

# **CHORAL ORCHESTRATION**

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Choral Orchestration by Cecil Forsyth

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**CECIL FORSYTH**

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BY

CECIL FORSYTH

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To

A. M. G.

WITH PLEASANT RECOLLECTIONS

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## Preface

THE number of anthems and other choral works written each year by English and American composers is enormous. Most of these are rarely performed with orchestral accompaniment. But the proportion is increasing; and it is most desirable, in the interests of musical culture, that this increase should continue, however small the orchestral force employed may be.

Organists constantly inquire for a short handy book which will give them a technical grounding in the scoring of their compositions. And it is for their use that this slim volume has been written. It makes no pretence of taking them into the high sun-smitten pastures of modern orchestration. But it does claim to lead them to the foothills there-under, and to deal practically with the routine problems which face them on every page of their compositions.

General principles have by no means been avoided—indeed, they are the foundation of the book. But they are shown mainly in their application to every-day orchestral necessities. When once these applications have been grasped, there is nothing to prevent their extension into the more elaborate fields of instrumentation, according to the musical ability of the individual composer. A *foundation-technique* is the thing to aim at, a technique that gives one ease and certainty of orchestral method.

The plan of the volume is, I think, new. It amounts to this: that the reader is presented with a complete composition, and is then taken through it bar by bar, almost as if in conversation with a friendly critic. First, the musical difficulties of the work are considered in large blocks, as it were; the orchestral possibilities of each passage are then balanced one against the other; then, when a decision has been made, the details of the orchestral execution are taken up and explained.

In this way it is hoped that organist-composers may be encouraged to a better study of the subject of orchestration, not as a platonic text-book affair that is wholly outside their own sphere of action, but as a practical part of their profession. An organist who can give even one performance a year of a work written and orchestrated by himself may find that he is sowing seeds that will produce a crop of musical fruitfulness far beyond his anticipations. In small towns, remote from the great centres of national activity, he really owes this to the community in which he lives. And it is a species of healthy "provincialism" to which every lover of art should accord his heartiest support.

These ideals call for much musical planning and much quiet preparation. Let us then remember the answer that Aristotle is said to have made when he was asked where the Muses dwelt: "In the souls of those that love work."

CECIL FORSYTH.

## Choral Orchestration

Choral accompaniment is not the main business of an orchestra. It is a secondary and occasional task, usually undertaken by the players without much pleasure, and often carried out in a way that does not bring any great joy to the audience.

Pitted against the chorus each player has an uncomfortable sense of loss in his own personal value. His daily experience has given him an unerring feeling for current orchestral dynamics, and in time this scale becomes almost a second nature to him. He regards it much as a philosopher regards the law of gravitation; and—it must be confessed—he often claims an aristocratic proprietorship in the law and its workings. Then comes the choral performance, at which the big democratic planet Vox Populi swims into his ken. He finds that what he has been considering the *immutable* has become the *transitory*. Vast readjustments are necessary: but for these there is neither time nor encouragement. Hence comes much rough and careless orchestral playing, and a general effect of muddled *mesoforté*—the worst type of orchestral criminality.

Meanwhile, the man in the audience holds on to his chair and wonders why all this unmusical wickedness should be visited on him only at a *choral* performance. He does not complain—Anglo-Saxon audiences never do, except by the practical method of staying away from the next concert—but he registers a mental *crescendo* of irritation at all the fuss and pother, at being forced to hear the things which he does not wish to hear, and at having to leave unheard the things which he does wish to hear. Finally he ends by saying that choral concerts are a blatant nuisance. And, when he is in that frame of mind, it is the merest chance whether the next wind will blow him into a quartet performance or into the movies.

But, it may be asked, what is the composer doing all this time. Surely it is *his* business to foresee and overcome these difficulties. Being a choral composer he has limitless wealth (from royalties), and therefore unlimited leisure. Why is he such an incompetent bungler?

Well, the fact is that, like the rest of the world, he is "doing his best". But he labours under certain disadvantages. To begin with, as a student he is not likely to hear much about the proper presentation of choral music. That is perhaps unavoidable. His youthful days are filled with aspirations and counterpoint exercises. Then, if he turns to books, he is likely to find himself somewhat undernourished mentally. In general works on orchestration space cannot be spared for the adequate illustration of this particular topic. From them he will probably learn no more than this: that choral works should be scored thickly and solidly; but that, as choruses vary in number from fifty to five thousand, any examination of principles or setting-forth of rules is so much waste of time. The consequence is that, even if he has had two or three choral works performed, he will probably rely on a miserable rule of thumb which has no relation to the true *analytic* that precedes all useful artistic attainment. And what is more, he will possibly go on to say that there is no method for accompanying choral music; that it is nothing but accident and "fake" from beginning to end; and that therefore the best way is to put down as many notes as possible and leave the result to chance. Q. E. D.



