



# Melisma

"To Be Certain of the Dawn."  
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- **Wrap-up from the conference:**

- For many conference **handouts** and reading session **lesson plans**: go to <http://ncacda.org/sessionsclinicians-descriptions-and-schedule>
- To view reading session **music packets** for free at the ACDA Online Viewer, go to <http://acda.jwpepper.com>. Sign in with your Pepper ID, or sign up! Packets are grouped by session.
- For **photos** from Immersion Day and conference concerts, go to <http://ncacda.org/beyond-notes-2012-conference/photos>. More to come.

- **National Conference Performance Applications Due APRIL 30**

It's among the most coveted and invigorating choral performance opportunities available: performing at an ACDA national conference. Applications are now being accepted for mainstage choral performances during the 2013 conference in Dallas, Texas. The deadline for performance applications is APRIL 30, 2012. For performance guidelines and online application, go to <http://acda.org/news/conference-performance-applications-due-april-30>.

- **NC Summer Enrichment Opportunities** Here are a few wonderful options for education and enrichment hosted by North Central Division states.

**NCDA Summer Conference: July 8-11**

Doane College, Crete, NE. <http://www.nebraskachoral.org/node/249>

**ICDA 2012 Summer Symposium: July 22-26**

North Iowa Area Community College, Mason City, IA  
<http://www.iowachoral.org/convention/>

**SD-ACDA Summer Conference: August 1-3**

Vermillion, SD. <http://www.choralnet.org/view/257735>

**ACDA-MN 2012 Summer Dialogue: August 7-10**

St. John's University, Collegeville, MN. <http://www.acda-mn.org/events>

- **Melisma Publication Information**

Submit **articles** to David Puderbaugh, editor, at [david-puderbaugh@uiowa.edu](mailto:david-puderbaugh@uiowa.edu) or write David at The University of Iowa, 2767 UCC, Iowa City, IA 52242.

For **Melisma ads**, contact Sheri Fraley, advertising editor, at [sheri.fraley@yahoo.com](mailto:sheri.fraley@yahoo.com).

**Deadlines for Melisma articles and ads:**

Issue	Submit by	Posted Online
Fall, 2012	September 1	October 15
Winter, 2013	November 15	January 6
Spring, 2013	March 1	April 15

- **Website Advertising at [www.ncacda.org](http://www.ncacda.org)!**

Contact Sheri Fraley for details and rates at [sheri.fraley@yahoo.com](mailto:sheri.fraley@yahoo.com).

*Melisma*, the official newsletter of the North Central Division of the American Choral Directors Association, is published three times a year: fall, winter and spring.

*Melisma* has a circulation of over 2,700 members in its six-state area including Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin, and over 200 ACDA leaders nationwide.

NC-ACDA reserves the right to edit and approve all materials.

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David Puderbaugh

### ON THE COVER:

A standing ovation for the memorable NC-ACDA conference performance of *To Be Certain of the Dawn*, recognizing Virginia Sublett, soprano; Ann Cravero, mezzo-soprano; Michael Dennis Browne, librettist; Stephen Paulus, composer; Lee Nelson, conductor; Brian Pfaltzgraff, tenor; Dennis Willhoit, tenor; Brandon Hendrickson, baritone; members of MN State University Concert Choir; NE Wesleyan University Singers; Wartburg College Choir; Madison Youth Choirs; and the Wisconsin Youth Symphony Orchestra.

Spring has come early to the North Central division, and, while it feels more like May than March, the spring term is still in high gear, with performances, contests, and festivals around every bend. I hope each of you is experiencing a musically satisfying semester.

In this issue, outgoing NC-ACDA President Aimee Beckmann-Collier bids us farewell in her valedictory presidential column. Aimee leaves her post as we continue to bask in the afterglow of the fabulous conference in Madison, a gathering shaped by her unique vision and tireless work ethic. The division is grateful for her leadership these past two years, and we look forward to benefitting from her wisdom for many years to come.

One of the many highlights of Madison was the TOM Talk (Thoughts on Music) by Patricia Trump. Her inspirational message of personal transformation resonated with all who heard it, and Trump has graciously allowed *Melisma* to reproduce the text of her speech. If you missed her appearance, or if you were there and simply wish to read it again, you will not be disappointed. It is a must-read for all of us who struggle to find the time required for us to better ourselves, both personally and professionally.

The spring issue of *Melisma* offers some great practical advice, too. In an article reprinted from ICDA's *Sounding Board*, Donna Washburn provides a number of excellent tips on starting a jazz choir, from selecting singers and repertory to the reasons why teaching jazz is important. Boy Choirs R&S chair André-Louis Heywood gives readers his High 5 pieces that speak to the pressing social issues in today's world; in his words, these works "inspire and challenge singers and audiences alike." *Melisma* is also pleased to reprint WCDA R&S chair Benjamin Schoening's High 5 selections for 2-Year Colleges.

If you have produced a choral recording recently, and would like to have it reviewed in *Melisma*, contact me. A review of your work is an effective and very economical way to get the word out about your work, and to keep our readership abreast of the fine music being made across the division. See this issue for more details on submitting a recording for review.

Finally, this issue marks my first full year at the helm of *Melisma*. Thank you for your patience and support as I have learned the position. Moving forward, I hope that *Melisma* will become even more valuable to your work than before. If you have any ideas on doing that and would like to share them, I welcome your thoughts. Best wishes for a successful spring, and a restful and productive summer.

