

## **Instruments Can Sing Too!**

### **How the Music of the Renaissance Could Solve Problems for Your Program**

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Music of the Renaissance is commonly programmed at the high school level, thanks in no small part to the tradition of Madrigal groups which have long been a part of many programs in Illinois. However, most do not look to the Renaissance for repertoire for their beginning or struggling groups. This presentation will provide you with resources and information that will reveal this era of music as a resource for your high school or middle school program in a variety of ways beyond just an exclusive, auditioned choir.

Some of the typical problems facing teachers – particularly those at smaller schools or early in their careers:

- Finding “quality” repertoire
- Unbalanced Groups
- Finding “fun” repertoire
- Small ensembles/Low Numbers
- No tenor/bass voices
- Inexperienced choirs

The need for answers sometimes leads to these solutions:

- Programming “easy” music
- Eliminating or rewriting parts
- Sticking to 2 part or unison rep.
- Asking voices to sing outside range

Music of the Renaissance may not always be considered because it is:

- Often in a foreign language
- Difficult
- Sacred
- A Cappella

The “a cappella” barrier, is one that is particularly challenging, but is one that current scholars understand need not be a barrier at all:

"It is sometimes suggested that to sing a cappella is essential in all sixteenth century music...Now a cappella music can be exquisite: under a burden of intonational inaccuracies, however, it can be the reverse. Our sixteenth-century musicians were a practical lot. They sang a cappella more often than not, but they were not above putting in an organ part or even a supporting group of whatever suitable instruments were available in order to achieve security or to explore the forbidden delights of variegated timbres." (Percy M. Young, *A Choral Tradition*, 12-13)

“. . .pieces in the new style [that of Josquin and his contemporaries] were not always performed exclusively by *a cappella* choirs. Some organizations, like the Sistine Chapel in Rome, did exclude instruments from the performances of sacred music, but in all probability most choirs sometimes sang with instruments and sometimes without. The “a

cappella ideal” (a term that used to be associated with sixteenth century music) has, then, little or no historical validity, even though it does draw attention to the homogeneous texture of much of this music, a texture that sounds well, it must be admitted, whether played by groups of like instruments – consorts of flutes, records, or viols, for example – or sung by consorts of unaccompanied voices.” (Howard M. Brown, *Music in the Renaissance*, 119

Given the acceptance of the possibility of using instruments to support vocal music of the Renaissance, what are the possible techniques and solutions to make this viable?

- Instruments doubling voices
- double choir music with Instruments subbing for one of the choirs
- Instruments covering specific parts
- Alternating between voices and instruments between verses or sections

When considering these types of adjustments to the written score, changes should not be made arbitrarily. As with any musical decision, any choice should be grounded in research historical performance practice. Two good sources which might serve as an introduction to this material:

Brown, Howard M. *Music in the Renaissance*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall (1976).

Reese, Gustave. *Music in the Renaissance*. New York: W.W. Norton (1954).

**More good news?** A great deal of music from the renaissance can be found for free online.

[www.cpdl.org](http://www.cpdl.org)

[www.imslp.org](http://www.imslp.org)

When possible, these scores should always be checked against an original, which can often be found in the **collected works** in your college music library. This issue of score accuracy can then be an excellent teaching opportunity for your students – discussing the merits or pitfalls of a given score and ensuing discussion about performance practice.

For a complete list of scores utilized during today’s presentation, or for any questions, please contact me at your convenience.

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