

♪ West Gallery Church Music ♪

3. Preparing your West Gallery Event

by Francis Roads

Recruitment

It helps to have a core of experienced singers who can read music, but West Gallery (WG) music is also well suited to those who are not confident about holding a part, or of their music reading ability. The practice of doubling the voice parts with instruments makes it easy for such singers to take part. Willingness to sing out and not worry about getting things wrong is the most important requirement.

Instrumentalists do not need an advanced technique, and the repertoire is well suited to young and less experienced players. What is needed is the ability to play out and lead with confidence, and flexibility over such matters as following a part in a score, which may not be in the usual clef or transposition.

Voice parts

WG voice parts generally have a narrower range than the cathedral repertoire. Soprano and tenor parts, for example, rarely rise above F. It may therefore be expedient for mezzo-sopranos who might normally sing alto to sing soprano, and for baritones to try the tenor part. The soprano and tenor parts are particularly important in WG music.

It is often useful to double the tenor line at the upper octave with some high voices. This was common practice in the WG period, and it helps to produce a traditional WG sound. Often the air, or main melody, lies in the tenor line. Those singing the soprano line may need warning when they have a harmony part, if they are usually used to singing the tune.

Instruments

It is usual to double each voice part with at least one melody instrument. Instrumentalists sit near the singers whose part they are doubling, and not as a group. Violin, oboe, clarinet, descant recorder, trumpet, and flute playing an octave higher, are suitable for the soprano line; violin, viola, clarinet, horn (F or Eb) for alto; viola, 'cello, clarinet, horn, trombone for tenor; and 'cello, double bass, bassoon, trombone and tuba for the bass. Other usages are possible. Some players may need to have their parts rewritten to accommodate clefs or transpositions.

When fewer than four instruments are available, the alto may most conveniently be omitted, bass and air being the most important parts to double. When more are available, one may double the tenor line at the upper octave, chosen from those instruments recommended for the soprano line. When there is a lack of tenor pitch instruments, the part may be doubled at the upper octave only. Any extra instruments should be added in such a manner as to balance the overall ensemble.

Style of singing

Many good WG singers have a background in folk music rather than in classical. A vigorous, open-throated, vibrato-free style suits the music best. Faster settings should be sung with rhythmic drive.

Marks of expression are rare, but should be observed where they occur. Any additional expression should be simple and straightforward. Dynamic markings usually reinforce changes of texture, and it is within the style always to sing thinly scored passages more quietly. The marking "solo" over a passage may be taken as optional.

Rehearsing

If you need to use a keyboard for accompaniment, it is helpful to get the singers used to following a single line. An organ can play three of the four parts with contrasting tone colours. With a piano, try accompanying just one or two parts at a time.

By far the hardest aspect of WG music, for those new to it, is underlaying the text in the strophic settings after the first verse. It is worth spending some time practising this aspect, and getting used to the symbols used. Even experienced singers find this difficult at first.

Practicalities

Make sure that lighting will remain good throughout the event, and that there are good sightlines to the conductor for all musicians when the singers are standing. Remind instrumentalists to bring music stands, unless you have plenty.

If you are using photocopied sheet music, as you probably will be, please make sure that there are no copyright restrictions. It helps to have the music ready in sets, with sheets numbered or otherwise ordered. Much valuable rehearsal time can be squandered giving out sheets one by one, or sorting music, when it could all have been done beforehand.

If there is to be a long rehearsal leading to a service or concert, a fair time (at least an hour, preferably more) is needed between the end of the rehearsal and the start of the main event, for people to rest their voices. Some refreshment at this time is usually very welcome.

There are three other leaflets in this series: 1. *West Gallery Church Music: An Introduction*, 2. *Arranging a West Gallery Event*, and 4. *Interpreting West Gallery Church Music* all available free of charge from the address below for an SAE. Further information is also available from the West Gallery Music Association (WGMA) at <www.wgma.org.uk>



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