



T e a c h e r R e s o u r c e G u i d e

The Bee

Tom Shelton

Hinshaw Music: HMC-1778

SAB

COMPOSER/ARRANGER

Born in 1966, Tom T. Shelton, Jr., is a native of Greensboro, North Carolina, and a graduate of the University of North Carolina–Greensboro. A music educator specializing in middle school choral music education, Shelton was named middle school teacher of the year by the North Carolina Music Educators Association in 1999, also having received similar accolades at Atkins Middle School and Kernersville Middle School (both in Forsyth County, NC). In addition, he has worked with the Greensboro Youth Chorus as the conductor of the Chorale and serves as Director of Music at First Christian Church (Greensboro). Shelton has written pieces for both elementary and middle school ensembles, including the North Carolina Elementary Honors Chorus and the North Carolina Middle School All-State Chorus.

COMPOSITION

Written for the 2000 North Carolina Middle School All-State Chorus, *The Bee* is an animated setting of an Emily Dickinson poem. The quick, scherzo-like tempo (marked “frenetically”) encapsulates the random, unpredictable movements of the bee, culminating in a flurry of sixteenth notes in the piano to dramatize the bee’s departure.

The Bee provides a wonderful opportunity for middle school students to

experience the poetry of Emily Dickinson in the context of an accessible choral work. It would find a comfortable place in concert among a set of works based on the poetry of other noted American poets.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

At no time was there a stronger marriage between music and text than in the nineteenth century, during which even the most famous composers sought out the most highly renowned poets and librettists to create works of unsurpassed beauty inspired by lofty prose. This tradition has continued to the present day with compositions that hearken back to highly expressive musical settings that are heavily influenced by the spoken cadence of the poetry.

TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Given the relatively fast tempo and active rhythms, clear enunciation of the text will be of primary concern in the preparation of *The Bee*. To familiarize the students with the text and with the work as a whole, the text should be spoken in rhythm with correct dynamics and articulation before pitch is added. Speaking over the piano accompaniment will aid the students in internalizing the cadence of the words while they aurally take in the musical language of the piece. Such a layered approach to the teaching of this piece will allow the students to experience success early on, even before pitch is added.

Rhythmic breathing also plays an important role in *The Bee*. Frequently, there are only brief moments between phrases in which the singers can breathe; thus, the singers may tend to take breaths that are not grounded or appropriate for singing. Encourage the students through warm-ups and rehearsal of repertoire to always use proper breathing technique, but also encourage them to breathe in the rhythm and *character* of the piece. Changing the dotted-quarter notes at the ends of the phrases in the A section to quarter notes followed by eighth rests (as in the B section) will allow the students to better visualize the breath. Having students do physical motions during rehearsal to illustrate the expansiveness of the breath (such as swinging their arms out during inhalation) will serve as a reminder of breathing technique and will provide kinesthetic stimulus.

While concentrating on these technical issues, the choir may begin to produce

a sound that is too heavy or even rushed. Remind the singers to keep the sound light with a forward placement. Make them aware of the text painting that exists throughout this piece; the active rhythms, the tempo, and the overall gradual ascent and descent of the melodic lines all contribute to the image of a bee flying. Students will enjoy creating a sound that fits such an exciting image!

STYLISTIC CONSIDERATIONS

In keeping with the mood of the piece, the conductor should be sure that his or her gesture engenders a light and rhythmically playful sound throughout. Likewise, the gesture should mimic the changes within musical texture, with perhaps a smaller, more buoyant gesture in the A sections giving way to a larger, more robust gesture when the texture fills out in the B section and the final measures. The conductor should maintain strong rhythmic energy throughout the piece, making sure that even the breaths are rhythmic and in character. As mentioned above, assigning note and rest values for each breath mark will give the students a concrete concept of where to place final consonants and where to breathe. Active releases and rhythmic breaths will ensure that the rhythmic drive of the piece is not interrupted. In the canonic sections, the conductor should verbally and with the conducting gesture encourage the two voices to sing with equal dynamics and articulation.

The accompanist plays several roles in the performance of this piece. Along with the conductor, the accompanist should come to a decision on the places where the piano has a motivic role and where it simply serves as accompaniment. For example, in the opening and closing measures where the piano alone presents the flying introductory motif, the accompanist should treat the piano as a solo instrument, emphasizing the light, flying character of the piece. Similarly, the accompanist should bring out of the texture the brief, rhythmic punctuations that are found between phrases and stanzas of text. When the piano serves purely as accompaniment (i.e., while the voices are singing), the accompanist should remember to keep the character light, which will encourage the students to do the same.

MUSICAL ELEMENTS

The composer has provided many teachable moments in his descriptive musical setting of this highly descriptive poetry (see also, *The Moon Is But a Chin of Gold*,

also set by Tom Shelton), all of which provide lessons in literature and music all wrapped into one. In this case, the frenetic and buoyant musical setting provides a glimpse into the nature of instrumental writing as well. Agile sixteenth-note passages set in a minor key are reminiscent of the scherzos of Dvorak, Beethoven, and Mendelssohn with their pointed rhythms and vibrant shadings. While this work falls short of being labeled a true scherzo, the choir could benefit greatly from listening to a few instrumental compositions from that genre simply to grasp the implicit energy and precise articulation. If one chooses repertoire with the intention of providing a balanced diet of genres and styles as part of a comprehensive approach to music education, this piece will add a wonderful flavor to the educational program.

FORM AND STRUCTURE

With a lively tempo (quarter note = 105), the piece begins “frenetically” with a brief, flying piano introduction. The sopranos and altos begin the first (A) section with a light, rhythmic melody over a driving, chordal accompaniment. The men echo this melody in measure 8 with the next strain of text, leading into the B section at measure 13, where all three voices join together homophonically and the women’s voices ultimately divide into three at the cadence. The A section music with a new text then returns in canon between the women’s and the men’s voices, followed again by the B section. The piece concludes with a return of the A section music, again in canon, punctuated in the final measures with five-part divisi chorus and a return of the opening flying motive in the piano.

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