

Personent Hodie

by Lara Hoggard

Suggestions for “Processional Choreography”

1. Singers should memorize the vocal parts (or nearly so) so that the visual aspects of the processional may be enhanced. All must sing with faces uplifted and with eyes fixed upon a central focal point above the risers (or choir loft) toward which they will be moving.
2. Choose four people (one for each line of singers) to play FINGER CYMBALS while processing. They must memorize and play the notes *as written*, — they *must not improvise*. They must be able to maintain a steady *tactus*, playing the cymbals with one hand while holding the music folder in the other OR they may use a cymbal in each hand, striking the cymbals in an upswinging movement. An adjacent singer can carry the cymbalist’s folder until they are on the risers. Little “high sounding” cymbals (Psalm 150) maintained the *tactus* for processions both in biblical and medieval times.
3. If the auditorium floor permits the use of three (3) aisles (one center and two at each side) the WOMEN will move down the two outside aisles in single file, —the MEN, in pairs, move down the center aisle. If your situation does not provide a center aisle, have the singers form two double lines in both side aisles, with WOMEN on the inside and MEN on the outside. Equalize numerically the two lines of MEN and the two lines of WOMEN so that the ends of the converging lines are symmetrical.
4. After the music has been rehearsed and is well in hand, begin the first rehearsal of the processional in the auditorium by placing the singers on the risers (or in the choir loft) in concert standing arrangement.
5. Explain which aisles are to be used by WOMEN and which by the MEN, then have them leave the risers in double file (front row first; back row last) with singers moving toward the center of the risers and then, in the steps, thence to the aisle down which each line will process.

6. When the last two singers have stepped down from the risers to the floor level, everyone should HALT. Now is the time for the director to discuss and determine proper spacing of adjacent singers in each of the four lines. A good determinant of spacing is to have the singers move until adjacent singers stand alongside every other pew or row of seats (about 5-6 feet apart). Since some people have very poor sense of distance and space, encourage everyone carefully to analyze the distance separating each person from the ones in front of, and behind them. (Depending on the size of the choir, this important initial positioning may cause the recessional line leaders to have reached the back of the hall or narthex.)
7. From the foregoing positioning, now have the singers reverse direction and move, IN CADENCE, back to the risers for an important initial rehearsal of how to mount the risers, — WOMEN first, then the MEN, — and after they are on the risers in concert position to proceed with leaving the risers in recessional order. This time they should move to the narthex or back-of-the-hall area from which they will be in position to rehearse the processional. “BE AWARE OF YOUR PLACE IN YOUR LINE! KNOW YOUR NEIGHBORS!”
8. The director will already have determined the area in the vestibule or back of the hall where the four lines must assemble. The choir must group as compactly as possible so that all singers (if possible) will be inside the sanctuary/auditorium. We are asking for trouble if the processional is begun with singers outside the grouping area where it will be difficult to adjust to the tactus and to feel secure.
9. The director, having examined in advance the situation dictated by the architecture of the narthex or vestibule or floor space behind the back row of the audience, will be able to suggest optimal groupings of the four lines of singers. (See diagram on **page 8** which illustrates paragraph 5 and paragraph 9, i.e. how to leave the risers and stage illustrate paragraph 5 and paragraph 9, *i. e.*, how to leave the risers and stage area, and how to assemble in preparation for the first notes of the trumpets.)
10. The length of the hall determines just when the singers begin their forward movement and from exactly what point. After three or four trial runs all of these matters will determine how best to “crowd” everyone into the area behind the audience. It is possible that the four lines of singers, in a large hall, will have to assume preliminary positions and several of the singers toward the front or each line will move quietly into position just before the downbeat is to be given by the conductor who will be positioned on-stage near the organ, brass and percussion. Trumpets should be in antiphonal position at both sides of the stage.

11. Singers should be aware of the *tactus* by measure 2. By measure 3 everyone should be discreetly “marking time” — in place:

L - R - L - R
1 - 2 - 1 - 2

— and start walking (processing) on measure 5.

(NOTE): After one or two tries, it may be determined that the START MOVING point should be earlier, or later, — depending on the distance to be covered. If the processional is properly timed, spaced and executed, the last of the MEN should have arrived at their positions on the risers just before the exultant *Gloria in excelsis Deo*.

