

# Risk-taking in Programming

## *Ways to Explore New Music*

*Dr. Cara Tasher*

*Director of Choral Activities*

How many conductors are programming music outside of their comfort zone through the exploration of new cultural idioms or commissioning composers? If a conductor wants to explore new music but has never done so, it is my hope that this article will serve as a small inspiration. I have asked a few seasoned conductors from varying backgrounds to respond to this with their reflections.

What is the comfort zone? In essence, some of us have a clear line between our comfort zone and a discomfort zone. **André De Quadros** (Boston University) and I discussed this at length, exploring the idea that the “comfort zone” is the stuff that we *think* we know about, a Bach cantata, for instance. If someone asks you to perform a Philipino mass, it may seem out of your realm. Yet one can use the same microscope for any seemingly exotic piece that one would use for Bach.



*André de Quadros*

Excellent and thoughtful conductors use the same questions for every piece they are conducting so that nothing will be unfamiliar as they introduce the score to their ensemble. When approaching a work (old or new), Robert Shaw started from scratch as if nothing were familiar. When one does background on any work to be performed, it should be consistent: What do I know about that period? What kind of vocal color is distinctive for the music of (*insert composer or genre*) that I can get from my choir? What is its context in the composer's life, harmonic language, rhythmic complexity? How do I approach texts/transliterations? These are the same questions no matter which repertoire you perform. It seems that many people make assumptions about their familiarity with certain subjects and in essence, neglect certain repertoire for the wrong reasons. People think they are familiar with Bach because they have studied him, performed some of his works, can pronounce the German using IPA, and so forth. Therefore, they choose to not visit the unfamiliar because they think they know about Bach, and they think they do NOT know about Indonesian music. André put it succinctly. "What do most conductors know about the Age of Enlightenment? Yet they are performing music from this period as if it is well within their comfort zone. And, simultaneously, they think they need to know everything about Indonesian culture before performing that repertoire and thus do not." The clarity and simplicity

of this statement was overwhelming – the reason that certain repertoire has been neglected is not in the “I don’t know”, but because we are using over-simplistic reasoning regarding our familiarity with a subject.

**Cara Tasher (CT):** *Why should one perform music outside of their comfort zone?*

**André de Quadros (ADQ):** Why should one study world history? Why should one bother to study another language? Our world is increasingly globalized. When the Chinese currency moves, that affects the American economy, and so forth.

André de Quadros recently finished editing an Arab piece (*Fog Elna Khel*) by a Syrian-Iraqi composer. “The most interesting part is its beautiful traditional Iraqi melody; it’s a love song—likening the moon to the face of the beloved...” This work, and a carefully crafted translation and transliteration is published in a new *earthsongs* series called *Salamu Aleikum Choral Music of the Muslim World*.

**Yu-Chung Johnny Ku (JK) (Taipei Philharmonic Chorus):** To me, one of the core values of the arts is the creativity factor. It can be a new point of view regarding a composer, a new approach to an old piece, a new philosophy of programming, a new way to perform, or simply a new composition. Creativity is one of the most important forces to propel the arts—to evolve, to move forward. Look at Dufay, Monteverdi, J. S. Bach, Beethoven, Liszt, Wagner, Stravinsky, and many others. Without their creativity, we would not have the music we are experiencing in the present. Therefore, in order to further develop our music, to perform never-before performed music is something that we must do. It is a challenge to the performers and audience alike, requiring courage and an open mind, disregarding the fear of a negative audience reaction as it may be more difficult for an audience to accept new music or even attend such a concert.



*Yu-Chung Johnny Ku, Taipei  
Philharmonic Chorus*

*(CT): How would you describe your approach to never-before performed music, or music that is less performed in your particular culture?*

**Dr. Earl Rivers (ER)** (University of Cincinnati Conservatory of Music-CCM): In approaching a newly commissioned work or a work that I have never performed, I first seek more information about the composer and her/his works. I seek not only choral works, but also more importantly, works for other mediums – orchestral, opera, string quartet and chamber music. Insight of a broad range of a composer's output better prepares me to analyze a new work, to anticipate compositional procedures including forms, melodic and harmonic treatment, text setting and facility with instrumental writing. I complete a large or macro analysis of the formal structure to determine how the work is unified and how contrasts are offered. Next, I begin a more detailed analysis to delineate phrase structures and harmonic treatment. A detailed analysis is a long, on-going procedure, as I add layers of detail with additional study, continuing to refine my understanding of and ability to

internalize the work.



