

Conductor's notes – Modern Musick – William Billings

Background:

Modern Musick is hardly modern. It was written as a humorous composition for an eighteenth century choir. The composer, William Billings was one of the first widely recognized American composers and his works form an important part of early American choral literature. He was a Boston tanner and self taught musician and a contemporary and friend of Paul Revere and Samuel Adams. He is well known for his hymns, anthems, psalms, and fusing tunes characterized by vigorous rhythms, and straightforward harmonies. Billings was also an itinerant singing master and an important figure in the American singing school movement.

Meter: The meter changes throughout this composition, while the note values remain fairly constant. Meter changes make it feel as if there are tempo changes – though note values are constant.

Beat patterns are as follows:

measures 1-9 – in 2
measures 10 – 26 – in 1
measures 27 – 38 – in 2
measures 39 – 49 - in 1
measures 50 – 60 – in 3
measures 61 – end – in 2

articulation

legato
marcato eighth notes; sing through dots
legato
marcato
legato
stress on beats 1 and 4

Rhythm: Rhythm is “king” with this style; stress downbeats throughout

Breathing: opening - breathe a phrase endings, slight crescendo on half notes

measures 10-26 – breathe at punctuation, no breath after “agree” in measure 20, or “key” in ms. 24;

measures 27-38 – four bar phrases; sing through dotted half notes with slight crescendo;

breathe after these words: bass – “proceed” if necessary, the first “agreed”;

tenor -”lead”,”agreed” if necessary; alto” – “choir”; soprano – “forbear”

measures 39-49 – breathe at “time” if necessary; definitely breathe at “again”

measures 50-60 – stagger as needed with long phrases and long note values; breathe at “tones”, “low”, “degrees”. “please”

measures 61-end – breathe at commas

Phrasing: follow the contours of your musical line; crescendo longer note values mid- phrase; descrescendo longer note values at phrase endings

Dynamics: There are no dynamic markings in the score.

The lyrics may give indications for changes in dynamics.

The lyrics in measures 39 – 70 refer to the melodic contours of the tenor line (melody).

In the $\frac{3}{4}$ section is softer, “pensive”.

“the notes exceeding low – keep down a while – then rise by slow degrees” – this calls for softer volume and gradual crescendo (as well as the pitch contour of the tenor line).

Diction: “r” is silent before a consonant; “r” is flipped before a vowel

“t”, “d”, “p” and “k” need to be clearly articulated with extra support

give careful attention to diction in the sections with smaller note values; (those conducted in 1)