## CHORAL ORCHESTRATION

All this is, of course, the merest nonsense. The factors in the problem are just as easily ascertainable as the factors in any other musical problem. But they are not to be found, nor is the problem to be solved, by regarding the two elements, the choral and the orchestral, as violently opposed to each other and incapable of artistic fusion. If one has the brains and the "inner ear", one can start from the idea of simple writing in one colour—say strings—and progress to the more complex idea of strings plus two bassoons, or of strings plus four horns. And from there one can proceed upwards through all the tinted winding paths of musical fancy till one arrives at the summit, the mountain-view of the full orchestra, whether used as a complex form of contrapuntal speech or as a single massive harmonic utterance.

But, now that we are at the mountain-top, what is to prevent us these days from rising into the air above the mountain? What is to prevent us taking the voices, one by one or in a group, and associating them with the whole or with any part of our orchestral fabric at pleasure? Associating them, I mean, not as a dreaded outside element that is bound to struggle with our orchestra and blot it out, but as a congenial friendly factor of infinite delicacy and power. Essentially we are only completing our own *legit* by adding the last and most perfect of musical sounds. And, in adding them, we retain all our freedom of musical treatment. For, just as we can view the orchestra in its dual capacity, harmonic, and contrapuntal; so we can view the voices in relation to the instruments as only partially distinct from them by nature, and therefore either to be used for purposes of contrast, or to be fused with them into one warm tonal combination.

No voice exempt, no voice but well could join  
Melodious part, such concord is in Heaven.

Surely this is the simplest, the most obvious, and the most practical way of looking at the problem. It is not a purely orchestral problem at all; but a vocal-instrumental problem, the key to which is engraved with the motto "industry and sympathy".

Here our old bugaboo "Size-of-the-chorus" raises his ugly head and hisses. The hiss sounds venomous, but there is nothing much in the way of fangs behind it. We all know that a chorus *can be* anything from fifty to five thousand. But I would like to put this question: supposing a composer were writing a choral work and were asked to make a bet as to whether his work would be sung by fifty or five thousand voices, what would his answer be? "One hundred and fifty" obviously.

Now let us approach a little nearer to our problem. Let us try to see its special difficulties—how to attack and overcome them. Choral scoring is, first, a matter of broad decisions; and, then, of rather heavy dog-work in carrying them out. The decisions must be right, and the workmanship must be right. If either is wrong, we may expect bad results in the concert room. Naturally experience counts in both. But, with the average musician who is not an orchestral expert, there is less likelihood of faulty decisions than of their imperfect execution. That almost goes without saying. In carrying out the details of the dog-work the main lines of the original decision may get blurred.

The two main questions, then, are "what to do" and "how to do it". And, as an answer to these two questions, I propose in this little volume to adopt a somewhat unusual method. Instead of limiting myself to generalized good advice backed up by picked examples from the great masters, I intend to take an actual work recently written for public performance and scored with the sole object of enforcing its musical value—certainly with no idea of its being made the subject of a book.

The work that I have selected for this purpose is Professor Walter Henry Hall's *Festival Te Deum* composed for the Peace Celebrations and first performed at Columbia University, New York, May 5, 1919. A complete copy of the *Te Deum* is printed at the end of this volume; and I shall dissect the whole work out, six bars at a time, placing the

## CHORAL ORCHESTRATION

original copy for organ and voices at the head of each left-hand page, with its orchestration on the page opposite. In this way the reader will be able to look at the work in big blocks, as occasion may demand, and at the same time I shall be able to direct his attention to the details of the orchestration, and point out how it has been built up.

The text will be arranged so as to tally as nearly as possible with the music. This is generally feasible. But naturally when one is considering the pros and cons of a lengthy musical section, a certain amount of reference has to be made both backwards and forwards. However, it is quite certain that nothing is so distracting to quiet study as the constant turning and returning of pages. Outside these references, therefore, I have kept the text and the music as closely in contact with one another as I could. This involves some irregularity in the printing, and even an occasional blank page—blank, that is to say, as far as text goes. But this is not altogether a disadvantage; provided the reader keeps before his mind the fact that the object of this book is not merely to talk about choral orchestration, but to show how it is done. When there is no easy ambling to be had on the flat field of the text, he may possibly get better exercise by putting his horse at the five-barred gates opposite.

Let us imagine, then, that we are sitting down to orchestrate this *Te Deum*. We have before us a manuscript copy or a clean printed proof free from mistakes. The pages are numbered, but of course not the bars. How do we begin? Obviously we can do nothing till we know what orchestra the work is to be scored for. We must know that accurately; and in particular we must know whether there are to be sufficient strings to balance the wind and to sound beautiful in themselves. These details, so important in their artistic outcome, are of course in the first instance only matters of money. They are beyond our control, and it is conceivable that we might be asked to score the work for a wholly inadequate orchestra. Naturally that would be a very difficult task, though certainly not one to be avoided for that reason. However, no such difficulty confronts us. We are promised two each of the wood-wind, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, one timpanist (with an extra percussion player for the special "Festival Ending"), and strings in the proportion 12—12—8—6—6. All good symphony players.

