Putting the Pieces Together

An Honors Thesis (HONORS 499)

by

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Purpose of Thesis

Arranging a choral composition requires certain steps and considerations. Organization and concentration is required as with any project, including putting together a puzzle. Within this discussion, one will find the steps used by the author to accomplish such an endeavor. Also included are two completed arrangements by the author of the discussion. These completed arrangements demonstrate specific examples of the concepts. The examples also show the similarities between two-part and three-part choral arranging.

An arrangement of a choral composition is similar to putting together pieces of a puzzle. Through choral arranging class and choral arranging attempts, it has been determined that there are three steps that must be followed to complete the puzzle. The first step is to choose the piece with which the arranger would like to work. The arranger should have an idea of who will perform the piece and what it should sound like upon completion; consider the suitability of the piece for the group; and consider the group's traits. This will create the framework for the arrangement. The second step requires organization and consideration of specific musical elements such as melody, harmony, vocal texture, dynamics, and accompaniment. This step carves the pieces of the puzzle. The third step is refinement and performance. The arranger must return to the arrangement to correct voicing and chords until the desired effect is achieved. The refinement step ensures that the pieces fit together to complete the puzzle.

At the very beginning of the arranging process, an arranger usually has a musical selection in mind. This selection could be a favorite song or even a melodic solo line that inspires the writing. The arranger has an idea or concept of how specific parts or voicing must be written to achieve the desired effect or outcome.

Before arranging a musical work, a few items must be considered. What should the piece sound like upon completion? Who will be performing the completed piece and for what audience? Are there any copyright laws that must be confronted before arrangement begins? Once these questions are answered, the arranger may begin. Other questions may occur during the process of arranging, but can be dealt with accordingly. Such questions include how harmonic structures will affect the melody and how the dynamics can assist in

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this effect. It will become apparent to the arranger that each decision will affect or be affected by other decisions.

Once the arranger has considered these components, he must decide whether the musical literature will be appropriate for performance by the desired group. The arranger needs to consider the text and voicing suitability for the group (Ostrander 116). He also needs to investigate the community support for specific styles of music. Many schools tend to avoid sacred music while others prefer it. The attitudes of the community greatly affect the musical program and influence the students' beliefs and opinions (Roach 100). It is important to create a piece that the students will enjoy learning. It should also have educational value. A piece of music should have both aesthetic and conceptual value. It should develop specific learning within each domain of learning: cognitive, psychomotor, and affective.

To arrange a piece for a specific group, the arranger should study the group extensively. During observation, the arranger should focus on the vocal and reading abilities of the performers. He should identify strengths and weaknesses within the group to create an arrangement appropriate for the ensemble (Gordon 193). The arranger should know voice ranges, ability levels, and voice independence or the ability of a person to hold their own part with little to no assistance (Ostrander 115). This research will indicate to the arranger the ability of the group musically as well as the appropriateness of the selection for the group.

By answering the previous questions, the arranger can create a clearer picture of the finished project. The questions have narrowed the field of subjects, ranges, and abilities. The arranger must then focus on how the finished product should sound. Specific musical elements such as melody,

harmony, and dynamics create the foundation on which to build the arrangement. The harmony will either enhance or detract from the melody while dynamics will set the mood for the melody and text. Different combinations are created within an arranger's mind from the beginning of the project.

There are three traits of a group that will affect the arrangement. One consideration is the size of the group. Ensemble size will determine the style of the arrangement. A small ensemble may not have the vocal ability to perform an eight-part madrigal. Another consideration is sectional balance and the maturity of the voices. It may become necessary for the arranger to create multiple parts for sections. Some choirs have a large ratio of women to men. In this case, the arranger must balance the parts accordingly. If the voices are still in the early stages of maturation, an arrangement with a challenging tessitura or a piece in which one vocal part is constantly singing may be too exhausting vocally (Gordon 30).