See you in the fall! ■



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Aimee Beckman-Collier

*“Thus came the  
lovely spring  
with a rush of  
blossoms and  
music,  
Flooding the  
earth with  
flowers,  
and the air with  
melodies vernal.”*

—Longfellow  
*Tales of a Wayside Inn,  
Pt. III: The Theologian’s  
Tale: Elizabeth*

“Find the thing that stirs your heart and make room for it.” This quote, by Joan Chittister, is one that informs my thinking on a daily basis. If I may be so bold, I’ll bet it speaks to the mindset of *Melisma*’s readership as well. Being a choral specialist is certainly a heartfelt activity, demanding a great deal of room- and time-making in the pursuit of artistry.

As I near the end of my term as president of the North Central Division of ACDA, I offer thanks to you for the privilege of serving. Choral music stirs my heart and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to serve ACDA, the organization that supports, inspires, and informs our art. My attempts to move the organization forward in small ways, and, especially, to have planned *Beyond the Notes*, the 2012 NC-ACDA conference, have been among the most joyful challenges of my life and I am thankful for the trust you placed in me.

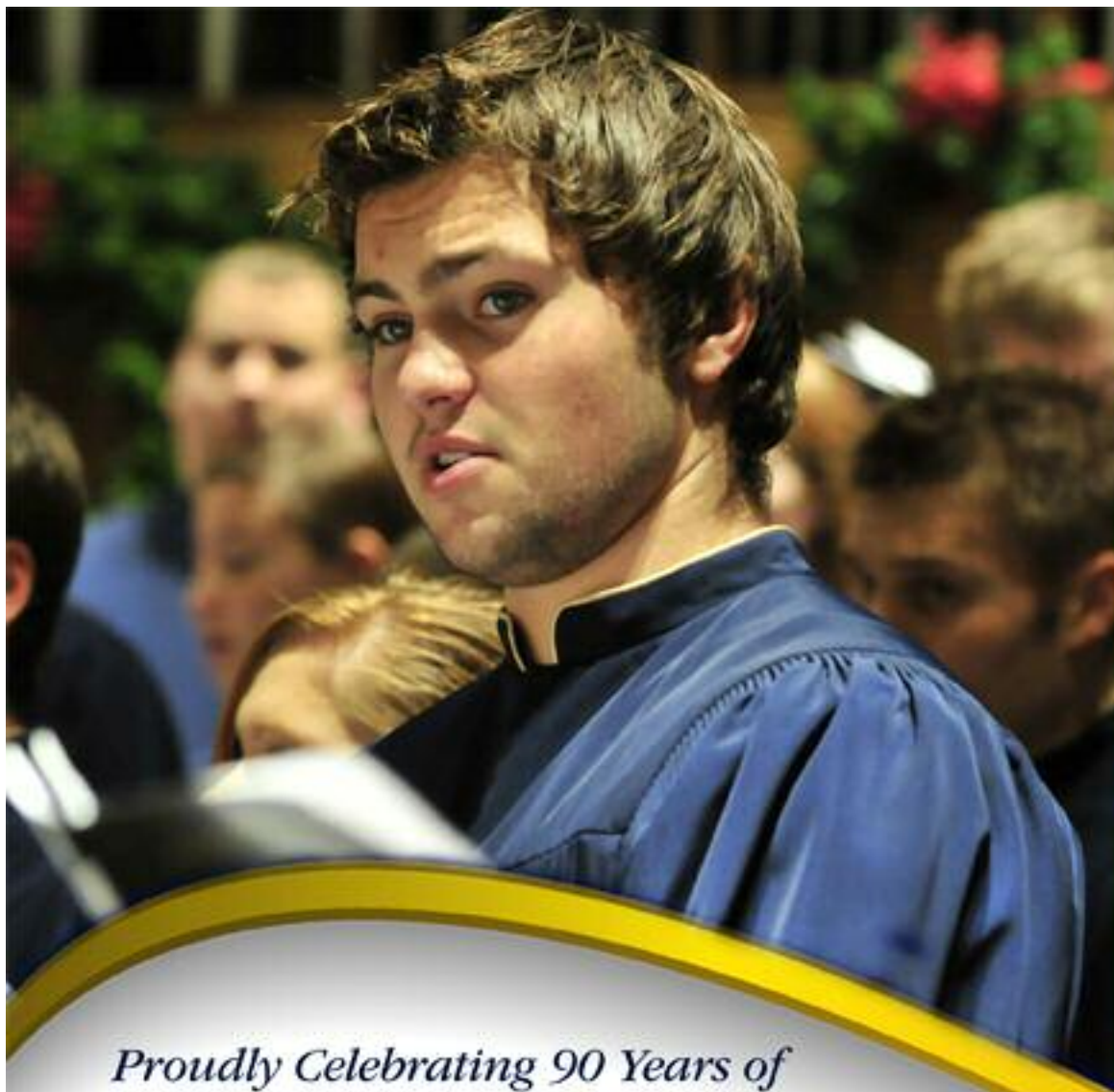
I like to think, so the opportunity to plan the conference around a “big idea” was a wonderful intellectual challenge. I like to organize work, so the chance to provide an organizational foundation, with the huge help of the conference planning committee, was energizing. I like to talk, so working with so many willing ACDA workers, in addition to headliners, honor choir conductors, interest session presenters, and those who assisted us at the Overture Center, churches, and hotels was just plain fun.

