



Celebrating 10 Years of Great Choral Treasure Hunts  
**Soccer, Star Wars, and Legos**  
**Finding a Place for Music in the Life of Boys**

**Margaret Jenks, Michael Ross, and Randal Swiggum**  
Thursday, October 25, 2012 • 11:30 am • Madison Ballroom B • Monona Terrace

Let's explore beyond the boundaries of clichéd repertoire for boys, from elementary through high school, and maybe discover some surprises about boys, and music for boys. What's good music for boys? Good music. Period. (Same for girls).

## Stadt und Land

Traditional

I  
Stadt und Land in stil - le Ruh, stil - le Ruh, stil - le Ruh,

6 II  
Stadt und Land in stil - le Ruh, stil - le Ruh, stil - le Ruh,

11 III  
Stadt und Land in stil - le —Ruh, stil - le —Ruh, stil - le Ruh.

*Town and countryside in quiet peace.*

### I. Boys: the Research

**(okay, so we pretty much know this already, whether we've read the research or not)**

- Boys are less committed to school and less likely to go to college than girls today.
- Boys are three times more likely to be enrolled in special education classes than girls.
- Boys are more likely to be held back and more likely to drop out of school altogether.
- Boys are four times more likely to be referred to a school psychologist.
- Boys have higher crime rates, alcohol and drug offenses, in-school suspensions.

### II. Choir: the Research

In 2009, Chorus America published the findings of its Choral Impact study (okay, maybe not completely unbiased, but we already sort of know this, too).

- 90% of educators believe singing in choir keeps those students in school who might otherwise be lost.
- 80% of educators believe singing in choir improves academic achievement and willingness to participate in group activities.
- 71% of parents say their children are more confident and self-disciplined, and have better memory skills, due to singing in choir.
- The study also showed choir students exhibit enhanced social skills, volunteering, and charitable giving.

### III. Seriously? Choir is the answer to all of this?

Simply being involved in a choir may not be the solution to all these issues, but for most boys, being somewhere that harnesses **imagination**, promotes **critical thinking**, encourages **empathy**, and fosters **creativity** would seem to be part of the solution to what many have seen as a crisis for our boys. The arts, particularly music ensembles, have

the potential to be a place where these ideas that are so important, but never appear in test scores, can actually be deeply explored.

We need to approach this less as “I need more boys for my choral program to succeed” and more as “what can our choral program offer boys—all boys—that might just change their lives?” How can I be more intentional about repertoire selection in a way that not only attracts boys, but fires their imaginations, challenges them with the same rigor as sports, and makes them proud and self-satisfied with their personal growth and public achievement?

#### **IV. This is not a boy vs. girl thing, really.**

We do not believe in focusing on “boy-friendly” repertoire, at the expense of girls. There is already too much “flirting” with boys with strategies to entice them into joining choir. They are on to us.

What’s good for boys is the same as for girls. Quality music.

Music that:

- Engages the imagination.
- Asks questions that provoke thought
- Has layers of meaning to ponder.
- Demands physical energy and mental sharpness.

Music that is **art**, not merely entertainment. Music that will stand the test of time.

## **A Few Successes We’ve Had With Music and Boys**

### **1. Medieval and Renaissance (castles, knights, D and D, mythology, fantasy)**

#### **a. King Henry VIII: Pastime with Good Company**

Many editions free on CPDL. Even the language sounds cool. Three parts ATB

#### **b. Henry Purcell: Purcell Catch: a canon in three parts, a “watchmen’s song”**

#### **c. Stella Splendens: the most amazing melody from the Red Book of Montserrat; 2 pt.**

#### **d. Cuncti Simus: also from the Red Book, exciting and dance-like, unison**

### **2. Ancient or other “exotic” and modal sounds**

#### **a. Verbum Patris Humanatur**

This is not as hard as it looks. Our boys love it. Many recordings (and interpretations) available. 3 parts, usually TTB, but could be revoiced in many combinations, including SSA, ATB, or mixed.

