

Overview

This piece is crafted to be accessible to a broad variety of vocal ensemble styles and sizes, including high school, college, community, pop acapella, jazz, gospel and especially church choirs. It can be treated like a blues, jazz, or gospel song. The voice leading often follows J.S. Bach's rules while the chromatic elements are inspired by some of the compositional techniques of composers such as Florence Price and Antonin Dvořák who helped form the "American" folk sound for classical ensembles. The low range and less virtuosic material are meant to allow any groups of singers to focus more on text alignment, tuning, balance, and expression. Remember not to let a comfortable range cause slacking vocal production or lack of breath support. If there are not enough voices to cover all the parts, then omitted notes should avoid changing the tonality or function (predominant, dominant, tonic) of the chord, being careful not to remove tendency tones leading into the next harmony. A robust alto section may also be able to cover many of the inner voices. Whatever the voicing, balance should be from the bottom up. This arrangement is all about communicating the poetry and making the music your own.

Notes on Vocal Production

As a voice teacher, I expect singers to follow this rule: sing only as softly as is comfortable. Dynamics can always be scaled up, but healthy vocal production cannot be sacrificed. Think "intense" (with extra diction) rather than "soft." Think "open" rather than "loud." Because of the blues or folk style, vibrato should be narrow and minimized except for effect when the ensemble is crescendo-ing to the end of a sustained chord (as with a gospel choir). If there is a soloist on any of the stanzas, tasteful use of vibrato is at their discretion; the singer may also choose to improvise within the melodic scales and rhythmic structure. When performing with a larger ensemble and stagger-breathing through long phrases or sustained harmonies, all singers should take care to fade out and back into the texture without "popping out" or glottal onset. For a smaller vocal group more breaths may be taken between pitches, emphasizing harmonic shift.

Notes on Phrasing & Tempo

"Molto Rubato" means watch your director and stay in touch with your ensemble. Phrases should have a bit of push and pull, moving towards important words and syllables. Time must be taken by the director and singers to read through, interpret, and reflect upon the poetry. Tempo choices should be based upon the amount of reverb in the performance space; swifter movement may be necessary if singing in a deader, more acoustically insulated room. Unobvious slight ritardando is to be expected at the end of phrases, but the director and ensemble must return to tempo and avoid continuous lag. Outside the rubato of each phrase, non-ritardando should be assumed unless marked. The amount of time taken after breaths, cuts, fermatas, and the half-fermata should also be based upon reverb. Time after breath marks should be as brief as possible. After fermatas, the resonant overtones within the space should not have fully ended. After cuts, the sound should be allowed to completely fade away before beginning the next phrase.

Applied Warm-Ups & Vocal Unification Exercises

This section contains some suggested exercises to work in conjunction with your ensemble's usual routine. Feel free to customize or expand upon them as best serves your people. Solfeggio uses moveable Do.

Letters in brackets refer to International Phonetic Alphabet.

- o Pattern: So-Mi-So-Me-So-Re-So-Do, transpose up or down.



- o Pattern: Do-Re-Do-Me-Do-Mi-Do-Fa-Do-So, transpose up or down.



- o Pattern: "Pentatonic with some Blues", transpose up or down.



- o Vowel Unification: Have all the singers face the center of the ensemble. Micromanage the formation of the [u] vowel: pucker up, forming the shape, then relax the tongue lowered in the mouth with the tip touching the back of the bottom front teeth, then raise the soft palate (yawn feeling). Think "laser" in front, "cathedral dome" in back. Have the group form a root-position major chord (add a 7th and/or 9th if you like). Practice inaudible stagger-breathing as you move through the vowels [u]->[o]->[ɔ]->[a] and back, trying to move the lips and jaw as little as possible.
- o Consonant Unification: With the same positioning as our vowel exercise, have the ensemble cycle through the bilabial consonants three times each in beat with a light puff of air: [b]x3, [p]x3, [v]x3, [f]x3. Consonants should be formed slightly ahead of the beat so the following vowel is in time.

Final Notes from the Composer

Ultimately, it is up to the director and ensemble to make the stylistic decisions that cater to the strengths of the group, those that will best communicate the meaning of the poetry and the emotions behind it. Perform in the way that works to make you feel it and that makes your congregation feel it, too.