Thank you for all of that. It has been humbling to serve those who serve others so fully and so well. Now, more than ever, choral music is important to our schools, churches, communities, and culture. Best wishes as you continue to pursue the thing that stirs your heart. ■



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Dr. Paul Nesheim, Associate Professor of Music,  
Director, The Augustana Choir



Dr. Lisa Grevlos, Associate Professor of Music,  
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Patricia Trump

*“Why do we avoid doing what our rational brain knows we should do? Why is it so hard to change? Well, scientists are beginning to figure it out. It seems we have a divided brain.”*

*The following TOM Talk (Thoughts on Music) by Patricia Trump earned a standing ovation from the attendees at the NC-ACDA conference in Madison on February 10, 2012. Trump teaches at Monroe Elementary School in Des Moines, Iowa.*

Over a year ago, Aimee Beckmann-Collier asked me if I had ever seen a TED Talk. I had not, so I went online and saw these brilliant and highly engaging people, and they only talked for 10 minutes!

So I told her, “These things are great.”

She said, “Good, because I want you to do one!”

Now you might think that would give me pause. After all, she was expecting me to be brilliant and engaging, but I teach in an elementary school. In just this past week I’ve been a Tall, Tall Tree, a Little Teapot, and an Itsy Bitsy Spider. I can do “brilliant and engaging,” no sweat.

So I said, “Where and when?”

She said, “At an ACDA Regional Conference.”

Well, that **did** give me pause. I’ve taught elementary music for thirty-seven years, but I am **not** a choral conductor, and I have **no** expertise in choral music. I often wonder why ACDA ever let me join. So, here’s the good news: I will not be sharing my thoughts on choral music, and you only have to listen to me for nine more minutes.

I want to talk about change. I want to talk about change because we’re here at a conference that, from its inception, has been all about change. The organizers think there should be more to this business of conducting choirs than teaching the correct pitches, and winning competitions, and sending kids to All-State, and getting through Advent without becoming an atheist.

The folks who have worked so hard to plan this conference want you to change the way you do your job. Sadly, research shows most of you won’t change anything. In fact, even those of you who **want** to change...will not.

Let me give you an example. Everyone in this room wants to have good health and everyone knows how to lead a healthy lifestyle: avoid salt, do not eat sugar or fat, do not smoke, do not drink. Have I mentioned your favorite yet? Exercise vigorously every day, and do not forget to get eight hours of sleep every night. Have you **ever** met a choral director who got 8 hours of sleep?

Why do we avoid doing what our rational brain **knows** we should do? Why is it so hard to change? Well, scientists are beginning to figure it out. It seems we have a divided brain. Think of it as the old brain and the new brain.

*Continued*



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## TOM Talk, continued

*“The old brain...  
is why we can  
walk and chew  
gum at the same  
time.*

*The new brain...  
is our conscious,  
reflective, truly  
human brain.”*

The old brain has been evolving for over 600 million years. It is powerful. It makes sure we survive long enough to reproduce. It is instinctive. It is our multi-tasker. It is why we can walk and chew gum at the same time. The new brain, on the other hand, has only been on the scene for about two million years. It is our conscious, reflective, truly human brain.

When scientists try to describe how this “divided” brain functions, or, if you are like me, fails to function, they use a metaphor. Imagine that the old brain is an elephant: strong, capable of great endurance, but not very nimble. Now imagine that the new brain is a rider perched on top of that big elephant. It is the smarter, but far weaker, guiding force that is trying to direct the elephant.

So you come to this conference and hear wonderful new ideas, and your conscious brain (the rider) decides to change. But getting that massive elephant to move is no small feat. Research shows that the rider has a finite amount of strength it can devote to moving the elephant. At some point, the rider will become exhausted and the elephant will take over. If you have tried in the past to change your eating habits, or your priorities in the choir room, you probably started with a burst of good intentions, only to slide gradually back into old routines.

Chip and Dan Heath, who wrote the book *Switch*, have suggested that if we want to change our behavior we have to start by accepting the way our brain functions. To make change happen, we have to do at least one of three things: we have to **help the rider**, or **motivate the elephant**, or **change the environment**.

The rider needs specific directions. He cannot do everything because he doesn’t have the strength, but he can do something if he knows exactly what that “something” is. The elephant just needs to know what the reward is and he will be on board. We all know our environment can make us or break us, so if we are smart, we will shape the path to make it easier for our elephant to go the right way, or harder for him to take a wrong turn.

Let me give you an example: every year my doctor tells me to exercise, and every year I tell him, “Exercise is boring!” In an effort to get this guy off my back, I decided to do the following:

1. I have this glider thing gathering dust in our basement, so I decided to walk on my glider for ten minutes every day.
2. I decided I would watch the monologues from *The Late, Late Show with Craig Ferguson* while I walked.
3. I decided I would do it at home before I left for school in the morning.



Much to everyone's surprise, I've stuck with this plan for over a year, and I am now actually up to 30 minutes a day – every day! What I had accidentally done was follow Chip and Dan Heath's advice to the letter.

