

Hallelujah! (from “Athalia”)

G. F. Handel, edited by Ronald Kauffmann

SATB, Keyboard

Hinshaw Music, HNC 1714, 1999

Athalia, written in 1735 when Handel was 50 and one of Handel’s earliest oratorios, is the story of queen Athalia’s enforcement of the worship of Baal for her Kingdom. In a dream her mother, Jezebel, appears and warns her of Jehovah’s anger. This Hallelujah concludes *Act I* as the temple celebrants proclaim their faith and trust that God will ultimately deliver them.

Such is the background as presented by Ronald Kauffman in the notes included with the piece. All of the trademarks of Handel which make it so vital for both performer and audience are contained in this setting – the rhythmic drive, contrapuntal lines, and joyous harmonies are all in abundance. The one-word text allows (for the music’s sake demands) the musically sensitive choir to interpret the typically Baroque music. A keyboard realization is a part of the piece, though with the proper resources, one might search the complete works of Handel, adding the instrumental parts. The two fugal motives, one bouncy and rising, the other smooth and falling give the possibility of mixed textures while letting the choristers experience the best of the Baroque period by one of its masters. Ranges are accessible for the choir who can competently “handle” Messiah’s Hallelujah chorus. On the top end, the sopranos touch on A5 and the tenors G4 two or three times each and then only briefly. This is music to get the body and blood flowing!

Alleluja! Confitemini Domino

Johann Michael Haydn, ed. Dale Miller

Dedication: *for Nancy*

SATB, organ (reduced from an instrumental score of 2 violins, 2 horns and continuo)

National Music Publishers, CH120, 1999

Michael Haydn, younger brother of the more famous Joseph by 5 years, is a composer of the first rate often unnecessarily overlooked. A court organist in Salzburg for over forty years, his compositional output numbers well over a hundred works, with both sacred and secular pieces from his pen.

This cheerful and energetic Alleluja is one of the many choral Graduals he composed, with verses taken from Psalms 117 and 118. The organ part, which could be played on piano, is realized by the editor from the figured bass and four instruments of the original. There are no markings in the score, letting the conductor interpret the music without preconceived notion.

The voice part leading is exquisite, the singer will instinctively realize that s/he is in the hands of a master composer. Very little polyphony can be found, the words are presented mostly homophonically, as would be expected in works of an 18th century composer. Ranges for all voice parts are extremely reasonable, allowing for many levels of choir to think about this piece. The tenor part (from F3-F4) actually would fit a cambiata voice well, (Junior high honor choir directors, are you listening?) while the simple directness of the message and melodic construct make this work satisfying for any choir.

Jägerchor (Hunter Chorus) D. 797 Nr. 8

Franz Schubert, ed. Robert Carl

SSAATTBB, piano

National Music Publishers, NMP287, 2000

Franz Schubert, though supremely gifted when penning gentle, intimate melodies; also had a robust side, shown in some of the engaging hunting or outdoor songs of *Die Schöne Müllerin* and other *Lieder*. This piece is a chorus from one of his operas, *Rosamunde*.

Four-part men open in a common “hunting” key of D major. The writing is tight and very traditional, lending a great satisfaction to the choir whose men energetically and enthusiastically advance the text. Four part women’s voices essentially repeat the men’s opening with different text, making it a possible time-saver in rehearsal to have the men and women learn their opening salvos together. Only experienced and confident (with leaps) pianists need apply for this short but hearty opera chorus.

When the choir arrives together, a 6 part texture ensues, with the soprano and tenor voices canonically ripping off an arpeggiated dominant seventh chord over galloping alto and bass ostinati. The piano finishes out the 60 measure piece as it began - alone and vigorous.

This work seems a good opener or closer, or to spice up the middle of a set. I strongly suggest the German as worth the effort. The English translation, by Silvia Schmidt, is not only archaic but presents instances of awkward misplacing of syllabic stress in relation to the fast 6/8 meter.

Abschiedslied der Zuvögel (Farewell Song of the Birds of Passage)

Felix Mendelssohn, ed. Robert Carl/English Translation - Silvia Schmidt

SA or TB and Piano

National Music Publishers, NMP288, 2000

From a set of 6 duets published in 1845 near the end of his short life, this is a lovely haunting tune set in g minor. Mendelssohn’s marvelous gift for writing flowing, eminently singable melody is on display throughout the piece. Mostly in thirds and sixths, the two interwoven parts wind their way around gently modulatory passages as one voice.

As with all vocal literature, singing in the original Language is recommended, especially when a stilted English translation is given. In this case, though the poetry (written by Hoffman von Fallersleben, though the edition doesn’t acknowledge that fact) is consistently in the past tense, the English slides from present to past, depending upon the part of the poem. It is highly recommended one sing the German anyway - ever moreso given this translation.

Finally, the tessitura and range of the accompaniment suggest that this would be better served with women’s voices in duet than men’s, and certainly more effective either of those ways than by putting sopranos and tenors on one part and bass and alto on the other. However, given the quality of writing and wonderful melodies and harmonies that sometimes conjure a harmonic progression or two from his oratorio *Elijah*, this is a piece to be recommended as a wonderful introduction to Felix Mendelssohn, as well as a lyrical portrait of an outdoors scene, a subject that so intrigued many 19th century composers.

