

The Gift of Music... What's on Your Shopping List?

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My husband's birthday was just a few days ago and I was looking forward to shopping for his gift. I always do. My husband is a pleasure to shop for...he has so many interests, that, with a bit of thought, I can always find "just the right thing." After thinking about what he would like or need, I decide what I'd like to get him. Then I think about the other details...the box, decorative wrapping, bow and finally, the message of the card. I cannot wait to present the gift; to see how my husband reacts to it. All of these elements...*all of them*, combine to form "the gift."

Choosing music for rehearsal and ultimately, the performance, is similar to this "gifting process." Do we, conductors, realize this each time we select a piece of music? Do we consciously think about all of the elements of "giving the gift of music" to ourselves, our students and our audience? Think about it for a moment...all of the same decisions are inherent in both processes.

▪ ***Who is going to receive the gift?*** Our students, the audience, ourselves (we often forget ourselves). We must choose music that inspires us in such a way that we will want to work diligently on it. We must choose music that will inspire our audience. Most importantly (I submit), we must choose music that aids in the development of our students, both as musicians and as human beings. Does the music help them connect with humanity by singing a different language, a marvelous lyric of poetry or understanding the context of the original performance of the piece? Does it help them connect with or reaffirm something that's already within them? Does it help students understand and express the multitude of emotions that exist within them on a daily basis? The music we have chosen becomes their life-textbook, filled not with equations, formulas or dates from history, but with memories, emotions and empathy.

▪ ***What do they want or need?*** Many things! A feeling of "connecting with others" is essential to our world, and the very essence of what we do as artists. Sometimes a certain piece of music can provide a moment of "self-awareness" and clarity, comforting those who are struggling with life issues. Very importantly...I believe that understanding people from another time and place is vital to our growth as human beings. We can always learn from singing or hearing another language, a translation, music that is built in a different manner than we are accustomed to. Finally, in a comprehensive sense, we need to provide a sense of beauty. There is so much ugliness in the world...we need to help people recognize the beauty within in it. Don't misunderstand this for suggesting all "light-bright" songs...there are countless pieces that are sorrowful and beautiful, by virtue of their text, sincerity or tonal color. Additionally, music that has a sense of the unknown allows the performers and listeners great interpretive flexibility. They don't know "how" to feel about it; these can be the most rewarding to perform.

▪ ***Select it.*** This is the easy part, right? Sometimes.... It depends on what we do to actually, physically choose the music. Where do we "shop?" Do we look through our "tried and true" files, rely on sampler cds from the publishers, or do we get to a music store(as often as we can) and get into the stacks of music? We should strive to do all of those things as our busy schedules allow. I know I'm guilty of getting busy and quickly selecting something in a moment of "desperation;" I am usually sorry about it later when the piece is struggling. Finally, don't forget about being inspired, repertoire-wise, by listening to colleagues concerts and cds!

▪ ***Wrap it up.*** Think of preparing notes & rhythms as the structure (box) for the gift. We need these things to be solid for the music to take form and shape. After these things start to take place, we get to work on the fun part! We decorate the package with our choice of colored paper (tonal color) and choose other decorative details (diction, expressive markings, dynamics, etc) to finish wrapping the gift. What greater delight than to receive a gift that has been beautifully wrapped, with such keen attention to detail...the recipients know that they can expect something wonderful indeed.

▪ ***What's your message?*** Your "card" is ultimately your final manner of presenting the music. What is the sentiment you hope to evoke from your singers and express to your audience? Is it one of sorrow or mystery? Laughter, hope or joy? Is it expressed clearly to the audience through your manner of performance? How can you tell if you've gotten it right? Perhaps by the way your choir feels after their singing. I always tell my singers to sing so that they "move themselves," and the audience will automatically enjoy it. Ultimately, the quality of your selection process, preparation and attention to detail shall be evident to your students as well as your audience.

Balance & Inspiration...the Art of Programming

We may agree that these processes are ideally good for the music-selecting process...beyond that, what types of pieces do we choose to accomplish our goals and how do we ensure that our choices are balanced in an educational, musical and expressive manner? What fundamental things do we seek to know about each piece of music before we choose it?

I have a rubric that I developed about five years ago to ensure that my program was varied and well balanced in as many regards as possible. Each year I begin with the pieces I'm most inspired by and then build around them...striving to have a variety of styles, eras, tempos, keys, languages and timbres in terms of soloists and accompaniment. Here are a few repertoire examples in the rubric as an example. After placing each piece in the context of the larger program, it becomes easier to see what kind of pieces will balance this your program. Email me if you'd like a blank copy of the rubric.