First, I helped the rider. I didn't try to become an athlete or lose a hundred pounds. I just committed to walk for ten minutes. The rider knew exactly what to do. Second, I motivated the elephant. I love comedy, especially if it is rude, profane, and inappropriate. If you think this is rare among elementary teachers, you would be wrong. We have a secret life you folks can only imagine. Thanks to Craig Ferguson and a DVR, my elephant got to do something it already wanted to do.

As the final step, I shaped my environment. By exercising in the morning at home, I made it harder to fail. I could not use the excuse that I was tired or I could not afford to join a gym. I had outsmarted my divided brain and made a positive change in my life.

So, how can we help the rider, motivate the elephant, and change our environment so that we can apply what we are learning here in Madison? If you want to help the rider, remember that you cannot do everything, but you can do something. I could not become an athlete, but I could walk for ten minutes. Your singers cannot become excellent sight-readers tomorrow, but I bet they could learn one song without depending on the piano. You do not have time to write a thesis on your contest music, but you could write a really good rehearsal plan for just one composition.

If you want to motivate the elephant you have to make what you do a reward, not a punishment. Give yourself and your singers a gift. Give the gift that every choral director and musician covets more than any other: the gift of time. I dare you to schedule one less concert next year. I dare you to cut one piece from every performance.

As you plan your Lenten services, think less singing and more silent prayer. That sounds funny coming from a musician, but it is no joke. You will find yourself with more time to "go beyond the notes" in the music you do sing, and if your church is like mine, they will argue and complain about the music, but they will have a tough time griping about prayer.

The last step is to shape the environment, and I admit that is a tough one. You do not have to tell this old public school teacher that it is a jungle out there. You do not have to tell a former bargaining team chair that it is an uphill battle to change the workplace. It is not any different if you are a church musician or working for a non-profit.

You probably cannot change your budget, your principal, or your department chair.

You cannot order up a new board of directors. You cannot get rid of

*Continued*

*"So, how can we help the rider, motivate the elephant, and change our environment so that we can apply what we are learning here in Madison?"*



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**OUR LEGACY: A DISTINGUISHED PAST...A VIBRANT FUTURE**



## TOM Talk, continued

your senior pastor. I have looked into blowing up the Department of Education, but apparently that would nullify my retirement plan. Lord knows, you cannot change the governor, though my brothers and sisters in Wisconsin seem to be giving it a shot.

So let's focus on what you can control. You control the repertoire. You control what activities go in your rehearsals. You control how much responsibility to turn over to your singers. You get to determine if traveling, fundraising, and working every weekend is healthy for your choir. If you are not sure about that last one, ask your spouse.

You **can** shape your environment, and do not forget that when it comes to forging a new path, nothing beats having a whole herd of elephants moving together. Look to the right and to the left; you will see like-minded people willing to travel with you.

Change is hard; that is a scientific fact. I know this will not be the conference that changes everything, but it might be the conference that changes something.

It might be the conference that changes you. ■

*"I know this will not be the conference that changes everything, but it might be the conference that changes something..."*



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André-Louis Heywood

*“Just as music has been used as a vehicle to trigger certain emotional responses, we cannot forget music’s use through history to bring about social and political change.”*



No need to preach to the choir. As choral directors, we are well aware of music’s incredible power to move us—to inspire us, to tamper with our emotions, to lift us up, or to cause us to embrace a certain mood. If you have had the opportunity to watch a film with its soundtrack removed, you realize firsthand the importance of the musical score in eliciting just the right reaction from the audience. Just as music has been used as a vehicle to trigger certain emotional responses, we cannot forget music’s use through history to bring about social and political change. Whether it is used to rouse nations to war, or to unite people to march for civil liberties, music’s mark on society is indelible.

As conductors we already play a huge role in challenging and developing our singers through our pedagogy and repertoire. Do we have a role to play in challenging and developing our audiences as well? In addition to providing them with artistry, can we also seek to inspire, challenge and motivate? This idea is enticing to me, but how does one manage to do this in the divisive political and social environment we have witnessed over the past few years in our nation?

I believe the following five selections are fine examples of works that inspire and challenge singers and audiences alike. They address issues such as the environment, poverty, war, and social injustice by appealing to our humanity rather than taking an overtly political stance. As a boychoir conductor, I have found these appropriate for boys’ voices, though they can work for other types of ensembles as well.

**1. *O, Colored Earth*, Steve Heitzeg. SA, piano. Stone Circle Music. Easy; 4’ 30”**

The beautiful yet pure simplicity of the melodic lines and harmonic movement allows us to focus on the message of this moving piece by Minnesota composer Steve Heitzeg. In an age of environmental awareness, and in a time of global suffering caused by war and other human-made and natural disasters, *O, Colored Earth* reminds us of our call to be stewards of the earth and for each other. Repeated mantras in quick shifting meters drive the message home. It is suitable for boys’ groups of all ages, and changing voices can easily be incorporated. This has been an audience favorite, and as a result, it has stayed in our program for the last three seasons.

