

Historically Significant Repertoire for Middle Schoolers

The following is a list of repertoire from the Western historical canon performed within the last ten or so years by the University School of Milwaukee Middle School choruses. The pieces that made it on to this list were particularly successful; the ones that received only a mediocre response from the kids were left off. (For which I take the entire blame. Intrinsic greatness and beauty of the songs themselves can be assumed, since they have lasted throughout generations.)

A quick note about my curriculum:

Our middle school encompasses grades five through eight. There's (at least) one curricular choir per grade level. I try to include one or two pieces from the Medieval and/or Renaissance period at every grade level, every year. Meanwhile, I cycle through the four remaining main periods of Western music - Baroque, Classical, Romantic, 20th century/Modern - focusing on one period per year. Every grade level studies the same period the entire year. For example, 2013-2014 is a Classical year. Next year's focus will be Romanticism. That way, every individual student will cycle through all four eras during their middle school career. We learn about the characteristics of the period, sing music by historically significant composers, and weave together music, art, architecture, literature, philosophy, history - whatever I can pull in. We also spend time investigating the impact of those times on today's culture and, last but not least, connect the overarching themes to ourselves. What does each child learn about him or herself as a result of all this study?

A shout-out to the Comprehensive Musicianship through Performance project, which is going strong at 40-ish years. The colleagues I've met through the project are amazing and inspiring. If you're interested in how to get kids to actually like – or fall in love with – much of the music in this list, you should investigate further. Start here: <http://www.wmea.com/CMP>.

P.S. My middle school kids study many other cultures, genres, and styles, too, just like any other school choral program, from traditional West African recreational music to the latest pop/rock on the radio.

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MEDIEVAL

Miri It Is

Secular English song, early 13th century

Flexible voicing

CPDL (Swiggum edition attached)

Edition available for purchase: *Miri It Is*, ed. Epstein. SSA. Theodore Presser Co.

The lyrics are about being exhausted with winter and wishing the spring would come soon, something my Wisconsin students can identify with. We added drones and string instruments in the arrangement we created.

O Virtus Sapientiae

Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179)

Flexible voicing

CPDL (Helm edition available here:

[http://www1.cpd.org/wiki/index.php/O_Virtus_Sapientiae_\(Hildegard_von_Bingen\)](http://www1.cpd.org/wiki/index.php/O_Virtus_Sapientiae_(Hildegard_von_Bingen)))

"O strength of Wisdom, who, circling, circled, encloses all in one life-giving path." The subject matter is not overtly Christian, and my students made connections with the music to ancient symbols of infinity and rebirth (e.g. ourborous, pheonix, labyrinth, etc.). The chant sounds fantastically gorgeous sung by pure, breathy middle school voices. We're singing it this semester; my students can't get enough of it. There are multiple versions available on iTunes. After studying several, I chose the recording by Schola Magdalena as our template.

Sumer is icumen in

Secular English rota (canon) c. 1250

Flexible voicing

CPDL (Swiggum edition attached)

Sumer is one of the most famous pieces in history because it was one of the first secular pieces "published." Today, it's probably one of the best known of all medieval compositions. We made lots of connections regarding music's transcendent and connective powers. "I can relate to the same feelings and experiences as someone who lived nearly 800 years ago. Besides reading about it in a book, I sang the EXACT same music they sang."

RENAISSANCE

A word about the following SATB pieces: Sometimes we had the SATB voices. Other times, we didn't. A string instrument can be used to play the absent tenor or bass line(s) - or double them - depending on what the guys' voices were doing that particular month. It sounds great AND is historically accurate performance practice.

Anima Mea

Michael Praetorius, arr. Vierendeels/Swiggum

SAB

Swiggum edition attached

Anima Mea ("my soul") was composed as a single melodic line by Praetorius. The composer André Vierendeels (born 1937) added the multiple voices (which are essentially a canon at the fourth with the original line). Randal Swiggum's addition of the chords and piano part add a third element. I've often heard Randy play the chords in broken eighth note patterns, creating a kinesthetic, swirling effect. My seventh and eighth graders begged to sing this every class; many said it was their favorite of the entire year.

