A Conductor’s Perspective of Selected Unaccompanied Works for Mixed Choir by Egil Hovland

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Egil Hovland is a contemporary Norwegian composer about whom very little is written in English and whose published materials are mostly in the Swedish language. However, Raymond Arnold O lien has written a dissertation on the larger choral/orchestral works of Hovland. O lien chose four of Hovland’s works to analyze; each is representative of different periods of Hovland’s compositional style evolution. Hovland’s has composed works for different combinations of instruments, organ, and accompanied mixed choir. Because he is church organist, many of his compositions are for liturgical use and based on scripture.

Hovland was born in 1924 in Fredrikstad, Norway, where he would eventually serve as organist for the Glemmen Church. His compositional studies began at the Oslo Conservatory in 1944. In 1949 he was appointed to the organist position at Glemmen, and he remained there until 1994. After attending the Conservatory, he continued his compositional studies with Bjarne Brustad, Vagn Holmboe, Aaron Copland, and Luigi Dallapiccola. Hovland also spent some time in France with the Benedictine Monks of Solesmes. His compositional style has evolved through the years beginning with late-Romantic nationalism, which was influenced by Hindemith, Stravinsky, and Bartók. This period was followed by neo-classicism and eventually led to experimentation with electronic and aleatoric techniques. His vast compositional output includes more than two hundred pieces for various instrumentation, soloists, and choir, of a mostly sacred nature.1

The works chosen for this discussion are the unaccompanied choral works for mixed voices that are easily obtainable to choral directors. The following works will be discussed in

further detail: “The Glory of the Father;” “Now Hail the Joyous Day;” “How Long, O Lord;” “Jerusalem;” “I Know of a Lovely Flower;” and “Karin Boye’s Evening Prayer.” These works will be presented chronologically coinciding with Hovland’s three periods of compositional style. The discussion of the pieces will include some analysis for conducting and performance, including performing forces. The performing forces will be categorized as a Volunteer Choir, School Choir (High School) or Collegiate Choir. A Volunteer Choir would consist of mostly non-music reading people, such as a church choir. A School Choir would be considered to have more music reading personnel and should be able to prepare some more difficult works. Collegiate Choir, provided it is an auditioned group, should be able to prepare most music at any difficulty level.

Hovland’s early works are marked by the influence of Stravinsky, Bartók, and Hindemith and the late-Romantic nationalistic style. It was during this part of his life that he wrote two of the selected pieces: “The Glory of the Father” (1957) and “Now Hail the Joyous Day” (1958). Both pieces are suitable for all the mentioned choirs and would make great pieces to be added to anyone’s repertoire. The harmonies are straightforward and diatonic. “The Glory of the Father” is written with a da capo ending giving it an ABA form, while “Now Hail the Joyous Day” is only one stanza and is through-composed.

In “The Glory of the Father,” Hovland composed the opening and closing statements in a chant-like style with no measures or meter; this is noted by Olien as the foundation of many of Hovland’s compositions and melodic lines.² Hovland pays special attention to the text in his works. For example, in the first line “The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us,” the word “dwelt” is the highest pitch giving that word emphasis in the phrase, and creating a climax to the

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² Raymond Olien, “Egil Hovland, four selected works” (DMA diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1982), 191.
In the next lines of text, Hovland’s addition of the tenors to the end of the phrase “Of the Father” and the basses to the text “full of grace and truth,” gives emphasis to those lines of text. This leads to the B section, which contains a standard four-part writing style. In measure 6, all parts cadence on the dominant of E Major (the tonic key), which Hovland then uses to build intensity of the piece through several chromatic chord progressions and his use of open fifths, B and F-sharp, at the cadence point of section B. This cadence ends the B section in B major. Using mediant relationships, a Romantic-era technique, Hovland transitions back to the original key of E major before returning to the da capo ending.

