

Selecting Solo Vocal Music for High School Competitions

High school music educators are called upon to know everything, be everything, and have all the resources for everyone – and some do, are, and have. Many, however, have few resources and are still called on to prepare any student for anything.

Adjudicators of high school solo vocal competitions and auditions sometimes wish that every high school had a complete set of the Joan Frey Boytim beginner books in all voice parts, the new editions of the standard Italian songs, and ten or twenty other excellent anthologies that are usually found in the libraries of teachers who specialize in solo voice.

In a spirit of helpfulness to the overworked high school music educator I have spent a few hours making a ready-reference chart of some of the standard literature with categories that may make the process of finding the right songs for young singers a little quicker and a little less of a trial and error experience. The chart below offers some descriptors of young voice students and of some beginning songs that might help in the literature selection process.

This particular chart is based on the first volume of Boytim's *The First Book of Soprano Solos*, which has since been joined by a second volume, Part II under the same title, as well as *The Second Book of Soprano Solos*, which contains slightly more advanced literature. A large proportion of the songs in each of these books is in English, but songs in Italian, French, German, and Spanish are also included. Similar three volume sets are published with different repertoire for mezzo-soprano/alto, tenor, and baritone/bass, a total of twelve beginners' books, all of which can be purchased with CD's of accompaniments if desired. It is quite an investment if one expects to need half a

dozen songs each year. Moreover, many times a song in one of the books is appropriate for a voice type other than that specified in the title.

The other three books that are covered by this chart are the venerable *Twenty-Four Italian Songs and Arias*, the more up-to-date scholarly edition by John Glenn Paton *Twenty-Six Italian Songs and Aria*, and the new Peters edition of *Thirty Italian Songs and Arias*. Italian repertory is commonly used in beginning voice because of the well-placed Italian vowels that help young singers understand the process of resonance. The many auditions and competitions that require an early Italian song make one of these books a near necessity.

Dr. Paton's work was the first reassessment of this standard literature since the original late 19th century collection by Alessandro Parisotti (1853-1913), which is still available in three volumes from Ricordi. Parisotti found and arranged 18th century arias and duets for solo voice and piano, realizing the original figured bass in the Romantic style of his era. Parisotti's accompaniments are so familiar that the newer, lighter, more authentically 18th century Paton accompaniments almost seemed bare when they first appeared. All the voice teachers had to learn to say *Se tu m'ami* by Parisotti (not Pergolesi!) as the research became general knowledge: it seems that Parisotti slipped a song of his own into his *Arie Antiche* under the cover of Pergolesi's name. We don't feel too badly because even Stravinsky was fooled into using *Se tu m'ami* in his ballet *Pulcinella*.

In addition to stylistic and factual corrections, Dr. Paton's wealth of scholarly information and translations for each song (IPA, word-for-word, and idiomatic), make it almost impossible not to suggest to a student that he or she buy either "the purple book"

(high voice) or “the blue book” (low voice). One of the most recent contenders in the field is the new C. F. Peters *Thirty Italian Songs and Arias*, which has come out with the entire music to *Lasciatemi morire* and accompaniments that seem to strike a happy medium between Parisotti and Paton. A recent development by Hal Leonard is the re-publication of the *Twenty-Four Italian Songs and Arias* now in five keys, not just the original two, under the title *Twenty-Eight Italian Songs and Arias*. This happy event took place after the publication of this article, so all the new keys are not included in my chart.

The opinions about who should sing which songs and the descriptions of the songs are my own, based on my forty years as a singer and voice teacher. The translations that help one decide if the song is appropriate for male or female singers are readily available on the blessed web resource found at <http://www.recmusic.org/lieder/>, *The Lied and Art Song Page*, that has made life for young singers much less stressful. Even so, many of the traditional teaching songs, like *Caro mio ben*, are commonly used by male and female singers without adjusting the grammar for gender. In determining whether a song requires a “good” high school musician, I’ve based my opinion on how much independence from the accompaniment is required. My opinion on whether or not the accompaniment is “easy” is reliable; if with my piano skills I can play it, there is no doubt that it is an easy accompaniment.

It was a good experience for me to go through these books and remember some of the songs that I had forgotten. I hope that my chart is useful, and if it is perhaps I will continue with more literature.