Working toward Balanced Programming with Tools from the

INSTITUTE *for* COMPOSER DIVERSITY

Choral Works Database

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Search. Program.
Perform. Repeat.

Programming is a crucial task. Traditionally, programming decisions have focused on increasing musical literacy, refining specific vocal techniques, designing affective moments that evoke emotions, and teaching the history and practices of various musical styles and genres. However, responsible programming that expands cultural awareness and amplifies marginalized and minoritized voices, honors diverse perspectives, and is representative of today's singers and audiences is just as important. The benefits of more inclusive programming are well documented for participants, organizations, and broader communities but require conductors to look for music outside the traditional western canon and its well-established composers who happen to be mostly white, mostly men, and mostly deceased.

Faced with organizational/institutional pressure, limited resources, and finite time and energy, many conductors consult familiar repertoire choices, known either through training, choral performances, or choices readily available on major publishing websites. In a 2017 letter to the editor, ACDA's own Diversity Initiatives Committee acknowledged that "[s]earching for publishers and distributors of lesser-known composers' works, vetting new scores for quality, and expanding a performance library are time and cost intensive…"[1] In response to these issues, The Institute for Composer Diversity has developed tools to help conductors diversify their repertoire and programming.

Introduction to the
Institute of Composer Diversity

The Institute for Composer Diversity (ICD) is a volunteer-staffed non-profit housed within the University of New York at Fredonia's Research Foundation. ICD "works to encourage the discovery, study, and performance of music written by composers [and arrangers] from historically excluded groups."[2] Among ICD's many tools are the Choral Works Database, launched in 2021, and suggested Best Practices for programming. These tools are designed to help conductors select works by marginalized and minoritized composers with clearer intentionality and impact, and help conductors "operationalize [diversity, equity, inclusion, and access] goals… through the repertoire [they] select and perform."[3]

ICD Choral Works Database

The Choral Works Database is a free, online, searchable database containing repertoire composed by historically marginalized and minoritized composers.

Living composers and arrangers in this database have all consented to be included, and, as part of that process, have provided their own identifying demographic criteria (as well as a profile, if they choose). Some composers have a complete catalog included, while others have a representative sampling.

Using the Choral Works Database, programmers can filter their searches by voicing (SSA, SATB, etc), genre (sacred—referring to all faith traditions, secular, or jazz/popular), difficulty criteria, lyricist, time period, language, maximum duration, whether the work is in the public domain, accompaniment criteria, and whether video and audio links are available. Composers are searchable by name, date, gender identity, sexual/romantic orientation, demographic criteria (Black, Latino/Latinx, Indigenous Peoples, African, East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, West Asian/North African), genre(s) in which they compose, as well as location in the US or in the world. As of the writing of this article, 6,015 choral works are included in the Choral Works Database.

Using the database can help conductors by providing filters to target their searches to their specific ensemble or classroom needs. For example, a high school choir director with an SSA ensemble that uses keyboard accompaniment and wants to explore music in Spanish can filter for this particular voicing, accompaniment, and language preference. If a community chorus in Pennsylvania wants to highlight composers from underrepresented groups active in their state in partnership with a community orchestra, they can filter by location and accompaniment by chamber or full orchestra.

From the search results webpage, works can be further researched by looking at links provided to the composer's website, score preview, video and audio links, as well as details about language, duration, and other information. Search results are randomized by default, but can be sorted alphabetically, and can be downloaded for reuse.

ICD Best Practices

ICD's suggested Best Practices help conductors curate repertoire responsibly. The following is taken from ICD's website:

1. DISTRIBUTION: Spread works by women composers and composers of color throughout your concert season rather than only performing them on one "special" concert.

