

Be Like the Bird

Abbie Betinis (b.1980) Text: Victor Hugo (1802-1885) Abbie Betinis Music Co. AB-062-C9

Analysis

Broad description/type: Unison melody - to be performed in canon

Context (Curated & Meaningful to Teaching Plan):

A language enthusiast with a penchant for research, Abbie Betinis (b.1980) enjoys exploring the world through music, leading her to incorporate into her projects elements from early American shape-note singing, Chinese compassion mantras, ancient Greek binding spells, Gaelic keening, Japanese origami, and – in an extended piece for women’s voices with cello, oud, and Persian hand drums – the mysticism of 14th c. Sufism.

Regarding “Be Like the Bird,” Abbie writes: This canon was composed in 2009 just after I completed the cancer treatments for the second time. It was one of my grandfather’s favorite poems, which he often recited in his sermons to inspire carried you in the face of adversity. I thought setting it adds a canon would be the perfect metaphor for getting through rough times in life, because a canon is a melody which given time, and a few friends creates its own support system of pitches and rhythms. Even when I’m alone I sing this canon to myself and I imagine friends coming in around me.

The Poem “Be Like the Bird” was written by French novelist Victor Hugo (1802-1885)

Form

The first three phrases are 1 measure, 3 measures, and 2 measures in length. This irregularity and instability fits the “tentative” nature of the opening half of Hugo’s poem. Unsteadiness gives way to a more resolute confidence in the final 4 measure phrase “and sings, knowing she hath wings.” Even within the limiting form a of a canon, Betinis has found a subtle way to highlight the contrast of emotions through varying phrase length.

Melody

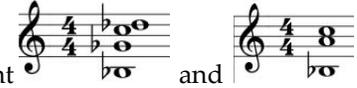
With a range of an octave and a minor third, this melody is full of larger leaps, which add to the beauty and difficulty of its performance. After an initial step-wise walk up the natural minor scale, the first leap of a major 7th feels as unsteady and unsettling to the singer as the text it paints. After some leaps downward of a 4th (‘do-sol’), the melody descends back and rests on “sol,” again echoing the tentative, cautious nature of Hugo’s line “pausing in her flight a while on boughs too slight.” A more confident upward leap (again, ‘sol-do’) and further stepwise motion to the highest note of the melody thus far then gives way to a glorious minor 6th leap upward (‘sol-me’), a climax on the fitting text, “and sings.” The melody slowly progresses through two large, though seemingly gentle leaps of a 5th (‘re-sol-re’) before arriving back on the runway of a descending natural minor scale, mirroring the opening motion, and subtly reaffirming the steadiness and confidence of “knowing [you] have wings.”

Rhythm

When a song is only 10 measures long and only one vocal line, every rhythmic nuance takes on heightened importance. The first six measures (3 phrases) use syncopation, dotted quarter - eighth, and quarter rests to give the work a halting, disconnected feeling. There is no repetition of rhythmic figures in any of the first 6 bars. The final 4 bars use a dotted half, half, and steady consecutive quarter notes, lending this section a more continuous and reassuring feeling, again underscoring the confidence of the second half of Hugo’s poem.

Harmony

Unlike most canons, which have clear, simple harmonies on large beats, Betinis chooses instead to alternate between the



semi-unstable sounding Bbm6 (tonic chord in 1st inversion) and the very dissonant and chords. Because these sonorities incorporate minor seconds and tritones, they evoke an unsettling, uneasy mood, even though they retain the original Bb tonic note within them. Here again, Betinis employs a small idea (dissonance, clashing, yet with a hint of “home” or tonic) to great effect throughout the work, highlighting Hugo’s text, which calls for courage in the face of uncertainty.

Timbre

A darker, more round and pure tone color - even at the height of its tessitura - would best fit the mood of this round. Because of the aforementioned dissonances, the tone should be placed forward, with little vibrato, to highlight the tension and release of clashing voices in canon.

