

# Book Reviews

*Andrew Crow, Editor*

*A History of Western Choral Music, Volume 1*

Chester L. Alwes

Oxford University Press, 2015

488 pages, \$150.00 hardcover,

\$74.00 paperback

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From time to time a brand new book becomes an instant classic. *A History of Western Choral Music, Volume 1* by Chester L. Alwes will undoubtedly fill that role as it finds a place in university libraries nationwide and becomes required reading for university students. Based on content from choral literature courses the author taught for many years, the book is intended in part to help meet the “challenge of effecting a synthesis between academic knowledge and performance.” Thus *A History of Western Choral Music* is a valuable tool for all practicing choral conductors. Conductors of collegiate, church, community, professional, and advanced school-age choir will surely value this engaging narrative and analysis of historical choral literature from the Middle Ages to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Alwes organizes the information by genre, style period, or country of origin, depending on the topic. He divides Renaissance music of the Continent into sacred and secular genres. However, Renaissance music of England is covered in a separate chapter due to its unique development. The Baroque era is organized by nationality, beginning with Italy and ending once again in England before circling back to Germany

with a chapter dedicated solely to J.S. Bach. In a valuable chapter on the French Baroque period, the author encourages performance of this often-overlooked genre of music, citing recent availability of modern performance editions. The 11<sup>th</sup> chapter is a fascinating essay on the difficulties of defining the Classical era. Alwes demonstrates the overlap of style periods in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (noting that beginning and ending dates depend on geography) while drawing a philosophical connection from the Romantic period back to the Baroque. Through that lens, the final chapters cover the symphonic masses, requiem masses, and sacred music of both the Classical and Romantic periods.

The book begins with an overview of medieval modality and catholic liturgy, then proceeds to detail the metrical organization of isorhythmic motets. Alwes notes that the modal, metrical, and liturgical legacy of this early music continues to influence music across style periods. These characteristics reappear in the analysis of music throughout the volume. Short musical excerpts illustrate the compositional architecture discussed in the text, but Dr. Alwes suggests

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that readers gain access to scores. Several of the book's endnotes contain suggestions for scholarly editions. Many of the works discussed are already included in popular anthologies such as Ray Robinson's *Choral Music: A Norton Historical Anthology* or Dennis Shrock's recently published *Choral Scores*. Readers can access most other scores in the Petrucci Music Library online ([www.imslp.org](http://www.imslp.org)).

To read the book from beginning to end allows the reader to trace stylistic trends and developments through history. Those wishing to go directly to a chapter on a specific topic will also be satisfied with the author's consistent pattern that puts music in context, covers the topic with clarity, and finishes with a succinct yet thorough summary. Throughout the book, major composers receive only the necessary biographical treatment to give context for their music. Stylistic analysis of important representative works receives primary attention.

Detailed analyses of each genre's seminal works give valuable insight into important compositions while providing a model for conductors to examine different scores from the same era. Minor composers receive only passing mention, but lists of lesser-known names offer a gold mine for those who want to explore a genre more fully. In this way, Alwes has provided a unique contribution to our choral field by resisting the compulsion to create a compendium—we already have those resources available. Rather, Alwes has organized the content according to his own esteemed priorities.

This reviewer appreciated the endnotes at the back of the book. Some notes simply provide a citation, but many offer additional explanation of the topic at hand or refer interested readers

to other sources with greater depth. Some of these sources are the landmark publications on a given composer or genre; others are some of the most recent research available. Occasional editorial errors are a minor distraction. Misplaced or missing words (p. 9, 27, 85, 270, e.g.) do not ultimately detract from the worth of the book but will hopefully be corrected for future printings.

*A History of Western Choral Music, Volume 1* by Chester L. Alwes is a welcome addition to the literature on choral music. Choral directors of all levels will appreciate this book for its clear narrative and methods of analysis whether they use it as a textbook, a reference work, or a guide to programming. *A History of Western Choral Music, Volume 2*, which explores other 19<sup>th</sup>-century genres and the contemporary period, is due to be released in June 2016.