**2. *Set*, Stephen Hatfield. Unison, 2-part or 4-part. Boosey & Hawkes 979-0-051-47271-0. Medium-Difficult; 4’**

*Set* is just one of Hatfield’s numerous compositions that fit this bill. It takes a fun, lively, semi-humorous look at some of the oddities of North American society. The song pokes fun at our constant desire to work hard and be in control of

*Continued*



# The St. Olaf Conference on Worship, Theology and the Arts

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**Anton Armstrong**  
St. Olaf College  
*Conference Choral Conductor*



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## Boy Choirs, continued



our own lives, and yet there are so many factors over which we have absolutely no control. If one thing is clear, it is that the future is uncertain. We are “banking on a world that is overdrawn,” so the best that we can do is get ready and get set. This piece can be done with just the melody, or up to four parts, making it a fun challenge for any group. Changing/changed voices can easily tackle the low alto lines. Advanced SATB groups should check out Hatfield’s *Hard Shoulder* as another socially challenging work.

**3. *Tikkun Olam (Repair the World)*, Gary Kent Walth. SATB + percussion. Hal Leonard 08745740. Easy-Medium; 3’ 20”**

Borrowing words from a traditional Jewish prayer, the text is intended to serve as a call to action. The composer’s performance notes indicate that “this concept is representative of all those who promote peace, social justice, equality, freedom and care for the earth.” The piece encourages us to consider that our differences pale in comparison to our common goals. With boychoirs, I recommend that the SAT parts be sung SSA, with the bass part covered by any changing/changed voices (it is a very comfortable range for them). Add percussion to make the piece come to life.

**4. *Green Songs*, Bob Chilcott. 2-part. Oxford University Press, 9780193426313. Easy; 6’**

*Green Songs* is a very accessible set of songs by Bob Chilcott – fun to learn, fun to teach, fun to hear, and with a great message to boot. There are four contrasting songs in the set – a bluesy song about turning off the heat (*Be Cool*), an exciting romp enticing us to get out of our cars (*On Your Bike*), a charming ballad about taking care of the earth (*Keep It Good*), and a straight-out rap about the usefulness of the ozone layer (*Nozone*). Boys will enjoy adding some choreography, and even light costuming, to some of the numbers.

**5. *Lay Earth’s Burden Down*, Paul Caldwell & Sean Ivory. Available in 2-part, SSA children, SSA women’s, and SATB at [www.caldwellandivory.com](http://www.caldwellandivory.com). Medium; 3’**

This gospel-style composition calls on the current generation to take up the challenge of healing the “tired” earth. An opening recitative-like monologue clearly states the message—a message later reinforced by calls to action (*We gotta get up!*). Fun, lively, and direct, singers enjoy learning it, and audiences get into it. Caldwell and Ivory have made several versions to satisfy various types of ensembles, so that the vocal lines can be just the right amount of challenge for your singers. ■



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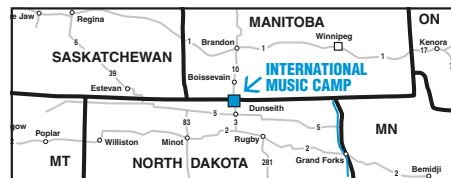
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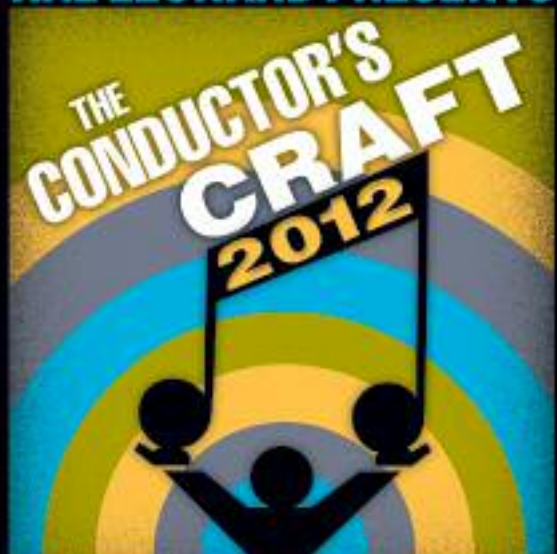
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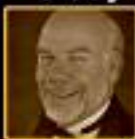
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## Benjamin Schoening

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Benjamin Schoening



1. *In the Bleak Midwinter*, arr. Abbie Betinis.  
The Music of Abbie Betinis  
([www.abbiebetinis.com](http://www.abbiebetinis.com)) AB-047-01; SATB with  
S & A solos, piano.

Abbie Betinis does a superb job of resetting a traditional Christmas hymn. She is able to transform what is a simple strophic work into something filled with emotion and beautiful text painting. The work uses a combination of imitative counterpoint, ostinato, and homophony. The work is not overly difficult for what it is able to accomplish in sounds and textures and will be a rewarding experience for any choir to perform.

2. *The Shepherd's Carol*, Bob Chilcott. Oxford University Press BC 44; SATB divisi,  
*a cappella*.

This is a beautiful setting of the Clive Sansom poem by Bob Chilcott. Chilcott moves back and forth between simple and compound times, seamlessly allowing for proper emphasis of the text. With the exception of the opening and closing soprano section soli, there is not a moment where the ensemble is not creating beautiful sound and Chilcott masterfully carries the musical lines between sections. This is a great work for choirs to master movement between meters and an understanding of feeling pulse internally within the ensemble.

3. *Amazing Grace*, arr. Jack Schrader. Hope Publishing Company GC 1006; SATB,  
piano (optional orchestration).

