

# CHORAL SINGER

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The goal of *Choral Singer* is to offer guidance that will help the individual singer make the most of his or her abilities and thereby enhance the choral experience, as well as increase his or her value to the group. It is not intended to supplant the instruction of the choral director, or to substitute for professional vocal training or care.

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*Kevin Siegfried*

## Music From Our Midst

Where does great choral music come from? One not very

surprising answer is, from the heart and mind of a chorister. Kevin Siegfried, who has garnered great critical acclaim in his relatively brief career, started out as a boy soprano at an Episcopal church in Cleveland, Ohio. The program there was based on the Royal School of Church Music. By his own account, he was “very active,” eventually becoming head chorister. In a recent conversation, Siegfried acknowledged this as his “most influential childhood musical experience, and a huge determinant” of why he is as involved with choral music as he is today.

Siegfried also started writing music when he was quite young. As a teenager, he was a serious rock singer/songwriter. “Writing music,” he says, “got him through those teenage years.” It wasn’t until college that he “found his way to classical music.” Until then he had played piano by ear, but with encouragement from a very influential mentor, John Ronsheim, at Antioch College, he began to study classical piano.

During his student years, he took off six months to study music in South India (see sidebar). The

culture there affected him profoundly. In India “you’d sing constantly,” he says; “it’s just part of their life.” So when he settled in Seattle upon his return, he “found his way into choral groups in order to nourish his new-found need to sing all the time.” Like many young musicians, Siegfried cobbled together a modest living; he took piano students, ran a Montessori school music program, taught South Indian music... and sang.

Mostly, he sang countertenor in early music groups. Early music appealed to him, he explains, partly because of its “rich modalities and scale forms.” The Tudor Choir, which morphed from amateur to professional during his tenure, afforded him an opportunity to work with noted musicians such as Peter Phillips of the Tallis Scholars (see Resources) in a relaxed environment. Eventually, he traded Seattle for Boston and the New England Conservatory in order to acquire a doctorate in music.

A decision to focus on musical practice rather than academics led him to the world of workaday composition. (To read about a recent commission, turn to “At the Water’s Edge,” page 1.) Siegfried loves to meditate on texts before



he “lunges forward” into composing. It is a dialog process for him – “a kind of patient listening to a text, which eventually starts to speak.” Inevitably, what he hears first is melody. This very important phase gives him a sense of “line and lyricism.” Rhythms and images usually come next.

Then, rather than “hugging the piano,” as he calls it, the composer likes to let these elements “breathe in his head.” He allows the melodies “to live and breathe for a while,” and then “improvises on the

melodies in his head for a long time before he sets anything to paper.” Eventually “things do become set and definite,” or fall into a certain groove. Sometimes, “they just fall onto the page, stare back and say, I’m done.”

Usually, though, in the process of writing out the music he recognizes difficulties he may not have noticed previously. “Sometimes,” he says, “you have to explore another way of thinking about it.” Often, for him, it’s a function of the relationship between the words

and the music. “It all has to be married.”

“Over time,” says the 37-year old composer, he has come to realize that “the music I write is my own best teacher.” Sometimes it even shocks him. When he was going through an atonal phase, or a period of writing hyper-complex music, for example, the music he is writing now would have seemed much too simple. Now, he says, “I have learned to be comfortable with simplicity.” ■

## A Passage in India

Kevin Siegfried’s music is much influenced by the music of India, but not of the genre best known in America. In the 1970s Ravi Shankar helped to popularize the music of North India. There the culture is heavily influenced by its northern neighbors, including Pakistan and China. According to Siegfried, music in the North of India was an art form tied with courtly patronage. It is secular, and performance is mostly improvised.

The less well known music of South India, called Carnatic, he explains, is “more purely Indian.” It keeps closer to its ancient roots, and has remained closely connected with the temples until the 20th century. This music is “more pure and devotional, with lots of chanting.” It is also “extremely rich,” Siegfried tells us, “in terms of scale forms and rhythmic invention. Composition and improvisation are of equal importance and could go on for hours.”

The young composer learned all this when he went to study South Indian music in Madras. Now, some ten years later, he is “still processing” what he learned “Audiences there are very educated,” he says. “The

music of their ‘Trinity’ of composers — their Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, as it were, and roughly of the same dates — is still performed. A performance might start with an improv, followed by a melody - which the audience would recognize — and then by an improvisation on that.”

Siegfried’s visit to South India was inspired by his composition teacher at the University of Iowa. A medievalist with a broad range of interests, he appreciated the parallel of the Dravidian music with, for example, Gregorian Chant. Siegfried found that the Indian musicians recognized and respected this, as well. On his Indian travels he sang Gregorian chant to the accompaniment of a drone instrument called a tanpora. The combination, he says, was “very rhythmically alive!”

The influence of chant, particularly in the aspect of repetition, is especially evidenced in Siegfried works such as “Tracing a Wheel on Water” and his exquisite arrangement of the Shaker song, “Lay Me Low.” To hear excerpts visit [www.kevinsiegfried.com](http://www.kevinsiegfried.com). To read about and hear the music of South India, see Resources. ■