

The background of the top half of the page is a photograph of a church interior. It features several arched stained glass windows with intricate geometric patterns in shades of yellow, orange, red, and blue. The lighting is warm, creating a soft glow through the glass. The text is overlaid on this image.

Hallelujah, Amen!

A Focus on Music in Worship

Introduction by Terre Johnson

The stresses that have been created by the worldwide pandemic have made the already stressful job of directing music in a house of worship fraught and overwhelming. The musicians who work full time or part time in these positions have been forced to find creative ways to keep their singers engaged while not endangering them. In many cases, they have also been forced to defend their positions in the long-term planning of the congregation while short-term financial damage is being experienced.

But along with these difficulties has come the opportunity for these musicians to take time for reflection about their leadership, musicianship, and pedagogy. With the following article, it is hoped that musicians in houses of worship can

draw on the knowledge and skill of one of the nation's best-known and longest-serving sacred musicians, John Yarrington. His career continues with passion and energy after six decades serving in various denominations and institutions of higher education.

John and I recently spoke about his vast experience, and how this is a unique time in which conductors can take a moment to reflect on their own skills and experiences, and can benefit from the perspective of one of the most admired leaders in the fields of sacred music and conducting. He has written an insightful reflection on his philosophy and technique, and it will be valuable to all conductors, whether or not they are currently serving in a house of worship.



Less is **More**

by John Yarrington

A three-year-old, whom I know, always referred to me as “the connector.” Like many malapropisms, her delightful slip of the tongue reveals a lot. Conducting is about connecting; and hope that by strengthening these links, you are a conductor in the specific sense of the term.

Contrary to some people’s perception of conductors, it appears that, in fact, a monkey would not be able to do a better job. Bad news for the monkey. Good news for the conductor.

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Premise

Conductors who expend too much energy in an effort to obtain musical results can learn to conduct less and listen more. One sees a variety of conducting where the sound of the group bears little resemblance to the gestures seen. The picture of flailing, flopping, swaying, bobbing, and weaving actually gets in the way of the music. When effortful gesture is expended, one simply does not listen well. When all the work is done by the conductor, players and singers are not asked to take their part of the responsibility for the music making. Ann Jones says we should “engage the music makers.” We only engage when we expect and trust players and singers to mark changes in articulation, tempo, and dynamics. Marking lifts and breaths allows articulation and space. Circling important weighted syllables gives life to the text. Marking is a sign of intelligence.

I believe in a standard grammar of conducting gesture, which is instantly recognized by players and singers alike. Most of us have studied conducting in books that show pattern maps of two, three, and four. These gestures can be shortened or lengthened—one can show short, loud, soft, and long by letting the gesture serve the music. When a pattern is used out of habit rather than one that serves the essence of the music, conductors can, out of frustration, resort to anger and sarcastic remarks. This destroys the very nature and spontaneity of the music. Asking for detail and keeping everyone on track is one thing. Insulting anger rarely solves the problems. If you really cannot make anyone sing or play better by swaying, grunting, clapping, and tapping, then what appropriate steps might one take to use with less effort but much more meaning?

One could say, “But you have not been in my classroom. To get any energy, I have to cheer-lead with exaggerated gestures.” After fifty-five years of directing volunteer church choirs, collegiate choirs, and symphonic choruses, I believe strongly that I must train my people to respond to recognized gestures. This is particularly important when singing with orchestra. Our gestures should focus on the music and not detract from it. This means adjusting patterns to convey what, in your opinion, allows the composer’s intentions to be brought forth. A beginning downbeat, in a definite tempo allows the music to live in its most habitable environment. We ask everyone to join in our intentions

without swaying, grunting, clapping, tapping, or talking.

Ask any orchestral players if, on the first run, they need to be stopped over and over again. You have made sure individual parts have numbers or letters or both corresponding to the full score. Much will be corrected in the second playing. With a chorus, it is important to let the orchestra play and not be concerned, at the beginning, about balance. A technique I use is to let the orchestra play a passage and the choir or soloists, listen. Then let the choir sing, and let the orchestra listen. Gestures should be practiced until they feel comfortable. Practice creates muscle memory and security.

