

Background

My program, “A Night of Movements,” delves into the various definitions and concepts surrounding “movement.” Initially conceived as a program for emotional movement, I felt that this lens was too shallow to construct a full program, with a decent amount of contrast between works. Essentially, only focusing on the contemplative notion of “movement” would box me into picking primarily slower tear-jerking pieces; though I included these, I also broadened my concept of the idea of movement, allowing me more freedom in developing a full program.

In order to fully develop each definition of “movement”, each ensemble has a unique “movement” topic of focus, around which the content of their repertoire revolves; however, the repertoire is still varied enough to diversify the students’ musical experiences within each performing group. The Chamber Choir (“Espresso Ensemble”) focuses on moving the heart, the Advanced Treble Choir (“Decaf Descant”) represents movement in nature, the Beginning SAB Choir (“Veranda Voices”) performs movements of life, and the Auditioned Mixed Choir (“Pike Place Blended Choir”) explores movements over time. At the end, all of this culminates in a combined performance, subtitled “Movement of Soul;” this piece is intended to compile the musical and emotional experiences of the audience in a hyper-cathartic musical experience.

As a disclaimer, this program would likely be fairly difficult to execute. However, as I’ll describe below, I did my best to choose repertoire for each group with varied levels of difficulty, which would allow me to dig into the challenge piece(s) for each group, while knowing the other songs will turn out alright. That being said, this isn’t a “first year teacher” concert; I would only attempt to execute this after I’ve had enough experience to be certain that my students could pull this off; I’d also spend a few years developing some of the skills necessary – especially for the advanced ensembles – to bring this to fruition.

“Espresso Ensemble” Chamber Choir – “Movements of Heart”

“I’m Gonna Sing ‘Til The Spirit Moves In My Heart” by Moses Hogan serves to set the tone of “movement,” in a variety of ways. To start, it thematically discusses the movement of the heart by the Holy Spirit; removing the religious component, this is the subtheme for the chamber group. More broadly, however, it represents the overarching notion of the entire program – the students, in every ensemble, will sing until the spirit moves them (and the audience, too). In theory, this would happen in the final piece of the program. This is the ensemble’s challenge piece and would push the students due to the complexity and independence of each part. It would also demand careful attention to style, as Hogan’s spiritual writing is incredibly nuanced.

“All Creatures Now” by John Bennet is the easier piece for this group; as the top ensemble in the program, students should be fairly confident in their ability to sing diatonic parts independently, making this Renaissance quintet fairly attainable. It also gives some historical diversity to the ensemble’s selection. Thematically, the piece represents merriment of the hearts of all people and animals in nature (giving a hint of foreshadowing for the treble group), and acts as a nice follow up to the Hogan; the ensemble declares the intention to sing *for* the heart, then immediately begin to sing *from* and *of* the heart, representing the start of this musical endeavor.

“Earth Song” by Frank Ticheli continues this mission, and also continues the segue into movement of nature. This is also the “ballad” of the chamber ensemble and challenges the students slightly in their performance of crunchier chords and harmonies. “The torn heart cries out in pain” represents not only the heart of the earth, damaged by warfare and corruption, but the heart of humanity, which cries out through song. This negative movement of the heart is embodied through the dissonance of this piece, and is resolved through the “light of song,” as music – and this program – seek to heal the damaged heart.

“Decaf Descant” Advanced Treble Choir – “Movements of Nature”

“Winter Wind” by Brandon Williams brings about a sweeping thematic shift to depictions of nature, and the movement of various forces within. The wind represented by Williams’ setting of Shakespeare’s text serves to embody one of the most active of these forces, which is depicted both in the accompaniment and vocal part. As a two-part piece, this song should pedagogically be no problem for the advanced treble group, while allowing them to flex their rhythmic chops, as well as learn some lessons on polyrhythms. Realistically, I would not be worried about students learning this piece and would utilize this in warmups and cooldowns.

“Tundra” by Ola Gjeilo gives a brief moment of rest; the song itself seems to depict a still image of a vast “sacred expanse” of earth, represented by the still held out chords that dominate this song. This is then contrasted by the increase of movement illustrating the dancing clouds about the still land. This is another easier piece for an advanced group, which would challenge the students harmonically, similarly to “Earth Song” for the chamber singers. However, it would not require a lot of rehearsal time, allowing the following piece to receive its due attention. The majority of the work for this piece would be concentrated on the modulation and the end, as well as the tuning of some of the sustained chords; breath management could also be addressed.

“Barso Re” by A. H. Rahman (Arr. Ethan Sperry) is certainly the challenge piece, but it should be feasible; juxtaposition of it against the prior two selections would allow the ensemble to dedicate the majority of rehearsal time to this work. Thematically, it represents the natural forces of water; though it most directly depicts the rain, it creates an equivalent amount of imagery of flowing bodies of water, moving through their natural course. This piece also allows gives the singers some experience with diverse repertoire, as the other two English pieces, though representing different styles, do not do much in the way of cultural respect and inclusion.

