

Choral Repertoire: Enriching Curriculum and Programming

BY GREG MOOMJY



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Diversity in choral repertoire, like the repertoire for solo singers, is a constantly evolving canon. For voice teachers and choral conductors alike, adjustments to curriculum and programming broaden not just the repertoire itself, but historical understanding of compositional techniques.

For anyone keeping up with obscure developments in the world of music theory, something big and unexpected happened during the summer of 2020, while the pandemic was in full swing. Musicologist Philip Ewell, an associate professor of music theory at Hunter College of the City University of New York, raised questions about Heinrich Schenker's place in the canon as well as in academia. If anyone needs a refresher, Schenker's theory can be encapsulated by one maxim: the chordal progression of all music that is "worth listening to" has three main tonal areas—the tonic, the dominant and, again, the tonic. In many cases, universities do not spend that much time on Schenker, except to make that point.

On the surface Schenkerian theory seems innocuous, even preferable to the drudgery of writing out a Roman numeral analysis of the chordal progressions of a piece. However, upon closer inspection, one realizes that Schenker came up with this theory to prove the superiority of Western European classical composers. Specifically, those comprising the First Viennese School who, for better or worse, not only make up a significant portion of the canon but are also the backbone of music education. This importance bestowed on Schenker can have pronounced negative effects. The emphasis on white European men who make up the canon in turn forms the backbone of music curricula across the United States. This is particularly the case for statewide high school choral competitions.



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Each state in the U.S. has its own list of possible repertoire for students to choose from in these competitions. This repertoire is not diverse—and in some states, even when the repertoire includes works by Black composers, they are typically only spirituals. While the importance of spirituals to American music and, indeed, to Black composers should not be overlooked, it is important to recognize that Black and other BIPOC composers have contributed far more to America’s rich musical heritage.

Given the constantly developing conversations about diversity and inclusion in music, the easiest way to make space for diversity in the canon is simply to start from the ground up and include diverse composers in national music curricula. Unfortunately, there is no standardization of criteria for choral repertoire. To put it simply: there is no easy fix.

There are organizations such as the National Association for Music Educators, which provides broad outlines but whose updated guidelines are still forthcoming. Some states, like Indiana and New York, provide festival manuals with lists of approved repertoires. New York updates its festival manuals every three years. Diversity in choral repertoire also varies from state to state based on each state’s funding for music education.

According to Jeremiah Selvey, co-creator of Chorosynthesis, “There’s a vast difference in the number of students that they might have or the abilities of the students or even the type of funding that their school has. So, of course, say, Texas is going to have a robust list because they have an amazing choral culture there.”

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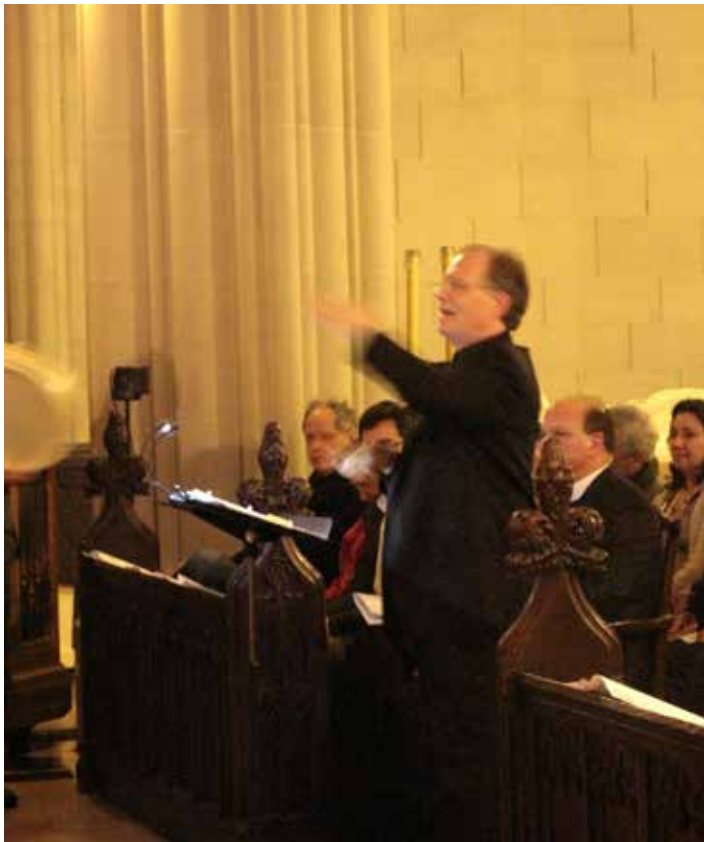


