

# PERSPECTIVES ON PROGRAMMING PEDAGOGY

JAMES M. MEADERS

**I**s there ever a time that choral conductors are not thinking about programming? Whether perusing composer websites, combing through the publishers' stalls at a conference, chatting with colleagues, or attending reading sessions, the programming search is unending and can be daunting, invigorating, frustrating, and enlivening all at once. We are continually challenging ourselves to

increase the breadth of our singers' experience—to find pieces that are age-appropriate, pedagogically sound and well-crafted, socially enlightening, and enjoyable to sing. We consider our audiences, acoustic environments, strength of sections within the ensemble, and overarching educational value. The task is always in front of us.



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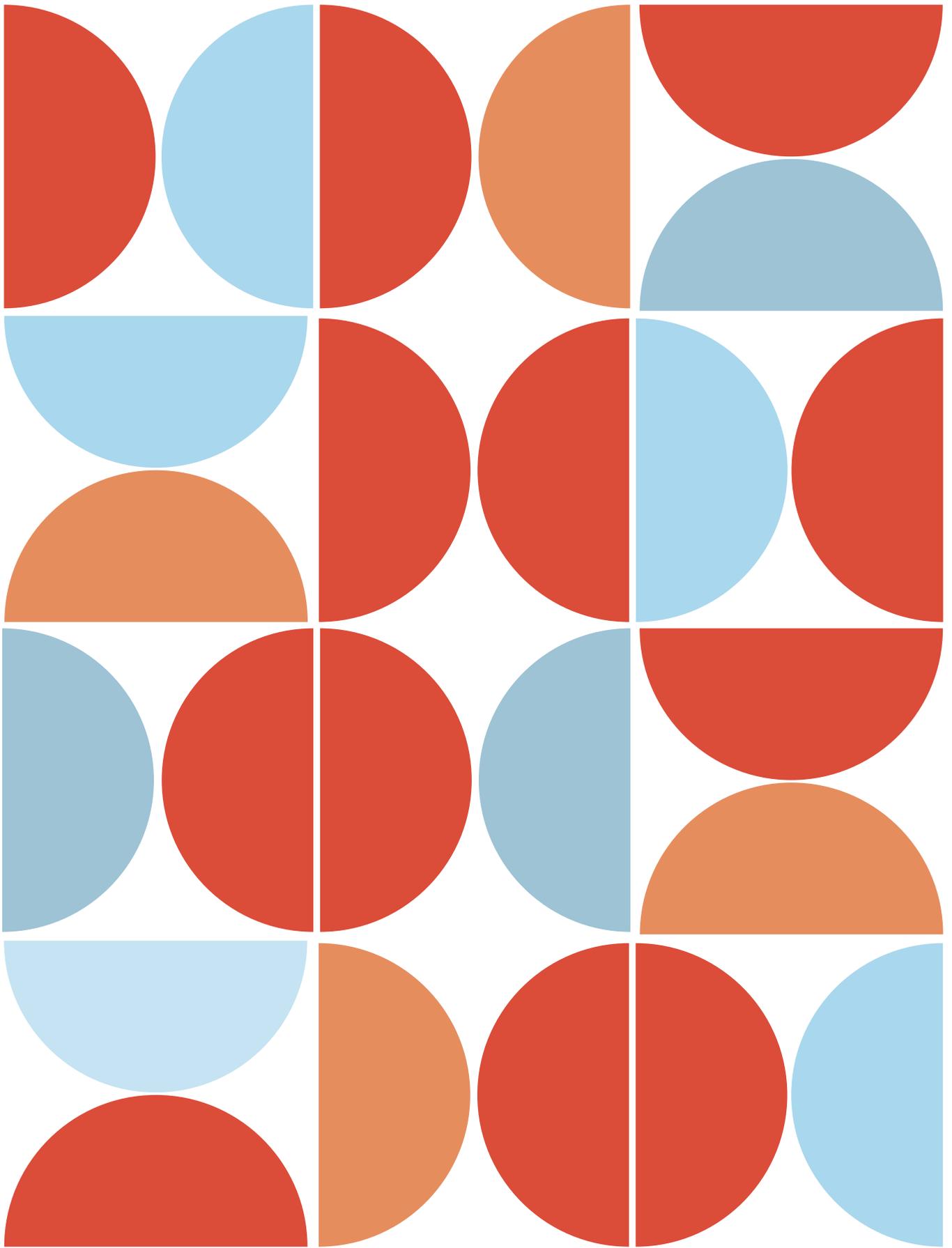
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The following article contains perspectives on the pedagogy of programming from several colleagues across the country who represent varied regions of the United States and choose repertoire for a broad spectrum of performing ensembles—from young singers to professional, from church to community to university. Each interviewee received the same four questions to answer, and then each received three additional questions and were asked to choose only one to answer. Their responses were insightful and inspiring.

