Stylistic Characteristics of Randall Thompson's Choral Music

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STYLISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RANDALL THOMPSON'S
CHORAL MUSIC

A Research Paper
Presented to
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Robert Hugh Creigh
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APPROVED FOR THE GRADUATE FACULTY

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Randall Thompson's choral music, widely performed by professional groups, colleges, and choirs from public schools, establishes this composer as one of the foremost in contemporary music. In view of such popularity, it would seem that choral directors should more fully acquaint themselves with some of the idiomatic characteristics of his style.

I. IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

A choral director should have a complete understanding of the music he performs. The significant musical traits of Randall Thompson should be known for effective interpretation of his music; therefore, a study of these traits has value for the choral conductor who wishes to perform Thompson's music.

II. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study discusses only those style characteristics peculiar to Thompson's choral music. No attempt has been made to present detailed harmonic or rhythmic analysis. The titles examined in the study include the

III. DEFINITION OF TERMS USED

**Antiphonal singing.** Singing in alternating choruses (1:41). This technique is also known as poly-chordal style (1:592-593).

**Augmentation.** The presentation of a theme or subject in doubled values, e.g., with the quarter notes being replaced with half notes (1:62).

**Contrapuntal.** In the style of counterpoint. The term is usually used interchangeably with polyphonic (1:183). Music written with several voices or parts being performed simultaneously, but maintaining their own individuality, to some degree (1:593).

**Prosody.** The study of metrical structure, including poetic feet and meter, and the rhyming patterns of texts used in choral music (13:678).
Randall Thompson was born April 21, 1899, in New York City, but grew up in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, where his father, Daniel Varney Thompson, taught English. His parents encouraged him to learn to play the piano and to sing. However, he did not become serious about music until he was twelve years of age. At this time he became inspired by Schuyler Van Dyke, a mathematician who played chapel organ in Lawrenceville. Through Van Dyke, Thompson became acquainted with the works of Bach, Widor, Vierne, and other composers. At fifteen he succeeded Van Dyke as organist. Subsequently, Thompson started composing hymns and decided to go to Harvard for his musical training (12:8).

While attending Harvard he studied with Dr. Archibald T. Davidson, Edward Burlingame Hill, and other faculty members of the school of music. His development as a composer at Harvard was rapid. He developed a friendship with Roger Sessions, who urged him to continue his studies in New York with Ernest Bloch. As a result of this study he won the Prix de Rome and was made a fellow of the American Academy at Rome from 1922 to 1925 (12:25).
When Thompson returned to the United States he became Assistant Professor of Music at Wellesley College, a position he held from 1927 until 1929. During 1929 and 1930 he held a Guggenheim Fellowship in New York City, and in 1933 he received an honorary Doctor's degree from the University of Rochester. In 1937 he was appointed Professor of Music and Director of the University Chorus at the University of California at Berkeley. From 1938 through 1940 he was Director of the Curtis Institute of Music. He headed the Music Division of the School of Fine Arts at the University of Virginia from 1941 through 1946. For two years, from 1946 through 1948, he was Professor of Music at Princeton University, and in 1948 he joined the faculty of Harvard University. In 1959 he was given an award of merit by the Italian government. He is now retired and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (10:2214).

II. HIS PHILOSOPHY

Randall Thompson, one of the most successful composers of choral music in America (3:14), has a definite philosophy regarding his music.

High among the driving forces behind Thompson's composing is his attempt to write music that "will reach and move the hearts of his listeners in his own day" (4:431). Such a goal has kept him from becoming interested in esoteric styles or intricate techniques and forms. He
has tried to write with sincerity, high purpose, and depth of feeling within the traditional forms. His music, characterized by economy, simplicity of means, and nobility of expression (4:431), is clearly contemporary in its construction (6:110).

While Thompson's music is American in spirit, composed for American needs and inspired by the native artistic environment of this country, its means of expression may be traced to the sixteenth century. This, then, places him among the nationalists and the eclectics of America's composers (4:431).

