

Karen S. Nevins, M.A.

406 Jipson Street
Blissfield, MI 49228-1349
734-730-0007 (cell)
Website: karennevins.com
karen@karennevins.com

July 24, 2007

My dear MSVMA Colleagues,

I am most honored and humbled to have been elected to conduct this year's SSAA State Honors Choir! This huge responsibility to you and to your students allows us to walk hand-in-hand on an exciting musical journey! As you well know, literature research and selection is always tedious. My goal has been to select music to challenge your singers while providing contrast, beautiful music and meaningful texts. As I explored a multitude of exceptional SSAA recordings, I finally settled upon some old and new favorites. I also happened upon the beautiful music of a 16-year old composer. My daughter recently reflected on how significantly her 1998 State Honors Choir experience with Charlene Archibeque impacted her musical life. With that, I am committed to creating a memorable experience for your students!

Regional Honors Choir Selections

"Ave Maria" by Brahms (C.F. Peters 661396) was originally written for SSAA voices with organ accompaniment. I selected the C.F. Peters edition for ease of reading its more open score. Brahms adored the solo voice and composed prolifically with an excellent understanding of the vocal instrument. We have all experienced his gorgeous *"Requiem."* To my surprise, I found two recordings of his "Ave Maria" in my personal CD library. As I listened, the tonal contrast between the young San Francisco Girl Choir and Alberto Grau's (more mature) *Cantoria* was absolutely amazing. If you have not heard *Cantoria* and do not own at least one of Grau's recordings, I highly recommend him to you for peaked listening, healthy (unpushed) vocal resonance—and REAL ALTOS! A Brazilian composer and conductor, Grau's recordings include traditional sacred Latin texts and wonderful South American literature.

"John Saw Da Numbah" by André Thomas (Heritage Music 15/1666H) is a great contrast piece. The challenge here is in the opening section, requiring excellent breath support for dynamic development as a preface to the energetic contemporary spiritual text that lies ahead. I'm certain André prefers us to utilize African-American diction appropriate to the traditional spiritual, so consonants will be more subtle in this piece. The gals will have a great time with this—one of our less challenging pieces.

2008 State SSAA Honors Choir Selections

"Kyrie" (from *Missa Brevis*) by Ron Jeffers (Earthsongs). The opening of this piece provides rich layering in sustained vocal entrances. In contrast, inner sections call for free flexibility through moving rhythmic sections that call for adjusted tempos between sections. Clean vocal technique will be critical for the production of healthy resonance and vocal flexibility in this piece.

"Sunrise" by Costas Dafnis was submitted as an original manuscript from his trilogy, "The Pacific." By his invitation, I premiered the piece in 2006-07 with my women, who were so taken by his trilogy that I post-commissioned it in their honor. This young man has been recognized for his instrumental and vocal compositions at previous MENC Conferences and is to be encouraged to continue his work. He will be attending Indiana University this fall. On the MSVMA website, this manuscript is noted as being available through me; however, Costas has indicated his intent to publish and distribute his music through Musical Resources by this fall. I will note any progress or changes in this regard on my website. The piece provides solo opportunity. While harmonies are close, voice leading is easily manageable and there is excellent opportunity for expressive interpretation and significant dynamic contrast.

"Morning's Innocent" by Gwyneth Walker (ECS 5021) is my favorite from her famous set of songs for Women's Voices. With solo opportunities for two to four singers, the opening solo is very sensitive and quickly captures the attention of the audience. Just as my girls beg to sing this piece after hearing it, hopefully your girls will want to bring this one home to you!

“Punching The Dough” by Alice Parker (Treble Clef Press – TC-119) is a rabble rousing and rhythmic contrast piece with comical text, expressing the early American pioneer woman’s rebellion as she aggressively parallels her chores to those of her husband—“While You’re Punching the Cattle, I’m punching the dough!” Singers will be challenged by mixed meter and overlapping rhythmic patterns. As the women learn their individual parts, I recommend they focus upon keeping the eighth note consistent to secure rhythmic challenges. Hoping this comes together swiftly, I may utilize some choreography to make this piece even more fun!

“A Child Said” by James McCray (National – NM 130) is found on our MSVMA Advanced Required list. It provides a lush solo opportunity and includes the haunting voice of the oboe. The lovely text by Walt Whitman will facilitate beautiful phrases and expression. For clarification, unless your newer copies have been corrected by the publisher, there seems to be an error on page 8. Below the triplet, “real-**ty** no death” should be “real-ly no death.” Do you own a recording of this piece you’d be willing to share?

Recorded examples and rehearsal resources

I was thrilled to learn my gifted son-in-law graciously re-designed my personal website as an August birthday gift. The new website software will allow me to upload mp3 examples that are password protected. Publishers are usually pretty accommodating for a minimal fee. Password information will be provided in State SSAA Honors Choir folders. On the other hand, some recordings are available on iTunes or you may have your own recordings. My hope is to allow your students to listen anytime they feel inclined. This will alleviate the need to create a multitude of individual CDs. Please note that logging onto my website should NOT replace the digital part-learning rehearsal CDs available through ChoralTech. Please encourage singers to learn their music early and memorize before that January rehearsal when we will need to develop the music. To date, I have been unable to locate a recording of “A Child Said.” I would be most grateful to anyone who can assist me!!

IPA – Vowel Modification in the choral rehearsal

Through preparation of my own oratorio and opera solos, and in further meeting the challenges of my Lincoln High School choirs, collegiate and private voice students, I finally discovered a gold mine as I began delving into Berton Coffin’s “Belle Canto” method. This book, with elaborate piano vowel modification chart, had lingered a good time in my home library after an ACDA Convention shopping spree. As I explored further into Coffin’s scientific approach to singing it became quickly apparent that Coffin’s goal was to improve resonance and flexibility through modified tongue position—thus the need for our universal IPA vowels across the languages. After applying Coffin’s theory to my vocal and choral teaching, two years ago in Los Angeles, I was thrilled to find the newly published “Prescriptions for Choral Excellence” by Emmons & Chase, which further supported Coffin’s (and Ralph Appelman’s) philosophies on vowel modification in the choral setting. Emmons & Chase further support their conclusions utilizing philosophies from Richard Millar, Vennard and so on.

My goal for working with your students will be to help them seek a beautiful, mature tone--safely and with a goal for excellent, un-pushed resonance. Most young singers produce tone phonetically, which inhibits unification and vocal efficiency. While some of us grew up learning the “old school” three-finger rule, Coffin’s vowel modification quickly reveals that often too much frontal space encourages a pulled back and less resonant (un-tuned) tone.

I realize that the Honors Choir rehearsal experience must produce quick and positive results. In an effort to create some exciting vocal experiences for your singers, I will be utilizing a simple IPA chart similar to that which Constantine Tsolainu utilizes in her “Ensemble Diction” video. I will also provide English examples of these sounds. It will be important for the singer to understand the importance of tongue position with each IPA vowel. IPA should be revered as a most valuable tool to more beautiful singing! Hopefully your singers will find these tools helpful for common challenges as managing syllables that “slip back” into the throat and go out of tune. It is always so delightful to see singers’ eyes light up when a simple modification brings them up out of their seats with joy!

Look for further SSAA Honors Choir updates on karennevins.com

Best Regards

Karen Nevins