This is a fun, approachable version of *Amazing Grace* set in the gospel/spiritual style. Schrader uses a slow tempo, creating a wonderful groove for the ensemble to sing the work. In addition, he writes piano licks that sound as authentic as any you would hear from a trained gospel style pianist. One of the unique features of this arrangement is that Schrader arranges the choir as the “backup singers” in the final verse to the piano’s solo on the melody. Overall your choir will find this fun piece to work on and perform.

4. *Bonse Aba*, arr. Andrew Fischer. Alliance Music Publishing AMP 0626; SATB,  
*a cappella*.

This is a wonderful and upbeat setting of the traditional Zambian song *Bonse Aba*. The text means “All who sing have the right to be called the children of God.” The song is rhythmic and can use auxiliary percussion if desired to create a more authentic feel. It is a wonderful introduction to African music as it is compelling for both performers and audience members.

*Continued*



5. *Schicksalslied*, Johannes Brahms. In the public domain. If purchased, I recommend Breitkopf and Haertel ChB 3442 (can be purchased through Lucks music library – lucksmusic.net); SATB, orchestra.

This is a wonderful piece to introduce your singers to Brahms and the choral/orchestral repertoire. Its text is from a Friederich Hölderlin poem. The work is mainly homophonic in texture throughout, making it approachable to singers at this level. It is constructed in a rather exciting ABA form. The initial A section is slow, beginning with an orchestral prelude before the singers enter on text describing the bliss of the gods. The middle B section is at a much faster tempo as the second verse of the poem describes the sufferings of mankind as they have been “plunged into the abyss.” The slower A section returns to finish off the work but in the orchestra only (there is an earlier rendition of Brahms’ work in which the choir reprises a portion of the first verse which can be performed as well). Overall, this a great piece from one of the great masters that is approachable and will be rewarding for singers. ■



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# Jazz Choir for Beginners

—Donna Washburn

*This article first appeared in the February, 2012 issue of ICDA's Sounding Board. Washburn is the 7-12 choir director at Audubon Community School, Audubon, Iowa.*



Donna Washburn

*"Can [the singers] control their vibrato? If they can't, when they sing tight harmonies, they will never be in tune."*

I started my first jazz choir in 1992. I had no idea where to begin. I just knew that I wanted to try a small group that sang on microphones and addressed American music. I couldn't find books or magazine articles that told me what I should do and when I started I didn't even know who to ask. I tried a lot of different things in the early years. Some of them worked really well and some of them were epic failures. Now, twenty years later, I am often asked questions about jazz choir, and while I'm no expert, here are some of the answers I've given to questions that come up each year. These are only my opinions and there are many other ways of teaching jazz that have been extremely successful.

## How do you audition and select your Jazz Choir?

Picking the group is the first thing you need to do. There are many opinions about this process but for me, there are three simple rules.

**1. Never pick more than one or two more students for a group than you have microphones.** I have room for twenty mics in my board, and so I have sixteen students in my varsity group and twenty-one students in my JV group. All students know that if (and the big word is "if") everyone is there, someone may have to sit out on a song. Usually attrition takes care of all decisions for you. My example would be that I have yet to rehearse all twenty-one kids so I haven't had to have a kid sit out yet. When they are all there, I will have the soloist sing off mic. This lets us work on the backgrounds, and it gives the soloist freedom to experiment without everyone hearing their experimental mistakes. The usual number for a festival is sixteen. Make sure you contact festival directors if you have more than sixteen or make arrangements to have sixteen singers per song. You can have any number you want but the IHSMA state rules say that you have to have at least four.

**2. Don't pick students that can't sing in tune or time.** This sounds simple, but it gets more complex as you look into it. In auditions, make sure you give them a chance to sing something they should know. See if they can hold their own part while you sing or play another. If they can't, they can't be in the group. I also have them sing scales – major, chromatic and a blues scale. If they can't get the right number of notes in the scale even after you've worked with them, they will be of no use in jazz choir. Can they control their vibrato? If they can't, when they sing tight harmonies, they will never be in tune. Here's the hard part. I have had students who have been considered pretty accomplished singers (small group 1's, honor choir members, and even all-staters) who don't meet these criteria. Remember they will be on microphones, so if you make a mistake picking your group, you can always turn a singer down or off. *Continued*



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## Jazz Choir for Beginners, continued

*“Everyone needs to be equal in importance, and that will make the group stronger.”*

**3. Don’t pick students who are high maintenance or difficult to work with.** You will be spending a lot of time with them, and they will need to accept each other as a “team.” One “special” singer can ruin the morale of a group. It’s up to you as a teacher to not let this happen. While it’s painful upfront to not select someone who is expecting to get in, it is better to cut the student loose early and get the headaches out of the way before contest season starts.

Never promise solos. Always have a back-up or at least make them think you have a back-up. Everyone needs to be equal in importance, and that will make the group stronger. If you get someone who consistently is late or absent, cut them loose and make the group work without them.

Notice I didn’t say anything about what voice parts to use. Find the best singers you can and assign parts. Don’t try to make a real tenor sing bass or anything like that, but a baritone can be stretched higher or lower. The best group I ever had really didn’t have any sopranos. They were all altos or mezzo sopranos, and I just split them up as the song needed. You will need to pick music according to your group, but don’t take an inferior soprano and leave an exceptional alto sitting still.