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Fortunately, at the university level, courses exploring non-Western music are becoming more common. And organizations that offer solutions to diversify the curriculum are becoming increasingly prevalent. One such organization, Decolonizing the Music Room, even has a private Facebook group where music educators can discuss strategies for increasing diversity. A common solution is to find places in the curriculum where a canonical Western composer or traditionally Western music making can be complemented by relevant works from less prominent composers and musical traditions.

This is especially important because the sound that has been used to this day as an identifier of national styles of choral music in countries like England was created when white men like William Byrd and Thomas Tallis began incorporating the interval of a 6th into their work. This predominance has led to the creation of the sweet-sounding choirs that have become hallmarks of Oxford and Cambridge.

Students should be taught a diverse curriculum from an early age. For example, one could teach kids Sargam (this is the name given to the scales used in Indian music) alongside Solfeggio. The many similar pitches which Solfeggio and Sargam share make it approachable for school children to learn concurrently. Similarly, music educators can explore the historical background of various canonical works. One such example is when the Verdi *Requiem* was performed in the Terezín concentration camp. The Nazis had staged the performance to fool the Red Cross; however, the prisoners specifically chose to perform *Requiem* for its operatic take on divine judgement.

As a discipline, musicology has developed through traditional Western music. Consequently, Western traditions have come to dominate how we think of and interact with music across genres. Yet, if you look at a global and historical context, you realize that at some point around the beginning of the Baroque Era in the 1600s, compositional techniques like monody and choral textures like homophony began to take precedence over the polyphony that had its final flowering in the late Renaissance. When this occurred, Western music lost the rhythmic richness of polyphony in favor of the harmonic richness of the series of stacked pitches that form the basis of homophony.

However, other non-Western traditions such as West African music developed along different lines. Consequently, to fully study and learn from them, one needs to be better acquainted with musical techniques which the Western musical traditions do not particularly emphasize. The easiest way forward in the diversification of the canon is through music education conferences.

If a composition is performed often enough, the chances are higher that it will then receive attention at one of these conferences. Then it is much more likely to be included in subsequent required repertoire for choral festivals. As such, repertoire for choral concerts needs to be diverse. An easy way to diversify the repertoire is to perform pieces with less exposure alongside established canonical works. Jeremiah Selvey programmed a concert featuring a mass by William Byrd alongside a piece which updated the seven last words of Christ to an HIV-positive gay man.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way that choral composers gain notoriety, to some extent, making it easier to reach students and children without the need for travel. Platforms such as Zoom make it easier to connect with students. And, in the pandemic, choral performances on YouTube have grown in popularity and commonality. It may take longer to edit and post videos, but the use of these video platforms in response to the pandemic have democratized choral performance by significantly expanding the audience for them.

The response of performing arts organizations to the developing progress toward social justice has also been a catalyst for the creation of new choral works by composers of diverse and underrepresented backgrounds. For example, Opera Lafayette, a DC-based company that performs mostly opera from the Court of Versailles—with the occasional addition of choral works by Monteverdi—has created a new work. *Nigra Sum Sed Formosa: I Am Black but Beautiful* (A fantasia on microaggressions) was composed by bass-baritone Jonathan Woody with text compiled by countertenor Reggie Mobley, both of whom perform with the group. The piece is structured like a Baroque motet, in the style of Monteverdi. The text primarily consists of microaggressions that singers face from casting directors, conductors, and others. One line that sticks out says something to the effect of “You are so big, you should play in the NFL.”

In the May/June 2021 issue of *Classical Singer*, there is an article about Francesca Hsieh, a voice teacher who wants to empower young singers to have the right to choose repertoire they want to sing. She does not want any of them to feel pigeonholed into any repertoire that they might be uncomfortable with—such as Asian American students singing more than just *The King I* and *Miss Saigon* or Black students singing “Summertime.” While it could be difficult to allow elementary school students that freedom, this does seem like a viable option when teaching older students. Either way, choir directors should teach their students about composers and music in all its complexity.