12. Prior to moving into the auditorium for the first rehearsal of the processional, in the preceding choral rehearsals (while learning the music of *Personent Hodie*) the singers should practice, in place, in place, keeping time with the *tactus* by treading lightly with the heels: L - R - L - R, and observing the “stoppings and startings” in the processional, *i. e.* when to move and when to stop. WOMEN move: step for each *half*-note. MEN likewise, except at *Letter G* when they move in *augmentation*: a step for each *whole*-note.
13. Earlier, also, in the regular rehearsal room the singers should be shown “how to walk” in a recessional, *i. e.*, keeping the body erect with face slightly uplifted, and not swaying from side-to-side with each step. The heel should be walking an imaginary chalkline, with the toe turned slightly outward in order to maintain good balance. Caution long-legged MEN not to take long steps, else shorter people will be out-distanced. Urge everyone to practice at home with a beat of half-note = 76. Be light-footed; don’t plod! Try to move with grace and dignity, — not heavily, stiffly or earthbound.
14. If the processional MUST begin with some singers outside the hall in the vestibule, try starting forward movement at measure 5. There will be 20 measures of trumpets before *Letter B*, thus insuring that enough singers will be sufficiently into the *mileu* to give a firm impact when the chorus breaks forth — jubilantly — at *Letter B*. The opening must not sound tentative!

15. At one measure before Letter C, singers come to a standstill, thus:

“da - tus”

(L - R)

(1 - 2)



STOP!

The right foot takes a half-step to be even with the left.

16. All stand motionless for 4 measures.

At 5 measures after *Letter C*, WOMEN, *i. e.*, the two outside lines, MOVE, leading off with the left foot. MEN, however, REMAIN IN PLACE. (They do not visibly mark time, nor do they move in processional again until *Letter G*.)

17. At 8 measures after *Letter D*, WOMEN stop, bringing the right foot even with the left at the beat before *Letter E*.

COMMENT: Throughout the processional it is important for each singer to “point” the body in the direction the line is moving. Do not peer around the person in front, or try to discover who might be in the audience! Heads should be tilted slightly up, as though gazing at a star above the distant horizon. (Determine a focal point high up in the center of the chancel, or at the center of the procession, or at the back ceiling of the stage.)

18. By *Letter E* the WOMEN (the two outside lines of singers) should be nearing or be on the steps leading to the stage, or perhaps be approaching the risers. The two WOMEN leaders should be at the same forward point, in line with each other as indeed should be each successive person in the two lines. The effect is quite beautiful if, when they STOP at *Letter E*, both lines of WOMEN are symmetrically positioned.

COMMENT: After adequate orientation and rehearsal. ALL LEADERS in the four lines should know exactly where they are to be at a given point in the music. Let there be quality of pageantry!

19. At the measure before *Letter F* singers prepare to turn their bodies (90 degrees) so that — at *Letter F* — they sing with vehemence (approaching defiance!), “*perdidit -*

dit - dit ... spolia” as though directly at the audience. In detail the foregoing movements are as follows:

WOMEN in the RIGHTSIDE line (facing the stage) will turn 90 degrees to their left, thus singing directly over and across the heads of the audience toward the MEN in the RIGHTSIDE line (center aisle) who will have made a 90-degree turn to their right, sing directly across to one another. The gesture should be abrupt and strong. In the process of making the 90-degree turn of the body, the foot in the direction of the turn should be firmly planted at the first beat of *Letter F*: “*PERdidit!*”

20. WOMEN resume forward movement on the 9th measure of *Letter F*. (Remember: the MEN do not move forward until *Letter G*.)
21. *Letter G* MEN resume marching, but now in augmentation, *i.e.*, a step to each measure:

“Magi tres venerunt, munera offerunt”

L - R - L - R

COMMENT: This double-slow time should be carefully rehearsed so that the effect is not optimal. The MEN are the Magi! They move with a certain dignity and nobility. (Remember, from your childhood, the three “Orientars” who traversed “field and fountain, moor and mountain” while (as our text says) “*stellulam sequendo*”.

The director must indicate a focal point, — a spot or object high up in the chancel (or proscenium) so that the MEN appear to be steadfastly “following yonder star.” The WOMEN, at the same time, should also gaze at a focal point as they continue marching toward the star. NOTE: Remember the WOMEN are observing their usual 2-steps-to-the-measure even while the MEN, throughout *Letter G*, advance 1-step-to-the-measure. This plan allows the WOMEN to move far enough ahead of the MEN to be out of the way of the advancing Magi. (By this time a number of WOMEN probably will already be in place on the risers, or moving into position.)

22. A focal point should be marked at the center edge of the stage floor (this would be the footlight area in a theater). As each singer mounts the risers and moves into position, the eyes should then look at this focal point, — as though it is the *creche* — and the body should lean forward slightly to intensify the dramatic effect. SINGERS MUST

NOT LOOK AT THE CONDUCTOR (thus breaking the fundamental rule of choral performance, of course!). ALL singers STOP one measure before *Letter H*. At *Letter H*, ALL will face toward this focal point on the stage floor; (it can be marked with a small piece of masking tape or chalk). Some of the singers, still approaching the stage because of their location in the line, will not actually be able to see this focal point, but they know its location and will turn the body toward it, — as though adoring the Babe in the manger. This can be a beautiful moment. Singing with the hushed, intense tone (not to be obscured by the muted trumpets playing a mystical, regal, motif), the singers lean forward, slightly bowing, and extend their arms as if, indeed, they are offering a gift to the Child.