The second piece from this period “Now Hail the Joyous Day” is through-composed and uses the relative minor to create a contrasting section making three sections to the work. The first eight measures in the key of D major cadence on an F-sharp major chord leading to the middle section. The middle section in B minor starts in measure 9 and continues through the down beat of measure 22, which cadences on the tonic. In measures 23 through 26 the song returns to D major and ends with an “Amen” style cadence, typical of earlier hymn writing, of VI-IV-I.

The music of these two pieces illustrates the early compositional style of Hovland. He uses diatonic harmonies with little deviation from the tonic key. He also is showing a preference for a three-sectioned style of writing, with a contrasting middle section. Hovland uses a minor section in “Now Hail the Joyous Day,” and four-part writing in “The Glory of the Father,” to provide a contrast from the chant-like opening.

This early compositional style evolves into the next period of writing, which consists of Hovland’s experimental writings. Olien’s discusses four extended choral works that Hovland composed from 1967 to 1976. They are: Missa Vigilate, Op. 59 (1967); Missa Verbi, Op. 78.
(1973); *Missa Misericordiae, Op. 80* (1973); and *Kyrkans Eviga, Op. 82* (1976). The first three works were written for the Lutheran Church service and the last work uses sacred text but is not for a specific liturgical use.

The *Missa Vigilate* was written as an experimental piece that uses older mass parts with newer innovations. The work was commissioned by Knut Nystedt for a church service and included a mime dance to a passacaglia movement from Hovland’s *Elementa pro Organo, Op.52*. The mass was not well received as a liturgical work but later was performed for ABC theatre and television, which the audience enjoyed. The next experimental work that Hovland wrote was *Missa Verbi*, which is a mass of the word and traditional in structure. This mass includes the use of nine instruments, organ, liturgist, and congregation. *Missa Verbi* is a through-composed service and has been well received by worshipers in Norway. Two of the motets in this extended work were written with the same compositional techniques as “How Long, O Lord” and “Jerusalem.”

In “How Long, O Lord,” (1968) Hovland demonstrates these techniques as found in the motets of *Missa Verbi*, with close harmonies and cluster chords. The opening statement displays a typical compositional trait of Hovland, staggered entrances that introduce new tones to the cluster until all voices have entered. In “How Long, O Lord” the cluster happens in the bass and tenor parts while the alto and soprano parts have a melody decorated with major and minor seconds. With no indication of a traditional key signature, Hovland frequently used accidentals creating chromaticism and movement through the vocal lines. This composition has a slow tempo but contains rhythmically active lines giving it forward motion. The main text is usually

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3 Ibid., 12.  
4 Ibid., 59-60.  
5 Ibid., 101-111.
in one or two of the vocal parts, either the soprano/alto or the tenor/bass, with the other voices providing the accompaniment. In measure 29 there is a stretto-style entrance from high to low in the voices that leads to homophonic texture in measures 33 through 35. The overall texture of the work is dense with all voices active most of the time; from measures 36 through 41 he lightens the heaviness with a thinner voicing, but immediately returns to the same rhythmically active accompaniment for the melodic line. In the second half of the piece the lower voices begin with the same text and rhythms while the sopranos have the melody in a descant style. The soprano II part deviates from the rest of the parts in measure 43 and joins the soprano I descant in measure 44. The soprano II part then returns to the accompanying parts in measure 47. In measure 51 the basses obtain the melody until measure 55. The next few measures are a transition that moves the melody to the soprano part in measure 58. The final measures contain less rhythmic activity and diminuendo to the last cadence on an E minor triad. This piece would function well for a church service, but may prove to be difficult for the Volunteer Choir. However, it would be a great concert piece and could be a nice challenge for singers of School Choirs and Collegiate Choirs. The vocal lines overall have a narrow range and are well written providing an interesting line for singers. There are a number of dynamic contrasts that provide life and breathe to the work.

