

CMP Analysis/Planning Form

Title The Hills are Bare in Bethlehem Composer arr. Ralph Johnson

Publisher Earthsongs Copyright Year 1995 Voicing SATB

I. Analysis

Broad Description/Type:

- SATB and soprano solo arrangement of an early American hymn tune

Background Information:

Composer Bio (250 words):

Ralph Johnson is the arranger for “The Hills are Bare at Bethlehem.” He is currently the music and choir director at Pilgrim Lutheran Church. He also continues to compose and arrange music for publication and commission. He received his bachelors in music composition and theory from St. Olaf College and he gained his masters in music composition and theory from the University of Minnesota. “Prospect” is written by Graham whose first name is unknown. The text written by Royce J. Scherf comes from the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (c. 1978). Another hymn text written by Scherf is “O God of Life’s Great Mystery,” which is also from the *Lutheran Book of Worship*.

3 quality internet resources for composer information:

1. <http://www.linkedin.com/in/ralphjohnsoncomposer>
2. <http://www.hymnary.org/tune/prospect> (about composition)
3. http://www.hymnary.org/person/Scherf_RJ1 (links to other hymn text by Scherf)

Information on Composition:

“The Hills are Bare at Bethlehem” is an early American hymn tune arrangement to the tune “Prospect.” “Prospect” is found in the *Southern Harmony and Musical Companion* book by William Walker. The text, from the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, is appropriate for a Christmas season concert not only because of the Bethlehem references, but also because of third verses text about the hope of God coming to earth (i.e. the birth of Christ). Many religious choirs, including St. Olaf’s Choir, the National Lutheran Chorus, and the Westminster Choir from Westminster Choir College, have sung this arrangement.

Text/Translation (if applicable):

The hills are bare at Bethlehem,
No future for the world they show;
Yet here new life begins to grow,
From earth's old dust a greenwood stem.

The stars are cold at Bethlehem,
No warmth for those beneath the sky;
Yet here the radiant angels fly,
And joy burns new, a fi'ry gem.

The heart is tired at Bethlehem,
No human dream unbroken stands;
Yet here God comes to mortal hands,
Hope renewed cries out: "Amen!"

Recordings available:

- *A Princeton Christmas for the Children of Africa vol. 1* by various artists (CD)
 - The Westminster Choir of the Westminster Choir College of Rider University
 - Label: CreateSpace
 - Released Oct. 30, 2008
- *St. Olaf Choir Great Hymns of Faith II* by St. Olaf Choir (CD)
 - Label: St. Olaf Records
 - Released May 20, 2004
- *Only in a Manger* by National Lutheran Choir (CD)
 - Label: National Lutheran Choir
 - Released Jan. 1, 2000

Elements of Music:

Form: *The Hills are Bare at Bethlehem* is a strophic piece that gradually builds with each respective verse. The melody begins with the soprano solo and then moves from the men to the altos and then back to the sopranos. There is a total of three verses.

Rhythm: The rhythm is very straightforward in this piece. The smallest division of the $\frac{3}{4}$ meter is the eighth note. The largest note is the dotted half note. Other rhythms are made up of quarter notes, dotted quarter notes, and half notes. The rhythm is steady throughout the piece, but because of the lilting nature of the melody it has a rubato feel.

Melody: The melody is a lilting pentatonic tune from the American South. It is relatively simple melody made up of four bar phrases. By itself it resembles a folk song. The melody begins with a soprano solo for the first verse. In the second verse the men carry the melody

and in the third verse the first two phrases are sung by the altos and the last two are sung by the sopranos. In the original tune the melody is sung by the tenor.

Harmony: The harmony does not begin until the second verse when the women are echoing text of the melody on open fourths and fifths while the men are singing the melody. The main purpose of harmony in this piece is to support and reiterate what the text of the melody is saying. In this section the arranger also makes use of thirds and sixths in the women's intervals, however, he rarely completes the chord. In the first part of the third verse the harmony is less apparent because it is sung on a quiet "oo." The last half of the third verse the harmony increases in complexity as the harmonic voices emphasize the melody.

Timbre: The timbre of this piece should be very simply. Especially at the beginning when it is only the soprano solo and the wind chimes. Vibrato should be kept at a minimum to reinforce the "simple" nature of this piece. A sweet, free flowing tone would best suit this piece.

Texture: The texture is also relatively simple. The harmonic voices add texture by echoing the text of the melody in chords, but they do so in a homophonic manner. The text builds towards the end of the piece as all the harmonic voices move between the chords.

Expression: Expression in this piece is not flashy but rather understated. The dynamic level never goes above a forte or below a piano. It is important for the director to be aware of what voice has the melody so that the other voices can be a step below in volume. The arranger has done this for the director, but liberties could be taken so that the choir is accurately balanced. The phrasing in this piece is relatively simple for the melody as it is the same in every verse. Each individual phrase has a peak and the verse as a whole has a peak as well.

