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## Plans and Suggestions for Teaching David Cherwien's arrangement of

# "Maria Walks Amid the Thorn" CGA-597

by Sue Ellen Page

This haunting minor melody accompanies a text which uses the popular early Christian symbols of rose and thorn. These images have their roots in the poems of St. Ambrose (339 - 397 AD) also known as Ambrose<sup>1</sup> of Milan, where he was bishop. As Ambrose tells it,<sup>2</sup> the original rose had no thorns. Thorns appeared only after people populated the earth. The thorns were added to remind us of our sinful nature. According to Ambrose, Mary (in the German, "Maria") is exempt from original sin; therefore, she is called "a rose without thorns" and can walk among thorns without penalty. Roses have long been associated in Christian art with Christ: the red rose for his passion and the white rose for purity.<sup>3</sup>

Even though the tune is a simple one, I recommend this anthem for upper elementary and junior high choirs on the basis of the text: 1) it is full of imagery, difficult to understand by younger singers still in the concrete developmental stages; 2) it uses uncommon word patterns to accommodate the rhyme scheme. As stated in the first study plan of this series, I like to imagine my favorite lieder singer, Elly Ameling, the great Dutch soprano, interpreting a song I'm preparing to teach to children. If you haven't had the pleasure of hearing this consummate artist, do so. Listen to how she and other master singers of the song repertoire bring simple ideas to life with the subtlest of shadings. Children are capable of so much more sophisticated singing, or artistry, than we credit them! Have them experience just a taste of these artists by playing a particularly appealing *lied* for them, such as Schubert's *Seligkeit* or *An die Musik*.

Here are some places in "Maria Walks Amid the Thorn" in which to work towards this high standard:

- The opening phrase suggests the most legato line imaginable, (as in *An die Musik*) in contrast to the portamento bass line of the accompaniment. The melody must sail forward without any bumps, on lots and lots of supported air. Don't mistake "lots of air" for taking only one breath. The singers should breathe as often as necessary, but not in obvious places. Singers of all ages and voices often fail to give enough air to the tone. It sounds like they are stepping on it. Encourage the chest cavity to remain high as the air is used. An interesting phenomenon usually occurs when the singer gives

more supported air to the tone: since abdominal support has increased, there is better breath control, which leads to more air available and fewer breaths necessary to sing the phrase!

- In measures 10 - 13, make certain to cite the use of the device known as "sequence." This particular example is a simple one to see, hear, and sing. Encourage the singers to think "horizontally" rather than vertically in their interpretation of this passage.

- In the Latin phrase *Kyrie Eleison* (Lord have mercy) note the pronunciation "kee-dee-eh-leh-ee-sohn." (The flipped "r" in the first word is easy for young singers if they simply substitute a soft "d.") Of course, a "round sound" for each vowel is essential to a beautiful tone. The most carefully phrased sequence will fall short if the vowels are thin and spread. Work weekly with your singers on carefully formed, pear shaped vowels. (The pear is in the mouth "fat end" first.)

### A Lesson Plan

**Week 1** A) vocalize in the minor mode. Use g minor rather than f minor, since the child's voice generally "blooms" better there. Using a neutral vowel [a] or [u], and preferably matching voice to voice, not voice to piano, sing phrases from the song, not necessarily in order. B) Repeat phrases until you achieve the forward line you are looking for. *Listen! Don't sing with your choir!*

**Week 2** A) begin with a recap of the vocalises sung the previous week. B) Still without looking at the scores, introduce the text used on the repeated phrases, *Kyrie Eleison* and . . . "Jesus and Maria." As leader, continue to sing the remaining melody on the neutral vowel, so that the sequence of phrases is heard. C) Offer what Helen Kemp calls "unison eye" notation on these two repeating passages - an overhead transparency, large tagboard, etc.

**Week 3** A) Hand out scores. Ask the children to point to each pitch as you repeat exercises A and B from Week II. Try stopping on a random pitch and asking the choir to tell you the word at that place. Since you are singing on a neutral vowel, this will compel them to pay attention to the melody and its rhythm, not just follow the words. B) The children should now fit the full text to the tune, verse by verse. C) Discuss the text origins if you have not already done so.

**Week 4** Since from the earliest explorations of the song you have worked toward creating energy in the phrase (forward line), intonation should be no problem if the choir is well warmed up and thinking. A) This is the week to clean up any vowels which are heading east and west rather than north and south, to invite the children to participate in such artistic decisions as dynamics, and animation. B) Attend also to memory work, pointing out that the story is in narrative sequence. C) Send home or work together on the accompanying Chorister Activity Sheet.

<sup>1</sup>Ambrose is the author of several hymn texts in modern hymnals, such as "Savior of the Nations, Come" and "O Splendor of God's Glory Bright."

<sup>2</sup>*Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* by George Ferguson, Oxford University Press, New York.




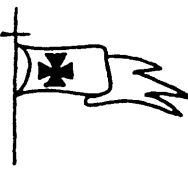






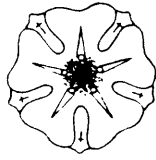


<sup>3</sup>ibid

**NOTE TO DIRECTORS:** This *Choristers Page* is a replacement for the one on page 46 of the September *LETTERS*. The one on page 46 should have been printed on page 78 of the October issue. I apologize for this editor's nightmare in which copy appears - not only on the wrong page - but in the wrong issue! While page 78 may be used as it is, you are encouraged to use "People Who Had a Living Faith" (page 46) instead. It is prepared by Joyce MacKichan Walker, Director of Religious Education at Nassau Presbyterian Church in Princeton.

... Donald F. Jensen

## Chorister's Page for "Maria Walks Amid the Thorn"

Here are some signs and symbols commonly used in Christian art, poetry and architecture. Try to match the symbol listed in the left column with the correct person, object, event, or idea in the right column.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1.                               | a. calls the faithful to worship  |
| 2.                               | b. the Last Supper  |
| 3.                               | c. Joseph, husband of Mary  |
| 4.                               | d. the first three letters of Jesus' name in Greek  |
| 5.  (clue found in Hebrews 6:19) | e. this surrounds divine people   |
| 6.                              | f. hope and steadfastness   |
| 7.                             | g. Christ, salvation and redemption   |
| 8.                             | h. the means of sustaining life   |
| 9. the color purple   | i. victory  |
| 10.                            | j. royalty  |
| 11.                            | k. songs and music in praise to God   |
| 12.                            | l. eternal life or resurrection   |
| 13.                            | m. the two Greek letters, X and P, which are the first two letters in the Greek word for Christ |
| 14.                            | n. Mary, Mother of Jesus (thornless rose)   |

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