

Themes encourage creative programming

—James Kinchen, Jr., R & S State Chair

Do you ever do thematic programming?

Looking back over most of the concert programming that I have done, a good deal of it has been of the “potpourri” type. There is nothing at all wrong with an eclectic approach to choosing and programming literature. But some of my fondest concerts have been those that have fit within a thematic rubric. *Themes* help give coherency to a program. Arguably, the use of a theme can encourage more thoughtful engagement of the listener and the singer. Seldom do any of us use themes without looking for new repertoire, and, in the process, making exciting literature discoveries. Themes challenge us as choral musicians to build within the large frame of the performance an edifice that requires some of the same creative and disciplined use of ideas, organization, and structure that composers successfully employ in their works.

Thematic programming can be *deductive* or *inductive*. William Witwer, UW-Green Bay, says, “In general, I either chose a theme first and then pick [repertoire] to fit, or pick a piece or two that I must do, and then seek connections with other rep. Sometimes the connections are very obvious, and other times much more subtle.” This is true for me, too. Bill’s most famous (or, according to his students, infamous) program was an “Ornithology Chronology.” The repertoire? You guessed it. “Bird songs” of several centuries. Bill adds, “I’m drawn to historical connections first and like to program composers that influenced later composers—Schütz, Bach, Brahms settings of similar texts or treatments of the same tunes. I’ve programmed entire concerts to the same theme or had several ‘sets’ of contrasting themes. It provides me with a way of thinking about repertoire and how it connects to other disciplines...”

My most memorable—and riskiest—theme was “Loss of a Child,” which we did twice in the late 1990s. A faculty colleague’s toddler died in a car crash. As we pondered an appropriate artistic response, the colleague suggested a musical program that offered comfort to all parents of the community who had lost children of any age and by any cause. Music programmed included Schütz’s plaintive “Erhöre mich, wenn ich rufe,” Billings’ setting of “David’s Lamentation,” treble

voice arrangements of John Alden Carpenter’s “When I bring to you coloured toys” and “The sleep that flits on baby’s eyes,” the “In Paradisum” from Fauré’s *Requiem*, the “Nänie” of Brahms, and various children’s songs from African American, Jewish, and Native American folk cultures. To my relief, the concerts worked and were seen as wonderful examples of the universal power of music to heal.

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I also enjoyed doing “Cantus Prius Factus,” a term that once almost got me booted from a doctoral class, when a professor thought that I had made it up to use in an analysis! It, of course, is Latin and refers to a pre-existent song or melody. This program included a wide variety of pieces, from early music to modern folk settings, all of which were based on or quoted previously existing music.

I consider Sharon Hansen, UW-Milwaukee, and Rick Bjella, Lawrence University, to be the “Theme Queen” and “Theme King,” respectively. They bring such creative thought to their programming. One of Sharon’s successes was “Tender Love,” using Norman Luboff’s arrangement of the same title as interlude music, connecting pieces with divergent opinions—both strongly positive and negative—on love. “East Meets West” was a choral voyage from America to Western Europe to Eastern Europe. Explained Sharon, “Passports to and maps of the countries we were ‘visiting’ were given at the door, and the concert flowed as if one was traveling through various countries, finally ending ‘home’ with American folk music.” This is a trip I would like to have made! Sharon recalled that her “Madrigals and Merriment,” a look at merry-making throughout the centuries, “was made all the more poignant, because the concert took place in October 2001, when people were still reeling from the devastation of September 11 and not at all sure



—James Kinchen, Jr.

“HIGH FIVES”

if they should be feeling merry without feeling guilty... This was a tough concert, but a very healing experience in the end.”

