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American Choral Music: 1870-1923 [Review]

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American Choral Music: 1870 – 1923
Library of Congress

Background

The digital collection *American Choral Music: 1870 – 1923* is the product of a 2007 agreement between the Library of Congress (LOC) and the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA) to digitize and disseminate American choral music in the public domain. The collection seeks to represent an accurate and diverse sampling of American choral writing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Beyond that, its goal is to make available to choral conductors public domain works that are both useful and provide a historical context. The majority of the items are from the archives of the A. P. Schmidt Publishing Company, whose founder was a pioneer in American music publishing, and whose records were donated to the LOC in 1958. Among Schmidt's many accomplishments are the co-publication of John Knowles Paine's *Spring Symphony* and the publication of George Chadwick's Symphony no. 2, op. 21, the first orchestral score by an American composer issued by an American publisher. The sampling of gems in this collection was plucked from nearly 300 boxes of manuscript and printed music, yet the physical collection also contains as many boxes of company correspondence, financial records, legal files, and the like.

One of several "best of" showcase collections that have been added to the Performing Arts Encyclopedia in recent years, *American Choral Music* has thus far experienced two distinct phases. Essential octavos were identified by members of the ACDA Research and Publications committee, in consultation with staff in the LOC's Music Division, and selected for inclusion in the collection. Phase I of *American Choral Music* launched in April 2008 with twenty-eight works by eight composers, representing a tiny fraction of the over 100,000 choral works held by the LOC. Among the composers who made the first cut were Amy Beach, Margaret Lang, George Chadwick, and Horatio Parker. Over the next couple years and after several on-site visits to the Library of Congress, committee members expanded the scope of the collection to include works by H. T. Burleigh and Will Marion Cook; both men were fine performers, both did some work for Dvořák at the National Conservatory of Music, and both migrated away from the classical training of their youth to become pioneers in the composition and arrangement of African American folk music. In addition, Phase II also brought to the digital collection works by Arthur Foote and John Knowles Paine as representatives of the Second New England School of European-trained, Boston-based composers. Also included are three popular songs by Septimus Winner, composer of "Listen to the Mockingbird," a song that sold over 20 million copies from 1855 to 1955, but that is unfortunately not found in this collection. As the collection's subtitle suggests, coverage spans the period from the late 1860s to 1922. The collection contains scorings for *a cappella* and keyboard accompaniment, and includes both sacred and secular works. Compositions for mixed ensembles as well as women's, men's, and children's choirs are represented.

At seventy-six octavos, the small size of the collection gives it some affordances in terms of organization and presentation of the material. Aside from the inconspicuous basic search box for the Performing Arts Encyclopedia in the left margin, there is no prompt to search for content specifically within the collection, no option to limit to a certain decade or style. On the landing page, each composer is listed alphabetically by name, under which their included compositions are listed by title. The landing page also displays links to several supplemental pages that have a description of the digital collection, more information about the LOC's choral music collection, acknowledgements of project contributors, and a concise bibliography of related materials. Clicking on a composer's name reveals a brief biography (around 500 words), written by committee members and edited by John Silantien, chair of the project's

subcommittee that oversaw the collection's development. Clicking on a work title brings the user to a helpful article on that piece. To get to the score itself, the user must click again on either a thumbnail image of the score, or on a link in the left margin, which bring us to another thumbnail image and a Dublin Core metadata record, with options in the left margin to view the score in different ways. The page turner view allows one to navigate from page to page, zoom, and download the score as TIF images, while the contact sheet view displays each page of the score as a grid. The full description link in the margin leads to a page with a slightly richer metadata record (with subject headings and notes), and the link to print a PDF of the score brings up a full color, downloadable, and legible version.

I suppose that the collection—which in all fairness is being billed as a "sampler"—in its current state could be criticized for its lack of content. While the online availability of these octavos in their original printed editions is wonderful, perhaps the collection was launched prematurely, containing only three percent of the material that the LOC intends to digitize, describe, and upload. It's important to remember that when one works with the scale of content represented by the LOC but does not have relative budgets for personnel or operations, it must be difficult to know where to begin and end with any project. Further, it is really the added-value components (composer biographies, history of each score, and digital object descriptions) that are the most time-consuming part of developing the collection. Today's representation of *American Choral Music* is a small but might example of what's to come, as collaboration between the two organizations is ongoing, with the plan of increasing the size of the digital collection to over 1,000 works.

In fact, this digital collection is just one—if perhaps the most tangible—piece of the partnership. Reading sessions focusing on octavos in the collection were held at the 2010 ACDA Division Conventions. In June 2012, ACDA will hold its first ever National Symposium on American Choral Music. With sessions held primarily at the Library of Congress, choral directors will convene and, using the digital collection as jumping-off point, consider the theme "Searching for an American Style, Then and Now." ACDA has also issued to its membership a call for recordings, with the intent of including audio in the collection at some point. For more details about the history of this fascinating and unusual partnership between the LOC and ACDA, consult the March 2008 issue of *Choral Journal*. (Silantien, John. "Made in America: A Library of Congress & ACDA Collaboration." *Choral Journal* 48, no. 9 [March 2008]: 6-17.)

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