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**Howard Swan**  
"Dusty Pieces"

One of the best things about having your music published is that you get to interface with some of the best and brightest teachers and conductors and, believe me, I didn't take that bonus lightly. In fact, this book is filled with moments that have shaped my professional and, in some ways, even my personal life. Howard Swan is just one of those people.

Sometime in the early 1980s, I was asked to present a workshop in Minneapolis on popular choral music and the keynote speaker was Howard Swan. About eight of us were seated at the head table; we had just finished lunch and Howard rose and went to the podium. His voice was quite gravelly and rough as he had damaged vocal cords, if I recall, from an illness. In fact, he could not model for his singers and yet produced marvelous ensembles. Ponder that for a moment! He began his address with these words:

"Bach....Handel....Mozart..." (Then, turning to me) "...and even Emerson....have their 'dusty' pieces!"

I'm sure that I laughed along with everyone else, as in a weird way I was flattered that he had even included me in his keynote address, especially with the likes of those truly great composers.

He went on to talk about the pieces of each composer that have not seen the light of day and there is a reason....they're not very good. And, he's right! Some

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pieces are just better than others. Even though we...or I...make an effort to make every title excellent, some pieces just arrange better or are truly inspired. I have arranged or written more than 1,000 choral titles in the past 40 years, but I can count my favorites on my fingers and toes!

Having said that, I am reminded of a Q&A some years later when a student asked the question, "What was your least favorite arrangement?" It didn't take long to answer because I had just finished an arrangement that I did at the publisher's request called "Slow Down I'll Find You" from the latest Susan Anton movie. I did my best, but the song just wasn't very strong. To my surprise, a teacher in the back of the room began frantically waving her hands in the air. When I called on her, she said, "My kids just loved that song!" It just goes to show you that one person's coal is another's gold.

Howard's lesson? Just because someone famous wrote it, doesn't mean that it's good. Be discriminating. Use your musical sense. When I see an edition of a "masterwork" I'm not familiar with, I'm often not surprised that there is a reason it has not surfaced sooner....it's just not very good.

SIDEBAR: Howard Swan was Robert Shaw's first choral conductor at Pomona College.

"SYNCOPIATION IS EMPHASIS ON A NOTE THAT IS NOT IN THE PIECE."  
4th Grader

**Jester Hairston**  
"If Only I Could Arrange Like That!"

One of my earliest reading sessions (circa 1979) was for the ICDA (Iowa Choral Directors Association) held in Mason City, Iowa. For those old enough to remember, Mason City was the final concert for Richie Valens, Buddy Holly and The Big Bopper, as their plane crashed shortly after takeoff from nearby Clearlake. Don McLeann refers to that as "The Day the Music Died" in his hit song, "American Pie." I remember where I was that day in 1958...even at eight years old I was a big fan of pop music and "Donna" was one of my favorites.

I had just started publishing the year prior and had a very popular choral called "Sinner Man." I followed it with an arrangement of another spiritual entitled "Wade in the Water." As I prepared for my session, I noticed a familiar face in about the fifth row and to my right. It was Jester, his hands folded in front of him, smiling his toothy grin. I had met him briefly about 10 years prior when he guest-conducted a festival at College of the Siskiyous for my mentor, Kirby Shaw.

Needless to say, I was nervous. Not only was I conducting my own pieces, but they were drawn from the fabric of Jester's heritage and own success: African American spirituals.

After my session, he walked to the podium. I was expecting perhaps a "dressing down" as my treatments were set to a rock beat and quite contemporary in na-

ture. I was relieved when he gave me a big hug and said, "If only I could arrange like that!"

On that day I learned a couple of things:

1. Don't pre-judge what you think someone else thinks of you and your work. You may very well be wrong.
2. Always be gracious. It goes a long way.

His validation, to this day, has made me a better composer and arranger, just from knowing that someone of his stature could, or would, appreciate my work. I will be forever grateful to this wonderful musician and human being.

**SIDEBAR:** At a lunch with Jester a few years later, he shared the concept of "Telegraph Songs" with me, which both my "Mary Had a Baby" and "Wade in the Water" arrangements utilized. The idea is that slaves used these songs as a way to communicate the best time to try and escape to the Freedom Train. In the case of "Mary Had a Baby," the slave owners would drink heavily on the days leading up to Christmas, which made those days a good time to leave. But once Christmas Day came (when Mary had her baby), it was considered too late..."the train has gone." "Wade In The Water" encouraged escaping when the waters became muddy..."God's a-gonna trouble the water" as it would conceal any crossing of the river.

**Fred Bock**  
"Cheap, Tawdry, Contrived, Predictable and Overblown"

I don't think that Fred would consider himself a "choral master" but believe me, he was very talented! Few are aware that the pipe organ music at Disney's Haunted Mansion was indeed recorded by the late Fred Bock. For those even older, he was the producer of the legendary Mrs. Miller and her recording of "Downtown" in the 1960s.



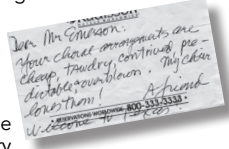
Fred was also a born comedian. His forewords in the "Bock's Best" piano books are a hoot. I had admired his work since I began teaching in the early 1970s when I stumbled on his "Child in a Manger" set to the folk tune of "Morning Has Broken." His vocal lines were very singable and accompaniments tasty.

