

Real Repertoire for Women's Choirs

By Mary Lycan

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Sometimes, when I look at women's chorus concert programs, I think we sing a lot of fluffy repertoire. And when I hear about the school and college women's choirs that are farm teams or dumping grounds, I think our chorus culture is pretty cold. I'd like to suggest that we sing repertoire of the very highest musical standards, and do our best to establish a seriously supportive chorus culture, educating our singers about women's choral history, stressing positive role models, and connecting on every level we can to the pieces we sing.

I am coming to the conclusion that real repertoire for women's choirs is music which has been composed--or is being composed--for real women: choir nuns in convents, girl orphans and their teachers in the Venetian *ospedali*, cultivated young German amateurs, young American women at boarding schools and colleges, adult women in music clubs--who performed music written by their teachers, peers, and alumnae.

This music is written out of deep familiarity with how women's voices work. It is grateful to the voice. It has good alto parts. The best of it is technically so intelligent, so beautiful and so compelling, that teaching and conducting it provides a complete and satisfying musical experience for everyone involved.

Music for real women also comes embedded in the culture of the women who first sang it. Each piece is a window on a choral culture that gives us part of our history, a history we may not yet know. As we learn what we can about these choral cultures, and pass it on to our singers, they gain the sense that they are part of a proud tradition. The repertoire becomes real for them.

Real women have been making music for a long time. New editions of our repertoire are sometimes hard to find--they're not in the bins in the music store, or in the Pepper catalogue--but thanks to the musicologists and the early music performance crowd, and to the specialty choral publishers, you can get them.

Your handout shows some nodes of real repertoire--pieces from various periods you can get your hands on right now, both as sheet music and on recordings. Some of it is virtually unknown on the choral circuit, and some of it has been around for so long that people don't bother programming it any more. All of it is real.

17th century Italian convents:

Musicologists are now rediscovering and reconstructing the musical practices of the 17th

century Italian convents, especially those in Bologna and Milan. One of the Milanese nun composers, Chiara Margarita Cozzolani, wrote motets for two to eight voices and basso continuo, involving melismatic solo sections alternating with homophonic choral chunks, in a texture reminiscent of Monteverdi or Schütz. What a fantastic texture to use with your chamber choir! Or, if you have a choir of pretty good singers with a few standouts, what a fine vehicle these pieces would be for them. Let's start doing some of this music.

18th century Venetian ospedali:

During the 18th century, the girls' orphanages in Venice, the *ospedali*, gave choral and orchestral concerts that awed visiting musicians. They performed major works--masses, Magnificats, cantata-length Psalm settings, oratorios--from a large repertoire composed by their music teachers—people like Antonio Vivaldi. This is wonderful music, still largely unobtainable in modern editions--over 100 major works notated for women's chorus, and hundreds more notated for SATB, but, from internal evidence, apparently intended for performance by women's choirs as well.

Many conflicting and some silly things have been written about which octave transpositions of the lower parts are necessary for performing this revision repertoire. My personal approach is to get familiar with the pieces actually surviving in SSAA notation, and to study other people's work. The handout shows several pieces for which there are both good recordings and good editions, available right now. Please, jump in and get started. Get those CDs. The baroque sound of four-part women's chorus, strings, and continuo is luminous.

Those of you looking for a DMA topic or for your next publication, listen up: the *ospedali* repertoire is the largest treasure trove of forgotten first-class choral music since the rediscovery of the cantatas of J.S. Bach. I'll say it again: **the ospedali repertoire is the largest treasure trove of forgotten first-class choral music since the rediscovery of the cantatas of J.S. Bach.**

When I performed Vivaldi's "Magnificat in G Minor" with my women's chorus, they were grabbed by two things besides the music itself. One was the delight they took in learning about how very fine those *ospedali* choirs and orchestras were. Tributes to their performances, by touring musicians like Charles Burney, survive, and they are raves. My singers were also happy to be singing a major setting of the Magnificat text. The Magnificat is one of the evening canticles performed by generations of cathedral and church choirs from which women have been systematically excluded. Its text, of course, is the joyful song of greeting by a pregnant Jewish woman to her even more pregnant cousin, Elizabeth. It was good for us to claim a major setting of this text.

19th century German Frauenchor repertoire:

The 19th century German *Frauenchor*, an outgrowth of the rise of an urban, educated middle class, is the first flowering of the modern women's choir, with multiple women on a part singing secular music in salon and concert, rather than religious, performances. It has given us lovely music by Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Brahms, and others. Why don't we hear more of it more often?

The pieces I've listed on the second page of your handout are golden oldies I have loved and performed, and for which I was able to track down current recordings. The Brahms "*Regina coeli*," in particular, is right up there on the list of music for my funeral.

Isn't the music we care about that deeply the repertoire we want to place at the core of our programming for our women's choirs? Can't we try to have at least one piece with a high eternity quotient on every program, one from which incandescent joy wells up for us and our singers?

My singers really like to sing Brahms. They hate to sing German, but they love to sing Brahms. They also enjoy learning how the accomplished young ladies of Hamburg had to copy their music into their own partbooks, and how they developed crushes on the young, handsome composer. But what my adult women talked about at the next rehearsal was the struggle of the singer who married, moved away with her partbook to an isolated farming village, and started her own women's choir there. The singers couldn't read music well enough to copy it, so she had to make all the partbooks herself. The roads were so muddy that singers couldn't get to rehearsals in bad weather. Her own work with the chorus was interrupted when she gave birth. Ten times.