At the risk of stating the obvious, the Internet is a major boon to those who want to diversify choral repertoire. There are several databases that provide users not only with names of composers and works, but also links to PDFs and other types of scores. Some of these databases are crowdsourced, among them Chorosynthesis—which was developed by Dr. Wendy K. Moy and Jeremiah Selvey (both educators and choir conductors), whom I spoke with this past May.

Dr. Moy also teaches a class for future music educators. She makes diversity of repertoire a key issue in her classes. By the end of the semester, her students each must give a presentation on a composer that they feel is underrepresented. A part of that presentation is to propose ideas on how to incorporate them into the standard

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repertoire. She truly believes that her students one day will have a voice in the creation of statewide music education programs that help to broaden choral repertoire.

In response to the drive for greater social equity, the diverse fields in the performing arts have created their own organizations and alliances to ensure greater representation onstage and off. In opera, one such organization is the Black Opera Alliance. In choral music, there is Black Voices Matter, which pledges to combat racism in choral practices.

The pledge itself is divided into sections, each of which is dedicated to a specific element of a choral performance (whether it's conductors, singers, etc.). The pledge also extends to the different contexts for which choral music is created, liturgy music (masses, requiems). On the surface this might seem obvious—after all, much of Western choral music was written for liturgy purposes. However, Black Voices Matter distinguishes themselves by pledging to do research into diverse composers.

For a recent example of how the Black Voices Matter pledge to explore faith music can be put into practice, look to the Cathedral Choir of Saint John the Divine in New York City. A few years ago, under the direction of Kent Trittle and with the early music ensemble Rose of the Compass, they performed a “Golden Age of Spain” concert of music from Islamic Spain. This era in Spain (711–1492) was known for its toleration of all religions, which was in marked contrast to the rule of the Catholic monarchs who later re-conquered the country and established the Inquisition.

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The concert program featured Mozarabic chant as well as music of the Sephardic Jews. It is important to realize that the Mozarabic chant of Islamic Spain is just one of the many vocal traditions that became standardized as Gregorian chant, the basis for all Western vocal music. By performing Mozarabic chants, the cathedral choir highlighted the fact that Gregorian chant was not born in a vacuum; rather, it came into existence with the help of multiple vocal traditions across cultures.

Performing arts institutions such as choirs and opera companies can also play a role in helping to diversify vocal repertoire for music education curricula. Two possible methods are developing educational programs around a new piece and performing new compositions through community outreach. An example of the former is a program developed by New York City Opera when they presented the company premiere of Richard Danielpour and Toni Morrison's *Margaret Garner*, an opera about slavery in the Antebellum South that inspired Morrison's classic novel, *Beloved*. Schools that participated in the opera's outreach program were given choruses from the opera to perform during schoolwide assemblies.

The Glimmerglass Festival provides an example of the second type of outreach. Each summer the company performs a short family opera with large choral numbers sung by local children. These operas are frequently newly commissioned, and several have been performed outside

of Glimmerglass. Unfortunately, in 2020 the festival had to cancel the world premiere of Kamala Sankaram's *The Jungle Book*. Sankaram is known for mixing techniques of both Western and Indian classical music. Fortunately, Glimmerglass was still able to debut the panther Bagheera's aria over YouTube. The role of Bagheera was even portrayed by a dancer who incorporated elements of traditional Indian dance into the choreography.

One of the first things I learned as a budding musicologist a decade ago was the acronym DWEM, which stands for "Dead White European Men." It is sad to admit that even today, when the repertoire for classical music is the most varied it has ever been, Dead White European Men still dominate. Fortunately, thanks to outside forces like the Internet, it is getting easier for diverse voices to gain visibility. We still have a long way to go, but these are the first steps on the road to equity in choral music.

Gregory Moomjy is a New York City-based journalist who writes about opera. He is a graduate of Columbia University with a Master of Science in Journalism and a graduate of Fordham University with a bachelor's degree in Musicology. He is a contributor for The Indie Opera Podcast. Additionally, Moomjy has written many reviews and commentary on opera for a variety of publications, including New Jersey Monthly, Salon, PC Gamer, and Mexico's Pro Ópera, as well as many others. CSJ MUSIC



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