El Grillo

Josquin Desprez (1450-1521)

SATB

CPDL (many, many editions available)

El grillo is literally translated as "the cricket," though the seemingly innocent lyrics are actually a sting on a political contemporary of Desprez. (Sort of like what might be on a Renaissance-era Daily Show or Colbert Report.) The piece is very homophonic; kids like the full sound they can achieve once they lock in their pitches. Very fun.

Jubilate deo

Michael Praetorius

Round

CPDL (Two editions available)

My fifth graders particularly enjoyed this one; finding their upper range never sounded so elegant.

Sing With Thy Mouth

Thomas Ravenscroft (1582-1635)

Round

Edition available here: http://www.pbm.com/~lindah/ravenscroft/modern/loath_to_depart.pdf

There are dozens of Ravenscroft rounds available; this one has been a favorite of my students. Rounds, catches, and folk music were Ravenscroft's specialities. Boosey & Hawkes publishes a book of them, titled *Sing We Now Merrily: A Collection of Elizabethan Rounds from Ravenscroft*, Ed. Bolkovac; HL48018895.

Tourdion

From *Neuf Bases Danses*, Anonymous

Attaignant, 1530

SATB

CPDL (Swiggum edition attached)

It's a drinking song, though drinking songs are always more tasteful if sung in French, non? The guys whose voices were changing were successful at navigating both the tenor and bass parts, depending on their tessitura, so many of them listed this as one of their overall favorites from the year. It's one of those pieces that sounds way harder than it is. We performed it with harp and drum accompaniment.

Viva la musica

Michael Praetorius (1571-1621)

Round

Edition available here: http://teachingkidstosing.com/downloads/viva_la_musica.pdf

Most of Praetorius' music will need to wait until my students are in high school and beyond. His rounds, though, are lovely and quite accessible by anyone. (Apparently there was a discussion on ChoralNet about whether or not this is actually Praetorius' work. Feel free to dig deeper if you wish...)

BAROQUE

Bel Piacere from "*Agrippina*"

G.F. Handel (1685-1759)

Edition available here: <http://www.free-scores.com/download-sheet-music.php?pdf=15730>

When I want my students to experience music from master composers of the Baroque, Classical and Romantic eras, I often have the whole choir learn an aria or art song, which we perform in unison. I find the effect to be absolutely beautiful, and the students gain repertoire depth. I feel it's more appropriate than using some Hal Leonard editor's simplified arrangement of a well-known SATB piece. The tessitura often works quite well for changing voice guys, too. You'll see more arias and art songs on this list, later on.

Canons by Henry Purcell (1659-1695)

- Under this stone
- One, two, three
- The watchmen's song
- Of all the instruments

Many editions available on CPDL. I'm attaching my edition of *Of all the instruments* and the Jenks/Swiggum edition of *The Watchmen's Song*.

Purcell catches are very successful, though you do need to be careful of the bawdiness of the lyrics. These are relatively G-rated (or have been adjusted to be) and sound wonderful. We often include string

instruments along with the singers for a fuller effect. Though I haven't used it, I know several middle school teachers that love his *When V and I together meet*. A good resource for Baroque rounds is the king's singers *Book of Rounds, Canons and Partsongs*, published by Hal Leonard. (HL08743259). The book contains *One, two, three* and *Under this stone*.

Dove sei, amato bene? from "Rodelinda"

G.F. Handel (1685-1759)

Edition available here: [http://imslp.org/wiki/Rodelinda, HWV 19 \(Handel, George Frideric\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/Rodelinda,_HWV_19_(Handel,_George_Frideric))

I have to stop myself from doing this piece too often. Absolutely gorgeous. Plus, the kids can learn about the tradition of countertenors (heroes sing high, baby!).

Bist du bei mir

Often attributed to J.S. Bach (actually by someone else)

CPDL (two editions available)

Whoever wrote it, it's brilliant. Much easier for a chorus to sing than an individual, since staggered breathing is an option on the long phrases.

