

CHORAL PUBLICATIONS: Standards, Suggestions, and Stravinsky

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THE GIST of this essay is simple, yet what it intends to accomplish and define is difficult. Many have spoken of standards in choral music, and the results have not always been in proportion to the admonitions. The line of demarcation between what has become acceptable and unacceptable choral music is a clear indication not only of the changing tastes of choirs and directors, but of their respective technical abilities as well.

Thus this question of standards involves not only the promotion-bombarded consumer, but anyone who has ever attempted a choral composition intending to stand a modest notch above the usual octavo.

My purpose in discussing several aspects of Stravinsky's choral art is not to insinuate that every choral piece performed in our schools and churches must be on a level with a choral work by Stravinsky. However, if as educators we are concerned with quality, let us not be hesitant to study the works of a unique musical imagination. Points of quality found in them can also be found, though in lesser degrees of course, in most well-conceived works designed for the choral media.

DESIGNED for the choral media—what does this imply? Still another question is, how well do most producers and consumers of choral music differentiate between *chorale* and *choral*. While the chorale style is certainly ideally suited for congregational or mass participation, it is by no means the ideal toward which choral singing or composition should strive. Viewed as an outgrowth of polyphony, choral singing implies a multiplicity of parts. The harmonic developments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have in many ways caused this essential multiplicity and individuality of parts to be slighted. From this it becomes apparent that much choral music published today is not well conceived or designed for the choral media.

A sense of multiplicity clearly carries with it the idea of separate or individual parts which, in order to be individual, demand contrast. Given a score satisfying these demands, the choral director can isolate contrasting lines, metric patterns, dynamics, treating each accordingly for a well-rounded performance. However, if the composer has failed to provide these contrasting elements, he has not satisfied the multiple demands or potentialities of the vocal ensemble.

In letting Stravinsky's approach to the choral art

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be our guide, examples will be drawn from the *Mass* (written for mixed chorus and double woodwind quintet in 1948) and *Les Noces* of 1917.

Of the two works, the *Mass* is more conventional and may be considered an ancestor of either Machaut or Dufay masses. Its severe and seemingly impersonal style is purposely undramatic, avoiding the theatrical gestures of much nineteenth century sacred music. Stravinsky seems to seek a link with the great religious music of the early Renaissance by striving for identification with a well-established and accepted style. Technically one can see a similarity between Stravinsky and the Netherlands' tradition in the use of imitative devices, chord spacing, first inversion triads separated by dissonant passing tones and the avoidance of marked dynamics. Cadences often appear with doubled root and third, omitting the fifth altogether, or doubled fifth, root, and third. (See rehearsal marks 4-5 in the Kyrie.) Besides these features is the easily overlooked form-building device of varying an interval's shape in repetitions. Such devices seldom appear in today's choral publications, yet they can be applied in various ways for a fresher choral sound.

Besides offering clues to original part writing and texture, the *Mass*' "Credo" and "Agnus Dei" provide unique examples of syllabic scansion in a homophonic style. Notated in two-four time with occasional interruptions of three-four—three-eight, the variety of rhythmic phrasing is astounding in its juxtaposition of simple rhythmic divisions. Of the "Credo's" first 29-syllable sentence, Stravinsky constructs two asymmetrical phrases of six and five measures; the first six measures, though equally divided, are also irregular through placement of a crucial rest. This subtle conflict between macro and micro rhythm seems a neglected art today. Without it, one of the most vital, life-giving sources of choral music dies. There are well-known items in today's choral repertory never departing from usual three-four divisions, or attempting to extend a phrase through rhythmic variations.

STRAVINSKY is often accused of faulty scansion and generally distorting language, be it English or Latin. One need only "correct" Stravinsky's scansions of Agnus DE-I to see how the rhythmic line loses its impetus. Latin texts conventionalized meanings leave the composer freedom for rhythmic play, and the Organum tradition permits flexibility in treating syllables. Similar allowances can be made in English as has been done in other languages. While composers

of choral music should be concerned with proper scansion, rhythmic insight should pardon breaches of metric propriety. Too much new choral music refuses to profit from its rightful historical inheritance.

The criticism often leveled at the *Mass* as being cold or impersonal is difficult to understand. If any sacred music is impersonal, it is the stylistic uniformity too often found in sacred music appearing today.