Sometimes, when we have one of those rehearsals when nothing stays in tune, I can think, and so can my singers, "If Franziska Meier could do it, we can do it too."

20th century French repertoire:

Poulenc's "*Litanies à la vierge noire*" are so well known. The piece is on my list of lifetime favorites, but I don't get to hear it very often. It's a good example of how different kinds of extra-musical preparation make repertoire real for your singers. When your choir knows the circumstances of its composition--Poulenc's breakdown after the death of a friend, followed by his retreat to the chapel at Roc-Amadour, where this piece began to gather in his mind--then the repetitive petitions of the text are no longer a laundry list, but a plea for healing and strength.

Roc-Amadour is a real place, and it's still there--so I looked in travel books about France for information on what it's like. I went to an art library and found pictures of the statue of the Black Virgin, and of the small medieval bell, the shape and size of a World War I soldier's helmet, which is said to ring spontaneously when petitioners' prayers are answered. Did it ring for Poulenc?

20th century English (and British commonwealth) girls' schools tradition:

I've put down the reference to Gustav Holst's "Songs from 'The Princess'" to remind us that he wrote more than one piece. His years of teaching in a girls' school taught him how women's voices work, and I consider him the grandfather of the British melt-in-your-mouth, or yummy school. Anybody can write parallel thirds, but somehow, British parallel thirds are better.

Commonwealth countries have to some extent maintained the British tradition of single-sex secondary schools and a strong commitment to choral music—a recipe for wonderful music for women's choirs, and for the nurturing of women composers.

The New Zealander Katherine Dienes's music is a prime example of British yummy--her "*Ave verum*" has been recorded by Nancy Menk's choir. The most recent entry onto my lifetime favorites list is the Canadian Ramona Luengen's "*Salve regina*," which I conducted in January. This piece became real for my choir in two ways. First, after we had learned the notes, I played Elektra's recording for the choir, so they could hear it from the outside, and they immediately committed to the piece's pure musical loveliness.

Second (and I learned this from Patty Hennings), I tried to find a central image, a subtext for the piece, which could be the interpretive motivation for all the women of the chorus, including the atheists. I chose the image of a child, frazzled at the end of the day, finding soothing and comfort in her mother's arms. That image is supported by the text, a believer's evening prayer to Mary, and meshes beautifully with the music. That piece became very real for my chorus.

US Women's Colleges and Women's Clubs:

In the United States, the FIRST great age of the women's chorus, from about 1895 to 1960, arose with the entry of women into higher education, and especially with the founding of women's colleges. James Laster of Shenandoah University, in an unpublished research project, has documented how the choral directors at the Seven Sisters colleges established a tradition of fine choirs. Some of them, notably Harold Geer, edited series of early music publications for women's voices.

The graduates of these colleges often formed women's clubs, many of which had club choruses which rehearsed and performed to a high standard, held composition contests, commissioned new works, and sought out and supported the music of women composers. About 15 years ago Jim Laster started looking at this forgotten culture from the institutional end. About six years ago I approached it from the repertoire end, tracking the dedications to college and club choruses at the top of individual octavos. We have met in the middle with the same conclusion: there is a chapter of American women's choral history that offers great riches, and which we must not lose. More paper topics!

The next piece I will program from that repertoire is Amy Beach's "The Chambered Nautilus". This flagrantly romantic, edging into impressionistic, secular cantata is about 21 minutes long, on a poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes. The central image of the text is that of the spiral shellfish, which forms new and ever-larger chambers, daring to grow and leave its old, confining chambers behind--an inspiring metaphor for your singers.

For me, this will be the centerpiece of a program which pays tribute to the places in which women make music, entitled "A Room of Her Own." Besides the Beach, I'll program one of the Cozzolani motets for the cloister, and Ysaye Barnwell's "Music in My Mother's House," and fill in with some fun things around the edges. Won't that be neat?

Music from World War II:

Most of the places women have made music together--convents, orphanages, schools, colleges, clubs--have been places they entered voluntarily, or where they were at least nurtured and trained. Then there is the music from the prison camps and concentration camps of World War II. Performing this music is an extremely powerful experience for your chorus, and its very existence is an inspiration to women's choirs everywhere. It is the opposite of fluffy.

"Other" repertoire:

Most of the music I've mentioned is Western art music, and sacred music at that. It is good for me to remember that we are not all white, heterosexual Episcopalians, and I invite you particularly to investigate the music of the specialty presses--Barnwell's Notes, Yelton Rhodes, Israel Music Institute--I've listed on your handout. There are a lot of different ways for women to be real.

My dear nephew says he began to understand the difference between men and women when he volunteered to coach his six-year-old daughter's soccer team:

"And what position would you like to play, dear?"

"Next to Jennifer."

When my singers and I connect to the historic and new repertoire composed especially for women's choirs, we are playing next to Jennifer. When we listen to recordings of other women's choirs and girl groups, or watch "A League of Their Own" or the video of the 60 Minutes story on the Harlem Girls Choir, we are playing next to Jennifer. When we are next to Jennifer we are stronger and smarter and tougher and more eager to get the job done.

I've been looking for an icon for my chorus, our own private visual role model and source of inspiration. The engraving of the Thomaskirche in Leipzig just isn't going to do it for us. But I think I finally found her: Rosie the Riveter, the archetype of the women who went into the factories and helped us win World War II. The poster came last week. Would you like to see it? Her message is "We can do it." And so we can.

For copies of the handout referred to above, please check our website at www.womensvoiceschorus.org (*coming soon*).