Der Herr segne euch

Duet from BWV 196 (*Der Herr denket an uns*)

J.S. Bach (1685-1750)

Complete cantata here:

[http://imslp.org/wiki/Der_Herr_denket_an_uns, BWV 196 \(Bach, Johann Sebastian\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/Der_Herr_denket_an_uns,_BWV_196_(Bach,_Johann_Sebastian))

There are lots of duets from Bach's cantatas that sound successful when sung by choirs. Most of them are also really hard. This one is simpler and the text translates as a rather neutral, "May the Lord bless you more and more, you and your children." My seventh and eighth graders enjoyed this; it would take a really strong group of fifth or sixth graders to pull it off.

Dido's Lament from *Dido and Aeneas*

Henry Purcell (1659-1695)

CPDL (multiple editions available)

OK, so the kids will sing the word "breast." If you can get them past that and hooked on the richly metaphorical allusions in the lyrics and the ground bass, you're all set. I've found this piece appeals to the dramatic melancholy in many early adolescents.

Esurientes from *Magnificat in g minor*

Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)

SA

Full *Magnificat* score here: <http://media.bachsoloists.org/pdf/ibs/scores/vivaldi-magnificat-score.pdf>

I've sung this with young treble voices; I've sung this with mixed voices. I've had fifth graders that love it; I've had eighth graders that love it. There's nothing like singing a long Baroque melisma to make you feel grown up. It just sparkles, and the kids can feel that.

Ich will den Herrn loben

Georg Telemann (1681-1767)

Edition available here:

[http://www0.cpdll.org/wiki/index.php/Ich_will_den_Herren_loben_\(no._2\)__\(Georg_Philipp_Telemann\)](http://www0.cpdll.org/wiki/index.php/Ich_will_den_Herren_loben_(no._2)__(Georg_Philipp_Telemann))

If I had to pick just one round to ever sing again with my students, it just might be this one. (And I sing a lot of rounds with my students.) This gem is so perfect, so fun to sing, so elegant! Add a violinist and your students will sound like they're ready for Carnegie Hall.

Trip it in a ring from *The Fairy Queen* Z.629

Henry Purcell (1659-1695)

SA

Full score available here: [http://imslp.org/wiki/The_Fairy_Queen,_Z.629_\(Purcell,_Henry\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/The_Fairy_Queen,_Z.629_(Purcell,_Henry))

There are many Purcell duets that are popular with choirs (e.g. *Sound the Trumpet*), but this one is easier - and shorter. My sixth graders latched onto the joyfulness in this piece. While I haven't done the following duets myself, I know colleagues who have programmed these two. They'll be on my list the next time it's a Baroque year for me.

- "For Love ev'ry Creature is form'd" from *Orpheus Britannicus*. At first glance, this is a love song. Once you uncover its placement in the opera's story, however, you learn that the singers are, in fact, casting an evil, magical spell as they sing. Quite cool.
- "Lost is my quiet for ever." Poetry for eighth graders in their moody, introspective moments. Beautiful, vulnerable music.

CLASSICAL

Canons by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

- Selig alle, selig sie (Two options here:
[http://imslp.org/wiki/Canon_for_2_Voices_in_C_minor,_K.230/382b_\(Mozart,_Wolfgang_Amadeus\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/Canon_for_2_Voices_in_C_minor,_K.230/382b_(Mozart,_Wolfgang_Amadeus)))
- Friends, Forget the Cares
- Lacrimoso son io (edition attached)

Friends, Forget the Cares is in the king's singers' round book mentioned with the Purcell rounds earlier. These are some of the more accessible of Mozart's rounds, and a meaningful inroad to approaching his music. Some are easier than others. For instance, *Lacrimoso son io* was performed with the kids singing in two voice parts; string instruments covered the other two "voices" of the round.

Luci care, luci belle from *Six Nocturnes* KV346

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

SAB

CPDL (Coro Gaudeamus edition here:

[http://www2.cpd.org/wiki/index.php/Luci_care,_luci_belle_\(Wolfgang_Amadeus_Mozart\)](http://www2.cpd.org/wiki/index.php/Luci_care,_luci_belle_(Wolfgang_Amadeus_Mozart)))

My seventh and eighth graders are currently working on this. It's a light confection of a love song and very accessible. Singing in Italian is very fun for them; they sound so mature. Mozart's original voicing for all six of the nocturnes is SAB, and the voices would all have been doubled by instruments. This is my favorite of the six, but you should check out the other five, too.