COMMENT: If the singers are carrying their folders for the ensuing concert, then — in symbolic gesture — let them offer the music folders (and the treasure contained therein!) as their “gift”. Singers already on the risers must limit somewhat the scope of this gesture.

The “offering” of the gift (extending the arms) should begin at the 5th measure before *Letter I* (“*e-i of-fer-*”). Then hold the arms outstretched for *one measure*, bringing the arms back to normal position in the following measure, — the extension and return occurring on the two measures of “en” of the word “*offerendo*”. In the measure before *Letter I*, singers turn, as necessary, in the direction of the processional to continue toward the risers. EVERYONE now walks in the basic 2-steps-to-the-measure — and on to concert positions on the risers.

23. The last of the MEN should be mounting the risers during the first 4 measures of *Letter K*. Throughout *Letter I* and *Letter J*, singers on the risers should not look at the conductor, but should ALL focus their eyes on a *central high point* (balcony ceiling? Chandelier?) so that faces and eyes are all uplifted — jubilantly affirmative!

COMMENT: Remember! This is the 13th Century, when the medieval “mystery plays” (the Passion Plays, the *Pastores et Magi*) and “Miracle Plays” were the only source of theological enlightenment for the illiterate masses. This was not an age of sophistication, or “we-know-better” or of cynicism! *Personent Hodie* attempts to recapture the simplicity and child-like naiveté of those early church (and street) dramas and processions, which may have begun with “trumpet-calls” from the walls of the medieval city, summoning the people to gather for the Nativity, or Epiphany, celebrations.

Therefore, in the last 10 measures of the piece, hopefully with all singers now in place on the risers, “let your light so shine” — through the glowing beauty of your face — that the final phrase: *Gloria in excelsis Deo* is nothing short of radiant!

SUMMARY

Much of the visual impact of the processional stems from the balance, location and symmetry of the lines of singers at the various “stopping points” — where everyone stands “in-place”. Other potentialities may be realized after everyone understands the choreography.

Depending upon the distance to be covered by the singers during various segments of the processional, and the architectural boundaries (limitations and possibilities) of the auditorium which must be recognized and dealt with — the following is a summary of the “startings” and “stoppings” of the singers throughout the processional:

- ... Intro: (first 16 measures) — “get with” the tactus either while marking time, in-place, or actually moving, in-cadence (a step to each half-note), to the “starting” marching position.
- ... *Letter A*: Optimally, the processional should begin here, but movement might have to be earlier or later, depending on the number of singers and the distanced to be traversed to the risers. Each singer must try to maintain proper distance behind the one in front. The first vocal sound (*Letter B*) must be firm and joyful.
- ... One measure before *Letter C* (on the word “da-tus”) all movement should cease on the second syllable (“-tus).
- ... *Letter C*: (8 measures) is sung with all singers standing “in-place”.
- ... *Letter D*: WOMEN proceed in half-note cadence. MEN *do not advance*, but remain in-place (with faces slightly uplifted and eyes focused on the imaginary star above the distant horizon) until the optional action suggested for *Letter F*: (See paragraph 19). *In-place* until *Letter G*.
- ... WOMEN come to a halt during the last measure before *Letter E*, remaining in place (except for the optional action suggested for *Letter F*: see paragraph 19) throughout *Letter E* and the first 8 measures of *Letter F*.
- ... WOMEN continue their forward movement 6 measures before *Letter G* and continue until they halt during the 3rd measure before *Letter H*, then bow toward the imaginary *creche* during 2 measures before *Letter H*: “*Ipsum adorando*”.

- ... MEN, at *Letter G*, begin their advance with cadence of *step to each whole-note*. (WOMEN are advancing with cadence of *step to each half-note*). MEN halt at the 3rd measure before *Letter H* and (with WOMEN) bow toward the imaginary creche during 2 measures before *Letter H*: "*Ipsium adorando*".
- ... *Letter H*: All singers are *in place*, as if bowing toward the manger-bed. (See paragraph 22).
- ... The processional moves toward its conclusion, beginning at one measure before *Letter I*, with all singers not yet on the risers marching with a cadence of a *step to each half-note*.

As a *Recessional*, have the singers start their descent from the risers as the trumpets begin. Keep the cadence of a step to each half-note with no stoppings: let the four lines group at the back of the auditorium for the final phrase. If the hall and the choir are small, cut from *Letter B* to *Letter I*. (Experiment! Be creative!)

DIAGRAM of Processional Flow:

