It is 52 degrees outside today. Students in Madison are wearing T-shirts and flip-flops. It is the first 52-degree day since sometime back in 2004—I can barely remember. This feeling of spring around the corner really does something to my brain—it quickens it, makes it feel more alive with possibilities. My imagination starts to itch.

Today’s weather reminds me of a piece of music which perfectly captures how I’m feeling today. It has been a great success with both middle schoolers and college students. It’s a piece over 750 years old, the famous canon from Reading, England (and one of the oldest extant pieces in English): Sumer is icumen in. It was my imagination that sparked my interest in the piece and made me want to share it with young singers, so they could have the joy of singing it.

Summer is coming!
Sing loudly, you cuckoo!
Seed is growing, the meadow is blooming, the wood is springing now!
The mother ewe bleats after her lamb,
the cow lows after her calf.
The bull leaps, the buck farts!
Sing merrily, cuckoo! Don’t ever stop!

Why do I love this piece?
Let me count the ways:

■ It’s something medieval that we can experience live. Unlike most history lessons, which depend on merely reading books (or at best, watching videos), we can actually experience firsthand the same singing thrill as our 13th century ancestors.

■ It creates what I like to call “intellectual companionship” with people from a distant time and place. It reminds my students that “those people” were not so different from us—they got excited about the first warm days of spring, too.

■ Melodically, it is rich. Besides its infectious lilting joy, it is a beautifully crafted melody which manages to, all at once, create a dance, stay within an octave yet explore that octave creatively, imitate a cuckoo (and other animals frolicking), and maybe best of all: it’s a melody that bursts into sunny, feel-good harmony when sung in canon.

■ Its Middle English text is just close enough to modern English to be intelligible, but different enough to be strange and exotic. It’s a mini history lesson in English etymology.

■ It’s an artistic way for students to have their awareness of the natural world enlarged. Because so few kids nowadays are as close to nature as our 13th century forebears were, they might not notice all the signs of spring around them besides T-shirts, flip-flops, and new window displays at the mall. They mostly don’t even know what a ewe is. But the exuberance of Sumer might catch their imagination and open their eyes to robins and new buds on trees. This is the power of art to reshape the way we see the world.

■ There’s humor. I haven’t done an empirical study, but I think this might be the only significant piece of choral music that uses the word “farts.” In the words of a middle school tenor, “SCORE!”
The above reasons are basically aesthetic ones, not just educational ones. Of course, the first time I looked at this piece, my "teacher brain" immediately saw all the reasons this piece is a good teaching piece—this is how we are trained to think as music educators.

- It can all be sung on solfège pretty easily.
- It’s great for teaching independent partsinging (like all polyphonic music).
- Those big rolled r’s are a skill that kids need to learn, and they reinforce a deep, energized breath connection.
- It’s in 6/8, a meter that singers just don’t see very often.

The problem with thinking this way is that it misses the point of music itself. This piece was not written for any of those reasons. Great art does not exist to teach technical skills and no composer ever wrote a great work whose purpose was “to teach breath support.” I get very suspicious of choral publishers who market pieces with lines like “great for teaching 6/8!” Do I think learning 6/8 is important? Of course I do. But I want to find real art to teach it.

I need to model imagination with my students in the way I choose music, the way I introduce it, and the way we rehearse and perform it.

**Imagination in Music Selection**

I already know I want to do a wide variety of music—not just the latest thing—and that includes the oldest music I can find. Sometimes I ponder distant places and times and try to find music that would give insight into them. Sometimes I think about pieces that have lasted a long time, or are written about and discussed often (like *Sumer*). Sometimes I hear an interesting recording and think, “I could refashion that for middle school singers.”

One of the common complaints I hear is, “My students would never go for this.” This is very telling. I think we sell our students short and limit them by our own fears and insecurities. Of course, no one starts their career in choral music thinking, “I’m going to do superficial and trite music with my students.” Yet the daily grind of kids with weak reading skills, poor rehearsal discipline, and no previous exposure to great music slowly crushes us into a tiny, constricted experience of making music without much imagination. No one likes to do battle with kids (or their parents) about music selection, so we give up. With the best of intentions, believing we are serving our students and our community, we compromise our repertoire choices with sounds that seem familiar and safe.

An unfortunate result of this good intention, though, is that often the thoughtful, creative, and intellectually hardy kids in the school start to drift away from choir toward other pursuits, because choir doesn’t challenge them intellec-

**Imagination in Introducing the Piece**

There is never only one right way to introduce a piece like this to students, but I know it’s almost always the wrong way to pass it out and try to sight-read through it—a recipe for immediate distaste. I try to spend time contemplating the piece, using my imagination to consider:

- What is it about this piece that makes it so great, and how can I immediately connect my students with that aspect of it?
- What are the immediate obstacles in the piece, from my students’ point of view? What will be off-putting to them about it, and how can I bypass those obstacles or deal with them head-on? These obstacles are “friction points”—they can generate a rub of discomfort, but they can also generate warmth and light.

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“Do I think learning 6/8 is important? Of course I do. But I want to find real art to teach it.”

