

Off the Beaten Path: Undiscovered gems from the Choral Public Domain Library

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Abstract

The Choral Public Domain Library represents a wealth of free music: the site currently hosts free scores of over 20,000 choral and vocal works by over 2500 composers, and its stores continue to grow daily. As schools of all levels battle reduced budgets, a free resource such as CPDL represents a treasure trove of easily reproducible, conveniently stored and readily accessible repertoire. While CPDL permits easy access, the sheer volume of possibilities can be overwhelming. In an attempt to make certain selected CPDL compositions more familiar, this reading session will aspire to present to attendees largely unknown but accessible works for mixed choirs from every era of music history appropriate for mixed choirs of various sizes at high school, college, community and church institutions. Palestrina wrote so much more than *Sicut Cervus*, and Certon wrote more than *La, la la, je ne l'ose dire* (to name two Renaissance composers). Let's explore beyond the tried and true and see if CPDL holds any further choral gems which are less well known but no less deserving of performance.

This paper is a revision of the presentation that Vaughn Roste, Director of Choral Studies at Indiana University – Purdue University Fort Wayne, made on Friday, October 2, 2015 at The Singing Symposium at Memorial University in St. John’s, Newfoundland. Participants were provided with scores to all of the titles below; here, the titles have been hyperlinked in the chart provided for reader convenience. Titles can all still easily be found with a search of the [Choral Public Domain Library](#), which will henceforth be abbreviated as CPDL.

**Table 1: Undiscovered Gems from CPDL**

<b>Composer</b>	<b>You’ve already heard of....</b>	<b>...let’s introduce you to...</b>
<b>Renaissance</b>		
Palestrina (1525-1594)	<i>Sicut Cervus</i>	<a href="#">Ave Maria</a>
Thomas Weelkes (1576-1623)	Hence Care, Thou will Dispatch?	<a href="#">Rejoice in the Lord</a>
Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625)	This is the Record of John	<a href="#">Great King of Gods</a>
<b>Baroque</b>		
Henry Purcell (1659-1695)	Hear My Prayer O Lord	<a href="#">Allelujah</a>
Johann Ludwig Bach (1677-1731)	J. S. Bach’s <i>Jesu Meine Freunde</i>	J. L. Bach’s <a href="#">Das ist meine Freude</a>
G. F. Handel (1685-1759)	Hallelujah Chorus from <i>Messiah</i>	<a href="#">To Song and Dance</a> from <i>Samson</i>
<b>Classic</b>		
Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)	(the philosopher – same guy!)	<a href="#">Hush My Babe</a>
W. A. Mozart (1756-1791)	<i>Ave Verum Corpus</i> KV618	<a href="#">God is Our Refuge</a> KV 20
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)	Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee	<a href="#">Jesu Dulcis Memoria</a>
<b>Romantic</b>		
Robert Pearsall (1795-1856)	Lay a Garland ( <i>Tu es Petrus</i> )	<a href="#">Great God of Love</a>
Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)	Elijah & St. Paul	<a href="#">Kyrie</a>
Charles Gounod (1818-1893)	<i>Ave Maria</i> (his melody over Bach’s Prelude in C major)	<a href="#">Pater, in Manus Tuas</a> from <i>The Seven Last Words</i>
<b>Modern</b>		
Herbert Howells (1892-1983)	<i>Requiem</i>	<a href="#">Here is the Little Door</a>
Abel Di Marco (b. 1932)	(retired priest from Argentina)	<a href="#">Lux Aeterna</a>
Peter Bird (b. 1951)	(retired geophysicist from UCLA)	<a href="#">Gloria in Excelsis Deo</a>

The CPDL represents a wealth of free music: the site currently hosts free scores of over 21,000 choral and vocal works by over 2500 composers, and its stores continue to grow daily. As schools of all levels battle reduced budgets, a free resource such as CPDL represents a treasure trove of easily reproducible, conveniently stored and readily accessible repertoire. While CPDL

permits easy access, the sheer volume of possibilities can be overwhelming. In an attempt to make certain selected CPDL compositions more familiar, this reading session presented to attendees largely unknown but accessible works for mixed choirs from every era of music history appropriate for mixed choirs of various sizes at high school, college, community and church institutions. I selected three pieces from each era by some of the best-known composers, but hopefully discovered works with which you are not yet familiar.

The genesis for this project came from when the author adjudicated a high school choral event wherein four consecutive choirs each selected Palestrina's *Sicut Cervus* for inclusion (I assume independently). While *Sicut Cervus* certainly well represents Palestrina's style and Renaissance music as a whole, I had to wonder if Palestrina didn't also write other lesser known pieces which were equally representative of his *oeuvre*. I was thus motivated to explore beyond the tried and true and see what further choral gems CPDL holds which are less well known but no less deserving of performance. Palestrina's *Ave Maria* (1563) is an accessible through-composed (the final phrase is repeated) work that offers a great opportunity for classroom learning about *musica ficta* – the work appears twice in Palestrina's collected works, and each time with different editorial decisions. Conductors should feel free to raise ascending scales in minor, or if leaving the tonic only sing a half step, as desired. The text for this piece differs slightly too (in the final lines) from other *Ave Maria*'s you may know, only because the text for this Catholic prayer was not standardized by the Pope until 1568. This was during Palestrina's lifetime, but after the composition of this piece.