### **What music should I do?**

If you want a list of songs, check out the ICDA website: <http://iowachoral.org/rs/Jazz>. The R&S people have assembled a nice list of pieces used by the All-State Jazz Choir as well as from other fine sources. You won’t find very many songs or, in my opinion, the right selections by looking only at the JW Pepper website under vocal jazz. There are some excellent choices listed there but vocal jazz is young enough there really isn’t a bank of “warhorses” like there is for concert choir.

For jazz choir you need three types of songs in any set for contest. The first is a swing tune, the second is a ballad, and the third you get some choice, but it needs to be up-tempo and should be Latin, funk, or very solid rock.

**1. Swing** is eighth notes that have a triplet feel. That sounds simple, but like most things in jazz, you can say it and it seems simple but once you look at it closely it is extremely complex. Describing swing is like a blind man describing an elephant. Once you have listened to and worked with swing, it becomes easier, but until you have a lot of experience, you will be just like that blind man who tries to describe an elephant by touching only the trunk with no idea of the mass behind it.

YouTube is a wonderful resource. You can find many songs with examples of how to interpret them there. Since it is free, there are also many bad examples out there. Be careful and listen for names of performers like Diana Krall, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, Dianne Reeves, Nat King Cole, Harry Connick, Jr., Mel Tormé,



Louis Armstrong, Michael Bublé, Lena Horne, or Frank Sinatra.

Find something that has a place to improvise. All jazz needs improvisation. Without it, it's not jazz. Band directors have a whole bank of songs that are made for educational purposes. Many of them are easier arrangements from the big band groups or songs based on works by jazz artists but written for high school groups. They all have a place to improvise. Choir directors have a couple arrangers who write for high school students, but most jazz choir arrangers write for college groups, making the tunes inaccessible to high school students. Don't pick something that is so hard harmonically or rhythmically that you spend all of your time teaching parts. You need to choose a piece of music where they can learn the parts easily enough that you can spend the bulk your time teaching style and improvisation.

How do you teach style? By listening to the masters. Always approach each phrase of lyric as you would say it in the vernacular. You aren't doing public speaking here; you are telling a group of friends a story. The consonants can't be as hard, and you don't want to accent them like you do in concert choir. It should be much more intimate. If you approach the lyrics in this way, most of the time you will be doing jazz styling. The part of the pulse that is accented is 2 and 4. Most vocalists accent 1 and 3. It is the European way. Have students tap 2 and 4 and make the corresponding lyric louder each time they tap. Eventually they will start to feel it and so will you.

Once you get the outline of the song going, find a place to improvise, even if it's not in the arrangement. Repeat a verse or a chorus, keep the chord structure going, and let them improvise over the changes. All high school jazz arrangements should be straightforward enough to let you put in a repeat for solos. Go around the room and let all students try. Hint... you will have to try also. Don't do this once; do this every rehearsal for a couple of months and they will find something to sing. Once they are singing, you can work with what they are doing. The hardest part of getting kids to improvise is starting; once they've started, you are half way there.

**2. Ballad.** In my opinion, the easiest music to find for jazz choir is the ballad. People have been writing and arranging ballads forever, and there are many choices in places you are used to looking for choir music. I'll only say that with your ballad, remember it's jazz choir, not chamber choir. Do your one, and I emphasize one ballad, and then go back to something that moves. Kirby Shaw, Paris Rutherford, Darmon Meader, Greg Jasperse, Steve Zegree, Roger Emerson, Michele Weir, Phil Mattson, Vijay Singh and many more all have many, many fine ballads out there that are either jazz standards or standards with jazz voicings for you to choose from.

**3. Other selection.** The experts tell us this should be a Latin song. I realized a few weeks ago that there were many students who assumed I was talking about

*Continued*

*“Always  
approach each  
phrase of lyric  
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say it in the  
vernacular.  
You aren't doing  
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of friends a  
story.”*

## Jazz Choir for Beginners, continued

*“Keep your selections sensible, and don’t pick something just because some other choir sounded cool doing it or because your students nag you to sing it.”*

Latin the language like we use in concert choir and didn’t realize I was talking about Latin American Music. Wikipedia says that latin music is a series of musical styles and genres that mixed influences from Spanish, African and indigenous sources. These include samba, bossa, and other upbeat and infectious sounds.

In a latin song, you don’t swing the eighth notes. You need a rhythm section or good vocal percussion. The rhythm has to be steady and contagious. You can often repeat two chords for an improvised solo in this style, making it a great place for young singers to start. With funk you need a good rhythm section or vocal percussion. You can steal things from hip-hop in funk, and this makes it accessible to kids. There are thousands of rock tunes out there, and if you are still trying to sell the choir to your kids or the community, I recommend doing a rock tune. It’s fun, it’s easy, and you can still learn a lot. Try to pick a decent tune that has appropriate lyrics and a good message. Rock tunes are a great place to teach vocal percussion as well as soloing.

The main goal of music selection is to find music that makes your choir sound good. If they like the music, they will probably sound better quicker, but often it takes some time for students to grow to like jazz. Keep your selections sensible, and don’t pick something just because some other choir sounded cool doing it or because your students nag you to sing it. Make sure it’s the right match for your group. If it is a song that takes a really high soprano and you don’t have one, it probably won’t work for you. If it’s a song that relies on improvisation and you’ve never taught improvisation, it probably isn’t for you. Be careful of songs that everyone else is doing. We all get bored hearing the same tunes at festivals, and it’s hard to set yourself apart when you are the seventh group to sing “Chili Con Carne” that afternoon.

