

Session II:
The Power
of
Description:
Finding the Reservoir
of Heartfelt Expression
In Choirs

Dr. John Ratledge, Associate Professor
Area Coordinator of Graduate Choral Conducting
Director of Choral Activities
The University of Alabama
Tuscaloosa, Alabama
ratledge@bama.ua.edu
www.johnratledge.com

Alabama Music Educator's Association
Friday, 19 January 2007 (4:00-5:00 PM)
Bryant Conference Center
Birmingham Room

©JOHN RATLEDGE 2007

*Where do you transport yourself
to sing this piece?*

What do you want to say?

Beatrice Unsworth – Voice Teacher
Royal Academy of Music
London, England
21 May 2000

*Send the voice along a sightline–
spinning, a traveling voice.*

*Bring it on the breath: keep traveling,
keep shimmering.*

Elizabeth Richie – Opera Singer and Voice
Teacher
Royal Academy of Music
London, England
20 May 2000

•The problem

- Lack of understanding
- Lack of emotional involvement
- Lack of facial relationship
- Absence of projecting intention of poem to an audience

•Create vignettes, tell stories

The Power of Description The Art of Storytelling

I think that what I do with Chorale is directly related to an author's ability to describe, to convey emotions, to tell stories by using the voice in creative ways, that will enable a listener to not only **enjoy the sounds**, but **feel the intent or emotions** being conveyed by the text, the music, and the human response to both.

•Elements of Nature

Air (wind)
Earth
Fire
Water

•Environments found in nature

Coasts
Deserts
Forests
Grasslands
Mountains

- Sunrise/sunset
- Seasons
- Ebb/Flow
- Shadow and light
- Celestial bodies (sun, moon, stars)

•Elements of Design

Color, Form, Line, Pattern, Shape
*Texture

•Senses as they relate to human experience

Sight, smell, touch, taste, hearing

•Characterization: narrator, characters

•Hot/Cold/Lukewarm

•Natural Associations Which Evoke Emotional Response

•Personification of inanimate objects

The realm of human emotion (the extremes of each)

Anger /Rage....	Loneliness
Joy/Happiness/Ecstasy....	Contentedness
Fear, Grief	Sadness, Anguish
Surprise/Astonishment/Disgust	Sensuality/Passion
Disappointment	Heartache
Panic/Worry/Anxiety	Pride (good and bad)
Apathy/lethargy	Infatuation/Passion
The absence of feeling	Rejection

Ad infinitum

A wonderful resource about the majesty of nature.

Ric Ergenbright. *The Art of God: The Heavens and Earth*. Tyndale House Publishers: Wheaton, Illinois. ISBN 0-8423-1898-4

- Reading the text**

- Corporately
- Individually

- Eye contact**

- Facialization of emotions**

- Your face, your focus, your strength, your vulnerability

A letter to my congregation:

Mirrors and the Glow of God

Mirror, Mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all.....

As I turned 40, I noticed that my body began to change—dramatically change. Things seem to shift, really shift. My body actually began realigning itself into some new formation—one that I was not overly thrilled with. Small “character” lines emerged, and I am amazed at the power of gravity. Even more interesting is my reflection in the mirror. I almost ask myself, “Who is that person in the mirror?” I see friends from times-past and gasp at how much they have aged, and yet what about me? The image in the mirror is, indeed me, but not quite the same. The package has definitely changed its shape.

Mirrors can be brutal, reflecting the ravages of time, but they often reflect our inner feelings as well. Our faces are capable of an infinite amount of change and expression. Often, we do not have to utter a word, and those around us know that something has changed in our countenance. “What’s wrong?” “You look so sad.” “Bored?” “What did I do?” “What?!?” “I would marry you again.” “Don’t mess with me!” “It’s OK.” “I love you.” Our faces communicate well with no words.

What do you *look like* during our morning worship services? Specifically, what is your facial expression during the hymn-singing or during the anthems? If a mirror was placed in front of you during the service, would your reflection show the power of the Holy Spirit in your demeanor?

