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THE *Choral Singer's* COMPANION



Ronald Corp

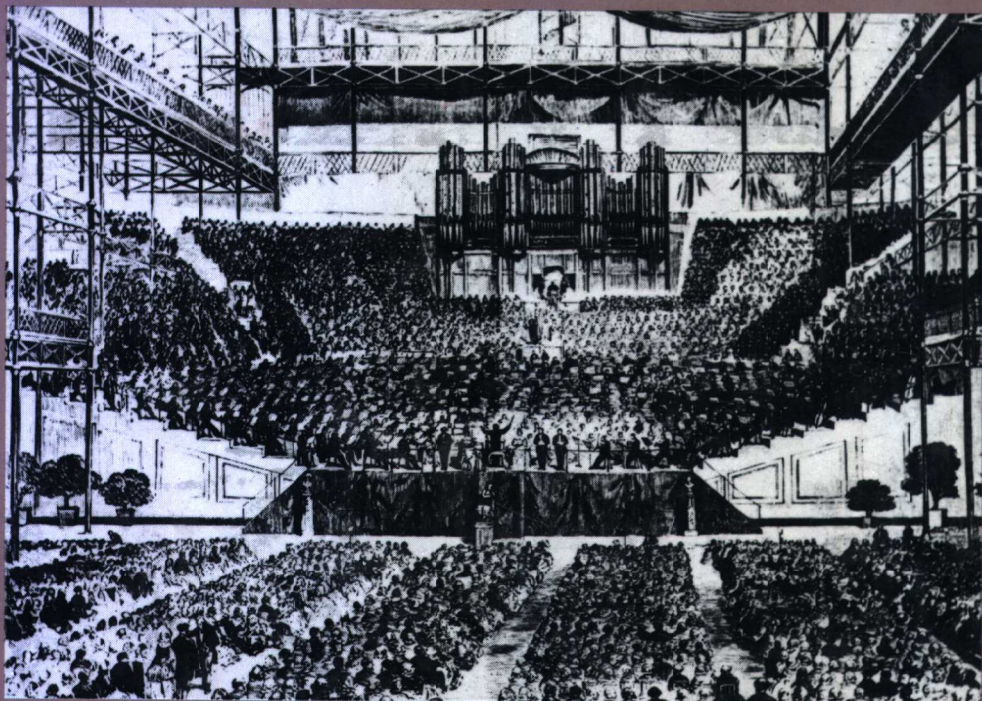
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THE
Choral Singer's
Companion



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by **RODNEY D. SORENSEN**, Director of the Choral Program, Bayside
Academy of Music, an Educational Option Program of the New York
City Board of Education.

The translation of the *Dies Irae* by William Mann
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Foreword

My first reaction to this book was to wonder why nobody had thought of writing it before; after all singing in choirs has been a social pastime for so long and is at a height of popularity just at the moment. For the singer, belonging to a choir is the perfect amalgam of individual expression and corporate responsibility, wearying rehearsals and thrillingly invigorating performances. However, every singer knows the moment when he or she would like to be just that bit better, and this is the book to guide and help. For the choral director this book will be the answer to many prayers: from helping to compile programmes for the next season through to exacting the last ounce of effort in the concert itself.

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Acknowledgements

A number of people have offered valuable help in the writing of this book. In particular William Mann has made available his excellent translation of the *Dies irae* from the requiem mass, and Barbara Alden has written the section on singing (pages 13–18)—she has years of teaching experience behind her and I am pleased to be able to include her practical guide. I am grateful also to Sue Harris for the lists of addresses and the book list.

Jane Burwell gave immense help and support with typing—but more than that, she scrutinized and questioned, and forced me to make order out of untidy scribblings. I hope the book will prove a source of inspiration to all involved in choral music-making.

Introduction

In this one volume I have tried to collect together all the information sought by the many thousands of people who sing in choirs. The material has been collected with choristers in mind, and particularly those who are members of larger choirs. It is inevitable that the accent is on the larger choral works (Handel's oratorios, Haydn's masses, and many nineteenth and twentieth-century choral classics) but works for small choir and chamber choir are also included. It is also inevitable that very small works such as madrigals and anthems should be generally overlooked except in passing.

The book should provide a useful companion to singers, conductors, and to committee members who would like to have a say in programme building.

It is a book you could spend hours dipping into. But to make things easier I have divided it into sections, as listed below. Information is scattered over the various sections of the book, and it is worth looking from section to section. For example, a certain amount of information is given about Berlioz's *Requiem* under Berlioz in the composer section, but more information can be found under *Grande Messe des morts* under the works section, and you can also look up requiem under terms to find out exactly what a requiem is. Further to this, the text of the requiem mass, and its English translation, can be found on page 155.