2. TOPIC: It is important to avoid placing topical limitations on composers when commissioning new works as well when programming your concert series. Composers from historically excluded groups have much to say about the world beyond works that speak directly to their identity or background. An inspiration for this suggestion is the work of Dr. Marques L. A. Garrett and his important web-based resource "Beyond Elijah Rock: The Non-Idiomatic Choral Music of Black Composers."[4]

3. RATIONALE: No composer wants to be programmed just because of who they are—program their works because their music resonates with you, and it will resonate with your audiences as well.

4. BENCHMARKS: Intentionally setting minimum percentage goals before solidifying specific reper-

toire decisions makes it much easier to achieve those goals (see below for more on benchmarks).

5. AUDIENCE: Program to your potential audience as well as to your usual attendees.

6. LOCALITY: Remember that there are oftentimes a sizable number of composers in your extended region—always consider how they could help you connect with your community if possible.

7. SUBSTANTIAL WORKS: Include more substantial works by composers from historically excluded groups in your program; too often works by women composers and composers of color are shorter and serve to start off a concert while longer, more extensive works are reserved for composers from the traditional canons.

8. AVOID "3-OR-MORE": Many ensembles will often perform multiple works by the same composer either in a special series or throughout their season. This practice has the unintentional consequence of removing space in a concert season that could be used to feature works by women composers and composers of color if done too frequently. While there's nothing wrong with an occasional focus on any one composer, balance should be given to ensure that other voices are heard as well.[5]

To this end, ICD includes several programming goals on the suggested Best Practices webpage. These goals include programming (1) a minimum of a quarter of a season with works by living composers and (2) a quarter by women composers and by composers of color combined (with as equal a distribution as possible). Suggested minimum benchmarks for composers identifying in the LGBTQIA2S+ community are not given in order to protect the privacy of composers, many of whom have not publicly identified themselves within such demographic groups. As an example, choral programs presenting a season with a total of twenty-five works would include:

• At least six works by living composers

• At least four works by women composers (at least two of which are women of color)

• At least four works by composers of color (at least two of which are women)

For single-concert events (such as an All-State or All-National festival for K-12 educators), ICD suggests at least one work by a woman composer and at least one work by a composer of color be included in each ensemble's concert if possible.[6] These demographics are able to overlap (e.g., a work by a living woman would count as both a piece by a living composer and a woman composer).

Working toward Balanced Programming

Programming "can explicitly and implicitly reflect [an organization's or a conductor's] values, [their] priorities, and [their] cultural perspectives."[7] It is important to be aware of what programming implicitly and explicitly communicates to ensemble members and audiences. When developing the program rationale and balance, consider representing the identities of the members of the ensemble and presenting the audience with multiple perspectives.

Working toward equity in music programming requires developing cultural intelligence and cultural competency. Cultural intelligence can be defined as "an outsider's seemingly natural ability to interpret someone's unfamiliar and ambiguous gestures the way that person's compatriots would,"[8] while cultural competency is "the ability of individuals and systems to work or respond effectively across cultures in a way that acknowledges and respects the culture of the person or organization being served."[9] Cultural intelligence and cultural competency need to be lifelong learning goals both for conductors personally as well as for the collective choral community. It is a challenging but critical task that demands radical courage and vulnerability.

There are many places to begin; the ICD suggested Best Practices described above provide eight different springboards. Other recommendations are (1) for conductors to learn about the history and performance

practices of the culture from which the music originates, (2) for the performers to acknowledge their positionality in relation to the featured culture, and (3) for ensembles and organizations to consult and compensate culture bearers when learning about history and practices.

As the choral community is expanding the canon, sometimes well-intentioned programming can hurt or misrepresent marginalized and minoritized communities. This often occurs in the form of cultural appropriation or tokenism. Cultural appropriation happens when "people from a more powerful culture adopt the art, symbols, or elements of a less powerful culture without understanding or respecting the context or history of that material."[10] In this context, "adopting" encompasses both the composition or arrangement of works using elements of a less powerful culture and the performance of music outside the programmer's culture without the necessary understanding.

