

Sue Ellen Page is Director of the Bach Choir at Nassau Presbyterian Church in Princeton, New Jersey. The Bach Choir produced the Choristers Guild recording for Our Heritage of Hymns, Series I. A prominent workshop and festival leader, Sue Ellen Page's choral compositions are listed in the catalogs of several publishers, including Choristers Guild.

Plans and Suggestions for Teaching John Shepherd's

"A Living Faith" CGA-580

by Sue Ellen Page

John Shepherd's dramatic text and tune combination, because it is primarily unison, may be assumed to be a piece for children's voices, and that it may be. But don't overlook the exciting possibility of using a variety of vocal forces for this festival anthem. "A Living Faith" lends itself well to the combined choir concept.

Teaching Sequence - The How and the Why

Week 1

1. Practice reading this striking text aloud as poetry, in preparation for reading it to the choir, no matter what their age group.

Why? Children need to hear its dramatic power as well as its theological content. Hearing your emphasis on consonants will be a non-reprimanding reminder to sing consonants with the same care. The natural flow of the text, when read unmetered as poetry, is captured in a seemingly effortless way by the author/composer in the metered setting.

2. Using a solfege ladder (fig. 1) point to the correct syllables while singing the refrain (ms. 19 - 25). Continue to point while the choir echoes, watching the ladder. Transfer this to a visual aid of some kind (overhead projector is my first choice) which shows the exact notation of the melody. Sing and point to the pitches and invite comments.

Why? Sequence is a superb way to help solidify the concept that higher or lower on the staff is higher or lower in the voice. The refrain is built on an extensive sequence, followed by a simple melodic fragment centered on Do and So using mostly stepwise motion. (Note: I try to use solfege syllables routinely but also pitch names. Because of the non-scale tone of Eb at the opening of the refrain, I would use pitch names rather than solfege syllables, unless you routinely spend a lot of time in solfege, in which case, the singers will feel at home there.)

Figure 1

D
T
L
S
F
M
R
D
T
L
S

Week 2

1. Begin to work the text of each stanza into a meter. Use only speech at first, insisting immediately on "tall" vowels and crisp consonants. No droning allowed! For now at least, set your metronome at $\text{♩} = c. 80$ to 84 rather than 108 - 112 as indicated in the score.

Why? Working without the melody focuses attention on the text. Choral speech, which demands a more vigorous production than droning or mumbling, results in a vocal warmup which uses most of the range. Also, the absence of melody forces singers to listen to themselves on the basis of text only. Is the way they are saying the words something worth listening to, or could anybody with or without choir training speak it just as well?

2. Once again using a solfege ladder, begin to outline the melody of the stanza. You will note and point out that measures 5 - 8 use mostly stepwise motion between Do (middle F) and both upper and lower So. Reinforce this by a visual aid of the actual staff with the melody, either using their own copies of the score (for non music reading adults and youth) or with the addition of a "unison eye"¹ visual aid such as the overhead projector (for children).

Why? We must always work toward music literacy! It isn't enough to teach music by rote. "Just play it again" is commonly heard from adult choirs full of people who have not been successful in discovering the joy of achieving this exceedingly logical language for themselves. Be a part of building the skills of a new generation of amateur musicians who are readers.

Week 3

1. Spend time this week on the activity page for the children.

Why? It connects works in the life of Christ and his followers with each verse of the poetry.

2. Decide with the choir where a breath may or may not be appropriate and where "staggered" breathing is essential. Work through the dynamic markings.

Why? Enlisting the choristers (in particular youth and children) in musical and artistic discovery and decision making is a great gift to them.

Week 4

1. Copy the coda (beginning ms. 72) onto a visual aid of some sort.² We often call a coda "the big finish." That is certainly an apt description in this case! Depending upon your vocal resources, you will either teach Part II to your unison choir, or both parts to one or more groups. Note the harmony in Part I is once again in sequence and in stepwise motion. Leave out the accompaniment at this point, as you have done throughout the learning thus far.

Why? The accompaniment, especially in "big finish" sections, can clutter and hide the voices. Save it for a treat once the parts are secure.

2. Play the accompaniment from where the voices enter in measure 4, through measure 25. Help the singers discover that the accompaniment has little to do with their part!

Chorister's Page

Biblical and Modern Heroes

I. Link up a Biblical character with each of the three stanzas of this text.

STANZA 1 - A person in the Bible who remembered to look at and delight in the beauties and wonders of the world.

STANZA 2 - A person in the Bible who tried to know God's will and held fast to that which was right when the "face of wrong" was there.

STANZA 3 - A person in the Bible who, though in danger, walked in peace and built courage in the face of trouble.

II. Link up an historic or modern day character with each of the three stanzas of this text.

STANZA 1 - A person who remembered to look at and delight in the beauties and wonders of the world.

STANZA 2 - A person who tried to know God's will and held fast to that which was right when the "face of wrong" was there.

STANZA 3 - A person though in danger, walked in peace and built courage in the face of trouble.

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Why? Enjoy the accompaniment standing on its own. Singers will be challenged to maintain their independence with this very real accompaniment - no doubling of their parts here!

3. Now combine the voices with the accompaniment. You will probably need a fifth week for the whole thing to "set" or "gel." Week 5 will then be spent for just that, and for working on the hymns which will no doubt be carefully chosen to fit

with the concept of a living faith, i.e., "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah."

¹ *Helen Kemp's term for a visual aid in which all the choristers look at the same thing together, with the teacher guiding the way. The logical next step is to find the same place in one's individual score.*

² *Overhead transparencies which are intended for use in photocopyers are a terrific help here.*