



HALLELUJAH!

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Effective Worship in the Choral Rehearsal

by Karen Marroli

There is a role beyond musical preparation that church choir directors are called to fulfill: that of spiritual leader. Just as musical learning in educational and community settings must never end with the teaching of notes and rhythms, preparing music for worship also must reach for a loftier goal. Preparing singers to minister through the choir anthem involves amplifying the sermon and deepening the worship experience for both singers and congregation. Along with musical concepts and right notes at the right time, it is the director's task to ensure that the choir has a deeper understanding of the text and its connection to the service to help them feel like a vital part of the church's ministry. Textual understanding will also more effectively teach some of the musical concepts that are needed.

Myriad musical and spiritual benefits come from taking time during each rehearsal to process texts and theological themes with the singers. First, directors of church choirs should fulfill the role of music minister, which means being part of the church fabric responsible for the spiritual formation of the congregation. The congregation members

with whom we have the most direct contact are sitting in front of us each week, genuinely loving to sing and hungry for whatever knowledge we bring to each rehearsal. When singers experience that "lightbulb moment" of a deeper connection to the text of a piece of music, they become more motivated and energized; they feel they are an important part of the service; and they understand how their role as musicians fits into the overall service. They become ministers themselves, and that proves powerful.

In addition, a choir that understands the meaning of a text and how that text fits with the music just sings differently. Tone becomes inherent. Dynamics have meaning and color beyond simply loud and soft. The music is allowed to communicate in a spiritual way, beyond text, and the congregation hears not just the syllables and sounds of the words but also the emotion and spiritual intent behind them. That is when music in worship becomes transporting to the listeners, connecting them to the creative God, which deepens the worship experience.

Two key components can help us give our choirs a better overall musi-

cal and spiritual understanding of a piece of music: connect the singers to the text and connect the text to the music.

Connecting Singers to a Text

Because I am a writer of both words and music, I am inherently connected to the message of a text. It can seem obvious to assume that because singers have seen a text, they are processing the words of the anthem and creating meaning from those words. One of my singers was a mathematician, and he told me that he was quite attuned to the patterns of tiles in the ceiling and a number of other numeric and detail-oriented observations. But one evening during a choir rehearsal, he thanked me for going over the text with the choir, relating that he wasn't really processing the words as he sang them and that they were more like building blocks for the music that washed over them. Each person is wired differently, so choir directors need to ensure that everyone is thinking about the text of a choral work. Otherwise, we may be cheating singers out of a profound



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spiritual experience. Here are some practical ways that we can process anthem texts with our choirs:

• **Let the choir in on the sermon theme.** Some singers may study the Lectionary, but many do not. Or perhaps your church is not Lectionary based and relies on various sermon approaches to create the structure of worship. In any setting, if you don't engage the choir in where worship is going, they may not process it until somewhere in the middle of the sermon on Sunday morning. You've

done the hard work of selecting an anthem that fits perfectly with each sermon. Be sure to make your singers aware of important threads in that worship fabric.

• **Get the singers to tell you about the text.** It may be tempting to quickly explain the words of a piece of music to the choir from your own viewpoint, but it can be valuable to have them tell you what the text means. When they know what the worship theme is, you can ask them for ideas of how the text relates. Guide the discussion, but let the choir members learn from each other. You may hear ideas that you would not have even thought of yourself!

• **Make it personal.** Help the choir to connect the spiritual food contained in the anthem text to their own lives. They might not share aloud, but the singers can more deeply connect to the words and the ministry within themselves. Is the song you're singing one of joyful celebration? Ask the choir to think of something for which they are currently feeling particularly thankful or joyful. Is the piece about reaching out for God in a time of suffering? Ask the singers to think about a time in their own lives when they felt lost and in need of guidance. You are giving them the gift of a piece of music that can feed them spiritually the next time they experience a need for God in the darkness.

• **Connect it to history.** Is there a particular story behind why a hymnist or lyricist wrote the text you are singing? Sharing that with the choir brings new perspective and deeper

understanding. Connecting pieces with their history creates a context in which the choir can view the music and also intuitively guides their musicality within a piece of music in unexpected ways. Whenever I do some of the more rugged Early American repertoire, I always ask the choir to think about what life must have been like for people of that time period. Was it easy? Most likely not. What must their faith have been like to get them through hard times? How do the words they are using in the text reinforce that idea? The sound that flows from that understanding is more solid and rhythmic immediately, without even discussing any musical concepts. This background engages the singers' imaginations and allows them to more deeply experience a musical work.

• **Boil it down to one word.** Ask the choir to select just one word that the text embodies. Words like "struggle," "repentance," "prayer," "praise," and "enduring" can clarify the underlying idea of the text and influence the way that the choir sings those words. This practice can also help them to apply musical concepts in a more meaningful way.