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Hooking Singers on Great Music

Randal Swiggum

Here are three strategies I’ve used with Sumer, to intrigue kids into owning the piece from Day One.

- Ask students: do you remember the first day the weather changed this spring, the first day you realized that spring was coming? Put yourself back in that day. How many words can you think of to describe how you felt? Have students jot their words down for just a minute on 3x5 card or in their journal. Let students call out the words they used to describe that feeling. I’m going to sing a piece that describes that same feeling. See if you can figure out where and when it came from. Teacher sings it. Let students speculate and invite them to give reasons why they think it sounds Irish or German or Scottish or medieval or whatever, beyond just “it just sounds like it.”

- Play a good recording. (e.g. The Dufay Collective: Miri it is, Chandos 9596; there are many others). Ask the same “guessing game” questions. Although there are many good recordings, and much to learn from hearing early music specialists’ interpretations of these classic pieces, kids seem to pay attention more when I sing it for them—from memory—than when I play a recording.

- Pass out copies of just the text to each student. Ask them to speculate on what language this is. When it’s established as Middle English, c. 1250, have students translate (hinting with a sly wink) that there are some surprises here. After they realize that “verteth” means “farts” (be prepared for disbelief—most students cannot imagine that those ancient people in stained glass windows would have ever used the word “farts.”) Capture students’ imaginations by coyly reminding them that they’ll be singing this in public.

**Imagination in Rehearsal**

The same goofy cheerfulness and sense of wonder that marks the first day of learning the piece (like the first day of spring) needs to be echoed in every rehearsal after that. Yes, the piece can be used to reinforce solfège skills. But too much of that—and too much drill—will kill the joy of just singing it. Save the solfège strategies for those phrases which have tricky intervals, so students see how solfège helps to clarify and they will welcome it as a valuable tool, instead of that thing that stands in the way of their fun.

Is the energy of the piece starting to sag? Try singing it on “bm” (no vowel), imagining being instruments like bells or cello pizzicato. Are the little melismas on “in” blurry and inarticulate? Instead of only doing warm-ups that energize their tummies, remind them of giggling and joy and giddy playfulness and how that feels physically. Apply that giggly feeling to those notes—they are certainly about giggling! Are students not rolling their r’s playfully enough? Instead of drilling it yet again, try teasing them in a thick Irish or Scottish accent: “Aye, won’t ya rrrroll yerrrr r’s, ladies? Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr! It’s a luff-sly sprrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
members into caring about the piece and listening more deeply. Students can read their own notes, or read each other’s.

Every piece suggests its own performance format. This piece suggests movement and works wonderfully as a jubilant procession. Although the piece is just a simple canon, my imagination gave me some ideas about how to arrange it: an opening “call” sung from the front by a strong soloist/“tribal leader,” followed by some exuberant violin drones and piccolo or, wait….better yet: whistling, as the singers sashay up the aisles, then boys with limited range singing the ostinato pes, everyone else in 4 part canon, a kid playing field drum or hand drum, and a little coda flourish from all the voices, so the ending “pops.”

Most pieces do not need special staging or gimmicks to make their point. But all pieces need an affective commitment from the singers. Even when standing in rows on a riser, I want the faces of my students—especially their eyes—to reflect meaning in every word they sing. For an audience, this is thrilling. But it is thrilling for the singers too, when they are set free to express the deepest and highest and even goofiest feelings of humankind in their music. Singers won’t need to paste on some phony face, though, because they’ve experienced in every rehearsal—not just the day before the concert—what the piece means and how it will feel for them when they’re totally connected to it.

Imaginative teaching pours forth from great repertoire. Shallow repertoire will resist this depth of experience. Singers who have tasted the musical depth of a great work of art—a multi-faceted, layered and rich statement about the human condition—will develop not just a taste for it, but a hunger.

The alternative is attractive but empty. This anecdote—in keeping with the scatology of Sumer is icumen in—says it all:

Last year, I was adjudicating a state choral festival. These choirs were fantastically well-prepared, with gorgeous sound and impeccably precision. But the repertoire they were singing was empty and clichéd, the kind of trite ditties which will be popular for the next two years, but embarrassing and clichéd in twenty (as opposed to Sumer which seems to have a shelf life of at least 800 years).

In a moment of weakness, I turned to a colleague and whispered, “I can’t imagine spending an hour every day rehearsing this music! Why would anyone work so hard for such beautiful tone, and then apply it to such junk?” He whispered back, in his charming Australian accent, “Yes, I know what you mean. It’s impossible to polish a turd.”

Use your imagination. ■

Resources
1. Here’s a score, program notes, and a facsimile of the original 1250 manuscript of Sumer is icumen in at the British Museum: <www.wmea.com/CMP/participants/repertoire/index.html>

Click on the PDF for “Great Choral Treasure Hunt II” and scroll down.


3. For an immersion experience in teaching this way, attend the annual CMP (Comprehensive Musicianship through Performance) Workshop, now in its 28th year, June 21-24 at Lawrence University, Appleton, WI. <www.wmea.com/CMP/index.html>

or Iowa CMP, June 13-16 at Drake University, Des Moines, IA <www.drake.edu/artsci/Music_Dept/>

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