

As one of America's most prominent youth and adult choir clinicians, John Yarrington is uniquely qualified to evaluate and teach choral music to young people and young adults. Dr. Yarrington has authored two books on youth choir techniques. Currently he is Director of Music and the Arts at Pulaski Heights United Methodist Church in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Plans and Suggestions for Teaching Margaret Tucker's "A German Christmas" CGA-595 by John Yarrington

Carol: "... songs with a religious impulse that are simple, hilarious, popular and modern." (Percy Dearmer, Preface to *Oxford Book of Carols*.) Erik Routley, in *The English Carol* (London: Herbert Jenkins) points out "It is not, of course, to be supposed that these medieval carols were designed to be danced to. The most we can say is that they take their form from the form that developed through dancing, and that they shared it with the traditional processional dances."

A Common Ancestry

These carols share a common history whose style is graceful, dance-like and lively. Most are in a large three-part form (ABA) with regular four measure phrases. An upbeat or anacrusic rhythmic impetus pervades and, for each carol, a sense of moving forward, across-the-bar-line is crucial. Unaccented second syllables of words like KEEP-ing ("watch are KEEP-ing") or SLEEP-ing ("o'er the babe so gently SLEEP-ing") enhance the style.

Rehearsal Strategies

Use a mixture of approaches to make rehearsals interesting and productive:

- Speak the text in a light mid-voice, listening for and enjoying word shapes. This is a chance to practice consonant articulation but always with a sense of phrasing and musicality.
- Sing the melody on a neutral syllable with attention to color, mood, dynamic and articulation. Generally speaking, shorter notes have less weight than longer notes, particularly in this style. This articulation enhances the dance-like, upbeat character of the tunes.
- Work in small segments, a stanza or section at a time. Begin with SA, then add T, then B. Try various combinations of voices but move quickly and know where you are going.
- Begin at the end and work backwards in sections.
- Mix your approach: some people sing words, while others sing on a neutral syllable. Everyone may speak while the music is played.
- Form provides a framework for learning and memory. Each of the carols has the form listed beside the title, "A" designating the first phrase, etc.

g) Phrasing is crucial. Help singers move toward a destination, letting the bar lines organize but not dictate the movement of the music. Avoid plodding from one note to the next by giving attention to phrasing, phrase shape, phrase ending, and phrase destinations. Sensitivity to phrasing enables the music to come to life.

h) The "Three R's" are: Review, Review, Review in a creative, interesting, and systematic way.

Conductor Preparation

From the first exposure to these pieces, demand more than the right notes, but notes in the right place, with appropriate color, sound, dynamic, articulation and inflection. (Sound familiar?) These important musical factors cannot be "added" at a later date but must be part of the initial approach.

A good rule of thumb is: "have the score in your head, and your head out of the score." This discipline frees the conductor to listen and react quickly to what is heard.

Homework assignment for conductors:

- Sing these tunes to yourself, listening to the natural rise and fall of words and the shape of phrases. Decide where you want the choir to phrase and mark these spots.
- Develop for yourself, by singing the tunes aloud, a sense of their color, mood, shape, and articulation. Your best teaching tool is still your own modeling of the sound/shape/articulation/color/mood/ you want.
- Isolate trouble spots. For instance, at the double "ll" of the word "still," the choir is most likely to move to the "ll" too quickly instead of staying on the vowel. A vocalize is provided to help this problem. Look for *divisi* choral places, unusual rhythmic or melodic patterns and be prepared to deal effectively with them. Anticipate trouble, but take what you get "for free."
- Develop your own warm-ups drawn from material in the carols.

A Rehearsal Plan

Week I

STILL, STILL A(11-17) B (18-23) B (23-26) A (27-34)

As an introduction, speak briefly about carols in general. Sing a familiar carol or two as prelude to the rehearsal.

Try this warm-up:



Stih-ih(II), stih-ih(II), stih(II) Stih - II

Ask everyone to sing the melody only; encourage a light, falsetto-like sound, and encourage shaping of words the first time through. (KEEP-ing, SLEEP-ing). Practice only the melody and only stanza one today.

O COME, LITTLE CHILDREN A(56-59) A(60-63) B(64-67) C(68-71)

Model speaking the text lightly, mid-voice vocal range, with an up-beat spirit. Shorter notes have less weight than longer ones. Ask the choir to do this with you, while the accompanist lightly plays the melody only.