Many times I am literally transported to the Throne of God when our Choir has beautifully sung an anthem. After we have completed the selection, I enjoy turning around, facing the congregation, in anticipation of the *Doxology*. I love to see some of your faces—the Jim Talley’s, the Joe Hofer’s, the Charlotte Terrell’s, and others. You have obviously been visibly moved by our offering to God. Without saying a word, I can almost see the Heavenly Father in these faces. Their special glow embraces me and affirms what I have felt. **We have been connected to the same event.** This visual affirmation verifies that the Choir has accomplished its task—leading the congregation in worship.

I would challenge each of you to explore the privilege of “getting lost” in the music—to be willing to be vulnerable to the Still, Small Voice, to not only listen to our offering but actually participate with us as we lead in worship. Many of you do this already, whether to an anthem you immediately relate/respond to, one you weren’t overly fond of, or by finding new dimensions to anthems experienced for a lifetime.

Our mission as a choir is not to entertain or to provide “service-filler.” We are

singing our faith to the Glory of God. **We are not singing about God. We are singing to Him.** It is a conscious effort to enable the Chancel Choir to “facialize” the music, to experience each word, to give feeling to every aspect of the music-making experience. I hope that you can hear and feel the difference from a rendition that was well-done to one which is well-done and inspired.

What about you? What are your responsibilities to worship while listening to service music or while you sing the Hymns of the Faith? Do you ever come out of worship saying, “That didn’t do anything for me.” “I didn’t like this or that.” Have you ever asked yourself, “What do I actually BRING to the service,” as opposed to “what do I EXPECT the service to do for me.” Are you willing to explore a new dimension of your service participation?

This week, as you stand in front of the mirror each morning, “recite” the Apostles’ Creed and watch your facial expressions. Would an unbeliever be convinced of your depth of conviction? (I know that I am lacking in this area myself.) Experiment the second time with different inflections of your voice, different speeds and facial expressions. Try to infuse your personal faith into words which are meaningless unless believed, empty unless you really tell the story of what you believe. Become a master storyteller of your faith on a weekly basis. No child wants to hear a bedtime story such as “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” without characterizations in the voice. Somehow, the change of our voices makes the story seem REAL. Don’t you think that there should be a combination of gripping silence (as we reverence the opportunity to be in the Holy of Holies), as well as a collective roar as we express our faith each week? The Still, Small Voice exudes an incredible aura of power which continually changes the world. If you can’t see it; hopefully, you can HEAR it and FEEL it!

I’ll be looking for your glow as you look for mine. “This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine. Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.” Let’s all work together to show our faith through our eyes and our faces. “They’ll know we are Christians by our love. Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

Thanks for all you do to support the music ministry at First Church.

Soli Deo gloria
(Only to the Glory of God)

JOHN R
Third John

In his article, “First Words, Then the Music: Basic Acting Skills to Enhance the Projection of Song Texts for Beginning Singers,” David Alt suggested that you ask these questions of your singers:

When does the story take place? (specific year, month, day)

Where does the story take place? (specific country, town, area. Describe the exact location.)

Who is the person singing? (Provide a brief biography as pertinent to the text. Gender, age)

To whom is the person singing? (is the person a narrator, singing to himself, others? If singing to others, what is their relationship?)

Is this song representational (members of the audience observe you in your scene, but they are not characters in your scene) **or presentational** (you sing directly to the audience as if they were characters in your scene?)

What has gone on just minutes before you sing that makes you sing these words and not some others? (emotional conflict and tension which may be resolved or complicated by the end of a song. Describe the tension or release of tension which causes you to sing these words.)