As conductors, understanding and acceptance of our equal role with musicians is a prerequisite to great music making. We actually do not conduct; we evoke sounds from our gestures. Gestures set in motion with our own breath—the miracle which is the musical phrase. After that, we guide singers not with our hands, but with our ears. It is our responsibility as conductors to intimately understand which gestures hinder singers, which gestures help singers and which gestures hinder singers and cause the music not to sing.

The Human Quotient

No matter what we do in rehearsals, or how we do it, we have to always remember they’re people.

They may be young or old. They may be seasoned or inexperienced. They may be sharp as a tack, or need a bit more time. These are people. They don’t belong to us, nor will they stay with us. We just have to make certain they will be all the better for the time we share together as human beings.

I have come to believe that the pursuit of musical excellence must involve responsible action and reaction of the music makers. To uphold the highest standards of our art without honoring those who play and sing is a huge mistake. The atmosphere should be collaborative always with clear responsibility placed on everyone. Do singers vote? Subtly, of course, they do. This is very evident in most any choir of volunteers. The collaboration of which I speak is not about voting on the music or the popularity of the conductor. It is about the essence of working for excellence with everyone sharing in the responsibility of the outcome. I do not believe worthwhile music is ever made in an atmosphere of fear or intimidation. We allow the process to unfold. We are well prepared to lead, but we expect the responsibility of which I spoke earlier. This is not weakness, but real strength. In this, both the product and the producer are recognized and honored.

The Perils of Notation

Our first responsibility to the page is to discover how the melody should sound, and then to sing it so convincingly that it would hold the attention of a three-year-old child.

When you perform music without having found the sound, you are skating over its surface. When you can sing the melody and convey its possibilities, you are in a position to learn whatever the composer or arranger has done with that melody, and to teach it to your group or to write your own arrangement.

We must begin with text! From the beginning introduction, we bring all the musicality to bear on the project. To gain correct pitches and rhythms is important. Unlearning mistakes is costly and time consuming. The question is: Where do these pitches go? How many go together toward a destination? Do we honor the text by first, carefully reading aloud with awareness to the natural accentuation of the words? The performance practice of singing Gregorian Chant is based on the natural accentuation of the words, and those words supply the rhythm. If all is correct in pitches, rhythms, dynamics, and vowel sounds, and the outcome is correct but sterile, we have failed the composer, the singers, and the audience.

Being yourself is more important than being who you think some people might want you to be. Even though you might have to highlight some aspects of your character more than others, you are who you are. Better to adjust the volume than twiddle the dial in search of another channel. Therein lies only madness.

Learn to receive the sound and

encourage the music makers to be part of the process. This is the meaning of ensemble. The music we sing or play is important, but equally important are the players and singers. Singing, at its best, is relational. The job of the conductor is to harness all of the intelligence in the room. Ann Jones once remarked, “You are through with your rehearsal, you are sweating and your choir asks, ‘What was that all about?’”

When asked to state weaknesses in young choral conductors, Margaret Hillis remarked:

They need to learn to study a score properly and make contact with the sound. There is a feeling that the sonority is in your hands and the music goes right by. You must stand up straight in rehearsal. Conducting is really the psychology of motion. If your body is open and poised and free when you conduct, you’re going to get that kind of sound. If it’s tight and closed, your forces aren’t going to breathe very well. A music director who sincerely loves music and works with people as fellow human beings all focused on the same thing makes conducting as easy as falling off a log. But if it’s one of those martinets who whips them over the head, you don’t get the same kind of conduct.

Score Study

Nothing gives security and power like knowledge of the score.

Strength in clear, precise gestures conveys not just the technical demands of the music but its spirit and life. Knowledge of performance practices in our study of music history allows each piece to exist in its natural environment. The labor of score study takes time and effort. Once properly learned and effectively rehearsed, a spirit-filled performance is possible. Our job is to represent the intentions of the composer with understanding of the style and performance practices we have studied. Analysis can help us understand the score well enough that we are not swimmers driven by a sea of emotions. Analysis lays bare the skeleton, but the bones should not show through in performance. We will study the technique of composition so that the spirituality of the composer may reveal itself to us.

