

PLAN for SUCCESS

AN ANTHEM LESSON PLAN: "PRAISE TO THE LORD, FOR THE LORD IS GOOD"

by Eileen Jones Straw

How One Director Approaches the Teaching of an Anthem

Order "*Praise to the Lord, for the Lord is Good*," CGAI044, by Ellen Woods Bryce
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Recently, several lists of "The Top Ten Things Children Should Know" have been published. Folk stories, myths, moral lessons, historical facts, people and events—these are the topics that have been addressed thus far. And several of my dearest friends—music educators—have come up with various lists of "Top 25 Songs Every Child Should Know". Songs like, *She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain* and *The Happy Wanderer* (I love to go a-wandering. . .) are inevitably on that kind of list.

Hopefully, those of us working with children in a church setting also have a "Top 25" list of hymns that every child should know. Hymns that communicate the beliefs and language of our faith, hymns that express our love and adoration, our need for a relevant relationship with our God, and songs that enrich our Christian walk—those are hymns that all of our children should have hidden in their hearts as they grow and learn.

Ellen Woods Bryce's anthem, *Praise to the Lord for the Lord is Good*, incorporates one of those "top 25" hymns in a fresh and creative way, and gives children the chance to sing the hymn tune un-adorned, as well as with a newly-composed partner melody, which serves as a link from our modern-day children to this historic hymn of our faith. *Praise to the Lord, the Almighty* is a hymn that should be at the top of the list for children, youth, and adults alike, since it is a vehicle of praise, adoration, and the recognition of the omniscience of God Almighty.

Starting the process of teaching this anthem using a vocalise based on the melodic pattern 1-1-5-3 (Praise to the Lord) is fun, and can be challenging for the elementary-age singer. Using the "moveable do" idea, echo-singing this phrase in several different keys helps children become familiar with these intervals, and is a great exercise in ear training and tonal memory (if you are not particularly secure in finding the pitches as you lead, write out the phrase in the keys of C, D, F, G and A, using the tones of the triad 1-1-5-3, so that you or your accompanist can play the pattern on a keyboard).

Next, since the tune (*Lobe den Her-ren*) uses the tones of the main chord/triad, then switches to a step-wise fashion, it is easy to "draw" the tune—in the air, on the board, on your singing partner's back, and on your own body. (See diagram for hymn tune and partner tune on next page.) As you draw attention to the skips in the melody (from 1 to 5 to 3), and the steps moving down from 3, singers can become more familiar with these two kinds of melodic movement—how they sound, how they feel, and how they look—as you go from air-melody to melody levels to actual notation.

Helping children see, feel, and hear the tune and its movement engages all of their useable senses in the learning process, and helps them develop their understanding of melodic movement and related notation. Singing the tune on a syllable first (like "loo" or "zoom") focuses singers on the tune first; the text can be added when the tune is secure.

Ellen's partner tune is a lilting and melodic companion to the hymn tune, and has enough repeated phrases to be easily singable. Ask the singers to find all of the phrases that begin with the same tune as *Sing to the Lord* (1-1-2-3). It happens 4 times per verse.

Hymn tune:

• • • • • • • • • • — —
Praise to the Lord, the Al-mi-ghty, the King of Cre - a - tion!

• • • • • • • • • • — —
Oh my soul praise Him for He is my help and sal - va - tion,
• • • — • • • • • • —

All ye who hear, Now to His tem-ple draw near,

• • • • • • — —
Join me in glad a - do - ra - tion.

Partner Tune:

• • • — • • • —
Sing to the Lord, Shout to the Lord,

• • • • • —
Wor - ship the Lord of Love

• • • — • • • —
Sing to the Lord, Shout to the Lord,

• • • — • —
Praise to the Lord a - bove

Begin by using the first word of each text phrase as the *handle*: Sing (to the Lord). . . Shout (to the Lord). . . Praise (to the Lord above). . . Sing (to the Lord). . . Shout (to the Lord). . . Worship (the Lord above). . . with children singing the underlined words, and a leader singing the other words. This focuses the attention on the ACTION words, actions we want to encourage in all worshipers by inviting them to be a part of the experience instead of just observers. It also helps them find the starting pitch of each phrase without worrying about the rest of the phrase at first. And they hear the rest of the phrase (being sung by a leader) before they have to sing it themselves. [NOTE: a great way to rehearse any new phrase without drilling is to have singers do the first note/s, then wait/listen to the rest of the phrase before jumping in with another "first" note.]

Once the two tunes are introduced, using the "waltz" meter of the first tune (the partner melody), guide your singers to move on the first beat in each measure, on those first action words they learned. Use a descriptive motion on each of those words (even using sign language for each of those words—sing, shout, praise, etc) to assist singers in emphasizing the text, especially those words of active worship.

Working toward clear and open vowel sounds is an extremely important part of putting this anthem together and having the singers fulfill the potential that the text offers. "GOOD SINGERS MAKE WORDS MAKE SENSE" is an effective phrase to use in rehearsals to help singers understand that when they sing those vowels correctly, their message gets through to the listeners.

Make a chart showing the phonetic expression of some of the important words—and some that are frequently overlooked. This is a great way to help singers focus. Also, using CAPS to show the correct syllable to emphasize helps with overall textual communication as well.

Of love = Ahv Lahv (instead of uhv luvh)
a - BOVE = Ah - bahv (instead of uh-buhv)
WOR - ship = WUHr - shih - p (instead of Wor-sh <u>u</u> p, rhyming with cats <u>u</u> p!)
Cre - A - tion = Cree - AAY - shahn (instead of CRE - A - sh <u>u</u> n)

And then there are the ending consonants—a teaching opportunity in themselves! The ending D on "God" and "Good" rarely happen without some attention being given to the idea of clear communication of text and diction.