Fred and I met in Denver at a reading session for Joe Keith at Music Mart and immediately hit it off as we both enjoyed irreverent humor. Below you will see a photocopy of a note he left for me years later when we were staying at the same hotel in Dallas. It says so much!

"Dear Mr. Emerson...Your arrangements are cheap, tawdry, overblown and predictable...my choir LOVES them!  
Signed...A friend."

The fact is...humor goes a long way and we should use it with each other and our singers often. We should take what we DO seriously, but not hold ourselves in the same weight.

Thanks, Fred...I'll continue writing my cheap, tawdry, overblown and predictable arrangements just for you! :)



"Refrain means don't do it!  
A refrain in music is the part you'd better not play."  
5<sup>th</sup> Grader

**Edith Copley**  
"Disco Fever"

A few years ago at our annual California Choral Directors Association (CCDA) Summer Conference at ECCO (Episcopal Conference Center, Oakhurst), there was a great deal of buzz about our headliner: Edie Copley. Everyone said, "You'll love her...she's so good and so real." So, of course, I was really looking forward to her sessions.



They were right...she WAS amazing. So knowledgeable, practical and down to earth. At the end of the first plenary session, I went up to her and said, "Ms. Copley, it's so good to meet you. Your session was so helpful and I learned so much. Thank you!" Her response was priceless:

"Roger! Don't you remember that we disco-danced in 1980 at ICDA (Iowa Choral Directors Association) in Mason City, Iowa?" I dug deep and did remember the fun and dancing at that local watering hole, but had no idea that it was her! Embarrassed I was, but glad that we had shared this connection, and that we continue to have a connection.

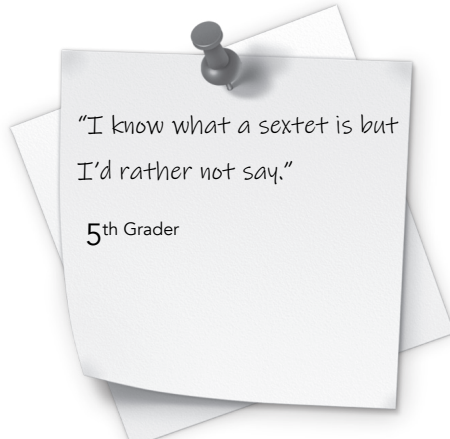
So, what did I learn from this "choral master"? That the reason she was so good is that she had started humbly in rural Iowa and truly understood where the rest of us were coming from. This is not always true, but certainly was in her case. A year or two later, I had the opportunity



to hear her ensemble from NAU (Northern Arizona University) and I realized something else. Her years of junior high and high school teaching made her a terrific programmer. Her pieces were beautifully paced and always kept the audience engaged. Sometimes, choral music can be so esoteric that it is appreciated but not enjoyed. It's a good lesson to learn.

"I know what a sextet is but  
I'd rather not say."

5th Grader



**Kirby Shaw**  
"You Can Do This!"

I often say that I would be playing and singing in your neighborhood Holiday Inn if it weren't for Kirby Shaw.

Even though I've been creating and performing music on a regular basis since childhood, I never considered myself "music major" material. After a year at Whittier College taking general education classes, I moved with a few high school friends to Northern California. If you think San Francisco is Northern California, you'd be wrong! There is another 350 miles of state above and I ended up at this small community college (College of the Siskiyous) in Weed, California. The town of Weed, named after its founder, Abner Weed (not the plant), sits just 60 miles from the Oregon border.

Who in their right mind would leave Los Angeles, the hotbed of commercial music, and venture to this small town to further his/her music career? ME! It was a fluke, quite frankly, or simply meant to be. I decided to take a few music classes, i.e., theory, musicianship etc., and you probably can guess who the instructor was... the unpublished Kirby Shaw. Let me just say, I finally had found my home. I loved learning to read music better, understand why chords moved and related the way they did and general rehearsal practice from this amazing teacher.

Shortly after my arrival, Kirby instituted his first vocal jazz ensemble. It was called Vocal/Instrumental Ensemble, as he also wrote for rhythm section and



four horns. I played guitar and sang for him and every day was like manna from heaven. He would pass out a new arrangement at each rehearsal in his impeccable pencil manuscript. It was there that I knew I wanted to be a teacher. But in our small schools, one would often have to teach instrumental music as well as vocal. I distinctly remember asking him..."Kirby, how will I teach clarinet?" He answered..."You'll get a clarinet, a book and stay a week ahead of the kids! You CAN DO THIS!" Although I had taken instrumental methods classes as part of my undergraduate work, I knew he was right...I spent the summer practicing clarinet, flute, saxophone, trumpet and trombone...the beginning band instruments.

Interesting thing...my bands were better than my choirs!! Even though I was an applied vocal major, I was in no way prepared to teach middle school choir. The other advantage that instrumental music had was a method book and graded arrangements. Vocal music was more of a free for all. It was during this time that I had an epiphany..."You call yourself a songwriter... write your 7th and 8th graders a song!" I did just that and fashioned it after the 3-part mixed formula pioneered by Joyce Eilers. The rest is history. "First, We Must Be Friends" and "Sinner Man" became hits for me and, more importantly, successful vehicles for fostering singing in kids, which has always been my driving force. Thanks Kirby, for believing in me and for always saying..."You Can Do This!"