## **What is your process of designing a concert program, and what do you believe are the essential elements of an ideal program?**

**BOYD:** I view programming much like a preacher prepares a sermon, a scholar researches for a lecture, or how a politician would approach preparing for a debate, and that is by choosing a subject or theme that is relatable, inspiring, and challenging for all who will experience the process (the singer) and product (the singers and audience). As a person who enjoys options and variety, I try to cover as many styles as possible when choosing literature, unless the program focuses on an upcoming significant historical anniversary or time period.

**DUFFY:** The lure of a strong, live choral concert arc is the siren song of the conductor's pandemic. Programming ideas came to me like a tease during quarantine, lingering promises of concerts to come. The ideal concert program launches the audience to a hidden world, filled with multi-layered meanings, chameleon tone colors, human urgency, and the beauty of new understanding.

One of the many things I learned from my teacher, Jo-Michael Scheibe, is how much the technical considerations of the jigsaw puzzle program pieces can dictate overall success. For example, opening with a melodic selection with long lines builds the choir's confidence and relaxation. Key relationships, and the way we navigate between them in our program order, strengthen the weave between works. My teacher, Nick Strimple, suggests avoiding strict adherence to a monolithic concert "theme" when it causes more constraints than creativity.

Concepts like "themes" are malleable: they can pres-

ent in pairs or groups or cycles. One thematic idea or subject can lead to another, telling a story, or multiple stories, or just painting soundscapes before veering into a song with purpose or protest or promise. The concert program is not just for an audience, but for the choir, as well, which has journeyed through time to culminate the rehearsal arc. We create the program-world that we want to live and breathe with our ensemble. Our job as conductor-creators is to reveal that world, first to the choir, and then to the audience, in the most vibrant way possible.

**FOSTER:** I work to balance numerous pedagogical considerations with repertoire that will also inspire my students and listeners/audience and get them excited about our program. My ideal program would include songs from multiple eras and genres, using multiple languages, and including songs from non-western composers that use non-traditional techniques. I also try to order the concert with contrasting pieces that will keep the audience engaged. I give special consideration to the sets that open and close the concert. Lastly, I try to make sure there are no abrupt or dissonant key shifts from one selection to the next (I rarely organize the music for a concert in "date of origin order").

**OWENS:** Designing a concert program is a three-step process for me. First, I consider my choir's ability and limitations. Second, I consider my audience that will be hearing this concert. I choose differently for a TMEA performance than I do the fall concert at Martin High School. Third, I consider how I want to musically "stretch" my students.

**RINSEMA:** Designing a concert program is an endless pursuit of the "perfect" arc. Within that "macro arc," the repertoire creates ebbs and flows to help create an effective programmatic flow. I decide early on how I want the audience to be welcomed to the experience and how I want them to feel at the end of the experience, and use these two points to devise the macro of the program. I always want to engage the listener from the very first note. That can be accomplished with something big and boisterous, or close and intimate. It can be a procession or a solo voice, but it has to be something that earns their



attention from the very beginning.

