

# Repertoire & Standards

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## Men's Choirs



Frank Albinder,  
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### Music for Men's Chorus by Raymond Wilding-White

Ray Wilding-White's name has appeared on thousands of concert programs over the past six decades, though most choral musicians can't quite place him—yet he was partially responsible for some of the most widely-performed choral works of the twentieth century. Wilding-White was one of two composers tasked with writing choral arrangements of Aaron Copland's *Old American Songs* in the 1950s. The other arranger, Irving Fine, also composed a number of popular original works for chorus, and a great deal is known about his life and work. But, Wilding-White, in spite of being a prolific composer in his own right, has remained more of a mystery.

Raymond Wilding-White was born in Caterham, Tandridge, Surrey, England, in 1922. At the age of five, his family moved to Saint-Germain-en-Laye, near Paris, where the precocious young musician was enrolled in the Conservatoire Camille Saint-Saëns. When he was 10, the Wilding-Whites moved to Buenos Aires to be closer to his mother's family. In 1940, the peripatetic family moved to Boston where Wilding-White enrolled at MIT to study chemical engineering. At the start of World War II, he dropped out to assist with the war effort. (He was classified 4-F but found work as a

civilian in a radar plant testing bomb sights.) After the war, he studied piano at The Juilliard School and went on to earn a master's degree in composition from the New England Conservatory of Music. He also found time to sing in Boston's Chorus Pro Musica and in the choir of the Church of the Advent (as a countertenor). He worked for a time at radio station WGBH, helping to start what would become one of the nation's most prominent public broadcasters and an important source of programming for both NPR and PBS. He studied with Aaron Copland and Luigi Dallapiccola at the Berkshire Music Center over several summers, and in 1962, he completed a doctorate in composition at Boston University.

Wilding-White's first academic appointment came in 1962 when he was appointed to the Kulas Chair at Case Institute of Technology in Cleveland, where he conducted the Men's Glee Club. While there, he collaborated with Robert Shaw on a recording of music by Cleveland composers. At the time, Shaw was conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus and minister of music at the First Unitarian Church of Shaker Heights. Most of the chorus members on the recording came from Shaw's church choir. In 1967, when Case Institute merged with Western Reserve University, Wilding-White accepted an invitation from DePaul University in Chicago to join the faculty and set up an electronic music studio. He became a fixture in Chicago's cultural life, founding a contemporary performing arts ensemble called The Loop Group. He retired in 1988, but remained active as a musician and visual artist until his death in 2001.

Wilding-White wrote more than 200 compositions during his long career. His

papers, including numerous manuscripts of unpublished works, are in the Newberry Library in Chicago, which made them available to the author for research purposes. Wilding-White wrote in virtually every genre, including orchestral and instrumental chamber music, solo songs, opera and liturgical dramas, and a great deal of choral music. Among the composer's choral *oeuvre* are several works for various combinations of voices and instruments, including 65 Psalm settings, *20 Tang Poems*, and *A Book of Madrigals* (52). There are also masses, motets, Christmas carols and a number of pieces for men's chorus.

Undoubtedly, Wilding-White's shortest male chorus work is No. 48 from his *Book of Madrigals*. His setting of a short poem by Roger McGough, an English performance poet, is only five measures long. Though short, the two-part unaccompanied piece follows a fairly strict twelve-tone scheme and would be challenging for many singers

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to master.

Another of Wilding-White's madrigals isn't much longer; No. 40 contains only six measures and is a four-part setting of an anonymous French text. While not strictly serial, the madrigal does contain elements of twelve-tone style.

Wilding-White didn't always use traditional musical notation. He was heavily influenced by the works of John Cage and often included pictographic images and aleatoric elements in his scores.

Two of the *Tang Poems* are also for men's chorus: VII is for two-part chorus, clarinet and marimba, and VIII is for eight-part men's chorus, unaccompanied (though the composer notes that the vocal parts can be doubled by eight cellos). These pieces are settings of English translations of the original Chinese poems and feature irregular meters (15/8 and 13/8 in VII) or no meter at all (VIII). The vocal parts are challenging, with a great deal of chromaticism and wide skips that many singers would find challenging.

One of Wilding-White's Psalm settings

(No. 2) is for "four equal male voices," though, oddly, the piece only has three parts. The text, "Why do the heathen rage?," seems well-suited for men's voices, and Wilding-White uses both modern and ancient musical features, including spoken notes, plainchant, and *fugato*.

Wilding-White also composed two extended works for male chorus, *Mexico City Blues* (1963) and *Restoration Lyrics* (1964). *Mexico City Blues* is subtitled: "3 Choruses from Kerouac for MaleVoices and Jazzidiom." [sic] The work is named for, and the texts are taken from, Jack Kerouac's monumental 1959 work of the same name, which consists of 242 "choruses," written in a jazzy style reflecting the Beat poetry of the era. The three choruses are for four-part (sometimes splitting into five or six) chorus, amplified piano and bass and various wind and brass instruments. The music is definitely jazzy (the singers are asked to snap their fingers on occasion), though the vocal parts move in unexpected directions at times, and some of the rhythms are quite complex.

*Restoration Lyrics* is probably the most problematic of Wilding-White's works for men's chorus, not because of the musical complexity, but because of the texts. The poems were written by John Wilmot, the 2nd Earl of Rochester (1647–80), a man whose short life was so filled with drunken debauchery that his story was made into a movie called *The Libertine* (2004), starring Johnny Depp, Samantha Morton and John Malkovich. The music is for four-part men's chorus, a cappella, and contains Wilding-White's typically challenging vocal lines and constantly-changing meters. But some of the poetry is so bawdy that one has to wonder if the pieces were ever performed in public. The poems can be found on the internet, though some of them (*I Rise at Eleven* and *The Mock Song*) are not for the faint of heart!

In many ways, it's difficult to square Wilding-White's lyrical arrangement of *At the River* with his adventurous and sometimes ribald original works. But Ray Wilding-White was certainly an influential figure in the cultural life of the United States and a quirky composer whose music is worthy of further study and performance.

**Note bene:** The author is grateful to Alison Hinderliter and the staff in the music collection at the Newberry Library in Chicago for their assistance with research for this article.



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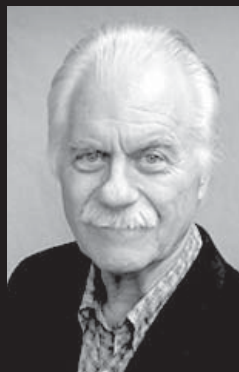
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