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Four psalms and two alleluias: Six sacred anthems for a cappella choir with soprano tenor and baritone solos

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FOUR PSALMS AND TWO ALLELUIAS
ORIGINAL COMPOSITIONS FOR A CAPPELLA CHOIR
AN ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF THIS WORK

by

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B. S., University of Minnesota, 1953

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the composer, in writing these six compositions, is to provide fairly easy sacred music for a cappella choir. Several of these compositions may be performed effectively by high school choirs, but a few of them will require more experienced groups, as well as trained soloists. The compositions, exclusive of the two Alleluias, have been set to four Psalms from the Holy Bible. The King James Version of the Twenty-third Psalm has been retained, due to its traditional popularity; but the other three Psalms have been taken from the new Revised Standard Version of the Bible, consequently making them more meaningful to both performer and listener.

The six compositions comprise a cycle and may be performed together, preferably in the order in which they appear. However, each anthem is complete within itself and may be performed as a separate unit.

The composer has made every effort to create music that would enhance the beauty and meaning of the Psalms. The melodies and harmonies were selected to suit the spiritual and emotional implication of every phrase in the four Psalms.

The composer admits that she is relatively

inexperienced in musical composition, but feels that the composing of these choral works has been invaluable. It has provided experience in notation and choral arranging, and certainly has heightened appreciation of the master composers. Most important of all, it has given the composer a deep insight into musical composition and has instilled a further desire to create. The Psalms were highly inspirational and provided excellent texts. These six compositions, written to the glory of God, are only a beginning, and continued study and experimentation along this line are anticipated.

I. ALLELUIA!

An introduction to the four Psalms, this Alleluia is written in the Aeolian mode. It begins with a simple eight-measure melody, scored for voices in unison and written in Gregorian style. The second section adds a very simple harmonic accompaniment to the same melody, which is in the soprano. The third section is a strict canon between the male voices and the sopranos, with the divided altos filling in the harmonies. The canon is written in the Aeolian mode a fifth higher than the original setting. The male voices begin the canon in E minor, the sopranos entering at the fifth. The closing section of the Alleluia returns to the original key of A minor, the sopranos carrying the melody again, and the other voices adding a rich harmonic accompaniment in contemporary style. The closing Amen is merely an altered repetition of the last Alleluia.

This Alleluia is a fitting introduction in that it ranges from the antique sound of a Gregorian chant, to the simple harmonies of 16th century music; and from the contrapuntal style reminiscent of 17th century canons, to the rich harmonic structure characteristic of the early 20th century composition. However, there is no attempt to duplicate any ancient devices; only pseudo-period techniques are employed.

The setting of the Alleluia is not one of excitement or joy, as commonly associated with an Alleluia, but it is a calm, reverent prayer of serious nature.

The technical demands of this music are average, making it suitable for high school or church choirs. It should be sung slowly and with deep reverence, fairly soft throughout, and the climax never overstepping a forte. The tempo should be quite regular, with the only noticeable ritard at the very end. The conductor may hold the fermatas at the end of each section slightly beyond the actual time values.

II. PSALM 121

I lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence does
my help come?
My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and
earth.
He will not let your foot be moved, he who keeps
you will not slumber.
Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber
nor sleep.
The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade.
The sun shall not smite you by day, nor the moon
by night.
The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will
keep your life.
The Lord will keep your going out and your coming
in from this time forth and for evermore.

Written in traditional 19th century style, this Psalm is perhaps the most suitable of the four for performance by church choirs, and could be sung with little difficulty by high school choirs.

The Psalm is arranged in four verses, one, two, and four being in F major, and all having the same harmonic structure. Verse three modulates to the subdominant. The melody here is given to a soprano soloist supported by a harmonic background somewhat richer than is used in the other verses. A simple Amen follows the fourth verse.

Similar to a four verse hymn, this Psalm should be performed with smooth rhythmic flow at a moderately slow tempo, so that the repeated triplet figures in the soprano may be executed leisurely. Due to the four verse repetition,

the conductor should make special effort to achieve variety in dynamics and tonal color. The overall impression is calm and peaceful, creating a feeling of quiet happiness and contentment.

III. PSALM 130

Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord! Lord,
hear my voice!
Let thy ears be attentive to the voice of my
supplications!
If thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord,
who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou
mayest be feared.
I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait, and in his
word do I hope;
My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for
the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.
O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there
is steadfast love, and with him is plenteous
redemption.
And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

This Psalm opens with a homophonic section in the Aeolian mode and then changes to contemporary contrapuntal style with the phrase, "Lord, hear my voice." Again the homophonic texture appears, followed by a unison phrase going into the repetition of counterpoint on "Lord, who could stand?" A brief passage of consonant, close harmonies then appears, ending in diminished seventh chords. Next follows a series of imitations, beginning with the sopranos and carrying through the other voices, creating more complicated sonorities. The subject is mournful, pleading, and appropriately based on the augmented fourth. Reaching a climax on "My soul doth wait," the tension is released on the words "And in his word do I hope." The plaintive subject based on

the augmented fourth appears again, exactly duplicating the previous imitation except for a slight variation in the rhythm. This section is closed by a repetition of the opening theme, this time in F# minor on the words "more than watchmen for the morning." Suddenly the mood changes and homophonic devices are employed. Parallel chord technique is used, often progressing to chords with roots a minor or major third above or below the previous chord. The very last phrase is an example of polytonality, the treble and bass voices moving in contrary motion, ending on a major chord with an added sixth.

