The Responsibility of the Choral Conductor to the Emerging Composer

Joshua William Mills

Of all possible performance media, I believe the unaccompanied choir is both the easiest and most difficult for which to write. It is easy because composers need not worry about transposition issues, awkward fingerings, orchestration problems, or any of scores of other issues they must be aware of when writing for orchestra, a solo instrument, chamber ensemble, piano or organ. With only four parts with which composers must work, perhaps eight if they like, entire hosts of orchestration issues are eliminated, and the blend is instantaneous. A good choir can make even the most basic harmonies sound heavenly; the composer need only put pen to paper and the ensemble will wrap the audience in the natural beauty of the human voice.

But what then sets good choral writing apart from the mediocre? Setting aside issues of musical content, it is things including sensitivity to the ranges and characters of different ranges in different voices, the way the text is set, and the freedom allowed to the conductor to tease out the music from the score. Choristers and their conductors can recognize when a composer doesn't really know what she is doing with a choir, and they wisely try to avoid such pieces regardless of their musical content; perhaps the music would work brilliantly recycled into a string quartet or an organ solo, but for a choir, it might just not *work*. Perhaps the text is dull, awkwardly set, or in such a texture that it becomes impossible to hear. Voice-leading in complex harmonic languages can easily go from being challenging to being practically un-singable. Maybe the tessitura is too uncomfortable for extended periods such that it will cause vocal strain in some voices, or possibly vowel choices in extreme registers are unreasonable. This is why

choral writing is so difficult.

Now of course every medium has its nuances to which composers who would write well for it must be sensitive. (Pianists are acutely aware of this phenomenon when it comes to music outside the established corpus of piano literature, especially accompaniments.) But the fact of the matter is that the background of most all composers is in the instrumental or keyboard realms rather than the vocal, and thus most typically do not have much first-hand experience from a performer's perspective when it comes to choral music despite the fact that these experiences are invaluable toward developing the necessary sensibilities needed for writing well for any performance medium.

Why is it that the best composers tend to not write much choral music, a domain too often left to a small handful of specialists or others who tend to be far more intimately involved with the choral art, especially choral conductors who know expertly what good choral music is but, with all due respect, for whom composition is clearly not their first gift? Now do not misunderstand me—I in no way mean to denigrate Robert Shaw and so many other wonderful musicians like him in the least, but the reason their compositions and arrangements are so effective and popular with choirs and their conductors is because they understand choral music in a way that most composers do not. A few luminaries aside (such figures as Arvo Pärt, Ned Rorem, and James MacMillan come to mind), the most brilliant contemporary composers are usually not well known in choral circles. I think of figures such as Christopher Rouse, John Adams, Joan Tower, George Tsontakis, Richard Danielpour, Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, Michael Daugherty, Philip Glass, and Lowell Liebermann, all of whom have written large quantities of excellent music but only a comparatively tiny sliver of unaccompanied choral music. This list could go on, but I think my point is made.

Now I can already hear choral musicians and conductors crying out that I am mischaracterizing the entire choral music scene, that there are in fact myriads of contemporary composers writing plenty of new choral music, and not the sort of choral fluff of which I have already spoken. And indeed there are. However, I am speaking here from a composer's point of view, and so what I am speaking of is slightly different. True, there may be mountains of choral scores written in the past fifteen years, but how many of these actually find their way into that elusive canon of 'standard literature' where they will live significantly past their premiere and a few more scattered performances by those lucky enough to stumble across the work—works that even those who are not vocalists begin to recognize and know? Few actually do. Contrast this with other media which, as the stranglehold of the modernist-academic elite upon serious composers continues to wane, are warming more and more to contemporary music. Thanks to dedicated performers, a category of standard contemporary literature has even started to emerge in some realms, much to the delight of composers; every young composer dreams of her piece finding its way onto a performer's or a conductor's bookshelf a few places down from that Beethoven sonata or Stravinsky score as an official 'standard repertoire' work. From the eyes of the emerging composer hoping that maybe *this* will be the breakthrough piece to launch her career, choral music is far removed from where the action is happening.

For emerging composers (i.e. composers under thirty or so still in the process of learning their craft and developing their careers), a performance of an orchestral work is a significant professional landmark; a performance of a choral work, on the other hand, is *nice*, perhaps not even a great deal more notable than a performance of a work for woodwind quintet or piano trio. In circles of serious composers, to specialize in choral music makes not much more sense than to specialize in string quartet music—it is artistic and professional foolishness. This is simply the

result of the musical culture and the training that serious concert music composers are receiving and perpetuating. To give a specific example, this is why Eric Whitacre, the beauty and effectiveness of whose works are undeniable, is not taken terribly seriously by most fellow composers at present, and may never be should he continue on the rather narrow path he is on. Say what you want about this academy-oriented state of affairs, but for better or for worse, this *is* the present state of affairs.