We as conductors have to discover the unique spirit of the piece or work of music we wish to perform. I like to involve students in this discovery through the question techniques I mentioned before. What emotion is evoked at this moment in the music? Why does the composer use a certain technique at this point? What colors would you use if you were painting a picture right now? Were I to tell the choir all about the music, the singers would have limited involvement. However, if the choir members discover insights about the music, the act of singing, then, is more meaningful.

Alice Parker will hold up a piece of music to her ear and remark, “I don’t hear any music.” She refers to the notes as “black blobs.” They convey very little of the essence,

style, performance practice using the printed page.

“In teaching works to your choir, don’t please let them read the notes and rhythms on the page and then add the words later. It simply doesn’t work—the words are never able to generate the line, and become squashed into the notes. If your choir can speak an entire anthem without pitches, words, rhythm, color, mood, dynamic accentuation, formal structure contrast, etc, with wonderful communication of the text then you are in the best position to drop the pitches gently in the words without losing their spoken value. If your choir can speak an entire anthem without pitches: words value.”

I always begin a new piece by speaking the text, listening for the rise and fall of words. I know that I cannot teach correct pitches and rhythms and then put the music in later. Every beginning aspect of the teaching begins with color, nuance, shape, sound, phrasing, articulation text meaning, weight and emphasis. I also listen for destination places.

While I believe that the black blobs often don’t reveal the true nature of the music, one does not have the right to impose upon the music intuition practices devoid of scholarship. One should try to represent the music with appropriate sound, articulation, care for the beauty, and natural accentuation of the words. Effective gesture with

attention to destination places and dynamic variation allows the music to sound authentic. The conductor invests in his or her group responsibility for the finished product.

In choosing a piece, I want to speak aloud the text, as poetry, and not in the rhythm notated. I begin with concepts of color, nuance, shape, sound, phrasing, articulation, and text weight and emphasis. Listening to the rise and fall means: 1) Speak for meaning, 2) Pause for importance, 3) Linger to love. Before presenting any music, I must absolutely be convinced of the worth and meaning of the text. If the music does not enhance and amplify, I cannot in good conscience put it before the choir. I have done a considerable amount of the music of American composer, Daniel E. Gawthrop because, without exception, his music enables, enlivens, colors, and carries the message(s) of the text. Mr. Gawthrop often says, “The music is in the words.”

I love conducting. I never turn over chairs in anger or single an individual out for criticism. I believe in a sacred quality of kinship with those I conduct. I think the best music is always made in an atmosphere of community. My job is to take what I have and do the best I can with it.

I have found the following to be helpful to my conducting students:

- With tall alignment, Palm down, forearm level with the floor, shoulders relaxed, arm back a bit with space under the arm.
- In a pattern of 3, emphasize beat

1, with 2 and 3 less. Then, emphasize beat 2 with 1 and 3 less. And then emphasize beat 3 with 1 and 2 less. This is not a jab or an accent, rather an elongation.

- In a pattern of 4, do the same.
- Try to rehearse without saying anything and using your gestures to indicate what is wanted.

Just as position five won’t make one a ballet dancer, these gestures alone will not insure success. However, if you train your choir to respond, you will see that, truly, less is more. ◻

NOTES

- ¹ Mark Wigglesworth, *The Silent Musician Why Conducting Matters* (London, England, Faber and Faber, 2018), 3.
- ² *Ibid.*, 22.
- ³ James Jordan, *Evoking Sound* (Chicago, Illinois, GIA, 2009), 6.
- ⁴ Peter Loel Boonshaft, *Teaching Music with Passion* (Gainesville, Maryland, 2002).
- ⁵ Alice Parker, “The Voice of Chorus America,” Volume 23, Number 3 Spring 2000.
- ⁶ Wigglesworth, *The Silent Musician Why Conducting Matters*.
- ⁷ Margaret Hillis, “The American Organist,” January 1992, 69.
- ⁸ Julius Herford, unpublished lecture notes.
- ⁹ Interview with Weston Noble.
- ¹⁰ Alice Parker, *Ibid.*

Sacred Music

Choral Reviews

Prayer of St. Francis

Text: “Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi” [Anonymous]

