service while also serving as an example of appropriate tempo, balanced harmony, careful phrasing, and proper enunciation. The inclusion of such materials will tend to educate the congregation toward a more satisfying style of hymn singing.

A new hymn is much more readily accepted and learned by the congregation after the choir has used it once or twice as a special number. Congregations rarely like to be “taught” new music. Nevertheless, to teach new and better hymns, styles of singing, and understandings of music is part of our task. The indirect method is the only recourse; the organist and choir are its instrumentalities. This very significant purpose for the church choir will likely move into wider acceptance as its potentialities are better understood.

The Understanding and Appreciation Level of the Congregation

It has been established that a people cannot appreciate a type of music which is foreign to them unless it is built upon some other type which is familiar and pleasant to them. Arnold Wirtala of the Division of Music at the University of Florida states, “. . . everybody has the capacity, to a greater or lesser degree, to make intelligent aesthetic choices on the basis of his past experiences”. Notice the last phrase: “on the basis of his past experiences”. Further he states, “The development of standards of taste requires real effort on the part of the individual”. Here is the emphasis: *effort* on the part of the one whose standards are to be developed. Progress is not made by forcing upon the congregation music which it cannot comprehend nor by the insistent use of unknown hymn material which the worshipper is incapable of singing with spontaneity of understanding. Bach realized this

fact, and following the lead of some of his wise predecessors, he developed his magnificent chorale-preludes using as *canti firmi* those melodies which were already known and understood by the people as being acceptable in the service of worship. Unless, like Bach, church musicians of today is willing to begin where the people of the congregation are in relation to musical understanding, and to move carefully toward a widened understanding and a deepened appreciation, they cannot help but be misunderstood by the people.

Where music is suddenly lifted to a plane which is too high above the congregation, these problems may develop: the worshippers cannot share in the music as an act of worship, the choir and the congregation are unfortunately separated by aesthetic distance, and the congregation resents the accompanying implication that their tastes are inferior.

Thus choirmasters may find it temporarily inadvisable to include certain of the more complex masterworks in the repertoire, but after a time of careful development of the appreciation of the congregation, they will have the more satisfying joy of seeing their own enthusiasm for the great works of musical art shared by the choir and congregation.

A word of warning: Some of those who understand the significance of perceptual differences as they dictate what is and is not worship for the individual, have gone to an extreme, often a theatrical extreme, in order to reach people. Church musicians should not tolerate, much less encourage, abuses of music in the church which turn the worship into a theatrical production. True enough, people do watch television, people do attend the theatre; but when they come to church, there is a different motivation, and it is unnecessary and inappropriate to adopt the ways of the theatre, e.g., dramatic entries, fancy lighting, featured performers, and trick musical effects, merely to produce a "smoother show".

The Talent Available in the Church

Since this is not an exposition of theory of choir management, it can be assumed that the choirmaster is utilizing every available suitable singer, and that the resulting groups have been developed into functioning choirs. Here is the point at which another repertoire problem arises. Not every choirmaster seems able to evaluate his or her choirs in terms of appropriate materials. Often a choirmaster is inclined to overestimate a choir's ability. Simplified arrangements can occasionally solve the problem. However, those of us who dislike synthetic art can solve the problem through a system of graded choirs, wherein the younger or less experienced groups are given the easier of the materials of the service, and nothing is performed which has been found in rehearsal to be *too* difficult.

There is a consideration other than mere ability, however, which deals with the tastes and attitudes of the choir members. Singers want variety in materials, and they want to be challenged. Before a choir can be of much real help to the choirmaster in participating in the planning and selection of repertoire, the group must learn to think and act together as a unit; in short, to gain *esprit de corps*. A prerequisite to this unified attitude is a thoughtful choirmaster who gives thought to variety and challenge, within the rehearsal as well as in the long-term repertoire. Singers like to feel that they are accomplishing something, that their efforts have reasonable reward in production, and that they are not working alone. The choir can be of immeasurable help to the choirmaster in matters of repertoire once its members gain a common purpose and a clear definition of goals. This is not to imply that we can turn over the selection of repertoire materials to the choir, but rather to suggest that advisory committees comprised of choir members can work *with* the choirmaster to assist in

such decisions and to produce, as a by-product, a feeling of co-operation and a sense of responsibility in shared decision-making that will result in a more co-operative and enthusiastic choir.

It has been found that the too-frequent use of the more outstanding voices in a choir as soloists tends to make the other members feel inferior. Although it is seldom likely that such attitudes are justified, one must deal with them as realities. Both in the selection of choral materials and in the planning of the individual service, it is healthy to favor full-chorus and two- or three-part materials over quartet, trio, duet, and solo selections. In anthems which contain solo or duet passages, different persons should be asked to sing the parts from time to time, so that no one individual gets a personality attachment to a particular leading part. Repertoire should be identified with the choir as a whole rather than with particular soloists whom the choir merely supports by singing backgrounds.

The Status and Budget of the Music Library in the Church

For some choirmasters the music library is no problem, favored as they are with magnificent collections and an almost unlimited budget for new music. For many more, however, the limitations of small music libraries and meager finances continuously challenge the imagination. There is an encouraging trend in several denominations toward a more adequate monetary support of the music program. Some choirmasters are now faced with the problem of deciding where to begin investing money in a music library. Hymnals of denominations other than one's own, and often other editions of hymnals which are available within one's own denomination, are a valuable source of understandable materials for the small and medium-sized church choir. The per-dollar value of such supplementary materials is very high; consequently, the hymnal itself can be a basic source. The same thing could be said of the better collections of choral works now available from the various important publishers. The choirmaster should thoroughly inspect any choral collection before purchasing it. It sometimes happens that not enough of the materials in a unit-bound collection are usable to bring the per-number cost down below the price of single-composition octavo music. The latter is ordinarily the most expensive, although it is certainly the most handy and durable.

In conclusion, these criteria for the selection of choir materials are proposed:

1. The composition must be within the technical capabilities of the choir.
2. The composition must be appropriate to the type of service.
3. The nature of the composition must further the purposes of the choir in the pattern of worship.
4. The composition must approximate the congregation's range of appreciation.

It would follow, therefore, in most of our churches, that certain materials would be questionable, if not objectionable. A list of some of these follows:

1. Music which is aesthetically beneath the dignity of the service and beneath the higher expectations of the congregation.
2. Music whose text is devoid of sound Scriptural content.
3. Music which appeals primarily to emotions.
4. Compositions or arrangements which glorify the performer.
5. Music which is complex beyond the capabilities of the performers.
6. Trite "novelty" arrangements of otherwise uninteresting materials.

No one else can answer the problems of repertoire for choirmasters. These are decisions which are theirs alone to make. There are principles and understandings, however, which are shared in common fellowship among church musicians, and it is hoped that the individual musician will take thought for himself or herself concerning the issues involved in the development of worthy and appropriate repertoire.