Additional Considerations:

Heart: The verses build in intensity all culminating in the last verse where the choir sings at forte. The text is especially important here because it describes the incarnation of God and the salvation of humanity. The song should end on a triumphant note because of the realization that God has conquered sin and saved mankind.

Introducing the Piece: Students will enter the classroom to the sound of "Prospect" playing. On their chairs will be a copy of the tune from the Southern Harmony Hymnal. We will then analyze the piece to find where the melody.

II. Primary Skill Outcome: Students will perform this piece with a clear and focused tone that reflects the simple melody.

Strategies:

Warm ups:

- Sing the pentatonic scale ascending and descending with four beats on each note on “wee-oo-wee-oo...” Use minimal vibrato
- Yawn signs on “ee” from high to low to achieve the proper resonance space
- Sing “me-meh-mah-moh-moo” with each vowel on the same note except the “oo” which will descend and ascend a fifth. Each vowel should contain the same forward resonance as the “ee”

Melody

- Students will have been introduced to the melody through the introduction exercise. Students will then sing through the soprano solo in unison on the solfege syllables. They will be instructed to sing “above the shelf” (i.e. sing above the roof of their mouth)
- Sing through the melody alternating between the vowels “wee” and “oo”. Use as much resonance as possible
- Sing through the soprano solo in unison on the text. Have the students “pull a string” from between their eyes to encourage a resonant space. Have each “pull” be the length of one phrase

Harmony

- Have harmonic parts sing alone (without melody) on an “oo” vowel. Draw attention to the mouth being a backwards megaphone (lips pursed with a large amount of space in the back of the mouth) or a “cave” by telling the students that they should envision a ping pong ball in their mouth
- Put all the parts together and have the harmonic parts “imitate” the timbre of the melody

Other Recordings

- Listen to professional choirs singing American folk music and hymn tunes

Assessment:

- Record choir when they are first learning the song and at the end when they are ready for a performance
 - Have students write a reflection on what makes a clear and focused tone. Then rate their first and second performance on clarity and focus.
 - Have students write how their tones changed over time. What did they personally do differently?
- Listen carefully to students tones over time, make suggestions as needed
- Put students into octets, have them perform the piece and then give them comments on their tones. If needed, make suggestions about how to change them.

III. Knowledge Outcome: Students will learn about Southern harmony tradition and common practices.

Strategies:

- Make copies of songs from the Southern Harmony Hymnal by W. Walker. Have students study the score in pairs and then groups of four. Make lists of differences and similarities between the music notation
- Role play the script in the front of the *Southern Harmony and Musical Companion* book titled *The Gamut or Rudiments of Music*.
- Listen to performances from the “Big Singing of Benton, Kentucky, 1966-1992.” Track music with finger while listening
- Have a small group discussion about what is different and similar about music education in the South versus music education today. (Compare our choir to how they learned music through Southern Harmony) Move the discussion to a whole class discussion.
- Read excerpts from the introduction to fifth edition of *The Southern Harmony and Musical Companion* by William Walker c. 1987

Assessment:

- Students will turn in note pages/lists that they generated during the small group discussions. Read through them to find out students’ understanding.
- Have students write a reading reflection to the article excerpts. What struck them and why?
- Evaluate group discussions on depth and clarity when students are asked to share in front of the class
- Give students an 8 bar pentatonic melody to transcribe into “shape note.”

IV. Affective Outcome: Students will explore the integrity of arranging music.

Strategies:

- Discuss in small groups what it means to be “authentic” to the music. Have groups write down their responses to share with the rest of the class. Have a classroom discussion.
 - Some questions to consider in small groups
 - What does it mean to be authentic to a culture?
 - What does it mean to be authentic to a culture’s music?
 - Can we be authentic to a culture’s music by changing the style?
- Have students write a response to the following questions:
 - How can an arranger be authentic to the original score?
 - How can an arranger not be authentic to the score?
 - Give examples and be specific.
- Lead a discussion about ways that we can be authentic to the Southern Harmony music tradition? What would this entail?

- Does Ralph Johnson stay true to the Southern Harmony style? Is he authentic? Is there a difference between the two? Have the students respond to these questions in a journal that they keep while learning the piece.

Assessment:

- Read through group notes on the discussions
- Evaluate student's reflective responses according to depth and understanding. If response is poor give the student an opportunity to revise and include supplement information where they were lacking
- Read journal entries. Did student's opinions change over the course of the piece as they learned more about the Southern Harmony style?

V. Selection:

I choose this piece because of my interest in Southern harmony and early American hymn music. I find it fascinating that a uniquely American system of reading music was created to teach the masses sacred music. I would like my students to become acquainted with this music literacy movement because I feel that its significance is overlooked in many music classrooms. I also choose this particular piece because of the melody. I found it sweet and soothing and also discovered that it easily became stuck in my head. Because the notes are relatively easy the song provides me with a great opportunity to teach the fundamentals of resonant singing