
Music Lab

Multiple Voice Settings — Unit Four

Examine duets, trios and other ensembles in the three shows that you have been modelling. In duets and trios, oftentimes the singers sing the same lyrics in the same rhythm, but in harmony. In larger ensembles individual characters may sing their own lines which are then interwoven together.

Ensembles where all the character sing the same lyric and rhythm together need to observe the same considerations for prosody as in setting a solo. In general being mindful of harmonic considerations should be the primary focus for the composer in this type of writing — including issues of voice leading. Composers easily focus on creating soaring melodies for solo songs but it is important in duet or trio writing that each singer is able to sing his or her own line just as easily. Often it may be tempting to give one part the notes needed to make the harmony work. However, the performer will need to figure out how to move from one of those notes to the next in a feasible manner. When a vocalist is given a “singable” line, he or she will be able to realize the harmonies more readily — and the composer gets a better result.

Ensembles which are put together with interwoven musical lines work best by capitalizing on motives already established within the score. One example of this model is the quintet at the end of the first act in *West Side Story*. By the time the quintet begins, the music of the Jets and the Sharks has been established for each of the gangs to sing just as the music for *Tonight* was established in the balcony scene between Tony and Maria. So, when the melodies appear together, it is not as necessary to understand individual lyrics because the musical themes carry the meaning of the moment.

While it is possible to introduce new lyric information in a multi-voice ensemble, it is better to follow the *West Side Story* model and allow the musical motives to carry the action forward. However, if all the characters are communicating a single piece of information, it is possible to have a phrase or two (called a period) of homophonic singing where all the voices sing the same lyric in the same rhythm either in unison or in harmony. Afterwards, they would depart into their own vocal lines again. This kind of structure works well if thought of as a rondo. The homophonic sections could comprise a coming together of character/dramatic thought, followed by individual character motives interwoven followed by a return to the homophonic section. This idea might them repeat.

Multiple voice settings offer many dramatic possibilities and certainly audiences have developed along with the form, so more kinds of ensemble are now possible than may have been true earlier in musical theatre history. However, remember that our focus is on story telling and in order to achieve that the lyric needs to be set in a clear setting to move the music forward.

A final thought from music history: During the 16th century meeting of the Council of Trent in the Roman Catholic Church, the council members considered the role of music in the church. For some, music had become so complex that the text was obscured and, hence, the music did not serve the mass. There was a feeling among the council that music should be eliminated from church life. At this point in history, the western music tradition was primarily carried forward within the church — so much could have been lost. The composer, Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, composed a mass to illustrate that the text of the mass could be communicated clearly in beautiful vocal ensemble music and because of the clarity he achieved, music remained a part of the life of the church — continuing the tradition we are a part of today.