According to Arthur Ostrander, author of Contemporary Choral Arranging, there are specific ranges for students and adults depending on their developmental level (4-5). Unfortunately, people develop at different rates and to varying vocal ability levels. The variety of the students' backgrounds, both environmental and academic, can affect the students' abilities. Each classroom can include a wide spectrum of vocal ranges. By studying the prospective group, the arranger can decide on the most appropriate voicing and ranges for the musical selection. Common ranges for middle school students, as presented by Roach in Complete Secondary Choral Music Guide, are shown in figure 1a (36). Figure 1b shows the vocal ranges for high school (44). Not all students have the vocal flexibility or training to sing all notes within a range. This is a situation which the arranger must consider when creating the

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arrangement. Balancing vocal parts is usually accomplished by combining all male voices into one part. This will greatly restrict the available range for the male vocal part. The tenors will be unable to explore their upper range while the basses will be unable to use their lower, rich tones (Ostrander 5). A compromise must be achieved. The combined range will be a compromise between a cambiata range and a junior high baritone range. This is shown in figure 1c.
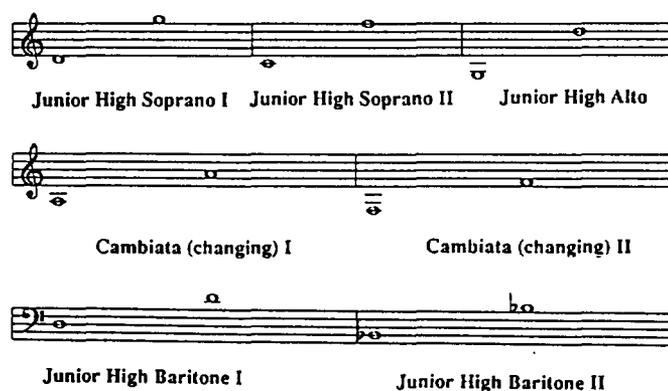
Figure 1a.   Junior High Vocal Ranges

Junior High Soprano I   Junior High Soprano II   Junior High Alto

Cambiata (changing) I   Cambiata (changing) II

Junior High Baritone I   Junior High Baritone II

Figure 1b.   Senior High Vocal Ranges

Senior High Soprano I   Senior High Soprano II

Senior High Alto I   Senior High Alto II

Senior High Tenor   Senior High Baritone   Senior High Bass
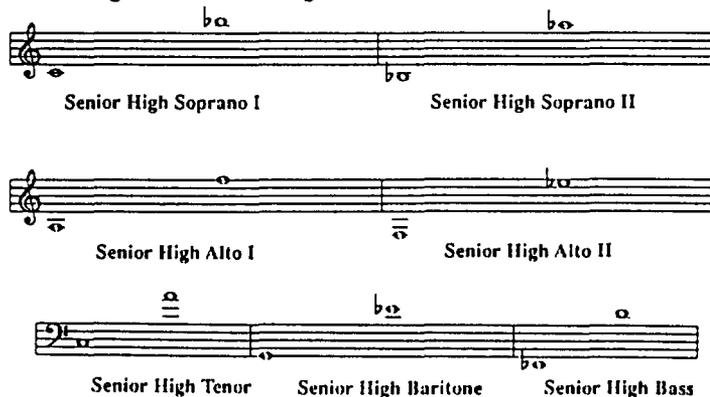
Figure 1c.   Compromised Vocal Range

Cambiata and Baritone combined

The prospective group will have varying musical skills along with their differing vocal maturity. Each student learns through a variety of methods and at their own pace. These musical abilities will affect the overall arrangement. Some students will be able to sight-sing a musical selection while other students will need extensive instruction. The degree of musical difficulty of the arrangement should be based on the students' abilities. Another factor that should be considered when determining the level of difficulty is the time available for instruction before the performance. Under short time constraints, it may be necessary to simplify the arrangement (Roach 99).

Through research, the arranger has created a framework on which to build the arrangement. The arranger now has a clear picture of the desired outcome as well as a group to assist in achieving that outcome. The next step an arranger must take is to focus on key concepts. Using the traits of the group and the arranger's music theory knowledge, the arranger needs to create melodic and harmonic lines which utilize the extent of the vocal ranges. The melody can be passed from one voice part to another if the ranges and the key of the arrangement allow. To keep the arrangement interesting, the texture should change approximately every verse. The arranger should be aware that too many changes within one arrangement can cause the piece to become fragmented and ruin the desired effect (Ostrander 118). In this manner it is similar to a partially completed puzzle. To complete the puzzle, each piece must be carefully carved to fit exactly. For the arranger to do this, he must examine the key of the piece, the melody, harmony, textural variation, dynamics, and accompaniment.

The first puzzle piece an arranger must carve is the key of the

arrangement. The key of the piece itself can affect the overall outcome. A musical selection may change keys one or more times depending on the length of the selection. The key change usually signifies a climax or the approaching end to an arrangement (Ostrander 119). The key change is dependent on the desired effect and the musical ability of the chosen group. If a key change will result in a stretch to the far end of the range spectrum, it is best to avoid changing keys. Causing the group to sing in an uncomfortable range will lessen the effectiveness of the piece (Roach 99).