The answer to the question of why the top composers, those whose reputations and careers are already established, generally write so little for choir, I think, is fairly simple: they lack incentive, and in the world of professional composition, this means primarily commissions. (Because choral scores are generally not very profitable to publishing companies, publication tends to not be much of an incentive either.) And one of the main reasons they lack commissions is because they are unlikely to receive them until they have proved that they are capable of delivering high-quality choral literature. It is indeed a vicious circle.

Young composers who want to write for choir find the same forces at work on a different scale: it will take a few pieces, several maybe, or more, before they begin to understand how to write for a choir, and even this does not guarantee mature sensitivity to the things which separate good choral writing from the mediocre. And as the number of unsung choral works in a composer's catalogue grows (lack of incentive), she will give up on the genre for ones (especially solo and chamber works) in which she can arrange performances of her works without the cooperation of a seventy-voice choir and its conductor. (One must keep in mind that while this is also true of orchestral music to a degree, because the symphony orchestra is still the standard-bearer in the world of concert music and contemporary composition, is it an altogether very different situation.) To complete the circle, without actually writing choral music, the composer

does not develop the specific skills needed for choral writing, and the end result is that choral music has lost another promising composer to far more fertile grounds.

Conductors, make careful note of this principle: while these forces at work pose an artistic frustration to composers who love and would write choral music, should nothing change and they never break into that realm, they will find music to write for other performance media—it is the future of *your* art which is at stake.

The solution as I see it is twofold:

First, it is incumbent upon choral conductors to offer their expertise in choral writing to emerging composers. Composers need to hear about the nuts and bolts of choral music from one who knows. They need to be told that the tenors will have trouble with that descending leap of a minor ninth in bar twenty-four; that the alto line will never be heard with the sopranos in that range; that the voice-leading in this passage is incredibly problematic; that this line should be a solo for best results, but with this one, double the sopranos with the altos; that the low basses won't really be able to sing that vowel on a low D♭, and with the rest of the choir *fortissimo*, a satisfying balance will be terribly difficult to achieve . . .

Second, nothing teaches the emerging composer what works like hearing something of her own that doesn't. With notation software, composers can hear poor simulations of what an orchestral score might sound like, were it to be played by an ensemble of robots on cheap instruments, but the only thing MIDI can offer the aspiring choral composer is what the notes sound like—only a single vowel, no consonants, no difference between voices and different ranges, no change in vocal color, no problematic passages for intonation issues, or missed notes due to terrible voice-leading, or unbalanced chords due to the limits of the voice, etc. The only way for composers to get a true sense of these things is to hear their works read. Even the most

experienced with finely-developed ears and uncanny score-reading abilities can have trouble knowing how a new piece truly sounds until musicians take up the score and begin to sing. Believe me what I say that there is no substitution for this.

So directors, from the high school through undergraduate and upper-lever conservatory and university ensembles, must make this opportunity available to emerging composers *and* let them know of it. Offer your expert opinion on their pieces. Have new composition reading sessions—even twenty minutes is better than nothing. Should a composer be sufficiently talented, entice her with a possible performance: nothing excites composition students like having their work performed or recorded by ensembles or individuals that they don't have to pay or organize themselves. With emerging composers, a performance is often payment enough for a commission, and the choral librarian can simply copy the score (and do so with the complete and legal permission of the copyright holder!) instead of purchasing enough copies for the choir.

Above all, the conductor must keep in mind that this is an *investment*—an investment in the future of choral literature. Reading sessions cost valuable rehearsal time, and preparing a student's work for performance means the exclusion of some other, and surely more worthy, composition from the program. But the conductor cannot think in terms of short-range profit; the investment will be repaid many times over when the result is a mature choral composer, the works of whom will bless the entire choral community.

Everybody wins in this situation: composers learn about the intricacies of choral writing from first-hand experience (the only good way to do so) and maybe even get a work performed; choristers have the opportunity of engaging with music that is truly new and fresh; the conductor can forge professional relationships with composers while young that could prove amazingly profitable should the composer become quite successful; and the choral art gains for itself

another potential composer of a breed not seen nearly often enough—one who is both brilliant at her craft and sensitive to the nuances of choral music.

And this is why I have entitled this 'The *Responsibility* of the Choral Conductor to the Emerging Composer'. It is not because I have a grandiose conception of the role of composer in the music-making process, some romanticized dream of the composer as a kind of *Übermensch*, or the notion that for some God-ordained reason, the choirs of the world owe me—and my fellow composers—their services merely by reason of my existence and vocation. No, it is your responsibility, choral conductors, only insofar as you are obligated to your art. At the risk of being accused of arrogance, I say to you that composers do not need choirs if there are others with whom we can work, but choirs do need composers if they hope to sing with a sound voice rooted in our present age. Emerging composers are the future of choral literature, and if the best of these never write true choral music, then the greatest choral music of our time will never be written. The highest quality literature available to choirs of today will remain the work of masters long dead, the echoes of a time long dead—still beautiful, still good, and, dare I say, still true, but never again contemporary. For such a timeless instrument as the human voice, and even more so for a full choir of voices singing as one, to be forever trapped in the past would be a terrible fate indeed.

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