In an Inaugural Address at Princeton University in 1946, entitled Music, Popular and Unpopular, Thompson made a statement about the relationship of the composer to his public that gives an important clue to the nature of his music and the attitudes that produce it. Regarding American composers and their source of inspiration, he stated:

"Literal and empty imitation of European models" must be rejected in favor of that source of inspiration which springs from "our own genuine heritage in its every manifestation, every inflection, and every living example" (5:2).

This philosophy allowed his style to develop without the influence of the more radical tendencies of contemporary composers. It evolved along the safer and more tried practices of older masters. Unusual is the composer, in this day, who uses musical words familiar to everyone, yet is able to write music contemporary in style (9:237).
CHAPTER III

STYLE CHARACTERISTICS

In the choral music of Randall Thompson four basic qualities of his style are found: (1) the invention of lines which, by their rise and fall and their points of rest, make the singing of them a matter of interest as well as ease; (2) the setting of every phrase of text into a texture of voice that serves not only to sound the words, but also to emphasize their meaning by particular choral color; (3) the rhythmic equivalent in music to the natural rhythm of the words when spoken; and (4) an organization of phrases, made clear by the use of passing cadences, which by their relative strength indicate the different relationships existing between successive phrases (5:9).

I. MELODIC LINE

Thompson's melodic line is characterized by economy and simplicity in its means and nobility in its expression (4:431). These qualities are achieved through step-wise motion and intervals that are easily heard and sung. Example 1 illustrates this point.
Example 1. The Last Words of David

In measure five of Example 1, the soprano part skips downward an interval of a fifth from the second to the fifth degree of the G major scale. The presence of the basses,
also on the fifth degree of the scale, makes the downward skip by the sopranos seem natural and easy to sing. In measures five and six the tenors make a skip downward of a fifth, from the sixth degree to the second degree, and then back up a fourth to a D, which the basses have been holding. It is obvious that these skips adhere closely to traditional voice leading.

Occasionally a series of skips are used in one voice, as in the bass line in Example 2. The parallel

Example 2. "Howl Ye," The Peaceable Kingdom

motion in the soprano, alto and tenor parts makes them less obvious. He either reverses the direction of the line following a skip by step-wise motion, or he returns to the previous note. This device is found in his early, as well
as his late works. The Peaceable Kingdom was published in 1936. A comparison to the Requiem, published in 1958, reveals that his treatment of skips and melodic line has changed little from his early style.

Example 3. "Thou Hast Given Him," Requiem

The same smooth style employed in his contrapuntal music is also evident in the chordal writing of Example 4 on page 10, from The Gates of Heaven. Especially noteworthy is the impressionistic technique of parallel motion (1:350) that is used in measure 30. Such simplicity of line in all voices, combined with the modernism of parallel motion and the nobility of directness, allows him to produce music that speaks to the audience in terms that it understands (5:1).
II. HARMONIC LINE

Simplicity and directness are also evident in the harmony and voice leading in Thompson's music. Example 4
demonstrates how he ends phrases with chords that are completely understandable. On the final syllable of the word "temple" (measure 31), he ends on a C Major chord. In measure 33, he ends "temple" on a C Major chord, but in its first inversion. However, in measure 35 the final chord is G Major. In measure 31 the voices move to the final chord in the simplest, most direct and logical manner, with the soprano and bass parts moving downward in thirds, while the tenors hold the common tone to both chords. Smoothness of movement is noticed in measure 33 when the sopranos and tenors move down a third while the altos move up a third from A to C through the passing tone B. Finally, in measure 35, directness is achieved by the simple G, F#, G, in the alto part, moving to the G Major chord, as all other voices move to their notes in the traditional and expected manner.

III. COLOR

Thompson has the ability to set each phrase of the text into a texture of voices that serves not only to sound the words but also to bring out their meaning by a particular choral color (5:9).

