



Repertoire Search Strategies

by

James D. Niblock

(Reprinted with permission from New York state's Choral Cues, Winter 2008)

As another concert season begins, many choral directors breathe a sigh of relief, having finally tracked down the music they will need to keep their choirs thinking, learning, and singing for a few more months. It is the first step in the cycle that many of us follow -- program, practice, perform. Among these three phases, programming is uniquely solitary. It is undertaken in the absence of performers. There is no real-time feedback by which one might gauge success or choose to make adjustments. Selecting music can be tiresome and frustrating as lead time evaporates. The path to a perfect program order is paved with purchase orders and littered with back orders.

Still, the nagging question resurfaces time and again: "Where will I find repertoire that will lead to a wonderful experience for my singers and a polished performance for our audience?" Those of us who direct a men's or women's choir have become especially adept at bemoaning the lack of repertoire appropriate to the number, skill level, or intellectual capacity of our singers. The truth is, the music is out there, but we have to find it. Here are a few clues to help you keep your sanity while you search.

1) Do not let yourself get locked into one mode of procuring music. You wouldn't assume that your choir could thrive indefinitely on the music of one composer, would you? Would you think that one publisher could fill all your present and future needs? No. So why count on one catalog, one convention, or one distributor to fill every void? Branch out!

There are many ways to obtain quality music. You may never explore all possible paths, but don't get locked into

any one for all of your music needs. If you peruse a single catalog from a single distributor and call it a day, you and your singers will miss out on some great possibilities. Look at samples, go through catalogs, shop online, listen to recordings, trade with colleagues, and read repertoire lists.

2) Remember your favorite composer(s). It's not good to assume that they haven't written anything your choir can sing. At this past year's national ACDA convention in Miami, attendees were treated to a performance of *A Sea Symphony* by Ralph Vaughan Williams. While few directors will be putting that into the folders any time soon, some might be wondering "What did Vaughan Williams write for my choir?" Dig up a list of his works and you might find the answer. It's easier said than done.

If you have access to the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* in print or online, look through the listed works by your favorite composers. If you are not able to access this particular resource, use other online indices. For example, a Google search will reveal the online home of the Ralph Vaughan Williams Society, complete with lists of compositions, arrangements, and the voicing for each work.

3) Figure out who arranges well for your type of choir. Look past the trendiest names, set aside your style preferences, and consider the craftsmanship involved in a few pieces that have worked well for you in the past. This might give you clues about what fosters interest, singability, and elegance.

Be pragmatic. Narrow the field based on the ability level and voicing of your ensemble. If the alto parts are too low

or the tenor parts are too high in the first four selections you peruse from one composer, there is a good chance this person is not arranging with a choir like yours in mind. As a first year high school teacher, I was asked by one of my male students "Why do we keep singing pieces that are arranged by Robert Shaw and Alice Parker?" My reply was simple "They're the best at what they do, and I want you guys to have the best." He thought I was being smug. The pieces had only one thing in common--great arranging for a TTBB chorus.

4) When you come upon a piece that works well for your choir, find out if it has a cousin. Pieces are often published in series, but how often do you follow up to see whether or not another piece from that series is equally appropriate for another day? A series specific to one voicing can be especially helpful in nurturing a fledgling ensemble.

Read the listed works on the backs of octavos you've enjoyed to look for other possibilities. Perhaps a favorite tune or poet will jump out at you. This can be especially helpful if you program thematically. Titles may reveal enough to pique your curiosity. Order a copy and take a look.

5) Long before all else fails, look online. You may not find the most comprehensive or scholarly sources available, but you'll certainly find something! Use web sites to discover new titles. Once you know a piece exists, you're a whole lot closer to getting your hands on it. Here are just a few starting points:

- sheetmusicplus.com - find octavo numbers or see if a piece is still in print
 - acdaonline.org - repertoire resources by area; an especially fine list for women's voices.
 - Intercollegiate Men's Choruses - concert programs, reading session lists
 - publisher's web sites - peruse catalogs, listen to samples, sort by voicing
 - composer's web sites - sound clips, arrangements for alternate voicings
- Edifying, beautiful, fulfilling music is available for every ensemble. Spend time refreshing your memory as to where you might find what fits your situation. The best chance for a great experience arises from the most appropriate repertoire for your group.



The Vocal Edge

by
Leanne Freeman-Miller

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In a September, 2001, column in the Iowa Sound-ing Board entitled "Knowledge is Power: A Choral Director's Responsibility," Dina Else and Leanne Freeman-Miller raised pedagogical issues facing choral directors as they train students in singing. The thoughts of Ms. Freeman-Miller, summarized here, might