Repertory and Programming: Guidelines for the Young Conductor

by

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Perhaps the most important role a conductor has is to program music for an ensemble to perform. The music they sing—its quality, genre, difficulty level—determines not only if they are successful on your upcoming concert, but also whether, over the long term, they continue to learn new things and to develop and change as singers and musicians.

Finding Literature

In order to administer a successful school, community, or church choir, one needs to know vast amounts of choral literature. The key to success for conductors lies in programming appropriate music for their choir:

- music that is challenging, yet not so difficult that they cannot be successful when performing it;
- music of a wide variety, from all periods and all genres of choral literature;
- and a quality of literature that enables you to teach them and allows them to grow and learn.

Too often, sadly, conductors fall into common traps. They either program music that they already know and have performed before, or they are too eager to program only new music that is sent from music publishers each year. Selecting repertoire takes time and care. Finding exactly the right pieces for your ensemble is a time-consuming task, but one that lies at the foundation of a successful program. Having recourse to knowledge of hundreds of pieces of music is essential to your survival. Think not just about how many works you may need to program one season for your ensemble, but how many concerts you will conduct with them over the next ten, twenty, or thirty years of your career—and then multiply that by how many different choirs you will conduct each year! You begin to see the magnitude of the effort. Here are some guidelines for finding literature for your choirs:

Music publishers produce an enormous amount of new music each year. Some of it is fine, and some, not. Take what you can from their catalogs and use it, but don’t rush to your music dealer each fall, snatch up copies of all the latest things, and decide that your job is complete. Publishers often offer to send you sample copies of new music. Take advantage of this generosity and write to them, asking for copies of those pieces you like. Keep these copies in a file, and refer to them each time you start to program a new concert or a new season.

Attend other choral concerts. Extra time is hard to find for most people, and nearly every conductor has concerts at similar times of the year. The opportunity to hear choirs similar to your own, however, is invaluable. Make time to hear these groups, not only to support them and hear what they are doing, but also to hear what literature they may be performing that may also work for you.

Meet and talk to your peers at conferences, district and regional chorus festivals, honor choir concerts, and similar events. Your colleagues are struggling to find the right literature as much as you are, and the opportunity to share new pieces at these times can be very useful.
Go to music dealers. Many, particularly the bigger firms, have large inventories of choral music in stock. Spend an afternoon browsing and looking through their files. Purchase single copies for your files to refer to later.

Finally, do not ignore the choral music library in your school or church. You will find many great pieces there. Do not be put off because a work is older and may exist in yellowed, dog-eared copies. One of these pieces may be just the one you have been looking for!

**Programming Objectives**

When programming and choosing repertoire for your ensembles, whether school groups or adult choirs, there are a number of long-term objectives to keep in mind. During the time singers spend in your choir, they should be exposed to as wide a range of literature as possible. Singing music of many genres enables individual singers and choirs to develop the skills, listening habits, and vocal resources needed to perform music of all styles.

The vocal skills necessary to sing a Baroque motet are different from those required for a Britten part song. So, too, are the listening skills and musical-stylistic nuances. If the goal is to develop a well-rounded, flexible ensemble, then performing a diverse musical program is essential. Similarly, in an educational setting, if the goal is to inform your students of the history and treasures of choral literature through their performance of its masterpieces, then it is obvious that they must sing some of all of this literature, not simply a small portion.

Program music from all epochs of music history, from the Renaissance up to the present day. You do not necessarily need to program something from each period each season. If students sing in your choir for three years of high school, for example, then during the course of those three years they should have sung at least some literature from each historical period, either in the main choir, chamber choir, or other specialty group.

Program choral accompanied and unaccompanied literature; and accompanied music should include the piano, and other instruments as well (brass ensembles, string quartets, organ, wind ensemble). The literature for choirs is vast—far larger than for any other performance area, since choral literature extends into the past three hundred years further, than the standard repertory for solo vocal, symphonic or band music, or opera.

Perform music from a variety of styles. The majority of your music should be classical—after all, this is where choirs as performing ensembles were started, and it is the tradition to which we belong. But choral literature is also rich in the traditions of folk-song arrangements, spirituals, and more recently, vocal jazz. There is a similar choral tradition in opera and musical theatre, and literature from those genres is also important and appropriate for your choir. Popular music has almost no choral tradition, and should have a limited role in any legitimate choral program.

Program sacred and secular music. In a school music program, one does not have to advocate a religious purpose for singing sacred music. It is enough that some of the most creative minds have written for choir (Bach, Mozart, Haydn, Brahms), and this music deserves to be learned by your choirs and heard by your audiences, regardless of the textual sources.

