

# Choral Arranging for the Adolescent Voice: Selecting and Adapting Indigenous Music into the Curriculum

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In the fall of 1990, I was the new music teacher at Frank Ryan Senior Elementary School in Nepean, Ontario. My responsibilities were to teach classroom music to the all of the students in the school — 750 grade seven and grade eight pupils. In addition, I was expected to teach an extra-curricular 110-member beginner band after school every day. There was no school choir, nor had there been any singing within the classroom setting. Having had rich experiences as a choral director in school programs in Newfoundland, I knew that I would eventually get all of the students singing. I just didn't know *how* at that moment.

I was faced with the challenge of finding suitable repertoire for the adolescent voice, and discovered quickly that there was a dearth of appropriate choral arrangements that met the unique musical and vocal requirements of early adolescent singers. While there may have been a variety of musical styles from which to choose at the local music store, the selections were usually too difficult musically or, in other words, inappropriate for these young singers. Unison pieces were unacceptable, considering the fact that many of the boys' voices were in the process of changing.

And so, having devoted much time and energy into a fruitless journey of accumulating possible arrangements, I soon determined that I must arrange music for them. Because I was from Newfoundland, I was a bit of a curiosity to the students, and decided, in keeping with my beliefs about a multicultural approach to music education, to arrange Newfoundland folk songs for them to sing in a classroom setting. This was an excellent opportunity for me to musically share with my students some of my life experiences as well as the culture of Newfoundland.

This paper will focus upon the vocal, musical and textual factors that I consider when arranging music for the adolescent voice. I will then discuss how to select and adapt indigenous music to include in the curriculum. (In the presentation, we will work through an arrangement of a Newfoundland folk song as an example of the processes involved for the arranger.)

## Selecting and adapting indigenous music to arrange

In today's evolving multicultural society, music educators are encouraged to construct curricula which reflect global awareness. Teachers are often faced with the daunting task of creating courses to incorporate music from other cultures as a means of educating students about the lives of 'others'. Rose, (1995) states,

"Understanding that music education is part of a social and cultural world is a starting point in viewing it as a vital force in the reproduction and production of our individual and collective histories and cultures" (p.39). While a multicultural approach to music education is indeed one to be heralded and promoted, teachers may look no further than the music of the student's culture or their own heritage for possibilities when considering music to arrange.

Gone are the days when family and friends congregated in the kitchen around a pot-belly stove trading gossip and singing songs; when aging Mrs. Murphy sang of the billygoat who ate her laundry; when children perked up their ears to catch every word of a ditty so that it could be retrieved later for their own musical rendition. The exigency for preserving this oral history is a vital and urgent one, as many youth today may not be able to conceive of the fact that it was once as natural for people to sing about the news of the day as it is for us now to turn on the television set, or tap into the world wide web.

The value of arranging and incorporating indigenous music into the curriculum brings to life an appreciation and understanding of people, places and history. Learning about cultures through music carries with it benefits for advancement in other school subjects as well. In an article in *Sociology of Education*, Seidman (1985) comments, "If you want to stimulate your students intellectually and emotionally, improve your social studies, language arts, literature and reading programs, unlock and develop creativity in your students' art work, try using folk songs in your classroom" (p.580). It appears that folk songs cannot only provide a way for meeting cognitive, affective and psychomotor objectives, but they can also acquaint children with their own social history. And what time in the young singer's life is better suited to revisiting the songs in choral forms than the early teens?

Again, Rose (1995) highlights the potential of including indigenous music into the curriculum with the following comments:

As an integral part of history and culture, indigenous music serves not only as artifact and tradition, but also as a means of expression that is unique and valuable in all societies. As such, indigenous music holds great promise in helping teachers and students understand themselves and their worlds in meaningful, relevant and comprehensive ways. (p.39)

Folk songs may generate in children an appreciation of their ancestors' experiences in the past. History comes to life in a natural and exciting manner, as folk songs are often concerned with the lives and stories of people. Peter van den Honert (1987) outlines five distinct values of including folk songs into the curriculum:

1. Folk songs are not the product of any one period, but are a cumulative expression of many ages. They are classical in that they have withstood the test of time.

2. Since folk songs are perpetuated by oral transmission, both text and tune are subject to transformation in accordance with a given community's character, and are in a constant state of evolution.

3. Folk songs are essentially simple and direct. They are an unself-conscious product of a community.

4. Folk songs can constitute a bond among people at all levels of culture and can lessen the gap between those who profess to enjoy only popular music and those who profess to enjoy only art music.

