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Believe in the style first...the notes will follow

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How often in the rush to get the notes learned do we neglect the spirit of the work and later, after the notes are well in hand, try to add some degree of interpretation of the music?

After all, aren't the rhythms and the pitches the first things we should make right?

But shouldn't we direct our singers in our understanding of the composer's intentions and the musical effect of a work prior to and during the initial and continuing rehearsals?

The concept of teaching style as we prepare to teach the pitches and rhythms in a choral work was recently promoted by Dr. Charlene Archebique from San Jose State University in an ACDA choral interest session organized by state choral chairman, Laurie Guttormsen at the 1996 Oregon Music Educators Conference in Eugene, Oregon on February 18, 1996.

Dr. Archebique's session reminded me of how important it is to teach style and interpretation first and let the notes take care of themselves in the process. She introduced several selections to us, rehearsing us as she might any choir under her direction.

Prior to our singing, she helped us study the stylistic aspects of text, phrasing and melodic and rhythmic structure. For example, rather than launching into singing the text, we first spoke the text for understanding of the poetry and for its rhythmic underlayment. This gave us an idea of the poet's subject matter and the composer's concepts as well. When we realized the "seven wondrous stags" was probably a symbol of death we were also more ready to infuse meaning and expressions into the notes once we began learning them.

Upon singing and making some mistakes in sight-reading the notes, Charlene continually reminded us of interpretive elements of dynamics, tempos, accents, phrasing and so on, in relation to the understanding of the text and its musical setting.

The process gave us a purpose and a direction in learning the piece rather than trying to apply an interpretation after we had mastered the part singing.

I was impressed at how much more enjoyment we experienced by focusing on interpretive concepts as we learned the song.

I have been since inspired to better approach teaching of a new piece to my choirs with greater understanding of the piece on my part prior to rehearsing it. I have committed more time to score study and to what elements of interpretation I might be able to teach as we learn the notes.

In addition to sensitivity to stylistic considerations, Charlene recommended to us that we be familiar with or review recognized sources of performance practice such as *The Choral Experience* by Ray Robinson and *The Dynamic Performance* by Donald Barra, to help us with questions of stylistic accuracy of various historical periods. Then we should apply our own sense of good taste as we infuse the “power to originate, create, and recreate...allowing to burst forth” the spirit of the music in our choirs.

An example is the practice of repeating a phrase softer in music of the Renaissance period. We should know the generally accepted rule and then consider its artistic effect as we examine each such repetition.

Furthermore, since publications of early music rely on the interpretive markings and decisions of an editor, we should know performance practices of the period in order to better achieve stylistic accuracy in spite of an editor’s suggestions.

Nevertheless, we as directors should always be sensitive to the interpretive elements of timbre, accentuation, dynamics, articulation, tempo, and accompaniment in addition to the traditional performance practice.

I have been excited by Charlene’s idea that teaching style throughout the rehearsal process can enliven the creative, individual process of learning and performing music. I have also enjoyed rereading the Robinson text which I last studied in graduate school years ago.

Charlene also provided us with an extensive list of “Rules of Interpretation and Articulation” which she has published with Santa Barbara Music Publishing. I am highlighting some of the aspects of this publication which I have found particularly helpful and useful:

No two consecutive notes, syllables, or words can be sung alike.

All notes longer than one beat must grow or diminish.

Every note must move into the next. Visualize each note pushing the next off the page.

Every new pitch must get a slight new accent.

Two notes of the same pitch must be separated for clarity.

Words ending with a vowel must be separated from a word beginning with a vowel.

Each note in a run or melisma must receive a breath articulation.

Pick-ups serve as spring boards to the following note, they must therefore be intensified, gathering energy released in the note that follows.

Syncopated figures call for a separation between each note.

In polyphonic music each voice must listen and respond to each line (like a conversation).

The rule of the octave leap is to put weight on the lower note and detach it from the upper note. The bottom note of the any leap should likewise receive more weight.

The top voice should use less vibrato and all voices should reduce the amount of vibrato at cadences and dissonances.

One phrase – one breath.

Accented words and syllables must be brought out in each sentence.

The basic articulation in Baroque and Classical music is non-legato.

There are four basic kinds of style: legato, staccato, marcato, sostenuto.

Notes which are held over the bar line should grow over the bar line.

Concepts like these prompt me to listen better for stylistic elements and to think about each note in a piece and its relation to the text and the phrase, regardless of interpretive markings. As a result, I hope my rehearsals infuse heightened awareness of the music and a greater satisfaction in all involved in the creative and re-creative process of making music together. And, I too believe, the notes will come!