Avoiding tokenism is another important element of responsible programming. ICD's suggested Best Practices #1 and #3 (referenced above) can help conductors with this. *The ICD Choral Team defines tokenism as a performative action lacking a sustained or sincere effort toward inclusive programming.* This often looks like a limited or symbolic effort to program marginalized or minoritized voices to either satisfy an occasional checkbox with a standalone piece or to restrict these voices to a themed concert program without including these voices elsewhere.

Some conductors, preferring to err on the side of extreme caution, avoid programing music from other cultures altogether. However, such actions perpetuate the silencing and marginalization that have plagued repertoire selection. It is necessary to take brave steps, keep an open mind, do the hard work of culturally competent preparation, and be willing to experience discomfort on the path toward growth.

Moving Forward at ICD

To help in the vital journey toward balanced programming across the choral field, ICD staff are working on improvements to grow the size, accuracy, and usefulness of the Choral Works Database. Users should note that difficulty ratings are missing for many choral works. Additionally, the choral team is working on a new filter to make the database searchable by whether works have score previews available. Lastly, staff are continually adding works by living and deceased composers.

ICD is also working on a new tool: the ICD Resource Database. This tool will provide a searchable database of articles, books, webinars, and other formats covering topics like performance practice, historical context, language pronunciation, musical analysis, and composer biography. These resources will help conductors feel more empowered to perform unfamiliar music with knowledge and confidence. Look for the introduction of the ICD Resource Database on ICD's website (composerdiversity.com) later this year.

Getting Involved with ICD

For those interested, there are many ways to become involved with ICD. Everyone is encouraged to include the ICD Choral Works Database as a regular part of their repertoire search strategy. (Scan the QR code provided to visit the database.)

Composers are welcomed to join the Composer Diversity Database, allowing their works to reach database users. Researchers are asked to contact staff with articles, books, or online resources for inclusion in the new ICD Resource Database. Undergraduate and graduate students in music education or choral-related fields are invited to apply for the ICD internship program. Collegiate instructors can enroll their ensembles or method classes in the ICD Collegiate Choral Research Project, an in-semester research project designed to augment student's awareness of marginalized and minoritized composers and the importance of balanced programming.

To partner with, contribute to, or provide feedback for ICD, please reach out to <choral@composerdiversity.com>.

Conclusion

Advancing the choral canon requires a collective effort to increase representation and create a more diverse and inclusive programming standard. This can only be achieved by including works by marginalized and minoritized composers and using ethical and responsible programming practices. While diverse programming cannot and will not solve the deep systemic issues embedded into our society, intentionally programming diverse perspectives can develop cultural awareness that might otherwise be ignored. These urgently needed steps can help create a vibrant and dynamic choral community that is more representative, welcoming, and just to its performers and audiences. CJ

NOTES

[1] Diversity Initiatives Committee et al., Letter to the Editor, *Choral Journal* 58, no. 4 (November 2017): 6.

[2] www.composerdiversity.com/about

[3] Caron Daley, "Operationalizing Your Diversity Goals through Repertoire Selection," *Choral Journal* 62, no. 7 (March/April 2022): 57-58.

[4] https://www.mlagmusic.com/research/beyond-elijah-rock

[5] www.composerdiversity.com/programming

[6] Ibid.

[7] Juliet Hess, "Equity in Music Education: Why Equity and Social Justice in Music Education?," *Music Educators Journal* 104, no. 1 (September 2017): 71–73.

[8] P. Christopher Earley and Elaine Mosakowski, "Cultural Intelligence," *Harvard Business Review* 39, no. 6 (October 2004).

[9] Bonita Williams, "Accomplishing Cross Cultural Competence in Youth Development Programs," *Journal of Extension* 39, no. 6 (December 2001): 1–6.

[10] Ryan Cho, "Cultural Appropriation and Choral Music: A Conversation That Can Make Both Our Music and Community Better," *Choral Journal* 55, no. 10 (May 2015): 59–63.

Call for *ChorTeach* Submissions

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Ask a Conductor Submission Form

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