5. Folk songs are a complete, not embryonic art form. They're not raw music which can be turned into works of art, but are works of art themselves which can stand alone. It is a mistake to think of artistic expression only in terms of formal training. Folk songs have positive, though unwritten, laws and principles that are unconsciously obeyed. (p.31)

Music educators interested in arranging folk songs for use in the classroom or choral setting need look no further than their own musical heritage for material to set to music. Simply recalling favourite tunes learned aurally as a child could easily be a starting point. Spending time in a local library studying anthologies of folk song collections may also prove valuable. For example, there are uncounted thousands of folk songs from Newfoundland, many of which have been recorded in the field by folk song scholars (they are housed in the Newfoundland section of the Queen Elizabeth II library at Memorial University). Such recordings and their transcriptions are often found in libraries and, in some cases, in folklore departments at other universities and are readily available for study. If these songs remain in libraries, they are still one step further away from their original intent - to be transmitted aurally to a broader population.

Of particular interest to those interested in Newfoundland folk songs may be the following collections which contain numerous songs: *Folksongs from Newfoundland* by Maud Karpeles; *Songs of the Newfoundland Outports* by Kenneth Peacock; *Ballads and Sea Songs of Newfoundland* by Elizabeth Greenleaf and Grace Yarrow Mansfield; *Come and I Will Sing You* by Genevieve Lehr and *Newfoundlanders, Sing!* by Blondahl. Each of these anthologies offer rich narratives regarding the process of collecting the songs, along with historical anecdotes regarding the uniqueness and variety of the tunes and texts.

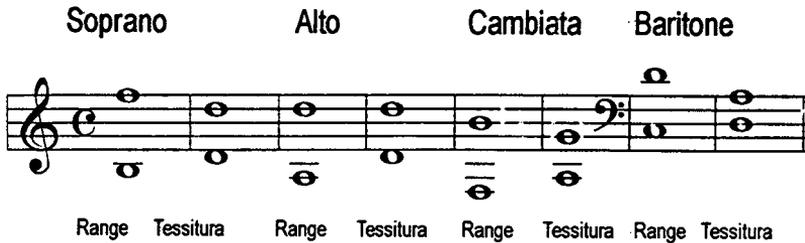
## The adolescent voice

The biggest concern when arranging for the adolescent voice is the change that boys go through during this maturation period. For the majority of boys, mutation begins at 12-13 years of age, reaches its most active phase between 13 and 14, then tapers off between 15 and 18. The newly changed voice usually appears between 14 and 15 but *settles* for one or two years afterward (Barresi, 1996). Junior high male voices generally follow the same sequence in stages on maturation, but individual growth rates vary greatly.

Figure 1 shows the average female and male vocal ranges and tessitura areas characteristic of adolescent singers in the various stages of voice change.

Inherent in this voice change process is a more limited singing range, and for some students, a lack of vocal confidence before their peers. It can be embarrassing to *squeak* or *squawk* in the middle of a melodic phrase, and, understand-

## Ranges



Range refers to the entire compass of pitches sung in the normal register of the voice (not falsetto or whistle register). Tessitura is that part of the singer's range in which the voice sounds best and functions with ease.

Figure 1

ably, boys often shy away from projecting their voices. So, the challenge for the choral arranger is to keep in mind the limitations in vocal range and tessitura for these developing voices. If the vocal range is limited to within an octave, or less, the boys may feel more comfortable and more inclined to participate fully in the choir.

When arranging for this age, usually the males have not fully matured to be classified as tenor or bass. Therefore, the arranger must consider writing the music to accommodate *cambiata* and new baritone singers (Barresi, 1984). The *cambiata*, which corresponds roughly to a high tenor part, could be written at pitch on the staff, to avoid the extensive use of leger lines.

While the adolescent females are also experiencing physical growth and vocal development, the changes are not as pronounced as that of the males. Their overall vocal ranges are not as dramatically affected as that of their male counterparts, but they too may have a singable tessitura confined to an octave. (Figure 1)

### Selecting songs

The general musical characteristics of a song may provide the basis for the development of criteria for the selection of pieces to arrange. Therefore, attention to the melody, harmony and rhythm should be the initial concern for the arranger. In conjunction with these musical qualities is the arranger's own feeling for improvisation. In choral arranging workshops, I have heard folk song arranger Alice Parker state that her choral students must be able to sing a melody convincingly, and improvise readily before they are permitted to *write*. This appears to be a logical as well as historically-based pathway to the art of arranging.