The division of the book into sections is clear-cut, but the contents of each section needs some explanation. There is of course a slight personal bias in the selection of works and composers selected and the amount of space devoted to them. I make no apology for devoting as much space to Stanford as to Mozart. I do not suggest that they are of equal merit, but I do insist that Stanford, as a neglected British composer, demands full coverage and exposure in these pages, while Mozart does not.

I have chosen the titles of works which I feel are most acceptable and generally known. I assume the reader will look under *Les Noces* for Stravinsky's ballet *The Wedding* although it may be difficult to justify the persistent use of its French title outside France. I have not provided cross-references to these.

Cross-referencing has been kept to a bare minimum. I hope that the reader will automatically look from section to section. Works mentioned

under *Composers* marked thus* are dealt with more fully in the *Works* section. Composers marked thus* in the *Works* section have their own entry under *Composers*. If you hear that you are going to perform Vaughan William's *Hodie* next Christmas, you will find it under the works section, and then can look up Vaughan Williams to put the work in a wider context. You will see then that two extracts from it appear in *Carols for Choirs* Book 1 – and you may have sung these already.

There is no attempt to describe the music itself, and I have not graded pieces according to their difficulty. What seems difficult to one choir will appear easy to another. I have, however, indicated if a work is suitable only for the larger and more proficient choirs.

Publishers of works have not been given, partly because this information goes out of date, and also because there are often different publications of the same work. Some vocal music is on sale from a publisher, but the orchestral parts may be on hire only – you must check. Unfortunately some works are available in vocal form from one publisher, while the orchestral parts may come from another. There was no way of dealing with all of these problems.

The book is divided broadly thus:

Practical

In this section there are guides to singing, sight reading, conducting, running a choir, planning programmes and obtaining music. Practical guides to singing and conducting are difficult to communicate through the written word and require demonstration and personal tuition. Guides to running a choir can only be non-specific – circumstances from one choral society to another will be so different as to make certain remarks irrelevant.

Composers

A basic selection of over one hundred and forty composers has been made. Of course some composers have been omitted, but I hope I have not left out any major composer of choral music. Some composers who wrote relatively little for choir are, however, included, because what they did write seemed to me to be significant. I have discussed only their choral output, making reference to their other music only where it is relevant.

Works

Works with titles such as *The Dream of Gerontius* suggested themselves for inclusion immediately, and there are over a hundred and forty titles listed, but there are countless other works known only as x's requiem or y's mass. I have created individual entries for the best known in this category – for example *Requiem* (Mozart) and *Mass in B minor* (Bach). Most dictionaries of music fail to include works of this type unless they have a nickname. Haydn's masses are included in musical dictionaries (they all

have titles of some sort) while Mozart's are not (only the '*Coronation*' mass or perhaps the '*Credo*' mass have nicknames). I have also indicated orchestration (see below).

Terms

I have tried to explain technical or musical terms which may pertain to choral music. I have not attempted to include everything that a general music dictionary would, but it seemed vital to elucidate on common terms such as oratorio, mass, requiem, cantata as well as explaining Tonic Sol-fa, and things connected with the liturgy – particularly as choirs spend so much time singing sacred texts.

Texts

It is not always easy to track down the text and a translation of the religious works most often performed by choirs, unless you know exactly where to look. I have provided the most obvious texts in this section. These should be consulted with care – there are many variations in composers' settings of these standard words.

Lists

The various lists of works will provide useful information as a starting point for programme building. These lists are in no way complete, and some works in one section have not been duplicated in another although they have a claim to be there (Christmas music with string accompaniment, for example, may be found under one category only). I have provided lists of works according to their orchestration and also a list of twentieth-century choral works by British composers in the hope of bringing to attention the vast amount of excellent music which is being composed for voices at the moment. There is also a short bibliography and a list of useful addresses.

Orchestration

The orchestral and choral requirements for each work discussed in the works section is indicated by a series of letters and numbers. The soloists are listed first; S (soprano) Ms (mezzo-soprano), A (alto) T (tenor), Bar (baritone) and B (bass), followed by the choral forces required. The orchestration follows a basic pattern – the woodwind are listed first – flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoon, most often in pairs and represented by the figures 2.2.2.2. If an extra member of the woodwind family is required – usually piccolo, cor anglais, bass clarinet or double bassoon – the number of woodwind becomes 2.picc.2.corA.2.bcl.2.dbn. If the extra instrument merely doubles with one of its relatives the = sign shows the doubling. 3(111 = picc).3(111 = corA).3(111 = bcl).3(111 = dbn) means three flute players, the third doubling on piccolo, three oboes with the third doubling cor anglais, three clarinets with the third player doubling

bass clarinet, and three bassoons with the third doubling on double bassoon. If the orchestration requires 3 flutes *and* piccolo, that is expressed 3.picc.