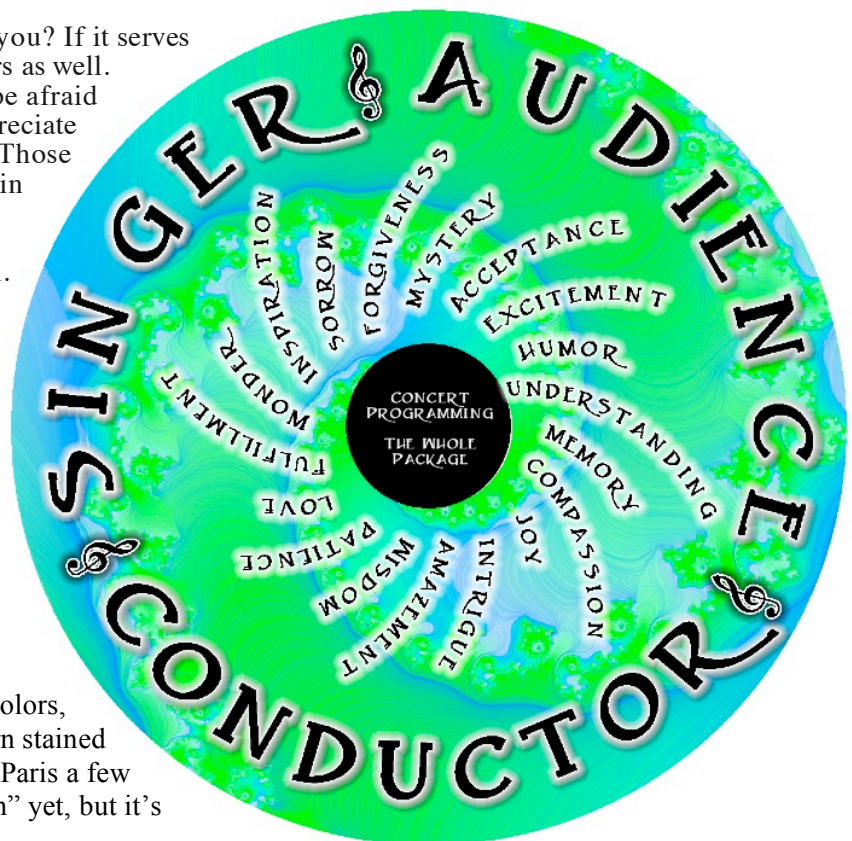
Title	Composer	Era	Key	Tempo	Language	Accompaniment	Solos	Genre	Source	Memorized?
Hide Not Thou Thy Face	Richard Farrant	16th	fmi	med-slow	English	a cappella		English Anthem	CPDL	X
Kyrie	Franz Schubert	19th	BbM	medium	Greek	a cappella		Liturgical	CPDL	
Hosanna	Dan Forrest	20th	GM	fast	Latin	a cappella		Sacred	order	
Amor de mi Alma	Z. Randall Stroope	20th	DbM	slow	Spanish	piano-Naomi		Contemporary	order	X
Natufurahi siku ya leo	Boniface Mgnana	20th	CM	med-fast	Kenya	perc.-Matt/Hannah		Multicultural	library	X
Go Down 'n the Valley & Pray!	Andre Thomas	20th	fmi	fast	English	a cappella		Spiritual	order	X

Certainly, we can choose music, piece by piece and build a balanced and expressive program...a sort of "musical smorgasbord," or we can build a program guided by thematic material. What kind of thematic material? Composer, similar subject matter or mood may define your entire program, or smaller "sets."

What kind of music, poetry, or mood inspires you? If it serves as inspiration to you, it will likely inspire others as well. Even if you've never done this before, don't be afraid to try something new. Your audience will appreciate the common connections between the music. Those that teach in smaller schools can still program in this manner if desired...and may possess the added flexibility to combine thematic material between the band & choir if you conduct both.

Consider taking a line of text from a piece of music that is particularly meaningful to your students and start building your program around it. Whatever the case, and the amount of time that you have to devote to it, this bit of extra time is worthwhile for your students and rewarding for you.

Some thematic programming ideas (including some that are obvious): love, seasons, light, poetry, geography, birds, haikus, inspired by fairy tales, Shakespeare, songs of travel, peace, children, flowers, trees, rain, water, languages, colors, etc, ad nauseum. ☺ I was inspired by the modern stained glass windows in the church of Saint-Severin in Paris a few summers ago. I haven't used "Windows of Faith" yet, but it's in my files for a rainy day!



Regardless of your conducting assignment and the seemingly ever-decreasing amount of contact time that we have with our students, one of the truest pleasures of our profession, in my opinion, is selecting the music that we shall spend our time learning, perfecting and sharing with others. Each piece and theme can be a journey to understanding something shared from our common human experience. Through our musical art form, we can help students and audiences behold beauty, sing with compassion, laugh with inspiration and wonder in amazement at the gift of music!