— *Andrew Minear*

*Modernism and Orthodox Spirituality in Contemporary Music*

Ivan Moody

The International Society for Orthodox Church Music

Institute of Musicology, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2014

232 pages, \$27, soft cover

available: [http://www.isocm.com/publications/publications/moody\\_music.html](http://www.isocm.com/publications/publications/moody_music.html)

ISBN: 978-952-99883-4-1

Since the publication of Sergei Rachmaninoff's *All-Night Vigil* in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, American choirs and audiences have been fascinated by the Orthodox choral tradition. Thanks to publishers such as *Musica Russica*, many works of Russian Orthodox

composers fill concert programs across the country. However, since the fall of the Soviet Union, a noticeable gap in scholarship existed regarding the musical tradition of neighboring Orthodox nations. How did the music survive during the Soviet years? How did Orthodox spirituality permeate compositional output despite government censorship? With *Modernism and Orthodox Spirituality in Contemporary Music*, Ivan Moody tackles these topics, giving the choral conductor valuable perspective on various Orthodox liturgical traditions and an introduction to less-heralded eastern European composers. Moody also investigates the intersection of composers and liturgy, extending a still-vibrant musical tradition.

As a conductor, composer, musicologist, and Orthodox priest, Ivan Moody is uniquely qualified to explore this topic. His education took him through London, England, and Joensuu, Finland, eventually completing his studies with a Ph. D at the University of York. He also has vast experience conducting choirs throughout the world, including Britain, Spain, Finland, Serbia, and the United States among others. His experiences as a performer and scholar allow him to adequately bridge the gap between the Western musical and Eastern Orthodox traditions. This should not be undervalued; traditionally East and West are leery of artistic synthesis between cultures. However, the acceptance of “moderate modernism” in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Orthodox art allowed the Eastern tradition to continue evolving while maintaining a safe distance from Western aesthetic influence. Moody masterfully navigates these two worlds through analogies to visual art. In each chapter he makes reference to iconographers of the era, perhaps inspiring the reader to explore cultural correlation through Orthodoxy’s most recognizable symbols.

Moody organizes the final six chapters into two major divisions: historically Orthodox nations (Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Russia), and Orthodox newcomers (Arvo Pärt, John Tavener, and composers from Finland). While Moody’s thesis refreshingly explores the output of Pärt and Tavener, the heart of the book for American choral conductors lies in the nationalistic chapters. Here the author shows his vast experience, seamlessly tracing the influence of modernism in each country’s cultural development. From impressionism, expressionism, and serialism to the extension of the Synodal tradition crystalized by Rachmaninoff, Moody illuminates every avenue in his examination of Modernism and Orthodox spirituality.

The wide survey of unfamiliar composers investigated throughout the text will be a valuable programming tool for conductors. Moody carefully curates each chapter to include a fair representation of *avant garde*, traditional, and living composers while still remaining faithful to the common trends in each nation. He examines a wealth of repertoire from well-known composers such as Vladimir Martynov and Georgy Sviridov of Russia to rising artists such as Galina Grigorjeva of Ukraine or Dobrinka Tabakova of Bulgaria. Moody analyzes repertoire applicable to amateurs and professional choirs alike.

The chapter on Finland exemplifies how readings from this text could be used in a choral literature course. Here Moody chronicles the effort of the Orthodox Church in Finland to separate itself from Russian tradition and to search for a uniquely Finnish voice. The composers highlighted stretch from Pekka Attinen, one of the early composers who employed highly modernistic elements in his music, through Boris Jakubov and Peter Mirolybov, whose works are

tailored to the Finnish church choir. The majority of the chapter focuses on Einojuhani Rautavaara, a prominent Finnish composer who established the harmonic language for a new generation. The chronological progression of a nationalistic style is typical of each chapter in the book, and would provide great depth to any graduate survey.

While excellent, the book does have some limitations. Moody himself acknowledges the need for further exploration into the Romanian, Ukrainian, and Greek-American traditions—research hopefully forthcoming in Moody’s future publications. Each chapter includes several musical examples and references to publishers when available. However, a list of accessible recordings and comprehensive information about published scores would better enable future performance of the works. Note that *Modernism and Orthodox Spirituality in Contemporary Music* is not a reference book such as Shrock’s *Choral Repertoire*, and should not be purchased with that intent. While there is an exceptional bibliography and index, the author’s ultimate intent is to illuminate the relationship between modernism and Orthodox spirituality, not to highlight specific composers or compositions. Ivan Moody is an active conductor invested in the future of this music. We are fortunate to have an expert illuminating the Orthodox repertoire from a choral musician’s perspective and his book would be an ideal resource for any conductor seeking to better understand and program this obscure repertoire.