The problem in setting a Psalm of this nature to music lies in achieving a line. The words are arranged in broken phrases, with constantly changing patterns. Taking this fact into account, the composer has tried to capitalise on this difficulty by changing the mood of the music with that of the words. The conductor is allowed much freedom of movement in performance of this Psalm, since rubato must be employed to weld its phrases together. Extreme contrasts in tonal color, plus all the interlying shadings, are essential to an effective performance. The mournful, downcast spirit of the homophonic section should be obvious, and the contrapuntal sections should cry out with despair. A complete reversal of spirit must occur in the joy and glory evident in the closing section.

IV. PSALM 23

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he
leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths
of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the
shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for
thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff
they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence
of mine enemies: thou anointest my head
with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the
days of my life: and I will dwell in the
house of the Lord for ever.

Considered by many to be the most beautiful of all Psalms, the Twenty-third was the most inspiring to the composer. The quiet beauty and tender warmth of the musical words readily fell into this musical counterpart. A pastoral serenity pervades the composition.

E major was selected as an appropriate key because of its brightness and vitality. The accidentals are written within the body of the composition rather than in the signature because of unusual harmonic shifts, such as several whole tone progressions. Harmonies are modern, but with a suggestion of antique quality, making frequent use of major-major seventh chords. Dissonance is found only in a few passing tones, but when the solo has such phrases as "shadow of death," and "I will fear no evil," the dissonance is

relatively stronger. As in the other Psalms, the repeated triplet figure occurs often in this composition, as the composer believes that it adds a Biblical atmosphere. The constant changing of time signatures is not intended to keep the music metronomically rhythmic, but is merely to aid in achieving a smooth flow of melody.

This Psalm affords the conductor and choir ample opportunity for truly expressive interpretation. The tempo is rather slow, and many liberties may be taken. Caution should be taken to use the changing time signatures only as a guide to the conducting of entire phrases, rather than individual beats or measures. The tenor and soprano solos, although written in exact note values, must be sung with smooth phrasing in recitative style. The melodic rise and fall closely follows that of the poetry, and dynamics should follow these patterns.

Performance of this Psalm is truly a challenge, and although it is not unusually difficult notewise, it should not be attempted by an amateur group. It requires sensitive and highly musical soloists and an excellent choir. Its charm and beauty lie in its subtleness, its serenity, and its simplicity. This Psalm may be described as a reverie. Perhaps more than any of the other Psalms in this cycle, it requires an inspired presentation.

V. PSALM 13

How long, O Lord? Wilt thou forget me for ever?
How long wilt thou hide thy face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have
sorrow in my heart all the day?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; lighten
my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death;
Lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him;"
lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.
But I have trusted in thy steadfast love; my
heart shall rejoice in thy salvation.
I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt
bountifully with me.

Written in the Phrygian mode, this Psalm begins with a baritone solo. The same plaintive melody is taken up by the sopranos, with a simple harmonic accompaniment by the rest of the choir. As the baritone solo returns with further pleadings, the male chorus provides a background of mournful chant in a low register. The baritone solo soars to a high pitch as it reaches the climax of the poetry. At this point, an exact inversion of the first melodic theme appears in the soprano. The full choir begins softly in a low register and gradually builds, modulating into Mixolydian mode based on C. Intensity mounts, and all traces of sadness disappear. In order to realize fully the joyousness of the poetry, the choir should break into the following Alleluia immediately, thus fulfilling the words, "I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me."

This Psalm is fairly easy, its main difficulty again being that of interpretation. The conductor must use skill in exploiting the dramatic theme of despair found in the first section of this composition. The striking contrast between despair and hope affords many interpretive possibilities.

VI. ALLELUIA!

Although intended to be sung following Psalm 13, this Alleluia is complete within itself and may be performed alone. It is an easy composition but requires a large choir, due to frequent dividing of parts. It is in the Mixolydian mode, with the exception of the contrapuntal sections, which are in minor. The entire composition is based on a three-note melody, occurring in many different keys and in all of the voice parts. One may think of the first contrapuntal section, beginning with the basses, as the "winding" and the second contrapuntal section, beginning with the sopranos, as the "unwinding." A cadence follows and an exact duplication of the exposition is heard, with a slightly varied ending.

Resembling a folk dance in its swinging rhythms, this Alleluia is to be performed as quickly as possible, always striving for lightness, grace, and clarity, through use of staccato. The conductor cannot place too much emphasis on sharp articulation, but should guard against stressing the last syllable of the word, "Alleluia!" The choir should sing with jeyous spirit and an air of abandon, but must always maintain accuracy. There should be an antiphonal effect between women's and men's choruses, and a happy

rivalry among voices in the contrapuntal sections. Rhythms should be nearly metronomic without pauses between phrases. The only ritards should be at the cadence just preceding the recapitulation and at the very end. However, the final "Alleluia" should return to the former lively tempo with an immediate release. This composition must be sung with complete joy and elation, and a spirited voicing of praise to God.