The second puzzle piece to be carved is the melody. The arranger must decide which voice part will carry the melody and at what point in the arrangement the melody will be transferred. The transference of the melody will be directly affected by vocal ranges and any key changes. The arranger can decide to embellish or ornament a melody to create dramatic effects. One dramatic effect is word painting. Word painting is the use of a musical passage to reflect the meaning of a text (Leonard 135). This method need not be limited to the melody. It can also occur within the harmony or the third piece carved in the arrangement puzzle.

Harmonization of an idea creates a contrast within an arrangement. There are many ways for an arranger to harmonize an idea. Some of the ways are note-against-note, countermelodies, descant, and figuration. These methods can be found in any type of part arrangement regardless of whether it is two, three, or four part arranging (Ostrander 61-67). Figuration and note-against-note are the two methods utilized in the examples included in the appendices as well as in figures 2 (Note-against-note) and 3 (Figuration).

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Figure 2.   Note-against-note harmonization [27]

Figure 3.   Figuration harmonization

Note-against-note harmonization is the use of parallel rhythm patterns
and notation. The parts collectively form a portion of a chord or the complete
chord. Remaining portions of the chords can be filled in by the accompaniment
(Ostrander 60). Figuration harmonization utilizes fragmentary phrases or
ideas. This allows for key phrases and entrances to be emphasized (Ostrander
66).

Another way to emphasize entrances or key phrases is through texture
variation. Texture variation is the method of treating the melody in a
different manner. One of the methods of texture variation is the use of a
different harmony with the same melody. This includes the figuration of

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harmony and change in dynamics. The different harmony can either be within the same vocal part as previously written or it can occur in a different voice part (Stein 96). In Appendix A, the melody is transferred from one voice part to another. The harmony changes each time the melody is transferred. Compare measures 8-11 and measures 24-27. This is an example of texture variation.

The fourth puzzle piece which the arranger carves is the dynamics. Dynamics of an arrangement can assist the arranger in the balance of voicing. If a group has a large majority of sopranos and few men or altos, the arranger may choose to keep the sopranos at a moderate or soft dynamic. The high notes will carry better and be clearer than lower notes. The softer dynamics will enable the low notes to be heard. Dynamics can also assist in melody transference. If a melody is transferred to a lower voice, one option for the arranger is to soften the harmony. An example of this is found in figure 4 in which the basses have the melody.

Figure 4.   Melody transference with dynamic differentiation

The dynamics also create a contrast from one verse to another. The text can also affect the dynamic setting of the piece. The dynamics allow for emphasis of key words or ideas. They draw an emotional picture for the

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audience. Soft dynamics in higher voices might show an angelic or ethereal idea while the louder lower voices show strength.

Another piece of the arrangement to be carved out or planned is the accompaniment. There are many ways to create different effects within the accompaniment. A few of the more traditional methods are chord doubling, arpeggiation, rhythmic patterns, and counter-material (Ostrander pg. 46-49). The two methods utilized in the author's arrangements are chord doubling and arpeggiation. These can be found in figures 5 (Chord doubling) and 6a and b (Arpeggiation). Figure 6a is an example of simultaneous arpeggiation and 6b of successive arpeggiation (shown within the bass line).

Figure 5.   Chord doubling in accompaniment

Figure 6a.   Simultaneous arpeggiation in accompaniment

Figure 6b.   Successive arpeggiation in accompaniment

Chord doubling is an exact replica of vocal parts within the
accompaniment. This provides a simplistic approach as well as reinforcing
melodic and harmonic lines. The arpeggiation approach allows for melodic
support with a thicker sound. It also creates a stronger harmonic structure
for the voices (Ostrander 46). Arpeggiation can occur in different ways.
Simultaneous arpeggiation allows the chords to be rolled. Successive
arpeggiation creates an ascending or descending pattern of notes from a broken
chord (Westrup 42). Using these two methods, the accompaniment will be less
"cluttered" and more simplistic (Cacavas 64). The group's collective musical
ability will determine how the accompaniment is arranged, as well. For
example, to facilitate ease of learning it may be necessary for the
accompaniment to imitate the choral parts. Conventional hymn settings utilize
this technique (Ostrander 46).