Finally, program music for a variety of voicings. Your choir (and your choir members) should sing four part mixed choral music, and eight-part music (or more), and music for single gender choirs (SSA or TBB). The rich vein of music written for these groups should be explored, and the experience of singing them should not be denied your singers.

**Putting It Together**

"Art isn’t easy," wrote Stephen Sondheim in *Follies*, and that includes the art of programming. Knowing hundreds of
choral pieces is one thing, but constructing a good concert program is even more thornier. I have attended far too many concerts where the conductor simply programs twelve or fourteen pieces in a row, without concern for how they go together. There should be a flow and an order to a concert, much like there is to a meal. A good meal starts with something small, such as a salad, before you get to the main course, which is accompanied by vegetables. Dessert—while important!—is something to be savored at the end of the meal. To continue the metaphor: the salad and vegetables of a concert are its shorter, serious pieces, while the main course is a longer piece or one more difficult for audiences and singers to listen to and execute. The dessert of a concert, its folk music or spirituals should not be the focal point of the concert. Doing this lighter literature is great and necessary, and indeed this body of music is one of the most beloved of our choral heritage. But its performance should not come at the expense of more substantial music.

Programming does not need to be the most challenging intellectual exercise. It is enough that there should be a good reason that two or three numbers are grouped together. Often, that reason is simple: a grouping of three opera choruses; two Handel choruses; three nineteenth-century part songs, and so forth.

A Typical Choral Program

There are many types of programs, but let’s begin with what I term a “typical” choral program. This is similar to those that I use when touring with my university Concert Choir, for example, because it allows us to sing a wide variety of music in many different styles, something not only valuable for us to do but, hopefully, includes music of interest for all our audience members.

I begin such a program with a short, upbeat number. This approach provides a celebratory opening to the concert and serves to focus the audience’s attention and rewards their anticipation of the concert with a brief piece. I have used various genres of music, from Baroque motets to new commissioned works.

The second segment of the program is usually historic, and often consists of three Renaissance motets. I think of a “through-line” for these pieces: three motets that follow the chronological order of the church year, for example. I arrange them in a tempo scheme that allows for variety (fast/slow/fast, for instance). This section of the program is fairly “meaty,” in that the works are serious, usually sacred, and from a time period that is increasingly unfamiliar to audiences. However, because the works are usually comparatively brief, the audience’s concentration is not overly taxed.

Following these pieces is a longer work, which is usually the most difficult work in the first half of the program. Often, this is a motet by Bach or Brahms, or two pieces six to eight minutes long that work together (not necessarily from the same musical epoch). This section requires more attentiveness and concentration from the audience, but it should have been prepared for by this point in the concert. The first half of the program often ends with two or three “dessert” pieces, often spirituals, since much of the first half of my tour programs is comprised of sacred pieces.

I follow a similar pattern in programming the second half of the concert, which is most often devoted to secular music. I begin after the intermission with three or four shorter, more contemporary works, followed by a longer work that is more difficult. The concert ends with lighter music, often folk song arrangements, Broadway tunes, or similar numbers.

Following my example above, once you have programmed this concert—culling all your resources for appropriate literature—put it aside. This allows time to think about alternate pieces, substitute new ones into the program that may have escaped your interest earlier, etc. Later, return to the program and think about its impact:

- Is there a wide variety of music, from several periods, genres, and styles?
- Do the tempi of the pieces vary, or have you programmed too much slow or too much fast music, and is the pace balanced throughout the concert?

- Do the key relationships make sense—
  is the tonal area within each group (three Renaissance motets, all in G Major, is not good!).

After asking and answering these questions, make adjustments where necessary, and then consider the new concert order. Eventually, you will arrive at what you think will be a good concert, one that challenges your choir, one they can sing successfully, and one that is interesting to your audience.

Themed Programs

There are other ways to program a concert, too. The most prominent of these is the theme concert. These are quite common, and can center around a time of the year (“A French Christmas”), an historical period (“Music of the Thirty Years War”), a season (“Music for Spring”), or an idea (“Music for a Time of Pestilence,” a concert I once gave that combined reflective motets and AIDS poetry that choir members recited). The list is endless, and is limited only by your imagination, knowledge, and desire to investigate new repertory.

Conclusion

Finding music for your choir to sing and programming appropriately is difficult and time-consuming. What is often hardest is that, until you have considerable experience, you will not probably know if the literature works together and the program is well constructed until you have “lived with it” for a while and performed it for an audience. With time, however, you will be able to make better choices and know earlier in the process how those choices will be received by the choir and audience. The foundation for challenging your singers, and enticing them through exciting music-making, and building a lasting choral program, rest on a well-informed knowledge of the vast and glorious repertoire of our choral heritage.