“Jerusalem” (1970) shows Hovland experimenting with chord clusters and atonal harmonies. Hovland opened this work with a staggered entrance of an open fifth in the bass and tenor line. The alto’s entrance provides the third of the chord but is soon disrupted by a neighbor tone. The lower three voices are used as the accompaniment repeating the text “Jerusalem” in polyphony. In measure 9 the sopranos enter with the syllabic chant-like melody on new text. As the tempo increases throughout the piece the emotions intensify and become more dramatic.
Measure 15 provides another chant-like staggered entrance in descending order, from sopranos to basses, which uses a limited number of pitches in all voice parts, those being B-flat, A-flat, and C-flat. These are also the opening pitches used in the first few measures. Hovland then returns to a metered homophonic section that is sung at octave unisons in all parts. In measure 21 he slowly expands the harmonies by dividing the sopranos, altos, and basses. Measures 24 and 25 provide the climax of the piece with a cadence that is a B major chord in the tenor and bass parts and a B minor triad in the sopranos and altos. This progresses to the same B major triad with a D minor triad in the upper voices. As Olien notes in his observations of Hovland’s extended choral works, the use of polytonality is common throughout Hovland’s compositions.\(^6\)

The final section of “Jerusalem” contains a writing style similar to the opening section with staggered entrances, but he varies the end by featuring a soprano soloist. “Jerusalem’s” final cluster chord illustrates the ambiguous tonality used throughout the entire piece. This work would be best suited for a Collegiate Choir because of the number of bi-tonal chords and dissonant passing notes.

Hovland’s later compositional aesthetic develops into an amalgamation of all his earlier techniques. The next two pieces, both from 1990, are very hymn-like in structure and would be quite easy for all choirs to perform. “I Know of a Lovely Flower” and “Karin Boye’s Evening Prayer” both have Swedish text and have been translated to English. Hovland provided program notes for each of these pieces.

“I Know of a Lovely Flower” is five stanzas based on the text of Svein Ellingsen (b.1929). Hovland notes that “this choral arrangement of the simple and luminous melody

\(^6\) Ibid., 191.
should be sung softly and quietly.” He provides three stanzas for the full choir and two for a small group in unison while the full choir provides a humming accompaniment. This piece is purely diatonic with a light and almost dance-like feel in 6/8.

The last piece, “Karin Boye’s Evening Prayer,” is based on text by Karin Boye (1900-1941). She was a Swedish writer and poet who was torn between personal satisfaction and societal expectations. She eventually took her own life. Hovland states in his program notes that “Boye brings together her personal confession and her deep longing for total surrender.”

Hovland provides three sections to this composition giving the piece an ABA form. Section A begins in G major and moves to an ambiguous key signature that never settles in one key. Hovland uses this compositional technique, in the B section, to show Boye’s conflict with her personal life and society. The reprise of section A gives the piece a definite ending and a conclusion. “Karin Boye’s Evening Prayer” provides a simply structured work that all choirs should add to their repertoire. This piece would make beautiful concert piece for School Choirs as well as meaningful service music for Volunteer Choirs.

Olien’s analysis of Hovland’s extended choral works revealed several techniques also used in his smaller motets, such as chant-based melodic lines, descant style vocal writing with static underlying harmonies, free tonal harmonies, tone clusters, and bi-tonal triads. He also mentions the use of biblical text mixed with freely written text. The last two pieces, “I Know of a Lovely Flower” and “Karin Boye’s Evening Prayer,” are based on free text of religious content.

The choral octavos discussed show various elements of what Olien had discovered in writing his dissertation. Hovland’s writing style is clearly illustrated through these selected

9 Olien, “Egil Hovland, four selected works,” 190-192.
pieces and show his progression from late Romantic to experimental and finally to an amalgamation of all styles. Overall, the discussed pieces should be performed and added to the repertoire of all choirs. While they may prove to be difficult for some choirs, the ending result once learned, would provide a growing and enriched musical experience for the singers.
