





THE INS AND OUTS OF CUSTOM ARRANGEMENTS

by Jeffrey Bowen

Custom arrangements have been a standard in many competition show choirs.

Most show choir directors and choreographers know that designing their shows around their custom charts will give them an edge over other groups. For younger generations of new show choir directors, the idea of stepping into the whole custom arrangement aspect of their show can seem daunting.

For those who have less experience with custom show arrangements,

this article covers three topics: arrangement details and the need for licensing; costs of licensing and other ways to license music; and a more affordable option for obtaining show choir arrangements.

Details Are Important

Every arranger has different needs, so the more details you can provide, the better. Let your arranger know what you want in the outcome of the chart and ask them what they need as far as directions. I have seen clients include so much detail that notes for each song took a full page!

For me, I am good with an mp3 recording with rough cuts and notes. The mp3 does not have to be seamless; in fact, many directors have blank spaces in the recording and notes that tell what they want in the blank spaces. The other immensely helpful direction is a copy of the lyrics with some lyrics marked out and handwritten notes giving directions of how much material to include. Clients may also draw arrows with directions like, "This is where the dance break is, but please use the material from bridge and chorus." This sort of note is called "road mapping" and conveys precisely what is wanted.

Then there is the whole licensing aspect. The simple fact is that all music, no matter what portion is used, must be licensed to ensure that the songwriters and publishers are fairly paid for both their intellectual property and the administration of those creations. While most, if not all, directors want the songwriters to be paid, many show choir programs, particularly smaller ones, often struggle to afford licensing fees.

Licensing Costs and Alternatives

This year, the licensing fees that Tresona charges increased from \$270-290 to \$330-340. This increase means that if your show has four single-titled arrangements and one medley, you could be paying up to \$250 more for licensing.

And we all know how medleys are a key aspect of a show choir set. If you are considering a couple of medleys, you will definitely see the difference on the bottom line.

Since licensing cannot be avoided, you have a couple of options to consider in getting the permission you need. First, always research the song title on the Performance Rights Organization sites (or "PRO" sites). These include ASCAP, BMI, SESAC and SOCAN to name a few. There are others as well, but the ones listed here are the larger ones. Once you find your title, check who the publisher is. If it is a mix of publishers, you will probably have to get your licensing through Tresona.

Second, go to Alfred.com and scroll down to the bottom of the page. Click on "Licensing Requests." Once on the Licensing page, click on "Catalog Imprints." Here you will find over one hundred publishing companies for which Alfred controls the print rights. I highly recommend you print the page(s) or copy and paste the list onto a document and save it. Cross reference the publisher(s) from the PRO sites and see if you may be able to obtain your licensing directly from Alfred. They have an online portal for making licensing requests. Please note that their wait time may be a bit long due to many requests coming in through the summer and fall. However, the wait may save you several hundreds of dollars if you can find the licensing through them.

If the title you find has a publisher that is not one of the nationally recognized publishers, you may be able to reach out to them directly to obtain permission. Such direct contact requires some footwork. Usually you can find a representative (like a manager, agency, or the songwriter themselves) on their website; oftentimes their contact information is available. Write to the representative and explain exactly what you want to do with the song. Include details like your school level, the song's

arranger, your plans to perform the song in competition, your plans not to record the song, etc. Be specific here—again, all the details count. You may even mention that you will be using the material for educational purposes. And keep in mind that it is best that you, the director, write the request message. And very importantly, tell them you need their permission in writing so that you can show the competition organizers that you did your due diligence.

The Least Expensive (and Legal) Way to Get Show Choir Music

A couple of years ago, I discovered a wonderful website called ArrangeMe.com. This website is owned and operated by Hal Leonard and offers arrangers the opportunity to post their arrangements online. Once posted, those arrangements appear on Sheet Music Plus and Sheet Music Direct, which are also owned and operated by Hal Leonard. There, they may be purchased like stock charts, like buying arrangements from JW Pepper, Alfred, Hal Leonard, etc.

Obtaining your show choir music from a stock website has several appealing aspects. You can save a lot of money on the cost of these charts. The vocal scores and band scores are sold separately; however, the total cost of thirty-five vocal scores and one band score is less than \$200! You can save a lot of time because the music is available immediately upon purchase. You do not have to wait for approval or worse, find out your request has been denied. And the best part of all is that all licensing is included in your purchase; these arrangements are completely legal.

Another aspect that is guaranteed is that these arrangements have been performed by a competition show choir. They contain the elements that directors desire. For instance, they include dance breaks, shorter arrangements (usually under three minutes), vocal

splashes, key changes, and much more. Simply search for “Music Arrangement Services, Inc.” on either site to find these arrangements. Much more music will be uploaded throughout the year.

Every arranger has different needs, so the more details you can provide, the better. Let your arranger know what you want in the outcome of the chart and ask them what they need as far as directions. I have seen clients include so much detail that notes for each song took a full page!

This option for purchasing show choir music is especially helpful for smaller programs with much smaller budgets. And if a director finds a title in the list of titles on the Music Arrangement Services website, it is more than likely that the arrangement can be updated and posted for online purchase.

Show choir is a marvelous and exhausting experience. Hopefully, the information in this article will help to make the arrangement process a little easier for you. All the best!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jeffrey Bowen has been creating show choir arrangements for over 30 years and has serviced schools from coast to coast as well as Europe and Australia. With nearly 2,000 show choir arrangements to its credit and over 200 Grand Champion and 1st Runner Up winners since 2016, Music Arrangement Services continues to offer high quality music arrangements for competition show choirs.