

## Some Thoughts on Writing Rounds (LP)

[From emails to beginning music theory class, April, 2008, in answer to the following question: "I'm having some trouble writing this round. I was wondering if you had any general tips/rules that all rounds have to follow? Thank you!"]

1) start with an ordinary, maybe quotidian text (short: "My foot hurts...", "I saw a great blue heron", "My mom just got a Prius"). Or a globally important one ("Stop the war!", "Don't drive cars, walk, use a bike", "Eat more tofu"), or a mystical one ("Furious blue dreams are leopards in the sand") — anything that suggests a rhythm, or a tune

2) or start with a simple tune in your head. It can be derivative, very simple, catchy, non-catchy. Just start with something!

3) next, write the first line of the round, maybe four measures

4) then write the second line, *under* the first line. Make sure that they fit together (or don't) however you want them to (harmonious, non-harmonious, whatever you like)

5) tweak the first or the second line to make them more what you want, together, and separately

6) repeat this procedure for the third line, or the fourth, however many "parts" you want (don't get too ambitious for your first round)

7) just for fun, think about adding a "ground bass" (see, for example, my little round for 3rd graders in this book called a "Thank you round..."). A ground bass is a repeating pattern that someone else sings, over and over again. It's simple and fits with all the other parts. (As another example, look at Billings' famous "Wake every breath...": the ground bass is the second line of the round).

### *Part 2 (some further thoughts)*

1) A round can be thought of as "one melody", that is recombinant with itself. Some would say that's the essence of rounds, that a round isn't a 4- (5, 6, 7...) part bit of harmony or counterpoint. Some of the best rounds are great *because* they can be sung simply as a melody, in unison, and they work that way, as well as in their "round-way"

2) get away from the piano when you write them. Don't write piano pieces. Rounds are, in general, to be sung. If you can sing them, then they're singable. If you can't, that's ok too, they may just be hard. But writing rounds is a wonderful way to get your brain and voice to work together a little bit more.

[I sent the question to David Mahler, and asked for his thoughts as well - LP]

### **David Mahler**

It's better if a round starts you than if you start a round. Walking (outdoors, purposelessly, or indoors back and forth or in a circle) often primes the pump for me. Also waking up in the morning. Lots of new rounds find me during the night.

Be surprised at the outcome of your round. Don't force.

Keep it lean!

Try writing a chant round, all on one pitch or mostly, so you can concentrate on making it rhythmically interesting. The same pitches that sound like misfits sometimes work just fine if they are rhythmically pruned.

Write a spoken round, for much the same reason as above.

Don't write a round in order to create a piece of harmony. This can be avoided by thinking of the round as "one melody."

Tinker and tweak as much as you like. But don't do it just for the sake of harmony.

If something isn't working in your round, look at what comes BEFORE the unsatisfying part. What we perceive to be a problem is often resolved by changing a rhythm, word, inflection, or pitch prior to the "problem," and lo, the problem isn't a problem anymore. (This works for lots of creative dilemmas. For life, too.)

Sing, always sing the round. If you can't remember the whole round after you've written it, go back and make it memorable.