Choose a **progression of emotional states which may be applied to this song.** (One is not interesting and will not hold the listener’s attention. Build in intensity and change emotionally throughout the song just as a song changes harmonically and dynamically.) Facialize the music reflecting the event/emotions occurring

Look at something concrete

Look at a thought or an idea

Look at the environment

Search for something concrete

Search through your thoughts for an idea, memory or solution to a problem

Close your eyes

Bibliography

- Alt, David. "First the Words, Then the Music: Basic Acting Skills to Enhance the Projection of Song Texts for Beginning Singers," *NATS Journal* (Jan/Feb 1994), 19-24.
- Beachy, Morris. Lecture notes from postgraduate summer study. The University of Texas: Austin, 1980.
- Beachy, Morris. "Diction: Its Relationship To Interpretation and Sonority," *The Texas Choral Directors Association Newsletter*, (Volume 8, No. 4, July, 1981), 1-3.
- Blum, David. The Art of Quartet Playing: The Guarneri Quartet in Conversation with David Blum. Cornell University Press: Ithaca, New York, 1987. (ISBN 0-8014-9456-7)
- Coffin, Errolle, Singer, and DeLattre. Phonetic Readings of Songs and Arias, Second Edition. The Scarecrow Press, Incorporated: Metuchen, New Jersey, 1982.
- Dixon, John. "Musical Pride and Textual Prejudice: The Expressivity of Language in Choral Music," *The Choral Journal* (September 1993), 9-20.
- DiCianni, Ron. Beyond Words, A Treasure of Paintings and Devotional Writings. Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.: Wheaton, Illinois, 1998. (ISBN 0-8423-0176-3)
- Ergenbright, Ric. The Art of God: The Heavens and Earth. Tyndale House Publishers: Wheaton, Illinois, 1999.
- English, French, German, Italian, Latin, Russian, and Spanish dictionaries which utilize the International Phonetics Alphabet (IPA).
- Hall, Thelma R. Sunlight and Stones. Shorter College Press: Rome, Georgia, 1998. (ISBN 0-9662255-0-3)
- Hall, Thelma R. "Unpublished Letter," Private collection of letters and poetry. Rome, Georgia, 2000.
- Hall, William, Editor. Latin According to Roman Usage. National Music Publishers, 1971.
- Jeffers, Ron. Translations and Annotations of Choral Repertoire: Volume I: Sacred Latin Texts. Earthsongs: Corvallis, Oregon, 1988. (ISBN 0-9621532-0-6)

- Jeffers, Ron. Translations and Annotations of Choral Repertoire: Volume II: German Texts. Earthsongs: Corvallis, Oregon, 2000. (ISBN 0-9621532-2-2)
- Kramer, Lawrence. Music and Poetry, The Nineteenth Century and After. University of California Press: Berkeley, 1984.
- Miller, Richard. The Structure of Singing: System and Art in Vocal Technique. Schirmer Books: New York, 1996. (ISBN 0-02-872660-X)
- Ratledge, John. *In the Beginning, There Was the Word...* Workshop for the Georgia Music Educators Association: Savannah, January 1998. (Also for Fayette County Choral Directors, August 1997)
- Ratledge, John. "Jesus and the Thief," Unpublished poem: Rome, Georgia, 23 April 2000.
- Ratledge, John. "Mirrors and the Glow of God," *The Roman Herald*: First United Methodist Church, Rome, Georgia, 1996.
- Ratledge, John. "Mist," *The Shorter Chimes*: Shorter College, Rome, Georgia, Spring 2000.
- Ratledge, John. Notes from my conducting and choral techniques classes. Shorter College: Rome, Georgia, 1990 to present.
- Ratledge, John. Notes from observing Robert Shaw. Texas Music Educators Association, All-State Rehearsals: San Antonio, Texas, February 1983.
- Ratledge, John. Notes from observing Bev Henson. Sam Houston State University: Huntsville, Texas, 1980's.
- Ratledge, John. "What of Light and Darkness?" Unpublished poem: Rome, Georgia, October 1999.
- Vaughan Williams, Ursula. "Ralph Vaughan Williams and His Choir of Words for Music," *Royal Music Association* 99 (1972), 81.