*Chantez**from Chansons des Bolis d'Amaranthe (Songs from the Amaranth Woods)***Jules Massenet**

SATB choir, piano

Alliance Music Publications, AMP0284, 1999

This is the fifth of five pieces forming the cycle above, all dealing with a favorite subject of the 19th century composer - nature. Though they are written originally for vocal quartet, they may be successfully presented by a chamber choir.

The exuberance of the music, tempo marking *very animated*, is intoxicating. The vocal lines are eminently singable - somehow the most boisterous *Liebeslieder Waltzes* come to mind - if somewhat high in tessitura. They flow happily and tonally in melodic and tuneful phrases, being passed back and forth from section to section, interspersed with lovely homophonic utterances. The piano writing is definitely virtuosic, with running sixteenth notes much of the time, giving your accompanist a chance to really shine. The sopranos top out on a high Bb in the final fortississimo cadence.

The advanced high school or other community or university chamber choir will be the better for tackling this outpouring of the love of nature. Not to be forgotten are the other four movements to this cycle. As for this piece, what a good idea for an opener or closer to a program!

*Before the Paling of the Stars***Leo Nestor**

SATB, Unaccompanied

E.C.Schirmer, 5087, 1997

The Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) text of this Holiday piece paints a vivid picture of the Christ Child's surroundings at birth. The lines are smoothly written, mainly stepwise or small intervallic leaps. Sopranos and basses split occasionally, especially on the last page – the fortissimo climax of the piece to the words “To hail the King of Glory.”

Leo Nestor is Music Director of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington D.C., where he directs two other ensembles in the Washington D.C. area as well. He writes with evident knowledge of the voice – ranges are extremely accessible in this piece (tenors never going above a top-space “e”, for example). The challenges will come in the many added-note chords. Seconds, sixths and ninths abound. However, the mainly conjunct writing and singable ranges should make this a possibility for any college or medium-to-advanced level church/high school choir (with enough men to cover 3 parts effectively).

*O Lady Mine***Stan Hovatter**

TTBB, Piano

Alliance Music, AMP 0219, 1997

A sparse treble piano part of rolled seventh chords leads us into the unison opening of the men in this arrangement for four-part male voices. Stan Hovatter has set a Mortimer Collins (1827-1876) text about a romantic evening in front of a fire with a lady friend.

There are a lot of possibilities for expressive rubato in parts such as “We’ll chat and rhyme and kiss and dine”, or “Let those seagreen eyes divine pour their love and madness into mine.” Needed is a choir that can sing major seventh chord tonalities in inversion well. An advanced high school, a college or community male chorus would likely enjoy this effective setting.

Elliska

Dede Duson

SSA, Unaccompanied

Alliance Music, AMP 0231, 1997

Commissioned by a Houston group directed by Sally Schott, the dedication is to the grandchildren of Ella Schott. The Margaret Schott Hrencher lyrics tenderly and respectfully describe the grandmother and the qualities she imparted to her family. My first thought is that the piece is perhaps too personal for another group to sing, with the name Elliska (grandmother Ella Schott’s nickname?) repeated prominently. But then there are famous settings such “Phyllis is my only Joy,” or “Amaryllis” sung by all sorts of groups.

This is a setting of fragments of melody, alternating between unison utterations and chordal sections. The piece is mainly homorhythmic (though with some challenging divisions of triplets and variations of eighth and sixteenth notes), giving the words a good chance to stand out. The tempo as marked (quarter = 48) and the sometimes exposed vocal parts seem to suggest a more advanced group as performers of this arrangement.

This Train

Gwyneth Walker

SSAATTBB, Unaccompanied

E.C.Schirmer, 5189, 1997

Edition notes state that “Gwyneth Walker is a prolific and inventive composer equally at home writing for the children, amateurs, and professional choruses . . .” If so, this setting of a traditional song is more to the latter than the former.

This energetic arrangement is filled with variety. The writing seems pianistically conceived, sometimes splitting single voice parts into three simultaneous notes. The hefty score of twenty-three pages is for an advanced group, with independent musicians and good ears. It includes multiple tempo changes, styles, and choral effects – such as the “ss” sound representing steam to open the piece. Investing the time and effort into this challenging setting should produce a great audience pleaser as well as a sense of satisfaction from the performers

I cannot Dance, O Lord (from “Ecstatic Meditations”)

Aaron Jay Kernis (Text translated from, Mecthild of Magdeberg)

Dedication: *Philip Brunelle and the Plymouth Music Series Ensemble Singers and Choir*

8 part Mixed Choir, Unaccompanied

Associated Music Publishers, AMP 8148, 1999

Ecstatic Meditations is a collection of four songs lasting 18 minutes and written for a professional ensemble. The third song, I cannot Dance, O Lord, is a rhythmically challenging, intensely energetic setting that only the most advanced choirs will want to tackle. Those that do

accept the challenge will find satisfaction in a driving, effective setting with text such as this: “I cannot dance, O Lord. If You wish me to leap joyfully, I cannot. Let me see You dance. Then I will leap into Love and from Love into Knowledge...There will stay with You whirling.”

Changing meters abound, as do ostinati passed from voice to voice giving the piece an almost hypnotic, though intentionally frenzied quality to it. Though clearly tonal, many minor and major seconds, often in running eighth note values, underline the insistence of the text. The final third of the piece, all set on the word whirling, conveys the word and concept in every sense. The seemingly carefree and out-of-control nature of whirling is achieved in the dichotomy of carefully chosen metrical accents and ever-changing articulated fragments of melody thrown around the choir. Singers in technical command of their voices will find a gem of a piece here.