The Peaceable Kingdom shows his sensitivity to text and his ability to choose the proper texture and color to broaden and clarify that text. The first chorus sets the mood for the total work by contrasting the pitfalls of wickedness with the rewards of righteousness. The next four
choruses elaborate on the lot of the wicked. The fifth chorus is masterfully placed to act as a denouncement of evil and a transition in mood to the side of the righteous (5:13).

Thompson uses tonality to change color in *The Peaceable Kingdom* by a modal effect when concerned with the wicked, and major keys when discussing the righteous (5:13).

The second selection, *Woe Unto Them*, shows the side of evil and is intensified through sheer rhythmic activity. While he uses an agitated declamatory style in one voice, Thompson punctuates the other three parts with detached outcries on the word "woe." He increases the tension by using "woe" more and more on unaccented beats until, as shown in measure 3 of Example 5, page 13, the chorus reaches its climax. This climax is effected not only by the color of all voices in their upper range, but also through the contrast of a sustained chord on "woe." The dramatic change in mood in measure 6 is characteristic of Thompson's sensitivity to the change in text. He compounds the effect of the high chord by a period of silence and then changes tempo and range in all voices. However, his change to a warm harmony at this point is the most striking change of all (5:17).
Example 5. "Woe Unto Them," The Peaceable Kingdom

In Howl Ye both texture and vocal color are used to intensify the meaning of the words. The following example illustrates the melody used for all voices as they enter.
in the strong part of their range, then drop one octave before starting to climb.

Example 6. "Howl Ye," The Peaceable Kingdom

In Example 7 the voices enter at intervals of one measure until, in the second measure, the voices come in one beat apart. The intensity of mood is increased by the rhythmic drive as the double choirs exchange the words "howl ye."

Example 7. "Howl Ye," The Peaceable Kingdom
While the foregoing illustrates Thompson's ability to build tension, he alleviates the conflict through the words "thou art dissolved." Here a descending melody is used to reach the lower ranges before the final "howl" is sung on an A minor chord with dynamic markings of pianissimo, crescendo, forte, decrescendo, pianissimo.

A feeling of mounting doom is created in the third chorus by an increase in the sharpness of dissonance. This increase is further enhanced by a lack of melody and the substitution of plateau-like lines rising in pitch as the piece progresses. Absence of counterpoint, together with the accents and sforzandi in all voices, help to bring
Example 8. "The Noise of a Multitude," The Peaceable Kingdom

about the feeling of mercilessness and inevitability that the words express. This inevitability is strengthened by the open fifth and octave in the last three measures of the
composition (5:18). Thompson's ability to bring out the meaning of the text through texture and vocal color is evident in the above example.

Example 9. "The Noise of a Multitude," The Peaceable Kingdom

Occasionally he achieves varied vocal color by the range of voice he chooses. In The Paper Reeds by the Brooks, he places the tenors a third higher than the alto part, creating an interesting and different vocal color. This is shown in Example 10 on page 18,
Example 10. "The Paper Reeds by the Brooks," The Peaceable Kingdom

Thompson's ability to sound out the word through his choice of voices is evident in Example 11, where he uses dynamic effects to bring out the sound and meaning of Example 11. "Woe Unto Them," The Peaceable Kingdom
the word "sea." Here he accomplishes the sound of a wave by the crescendo and decrescendo in the alto part.

The last two choruses of The Peaceable Kingdom elaborate upon the opening section of the text: "Say ye to the righteous, it shall be well with them." Their meaning is enhanced when in the sixth chorus the alto and tenor lines begin the quarter note passage on the word "sing," as shown in Example 12.

Example 12. "But These are They that Forsake the Lord,"
The Peaceable Kingdom

Throughout the rest of the chorus the double choirs build intensity as they exchange the words "clap their
hands." The staccato marking and the lack of melody are Thompson's way of emulating the sound of clapping hands.

