

The Volunteer Church Choir: Amateurs at their Finest

“You never conduct the same choir twice.”

“One or two can sight read like the wind, most are mediocre readers at best, and the rest must learn it by rote. How in the world do I keep them all engaged?”

“I hate wet-nursing neurotic sopranos.”

“How can ANYONE consistently sing a quarter-tone flat?”

These complaints are but a few in the long litany of laments expressed by directors of volunteer church choirs. The challenge is unique. Unlike our colleagues who direct school, college or community choirs, church musicians must muster up a weekly “performance” – one supposedly fit for both human beings and Almighty God - with singers vastly diverse in ability and experience. Since it’s a given that these musical offerings will rarely approach perfection, we are constantly setting priorities, forever deciding what to ignore and what to address.

A major key to success with the church choir is the selection of repertoire. As with any choir, quality of craftsmanship and variety of style are crucial in the literature we select. Choosing anthems for the church choir, however, involves a few additional considerations.

Is the text theologically sound and appropriate for the particular season of the church year or worship theme of the day? Someone once wisely said that we should sing what we mean and mean what we sing, especially in a worship setting.

Regarding difficulty, are we striking a balance between challenge and accessibility? Thumbing through a choir member’s folder at any given rehearsal should reveal diversity of tempo, mood, style, difficulty, and familiarity. Judicious repetition of especially fine or favorite music is a given in this setting. After tediously rehearsing a new and difficult anthem, your singers’ spirits will be instantly lifted when they are asked to sing a “success story” from a few months back.

Every church choir situation is unique, of course, but here I share brief descriptions of five anthems that my husband and I have obtained (or, in one case, pulled off the shelf) for our choir since the first of this year:

Thou Hidden Love of God, J. Aaron McDermid (SATB and piano: MorningStar Music Publishers MSM-50-6056, 2005). A thoughtful and expressive setting of a hymn text translated from the German by John Wesley, this is a beautiful anthem for Lent. With mixed meter and a flowing accompaniment, we have found it to be a satisfying and accessible challenge for our singers.

At This Table, Allen Pote (SATB, keyboard., optional flute: Hope Publishing, C 5429, 2006). This simple but lovely Communion anthem implores Christ to be the “wine of grace” and the “bread of peace.” We plan to use it at our Maundy Thursday service.

I Often Dance, Gary Hallquist (SATB, piano and optional flute: Carl Fischer CM8938, 2001). This joyful, uplifting text is set with a lilting Celtic feel. We are saving it for Eastertide or perhaps even next fall, but feel sure it will be a delight for the choir to rehearse and perform.

I’ve Just Come from the Fountain, Daniel Kallman (SATB and piano: MorningStar Music Publishers MSM-50-6044, 2004). Propelled by a wonderfully rhythmic piano accompaniment, this anthem is an arrangement of a lively African American spiritual. We modified it per the arranger’s suggestion to include soloists in the congregation during the call-and-response sections. Warmly received by choir and congregation.

With a Voice of Singing, Martin Shaw (SATB and organ accompaniment: G. Schirmer, Inc, 8103, distributed by Hal Leonard, HL50299170). Couldn’t believe that in recent years we had forgotten to pull out this rousing standby from the 1920’s. The juxtaposition of brief contrapuntal sections with unison and homophonic passages make this a strong, sturdy anthem of praise. It’s available in various other voicings.

The word “amateur” is derived from the Latin verb *amare*, “to love.” Our amateur choristers show up in response to the highest possible calling . . . they sing for the love of it. There is no finer tribute to the art of choral singing. May our efforts as their directors be ever worthy of that love.

Rev. Susan Cauley, Louisiana R & S chair for Music in Worship, is associate minister of music and organist at Emmanuel Baptist Church in Alexandria. She and her husband Jerry have served churches in Kentucky, Georgia and Maryland, and are currently in their 25th year of music ministry at Emmanuel.