SOME TIPS ABOUT VOCAL AND CHORAL COMPOSITION
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The ideas I am printing below apply to using words in composition. Since that applies to both vocal and choral music, I've divided it into two areas, voice leading and text setting. Voice leading deals with how different vocal parts relate to each other. Though mainly used in choral music, good voice leading is an important aspect of any music which isn't composed for a single instrument or voice, so the principles have many applications. Text setting applies to both choral and vocal music, though there is generally greater freedom to be more elaborate when dealing with a single voice rather than a group of singers.

HINTS FOR TEXT SETTING

- Choose your text carefully. Make sure you like it and feel comfortable working with it.
- Say it aloud a number of times. Make sure you know how to pronounce all the words correctly if this is not your own text (or even if it is). Nothing ruins a song faster than putting the emPHAsis on the wrong sylLABle. Stressed syllables usually get longer, higher and more notes than unstressed syllables and are usually found on strong beats. Once in a while it is effective to put a musical stress someplace other than where it would be when spoken, but that's only an exception. **FOLLOWING NATURAL WORD STRESS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PRINCIPLE IN MAKING AN EFFECTIVE SONG.**
- In deciding where to put more than one note per syllable, it usually makes more sense to emphasize syllables which end in a vowel or a voiced consonant such as m or n than a hard consonant such as k or p. A hard consonant coming at the end of a long string of notes often sounds unintentionally funny.
- When deciding how to approach the text musically, it is often helpful to find an image or idea in the poem or text which seems very important (for example, the sound of crickets, an earthquake, love so strong it makes the poet's head throb, an atomic explosion; you get the idea) as an activator for the music. For example, a steady pounding piano bass note might suggest the head throbbing, but not necessarily a cricket sound!
- Song structure is just as important as the structure of an instrumental piece. Often a composer will use the poem's structure as a framework for the song, using natural refrains or repeats. Some texts don't have these built-in structural aids, but it often helps to add some to emphasize words or phrases through repetition and to help give the listener a structure to hold on to. Going straight through the text once at top speed (to use an extreme example) often leads to a train wreck.

PRINCIPLES OF VOICE LEADING

Good voice leading, especially when dealing with three or more choral parts, is like doing a jigsaw puzzle. Lots of parts have to fit together for us to see (or in this case hear) what the creator had in mind. Good voice leading really enhances musical ideas and makes all the performers feel their part is important. Poor voice leading has just the opposite effect. Here are some things to keep in mind when using 3, 4 or more choral parts at a time (4 is standard, but these principles apply for more parts as well):

- Keep the parts in a comfortable range for each voice: **Bass**: F an octave and a fifth below middle C to D above middle C is the full range we can expect a choral bass of average ability to sing, with the optimal range from low G to middle C. **Tenor**: B flat an octave and a second below middle C to G a fifth above middle C. Optimal range: C below middle C to F above middle C. Please note: if each part is getting its own staff, the tenor part is written in treble clef with the notes sounding an octave below the written pitches. **Alto**: F below middle C to D an octave and a second above middle C. Optimal range: G below middle C to

C above middle C (in other words, an octave above the Bass range). **Soprano**: B flat below middle C to G an octave and a fifth above middle C. Optimal range: middle C to high F (i.e., an octave above the Tenor range).

- Try to avoid having the parts cross most of the time; it just muddies the texture having the tenor above the alto for an entire line, for example. Exceptions of course work well on occasion for dramatic purposes, but keep in mind that they are exceptions.
- Do not have more than an octave between any two consecutive upper voice parts at any time. In other words, there shouldn't be more than an octave between the tenor and alto notes at any given moment or between alto and soprano. A space larger than an octave tends to make for a real acoustic "hole" in the texture. However, more than an octave can occur between bass and tenor since the bass part tends to fill in the space with all its overtones (low notes have more overtones than high notes).When writing using traditional harmony, try to avoid parallel octaves and parallel perfect fifths. Example: the tenor and soprano lines both go from G to A at the same time, an octave apart or the tenor goes from G to A and the alto from D to E at the same time. The reason to avoid these strong intervals is that they make the upper part sound like an overtone of the lower part, not an independent voice. There are enough things going on already (see above!) that restrict the parts' independence without adding another one.
- Again, if using traditional harmony, try to avoid second inversion chords (that is chords with the fifth of the chord in the bass) unless it is at the end of a phrase (a so-called "cadence") and the keynote chord is in second inversion and then leads to the dominant chord (chord built on the fifth step of the scale). In traditional harmony there are three other very specific instances when a second inversion chord is appropriate, but the example just given is the most common. Second inversion chords tend to be VERY weak and ineffective, so if you aren't sure whether to use one, LEAVE IT OUT and find another chord to use. Your piece will thank you.
- Try to keep leaps small and use a lot of stepwise motion in each part most of the time. Remember that singers, unlike instrumentalists, have no keys or valves to press and must find the notes using their ear and their body. Large leaps are harder than small and should be reserved for dramatic or especially lyrical moments.