I have just used the words "only matters of money". This needs some qualification, or rather some mental adjustment. As far as the orchestrator and the concert-giver are concerned, they are true in a general way. But to the composer, who is *conceiving* a work there is a different and deeper problem—the problem as to what is the proper orchestral force for the presentation of his ideas. That again, except with the splurgiest of splurgers, generally narrows itself down into the question "What is my necessary orchestral minimum?" There is no desire here to evade recognition of the existence of this question. It has to be faced by every composer. And composers—being humanly anxious for the performance of their works—as often underestimate as overestimate their minimum. The question is, without doubt, important—more so than these few words would seem to suggest. And, though it is itself conditioned by many social and financial factors, one may safely predict the greatest success to the composer who approaches it with the freest and least stereotyped mind. A small volume would scarcely exhaust this topic, which touches musical life at so many points. But we have only space here to make the bald statement that it exists, before we return to our *Te Deum*, with its *prescribed* orchestra.

The first thing to do is to read the work through at the desk, in order to get a general idea of its scope and to see if any sections occur more than once. It may possibly be constructed, like the *Processional to Calvary* in Stainer's *Crucifixion*, out of contrasted phrases that appear over and over again; or it may have some one early section repeated literally in a later part of the work. Such bars may or may not need rescoring. This is a question that must be faced in an honest artistic manner, not merely with the object of saving trouble. If it is plain that the dynamic level and "spread" of the passages are pre-

## CHORAL ORCHESTRATION

cisely the same, and are intended to be so by the composer, then it is a waste of time to recopy the orchestration. The bars, at their first appearance, can be provided with reference numbers; and the same numbers can be placed in the corresponding blank bars when the passage occurs again. The copyist will copy the bars correctly according to these directions.

Remember these two practical points:

1. In a pianoforte accompaniment the composer's dynamic intentions are usually fairly obvious. But in an organ accompaniment the same notes with a difference of registration will represent quite different sound-values, and will therefore call for differences in the orchestration. It would not be hard to quote instances of a composer intentionally using three distinct levels of sound for the same notes of his organ part, and of these being represented orchestrally in a varied scale from strings *p* to *tutti*. It is on this type of analysis into the composer's intentions that we must base the "broad decisions" mentioned above.

2. If the repeated passage does not need rescoring, it is always just as well to watch the first and last bars carefully. Except in quite trivial music, which we are not considering here, the joining-on of the tone-colours at each end almost always necessitates the writing-out of the first and last bars. So that in what is practically a sixteen-bar repeat we should probably write out the first bar on the second appearance of the passage, then leave fourteen blank bars marked consecutively 1 to 14, and then write out the last bar. But this is, of course, a matter of practical judgment according to what goes before and what comes after.

However, in turning the pages of the *Te Deum*, we find that this question of repeated passages occurs only once, and then in a very simple form. Bars 2, 3, 4 are the same as bars 75, 76, 77. And, as the passage is used with precisely the same musical intention in both places, it is pretty obvious that the same orchestration is desired.

Having settled these points we must now prepare to translate the music into full-score. There is no necessity to count the bars; but ten minutes spent in laying out the paging of the score is ten minutes spent to very good purpose. After trying various methods of doing this, I can recommend the following plan. Begin at the first bar of your printed copy and number it 1, preferably in red-pencil so that it will catch your eye easily. This represents what is to be "page 1" of your full score. Then count on about six bars, judging carefully from the character of the music how much will go easily on to your page, and put in a red 2. This is the place where "page 2" of your full-score begins. Then go on to pages 3, 4, 5, etc., till you come to the end of the work, in this case page 36. You will then have your full-score plotted out; you will know exactly how many pages of score paper you will need; and you will have the prospective paging of your full-score on the copy from which you are working—a great convenience. Note, however, that in the printed copies of the *Te Deum* in this volume these page-numbers do not appear. In their place the whole work is numbered throughout bar-by-bar for convenience of reference. But, of course, in practical scoring there would be no object in numbering the individual bars.

In laying out the paging of a score it will be found that six bars is a fair average for 4-4 time; and, as the *Te Deum* has no brilliant passage-work, that arrangement has been possible throughout the whole work. Such invincible regularity, however, is quite a rare occurrence. In fact it does not happen once in a hundred times. A few bars of elaborate figuration in the flutes, the violins, or especially the harp, may make it necessary to cut down the number of bars per page; though this again may be counter-remedied by the presence of bars where there is almost no movement. The thing to watch for is the *maximum number of notes* that may have to be written in any one bar. In 3-4 time, where the music is quite simple, eight bars can easily be written on each page. And it is obvious that, if this *Te Deum* were written in 2-4 instead of 4-4, the page would take twelve bars