

The Greatest Is Love

by Allen Pote

What takes precedent for you as you begin working on a new anthem with your choir? Right notes at the right time? Of course, but let's assume we can teach the choir the notes and the rhythms. What about the music contained inside those right notes at the right time?

It seems to me that all choral conductors focus on three major areas when creating choral music — tone, diction, and interpretation. Tone is of the essence, because without well-produced, beautiful sounds, the music is not what it could be. Without energized and crisp consonants and articulation, the message is often lost. And without a heartfelt interpretation, perhaps the communication between singer and listener is missing. But when all three areas are in place, the music making is surely blessed, and hopefully a spiritual and aesthetic experience can take place as the music is lifted to God as an offering.

It is, however, sometimes difficult to transcend technique to achieve this result, so it is essential to start with the nuts and bolts when preparing the choir. In this anthem, I would begin with the choir singing a legato “loo” on the vocal lines, paying particular attention to the rise and fall of the phrases.

A composer always faces decisions of how many markings to place in the music. Too many can make the music sound contrived, but too few can lead to a very bland, “no phrasing at all,” unless the conductor is adept in “recreating” the music. Hoping for the best, I have chosen the latter in this piece; but let me mention some things I might do in rehearsing this music.

Asking the singers to point out the climax of the phrases on the first two pages, I would hope that someone would suggest measure 14 for trebles and measure 15 for the men. Indeed, the music gains momentum dynamically and very subtly in tempo to that point and then relaxes. The same happens on phrases three and four.



Next follows a quiet section that builds through alternating men and women's registers to the words “love bears and believes, hopes, and endures all things.” If performing this anthem with small forces, you might consider assigning measures 28 through 35 to a treble solo and measures 35 through 39 to a tenor or baritone. The full choir would enter in unison on the fourth beat of measure 39.

In the next section — “love never ends” — though the phrases are short, it is very important to maintain an arching shape. Most choirs have a tendency to sing the first note of a phrase too strongly and not come down at the end of it. With your singers aware as to how all these phrases relate to each other, ask them to find the most intense climax of the entire piece. Most will probably say measures 57-59, while others may mention measure 78. Both are important, but whatever the interpretation, it is vital that the singers are “connected” as they are making this musical offering. (How often have we singers sung mightily on the hymns, only to discover at the end of six stanzas, we have no idea what we sang!)

Now, let me list a few final reminders.

Don't allow your choir to sing one volume from beginning to end.

Don't allow the men's part to become too heavy. This part (tenor, bass, or both) should work fairly well with most changing voices. However, the sound will be light. Mature voices should be careful not to strain on the high notes and perhaps should mix in some head register.

Do have your choir, with pencils in hand, underline important words, and important syllables in those words. Likewise, do not let them produce too much weight on words such as "the," "and," "for," "to," etc.

Do practice phrase endings by having the accompanist play only the vocal parts and the choir speaking only the consonant endings at the exact place they occur.

Don't have your accompanist play all the time and certainly don't allow "pounding out" the parts. Occasional unaccompanied rehearsing is tremendously rewarding.

Do encourage your choir to memorize the anthem. Not only will they internalize this important scripture, but they will give you as conductor their eyes and their faces.

With a true spirit of music ministry, provide your choir with the musical guidance they need, but always aim for the deeper meaning in what is transpiring. Thus abide these three - tone, diction, and interpretation. But the greatest of these is interpretation.

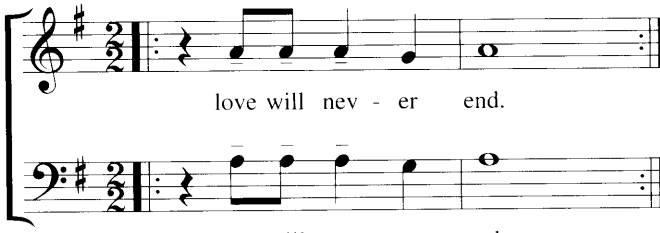
Allen Pote maintains an active schedule as a composer and workshop leader. As a church musician he has served churches in Texas, New York and Florida.

Editor's Note: There are several opportunities to devise warm-ups from this anthem that assist your choir in developing the tone and technic Allen mentions. Take a look at measures 60-61 as a pattern to focus on intonation when dealing with repeated tones, ascending and descending steps. Often when the melody repeats, singers fail to maintain pitch. When the repeated notes are followed by a descending step that then turns back up, the possibility of losing pitch is increased. Remind your singers to think of lifting the pitch when singing repeated notes. Tell the singers to think of placing the descending steps close together and the ascending steps farther apart.

MEASURES 60-61

(Repeat 1/2 step higher)

60



love will nev - er end.

love will nev - er end.

Another warmup could come from using measures 56-59 to introduce part singing (SATB) and to work on intonation. Use this fragment with the choir selecting a starting tone that will not have your young basses or baritones singing to low nor the sopranos singing to high. For example:

MEASURES 56-59

56



But as for love, _____

But as for love, _____