For a list of specific tunes, I would suggest the following websites:

UNC Jazz Press: <http://arts.unco.edu/uncjazz/jazzpress>

Contemporary A Cappella Society: <http://www.casa.org>

JW Pepper: <http://jwpepper.com>

ICDA Jazz: <http://www.iowachoral.org/rs/jazz>

SMP Jazz Sound Music Publications: <http://www.smpjazz.com>

Kerry March: <http://www.kerrymarsh.com>

Michele Weir Music: <http://michmusic.com>

### Where to take the group?

Finding a day with no conflicts is the first thing I look for when taking kids to a festival. Working in schools means that we have to be flexible, professional, thoughtful, and supportive of other school programs. Work with the festival manager to get performance times that work for your students, and try to find a date where your kids can go to the festival and not have to return by noon. Sometimes you have to share kids



and make sure that you actually are sharing both ways.

I like to have the jazz choir perform one song at a concert before contest season starts. This gets the choir a performance in front of an audience and helps you find out if there are any surprises you need to take care of before you hit contest. I also make sure that in the middle or the end of contest season we feature the jazz choir at a concert. Home performances are very helpful in getting support for the group. Often we get so busy taking kids on busses that we forget to show them off to the home crowd.

There are festivals with guest artists and there are festivals that are designed more like our traditional contests. Try different ones and find what works for you, your students, and your administrators. You can learn something at almost every festival you go to if you try. If you're always the best choir at a festival, find a new festival where your kids get a chance to hear a group do things better than yours. If you can't place at a festival and you want the kids to feel successful, find an easier festival. There are always new ways to approach learning when you take the kids out. You won't find any that are perfect, but it's always good to get your students out to hear new things.

Keep in mind the goal of festivals is for students to share what they have accomplished and possibly hear new and exciting things. Don't let the "trophy hunt" mentality get so serious that you start competing at festivals as if they were athletic events. They are not; they are part of the academic day and should be about artistry.

### **What to do in rehearsal?**

I've selected a group, I've chosen my music, and I have performances lined up, now what? It's time to start rehearsing, what do I do first? Listening is always a good place to start. Don't always have them listen to the exact arrangement you are doing. A good stylistic recording of the song will do. Copy ideas, steal ideas, repeat things from the recording or whatever you want to call it. It is like a new language, and the more you practice saying it, the more comfortable you will feel using the words.

I always start with the swing tune. You aren't a jazz choir without a swing tune, so start there. Don't try to do too much. Focus on one song and on one verse of the song. Once this much is feeling good and stylistic, move on but not until it does feel good. Next, learn the chorus and put the verse and chorus together. As soon as you have a verse and a chorus, start improvising. Maybe make up some background singer lines that fit in the chord and repeat so you can have a soloist sing overtop. They can sing either the verse or improvise with scat syllables. Just make sure you have the right style happening. Everything needs to be in tune and in time and don't think that it will get better with age. It will get better with confidence but only if you are careful with your approach. If you start the rehearsal by saying we only have fifteen rehearsals until our first contest, you have missed the whole point of jazz choir. Now it's become

*Continued*

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"trophy hunt"  
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## Jazz Choir for Beginners, continued

*“Working with difficult rhythms, extended harmonies, and the exact tuning and control of the voice will only make your students more successful as they approach solo and ensemble contest as well as concert choir.”*

a race to learn a few tunes so we can miss school, and not about learning a historic and truly American art form. You really are better off choosing literature that is accessible so that you have time to really work the details.

After I get them moving on track with swing and improvisation concepts, it is a good time to start the third number. It should be fun and fast to learn. If you work on it for more than four rehearsals and it still is awful, pick something different. It is better to start over now than to beat a dead horse. Get on with a song that might work better. I really only rehearse the group twice a week for forty minutes so there is not much time to waste on a song that I won't be able to make work.

The ballad is the last tune I start. I teach it a page at a time. Never get too much going for their young ears. The ballad is about lush harmonies, and most of the kids will have to get used to the “feel” of the sound because they will not have enough experience with theory to tell whether they are singing the correct chords. If you sing all the way through with this at first you will just confuse them and they won't remember anything. My favorite thing to do is the harmonically hardest eight measures. This is usually in the middle. I drill this and then add four more measures in front or behind and keep going until they can do the whole thing. Most of the ballads don't swing and usually don't have room for improvisation. So while there are many challenges, they are the challenges you are used to working with in a choir.

### **Why teach jazz?**

Jazz is truly an American art form. It is representative of our culture, population, history, and is a very democratic music. Where else can this many diverse groups come together to create something that allows for so much individuality? It is as complex as America and demands that you spend time learning about what makes America truly unique.

From a choral director's standpoint, you create a set of skills with jazz choir students that transforms your choir members into better musicians. Working with difficult rhythms, extended harmonies, and the exact tuning and control of the voice will only make your students more successful as they approach solo and ensemble contest as well as concert choir.

In the many years I have taught choir, I have always found that there was a small group of kids who wanted to spend a little more time, do something extra, work a little harder, and be part of a smaller group than the regular high school choir. I found years ago that what I did with those students who wanted that experience had better be one of quality. I found that the farther I went down the jazz choir road, the more I felt I had used their talents and abilities to their best potential. ■

—Donna Washburn



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