

Lent: A Teaching Tool

by Annmarie George

Soon we will be looking toward the spring season of a new year, where we will find an interesting and effective "teaching tool" just waiting for use by music educators, though many teachers may not recognize its value. The "tool" that I'm thinking of is the Lenten Season of the church year! It's a time that can offer us valuable opportunities to answer questions like these: How could I make the concept of key (especially minor key) understandable to my students? How can the students more easily grasp the way even subtle changes in the fabric of the music have a dramatic effect, not only on the music but on them and on how they feel? Do I really need a rock band to illustrate how music can be effective? Can music be effective without the instruments playing?

Here are some potential tools that Lent offers you as a way to help you solve these musical conundrums.

Keys and Key Changes

The concepts of key and key change(s) can be difficult to explain in a manner that will help the students understand not only what they are, how they work, and how they are used but also, and more importantly, how they affect a piece of music as a whole. Students usually understand that different pieces of music make them "feel" different in some way, but they can't really explain the reasons why such feeling shifts happen.

Use songs familiar to them (you might have them suggest some, but be careful that they are non-rap choices) that reflect a happier mood (usually in a major key) or a sad/pensive mood (usually in a minor key) to open the door for discussion about how the differences in the keys of those selections play a "major" (no pun intended) role in how the respective song makes them feel.

Next use a familiar hymn that is joyful or celebrating (usually in a major key), perhaps one like "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You" (used in many parishes during the Easter Season), and contrast it with a hymn that you might be planning on using for the coming Lenten Season - one that is pensive and sorrowful (usually in a minor key), like the hymn "From the Depths of Sin and Sadness" (text by Willard Jabusch, set to a Russian folk melody, found in the *We Celebrate Hymnal*¹). Discuss how these hymns differ in both word content and mood projection. Why is that? What is it about each of these songs/hymns that make us feel and think in a certain way when we are listening to it? The biggest controller in all of these choices is the key used!

Next, play on the piano or any other keyboard a hymn written in a minor key; then play it in a major key. (James Gerrish's "Out of the Depths" in the *We Celebrate Hymnal*, played in its relative key of G major, would work as an example). Discuss the differences between each rendition.

Next, go through a hymn you are planning to use for the Lenten services, breaking it down into its smaller components. Have the students sing through those shorter sections, then discuss how there are subtle mood shifts in these parts by use of a minor key area to help the composer illustrate the meaning of the words in the hymn more effectively. As you go through the hymn in this manner the students will recognize how certain areas of the hymn will have more of a "minor-key feel" than others, and they will discover how critical those areas are in relationship to the text. Two rather easy-to-learn hymns to use in class which might also appear in the parish's or school's Lenten services are "Up to Jerusalem" (Miffleton) and "Out of the Depths." Both of these hymns can be addressed in the manner described here above, and the resulting performance and understanding of the effectiveness of a minor key will be positive experiences for the teacher, the students, and those who participate in the Lenten service.

Instruments Required?

Do you have to have instrumental accompaniment for a song or hymn to be effective? The short answer is: No! A cappella performance is often even more effective and spontaneous-sounding and offers a greater ability to communicate the text to an audience or congregation than performance of the same song or hymn with instrumental accompaniment. In the hymn "Out of the Depths," for example, the *shading, accenting, and verbal influx* are essential to making the prevailing mood of the text not only apparent but even "felt" by the listeners! If you are fortunate enough to have a good-sized choir of mixed voices, you may want to feature the men's and boys' voices only for the fourth line of the first stanza - "But forgiveness is with you and withholds your hand" - to add an even more dramatic effect to the use of a minor key in this hymn. Likewise, in the third verse of "Up to Jerusalem," use an all-male voice rendering with great emphasis on the second and third lines, "Upon the cross he hangs, he hangs for you and me. There for all to see, and there to die for me." Done with deliberate word emphasis and a slowing down of tempo, the words will really "hit" both listeners and singers with the ways emphasis and incorporation of minor key add to the words' meaning.

Both of these hymns are very effective ways to teach how minor keys affect our emotions and really enhance the words' meaning. Lenten songs done in an a cappella manner are often an even more effective presentation that enhances a Lenten service for the congregation. A cappella performance also teaches the students about the concepts of minor and major key and how they really do

make a difference in the transmission of word expression by the composer. It also lets the students *hear and focus on the words*, undistracted by instrument involvement.

Absent Alleluia

As a supplementary addition in subsequent classes, you might discuss and illustrate how the absence of the *Alleluia* in the liturgical responses during Lent has both a musical and a liturgical significance.² The type of *Kyrie* (Lord, have mercy) chosen for the Lenten Season might also be used as an additional example to enhance or reflect the sorrowful or anticipatory tone of Lent. Either of the settings of "Lord, have mercy" - both in f minor - from J. Michael Joncas's *Sing Praise and Thanksgiving! Mass* will work well as examples of a more complete Lenten service "package" that enhances, rather than controls, the liturgical services. Further, once the students having a better understanding-in-action of what minor keys and a cappella performance do to add more psychological effectiveness to Lenten services, you've given them an experience in music that they can apply to any song or hymn they hear later.

NOTES

1. Those parishes using worship aids from World Library Publications-J. S. Paluch may find these suggested hymns and songs in the seasonal resources as well as in the *We Celebrate* worship resource. Parishes using worship aids and hymnals from other companies will easily find similar examples in the resource used in their parish.

2. *Alleluia* is omitted from Mass during Lent. Other acclamations are used to greet the gospel reading, and hymns that use the word are avoided. This is because, for Christians, *alleluia* is an Easter acclamation. St. Augustine of Hippo explained this when he wrote: "We are Easter people, and *alleluia* is our song." This Easter acclamation is restored to our sung celebration of Mass at the Easter Vigil.

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