



Teacher Resource Guide

The Moon Was but a Chin of Gold Tom Shelton

Hinshaw Music: HMC-1779

SAB

COMPOSER/ARRANGER

Born in 1966, Tom T. Shelton, Jr., is a native of Greensboro, North Carolina, and a graduate of the University of North Carolina-Greensboro. A music educator specializing in middle school choral music education, Shelton was named middle school teacher of the year by the North Carolina Music Educators Association in 1999, also having received similar accolades at Atkins Middle School and Kernersville Middle School (both in Forsyth County, NC). In addition, he has worked with the Greensboro Youth Chorus as the conductor of the Chorale and serves as Director of Music at First Christian Church (Greensboro). Shelton has written pieces for both elementary and middle school ensembles, including the North Carolina Elementary Honors Chorus and the North Carolina Middle School All-State Chorus.

COMPOSITION

Composed for the 2000 North Carolina Middle School All-State Chorus, *The Moon Was But a Chin of Gold* is a setting by Tom Shelton of a text by the celebrated American poet Emily Dickinson. The composer has sensitively set the text for three-part choir with flute and piano accompaniment. Ornamented, descending

arpeggios create a sense of falling moonbeams until the texture becomes more chordal in a cluster-like cadence. The piece is full of text painting (even in the piano scoring) and is likely to immediately appeal to the singers—especially those who have a fondness for poetry.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

At no time was there a stronger marriage between music and text than in the nineteenth century, during which even the most famous composers sought out the most highly renowned poets and librettists to create works of unsurpassed beauty inspired by lofty prose. This tradition has continued to the present day with compositions that hearken back to highly expressive musical settings that are heavily influenced by the spoken cadence of the poetry.

TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Intelligibility of text will be of primary concern throughout the rehearsals of this piece. It must be clear and easily understood without being obtrusive to the musical line. Speaking through the text, first poetically and then in rhythm while the accompaniment is played underneath, will help in this regard. The singers should read the text as they would a poem to get a feel for the rhythm and inflection inherent in the speaking of the text. The arpeggiated nature of the melody may cause the singers to produce a choppy sound; introducing the music on sustained neutral syllables will help to inculcate the legato character of the musical line. In the contrasting sections, where all three voices are singing homophonically, close voicing exists between the three parts, which might present tuning difficulties. Warm-ups that focus on tuning as well as the production of uniform vowels in the choir will help to keep these sections in tune. Also, taking these sections one chord at a time, and allowing the singers to listen to the chord progression on the piano, will help the singers familiarize themselves with the harmonic language of the piece. The entrances at the end of these sections, for example in measures 21–23, require independence in all voices. Making sure singers mark their scores and know how to count in preparation for their entrances will help build confidence in the singers. Another rehearsal issue in this same section is differentiating between the 6/8 measures—when they are divided into three quarter notes and

when they are divided into two dotted-quarter notes. To ensure these rhythms are correct, singers should get the feeling of them “into their bodies” by doing physical movements on the strong beats. They would benefit from doing these motions outside of the context of the music, applying them to the piece and then removing them when the concept has been learned.

STYLISTIC CONSIDERATIONS

Two ideals should govern the interpretation of this piece, the first being sensitivity to the text (including the nuance inherent of clear diction), and a fluid sense of tempo that lets each phrase ebb and flow as the composition unfolds. Note that the composer twice reiterates the directive to return to Tempo I (at measure 24, then again at measure 47), implying that he expects there will have been a judicious rallentando moving into the cadences that precede those points. The challenge is to let each measure breathe just enough to let the words play out without ever sounding rushed or frenetic. Working to capture the character of the poetry, almost as if speaking aloud, will inform most of your musical decisions within the context of good musical taste.

MUSICAL ELEMENTS

The dominating musical element in this work is the text-driven part-writing that requires a significant facility on the part of the singers, not only to capture the spoken nuance of the words but also to tune the many delicately voiced chords, often in the midst of disjointed leaps in the voice leading. One should employ the challenge of this composition to really hone in the choir’s aural skills, working to create musical sonorities that complement the thoughtful and introspective nature of the text.

FORM AND STRUCTURE

Written for piano and optional flute accompaniment, the piece opens gently with a descending chord progression (C-B-flat-A-flat-G) that serves as the harmonic basis for the majority of the work. The altos first present the triadic melody with the bass voice accompanying on a descending scale. The melody is then repeated, this time in harmony with the sopranos. The sparse texture fills out in measure

15 with a contrasting section, where all three voices join together homophonically and the flute drops out of the texture. At measure 25, the flute reenters and, along with the piano, accompanies the basses as they present a slightly altered version of the opening theme for two measures, leading into a return of the opening choral material from measure 7 with a new line of text. After a brief climax, a portion of the simple opening material returns yet again to finish the piece.

CONTRIBUTED BY

Jon C. Peterson

Amanda Weiss

Paul D. Head