

Compelling Concert Programming

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We had the experience but missed the meaning.
T.S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Party*

A performance that relies on the music alone is possible, but it might not be enough to justify the interest of a new generation for whom such a large number of other life experiences are available. The view that only the music matters might be a worthy ideal, but if it alienates more people than it attracts, it risks compromising the human connection that is its very purpose. We cannot afford to appear to be in denial of our audience. The event has to be as exciting as the music itself.

The Silent Musician Why Conducting Matters, Mark Wigglesworth, University of Chicago Press, 2018

Collaboration seeks to merge ideas, creativity, and tasks to share in the personal outcome. It leans on the idea that no one individual is the sole storehouse of knowledge and wisdom. Rather, the idea is that collective wisdom and knowledge will provide more ideas with greater breadth, and that then will lead to a stronger outcome.

Philip A. Swan, *Teaching Music Through Performance in Choir, Vol. 4*, GIA, 2017

To think I would've never learned what took place in my own hometown so many years ago if we had not encountered this piece is eye opening. I've had such long conversations with my parents about the things I was learning and my own family history, and I am so thankful to this beautiful work of art for bringing this knowledge to me. I think it has truly made me a much curious person. I have never felt more touched or moved by a piece of music in my life.

Penn State Concert Choir member (3rd year, soprano)

Before the Repertoire

Creating a compelling concert program is like creating a memorable meal. Both take time to construct. Both require quality and nutritious ingredients presented in a logical and attractive manner, to titillate the senses and leave the consumer feeling replete.

More Than Music

- Anniversaries, local community issues/interests...sensitivity/awareness
- Create a collaborative community – search for stakeholders
- Determining outcomes
- Need for long term planning
 - Research – reading, libraries, museums, organizations
 - Logistics – nuts and bolts of the project, including funding

Programming

Multiple works: engaging music, variety, pacing, connections

Commissioning: Who? What? Composer/Conductor relationship, cost, contracts

Include other groups (not necessarily musical)

Engaging with Singers

Preparing singers well before the downbeat

Short writing assignments – pre/during/post

Video resources? Share electronically, or play at retreats, special meetings

Interviews (live or video) with composer, librettist, people with experience of subject matter

Field trips

Engaging the Audience

Attracting new audience members – buzz, sharing programs

Pre-concert exhibits

Pre-concert lecture

Pre-concert audio recordings or multi-media

Multi-media during the performance?

Post-concert Q&A

Possible Themes:

- Composer/poet anniversaries
- Genres – Madrigals and Mass Movements, Cantatas to Calypso, Motets to Motown, Eclectic Mass, Music for the Masses
- Scientific Discoveries/Advances
- Nature, Creation
- Commissioners/Commissionees
- Timepieces, Passing of time (age, seasons, night and day)
- Underrepresented composers and/or poets
- Sacred and Profane
- American Melting Pot
- I Hear America Singing
- Royalty/Fit for a King/Queen
- Relating music to historical events
- Battle and Death (Swan)
- Community inter-generational concert
- Interesting juxtapositions i.e. Billings/Mozart
- Complete sets of pieces – Ravel, Hindemith, Debussy, Finzi, Emma Lou Diemer etc
- Choir and single instruments (families)
- Letters
- Folk songs
- Northern Lights
- Dance
- Title of one piece (or poem) as an overall theme
- Songs (and/or Worship Songs) of Old
- Music from the Stage
- Displaced composers/peoples
- Related readings

Examples of Recent Subjects/Compositions

before and after nature – David Lang, SATB, clarinets, cello, bass, piano, guitars, percussion, 2025
Mass in Exile – Mark Buller, SATB, guitar, percussion, strings, 2023-2024
Mass for the Endangered – Sarah Kirkland Snider, SATB, 12 instruments, 2018
Memoria – Scott Eggert, SATB, 3 trumpets, 2 trombones, bass, piano, synth, 3 perc, 2018
Fire in my mouth – Julia Wolfe, SSAA, children's/youth choir, orchestra, 2018
Mass for the Oppressed – Emerson Eads, soloists, SATB, strings, piano, perc. 2016
Considering Matthew Shepard – Craig Hella Johnson, SATB, small instrumental ensemble, 2016
Please Stay – Jake Runstead, SATB, piano, soloist, 2016
Consent – Ted Hearne, SSSSAAAAATTTTBBBB, 2014
Seven Last Words of the Unarmed – Joel Thompson, TTBB, 2vlns, vla, cello, bass, piano, 2014
Anthracite Fields – Julia Wolfe, SATB, clarinets, cello, bass, piano, guitars, percussion, 2014