#### **b. Chant: Hodie Christus natus est**

also Ave Maria, Dies Irae, Regina Coeli, Ut Queant Laxis—choose your favorite

### **3. Stories**

#### **a. Aaron Copland: Golden Willow Tree (from Old American Songs)**

Unison. A sailing tale. We used the new baritones for the Captain, treble voices for the Boy, and all for the narrator. Exciting story, but tragic and perplexing. Not a “cute” kid’s song.

#### **b. Purcell: For Love Ev’ry Creature (from King Arthur)**

2 pt. Not the piece it seems—definitely not a love song, but a tale of magic and mystery—fascinating piece. Learn more about it from Margaret’s CMP teaching plan on the CMP webpage. Google it.

### **4. Tunes or Texts with a Twist**

Many great pieces are meant to be unsettling in some way, either the text, the tonality, or some compositional quirk. Boys like to be subversive!

#### **a. Derek Holman: Rattlesnake Skipping Song**

3 pt. This music is much easier than it appears, but still a wonderful challenge. Piano part is freaky neo-Stravinsky. The whole thing feels like Salvador Dalí, but in sound.

#### **b. Britten: This Little Babe**

3 parts. This piece never fails to work its magic, whether for treble voices or SATB. Dig into the ironies of the text—you can go a long way into this theology without offending non-Christians. The ultimate boys battle piece.

## 5. The Stereotypes (Sailors, pirates, macho men, and grog)

### a. High Coast of Barbary, arr. Julseth

2 pt. A classic and a fantastic example of the genius of folk melody.

### b. Edward German: Rolling Down to Rio & When the Cabin Portholes

These are unison songs from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, to texts by Rudard Kipling. At one time, Rolling Down to Rio might have been the most popular song in England.

### c. Les Chantiers, traditional Quebec lumberjack song, arr. Mark Sirett

TBB. A truly artistic arrangement of a tune that's just a pleasure to sing. So much sarcasm and "bad attitude" in this text, that learning the French is fun.

## 6. Puzzles to Solve

Boys especially like puzzles and if you discover the compositional "tricks" of the piece, they will love them, too.

### a. Vaughan Williams: Orpheus with His Lute

Unison. A truly great work, the entire piece is built on the Vaughan Williams trademark intervals: a third and then a second (or that reversed). The mythology of Orpheus is always interesting, and the idea of whether music actually has supernatural powers. Who isn't intrigued about that?

### b. Persichetti: sam was a man

2 parts; of the Persichetti settings of e.e.cummings, this is the most "macho" and its text has its own puzzles. We did a "motif search" since the entire piece (including amazing piano part) is all built entirely from the first four notes ("sam was a man"). Amazing.

c. **Britten: This Little Babe** also fits here. The whole piece is enigmatic, text-wise and tune-wise. What says "Christmas" about *This Little Babe*?

## Overheard on a Saltmarsh

Nymph, nymph, what are your beads?

*Green glass, goblin. Why do you stare at them?*

Give them me.

*No.*

Give them me. Give them me.

*No.*

Then I will howl all night in the reeds,  
Lie in the mud and howl for them.

*Goblin, why do you love them so?*

They are better than stars or water,  
Better than voices of winds that sing,  
Better than any man's fair daughter,  
Your green glass beads on a silver ring.

*Hush, I stole them out of the moon.*

*No.*

I will howl in a deep lagoon  
For your green glass beads, I love them so.  
Give them me. Give them.

*No.*

Harold Monro (1879-1932)

This is the text chosen by composer Timothy Takach' for his piece *I Will Howl*, for TBB and piano or cello.

## 7. The Whimsical or Imaginary

Don't assume these kinds of texts and pieces are only successful with girls. If the piece has depth, boys will buy it.

### a. Kenny Loggins, arr. Swiggum: House at Pooh Corner

TTBB but not difficult and boys will never tire of rehearsing it. Don't miss the opportunity to explore with boys their own nostalgia for childhood and fear of growing up

### b. Takach: I Will Howl

For TBB men and solo cello or piano. Bernstein said that each work of art should be unique, "breathe its own special air" and "invite you into its own special world". There is no other piece quite like this.

### c. Persichetti: dominic has a doll 2 pt.

Sounds great with men's or treble voices. But sing the last shimmering 7<sup>th</sup> chords entirely in treble clef, close voiced, though. Magical.