In the decision-making process of what to do with the piece, the arranger needs to decide which characteristics of the folk song will be retained. There are basically two options. The first is to retain the straightforwardness of the music and text, thus keeping the simplicity intact. This style of writing is evident in Don Cook's arrangements of *The Morning Dew* and *Green Bushes* (published by Waterloo). A second option is to regard the folk song in terms of an art song as in the arrangements by Ralph Vaughan Williams (*The Morning Dew*), Harry Somers (e.g. *Green Shores of Fogo*) or Peter Allen (e.g. *Banks of Newfoundland*). With this

second approach, the folk tune provides the basis for another composition. By taking it out of the folk song element and turning it into art music, the arranger is preserving the melody and the words, but is surrendering the authenticity of the folk style. Perhaps the best way to absorb the true folk flavour of a song is to hear an authentic performance of it. For example, visiting the archives in the Department of Folklore at Memorial University of Newfoundland, and listening to any of the thousands of recordings of folk singers would give the potential arranger a sense of the originality of the song. Many of these songs, mostly recorded in the singers' homes, have not yet been transcribed, and await utilization by present-day performers and arrangers.

### Melody

The primary musical aspect to consider when choosing a song to arrange is the melody. It should be interesting for both the listener and the adolescent performer. Melodies may be classified either as primarily pitch-oriented, or rhythm-oriented and arranged according to these categories. While the harmonic and rhythmic potential of a melody may be considered of secondary importance in the selection process, a combination of a good tune, harmonic structure and rhythmic flow is always preferred by the arranger. The arranger should be cautious about using songs that are difficult to sing. For example, a song with augmented fourths and descending minor sixth intervals will pose problems for the adolescent voice. A 'tuneful' melody is easier to retain, and one which will linger in the musical mind long after it is initially sung.

### Range

As mentioned earlier in the discussion of the adolescent voice, the range and tessitura of a folk song are integral factors in the selection process. Choosing pieces that have the melody within the accessibility of the young singer is an important consideration for the arranger. Once a selection has been made regarding a song, the harmonic structure also becomes a concern in the category of range and tessitura. This is an area of writing where all voices may be easily accommodated. In other words, the arranger may 'construct' the music to adapt to specific voices within the ensemble. For example, if there is just one young man in the group who has dropped in voice to be considered a 'true' baritone, a solo verse would be appropriate for him. If, on the contrary, there are seven boys, all with a tessitura of an interval of a fifth or less, the arranger has the option of keeping the harmonic structure and range for these voices very limited.

### Text

The text factor is perhaps of secondary concern in the selection process. However, it should be suitable and interesting for the adolescent singer. Junior high students may not be inclined to get excited about singing overly romantic ballads or tragic dirges. Songs with a 'bawdy' text may also be unsuitable for this age group. However, texts which are humorous, heroic, or have a plot twist may hold the students' interest. If the singers are able to relate to the tale, they may be more agreeable about entering into the spirit of the tune.

As most folk songs tell a good story, the arranger should not hesitate to delete a verse or two. If, for instance, a song is strophic with sixteen verses, the arranger may simply run out of musical ideas. And, more importantly, a long piece

may be simply physically too demanding for the adolescent singer. As Barresi and Russell (1984) state, "...although junior high children appear to have a great deal of energy, physiological research has shown that they tire easily and that as their fatigue increases, their ability to concentrate is reduced dramatically" (p. 169). Therefore, keeping the audience (and singers) engaged with a good musical story is a challenge for the arranger.

### Rhythm

As with the discussion of melody, the rhythm of a piece may also determine its suitability. While a song may have a great story to it, if it is too rhythmically challenging for the young singer, problems may arise. Pieces with continuously changing and intricate rhythms may simply be too difficult for the students to articulate both verbally and musically. 'Nonsense' songs do not usually fall into this category. In fact, adolescent singers often latch onto, and fully enjoy songs which employ nonsense words and syllables.

### Summary

I believe that an integral aspect of music education is to foster and promote indigenous music to further understandings of culture for students in new and innovative ways. Swanwick (1988) states that, "The three central pillars of music education [are] : a concern for musical traditions; sensitivity to students [and an] awareness of social context and community" (p.10). What better way to achieve these goals than to introduce folk song arrangements into the music curriculum? Not only will the students enjoy singing and recreating rollicking sea shanties and sentimental ballads, but they will also gain an appreciation of history and culture through song.

The following considerations have been suggested as areas of concern for the arrangement of folk music for the adolescent voice: **selection** of suitable repertoire; **range** of the developing voice for junior high students; **melodic interest**; importance of **text**; and **rhythmic** possibilities. Attention given to these suggestions may result in successful choral arrangements which suit the adolescent voice, and in the process, a new generation of folk singers may emerge.

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