Sourcing Underrepresented Composers and Less Familiar Repertoire

Non-Idiomatic Choral Music of Black Composers (Marques Garrett)

<https://www.mlagmusic.com/research>

Institute for Composer Diversity Composer Database <https://www.composerdiversity.com>

Hildegard Publishing Company -women composers past and present www.hildegard.com

Orange County Women's Chorus database of women composers (not just music for upper voices):

<https://ocwomenschorus.org/>

Women Composers by Period – Oxford Music:

<https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/page/Women-Composers-by-Time-Period>

McGill Database of Choral Music by BIPOC Composers

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1vWLIEn5zWz0FwNNTN2p6TyOteG-zbdBwQOmYclwHs9k/edit#gid=0>

African Diaspora Music Project

<https://africandiasporamusicproject.org>

Major Orchestra Librarians Association (MOLA) – list and links of numerous resources for underrepresented composers

<https://mola-inc.org/p/education>

Rowan University library – list and links to databases, reference works and catalogs, anthologies etc.

<https://libguides.rowan.edu/musicdei/repertoire>

Publisher websites

Graphite Publishing <https://graphitepublishing.com>

MusicSpoke <https://musicspoke.com>

SeaDot <https://www.seadot.com/composers>

Other website resources

WMEA The Great Choral Treasure Hunt

https://wmeamusic.org/files/2016/12/CMP_GreatChoralTreasureHunt_L.pdf

Recommended Less Familiar Choral Composers (by no means comprehensive!)

Rafaela/Vittoria Aleotti
Elizabeth Alexander
Kathleen Allan
Robert Applebaum
Ysaye Barnwell
Amy Beach
Tine Bec
Alex Berko
Abbie Betinis
William Billings
Margaret Bonds
Brandon Boyd
B. E. Boykin
Catherine Dalton
Emma Lou Diemer
Melissa Dunphy
Reena Esmail
Emily Feld
Vivian Fung
José Galvan
Marques Garrett
Stacey Gibbs
Katerina Gimon
Jocelyn Hagen
Adolphus Hailstork
Christopher Harris
Fanny Hensel
Stanley Hoffman
Milk Kilstofte
Caroline Mallonee
Undine Smith Moore
Shara Nova
Knut Nystedt
Shawn Okpebholo
Roxanna Panufnik
Rosephanye Powell
Michael Bussewitz Quarm
Andrea Ramsey
Zanaida Robles
Marie-Claire Saindon
R Murray Schafer
Moir Smiley
Derrick Spiva Jr.
Joan Szymko
Christina Whitten Thomas
Joel Thompson
Michael John Trotta
Dale Trumbore
Mari Esabel Valverde
Tadeja Vulc
Ellen Gilson Voth

Brandon Waddles
Tracey Wong
Hyo-Won Woo

Further Reading

- Apfelstadt, Hilary. "First Things First: Selecting Repertoire." *Music Educators Journal* 87:1 (July 2000): 19-22, 46
- Barenboim, Daniel. *Music Quickens Time*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2008
- Budiansky, Stephen. "The Kids Play Great. But That Music..." *Washington Post*, Sunday, January 30, 2005.
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A46383-2005Jan29.html>
- Denney, Alan. "Ours To See Emerging Trends in Today's Choral Compositions." *Choral Journal* 60:3, p.8-20 (October 2019)
- DiOrio, Dominick. "A (Somewhat) Brief Guide to Commissioning New Music." *Choral Journal* 59:4, p.24-32 (November 2018)
- Menk, Nancy. "Composers Responding to Tragedy A Conversation." *Choral Journal* 59:4, p.10-22 (November 2018)
- Reynolds, H. Robert. "Repertoire is the Curriculum." *Music Educators Journal* 87:1 (July 2000): 31-33
- Shrock, Dennis. *Choral Repertoire*. 2nd edition. New York, NY: Oxford, 2022
- Swan, Philip A. The Collaborative Conductor: The Maestro Me Vs. The Art of We. In *Teaching Music Through Performance in Choir, Vol. 4*, Chicago,IL: GIA, 2017, ed. Jo-Michael Scheibe.
- Swan, Philip A. Community Collaborations: Relevant Programing that Moves Beyond the Classroom and into the Community. In *Teaching Music Through Performance in Choir, Vol. 5*, Chicago,IL: GIA, 2019, ed. Hilary Apfelstadt and Jo-Michael Scheibe.