Everyone sings the melody on the neutral syllable “doom” with the following as model:



TO US IN BETHLEHEM A(90-93) A(94-97) B(98-101)
C(102-105) C(106-109)

Everyone sing the melody on the neutral syllable “loo” with a gentle, lyric quality, like a cradle song.

RING BELLS A(123-126) A(127-130) B(131-134) C(135-138) A(139-142) A(143-146)

TB sing at the beginning imitating the sound of small bells and going immediately to the “ng” sound of “ring” and “ling.” Establish an ostinato over which the SA part joins, the women also go immediately to the “ng” sound with light, quick-tongue articulation of the sixteenth on “ring-a-ling-a-ling.”

At ms. 131, SATB sing, more legato, on the neutral syllable “loo” as a contrast to the A section. Ms. 139 is the return.

O THOU JOYFUL DAY A(152-155) A(156-159) B(160-163) C(164-167)

Everyone learns the melody on “loo.” Sing like a string quartet in a light, energetic, precise manner. Everyone change to “pahm” at ms. 160 and to “doom” at ms. 164 for variation in articulation.

The melodies are central to this collection and you have introduced them all quickly and in the style, color, mood, articulation, and phrasing you wish them sung.

Week II

STILL, STILL

Use the falsetto warm-up again.

SA sings text and melody, then add T, then B. All together sing stanza 1.

Stanza 2 (ms. 43): Ask S to sing words, A sings “doo.” SA change to “ah” (ms. 47) and continue. Repeat this segment, adding T at ms. 43 on text with B on “doo.”

O COME, LITTLE CHILDREN

TB begins, singing tune and text. SA continues, ms. 60. SA sings at ms. 64 to the end. Then, add T and B.

TO US . . .

Sopranos only, begin with melody on “loo.” Add B, encourage them to be musically sensitive, singing their line in support of the melody. Don’t let them plod. Add A, then add T. Move quickly when you are practicing only one or two parts at a time. Avoid talking too much and don’t allow singers to start talking. Help them achieve not only correct pitches, but character, mood, articulation, etc.

Ms. 98: Secure SSA pitches, tuning and balance, then add TB. The “refrain” is “Ei-a,” representing a crooning,

rocking, cradle song. Notice the “Decresc.” before ms. 106. Ms. 106-109 is an echo of 102-105.

RING BELLS

Begin as in the first week. The sound should be bell-like, playful, fun. At ms. 131, encourage a more legato articulation to contrast with the first section. The shaping of words is crucial: WIN-ter, EN-ter, GLAD-ness, SAD-ness. The goal is to *come back* from the unaccented syllable, not to accent the first one. Saying the words in a graceful, speech rhythm, then singing them is a good way to achieve this important musical concept.

O THOU . . .

All sing melody on “doom.” All sing SATB on “doom.” Everyone speaks the text, listening for and loving those important words: JOYFUL, BLESSED, PROCLAIM. The phrase structure is as follows:

2 + 2 + 4 (152-153) (154-155) (156-159)
2 + 2 + 4 (160-161) (162-163) (164-167)

SA sing on stanza 2 (ms. 168), then SB only. Add A to SB, then add T.

Week III

STILL, STILL

Concentrate on stanza 2 (ms. 43) for secure pitches. When the melody shifts to the men (ms. 47) make sure the lady’s “ah” doesn’t swamp the balance. Everyone must know where the melody is.

O COME . . .

This week, sing straight through, remembering upbeat articulation and importance of word shapes. (CHILD-ren, MAN-ger, etc.)

TO US . . .

Work backwards, starting with the “Ei-a” refrain (ms. 102). Have the women only sing at ms. 98, then add the men. Finally, sing from the beginning.

RING BELLS

This week, sing straight through, reminding singers of the importance of the “ng” sound and the imitation of bells. Perform it light and bouncy. Work for contrast between the A and B section.

O THOU . . .

Begin with stanza 2 (ms. 168) asking SB to sing. Then add AT, then ask the full chorus to sing. Go to the opening (ms. 152) with SA only singing, then add T and B.

Your individual circumstances, rehearsal time, and singers’ capabilities may dictate moving faster than this plan, or slower. If you begin with the melodies and secure the appropriate pitches, mood, color, articulation, etc., you can then proceed at the best pace for your group. Remember the three “R’s,” and, good luck.