Likewise, sometimes I want the listener to jump to their feet and other times leave in contemplation. So I usually decide on my opening and closing pieces of the concert and also of each half of the concert if there is an intermission. Once I have the “bookends” programmed, I take all of the elements that make up each individual piece into consideration (key, meter, tempo, rhythmic and harmonic complexity, text, language, style, genre), and I consider how these elements of each individual piece relate to all of the other works on the program and how it contributes to the overall flow and arc. I will often play around with the placement of each piece until it finds its “place.” Sometimes this involves putting all of the octavos on the ground and moving them around.

**WYERS:** I enjoy working thematically. Choral music utilizing imaginative poetic texts is ideally positioned to tell stories from across the human experience. If I can also create a feeling of progression or “plot” throughout the program, all the better. Some themes make that easier than others. Over the years, some of my favorite concert titles have been “The Explorers Edge” (songs of exploration across the ages—choristers wore head lamps in complete blackness for part of the concert!), “Burning the Bridge” (music about building and breaking bridges in relationships, with some choreographed numbers), “Fur, Felt and Feather” (a concert exploring the trials and celebrations of American pioneers), and “The Unbreakable Mirror” (songs about water, including Dominic Argento’s enigmatic *Walden Pond*).

I believe variety is essential but can be achieved in many ways—tempo, texture, key, language, country of origin, instrumental accompaniment/a cappella, as well as standing position for the chorus (on stage, in the audience, balcony, etc.) or use of lighting, narration, or surprise additions of recorded sounds in the hall. I have learned so much from other conductors who have taken risks with their programming and created fascinating, provocative program realizations.

**Do you work with stylistic ratios in mind? In essence, music from the canon in relation to new music?**

**BOYD:** The concert theme, choir’s ability, and the overall goal of the concert always determine my choice in literature. More importantly, as a conductor-teacher, I believe it is important to program music of many time periods to show that contemporary writers have been influenced by the masters. Of course, I promise diversity in our literature, but I will be the first person to admit that it amazes me that composers could be as creative as they were without access to music resources such as Apple music or YouTube. I also feel that contemporary and living composers deserve to see their music performed. There is no greater reward than hearing your musical thoughts carried out by an orchestra, chamber group, choir, or soloist.

**DUFFY:** A “canon” is always a work in progress. The best choral news of 2020, in my opinion, is that the Euro-centric, white-male-Christian-composer-based canon long imposed on us is bursting open, making space for composers and musics past and present that have been considered outliers—or, more bluntly, *outcasts*—from the canon. This expansion has been developing for some time, gingerly, tactfully, and slowly. The movement for racial equity in 2020 ripped the band-aid off the process and gave the choral community the ignition we needed to do the job now. Time will tell how well we reinvent the canon today—which musics we will include; which we will reclaim from the past; and which we will inadvertently exclude, leaving a treasure for a future advocate.

In terms of programming works from the aforementioned historic canon, I like to prioritize connections, contrasts, and access points. For example, I introduced the University of Montana Chamber Chorale to Marques Garrett’s setting of “Done Made My Vow to the Lord” together with Arcadelt’s *Il bianco e dolce cigno* to discuss the concept of code switching and hidden messages. We addressed how the performers of the Renaissance madrigal luxuriated in double entendre for sport—or rather, for art—whereas the original creators of the Negro Spiritual obfuscated the meaning, the oppression, the secrets, and the interpretations under the surface of the songs by absolute necessity. Finding a way into the music—establishing a degree of awareness of the position of the original artists, composers, creators, and performers—builds our choristers’ empathic librar-

ies. It enables them to approach the next piece with a critical mind and open heart.

**FOSTER:** I am a strong advocate of performing new works by living composers. The collaboration between my students and the composer can be of immense pedagogic value; plus, it is great for PR and recruitment of new singers. My normal ratio is probably 70-80% works from the canon and 20-30% new works.

**RINSEMA:** Because championing new works and commissioning works has been an important part of Kantorei's history, and because I, too, am committed to creating new art, much of our repertoire is contemporary. But I am always looking to bring to the singers and our audiences some of the canons in the choral repertoire. It's been fun to program some staples of the choral repertoire that Kantorei hasn't performed in the past because of their focus on new music. I've been able to introduce them to some of the music of Brahms, Mendelssohn, Britten, Hindemith, as well as some earlier music by Josquin, Schütz, Tallis, Palestrina, Byrd, etc. they'd never performed previously, so that has been a nice surprise. If you looked at a full season, I would say that probably a quarter of my annual programming has been devoted to the canon/major composers.