Some Ideas to Try

"Draw" an imaginary D in the palm of one hand; "Draw" a P in the other. Have the children do the same in their palms. Then rehearse these sounds, making the D or P sounds as you/they touch the letter in their palm. Rehearse saying *GoD*, *GooD*, and *worshiP* as you emphasize the enunciation of these final consonants by touching the letters in your palms. Then sing a section of the anthem, indicating the presence of these very important final consonants by each palm-touch. [NOTE: This is also very helpful when the group is singing in the worship or concert setting; it is a non-verbal way of discreetly reminding your them to "MAKE SENSE" of the text by singing those open vowels and ending consonants clearly and cleanly.]

Making the singers responsible for the successful communication of the text means that they begin to really listen—to themselves and to the group. It insures that the singers are "invested" in the piece/hymn/anthem and that they are motivated to contribute more of themselves to the process.

When the singers are comfortable with both tunes, ask them to sing the hymn tune as you (or another leader) sing the partner tune. Ask your singers if they think you can get them off-track! Enlist a student-singer to lead the hymn group, ask a leader (or parent) to sing the other, as you sing the 2-part section of the anthem. Have some fun if the process breaks down! Make it a challenge—to have the singers maintain their tune as you sing the alternate. Make 2 "singing circles" in the room, (children in a circle facing each other), each circle with its own part. When they're successful in maintaining their tune, have them turn outwards, letting their sound OUT, to mix with the alternate part.

Swap parts. Ask a few singers to join you on your part, with the others singing the hymn tune. As they become more successful, make yourself less and less part of the process, allowing the singers to stand on their own. If possible, enlist your accompanist (or a flute or clarinet player) to play one of the tunes, allowing the children to hear their tune more easily since it is paired with an instrument rather than a voice.

[NOTE: if playing a melody on the piano or keyboard as an example, always play one octave above where it is written so that it is easier for the children to hear.]

When the individual tunes become easier to maintain, enlist a few members of the adult choir (who may also be parents of your singers) to visit your rehearsal, and sing the SATB choir and/or Congregational portion of the anthem.

Make it a special event!

NOTE *Be sure* to notate your score to indicate places where the arrangement departs from the “normal” notation of the hymn. See measure 56 (“creation” is held 1 more measure than usual); same for measure 63.

FIELD TRIP! Take this piece to your worship space/sanctuary. Get in place and allow the children to listen to themselves in that room. Sing the two melodies antiphonally (*sound vs sound*) across the room.

IS IT LIVE. . . OR IS IT RECORDED? Record one part/tune on a cassette or CD. Ask the singers to listen to the recording, and find the “beauty spots” (things done well) as well as places that can be “fixed.” Then have them sing one tune while the recording plays the other.

PITCH PARTNERS Mabel Boyter (God bless her) taught so many things by pairing singers together so that they could teach each other. With that in mind, ask 2 Pitch Partners to sing one of the tunes, 2 others to sing the alternate. Have the singers come to the front, ask the other choir members to listen—and jump in to help if one of the pairs gets off-course.

TAKE IT TO THE STREETS! Go to a staircase or upper/lower floor-balcony. Divide the group into 2 parts, each singing from its own location. Ask another age-group choir or some of the parents to stand in between the two groups. . . to judge: “Which group could be understood more easily?” or “Which group made you want to sing their part?” The feedback that your singers get is going to be the encouragement they need to keep working on these important singing skills in a non-threatening and enjoyable setting.

How do we all learn best? By repetition, of course! So finding creative and unique ways to work through a piece like this one helps our singers experience two-part singing in lots of ways, without going over and over and over and over it (drilling) in the choir room!

Finally, once the text and tunes are secure, ask, “What are some ways for us to worship?” and “How can we express thanks and praise to the Lord?” Hopefully, you’ll get responses that include singing, being thankful, and showing joy—ideas from the hymn text. This is the way we know something has been learned—and absorbed. Giving singers the opportunity to articulate the ideas that they’ve been singing reinforces those concepts in their hearts and minds, and helps other children solidify their understanding as well. That’s what should happen with *all* of our musical choices, if chosen well, for their age-appropriateness and sing-ability.

Lastly, before you sing the anthem for worship or in a group setting, invite parents or members of your Youth or Adult choir to join the children at the end of a rehearsal. Work with these older singers on the SATB portion of the piece, and allow the children to hear how this new part sounds.

Then begin to put the piece together, section by section, giving the children the experience of layers of sound. When the final congregational setting of the hymn is ready to be sung, take just a moment to weave the children in with the older singers so that they have that multi-part sound all around them. This “family of choirs” setting not only builds part-singing skills within your children, but also enriches the experience of those youth and adults as they hear the uniqueness and sweetness of the child sound. . . and makes both groups appreciate the contributions made by all.

Praise to the Lord, for the Lord is good!



Eileen Jones Straw is a nationally-known clinician, curriculum writer/editor, and leadership trainer in the areas of Church Music Education and music for Early Childhood. She has been Guest Director or Clinician at the local, state, national, and international level for over 25 years, and is a frequent guest at denominational summer camps, Choir Festivals, and leadership training conferences.

She is a prolific writer of music education curriculum and teacher training materials; she has over 75 articles in print (with *Choristers Guild*, *Abingdon*, and *LifeWay*), and is the author of “Choir Starters,” a compilation of arriver activities for preschool groups, published by Abingdon Press.

Eileen is the Dir. of the Children’s Music Ministry at the Roswell United Methodist Church in Metro Atlanta, where she is in her 17th year of service. She and her husband, Scott, along with their son, Randy (a college freshman), enjoy traveling, baseball, and spending time on the Gulf Coast.