After the woodwind come the brass – most often 4.2.3.1. – four horns, two trumpets, three trombones (two tenors and one bass) and tuba. Sometimes the scoring requires cornets as well as trumpets; where they are specified I have indicated them. Next come timpani (kettledrums) and percussion, harp, organ, piano, xylophone etc. The number of percussion players required will have to be sorted out by consulting the score – there is no hard and fast answer in this area. The strings follow, and I have indicated all cases where ‘strings’ does not mean the usual first and second violins, violas, cellos and double basses.

I have given the duration of the works where known. In the case of Handel oratorios these may prove false if certain cuts are, or are not observed.

Handel oratorios also highlight another problem. How many vocal soloists do you really need? If you want your soloists to sing more than one part you may reduce the number of soloists.

Always check the score. You may notice a number of discrepancies between my orchestrations and those in recent manuals. I have checked and re-checked my orchestrations, but there will no doubt be mistakes and ambiguities still. Haydn’s masses are available in various editions – playing havoc with my system.

Practical

Singing

*'Since singing is so good a thing,
I wish all men would learn to sing.'*

William Byrd (Introduction to *Psalmes, Sonets and Songs* (1588)).

Improve your singing

It is virtually impossible to teach such a sensitive activity as singing through the written word, and this section is only intended to be a simple introduction to vocal technique and can in no way replace a live teacher.

Singing, like speech, is a natural function. The voice is the only musical instrument that is not man-made, and it is possible for most people to enjoy making music with their voice and to sing with ease.

Common vocal problems, such as tight or sore throats, hoarseness, lack of breath, harsh, wobbly or breathy tone, are usually caused by tension, bad posture and trying to push the voice out. Therefore some loosening-up exercises before singing are advisable.

The following are simple preliminary exercises which can be used with any group and take up very little time at the start of a rehearsal.

- 1 Stand with feet slightly apart and think that the spine lengthens towards the head. Gently shrug the shoulders then roll them loosely in a circular movement, (up, back and down) without tightening the neck.
- 2 Roll the head round slowly a few times in each direction, without tightening the neck or shoulders.
- 3 To loosen the jaw, relax the mouth and, leaving it in a smiling position, slowly drop the lower jaw as if a weight has been put on the lower back teeth. Slowly lift the jaw and repeat the movement several times. Make sure the jaw only moves up and down, *not* from side to side.
- 4 Let the jaw 'hang' with the mouth in a relaxed smile, and flick the tongue out and back, and then wiggle it from side to side, without moving the jaw. Use a mirror to check this.
- 5 When sitting to sing, sit well forward on the chair and feel the spine lengthen and rib-cage widen and feel flexible. Hold your music up

towards the head – don't slump down to the music. Keep the posture upright but relaxed – don't let the shoulders rise or tighten.

Breathing

Singing is essentially a physical activity, but do not make the mistake of trying to 'do' too much; this causes tension which interferes with the free flow of the voice. Easy, natural breathing is the first thing to be adversely affected, but since everyone breathed freely and easily as a baby, it is possible to rediscover this ease if you learn to 'let go' and 'do' less.

The following exercises develop an action from the lower abdominal muscles, which gives an upward thrust to the diaphragm. This is a large muscular membrane situated just below the ribs, separating the chest from the abdomen, which assists the lungs in inhaling and exhaling. In order for the diaphragm to rise to support and control the outgoing breath, it must drop as breath is taken in. Therefore the abdominal muscles should relax and the whole abdominal wall should gently expand when inhaling. Avoid the common mistake of trying to take too 'large' a breath, causing the shoulders to rise and forcing air only into the upper chest, thus drawing in the abdomen and inhibiting the natural movement of the diaphragm.

1 Lie on the floor with knees bent, feet flat on the floor, and head supported by a book or cushion. Rest the hands on the lower abdomen and cough lightly. Feel the abdominal muscles contract. Let them relax, then try pulling them in again, but this time catch a hiss on the teeth as you expel the air with a firm abdominal movement.

2 Vary the length and strength of the abdominal contraction and feel that this controls the sound of the hiss.

3 Repeat this movement, but instead of hissing, say an 'M', catching it on the lips, and feel them buzz.

4 Repeat this, but sing the 'M' gently on any notes around the lower-middle range of the voice. Feel that any variation in length and strength of notes comes from the pull of the abdominal muscles.

5 Take some easy, relaxed breaths by smiling, opening the mouth and letting the air gently flow over the tongue. These breaths should be silent and the cold air ought to strike the back of an open throat. Feel the rib-cage gently expand and let the abdominal muscles relax. Try not to 'take' air in, but let it flow by itself. Control the exhalation by a steady pull of the abdominal muscles, whilst slowly hissing out on the teeth.

