

PODCAST #19
CHORAL MUSIC
By Erik Nielsen

Hello. This is the 19th in a series of podcasts dealing with different aspects of music composition and the second of two podcasts on the subject of text setting. In the previous podcast I talked about some basic principles of text setting in the context of music for a single voice. This time our concentration will be on choral music.

It's not as if we haven't heard choral music in these podcasts before. Our earliest example came from the era of 16th century counterpoint as embodied in the English composer Thomas Tallis's **Lamentations of Jeremiah** (PLAY LAMENTATIONS OPENING – 18" FADE OUT AT 18"). From the early 18th century came the coronation anthem **Zadok the Priest** by George Frideric Handel (PLAY ZADOK 1'30" – 2'00"). From the very end of the 18th century we examined the first movement of the Nelson Mass by Franz Joseph Haydn (PLAY KYRIE 2'47"-3'10"). And finally, we had an example from the mid-19th century, the **Shepherd's Farewell to the Holy Family** by Hector Berlioz (PLAY OPENING- 18" FADE OUT AT 18"). Including our example from last time, the 17th century English composer Henry Purcell's aria "When I am Laid in Earth" from his opera **Dido and Aeneas**, that gives us examples from the 16th through the 19th centuries.

Of course, with the exception of the Purcell and the Tallis, all the other examples were chosen to illustrate effective four-part harmonic writing and voice-leading technique. Given that this is a podcast **about** writing for chorus, you might want to review podcasts 13 and 14 in particular because all the material on harmony and voice leading is especially relevant to any discussion about writing for an actual choir. While you're at it, you might also want to check out Podcast 18 again since it discusses text setting. Keep in mind, however, that a composer has somewhat more technical flexibility when dealing with only a single voice than when writing for a four-part chorus, though that has never stopped composers, particularly in the 18th century, from writing virtuoso choral music.

For today's example I thought we would examine a work from an era we haven't covered chorally yet, the late 20th century. The piece in question is a work for unaccompanied mixed chorus, **The Lamb**, by the English contemporary composer John Tavener. It is a setting of a poem of the same name by the English 18th century poet, painter and mystic William Blake and in Tavener's hands the piece is something very special, contemporary-sounding and yet timeless as well.

First a few words about the composer and a caution: there are two English composers with very similar names, John Taverner and John Tavener. The difference is a single letter in the last name and about 400 years. John Taverner (with an r in the middle of his last name) was a 16th century composer mainly of choral music. Our John Tavener was born in 1944 on the outskirts of London. After achieving fame as a composer while still in his late teens he struggled both personally and professionally for a number of years. In 1977 he became a member of the Russian Orthodox faith and since then his work has become increasingly an expression of his spiritual path. **The Lamb**, written either in 1976 or 1985 depending on the source you consult, is a prime example of this. Here is Blake's poem:

Little Lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?
Gave thee life, and bid thee feed,
By the stream and o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing, woolly, bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice?
Little Lamb, who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?

Little Lamb, I'll tell thee,
Little Lamb, I'll tell thee;
He is called by thy name,
For he calls Himself a Lamb.
He is meek, and He is mild;
He became a little child.
I a child, and thou a lamb,
We are called by His name.
Little Lamb, God bless thee!
Little Lamb, God bless thee!

The poetry combines the gentleness of a lullaby with obvious Christian imagery and Tavener captures that in a unique way right from the beginning. The music is not written in any meter but has dotted lines marking the ends of phrases. Over the beginning are the words “With extreme tenderness—flexible—always guided by the words.” The work begins with the sopranos singing the first line alone. (PLAY FIRST LINE SOPRANO.) Note how it begins and ends on the note G rising only to a B and going below only to an F#. This is important because as the sopranos repeat their opening music with the second line of text the altos join them, beginning in unison but then singing an exact inversion of the soprano line. (PLAY FIRST LINE ALTO.) Let's listen to the first 2 lines of text. (PLAY OPENING -18".) You may not have noticed but the altos briefly went above the sopranos for one note near the end as a result of the inversion. You may also notice that the only places Tavener uses melismata, that is, using more than one note per syllable, are on the important words “Lamb” and “who” in the first line and the corresponding place in the second line. The composer is very careful to save this technique for places of emphasis. As you listen take note of them.