Rick Bjella, of “Killer B’s” fame (outstanding literature by composers whose last names begin with the alphabet “B”), shared several of his favorite thematic ideas with me. I found his “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” to be intriguing. Rick explained, this was “not a tale of two cities here, but rather one of extreme emotions... that give us pause to consider the power of the word when it is woven with the music.” “Nigra Sum” was a kaleidoscopic sampling of music by black composers or from African-derived traditions. Beginning (predictably) with the plainsong of that name and two modern settings of “Nigra Sum,” the program included works as diverse as motets and partsongs by African American composers, “spiritual” settings, gospel arrangements, and songs from Caribbean, South American, and West African cultures accompanied by drums. I would like to have attended his “Italian Christmas,” which featured Respighi’s “Laud to the Nativity,” the “Magnificat” from Monteverdi’s 1610 “Vespers to the Blessed Virgin,” and a treat of various pieces by Bonelli, Scarlatti, and Gabrieli involving various combinations of brass, organ, and choir.

Give thematic programming a try if you’ve generally not been inclined to do so. There are many potential benefits, not the least of which will be your own discovery of exciting new literature, and the wonderful connections that you will help your listeners and singers make between the music you program and our shared humanity.

COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY REPERTOIRE

submitted by Gary Kent Walth

1. *Marvelous Musical Theatre Medleys, Part I* (Choral medley from “West Side Story”) Leonard Bernstein; lyrics, Stephen Sondheim; arr. Len Thomas. BOOSEY & HAWKES # M-051-47109-6. SATB, PIANO (INSTRUMENTAL SCORE AND PARTS AVAILABLE ENB 467).

This is a wonderful medley of six tunes in an arrangement that is creative and beautiful. Diverse textures are presented over an industrious piano accompaniment. Several opportunities for soloists are also included. My Concert Choir performed this medley recently in England and Scotland and

always received enthusiastic responses!

2. *Medley* from “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.” Andrew Lloyd Webber; lyrics, Tim Rice; arr. Roger Emerson. HAL LEONARD #40326241. SATB, PIANO (INSTRUMENTAL PARTS 40326245).

If you’ve ever produced this show, this medley will bring back fond memories. Including seven tunes from the original production, each song is set with the diversity of styles and energy that Lloyd Webber originally intended. Your singers will have a great time as soloists and as back-up singers with this medley. Performing it with a rhythm section, at the very least, is suggested!

3. *Gershwin! A Concert Panorama*. George Gershwin; lyrics, Ira Gershwin & Irving Caesar; arr. John Higgins. WARNER BROS./JENSON #408-07014. SATB, PIANO (INSTRUMENTAL PARTS 408-07029).

Originally published in 1985, this arrangement calls for a narrator and a piano accompanist who delights in stylistic variety. The voicings range from unisons to SSATB writing. Employing experienced bass and drum set players would really help in making this medley sing!

4. *H.M.S. Pinafore: A Choral Salute*. Arthur Sullivan; lyrics, W.S. Gilbert; arr. Philip Kern. ALFRED #16389 SATB, PIANO.

Gilbert and Sullivan fans will surely enjoy this delightful setting of this world famous nautical comic opera. The medley features several of the more recognizable tunes and would be very conducive to staging. There is some SSATB voicing and the piano accompaniment is very accessible. Three cheers and three cheers more for this arrangement! (Rated at “Level Five.”)

5. *Medley* from “Oklahoma!” Richard Rodgers; lyrics, Oscar Hammerstein II; arr. John Leavitt. HAL LEONARD #08552505 SATB, PIANO (INSTRUMENTAL PARTS 08552508).

Leavitt’s setting can be performed by choral ensembles of all levels due to the careful selection of keys, voicings and a supportive accompaniment. Including seven songs from the show, the arrangement features creative transitions and an overall determination to preserve the integrity of the original stage score.

(watch for more of Gary’s Broadway picks in the next issue of Soundings) *Continued on page 6.*

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Repertoire & Standards

SUCCESS

*“Start with a dream—
then start working.”*

*“Understand first,
then be understood.”*

*“Create your own
opportunities.”*

*“Courage.
Character.
Caring.
Communication.”*

*“Embrace challenges.
Expect no less than
yourself.”*

*“Simplify and
maintain focus.”*

*“Success is not the key
to happiness,
happiness is the key
to success.”*

—Anonymous

JAZZ CHOIR REPERTOIRE

submitted by Kevin Morrissey

1. *Jazz Alley*. Dave Barduhn. SOUND MUSIC PUBLICATION #SMP03-006SATB, PIANO, BASS & DRUMS.