Weelkes' brief composition "Rejoice in the Lord" numbers only 30 bars and has no *divisi*, rendering it accessible for even smaller high school and church choirs – and its generic texts allows for it to be suitable for most liturgical occasions. The third Renaissance motet

included below was written by one of most famous English composers to ever live. Orlando Gibbons graduated from Kings College in Cambridge in 1606 to become the organist at Westminster Abbey, as well a keyboard player in the court of Prince Charles, or as he would later be known, King Charles I (1600 – 1649). This anthem was specially composed for the marriage of King Charles I to Henrietta Maria (who was, scandalously, a Roman Catholic) on May 11, 1625. Gibbons did not live much beyond this event, dying the following month of apoplexy (what we today would likely label a stroke) at the age of 42. This anthem thus surely is among the last compositions he ever wrote. Gibbons might be better known for his madrigals (e.g. “The Silver Swan”), but his verse anthems, which alternate solo and choral sections, such as this are among the greatest examples of their sub-genre as well. His best-known verse anthem is surely “This is the Record of John,” but I contend that “Great King of Gods” deserves to be as well known.

Another piece that would fit well into most liturgical occasions (exempting Lent) is Purcell’s “*Allelujah*,” which is only that one word and 28 bars long. Its lilting 3 meter provides a rhythmic drive though the entirety of its seven 4-bar phrases. One could also point out that Purcell’s bass line here at the end, starting at measure 25, is the same as he used in “Dido’s Lament,” the famous dying aria from his opera *Dido and Aeneas*. Although there it is repeated as a ground bass and fleshed out more chromatically, it also appears here, in the same key.

Many of us have not heard of Johann Ludwig Bach, as his compositional career was surely overshadowed by his younger cousin Johann Sebastian – but his music is worth a look. “*Das Ist Meine Freude*” is a composition for two choirs, thus suited for larger ensembles in concert or liturgical settings. The continuo part, marked “*ad libitum*,” could be organ, piano, keyboard and cello, or even *a cappella*, although most conductors would agree that *a cappella* would be

neither historically accurate nor ideal. Melismatic sixteenth notes provide for a challenge for better readers, but the music stands well on its own, and is somewhat more accessible than J. S. Bach's double choir motets.

Today Handel is most famous for *Messiah*, but in his day he was more famous as a composer of opera: he had composed two already by the age of 20. This selection comes from *Samson*, which was the first oratorio that Handel wrote after the successful premiere of *Messiah* in 1742. Like most of Handel's oratorios, it too takes a subject from the Old Testament. This excerpt comes as the final chorus to Act II where the Chorus of Philistines praises their god Dagon. Handel's writing here is similar to what he did earlier in *Messiah*, with long held notes sustained in one voice while other cadence around it. Fugal entrances in the second half of the text provide a textural contrast with the opening, which is predominantly homophonic. The fun melismas on "dance" – meant to highlight a word, not obscure it – are typical of both Baroque music and Handel's unforgettable style.

Jean Jacques Rousseau was one of the founding members of the Enlightenment, and all of us today benefit from his reforms, particularly the concept, novel at the time, that it is in society's best interest that all citizens of a republic be educated at state expense. The fact that the famous philosopher spent time writing musical compositions may be surprise to some of us, but he wrote seven operas in addition to other pieces. Perhaps this is less surprising when we remember that he was one of the first proponents of educating the whole person. This straightforward piece, written for SATB ensemble *a cappella*, is a simply yet endearing lullaby sung by a mother as she rocks her child to sleep. Personally, I wonder if the austerity of this arrangement could be reflective of Rousseau's conversion to Calvinism.

Most of us are familiar with story of the child prodigy Mozart being traipsed around Europe by his father: “God is Our Refuge” is a direct result of that travelling. Mozart composed this at the tender age of 9 (notice the very low Köchel number!) and this is his earliest surviving vocal piece. Another fascinating bit of trivia is that this piece is Mozart’s only known setting of a piece in English. Its brevity of 23 bars and its lack of *divisi* renders it very accessible for smaller ensembles, and its generic sacred text leaves it very appropriate for a variety of liturgical occasions. One can hear nascent Mozart even in the precocious explorations of the young Amadeus emulating Renaissance style.

I included the composition by Beethoven because I have found personally that Beethoven, arguably the most important composer of his day, gets underrepresented in our choral programming. Many of us are familiar with his ninth symphony, the Missa Solemnis, the Mass in C, the Choral Fantasy, and even Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage, but what Beethoven is accessible for those of us who do not typically have access to a full orchestra for accompaniment? With no *divisi* and two strophic sections (each abacdeab; the recurring a-phrase assists in learning as well), this four-part Latin motet can help introduce our students to Beethoven.