**WYERS:** I think so. It's fair to say that conductors today are challenged to reflect the issues of our time, especially offering support to living composers, while also finding ways to advocate for canonic works of the past that are still relevant to modern audiences. There was a trend awhile back where all pieces performed at conferences seemed to be new, and yet we don't want to swing too far on the other side of the pendulum and only "preserve museum music" rather than "curate new music."

In that way, a stylistic ratio approach could be useful at least some of the time. Most importantly, committing to regularly program women composers, BIPOC composers, and celebrating indigenous musics from across the globe is essential to moving our choral culture forward into the next decades.

**Have you ever made a programming mistake? If so, how did you deal with it? Are there pitfalls to which we should all be more attentive, and do you have any biases that you embrace or avoid as you make program decisions?**

**BOYD:** One of my biggest mistakes was programming a concert titled, "O, for a Thousand Tongues," of twelve pieces in twelve different languages. You can only imagine how that went—not so well! I did not estimate the time it would take to teach the text and meaning. It dawned on me at the dress rehearsal that the singers learned the texts' pronunciation but had no emotional connection to its meaning or purpose. From experience, I now create a chart to show the level of difficulty in all the components or concepts to learning a piece that we sometimes think aren't as important (i.e., understanding translation, historical relevance, meaning behind the physical movement, etc.) to help guide my teaching process and the message I hope to pass along to those who attend the performance.

**DUFFY:** I am a people pleaser, which gets me into trouble, especially when I say, "yes," to extra things that overload the choir. Many of my mistakes involve over-programming or selecting repertoire that is too difficult or time-consuming for the choir. These decisions entangle the singers in the resulting stress of trying to deliver our best product on less-than-ideal repertoire under pressure-cooker circumstances. No one enjoys that sort of choral experience. One gift of directing modified in-person choirs during COVID-19 is the release from the spinning wheel of urgency to produce and program too much music for too many projects. Rehearsals become glorious sanctuaries from expectation. It's jaw-dropping to see how much we can accomplish when the only vehicle driving our intensity is our imagination.

**FOSTER:** My usual programming mistake is to over-program or plan for too much music. As we near the final stretch before our annual spring break choir tour, I inevitably have to remove selections from the program. Because my Chamber Singers perform so frequently during the year for a variety of events that



require unique repertoire, we end up with a folder that is way too fat. So, I have to make decisions about what should stay and what should go—truly one of my least favorite disciplines.

If I have an unhealthy bias, it would probably be to lean more toward the challenging repertoire and away from easier rep. I think my singers could benefit from easier rep that would enhance their phrasing, intonation, ensemble blend, etc. Besides, in a program that is 1.5 hours in length, having some music that gives the voice a rest can be helpful. I have definitely been guilty of creating a program that is taxing on the voice, if not also the listener.

**OWENS:** If I realize in the early stages of teaching a piece that I have made a mistake, I have the students return it and change the piece. If it takes me longer to realize that the mistake has been made by me (which most are) then I just deal with it and go forward. Example: One of the pieces I chose for my 2008 TMEA Women's Choir program was not working. Programs were printed, we had rehearsed it, and it was three weeks until performance. A colleague came to listen to the choir and literally said, "Don't do that piece." My response was, "It's already in the program." His response, "People will remember a bad performance much longer than if the selection was in the program and not done."

**RINSEMA:** I'd like to think that I've caught my programming mistakes prior to standing on the stage! Yes, I would say that some of my mistakes have been in over programming concerts, especially with thematic programs. When I've worked to develop a good theme, I find that there seems to be a never-ending flow of repertoire, and just when I think the program has settled, I come across something new I'd like to add. Unfortunately, it is often only when we get into rehearsing the repertoire that I realize there is far too much music. I try to aim for a little less than sixty minutes of music. Most of the time I program in an intermission, but there have been times that we have done the hour without pause. I find that fifty-six minutes of music is about the perfect length for the audience and the performers alike.