### d. Britten: The Ride-by-Nights 2 pt.

Seems to be about witches. Look closer. It's a wild ride through the night sky and constellations and the zodiac.

## 8. The Vocal Athlete

These pieces require a level of energy and commitment that

bring out the best in boys. They come with their own built-in motivation.

### a. Handel: Bel Piacere

Solo aria works great as a treble choir piece. Handel and mixed meter?!! (This does not need to be harmonized!)

### b. Boys Chorus from Carmen "Avec la garde montante"

2 pt. Learning the French always feels worth it—the melody and harmonies are buoyant but demanding.

**c. Funiculi-Funicula**

Margaret's 2012 "discovery" piece (or actually: rediscovery). Great story, great composition, and fun Italian.

d. **Shalom Chaverim** (the old canon; young singers can really feel the "pay-off" of singing that high D well.

e. **Hava Nashira** (canon) the piece feels "grown-up" even though compositionally it's simple. But singers really have to navigate all three vocal registers to sing it well.

## 9. Young Men Sing Treble

Changing and changed voices guys singing S or A need not be a freak show. This is a long tradition. They can also do it in a mixed choir.

a. **A Solis Ortus Cardine**

b. **Palestrina: Regina Coeli**

c. **Praetorius: Psallite**

## 10. Opportunities for Self-Reflection

Boys are craving, just as much as girls, the opportunity to explore important ideas, opinions, and inner struggles, especially as they navigate their own interior emotional landscape as it is changing and enlarging.

a. **Persichetti: Should Fancy Cease**

"Fancy" means imagination or the ability to dream.

b. **The Water is Wide, traditional arr. Zaninelli**

The power of this soaring melody and ancient text with its metaphors for all the different kinds of relationships does not grow tiresome. This works well in both the two-part and TTBB version.

c. **Randall Thompson: The Pasture**

TTB For a "first piece" for young men's choir, this is a winner. It's also a great Robert Frost poem that seems to be "about nothing" except a wonderful moment in time.

### SOME THOUGHTS TO PONDER

The best music has an authentic sophistication or complexity, even if it's a simple unison song. This is better for kids than music trying to be cool or convince them that singing is cool. The more we try to bolster their confidence with fake machismo (aka "We Are the Men of the Choir"), the more they sense how desperate we are to recruit them or retain them for *our* program. This is subtle.

This repertoire demands a certain kind of teaching, with strategies that get at the genius of the music. Helping boys see the relevance of choral music to their lives is neither all about the music or all about the teacher. It is a dynamic interplay of great literature and expert teaching.

It might be helpful to ponder:

- What makes this piece interesting to me? To someone hearing for the first time? What makes it "art?" What is the compositional integrity and genius of the piece?
- What is the "friction point" of the piece—that thing that's going to be an immediate turn-off to kids because they don't know better? (its foreign language, difficult intervals, weird accompaniment, elusive text ideas). In spite of the friction point, what makes it a good piece? How can I trick kids into seeing the friction point as a strength of the piece—something to be celebrated?
- What musical style periods, ideas, or compositional devices do my students have little experience of, but should know? (For example, that new pop melody style "Kyrie eleison" will be lost on kids who have never sung a historical Kyrie.)
- How can I break this all down? How can I introduce a piece like this so my students will buy into it from the beginning? Where is the best starting place—the text alone? That "hook" on p. 3?
- In what ways do my students need to grow, and how will my repertoire choices help them grow, not just as musicians, but as people? As future middle-aged lovers of the arts?

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**Michael Ross, Margaret Jenks, and Randy Swiggum** all conduct boychoirs or men's choirs of various ages through the Madison Youth Choirs as one part of their varied teaching lives. Though all three have spent many years teaching mixed choirs and women's choirs at various levels, in the last decade of working together they have amassed quite a collection of literature that works technically well for male voices and is attractive to boys in mixed or all boy ensembles. Finding great music is one of their passions. You can reach them at: [mross@madisonyouthchoirs.org](mailto:mross@madisonyouthchoirs.org), [mjenks@madisonyouthchoirs.org](mailto:mjenks@madisonyouthchoirs.org), or [rswiggum@madisonyouthchoirs.org](mailto:rswiggum@madisonyouthchoirs.org).