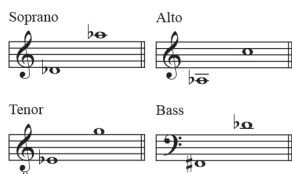
By Mari Esabel Valverde

SATB, piano

<http://marivalverde.com/MVC-111>

Performance demonstration:

<https://soundcloud.com/mari-valverde/prayer-of-st-francis>



Mari Esabel Valverde’s setting of the famous *Prayer of St. Francis* leaps off the page with immediate energy, highlighted by a forceful opening secondary dominant seventh chord in 2nd inversion, which is made all the more pleading by its colorful harmony. In fact, Valverde delays any hint of tonic harmony until the golden mean, and even then only nods at it briefly, after which she begins to gradually reveal her ultimate harmonic goal, almost always in inversion. Her piece, thusly, could be thought of as an extended cadence

that only finds its final tonic resolution on the final note—appropriate and fitting.

The piece is written in *non-divisi* SATB, though the harmonic language is fresh enough that it may challenge less experienced choirs. Valverde’s piano accompaniment alternates between supportive chordal harmony and an undulating sixteenth note dreamscape. She seems to pass through and around the listener’s harmonic expectations with fluid non-chord tones, ending each section of the prayer by hinting at new keys, before quickly moving on.

The music is in two large sections, highlighted by the opening chord which Valverde uses when the poet addresses the Deity directly. She creates melodic cohesion throughout with the use of lilting triplet figures, which drives each phrase’s rhythmic energy toward important textual landmarks, arriving with unresolved dissonance and ethereal beauty.

O Thou Who Camest from Above

SATB divisi choir, organ

Text by Charles Wesley

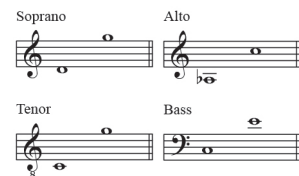
Music by Philip W. J. Stopford

MorningStar Music Publishers
MSM- 50-5209

e-address and

performance demonstration:

www.morningstarmusic.com/o-thou-who-camest-from-above-stopford.html



Phillip Stopford’s setting of Charles Wesley’s hymn *O Thou Who Camest from Above* begins with a brief, almost brooding organ introduction which pulses in 3/4 time in A minor. The thick organ texture continues under the entrance of the TB voices singing a hypnotically rocking unison theme, slowly and gently dancing, now in C Major. Stopford descends at the end of this poignant melody with an unexpected F minor plagal harmony on the text

Sacred Music Choral Reviews

“mean [lowly] altar of my heart” before cleverly returning back to C major with a swelling organ as the SA voices join the TB in unison.

The middle of the piece features a shift to Eflat Major, perhaps foreshadowed by the earlier brief F minor passage, as the choir symbolically climbs into the heights of the firmament on the text “and trembling to its source return”—a particularly glorious moment. Stopford expertly expresses the text by dropping the accompaniment out from under the choir on the words “in humble prayer,” highlighted by a crossed-voice dissonance on “fer-

vent praise.”

In the third verse, Stopford eschews the pulsing accompaniment for a more flowing instrumental line, supporting the sopranos, who now sing the melody in their upper registers. Stopford’s skills with voice leading and choral texture are on display as he once again removes the organ in favor of a warm, full choral palette. In the transition to verse four, back in C Major, the sopranos soar in a moving descant as the rest of the choir returns to the strong unison theme. The entire choir then evolves into a beautiful, heartfelt duet in thirds, the highlight of the

piece, before ending gently and quietly. The organ recalls the melody with a deceptive cadence on the relative minor underneath an extended unison choral pedal on the word “complete,” which is followed by a final, conventional repetition of the word with a perfect authentic cadence.

Kyrie (from the Missa Brevis San Francesco d’Assisi)

SATB divisi choir, unaccompanied
Text: Ordinary of the Mass and
“Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi”
[Anonymous]

Music by Anthony Bernarducci
GIA Publications G-9262

e-address and

performance demonstration:

[www.giamusic.com/store/
resource/missa-brevis-san-](http://www.giamusic.com/store/resource/missa-brevis-san-)

[int-g9262](http://www.giamusic.com/store/resource/missa-brevis-san-int-g9262)

Musical notation for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass parts. The Soprano and Alto parts are on a treble clef staff with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The Tenor and Bass parts are on a bass clef staff with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The notation shows a few notes for each part, with a fermata over the final note of each part.

