

Review of Hymn-based Compositions

All prices are in U. S. dollars.

Reviewed by Peter Stickney

“Borning Cry.” John Ylvisaker, arr. Sherri Hansen. SAB, piano. Gladsong/Augsburg Fortress 978-1-4514-9876-9, 2015. \$1.80.

Sherri Hansen has crafted the immerging classic “Borning Cry”, tune WATERLIFE, by John Ylvisaker into an accessible choral anthem for all choirs. This setting is for SAB with a lovely flowing piano accompaniment that supports but does not double the vocal lines. Ms. Hansen has done an excellent job in crafting a men’s part that is within the vocal range of both young and aging male voices. There are no tones for women above the staff, although several F# sharps are present, but they are approached with care and used sparingly. Most of the text aligns beautifully with the choral writing. Of particular interest is a lovely *a cappella* section with the melody in the alto voice and sung pianissimo. This arrangement has clear indications for breaths, dynamics, and phrasings and is worthy to celebrate the thirtieth birthday of this immerging classic.

“Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen—No. 1 of Two Uncommon Spirituals.” arr. William Bradley Roberts. SATB, *a cappella*, soprano solo. Augsburg Fortress 978-1-4514-9891-2, 2015. \$1.80.

The text of this African-American spiritual has been transformed into a gorgeous, innovative, and effective choral masterpiece with rich and approachable voicing for all parts. Of particular interest is the very beginning of the piece set with an ascending choral line in the bass against a descending choral line from the alto, all within a vocal range that volunteer singers should be able to negotiate. The text is clearly marked with phrase indications, thus helping singers to be as musical as possible. Your choir will need to have all four parts secure in their vocal lines as there is little doubling, but it will be well worth the extra time to prepare this piece. This solo can easily done by a second soprano and is only four measures long with a wonderful descending line. This piece has two distinct feelings, *adagio* and then *movendo*. The writing is expressive of each and includes musical text painting and balance. Ultimately the piece is crafted in ABABA form. I am planning on ordering this gem to use with my choirs of eight and thirty-five.

“Shadow and Substance.” Daniel Charles Damon, arr. David W. Music. Augsburg 978-1-4514-9897-4, 2015. \$1.80.

The tune TWILIGHT has received here a wonderful choral treatment suitable for many types of worship services. The text reflects an inclusive creator and the wonders and

mystery of the universe. It is a prayer for unity, humility and guidance. Musically it is very accessible without being trite. There are lines of unison male and female voices followed by four-part harmony. David Music has given us a rendition that will be interesting for all singers, but not confusing or frustrating to those singers who have low skills. The musical expectations in respect to dynamics, phrasing and general musicality are quite clear. Although the accompaniment is scored for piano, it looks quite adaptable for the organ with some of the bass notes being able to be transferred to the pedal with ease. There is a clear modulation into the final verse where the dynamics are indicated to be *mezzo-piano*; the piece ends *pianissimo* and effectively portrays the text of “guide us to mystical union in prayer.”

St. Olaf Choirbook for Men. Ed. Christopher Aspaas; St. Olaf Choral Series, Anton Armstrong and John Ferguson, eds. Augsburg Fortress 978-1-4514-9903-2, 2015. \$11.95.

What a joy to turn the cover of this the *St. Olaf Choirbook for Men*, compiled and edited by Christopher Aspass. The opening piece is an arrangement of the classic “Beautiful Savior” by F. Melius Christiansen, and closes with another St. Olaf classic “Were You There” by Robert Scholz. There is not one weak piece in the collection. Several of these pieces have auxiliary instrumental parts included. “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus,” to FREU DICH SEHR uses bongos and conga drums. “I Wonder As I Wander” includes an optional cello part that has wonderful counterpoint and adds interest to the interludes and text. The cello part will need a player who can handle double stops-*pizzicato*, and a free and expansive solo cadenza; in my opinion the cello is really not optional if you want to maximize the musicality of this arrangement. “In a Lowly Manger Born” features optional claves and finger cymbals or triangle. If you have the manpower for a double choir then use Carolyn Jennings’s setting of “Let the Whole Creation Cry” with its *a cappella* lush harmonies, clear text, and expressive dynamics. This is just a smattering of the contents of the collection. There are seven pages of pedagogical notes to aid in the preparation of the pieces. If every collection was as meticulously prepared as this one, many conductors and motivated singers could achieve their goals of excellent choral music with much less struggle. Highly recommended!

Pray, Praise, and Give Thanks: Organ Music for Christian Worship. Carl Ziebell. Northwestern Publishing House, 978-0-8100-2691-9, 2015. \$22.00.

Northwestern Publishing House, the publishing house for the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, has some wonderful music for organ that is hymn-based. Carl Ziebell has produced a collection of 15 hymns from the hymnbook *Christian Worship* and *Christian Worship Supplement*. All the arrangements might be considered a “meat and potato” offering of music, accessible for the part-time musician but nourishing to the full-time musician. They can be rendered on a two-manual organ

that has a good solo stop and full pedalboard. Of particular interest is “Prelude on LASSET UNS MIT JESU ZIEHEN” crafted for Ziebell’s bride Rachel in honor of their wedding day. It is stately, majestic, and builds nicely to the concluding tones. In addition, there is a setting of the same tune for the processional for the bridesmaids, set in a slightly faster tempo, still dignified and lovely. The entire collection is geared to a choral based prelude or introduction to the hymn. Many organists will find the more mainstream choral tunes such as AUSTRIA, PUER NOBIS NASCITUR and THAXTED very useful compared to some choral tunes that are better known in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Church.

One of my “New” Favorites

“Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty.” Adapted from Edward Elgar’s “Nimrod” from *Enigma Variations*. James Winfield. J. W. Pepper JFW-0151 www.jwpepper.com/myscore/Winfield, 2012. Also available for SSA (JFP-0151a) and SAB (JFW-0151b).

The famous hymn by Reginald Heber, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty,” is customarily sung to the tune NICAEA. Certain phrases have been selected from the hymn, and, combined with Elgar’s music, an awe-struck, prayerful setting is intended. Winfield has married a beautiful classic piece of orchestral music by Elgar to part of a tried and true text by Heber. The organ part is flowing and supportive of the voices, and there are indications to use four hands on a piano if organ is not available. This piece oozes musicality and supernatural intent. The opening dynamic is *ppp*, and will require all singers to work very hard blending of vowels and tones. There are very clear musical expectations listed in the score, including changes of tempo, and phrase markings. This piece does require sopranos to sing G and A^b above the staff, however the voice leading and release helps those singers whose voices do not speak easily in the extended range. This piece is perfect for All-Saints Sunday, Trinity Sunday, a memorial service or any service that wants an extra special transformative moment! This is well worth rehearsal time required and the dedication needed to create sacred sound and invoke that which cannot be named.

Dr. Peter Stickney is an active member of the American Guild of Organists, (secretary for the Portland, Maine, chapter), American Choral Directors Association (President for the State of Maine) and serves on the board of the United Church of Christ Musicians Association as Vice President and as editor for their journal Music, Worship and Ministry. Peter is grateful to make his home in historic Newfield, Maine, and is happiest when spending time with his son, Zeb, and creating beautiful sound.