“Veranda Voices” Beginning SAB Choir – “Movements of Life”

“Bonse Aba, a Traditional Zambian Folk Song (Arr. Victor C. Johnson), is a fairly simple culturally diverse piece for beginning singers. Originally translating to “All who sing with spirit have a right to be called children of God,” it is very celebratory in nature; this is compounded by the inclusion of driving rhythmic percussion. For the theme, this piece represents the physical movement of dance and communal jubilation. The parts are not too independent, allowing beginning students to start to learn to feel comfortable singing in harmony together, and in a different language as well – although the text is fairly straightforward and easily digestible.

“A Starry Night” by Mary Lynn Lightfoot continues in a similar vein with physical movement, although this contains aspects of the waltz style. This is represented through the imagery of movements in nature, specifically the heavens. In terms of student learning, this piece requires a bit more independence, as it includes more elements of canon. Similarly to “Bonse Aba,” this would be an easier piece, with the meter differences and polyphony taking the majority of the rehearsal time, while giving students another unique style to interact with. The meter also allows students to receive experience in the various ways music moves.

“An Die Musik” by Franz Schubert (Arr. Geoffrey Edwards) is the historical piece for this ensemble, and, due to the German, likely the challenge piece. This is also compounded by the presence of more difficult harmonies. However, due to the ease of teaching the other two selections for this ensemble, it should not be a problem for students to learn this work. Regarding movement, this song is an ode to music. Therefore, it represents the various different styles of music heard thus far, most of which originate from differing time periods and cultures, setting up a segue into the mixed choir’s time-based program portion. It also serves to celebrate the capacity of music to move the heart and soul – the bookend aspects of this program.

“Pike Place Blended Choir” Auditioned Mixed Ensemble – “Movements of Time”

“Wangol,” a Traditional Haitian piece (Arr. Sten Källman), though often merely used as a quota-hitting selection of culturally diverse repertoire, is a song embodying change. The end of the text translates to “the country is changing,” giving the program an element of societal progress, evoking the image of social movements, pushing for change in a country. This change is musically personified by the switch midway to an up-tempo groove, indicating the success of a given social movement. For an auditioned choir, this would serve as a warm-up piece; the parts are not incredibly independent, and the harmonies are fairly repetitive and simple to grasp. This would leave room for the next two more daunting selections.

“Only In Sleep” by Ēriks Ešēvalds pauses to reflect upon the passage of time. The speaker of the Teasdale poem looks back upon her life, remembering friends long gone. Various musical elements within this piece also evoke a sense of time moving forward, constantly and relentlessly. The chordal homophony will make this piece a bit easier, though the large number of splits will take time to rehearse. Though a large solo is written, this could be split up amongst a group of sopranos, in order to share the opportunity with multiple students. Intonation, tone, and breath management are all facets of singing which could be improved through this selection.

“Nyon Nyon” by Jake Runestad moves away from the reflective and into the innovative, as a quintessential representation of change over time. This would definitely be a challenge for students but could be fun to let them sink their teeth into. The piece strives to emulate Electronic Dance Music and draws upon the various sounds of the human voice. Thematically, this fits right in with movements of time, as it represents a shift in musical sound ideals and artistic mediums, especially after “Only In Sleep,” which is a fairly characteristic sound for a mixed choir, especially with the fully voiced chords and highly emotional subject matter.

All Ensembles – “Movements of Soul”

In culmination of all the previous subject matter and movements, “Meditation on Amazing Grace” by John Newton (Arr. Matthew Erpelding) provides the audience with a final opportunity to be moved emotionally – although plenty of chances have existed throughout the course of this program. This ties together all the themes, moving the heart through singing, as the chamber singers set out to do from the beginning, to representing the movement of this classic melody over time, as this modern rendition of the song adapts the melody in a unique and simple way, in order to draw out the maximum emotional movement of both the singers and listeners.

Pedagogically, this piece is not very hard, making it an ideal selection for every ensemble. SAB in voicing, there would not be an imbalance of voice parts due to the inclusion of the beginning SAB choir; in fact, this piece may ultimately have the most balanced ensemble, as all the low voices would join together on the baritone line to give it strength against the densely populated soprano and alto parts (assuming this district is fairly similar to other districts, with more upper voice singers than lower voices). This would also serve as an amazing opportunity for the beginning singers to sing in an integrated mixed formation with the more advanced members of the program, to model their singing after them and learn from and with their peers.

Finally, this piece has many opportunities for individual ensemble features – starting out with upper voices, the treble singers could be featured, with the SAB choir members being featured on another verse. The mixed choir members could be featured on a portion of a verse, on via layering of the repeated section, and the chamber singers could be given the opportunity to sing the aleatoric improvisations, giving them a unique role. I feel that this piece would serve as a great cornerstone to the concert, as it is ripe with the relevant thematic and pedagogical material to tie up the program, while giving all choral students a unique experience.