*Earl Rivers*

**(CT):** *As a conductor who has commissioned several composers, please share how you choose which composer to commission.*

**(ER):** In a commission, I seek original ideas for expressing text and music. To cite a recent commissioning experience, I encountered Aaron Jay Kernis' a cappella work, *Ecstatic Meditations*, at the 1999 IFCM World Symposium in Rotterdam and was enraptured with this three-movement work. In "I Cannot Dance, O Lord" Kernis, through mixed meters and rhythmic counterpoint, captures and stores enormous energy in a way I had never heard expressed in choral music. Likewise, in "How the soul speaks to God", the soprano and tenor dialogue with the chorus on two harmonic planes, creating a kaleidoscope of interesting harmonic progressions. I performed *Ecstatic Meditations* with both the CCM Chamber Choir and the Vocal Arts Ensemble of Cincinnati. (I had also programmed Kernis' "Teach me Thy way, O Lord", an accessible anthem featuring an original compositional device of a repeating 4' organ pedal ostinato.) When a commissioning opportunity arrived to

celebrate the restoration of a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century organ in Cincinnati's historic Plum Street Temple, my first choice was Kernis. I had had several years to hear, study, and conduct his music, and believed him to be an outstanding composer with original compositional ideas. His *Two Meditations*, commissioned by CCM's Tangeman Sacred Music Center and premiered by the Vocal Arts Ensemble in 2006, was fulfilling in many ways, especially in the handling of long phrases, punctuation of organ passages, and contrasts of textures. When I have the next opportunity to commission a work, in selecting a composer I will first draw upon the resources of my experiences with his/her works, to include listening, studying, performing and reflecting.

**(CT):** *Describe some of your experiences in commissioning or performing new music.*

**(ER):** I am currently learning two new works for February 2010. I have programmed Augusta Read Thomas' "Ring Out Wild Bells, To The Wild Sky," and Penderecki's "Credo". I began serious study of both works in early spring 2009. Having previously performed and studied works of each composer, I was better prepared to begin an analysis of each work. Score study, score preparation and listening further illuminated the works and has given me ideas for interpretation that I would not have gained by simply listening to the recordings. Having completed a macro and microanalysis, I feel well prepared to begin rehearsals. A thorough analysis has also given me confidence in the rehearsal plans I have devised for the choruses (mixed and children), soloists (solo, quintet and octet) and orchestra and in my ability to produce fine performances of these works.

**(JK):** Performing new music is not only a required duty for me, but also fun. During the process of learning/rehearsing/performing a new piece, you may be

producing a new sound, making a new vision, discovering a new world, creating an enjoyable experience for audience and performers alike. I believe that with the right work [in the right context]—a new composition or music of another culture can deliver a new vision, a new listening/watching experience, or even surprise the audience—it has the potential to be accepted and appreciated even in the conservative Asia. Compared to performing new music, playing music that is less performed in a particular culture seems easier for people to accept. I have taught Chinese and Taiwanese music to American choirs several times, and performed Chinese and Taiwanese music in the U.S. and Europe. On the other hand, I perform a lot of Western repertoire in Asia. No matter which way, audiences usually can accept music from different cultures easily. Maybe they are surprised, amazed, and charmed by the exotic flavor. That said, I believe it will take a long time for people to actually understand and perform music from different cultures, but we are well on the way.” Agreed.

*Thank you to André De Quadros, Johnny Chu, and Earl Rivers for their input on this issue’s Composer’s Corner. As we welcome our new ICB editor, we are still open to input regarding what you would like this section to include. Please contact me at ctasher@gmail.com.*