6 Repeat the above exercises in a sitting and standing position, remembering to keep the neck, shoulders and rib-cage free. Regular practice will improve the strength and flexibility of the relevant muscles, enabling you to support the sound from underneath, rather like squeezing a tube of toothpaste from the bottom.

When singing, continue to take breaths in this way, thus relaxing the diaphragm, and then use the contraction of the abdominal muscles to support high notes and give control of dynamics. Strong, firm tone comes from well-supported breath, and not by pushing or straining from the throat.

If you can achieve a feeling of ease, freedom and relaxation on the intake of breath, followed by active control of the outgoing breath, there will be less risk of forcing the voice.

Articulation

A stiff, heavy tongue and tight jaw make it harder to sing words clearly and can strain the voice, causing it to crack or go husky. Opening the mouth too much, especially on low notes, and over-gesticulating the mouth, tends to produce a chopped-up, woolly sound.

To produce words clearly and distinctly, without 'chopping-up' the tone, the jaw and tongue need to be light and flexible. Following the loosening-up exercises already mentioned, some simple singing exercises can be done to limber-up the tongue. It should move lightly and crisply without disturbing the jaw. Practise with the help of a mirror.

- 1 Sing descending scales – singing 'LA-LA-LA' and 'LEE-LAY-LA', keeping the mouth in a relaxed smile and moving the tip of the tongue neatly. Support the breath from the start, and feel that the vowel-sounds have a continuous flow.



La la la la la la la la la la la la la la la.

Lee lay la lee lay la lee lay la lee lay la lee lay la lee lay la lee.

- 2 To practise vowel changes, sing on one note, repeating, 'Lee-lay-loo-lô' (pronounce as in 'hot') and do not over-exaggerate the forward mouth-shape for 'Oo-ô'.

- 3 Work through the following examples. Remember to leave the jaw steady and concentrate on working the tip of the tongue crisply and lightly.



La la la la lee lay loo lô la.

Da da da da dee daydoo dô da.

Na na na na nee nay noo nô na.

Ta ta ta ta tee tay too tô ta.

4 Exercises using the consonant 'V' are useful for loosening the jaw. Sing descending arpeggios – singing 'Va-Vay' on each note. Keep the jaw light and bouncy and the vowels smooth and clear.



In a), incorporate use of the diaphragm by gently drawing in the abdominal muscles for the first note and don't release them until the end of the phrase.

In b), keep the jaw movement just as free for all vowel changes and finish with a 'vum' as an introduction to humming.

5 Gentle, sustained *humming*, on one note, helps to bring the voice forward. Start the sound by activating the diaphragm and catching the vibration of 'Mm' on the lips (as explained under 'Breathing'). Do this only in the lower and middle part of the voice without using any pressure or strain from the throat.

6 To brighten the voice, sing scales and exercises on 'Vee' and 'Zee' keeping the mouth and jaw relaxed. Feel that the sound travels by itself, forward and up into the 'mask' (i.e. the front of the face).

Start with a simple musical shape, which can be *gradually* extended and this will help to improve runs. Feel that the breath is steadily supported throughout, and use an extra abdominal pull for the highest note in the phrase, which also needs a more open mouth.



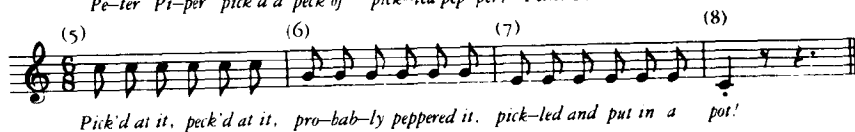
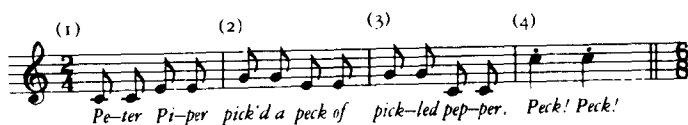
(N.B. All the musical examples in this section have, for convenience, been written in C major, but should be practised in different keys to gradually extend the range.)

7 To improve the clarity and interpretation of words, practise singing the words of entire phrases on one note. Gently support the breath from a controlled diaphragm and concentrate on crisp, clear articulation from the tip of the tongue, the teeth and the lips. Don't let the vowel changes pull the sound back, but keep the tone flowing forward, so that all the words feel on the same level.

8 Think about the *meaning* of the words, as well as their clear articulation. This also helps to improve the musical phrasing and develop a sense of 'line'.

9 Tongue-twisters are very useful exercises and can be good fun to sing in a group, especially in rounds, to enliven the warming-up session.

Practise thoroughly in unison before trying in parts, and aim for a brisk tempo.



Conclusion

The singing voice should always sound fresh and clear, with a natural ring or resonance. Voices will blend together more easily when the emphasis is on clarity, lightness and a free sound. Variation in dynamics can be