Choruses by William Billings (1746-1800)

- Chester
- Cobham

SATB

CPDL (multiple editions available of *Chester*)

For Cobham, use this link: <http://www.mrlauer.org/static/media/music/scores/cobham.pdf>

Billings is considered by many to be the father of American choral music. He was bff's with Paul Revere (really!) and his music was well-known and well-regarded - and sung! - by many of the founding fathers

we read about it textbooks. *Chester* was regularly and informally sung by Revolutionary soldiers as they marched and nearly became our national anthem. *Cobham* is not as widely performed, but it's incredibly catchy and powerful, and accessible by most middle schoolers (unlike much of the typically-performed Billings oeuvre). According to Billings' own writing, it's perfectly acceptable to double the tenor and bass parts 8va and make up your own arrangements from his work.

Constancy

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) (Words by Robert Burns)

SA

I was unable to find public domain editions through a five minute search on both CPDL and IMSLP. That doesn't mean they don't exist; you just might have to dig more. I used a collection as my resource - *48 Duets: Seventeenth Through Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. Prahl. ECS Publishing. (A very useful book and worth owning.) *Constancy* is short and very accessible for young voices. It was made for recreational singing in the homes of ordinary people. There are a couple other Beethoven duets in the same collection. I've done some of them, but this one really wins the kids over. Contact me if you'd like a photocopy of the relevant pages for perusal purposes.

Sehnsucht nach dem Frühling ("Longing for Spring")

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Unison

Edition available here:

[http://imslp.org/wiki/Sehnsucht_nach_dem_Fruehling,_K.596_\(Mozart,_Wolfgang_Amadeus\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/Sehnsucht_nach_dem_Fruehling,_K.596_(Mozart,_Wolfgang_Amadeus))

A simple and sweet little song, this nearly sings itself. The Neoclassic characteristic of accessible, tuneful melodies is very apparent in this piece. I found my younger middle schoolers liked the playfulness of it.

Voi che sapete from *Le nozze di Figaro*

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Edition available here: <http://yeslb.wikispaces.com/file/view/Voi+che+sapete.pdf> (this one is most likely protected by copyright) and a legitimately free one here:

[http://imslp.org/wiki/Le_nozze_di_Figaro,_K.492_\(Mozart,_Wolfgang_Amadeus\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/Le_nozze_di_Figaro,_K.492_(Mozart,_Wolfgang_Amadeus))

The lyrics are a little racy (though not at all inappropriate), but I find that they are so tempered by the simplicity and order of the melody that it doesn't matter much. Anyway, older middle school kids can definitely sympathize with their message. Treble voices sound beautiful singing this aria together. There's an amazing young boy singing this piece on YouTube. My students were rather enthralled by him and took up personal challenges to emulate his tone.

ROMANTIC

An die musik, D. 547 ("To music")

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

IMSLP (Multiple editions available here: [http://imslp.org/wiki/An_die_Musik,_D.547_\(Schubert,_Franz\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/An_die_Musik,_D.547_(Schubert,_Franz)))

Introspective, stately, unhurried. The aura of self-control needed for understanding this piece is attractive to middle schoolers.

Die Meere Op. 20 No. 3 ("The seas")

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

SA

IMSLP (Multiple editions available here: [http://imslp.org/wiki/3_Duets,_Op.20_\(Brahms,_Johannes\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/3_Duets,_Op.20_(Brahms,_Johannes)))

This duet is one of Brahms' more commonly performed, but it works nicely with both treble and mixed voicings. I like to pair it with a careful study of J.M.W. Turner's ocean landscape paintings for a fuller understanding of Romanticism.

Duets by Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

- Wasserfahrt
- Wie kann ich froh und lustig sein?

It seems that IMSLP has editions of both of these, though searches are leading me around in circles a bit. My next step would be to use Groves in order to find the exact title and Opus number of the collections as Mendelssohn published them, and then search further, particularly in IMSLP. There must be free editions somewhere!