This piece has simple unison and two parts that open into challenging 5 & 6-part voicings. An original tune based on the Doxy changes, the lyrics talk about life at the famous downtown Seattle Jazz Club. Piano parts are voiced throughout in quarter and half note patterns.

2. *This Little Light of Mine*. Traditional, arr. Kirk Marcy. SOUND MUSIC PUBLICATION #SMP03-002SATB, PIANO, BASS & DRUMS.

This gospel shuffle features your vocal belting soloist. With written out piano voicings, it allows freedom for your pianist to develop in the gospel style without needing to know how to spell out and voice the chords. Traditional 4-and 5-part harmony gives way to a lush *a cappella* section before finishing with two modulations that increase the song's intensity to its rousing finish!

3. *Danny Boy*. Traditional, arr. Kirk Marcy. SOUND MUSIC PUBLICATIONS #SMP 88-010SATB.

If the voicings and range of Yumiko Matsuoka's arrangement (as performed by Vox One) of this tune don't work for your current group, check out this arrangement by Kirk Marcy. More easily accessible for a high school jazz choir, these harmonies still enhance the haunting old text and melodic line. There is a short solo feature.

4. *Morning*. Clare Fischer. UNC JAZZ PRESS, LEVEL IV SATB, SSAT, OR SSAB, RHYTHM SECTION.

A standard around the world, this is one of Fischer's best arrangements of one of his most popular songs, with lyrics available in English only.

5. *Sister Sadie*. Horace Silver, arr. Christine Salerno. UNC JAZZ PRESS, LEVEL IV SATB, SSAT, OR SSAB, RHYTHM SECTION.

Wisconsin jazz musician Christine Salerno has 10 charts published through UNC jazz press. The piece contains a solo transcription with lyrics by Salerno placed in the middle of the chart, offering soli groups the chance to "tell their story" about Sadie. Repetitive motifs keep this arrangement simple, yet very appealing to the audience.

SHOW CHOIR—

THE KEY IS CONNECTION!

Submitted by Sarah Parks

Editor's note: Sarah is our newly appointed Show Choir R&S Chair. On the faculty at UW-River Falls, Sarah brings to this position a wealth of choral experience as well as an enthusiasm for representing and serving the needs of the WCDA show choir constituency that is absolutely infectious. We hope that directors who have show choir responsibilities will respond with equal enthusiasm to Sarah's commitment to choral excellence in this most visible area of choral performance.

Whether you are just getting started or are a master of the genre, if you are maintaining a well-established program or need to be rejuvenated, the key to successfully managing a show choir is an understanding of the fact that you are not in this alone. The following list presents various ways to remain inspired as a show choir director.

1. **Network with experienced directors.** If you are just learning the show choir routine, keep in mind that your choral colleagues with expertise can be a very helpful resource. Generate a list of specific questions and concerns that arise as you work with your ensemble. Then schedule an appointment with a knowledgeable director.

2. **Send interested students to a show choir camp.** Any music teacher who has sent students to camp can attest to the benefits of these enrichment programs. Students interact with professional directors and choreographers and return with heightened enthusiasm as well as new movement and literature ideas.

3. **Attend camp yourself.** Spending a week at a camp like Showchoir Camps of America can put you in contact with some of the best choreographers and music arrangers in the business. Also, camp allows other opportunities including motivational speakers and extensive choral reading sessions.

4. **Attend show choir festivals as a spectator or participant.** Spending an entire day at a competitive show choir event gives directors and students the chance to encounter a wide range of vocal literature and creative choreographic ideas.

5. **For those of you who have experience, please be willing to be a resource** for the music educators who are encountering the challenge of show choir for the first time. Encourage your own students to give support and encouragement to newly formed and developing choirs as well as to programs that are in transition due to a change in leadership. ♦