Music is everywhere. We are swimming in it. There is music when we buy groceries, in our dentist’s office, when we work out at the gym, and everywhere in the mall. Today we are even provided music while we pump gas. Music is so deeply woven into TV and film that we barely notice it. Diskmans and iPods mean that we can have our own personal music playing whatever we want, wherever we are. Music—once reserved for certain places or occasions (or whenever people chose to sing or play it themselves)—is now a very cheap commodity and as plentiful as air. We are literally swimming in it.

I am grateful for the easy access I have to so much recorded music. I love my iPod. But I confess I am nervous about the effect of all this “easy music” on the art I love: choral music. How has this new culture of easy music affected the old culture of choral music?

In what ways has our rich, powerful, and longstanding tradition of choral music been affected by this newer culture of easy music?
Easy Listening

Most people today seem to think that music should “go down easy”—that the purpose of music is to be “pretty” and that if it doesn’t immediately please then it’s “not good music.” The idea that a piece would reveal its beauty slowly over repeated hearings, that it would demand intellectual engagement or hard work, that its purpose was not immediate gratification but nourishment over a lifetime—these ideas seem strange and old-fashioned in our MTV, quick-fix, fast-food nation. Why should I struggle to learn to pronounce a Russian text—let alone learn its translation—for a Tchaikovsky partsong when I can learn a pleasant tune that a publisher trumpets as “guaranteed to grab any audience immediately?” Why should I take three weeks to learn to sing a difficult dissonance or complicated rhythm when I can sing a nice melody with predictable and safe harmonic language, more like what I hear on the radio?

Choral Music Lite

There is money to be made in choral music and the last twenty-five years have seen a huge commodification of the market known as “educational choral titles”—a genre that didn’t even exist until someone figured out that there were formulas that composers and arrangers could use to write choral music quickly and sell lots of it. Where did these formulas come from? From the musical language and styles of American popular music.

Now this is not a crusade against the evils of pop music, but merely a reflection on the blurring of some familiar lines which have historically defined different genres of vocal music. Much of what is being marketed today as choral music doesn’t bear any of the traditional markers of choral music, other than the obvious fact that it’s sung. It is essentially pop music dressed up as choral music. Its essential elements have the same features as pop music.

What are some of the markers of this style?

- Tuneful melodies that point toward obvious goals, are immediately singable and memorable because of familiar clichés, have limited ranges and tessituras, and simple harmonizations. Unlike truly timeless melodies—which are a wonder in themselves—these melodies are merely pretty and pleasant.
- No development of musical ideas. Musical interest is typically attempted through simple, predictable means: modulating upward or the adding of partner songs and descants.
- Straightlaced rhythms. Most of this music falls into two categories (borrowed from pop music): ballads and rhythmic up-tempo tunes. The ballads are almost always in 4/4 time and the up-tempo tunes get their rhythmic energy from piano parts that thump along like a pop band rhythm section. Singers really do not experience rhythmic sophistication or surprise—these pieces are very predictable in their rhythmic feel. As a result, singers’ rhythmic sensibilities and skills remain low.
- Obvious texts. Historically, great choral music has been inspired by great poetic texts, sacred and secular. The best texts of western poets and thinkers explore their themes in richness and nuance, using metaphor and ambiguity to suggest multiple interpretations of big, timeless ideas. Educational choral music can often be stereotyped in familiar, tired categories. Junior high choral music, for example, is commonly limited to music songs (“Isn’t music great?”), friendship songs (“Let’s hold hands and step together into our bright future”), and cheerful single issue songs (Unity is good, Our country is the best, Share my dream of world peace!).

Obviously, these are not bad themes. But to suggest that young singers are not capable of more nuanced experience than these trite lyrics offer is to sell this generation short. Young singers share the same hunger as anyone for spiritual depth, meaningful ideas, and emotionally varied music that doesn’t rely on hammering away at a one-dimensional message—music that offers questions instead of simplistic answers.

