

Custom Christmas Carol Arrangements as Choral Pedagogical Tools

James Rodrigue II

Music Department, Nicholls State University

What makes Christmas carols so special?

The fall semester is critical for choral classrooms across the academic spectrum; it is a time for building a sense of ensemble within singers who may not have sung together for months, but it is also a great time to address choral technique issues. The spring will bring choral festivals and assessments for primary and secondary schools while post-secondary institutions often use the spring semester to present recruitment tours and large-scale choral/orchestral masterworks.

Christmas Carols present an opportunity to further musicianship by using familiar tunes as a vehicle for technical lessons.

Why write custom arrangements?

Directors and arrangers should keep in mind the needs, strengths, and limitations of the ensemble(s) that will perform the piece before and as it is written:

- Harmonic language
- Voicings available (SSAATTBB, SAtB, SATB/SAT, etc.)
- Availability of soloists
- Language
- Rhythmic challenges
- Programmatic considerations: what else will be on the concert
- Which voice gets the melodic content (typically sopranos)
- Possibility of small ensembles within the choir

The two pieces explored here are James Rodrigue’s “In the Bleak Midwinter” and “Huron Carol” written for the Nicholls State University Concert Choir and Louisiana School for Math, Science, and the Arts Chorale, respectively.

Rodrigue has also written arrangements of carols, folk songs, and pop tunes for various high school and collegiate ensembles in Louisiana and Illinois including Phi Mu Alpha's Omicron Beta Chapter, Sigma Alpha Iota's Beta and Theta Theta Chapters, Northwestern State University Choral Ensembles, and the Holy Cross School Men's Chorus.

In the Bleak Midwinter

originally Gustav Holst

In the Bleak Midwinter

Christina Rossetti
Gustav Holst
arr. James Rodriguez

Largo, like wandering in a snow-covered field

Soprano:
In the bleak mid- win - ter, fro - sty wind made moon. Earth stood hard as

Alto:
In _____ Puh _____ Earth _____

Tenor:
i - en, wa - ter like a stone. Snow had fall - en, snow

Bass:
wa - ter like a stone. Snow on roofs, snow on _____

Soprano:
in the bleak mid - win - ter, long & - ge.

Alto:
snow, _____

Tenor:
_____ P

Bass:
_____ P

Score had fall - en, snow
Snow had fall - en, snow
oh
Snow on snow
Snow on snow,
Snow on snow,
Oh snow,
Out
Out
Out

Rodrigue's setting of Holst's carol opens with a nontraditional accompaniment based on a note other than the tonic, or "home note," of the key.

21 3

SA God, Heav'n's cas - not hold him, nor the Earth sus - tain, Heav'n and Earth shall

41 5

S But his mo - ther

37 7

SA flee a - way when He comes to reign, In the break - out - win - ter, a

47 9

S on - ly, in her mid - en bliss We - shipped the life

32 12

SA ex - ce - pted the Lord God Al - right - y, Je - su - s Christ,

51 13

S Solo
- lo - ved With a kiss. What can I give him poor as I

36 16

T An - gels and arch - an - gels may have gain - end there,

49 15

A All women
With a kiss. Hm...

B

The second verse, mm 22-37, is largely homophonic and follows Holst's original harmonic style.

The third verse, mm 38-53, moves the melodic line from the basses to the first sopranos to the second sopranos, giving more singers the opportunity to carry the melody.

Additionally, Rodrigue gives the singers an opportunity to perform in small, single gender ensembles when the opportunity may not have otherwise been available.

Huron Carol

traditional Canadian Christmas hymn

Huron Carol

SATB choir and frame drum

arr. James Rodrigue

Traditional

Soprano

Alto

Tenor

Bass

Soprano

Alto

Tenor

Bass

Soprano

Alto

Tenor

Bass

Tenor

Bass

Scored for SATB choir, Rodrigue begins his arrangement with just the women, swapping the melodic and harmonic duties between the soprano and alto lines.

When the men do enter, their primary role is to accompany the women singing the melodic lines in canon for the entirety of the third verse.

64

S *P*
Oh _

A *P*
Oh _

TB *mf*
O children of the fer-ent free, O sons of Man-i - tou, The ho-ly Child of

67

S (Oh)

A (Oh)

TB earth and heav'n is born to-day for you. Come kneel be-fore the rad-i-ant Boy who

79

S (Oh) Je - sus your

A (Oh) Je - sus your

TB before you have to come and see to get your

Many high school choirs have roughly equivalent numbers of sopranos, altos, and men. This makes some SATB arrangements trickier for the parts to adequately balance. When the men have the melody, the women serve as accompaniment until the final refrain.

For more information or to commission an arrangement, contact:
James Rodrigue
jamesrodrigue0@gmail.com