Texture

Polyphonic. The larger leaps and clashing sonorities give the feeling of a thicker texture as the ear becomes overwhelmed with listening for these moments.

Dynamics

In the absence of printed dynamics, singers should execute a natural crescendo with ascending lines and larger leaps, as well as a similar diminuendo for descending lines and near the ends of phrases.

Heart

The heart of *Be Like the Bird* is how well the unstable melody and tension-filled harmonies gradually give way to stability and consonance, a wonderful metaphor for the inherent uncertainty *and beauty* of life.

Outcomes

Skill - Students will sing with a heightened awareness of matching vowel, pitch, and timbre.

Strategies

1. Ah - Eh - Ee - Oh - Oo Vowel Matching with Hand Motions (a la Hodie)
2. One Part - One Vowel - After above, one group (in part circles) will sing line on only 1 vowel, watching around the group for matching, listening for tuning
 - a. Alternate vowels - students discuss within each part circle the difficulties of each vowel (ie tuning “oo” vowel in upper register, “ah” vowel falling back toward “uh,” etc.)
3. One of These Things is Not Like the Other - “Plant” a better musician to purposely either 1) go sharp/flat, 2) wrong notes, 3) larger vibrato within a smaller section. Ask class to listen/comment/identify the problem, then immediately rehearse and see if they can recognize the issue in their own performance.
4. Pair Matching - in pairs, students will attempt to match vowel/pitch/timbre of another pair of students. Allow time for pairs to perform an excerpt for class. Possible friendly competition to see which group can match the best.

Assessments

1. Fist to 5 - How well were you matching the vowel/pitch/timbre of your neighbor? Sprinkle throughout every rehearsal.

2. Self Assessment - Student journal: What are any obstacles to fully matching your neighbor's vowel, pitch, or timbre?
 - a. Second Journal: When you matched your neighbor the best, what did you do to prepare?
3. Peer Assessment - On/Off within row: How well did those around you match each other?
4. Record/Analyze performance, focusing only on vowels, tuning, and timbre matching.

Knowledge - Students will analyze tension and release as a compositional tool and determine a form (for performance) which heightens this effect.

Strategies

1. Visuals - rubber band stretching/breaking, going up roller coaster at top (video), Cirque du Soleil chair stacking act,
2. Microscope on the Song: As you sing, where do you hear tension? (Hands raised, students explain what they hear or experience as a performer).
3. Think-Pair-Share: What's printed on the page is only a template. How can we as a choir build & release tension while performing this song? What can we vary? (Form, dynamics, texture, tessitura (whistling?), timbre (instruments?), performance practice (risers, walking, facial expressions, etc).
4. Class Discussion: From an audience's perspective,

Assessments

1. Class Discussion: In life, what creates tension? Lead discussion to macro, transferable ideas.
 - a. Chart Your Tension (Randy's assignment)
2. Guest listeners? Mr. Sundell, Mr. Green? Suggestions?
 - a. As we experiment, how do we balance tension/release with the ultimate message of the song?

Affective - Students will analyze their comfort level (and inner thought process) with taking risks and/or encountering "the unknown."

Strategies & Assessments

1. Risk Articles
 - a. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/youth-and-tell/201107/risky-business-why-teens-need-risk-thrive-and-grow>
 - b. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/13/seven-reasons-why-risk-taking-leads-to-success_n_3749425.html?scrllybrkr=7d57de80
 - c. Journal reactions
2. 3 minute conversations - random pairings - pre-loaded topics (need random pairing generator)
3. What are the "unknowns" here at school?
4. Mrs. Jaffe - teach me a dance in front of TC
 - a. Project Choice (suggestions: Sit with a different lunch table, Interview parents - biggest regret not taking a risk, Volunteer at PADS, etc)
 - b. Essay - Tell your risk story, from syncopation to dotted quarter note. (Honest, from the heart, lessons learned - can only choose this one as a last resort)
 - c. Student-created project proposal?