

## Considering the Text in Choral Music

As I am gathering thoughts to share some ideas about text in choral music, so much comes to mind, bouncing from textual meaning, to emotion, to translation; to performance considerations and to rehearsal techniques. How best to convey to the choir the relationship between text and music? Where to start?

I like to 'press' the text of a choral piece, like a citrus in order to bring out all possible interpretations, understandings and images. We customarily study the composer's style of writing, however we also need to study the poet's often informing and inspiring output and biography. What might the origin of the text reveal about the style of the period and the setting? What do the words convey? I also find it necessary to translate every word. That degree of precision is useful in rehearsal when there is a need to stress certain words of a phrase. What overall mood can I identify? Is there a basic feeling extant from beginning to end or, is the sentiment evolving from one state to another?

What is the natural shape of the sentence? The natural stress of the words? Practicing speaking the text in the most expressive way diminishes chances of singing the rhythm in a 'square' manner. Speaking the text with rhythm should be done with a bit of chanting quality to it.

At this point, I should probably go back a step. Is the music and its rhythm actually enhancing the natural musical and emotional quality of the text or is the text subservient to the music?

It is now time to analyze and study the relationship of the music to the text. As important as it is to study the text, a good deep plunge into the study of the music will be just as indispensable. Which parameters, such as the texture or harmony contribute to the climax of the different sections? How are the phrases delineated and where is the peak of each phrase? How are the words painted? Are certain words characterized musically by special settings? Does the setting of the text allow for repeats of certain words? How are the choral parts interacting? How can I make the different vocal sections dialogue together and literally engage in a conversation? I sometimes find that, for example, each section delivers, in a fine way, the text, but the overall experience would gain even more emotional power if sections were engaging with each other. To identify these places in the score, I sometimes arrange the choir during rehearsal in a circle or a square to make the interacting more real.

What about diction and effects created by the shape of vowels and percussive quality of consonants? The *emotional understanding* of the text is the best place to start to shape the *interpretation* of the text. Pairing the articulation of the rhythm with the length and intensity of the consonants will *set the tone!* I know you know about initiating and projecting these consonants before the beat! the technical consideration of modification

of vowels, warming up vowels, insuring that deep-set vowels are sung, are tools used to enhance beautiful projection and sensitive delivery of the text. As you remember that the vowels are the chief vehicle for sustaining the vocal tone, singing a choral piece on the vowels only is a useful device to ensure vowel uniformity and blend.

When rehearsing a piece or parts of a piece, I very often use the text as a point of departure at the beginning of the rehearsal. The text becomes the pretext for rhythmic vitality, expressive rhythmic articulation (there is nothing like bringing lyricism to a timpani part) and expression, placement of vowels and consonants, overall energy. I find that the most tangible way to engage singers and maintain a high energy level is to deliver an expressive performance of the text. Of course we need to work on pitches but once this is mastered, text remains the best way to connect the emotion to the music. Text connects the singers physically to breathing and an emotional way of using the breath. The use of a piano or forte dynamic will become even more convincing if is motivated by the emotion behind the words rather than only a pure technical consideration. Text ensures that the musical line will always have shape. Musical shape is the carving of an enlivened and vibrant musical sculpture.