

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 Walter L. Pelz's

"A Child Is Born Today" CGA-598

by John Yarrington

Originally a processional carol, Pelz suggests the following performance possibilities:

- 1) For a longer processional, singers may begin processing with the instrumental introduction.
- 2) For a shorter processional, singers may begin with stanza 1 (even shorter, SA may sing stanza 1 before processional begins).
- 3) Instrumentalists may be stationed in one location area, or may lead the choir procession, playing as they walk.
- 4) Processional is particularly effective in a dimly-lighted building (as in a candlelight processional).

Rehearsal Strategies

From the previous lesson plan, you know that I believe in taking things in segments, a stanza or a section at a time, speaking the text (lightly, mid-range, inflected), singing the tune (neutral syllable with color, shape, rise and fall melodically), mixing approaches (some sing, some speak), always calling attention to the form, the phrasing, and destination points. It is important for our singers to know where they are going so that bar lines organize but do not impede the flow of the music.

There is no substitute for beautiful, tall, well-shaped vowel sounds, crisp consonants, and attention to word shapes, particularly unaccented second syllables.



SCEP - (ter), SHEP - (herds), TID - (ings),



GLAD - (ness) MAR - (y) MO - (ther)

There are many words in these verses which are diphthongs, such as ch^{AH}-ee-ld (child), h^{AH}-EE (high), kr-^{AH}-oon (crown), re-^{NAH}-oon (reknown). The principle is that the primary vowel (the AH) receives the most time, followed by the vanishing vowel, and in some cases, a consonant. There are a number of words in which an American "R" needs to be omitted. A basic reference is the *Singer's Manual of English Diction*, (Marshall, G. Schirmer). Here are some basic rules:

- Never sing "R" before a consonant (rule remains in effect whether the "R" and the following consonant are within the same word or in adjoining words of the same phrase)
- Do not sing "R" before a pause (one exception)
- Always sing "R" before a vowel sound.

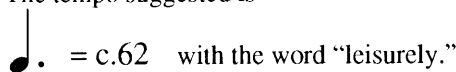
It is important to understand that "...when R is omitted, the syllable must have the same vowel sound that it would have had if the R had not been omitted." (P. 9, *Singer's Manual*) This applies to words like born, worthy, and scepter, to name a few. Have the singers cross out the "R" as follows:

~~B~~orn ~~W~~orthy ~~S~~cepter ~~h~~ear~~d~~ ~~t~~heir

Conductor Preparation

From the first, we seek not just the right notes, but notes in the right place, with appropriate color, sound, dynamic, articulation and inflection. These important musical factors cannot be "added" at a later date, but must be part of the overall approach.

1) Sing this tune to yourself, developing a sense of lift and lilt appropriate to its "carol" nature. Think dance...think upbeat. The tempo suggested is



2) As you sing (on a neutral syllable) begin to sense how the phrase structure works:

	Noel Ref.*	Noel Refrain
(19)	20 - 23	24 - 27
upbeat	4 +	4
	28 - 31	32 - 35
	4 +	4

* No - EH - (L), not No - EHL^LL; AN - (j^{el}) (not jul)


You will begin to develop a sense of destination toward the mid-point (ms. 23) and the end of the first section (ms. 27). The carol "refrain" is common in this type of music.

3) The rhythmic impetus is in 2, with shorter notes pulling toward longer ones, in a *poco staccato/poco tenuto* feeling, with lilt and grace as motivating factors, rather than speed. Be careful not to substitute speed for articulation. The rhythmic structure works as follows:




4) As you look over the stanzas, make an outline for yourself:


1: SA - unison

mp  *f*

2: S - melody, A - counter-melody

mp  *f*

3: T-melody, B - counter-melody

mf  *f*

4: SATB - ST has melody, AB has counter-melody

mf  *f*

5: SATB - the most difficult *f*

Coda *mp - p - pp*

5) Until the melody is well-learned with its inherent shape and color, you cannot make much headway. Here is a suggested rehearsal plan:

Week 1

Everyone learns the melody on a neutral syllable in the key of "F" (a step lower, which helps the boys particularly) - use doo, doot, pahm, or loo. If there are slurs (ms. 20, 24, 26, 30, 32, 33, 34) make use of them as you learn the tune on these neutral syllables.

Try snapping or tapping counts 1 and 4 as you sing, to gain the feeling of movement in 2 rather than 6.

Speak the text (mid-voice, lightly) with attention to tall vowels and unaccented second syllables. Remember, your vocal modeling is still your best teaching tool. Sing it to the choir as you want it sung, with all the color, inflection, mood, lilt, etc. you can muster.

Ask everyone to put their music down, and sing the melody from memory. At some point, move the key from F to the key of G.

Stanza 2: Who has the melody? Ask sopranos to sing the melody on doot or pahm. Ask altos to sing (learn) their part, also on a neutral syllable, then put these two together. Ask everyone to speak the text, but don't sing it.

Stanza 3: Who has the melody? Follow the procedure for stanza 2. It is important when not rehearsing the entire group to move quickly, give short, pertinent instruction (resist the temptation to talk). If you work with the women while the men sit too long with nothing to do, you are in trouble, and vice versa.

Week 2

Begin by singing short phrases, asking the group to echo. Go to the music (begin in F), asking them to sing the tune on a neutral syllable. Then add text. We are reviewing and shortening the process, but the tune must be well-learned. Some were not at the first introduction of the piece.


Stanza 2: Who has the melody? SA sing together on doot or pahm, then speak the text as musically as possible. Put the two (text and tune) together, singing.

Stanza 3: Who has the melody? Use the same procedure as in stanza 2 with the men.

Stanza 4: This is new this week. Who has the melody? ST sing the melody on doot. AB sing counter-melody on doot. Everyone speak text with inflection, beautiful vowel shapes and word shapes. Then, ask everyone to sing.

Week 3

Begin by asking everyone to sing the melody from memory. Try using a word sheet with important words listed as a memory aid:

A  Born ? high re - NAH - oon
most worthy of ? ? and a ?

Start at the beginning, singing stanzas 1, 2 and 3.

Stanza 4: ST sing text and tune, AB speak (lightly) only. Reverse the process.

Stanza 5: Who has the melody? Sopranos sing text and tune. Add the basses, then the altos, then the tenors. The altos, tenors and basses may need separate attention. Remember that stanza 5 is the most difficult and will require repeated rehearsal for security. One way to effect this is to have a sectional during rehearsal with women practicing separately from men, or ST working together and AB working together.

What remains is the Coda (ms. 111 to the end) and it is fairly straightforward. Practice the *divisi* women's texture at the very end for balance and security.

Summary

The tune is predominant in this piece. You may be tempted to move faster than you should, but, if you learn the tune well, the anthem will proceed easily. Your understanding of the nature of the tune and your vocal modeling is essential. Encourage singers to enjoy the beauty of words and word shapes. Don't let vowels sag, nor let consonants become soggy. Give yourself plenty of rehearsal time for this carol and it will be rewarding. □