As the arranger is creating the accompaniment, he should keep in mind
the major functions of the accompaniment. The accompaniment enhances the mood
and style of the text. It is used to create harmonic and tonal structures,
provide pitches or entrances, and reinforce rhythms or difficult voicing
(Ostrander 30). The previously mentioned functions can be used alone or in

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differing combinations to achieve the desired outcome. The accompaniment unifies the arrangement. While an arranger can utilize different methods, too many together can create confusion or fragmentation of thoughts. In this manner it is similar to texture variation (Ostrander 31).

With all these considerations and concepts established, the arranger is ready to piece together the puzzle. The arranger must use each concept to build the foundation of the arrangement. This done, the arranger can specify texture, dynamics, voicing, and accompaniment. With the arrangement written, he is now ready to test the piece. This is the time when music theory errors and vocal mistakes are discovered and must be rewritten. Although the rules of theory were written to be followed during musical creation, they can also be broken. To quote composer Andre Ernest Gretry, "Woe to the artist enslaved by the rules who does not dare yield to the flight of his genius." (73). If the arranger hears his arrangement with ideas that go against the rules, he should take careful consideration before he changes his arrangement.

The arranger has now reached the refinement step of the process. What may sound good in theory may not actually work in practice. The arranger may discover range difficulties or awkward intervals within a part. Should this happen, the arranger need not go back to square one. As with any experiment, portions of the process may need to be revised or repeated to ensure a specific outcome. Rarely does an arrangement emerge from the drawing board perfect the first few times. Outside criticism and advice provides a fresh perspective on an idea. Arrangers are similar to authors or editors. They may never be completely satisfied with an arrangement.

The arranger is now ready for the performance of his musical achievement. The piece is ready to be performed and brought to life. All the

considerations and hard work mingle together to create a moment of beauty. The notes, techniques, and concepts have been learned. It is now up to the creativity of the arranger to leave a lasting impression. The combinations created in the arranger's mind and set on paper are ready to be shared and expressed. After the performance, the arranger may have a stroke of genius to refine or perfect the arrangement. The arrangement may be performed and then revised in an infinite process.

Everything the arranger has undertaken has brought him to his desired goal. He has labored over an idea to create a finished product that is a close facsimile of the original in his mind. The arranger has focused his efforts on a specific musical piece and a specific group. In doing so, he has researched arrangement suitability for the group, the group's size, ranges, and musical abilities. Thus, he has created the framework of the puzzle on which to build the arrangement. The arranger then proceeded to use music theory knowledge to create desired textures within the melody and the harmony, dynamics, and accompaniment to produce a specific effect. This process was repeated through many trial and errors until he was satisfied. In this manner, the arranger carved out each piece of the puzzle. The arranger repeated the refinement step until he produced a finished product that reflects his many hours of careful work and consideration. The puzzle is now complete and all the pieces fit exactly as they should.

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Appendix A

Amazing Grace

Amazing Grace

Traditional Hymn
arr. Kimberly Bartling

years ... as the sun. ... We've

years ... as the sun. ... We've

years bright shin - ing as the sun. We've

no less days to sing God's praise then when we

no less days to sing God's praise then when we

no less days to sing God's praise then when we

Appendix B

What Child is This?

What Child is This?

Traditional Hymn
Arr. by Kimberly Bartling

1

lap————— is sleep — — ing? Whom
king————— to own————— him. The

an — — gels greet————— with an thems
King of King————— sal - va - tion

an — — gels greet————— with an thems
King of King————— sal - va - tion

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sweet———— while shep — — herds watch———— are keep -
brings———— let lov - - - ing hearts———— en - throne

sweet while shep - - herds watch———— are keep -
brings let lov - - - ing hearts———— en - throne

ing. This, this——————— is
him. Raise, raise——————— your

ing. This, this——————— is
him. Raise, raise——————— your

Christ the King whom shep - herds
voice on high. The shep an - gels

Christ the King whom shep - herds
voice on high. The shep an - gels

guard and an - gels sing.
sing their lul - a - bye.

guard and an - gels sing.
sing their lul - a - bye.

Haste,   haste———— to   bring   him
Joy,   joy———— for   Christ   is

Haste,   haste———— to   bring   him
Joy,   joy———— for   Christ   is

decres. poco a poco

laud,———— the   Babe———— the   son———— of
born,———— the   Babe———— the   son———— of

decres. poco a poco

laud,———— the   Babe the   son———— of
born,———— the   Babe the   son———— of

decres. poco a poco

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Ma - - - - ry.
Ma - - - - ry.
the

Ma - - - ry.
Ma - - - ry.
the

Babe ——— the son ——— of Ma - ry.

Babe the son ——— of Ma - ry.