

January, 1999

## *Ethnic music take you out of your comfort zone? That's good!*

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In order to achieve the best results for any of the music we chose for our choirs, certain expectations need to be in place. When choosing ethnic and multicultural music, many factors need to be established. For whom is the piece learned? What will the singer gain from this literature? How difficult is it? How much time should I allot for the learning of this piece? At what time of the year should I present it to my choirs? How interested in this culture am I? What energy am I willing to put forth to insure the success of this piece?

Though the questions are no different than those raised when choosing other literature, they are different in that we as directors are not always trained in all cultural approaches to music. When we choose to do ethnic music, we make a conscious choice to go out of our comfort zone. This I believe is one of the vaccinations against that dreaded disease called “burn out.”

I've heard complaints from some highly effective and skilled conductors that most of the ethnic music is so repetitive and easy that it is difficult to sustain excitement for the piece. Others complain that the diction may be too intricate or the pronunciation guide nonexistent. Yet others fear offending a particular ethnic sect by performing the music poorly.

All are legitimate reasons to shy away from ethnic literature. The obstacles, however, can be overcome by changing our own mind-set. How, we rehearse ethnic music needs to be clear in the director's mind. We must remember that much ethnic music is merely meant to be a motivational processional, work, or gathering song. In most cases, it will not contain drastic musical contrasts or complicated harmonic passages that are effective for both audience and singer alike.

I have found it necessary at times to explain to the singers that what they are learning will be easily learned and will fall flat if new life and energy are not infused every day. This helps to keep their musical expectations aligned with the depth of the music. It also allows them to enjoy the music for more elementary reasons, rather than searching for deep philosophical statements.

Many times I have found that multicultural pieces never really come to life until the actual performance. It is there where all elements (i.e., rhythm

instruments, processing in, dancing steps in ethnic attire or even in a full flowing robe) fall into place. If the piece is easily learned, I will actually wait until the week prior to the concert to “unveil” our grand “spicy” piece.

Unless we provide proper translations, historical sketches and pronunciation guides, their music will not sell. It is becoming the norm to include such information on music meant for wide distribution. I have also found that companies have recordings available or that they are willing to give you e-mail addresses of composers for any questions you may have.

Though you may feel like a lowly high school choir director from Idaho, remember that these composers see you as the person who is paying for their child’s braces. I have yet to receive any negative responses from composers I have contacted.

As a member of a minority population, let me state clearly that few, if any, will be offended by a good faith attempt to promote their culture. If in doubt, find a member of that specific ethnic community and invite them to your rehearsal. Allow them to dictate the acceptability and authenticity of your performance. This is always the best way to deal with all ethnic music.

Too often, we shy away from what and who we do not understand fully. Ethnic ignorance and stereotyping are major problems facing the United States and can be greatly relieved by careful implementation of ethnic and multicultural music in our programs. Perhaps with some of the suggestions outlined above, you will feel comfortable enough to do so.

We all will benefit from a little risk-taking, a little effort, and a lot of cross-cultural exploration.