For our purposes one would doubt the benefits to be gleaned from the study of *Les Noces*. Nevertheless, without going into detail concerning compositional methodology, there are some striking observations which can be made. Many works appearing since *Les Noces* offer more variety in terms of vocal devices, yet none equal its unique percussive treatment of voices. Though it remains the most completely choral of all Stravinsky's choral works (the voices seldom rest for more than six measures), its basic techniques are simpler than those encountered in his sacred works.

General impressions apparent from even a precursory glance at the score are its continually changing meters, variety of accompaniment, and a contrast between solo singing and a larger ripieno group.

The matter of changing meters is shied away from by most choral conductors and singers, yet it is a fact of life which has been and will remain with contemporary music for some time. Even occasional changes seldom occur in octavo publication; if conductors and singers are to keep in touch with rhythmic aspects of newer music, some attempts must be made in this direction. If we do not, choral groups may well become automatons in three-four time. Few scores are as demanding in respect to meter changes as *Les Noces*, and it is not set up as an ideal, but simple changes are essential in octavo literature if we are to learn, feel, and appreciate rhythmic growth in group singing.

Many publications state that accompaniments are "optional," and their presence or absence is often so inconsequential that little or nothing is added to the total musical effect. On the other hand, Stravinsky pondered the accompaniment for *Les Noces* for ten years. Integration of accompaniment is an important aspect of choral composition, and a well defined "motive of accompaniment" (to quote Schoenberg) must not only throw voices into relief, but must provide contrast of musical materials. Furthermore, the

accompaniment is the ideal place for harmonic or rhythmic development.

However, it is *Les Noces'* vocal concertante principle which should be of great interest and value in formulating fresher approaches to choral writing. The exploitation of this principle, plus a keen regard for vocal timbres (even further developed in Stravinsky's most recent works) are clues to such an approach. Variety of texture in the bulk of octavo publications is so seldom heeded as to be almost non-existent. We have seemingly forgotten that the concertante-ripieno principle, taken for granted in instrumental literature, originated with our polychoral heritage.

While much of what has been said here may be criticized as impractical or Utopian, a diagnosis has been made; it is one of which many are aware. Examples cited are not to serve as models; they are intended rather to stir the musical imagination which alone can produce results.

THE MOST immediate lesson to be learned from the comparison of the *Mass* and *Les Noces*, is the distinction Stravinsky draws between sacred and secular choral music. Technically this distinction is preserved by different methods of treating polyphony, homophony, and rhythm. Composers of the past have respected these traditional distinctions, emphasizing a difference in creative conception (Stravinsky asserts one supposedly commits fewer musical sins in church) and the mood intended for the listener. Consequently, different aesthetic values function in sacred and secular music, each possessing its own stylistic mannerisms. Today, it is this maturity of manners which most choral music lacks.

Composers and performers alike are responsible for a solution. As the composer must furnish the materials, so must the performer possess a taste for quality. The sameness of impression for which choral music strives today, seemingly demands the subjugation of musical personality. Equally important therefore, in this discussion, are the insight and criteria which hopefully have been provided to help judge characteristics of choral music. Mass music programs demand more than quantity. What constitutes musical progress, as expressed in terms of style, is debatable; standards of quality and taste are not.

Dates to Remember

| MEETING | DATES | PLACE | HEADQUARTERS |
|--|------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|
| MENC Southwestern Division | January 12-15, 1963 | St. Louis, Mo. | Chase-Park Plaza |
| MENC Eastern Division | March 1-4, 1963 | Atlantic City, N.J. | Chalfonte-Haddon Hall |
| MENC Southern Division | March 20-23, 1963 | Charleston, W. Va. | Charleston Civic Center |
| MENC North Central Division | March 29-April 1, 1963 | Minneapolis, Minn. | Radisson Hotel |
| MENC Western Division | April 7-10, 1963 | Bakersfield, Calif. | Bakersfield Civic Auditorium |
| MENC Northwest Division | April 17-20, 1963 | Casper, Wyo. | Morgan Junior High School |
| International Society for Music Education | July 3-10, 1963 | Tokyo, Japan | Metropolitan Festival Hall |
| Interim Meeting of Board of Directors and State Presidents of the MENC | August 19-22, 1963 | Washington, D.C. | NEA Building |
| 1964 MENC Convention | March 11-17, 1964 | Philadelphia, Pa. | Sheraton Hotel |