There's a lot of German text in both of these, and so sometimes the kids sing with English translation. *Wasserfahrt* is a dramatic, masculine, stormy piece. *Wie kann ich froh und lustig sein?* is more introspective and gentle. Accessible Romanticism in less than three minutes! My students have truly enjoyed both of these, though there are several others in the collection *Sixteen Two-Part Songs by Felix Mendelssohn*, published by Hal Leonard (HL50254590). (Like the Beethoven duet, contact me if you'd like photocopies of these pieces for perusal.)

May Song

Mailed, D. 503

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

SA

I looked but could not find a free edition online. Rather, I used Doreen Rao's edition, which I purchased: *May Song* by Schubert, ed. Rao. 2-part treble. Hal Leonard. (HL48004345). For two unaccompanied voices and two horns (which sounded super-cool as a call to the hunt). Short and to the point.

Welcome, Welcome Ev'ry Guest

From *The Sacred Harp*

Round

Edition attached

This song is older than the original publication of *The Sacred Harp* in 1844, but gained greater public knowledge thereafter. Coincidentally, a number of William Billings' choral works are also included in *The Sacred Harp* and sung regularly in that tradition. There's an engaging 7:30 minute video on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YaLnG7vfVOc>) on Sacred Harp singing. One day I'll find time to go to a sing in Chicago; it seems incredibly cool. *Welcome, Welcome Ev'ry Guest* is one of the few secular texts in this tradition.

20th CENTURY

The following are compositions that reflect a certain class of composers, ones who continue in the footsteps of the traditions of the Western canon. They are not in public domain, so you'll need to purchase, rent, or borrow octavos.

Aria from Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5

Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959)

Hal Leonard (HL50223340)

The original composition is scored for eight (yup, eight) cellos and soprano voice. There is a popular transcription of the cello accompaniment into a single classical guitar part (Kathleen Battle recorded this

version). You can get it with piano accompaniment of course, too. So here's what we did: the middle schoolers learned the opening vocalese, which they sang in unison. The middle part is all in Portuguese and has a lot of text, so we used a guest soprano soloist for that part. Then back to the middle school kids singing the vocalese, which is identical to the opening - ABA form. So gorgeous; the kids really loved performing with a professional singer (while sounding rather grown-up themselves).

Fancie

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) (Words by William Shakespeare)

Unison

Hal Leonard (HL48008906)

All of the following pieces are simple at first glance, and not necessarily technically challenging. But there is something compelling in their simplicity. One can see the brilliance of the mind behind the composition, hunt for puzzles in their construction, and focus on musicianship. *Fancie* is an intriguing puzzle, both in the text and the music. Hooking kids on uncovering the mysteries is critical; it's not appealing at first glance.

Friday Afternoons

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Unison

Hal Leonard (HL48011758)

This collection songs are frequently done by children's choirs, particularly British boy choirs, I've found. My students' favorites are two of the ones not sung as much, *A Tragic Story and Ee-oh!* The silliness of *A Tragic Story* had them hooked; both were sung with great storytelling nuances by the kids.

Gloria Tibi from Mass

Leonard Bernstein

2-part treble (with tenor soloist)

Hal Leonard (HL48004141)

I've heard this piece performed by children's choirs both with and without a tenor soloist, and I've done it both ways myself. If you can get a soloist, it's quite stunning. The fast 5/4 rhythms and accompanying bongos make it a showpiece either way.

Orpheus With His Lute

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) (Words by William Shakespeare)

Oxford University Press

ISBN 0-19-340136-3

I've heard this is P.O.P. However, I have lots of copies I am happy to lend out.

This little art song is another musical puzzle in an invisibility cloak of simplicity. Many students are familiar with the Orpheus myth because of their Classical studies in history/social studies (or because of Rick Riordan's novels).

She's Like the Swallow

Newfoundland Folk Song, arr. Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

Unison

Oxford University Press

ISBN 978-0-19-536609-9

Quite a dark storyline, which appeals to the morbidity in many middle school kids. I read once that the reason dystopian novels are so popular in YA literature is because they accurately mirror the landscape of a junior high hallway or lunch room.