

# The Scary World of Programming

—William A. Wyman, State R & S Chair, Collegiate Affairs – Nebraska ACDA  
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Nothing we do as choral directors can be quite so frustrating and perplexing as putting together the multiple programs we must present in a typical year. For the young conductor, this is especially challenging since there is little written about programming and it is a topic typically avoided in conducting and/or choral methods classes. Read three articles on this topic and you might find three very different ideas. As is the case in so many other areas of our discipline, experience is the best teacher of all. So, what is the young conductor just starting out to do?

Having taught programming for many years and finding it fascinating, let me suggest some ideas to consider. Your programming approach will change as your musical insights deepen. The two are very much connected. Most conductors agree that a successful program is designed to avoid excessive length, includes an interesting variety of literature, avoids close harmonic progressions, uses harmonies with common tones when possible, avoids drastic movement among style periods and vocal styles, avoids audience and performer saturation through the inclusion of too many pieces back to back in the same key, same tempo, same language, same voicing, same emotional expression and same general style. In other words, too much of a good thing can become less than good and if pursued excessively can become an audience turn off.

Audiences are highly accepting of what we do even if the ability of the ensemble is modest. But an audience has its limits. Most music can be categorized into mind, heart and gut. Mind music is intellectually engaging for both performers and audience. Heart music is the category most accepted since it allows both performer and audience to relax and just enjoy the moment. Gut music is fully sung and more physically engages the performers. It can be more emotional but it usually accesses fuller dynamics and higher range. Try placing your mind music earlier in the program where it might be better accepted by your audience. To follow a heart piece with a mind piece is asking for audience disengagement.

I think we can take very good lessons from some of our great composers in learning how to place music in a workable order. Just look at what Schubert did in his well-known song cycle “Die Schöner Müllerin”. Look at how Schubert uses key relationships to move smoothly from one piece to another. Look at how he mixes the dramatic with the introspective. And, look at the story telling he accomplishes. This famous song cycle is a wonderful model for successful programming in my opinion. It flows logically without saturating and while there is always a mind element present because of the German language, the mixture of heart and gut is masterful.

As my own programming ideas have evolved, I have come more and more to the conclusion that we expect a lot from our audiences with respect to our visual presentation. The typical classic program

expects an audience to look at essentially the same picture for 30-60-90 minutes. If you stared at the same painting for any length of time without benefit of changing your position, would you not get sick looking at that painting? So it is with the classic concert. I try in every concert to present not only musical variety along the lines I have discussed but also visual variety.

I have found that it also enhances the vocal performance level of my ensembles who instead of standing in one position, find it energizing and relaxing to move into alternative positions. So, as one more programming suggestion, I urge you to find ways to present the music you are including in different physical positions. I am not advocating extraneous movement or choralography but the use of tasteful changes that support the basic mood and nature of the piece. I do not try this with every piece sung in a program or this will get as tedious to an audience as does the general entertainment ensemble that never stops moving.

Finally, I try to connect with the audience immediately by using a piece to open the concert that engages the audience in a different way than just seeing the choir enter the stage and begin to sing. There are wonderful program openers available that allow the ensemble to settle into the concert, not be stretched vocally and not be placed in an awkward position. These pieces can be used as processionals, surround sound experiences, visual links from choir to audience and a terrific way for the choir to say to the audience, we have something important to say and we want you to listen. I have put together a collection of these kinds of pieces and have listed them below with brief commentary on each one.

Programming is an art and I hope you will not subscribe to the attitude held by some colleagues that any piece of music can work with any other piece of music if well performed. Program with this attitude if you wish. But I suggest to you that even the most unsophisticated audience will leave your concert feeling uneasy. Typically they cannot say why but if you are hearing from many of your audience members, "that was a nice program" understand that means, " It was o.k. but not exciting and I can't tell you why and I don't wish to hurt your feelings".

Good luck and feel confident since you can't fail at this, you can only succeed a little less.

## Opening Repertoire Suggestions

A Pentatonic Alleluia.....Ross Whitney  
Santa Barbara Music Publishing No. SBMP 444

The most successful opening I have ever used since it can engage the audience in a surround sound experience and is accessible to even young singers.

Adiemus.....Karl Jenkins  
Boosey & Hawkes, No. 10671

Random text with many possible interpretations, can be used as a processional and can involve recorders. This piece has a powerful impact on the audience.

Four Motets on a Gregorian Theme.....Maurice Duruflé  
No. 1 Ubi caritas

Durand/Theodore Presser, No. 312-41253

A processional of the faithful to the church and a great way to introduce chant singing to your choir. Use it as a processional into the concert hall.

Klee Wyck.....Brian Tate  
Cypress Press

Scored for children's voices in an SA arrangement but can also work in mixed voicing. This piece tells a powerful story of Emily Carr, a painter much revered by Canadian Native Americans. Placed in an audience surrounding position, the ensemble can immediately engage the audience. The use of drums and visual aids is also possible.

Jesus Christ, the Apple Tree.....Elizabeth Poston  
Eboracum/Hal Leonard, No. ECS141

This beautiful haunting melody captivates an audience especially if used as a processional. Poston never intended the piece be used as such but it works very well in providing a simple but grand beginning to a concert.

Medieval Sequence.....arr. David W. Music  
Concordia Publishing Co. No. 98-3294

Set with flexible voicing in 3-7 parts, this familiar melody based on the plainsong "Divinum mysterium", provides an opportunity to teach chant and is accessible to an audience because the tune is so well known. Used as a processional, it provides an elegant beginning to any concert.