Example 13. "But These Are They that Forsake the Lord," The Peaceable Kingdom
The victory of the righteous is final in the last chorus, as the prophecy of the opening lines is borne out by the antiphonal voicing of the words:

Ye shall have a song, as in the night when a holy solemnity is kept; and gladness of heart, as when one goeth with a pipe to come into the mountain of the Lord.

This chorus is full of examples of Thompson's ability to add to the meaning of words by his choice of rhythm and vocal color. By using men's and women's voices separately in the opening lines of the chorus, he gets an organ-like sound resembling the alternation of registers as the voices change. There is an interesting effect obtained in the following example as the men's voices sing the words, "when a holy solemnity is kept."

Example 14. "Ye Shall Have a Song," The Peaceable Kingdom
The work reaches its conclusion on a C Major chord that is arrived at in typical Thompson style.

Example 15. "Ye Shall Have a Song," The Peaceable Kingdom
One has only to study the last chorus of *The Peaceable Kingdom* to realize what is meant by "simplicity of means and nobility of expression" (4:431). Thompson is able to create music where text, texture, and vocal color help to make the music clear and understandable to his audience (4:431).

IV. PROSODY

A most unique quality in Thompson's choral music is his ability to rhythmically set music to the natural rhythm of the words when spoken (5:9). In choral music his setting of English words is admirable. In the past the treatment of the English language has been lamentably influenced by the characteristic rhythmic formulae suitable to other languages. This often caused the words to be so miserably distorted that the accents were unnatural and made the words hard to understand when sung (9:237). He is one composer who has done a great deal to correct this situation (9:237). He accomplishes this through his primary concern with the inherent rhythm of the text. By his choice of rhythm he attempts to interpret and bring out its meaning. In other words, musical ideas grow out of the text, rather than setting a rhythm and fitting the words to that rhythm (5:10).

A device frequently used to achieve clarity is to group several syllables into one beat, as in the second chorus of *The Peaceable Kingdom*. On the words "woe unto
them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth," he brackets the words "place that they may be placed a . . . ," so that there are seven syllables on the third beat of the measure. Example 16 shows that the words fit the same rhythm as if they had been spoken. Even though many syllables have been placed on one beat the similarity between the natural rhythm when spoken and this grouping brings about a clarity that is unmistakable.

Example 16. "Woe Unto Them," The Peaceable Kingdom

Still another sample of Thompson's setting of text is his satire Americana, which was written to show the extent of humor possible in the choral medium. It contains choruses based on five different aspects of American life: fundamentalism, spiritualism, temperance, capital punishment, and
optimism. In order to make every word distinct, Thompson reinforces the natural accent of the words by frequent changes in meter, and when necessary subdivides the beats into irregular numbers of notes in the same manner as in Example 16. However, he is often able to keep the irregularity of this prose within the existing meter, as shown in Example 17, where he keeps the 4/4 meter without changes or irregular division of the words (5:13).

Example 17. "The Staff Necromancer," Americana

In "The Noise of the Multitude" regular rhythms are employed, but accents are used on words that are to be brought out. Example 18 shows Thompson's sensitivity to the text and his adeptness at bringing out the proper feeling through his choice of rhythm and accent (5:18).

Example 18. "The Noise of the Multitude," The Peaceable Kingdom
A Feast of Praise, published in 1963, illustrates his continuing concern and care in seeing that the natural rhythm of the words is clear and understandable. Even on the first and fourth beats of measure 46 he accents the notes. It is not often that a rest is accented, as occurs on the first beat of measure 57. Thompson leaves nothing to chance when he writes a score; the last measure of the example (5 + 3/8 meter) illustrates his concern that every

Example 19. A Feast of Praise
word be given its proper inflection. The word "praises" is accented on the first and sixth beats, but "God," on the fourth beat, should be slightly expanded in rhythm.