I have also been known to choose too much slow, pretty music. I don't think I'm the only one out there

who has made this mistake. This should be in the chapter "How to keep your sopranos happy." DON'T program too much slow, pretty music especially high in the tessitura. In our dress rehearsals, I try to get through as much of the repertoire in concert order as possible. Sometimes it has only been in the dress rehearsals that I have realized my mistakes.

I have changed concert order even after going to print if I feel it is necessary to preserve the integrity of the program or to be conscientious to the singers. Sometimes you just don't know for sure until you are close to show time. I've not looked back on changes I've made with regret.

**WYERS:** In my first year of a tenure track position, I can still remember a painfully long holiday choral concert, which included lengthy sets of music from many choirs—as well as narration interspersed throughout—and an eleven-minute finale. My heart was in the right place, but I was programming with too much passion and too little practicality. My first big college job, and I was determined to conduct every piece that I had ever loved! My dear colleagues from the voice department stuck it out for the whole show, and then kindly pulled me aside and suggested that I pre-plan timings for concerts in the future. I am a big believer now in "leaving the audience wanting more." Even as a committed concert goer, I get squirmy in my seat after a couple of hours.

Everyone probably has unique style they prefer, and therefore unique pitfalls to avoid. I do believe we must try harder to notice that our choral music is telling a story, even if it's just a simple folksong arrangement or a motet from the sixteenth century. We must ask ourselves sincerely with every piece: are these stories we need to hear now? We must also look for the neglected stories that are too often left off of programs altogether. In the United States today, we are lucky to have many earnest, insightful composers looking closely at our society and offering works that tackle some of the hardest stories head-on, whether they be about gun violence, climate change, youth suicide, homelessness, or other social justice issues. My favorite recent books that discuss programming are Tim Sharp's *Relevance in the Choral Art* and Stephen Sieck's *Teaching with Respect*.

**How important is the listener in your program creation process? How does your approach/methodology to programming intentionally (or not) teach or inform the singers and listeners?**

**BOYD:** The listener is absolutely important in creating a concert program. At some point in your concert, the audience should experience the impact of music, especially in a live performance. Why not? If people want to hear “canned” music, they could easily say, “Hey, Alexa (or Siri), play some music,” without lifting a finger. Instead, they have come to hear from young, brilliant, and talented students who have been preparing a special presentation for ten to twelve weeks for a live audience, which in my view, should present a living experience. I think it is important that audiences experience something familiar, which could be a new arrangement of a standard tune or a choral arrangement of a contemporary popular song. In essence, I want audiences to walk away from the concert humming a tune, to be spiritually moved by the text, or inspired to mimic a “choralography” movement. Music should move people from one space to another, and this can be done if we are intentional about the pieces we choose to perform.

**DUFFY:** Conductors present repertoire to two audiences: the ensemble and the concert-going public, who either watches in person or in one of a variety of broadcast formats. Another of my biggest mistakes has always been in leaving the primary audience—the choir—out of the enrichment and education elements that I painstakingly package in slick sentences for concert delivery. My performance presentation usually involves a combination of incidental and musical jokes (I swear I would have slayed in stand-up) and contextual/historical/interpersonal/social-action-related lecture blasts about the repertoire in bite-sized “edutainment” chunks. Countless times, singers have approached me after a performance to say how much they learned about the repertoire *during the concert*, thus exposing my neglect of these concerns throughout the rehearsal process. The reduction in volume of repertoire that I can produce with modified choirs during this pandemic period has inspired me to spend more “rehearsal” time on critical elements such as: textual interpretation; relevance of

the repertoire in the context of societal equity, particularly in terms of race, but pertinent to all areas of historic and contemporary persecution; study of form and harmony; and contextualization of the music in the life of the composer, its geographical placement, its genre, and its relevance to today’s ensemble.