Connecting the Text to the Music

In my early education under Joseph Flummerfelt at Westminster Choir College, I, along with countless other young singers and conductors, learned the importance of understanding how text intersects with music. It is not enough to see that a section of music is *piano* or *forte*;

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we must understand why it is so. Is it a prayer? A request? What is the story inherent in a dynamic, an articulation, a harmonic color, or a crescendo? Our church and community choirs, just like eager student choirs, are hungry for these discussions, and their music making can benefit greatly. When we combine them with the power of musical worship, we are creating a meaningful experience for choir and congregation alike. Following are three examples of discussions I have had with singers that connected the spirituality of a text with the music of the anthem.

• **“Just As I Am,” arr. Hal Hopson** (Augsburg Fortress, 2012). Hopson’s arrangement of this familiar hymn employs a number of expressive dynamic and tempo changes that can teach spiritual and theological lessons. The worship theme for this particular Sunday was repentance. The word “repent” is an emotionally loaded word that simply means to change direction. Defining repentance as changing direction to walk toward God when one has been walking away helped to lay the groundwork for a discussion of musical elements of the piece. The stanzas represent different stages of a journey and are expressed in the arrangement. Hopson sets the first verse as a simple rendering of the familiar tune, but the second verse is set in a faster, more agitated tempo, in a minor key, with melody obscured to the point of its being a new composition.

Hopson expresses the textual idea of being “tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt” using these tools. Why is this verse set differently?



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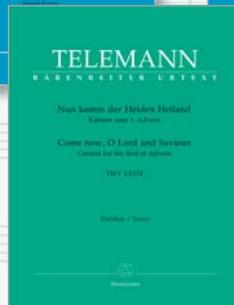
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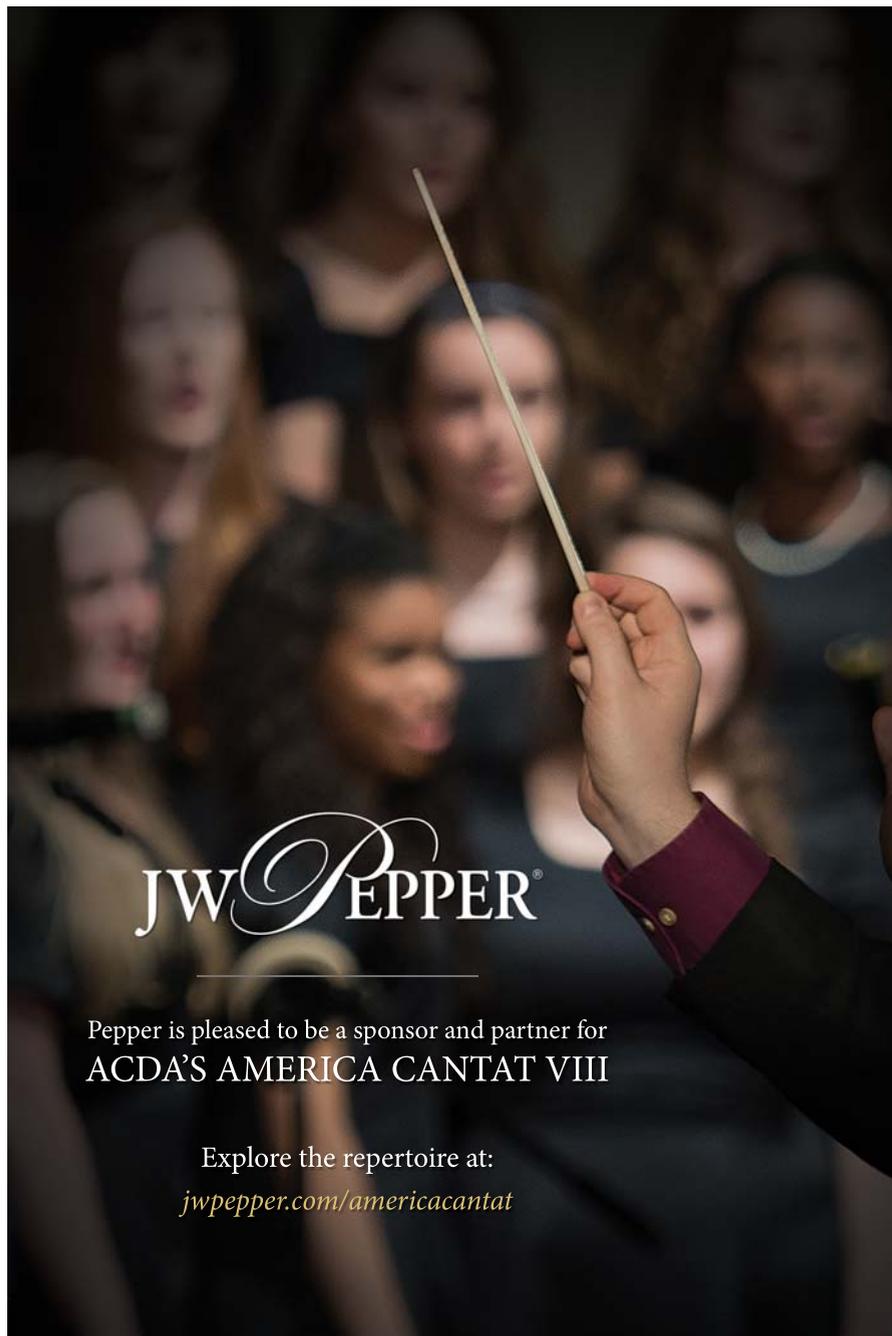
How does it feel to be walking on a journey away from God? Why does this conflicted section suddenly dissolve back into the familiar melody when the verse ends? Are we turning back toward God at this point? The end of this verse also features a sudden slower tempo and a subsequent