V. FORM

Characteristic of Thompson's choral music is his manner of moving from one musical idea to the next. One strength of his phrase organization is in his passing cadences, which by their relative strength indicate the different relationships between phrases. While the variety of ways to link phrases are endless, Thompson achieves gradations of punctuation in musical terms which interpret and enhance those at the disposal of the poet (5:12). A command of the musical language and his good musical taste enable him to achieve such results (5:9).

Example 20 illustrates how Thompson uses a melody or theme to link his phrases. The first motive (E, D, B, A in the soprano line) is employed in augmentation by the basses to join measures 4 and 5. The use of this simple motive is evident in the soprano part as he inverts the melody in half notes for measures 5 and 6. Here the tenors have already started the descending figure, doubly augmented, on the word formis. The subtlety of punctuation between phrases by musical means is illustrated by a comparison of the basses in measure 4 with the tenors in measures 6 and 7. Without the music a comma indicates the pause at the
end of both lines. Thompson has interpreted this distinction in musical terms so that the flow from measures 3 and 4 is not quite the same as from measures 6 and 7.
The above example shows the gradation of punctuation that he is able to achieve through a simple melodic device. The same device is used in the ending of the composition, where he uses this motive in all four voices in simultaneous inversion and augmentation (5:11-12).


Phrases are also linked by passing cadences. Through this device clarity of construction is achieved. While some contemporary composers create contrast between tension and relaxation more through the gradual resolving of extreme dissonances, Thompson attains high and low points of conflict primarily through the setting of contrapuntal tension to be resolved by a cadential figure. He often uses passing cadences as a springboard for the launching of a new
phrase (5:8). In Alleluia he builds tension through the texture of the eighth notes in the alto and tenor voices. Note the cadential relaxation in measure 6 of Example 22.

Example 22. Alleluia
Here Thompson moves smoothly into the next phrase through the B natural in the soprano line as it serves as the root of the B minor chord. On the third beat of the sixth measure, B becomes the fifth of the E Major chord. The resolving of the B to A makes A the root of the A Major chord. Doubling the A in soprano and bass parts makes the progression complete. The secondary dominant relationship of the B minor chord to E Major, followed by an A Major chord makes this progression natural, direct, and complete. Relaxing of texture at cadential points helps to make the various sections decisive. Although there are no breaks in the first twelve pages of the composition, Thompson, because of his cadential patterns, is able to change musical ideas and mood several times. Simplicity and directness are the characteristics that make the outline of the composition so clear.

*Requiem*, Thompson's largest choral composition, is one of his most inventive. His genius as a writer of choral music is evident in the scope of the work containing a dialogue between faith and despair in the presence of death. This dialogue is sung by one choir that utters despair when confronted with death, and the second that shows the beneficent hand of God. Finally the mourners are won over to the side of faith. Thompson's ability to compose for double chorus shows growth as he includes both sides of the dialogue simultaneously in the opening chorus. In the
following example (Example 23), he employs not two but three groups at the same time. The second choir is divided so that its reply to the first choir, faith, is sung antiphonally. The singing of two separate texts at the same time illustrates growth and inventiveness in his technique. Throughout the entire composition the two choirs maintain their identity. Even in the final chorus (see Example 24) the first choir, representing faith, sings "alleluia," while the second sings "amen."

While Requiem reveals Thompson's growth in technique, his musical ideas and style remain the same as in his earlier works.
Example 23. "Lamentations," Requiem
CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY

Randall Thompson developed a philosophy that allowed him to compose only when commissioned for a particular purpose. The sense of direction that this philosophy gave him shows in the directness and clarity of his music. His ability in employing vocal color and textures that enhance the meaning of the words, plus his skill at setting texts to the English language, establish him as an outstanding composer. Contemporary in sound, his music reflects good technique and taste. On the other hand, he resists the complications of rhythm and dissonance that are usually associated with modern music. Thompson's music is characterized by economy, simplicity of means, and nobility of expression. He has always tried to compose music "that will reach and move the hearts of his listeners in his own day" (4:431). These qualities have made him one of the foremost American composers of choral music (7:375).
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