**FOSTER:** The consideration of the listener in choosing a program is of immeasurable importance. I get to see my choir every day for seventy minutes per day (pre-Covid 19). I will only be able to be in front of the audience for the length of the concert. So, considering the listener’s experience of and ability to comprehend the music and text is of paramount importance. Through the years I have adapted my concert programs to include the texts of every song, not just a translation of the foreign language rep. Additionally, I will usually give a short talk about each set before we sing it, to help amplify for the listener what they are about to hear and to draw special attention to specific texts or unique/unusual musical or vocal elements. One danger is to talk too much in the middle of a concert, but the other danger is to talk too little. Generally, I find audiences appreciative of the explanations and narratives and that it enhances their experience of the concert.

**RINSEMA:** For us, the audience/listener is of major importance. Because we are a publicly funded entity, we can’t just perform music that is only fulfilling for the artists (me included); it has to appeal to the general public. This may be different in the academic or professional choir settings, but it is necessary in our situation. This does not cheapen or water down what I program, but I certainly must take the audiences’ perspective into consideration when premiering a new commission or bringing a challenging piece to them for the first time. Our audiences in Denver are quite sophisticated, and much of that is because of the adventurous programming that Kantorei has done over the years. But they still appreciate some simpler music sung extremely well.

Likewise, because I work with volunteers, every single piece I program cannot be a technically challenging piece. There needs to be balance in the programming for the singers too. They are giving up their talent, time, and energy, and I certainly can’t do what I do with-



out them, so their input is welcomed and appreciated. Sometimes I have to be reminded that Kantorei cannot be a priority for them at all times. I have to have their “buy in” as well, and if I am only programming difficult music, or not taking the singers’ feedback and ideas into my programming consideration, they will not feel a connection to the music and ultimately the audience will know.

I think this is one of the main reasons the choral art form has (or should have) much more appeal to the general population than some of the other classical art-forms. Within a sixty-minute program, the listener can be exposed to such a wide variety of repertoire. Rarely (with Kantorei) are our audiences listening to the same genre, style, colors, texture, language, tempi, for more than five or so minutes. If you don’t like a piece of music, just wait and you’ll probably like the next one! This gives us as programmers so much freedom to explore the ever-growing repertoire while finding ways to make it fit with our programming. I see some orchestras experimenting with this concept more and more—pairing pieces in the canon with new commissions and playing movements of symphonies instead of entire works. Modern dance probably is most similar to the choral genre when it comes to programming.

**WYERS:** If I am honest, as a college professor, the first “listeners” I consider are always my students. The audience becomes afterthought, since I hope and assume they are somehow connected to the performers. The music I love reflects how I feel about my students—they inspire me, provoke emotion in my work, stimulate my imagination, and bring rich contrasts of background and perspectives. Recently, I have made a pledge to choose music that always reflects some part of my direct choral community. Often, I will consider students’ place of origin and program works that allow us to explore their “home base” (examples include China, Sweden, Russia, and Latin America).

Sometimes I’m driven by an issue that I know deeply impacts my students, and we’ll program a concert around it (such as our recent benefit concert for the Matthew Shepard Foundation). I know many of my students are non-music majors and enjoy the vitality of a fast-paced, pop-infused piece such as *Pakkanen* (from

the phenomenal Finnish group Rajaton). Other times, my colleagues and I will tackle a large work, but put it in modern context (Verdi’s *Defiant Requiem*, Britten *War Requiem*). Part of programming intentionally is telling a story in a new way—that’s where relevance kicks in, even with older music.

**What is the best advice you would offer less-experienced conductors about programming for their ensembles?**

**BOYD:** My best advice to any less-experienced conductor is not to be afraid of foreign languages. If you fear or feel unprepared to teach a language, do as many of us do in fitness: find a language trainer or coach to help you and your students reach success. Also, keep in mind that music learning and language learning both rely on the ability to detect differences in pitch, meter, rhythm, phrasing, interpretation, tonal memory, and more. As I tell my students, conquer all fear with preparation and resilience.