ritardando before returning to the familiar tune for the third verse. Could these tempo alterations indicate our human hesitation to walk in a way that we know we should? These are the types of discussions that arise from such examinations. As a result, choir members internalize musical

shifts and dynamics more quickly.

• **“My Shepherd Will Supply My Need,”** arr. **Virgil Thomson** (Alfred Publishing, 1966). This favorite church anthem uses the same music for all three verses, but the tempos and dynamics vary in each repetition. The piece is a simple one to engage the choir in a discussion of dynamics. The first verse, for example, introduces the main belief: my Shepherd will supply my need. God provides. It is a *Credo*, and it is set in a straightforward *mezzo forte* dynamic, with some use of *piano* for contrast. The second verse, which begins with “when I walk through the shades of death,” is a little slower and is *pianissimo* and *piano* for its entirety. Talk about how God is present even in the shadows of life. When we understand this, we can understand the power of the final verse, beginning with “the sure provisions of my God attend me all my days.” What emotion or spiritual experience does this verse represent? Redemption, assurance, thankfulness? Although many descriptors can apply to *forte*, each will yield a very different overall sound. Discussions such as these engage an innate human understanding of the text that influences the musicality of the choir.

• **“Gather at the River,”** arr. **Susan LaBarr** (MorningStar Music Publishers, 2014). In rehearsing Susan LaBarr’s creative combination of “It is Well with My Soul (When Peace Like a River)” and “Shall We Gather at the River,” my choir was tempted to see it simply as a piece about water until we connected the deeper theme of healing and resto-



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ration in Robert Lowry's "Shall We Gather at the River" to the genesis of Horatio Spafford's inspirational text for "It is Well With My Soul." In the 1865 publication *Happy Voices*, Lowry described the genesis of "Shall We Gather at the River":

One afternoon in July, 1864, when I was pastor at Hanson Place Baptist Church, Brooklyn, the weather was oppressively hot, and I was lying on a lounge in a state of physical exhaustion...My imagination began to take itself wings. Visions of the future passed before me with startling vividness. The imagery of the apocalypse took the form of a tableau. Brightest of all were the throne, the heavenly river, and the gathering of the saints...I began to wonder why the hymn writers had said so much about the river of death and so little about the pure water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and the Lamb. As I mused, the words began to construct themselves.¹

In discussing how the concepts of enduring and hope for the future intersect with the well-known history of "It is Well with My Soul," written by Spafford after the death of all four of his daughters, the choir can now tap into the quiet, noble, and indomitable strength through faith of such an anthem. That connection feeds the singers spiritually and helps them to sing in a way that communicates those emotions and qualities to the congregation.

Worth the Time

It would be easy to think that there is no time in the choral rehearsal to dive into the text of an anthem and how it connects to the sermon, or to assume that choir members don't need to process theological concepts because they automatically make those connections. However, to make worship truly effective for both choir and congregation and to get the most musically from your choir, try setting aside a few moments each week to have these discussions. Connecting the choir to the text and guiding them toward understanding how that text fits in with the worship service will not only make their experience more meaningful, it will simultaneously address musical concerns and choral sound and will help the choir

sing better in a creative way. Your choir deserves it, the music deserves it, and the One to whom you are offering your gifts on Sunday morning certainly deserves the best that all of us can give. **□**

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NOTES

- ¹ Robert Lowry, "The Beautiful River" in *Happy Voices* (New York: American Tract Society, 1865), 220.



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