Perhaps you're beginning to realize that while the piece is superficially very stark and simple, Tavener is using some rather sophisticated contrapuntal techniques. In fact, he's using the mirror forms so beloved by Medieval and Renaissance composers. In the next two lines the sopranos sing again and this time the fourth line is the exact retrograde of the third line, that is, it's the third line's music sung backwards. (PLAY SOPRANO LINES 3 & 4.) In the fifth and sixth lines when the altos sing with the sopranos, you guessed it, they are singing the soprano line in inversion. Here's the alto line alone. (PLAY ALTO LINES 5 & 6.) What this means is that the altos' second half of this section is the retrograde inversion of the soprano opening line. Instead of this (PLAY

LINE 5 SOPRANO) we get this (PLAY LINE 6 ALTO). Here they are together singing lines 5 and 6. (PLAY 29"-41".) There's also something else going on here which you can't really hear but can only see in line 6 in the score, namely that visually the shape of the two parts loosely describes a letter x. This is an old trick that many composers, most notably Bach, used in sacred Christian music. The letter x is the first letter of the word Xristos, which is Greek for Christ.

Okay, so all this sounds really abstract and intellectual, but Tavener is just leading up to the ending of the verse, where he takes the opening line in soprano and harmonizes it in four parts. Let's listen to the ending of the verse so you can hear it as the culmination of all that preceded it. Notice the places where the composer places a melisma and note also that he has the final line of text in which the music is a repetition of the previous line sung in augmentation, that is, twice as slowly. Finally, note Tavener's wonderful use of root position in the bass and its contrary motion against the soprano which give structure to the harmony. (PLAY 43"-1'25".)

The second verse makes only two changes from the first verse. This time all voices sing the entire verse alternating unison lines with those in which the tenors and basses double the sopranos and altos, respectively, an octave lower. The second change is that the verse begins mp as opposed to the p which opens the first verse. In a piece in which no crescendi or decrescendi appear and in which all the music except the second verse opening is marked either p or pp such a change is significant.

Short and deceptively simple, I think **The Lamb** is a work of great beauty and tenderness which will greatly certainly repay the time spent studying it to any composition student who wants to write effective choral music.

There are so many great choral works by composers from Guillaume Dufay in 1450 or even earlier through Arvo Pärt and Morton Lauridsen today that it's impossible to come up with a comprehensive listing, but here are some fairly short pieces which illustrate great choral writing:

From the 15th century, **Sancta Maria** by John Dunstable; early 16th century, **A Robyn, Gentle Robyn** by William Cornyshe; **Oh My Hart** by Henry VIII (yes, **that** Henry VIII; whatever else he may have been, he was a good musician); late 16th century, too many to name but **Ave Maria** by Tomas Luis da Vittoria and **If Ye Love Me** by Thomas Tallis are great examples.

From the 17th century, almost anything by Claudio Monteverdi; try **Ave Maris Stella** from the **Vespers of 1610**; 18th century, Bach, Handel or **Ave Verum Corpus** by Mozart; 19th century, try choral selections from the **Liebeslieder Waltzes** by Johannes Brahms; in the 20th century Gustav Holst, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Benjamin Britten and Zoltan Kodaly wrote fine choral pieces either based on folk songs or inspired by them. In our own time Pärt, Lauridsen and Tavener are certainly three composers of fine choral works. And this list doesn't even include choruses from opera or musical theater.

In summary then, if you want to write successful choral pieces, choose your text carefully, become familiar with it, follow the natural stresses of the words as much as possible, remember to use effective voice leading and vary the texture and you too can write effective choral music. Wait a second. Texture? What does that mean? Listen next time and find out.