— Kyle Nielsen

*The Choir: Singing, Leading, Communicating*  
Tone Bianca Dahl

Andrew Smith, translator

Cantando Musikkforlag AS, 2008

165 pages, 235 NOK (≈ \$27.50 as of  
publication date), hard cover

ISBN: 978-82-92-49422-6

This slim, but powerfully written volume was originally published as *Korkunst* (literally “choir art”) in 2002 in the author’s native Norway. The 2008 translation by Andrew Smith, a native UK choral artist and composer who has spent his life in Norway, brings this important book to a wider audience. Author Tone Bianca Dahl states, “This is not a book about conducting, but about being a conductor.” More specifically, Dahl focuses on key aspects of conducting a choir that go beyond what we do with our arms. The ideas presented by Dahl steered my research in useful directions as I investigated the ways in which a choral conductor must adapt communication style based on the makeup of the choir being conducted. I recommend the book as a library resource for departments seeking to equip rounded leaders and interpreters of music. It would also be an effective source of readings for a rehearsal techniques class.

Tone Bianca Dahl is a conductor of over 25 years experience, during which time she has been active as both a conductor and solo performer. Trained at the Norwegian Academy of Music, she is currently a professor there. She is also the conductor of Schola Cantorum, one of Norway’s finest choirs, and she has a thriving role as clinician for choirs and conductors throughout Europe. The beginnings of *The Choir* came about when she was asked to design a course in Choral Didactics. Her research for the course led her to examine *why* she does things the way she

does, followed by an analysis of *how* and *what* exactly it is that she's doing as a conductor. Dahl advocates for beginning with the *why* and letting the *how* and the *what* follow. The result, she finds, is a deeper effectiveness and more meaningful connection to her choirs.

Intended for use by conductor training programs as well as lay choral leaders, *The Choir* is written in an easy-to-read, first-person style, and the text is interspersed with inspirational quotations, art, and poetry by Norwegian author, composer and sociologist Lise Knudsen. A quick flip through the pages draws a distinct comparison to books of the self-help genre and the comparison is apt; the light style makes it a joy to read and it is organized in such a way as to make specific information easy to find for later reference.

The book is divided into three areas that correspond to the subtitle of "Singing, Leading, Communicating." The first area is devoted to voice production and warming up, with a detailed but easily understood description of the physiological process by which the singing voice is formed. In the second segment, on Leading, Dahl deals with the role of the conductor in getting the choir from first rehearsal to performance. She discusses choosing repertoire, dealing with intonation (with a wonderful section on tuning individual notes in a chord), and practical aspects of planning a concert.

The final portion of the book, on Communication, is arguably the most powerful. Dahl reminds us that we are working with a living, breathing organism made up of a collection of individuals with different backgrounds, relationships, experiences, education levels, and emotions. The effectiveness and empathy with which we as choral leaders communicate with this collective

has a direct impact on the musical product we are able to create together. Dahl deals with issues such as how we speak to our choirs, how we inspire them, and how we distribute responsibility. Handling more sensitive issues such as dealing with choir committees, taking over leadership of an established choir and the removal of choir members are also given careful attention. Conductors who want to be more mindful of their own balance as a gateway to effective communication will find Dahl's set of personal exercises for developing physical and emotional balance valuable. I find that they have given me more control and expressiveness in my gesture and a greater ability to approach my role as a conductor with an open and affirming mind.

*The Choir* is an effective and engaging book, and I firmly believe that it serves a valuable purpose within choral education programs in North America. As yet, there has been no American publication of the book, but the translated volume is quite easily obtained online from the Norsk Korsenter AS. The book's translator, Andrew Smith, who is associated with the Norsk Korsenter states that they regularly ship the book outside of Norway and that those wishing to purchase the book should email the Korsenter directly at [korsenteret@korsenteret.no](mailto:korsenteret@korsenteret.no) to place an order.

— Sara Terrell