It is just happenstance that there are reviews of two different settings of the *Prayer of St. Francis* in this issue. Anthony Bernarducci’s setting, from his *Missa Brevis*, is a gem of a piece. Combining the *Kyrie* text from the Mass Ordinary with the opening lines of the Francis prayer, Bernarducci creates a poetic litany that could form the basis for meaningful worship, even outside of this music! The combination, however, in an unaccompanied choral piece is stunning. The music is difficult

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but well worth the effort.

Though often attributed to St. Francis, the poetry is likely the work of an anonymous publisher in the early 1900s. Regardless, it is a universal and beloved text. Bernarducci begins in F minor, echoing the first *Kyrie eleison* phrase with paired voices in ascending and descending duets. After the initial cadence, he begins the opening lines of the Francis poetry, with a slightly different, more homophonic texture. The interplay of voices, subtle dissonances, and slight syncopations are wonderfully written! Following the plea to “Let me sow love,” the *Kyrie* returns, this time even more florid and moving.

In the next phrase “where there is injury, your pardon, O Lord,” Bernarducci moves to the relative D^b Major, before immediately eliding into the *Christe eleison* text. The music is elegant, beginning to sparkle with more rhythmic energy followed by moments of profound beauty, particularly the brief deceptive landing on supertonic followed by a suspended resolution. He continues in D^b Major with the return of the *Kyrie*, this time serving as macaronic accompaniment to the opening line of the Francis prayer, sung by the tenors. The coda continues this texture with the SA voices singing *Kyrie* in *divisi* harmony that seems to weep with emotion, while the TB voices repeat the opening line of the Francis prayer in unison. At the final moment, all voices repeat the line before cadencing on a profoundly emotional B^b minor.

Let Us Love One Another

SATB choir, organ (or piano)

Text: 1 John 4:7-12, adapted

Music by Mark Sirett

Augsburg Publishing

9781506463612

e-address and

performance demonstration:

www.augsburgfortress.org/store/productgroup/1207/Let-Us-Love-One-Another

The image shows the first few notes of the piece for four voices: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The Soprano and Alto parts are in treble clef, while the Tenor and Bass parts are in bass clef. The music is in D-flat major, indicated by two flats (B-flat and E-flat) in the key signature. The Soprano part begins with a half note G4, followed by a quarter note A4. The Alto part begins with a half note F4, followed by a quarter note G4. The Tenor part begins with a half note D4, followed by a quarter note E4. The Bass part begins with a half note B3, followed by a quarter note C4. The notes are arranged in a way that suggests a simple harmonic structure.

Mark Sirett’s beautiful anthem sets the beloved passage from the Book of 1 John majestically, with stirring organ accompaniment that may also be adapted for piano. The piece is appropriate for all general times of the liturgical calendar and should be a permanent and lasting fixture in the sacred choral repertoire.

Sirett uses the opening line of the scripture as a chorus, opening the piece simply with his recurring theme. His choral writing is facile, yet is interesting, lyrical, and singable—aspects that choral directors at all levels will welcome. Subsequent passages from the scripture act as verses or episodes to his song, each with a unique counter melody and key, forming a succinct and symmetrical *rondo*. The anthem grows in power with each return of the chorus, ingeniously written with regular harmonic shifts that propel the music constantly forward.

The first verse is a particular

highlight of the piece. The SA voices weave in and out of each other in simple but well-written imitative polyphony. The second verse moves forward with unaccompanied energy. The return of the organ half-way through the verse is powerful, and begins to set up the climactic ending chorus, in which the ATB voices sing in powerful unison under a soaring descant. The ending is a resounding, floor-shaking, emphatic *forte*, voicing unequivocal support for the scripture’s premise. In all, Sirett’s work will resonate with choirs whose well-loved repertoire includes historic favorites from Gilbert Martin, Jane Marshall, and Moses Hogan, standing alongside these greats as a joyful celebration of love.

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