Robert Lucas Pearsall was an English composer, even if he spent most of the later part of his life in Germany and Switzerland. He was largely self-taught in music, and as a professional barrister he was afforded the luxury of not having to compose (or publish) out of necessity. This can help explain the modest size of his *oeuvre* of 22 part-songs and madrigals including this one, and perhaps also their quality. Pearsall’s interest for reviving Renaissance music is easily seen in this peice: his compositional technique of piling on dissonances is reminiscent of Monteverdi (1567-1643) or Lotti (1666-1740), yet its extended phrase structure is decidedly Classical. We

might be forgiven, then, for considering him with Brahms (1832-1897) as one of the Romantic period's neo-classicists. Many have encountered Pearsall's "Lay a Garland," composed in 1840, which was later re-worked into a Latin motet "*Tu Es Petrus*" in 1856; performing that piece encouraged me to familiarize myself with other works by the same composer, and "Great God of Love" is composed in a similar vein and at the same time (1839).

Mendelssohn's short (19-bar) Kyrie is set for double choir, allowing for an antiphonal effect if desired and geographically possible. It is brief enough for liturgical use, yet the full Romantic dissonances and complex harmonies render it impressive enough for concert performance. This composition is obviously related to the first movement of the Mass but not part of a longer Mass setting. Mendelssohn wrote three such self-standing *Kyries*; this one dates from 1823.

Gounod's *Les Sept Paroles de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ sur la croix* was written for unaccompanied SATB choir in 1858 and revised in 1866. Despite its multi-movement form, its brevity and its a cappella setting prevent it from being considered as an oratorio—and its use of the Latin language suggests that it was surely intended for liturgical purposes. While the rest of Gounod's setting is written in an austere style more reminiscent of the music of Palestrina, Gounod's setting of the Seventh word here is the only movement written in the musical language of the nineteenth century. Here Gounod uses two distinct SATB choirs, which is a division appearing nowhere else in the work. This allows for a much greater harmonic density, one which is more characteristic of the Romantic period in which Gounod's work was composed. Thus this movement can be easily excerpted here but does not well represent Gounod's *Seven Last Words* as a whole. The stately quarter-note motif here is traded antiphonally between the choirs and

could indicate Christ's resignation to his fate. This is Gounod's grand finale to his work, and some of the most gorgeous music that he ever wrote.

The music of Herbert Howells remains mostly under copyright, but due to a difference in copyright law at the time of publication in the country in which the piece was first published, Howell's "Here is the Little Door" (written in 1918) is in the public domain. The four-part "carol-anthem" is set in two verses, the second longer than the first, and discusses the arrival of the Wise Men at the scene of the Nativity (let's ignore that Matthew 2:11 has the Magi arriving at a house, not a stable). Each of their gifts is given symbolic meaning and an explanation in this gripping four-part *a cappella* setting.

Works on CPDL from the modern period are perhaps less numerous as most prefer to have their published works under copyright, but some contemporary composers, seeking only to get their works performed and not make a living off their compositions, chose to make their compositions freely available on CPDL. Such is the case with the last two composers included in this list, both of whom are still alive. Abel Di Marco is a retired Argentinian priest (who also edited the Palestrina arrangement I recommended above). His "Lux Aeterna," for SATB choir, piano, and soprano solo, is an accessible (33 bar long) setting of the movement of the Latin Requiem dedicated to the victims of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. It is not difficult for the choir to learn, although the soprano solo part is slightly more virtuosic, but this gives you the opportunity to briefly highlight one of your more able singers. The piece could easily be performed by high school or church choirs in either concert or even liturgical settings.

Peter Bird has made his living mostly as a geophysicist, teaching for most of his career at UCLA, and despite being a choral singer for most of his life, has tried his hand at composing only in the



past ten years. His compositions include several inspired by science: for example “Hubble Ascending” (text by the composer celebrating 25 years of discovery with the telescope) and “Mars 2. Roving the wasteland,” inspired by the Mars rover, which includes the text “spectroscopic analysis follows...” His “Gloria” takes the first several lines of the second movement of the Mass (to “*glorificamus te*”) and includes several imitative entrances after its antiphonal opening. With almost no *divisi* (the sopranos divide for five notes in total), this SATB setting could also be done by high school or church choirs in educational or worship settings.

The selection of pieces that I made for this presentation of course represents only a tiny fraction of the literally thousands of possibilities awaiting discovery on CPDL. CPDL is convenient, economical, and practical; scores do not even need to be physically stored because if the music is going to be re-programmed in the future it can be re-printed (in perhaps an even more modern edition). Many of us agree that there is much beautiful music written that is infrequently heard, and I hope that this selection of three pieces from each musicological era might inspire readers to find further undiscovered gems in perusing CPDL as they use this valuable resource for their own programming decisions in the future.