**DUFFY:** Keep looking under rocks. Find more that’s new, or new to you. I need to remind myself of this advice every day, because once we become complacent in the repertoire we know, we become irrelevant, regardless of age or stage in our careers. I have seen the predisposition of complacency in surprising places in the context of my work in promoting Jewish choral literature to the American secular choral community. Conductors eager to diversify their repertoire reject opportunities to consider gems of Jewish composition that have been excluded from the historic canon and locked away from all but the few dedicated Jewish-literature ensembles. Why the reluctance to explore this rich, varied, underrepresented, and mostly insular tradition? I have heard various responses, many of them variations on a theme of “I already know a lot of Jewish repertoire, and I program it for Chanukah”—a position that is indefensible considering that musicologists and ethnomusicologists continue to uncover “new” works all the time, that Chanukah is often reduced to caricature in holiday music concerts, and that the vast majority of repertoire is unknown outside Jewish art music circles.

Whenever I find myself hesitant to consider pro-

programming something unfamiliar, I interrogate my process to find out why. Is it lack of confidence in the language? Fear that I won't present it in the right context or honor the origins of the music? Is it about me? Am I considering the best thing for the ensemble? And here's the most important, and difficult, question: do I harbor an underlying prejudice that influences my rejection of this music? My advice to new conductors—and to myself—is this: if the answer to that last question is in any way a “yes,” do everything you can to immerse yourself in the music and eradicate that attitude. Our choral world is in the performing arts, and yet true allyship is not performative. To reconcile this discrepancy, our programming process must avoid performance affectation and embrace equity.

**FOSTER:** My best advice for less-experienced conductors about programming is to have high expectations of your ensembles and to couple that with the necessary strategies to ensure their success. Challenge yourself to choose repertoire that frightens you. Lean toward the dissonance, not away! Dig deep into the score and create strategies for how you are going to equip your ensemble to be successful. Do not be afraid to try rehearsal pedagogies that are outside the parameters of your own choral experiences. Cultivate an atmosphere within your ensemble that derives pleasure from the rehearsal process and gets excited about stupidly difficult pieces. Feel comfortable expressing to your ensemble your excitement *and* fear about approaching a particular piece of music. Let them know that you are working just as hard (if not harder) than they are, and that you are in this together. You *will* nail this piece, but that success will come through hard work and solid pedagogy. If they want to be the best choral program in the area, then they're going to have to work harder than everyone else, and that means not shying away from challenging repertoire.

**OWENS:** Know your choir! Don't over-program, and don't program a piece just because you like it. You must match the repertoire with the ability of your singers. The most common mistake that I see each year in new teachers is the selection of repertoire that is beyond a choir's capability.

**WYERS:** Less—in terms of length, difficulty, and divisi—is often more. Have fun with your programming. Let it be an ongoing process throughout the year. Have a constant curiosity about what is working and what needs to be put back on the shelf for another year. As your students sense your confidence with the process, they will be more inquisitive, too, and less “locked into” what they “like and don't like.” Bring in “culture bearers” to team teach a few rehearsals if you are timid about programming music from outside the Western European canon.

Usually the music you sang while a music ed major in college might not be the first thing to program with a high school or middle school ensemble. Learn some basic arranging skills (William Ades *Choral Arranging* is a classic) so you can be flexible and work with the singers in front of you, instead of trying to figure out how to “fit them into the music.” Visit composer websites and CPDL/IMSLP as often as you search commercial publishing websites. There are so many “hidden gems” that can emerge with some extra detective work. Finally, love and comfort your accompanist, if you are lucky to have one. They often have a lot of experience accompanying other choirs and can offer some fantastic ideas for works that are specific to the needs of your chorus.

## What do you see as primary challenges to programming?

**RINSEMA:** A major challenge for me programming in the future is the plethora of great music that is at our fingertips. There are so many people composing these days, and access to their music is overwhelming. No longer are we (corporately) reliant on publishers sending out/recommending music, but so many composers are self-publishing (and promoting), that there just isn't enough time in the day to consider everything that ends up in my inbox. I will say that I probably spend more time listening to choral music than ever before (frequently in my car!), so if you want to get my attention as a programmer, send me a good audio file in a portable format that I can listen to on the go! 🎧