- Insipid accompaniments. Unlike much great accompanied music, which treats the piano as a genuine voice in the musical conversation, much choral music today uses the piano merely to hold the texture together, like a rhythm section. Singers really need no internal rhythm of their own—these pieces provide an endless gurgling of pleasant eighth-note arpeggiations or a heavy-handed rhythmic drive with a beat so obvious, “you can dance to it.” And
Swimming Upstream, continued
Randal Swiggum

these accompaniment stylings (so familiar from radio and TV) are often accompanying timeless, ancient texts like “Kyrie eleison” or “Ubi caritas”—essentially pop tunes being marketed as “classical” music.

One caveat: this is not an issue of “hard versus easy” music. There is aesthetically challenging and sophisticated music so accessible that third graders can sing it, just as there is always music so difficult, yet unsatisfying, that it is ultimately not worth the painful, long process it takes to learn it. There is good music—with its own rewards and challenges—for singers of any level.

The Result: Flabby Singers, Weary Teachers

What is the effect of this steady diet of faux choral music on singers?

• Limited vocal skills. The safe tessituras of this music means singers rarely have to stretch their ranges. The always lyrical melodic contours, while often quite beautiful, do not challenge singers to learn to navigate interesting leaps. Baroque melisma—a skill unto itself—can only be learned by singing real Baroque music.

• Weak listening skills. Because this music is harmonically predictable, singers rarely have to contend with real dissonance, interesting modulation, or unusual voicing of chords. Rhythmic simplicity means no need for internal rhythm or rhythmic sensitivity. And if a singer does not regularly experience the subtle interplay of parts in a Palestina motet, a Brahms duet, or even a simple Britten folksong setting, a whole dimension of their listening faculty is stunted.

• Impoverished vision. The most tragic result of mediocre music is not the simple lack of skill development—after all, the purpose of art is not merely to get good at doing something. It is to experience the world in all its wonder and richness and depth and complexity. Shallow texts set to shallow music cannot give singers a window into that world. It cannot nurture their aesthetic sensibility nor give them a vision of an abundant, multi-faceted life of profound ideas and meaningful experiences.

I am convinced this is the reason many choral directors burn out. Although this “easy to chew” music may hold out the promise of contented singers and audiences who don’t complain, the day to day grind of rehearsing musical milquetoast cannot nourish the artist/teacher and will not attract singers who are looking for something deeper (which, I believe, is most singers). This music does not make rehearsals easier. Because there is little to do in rehearsal with the music beyond pounding pitches and playing “note doctor,” the whole rehearsal process grows devoid of color and meaning—a gray, predictable, mind-numbing experience. Singers come to expect that, just like at the gas pump or during TV commercials, one shouldn’t really expect much from music—that music shouldn’t be expected to have real meaning. It’s just there, something we do, pleasant and innocuous.

Breaking the Cycle

So singers swim all day in a culture of music that goes down easy. Although they may love music and surround themselves with it, they are unaware of their own limited expectations for what music can be. They come to believe that choir—the sound and feel of choral music—should be the same kind of entertaining, low-impact experience. Choral directors, fearful of their disapproval or weary of bucking their attitude, buy the music that feels familiar. Publishers need more and more of it, and solicit composers to produce it, appealing to our insatiable appetite for the “latest thing.” Audiences get used to it, and may even carp about a concert with too much hifalutin’ foreign language, or tunes that don’t feel familiar. And concerts—rather than providing an aesthetic thrill ride or a magical journey through the wealth of human emotion and experience—are vanilla events, pleasant enough, which lull listeners into long stretches of easy.
listening whose strongest attribute is that they don’t give offense or put any serious demands on the listener.

This cycle is now firmly established. The generation of young people now entering the choral music profession has grown up swimming in this easy music culture and many of them only know this aesthetic. Their concept of choral music no longer automatically includes Gabrieli or Britten.

The Alternative: Courage.
Courage to flex artistic muscles, and a commitment to the study and performance of the best possible music. Courage to seek ways to make more inviting and accessible that great choral music that may be harder, initially, for our singers to chew. Courage to swim against the current.

AN ARTS ADVOCACY RESOLUTION

Whereas the human spirit is elevated to a broader understanding of itself through the study and performance of the aesthetic arts; and whereas serious cutbacks in funding and support have steadily eroded arts institutions and their programs throughout the country; be it resolved that all citizens of the United States actively voice their affirmative and collective support for necessary funding at the local, state, and national levels of education and government, to ensure the survival of arts programs for this and future generations.