

Stylistic Tendencies within the Anthems of Leo Sowerby

By Jace Mankins

In the early and mid-twentieth century, Leo Sowerby (1895–1968) was championed as one of the leading composers of American church music. Sowerby exhibited a musical language that was and largely still is his own. His use of harmonic movement and voice leading make for a repertoire of choral music that does not always follow tonal conventions yet is smooth and comfortable for singers. Sowerby's style is difficult to describe, largely because it was born from many different influences, some of which include Native American music, British folk music, Johannes Brahms, and César Franck.¹ Despite his accomplishments, there exists very little analysis of his works. His choral output is enormous and includes cantatas, canticles, and anthems, the latter of which he composed the most. Sowerby regularly published anthems throughout his career, and they provide an excellent body of work to explore the stylistic changes of the composer throughout his life.

Sowerby composed nearly one hundred anthems, spanning from 1919 to 1966. Due to the sheer number of works and the nuances that exist between them, creating distinct compositional periods is difficult. Rather than intensely study each of these anthems and attempt to create strict periods, I have arbitrarily selected a handful of anthems over the course of Sowerby's lifetime (some from early in his career—1920; some from the middle—1934, 1939, and 1941; and some from later in his life—1954 and 1963) in order to highlight notable differences in his treatment of harmony, melody, rhythm, meter, and texture. My purpose is to provide an introduction for further analytical study into the composer's choral output.

Early anthems

Sowerby's first two published anthems, from what I will dub his "early period," are *The Risen Lord* and *I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes*, both published in 1920 shortly after the composer's service in World War I. The first of these pieces, *The Risen Lord*, features four soloists (soprano, alto, tenor, bass), SATB chorus, and organ. As with much of Sowerby's choral music, the most striking characteristic is his treatment of harmony. Many scholars and critics have recognized this element of the composer's style. Ronald Huntington stated the following:

Although a number of general features are recurrent in Sowerby's harmonic technique, it is in this facet of his music that the composer has exhibited greatest originality, even within certain traditional strictures, and it is here that the analyst encounters most difficulties in describing his style.²

In *The Risen Lord*, harmonic function serves as a foundation for progression but is skewed in several ways. First, Sowerby is able to generate non-standard progressions through the use of chromatic voice leading. In **Example 1** Sowerby writes an unusual seventh chord based on F-sharp that resolves to G major.

The harmony in the third beat of measure 28 could be respelled as a C half-diminished seventh chord, but Sowerby's choice to spell the G-flat as an F-sharp and the B-flat as an A-sharp makes sense from a linear and functional perspective. In terms of voice leading, F-sharp, A-sharp, and C resolve upwards to G, B, and D, and E-flat resolves downward to D. F-sharp being the root of this

Example 1: *The Risen Lord*, measures 28 and 29

Example 2: *The Risen Lord*, 140 and 141

Example 3: *I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes*, measure 29

harmony adheres to functional conventions of leading-tone chords resolving to tonic, but Sowerby uses careful spellings and shifts in chromaticism to achieve a greater variety of harmonies. A similar harmony occurs in measure 140, only instead of a C-natural, Sowerby substitutes a C-sharp, making the new sonority enharmonic to a D-sharp minor-seventh chord (**Example 2**). Still, the resolution of this harmony is the same, so the E-flat spelling is maintained. The alteration of C to C-sharp is a change of color, not a change in function.

In *I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes*, Sowerby uses many accidentals to convey specific voice-leading behaviors to each part. In measure 29 Sowerby composes an augmented seventh between the bass and soprano (**Example 3**). The E-natural in the soprano resolves upwards to F while the F-flat in the bass resolves downwards to E-flat.

This harmony could be enharmonically spelled as an E dominant-seventh chord

without its fifth, but the function of an E7 is to resolve in some fashion to A. Sowerby's spelling in this example allows for the resolution to an E-flat add 2 harmony, which further resolves nicely to the A-flat dominant-seventh chord in the next measure, ultimately resolving to D-flat.

Another way Sowerby will explore unusual harmonies within a functional structure is through the expansive exploration of key centers within phrases. Looking a little earlier at the same passage from *I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes*, we hear a phrase that cycles through a number of key areas. While Sowerby has composed a colorful progression, the overarching structure of this phrase is rather simple. Measures 26 to 30 live in the subdominant key of E-flat major, which moves very briefly through D-flat major before returning to the tonic key in measure 31, ultimately concluding in a half cadence; therefore, this example could be reduced as a motion from the subdominant to the dominant (**Example 4**).

Example 4: *I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes*, measures 26 through 34

*Brackets indicate non-chord tones and enharmonic respelling interpretations

Example 5: *Now There Lightens Upon Us*, measures 12 through 20

Example 6: *Now There Lightens Upon Us*, measures 46 through 55

In terms of texture, Sowerby's earlier anthems generally exhibit homophony or, if soloists are present, melody and accompaniment. *I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes* begins with a melody from a solo alto. This melody appears throughout the anthem, sometimes alone and other times against the choir. By exchanging between the soloist, the choir, and combinations of the two, Sowerby generates the form of the work. The call-and-response relationship in *I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes* is rather straightforward: the soloist sings the primary theme, and the choir often responds with its own melodic material, then later, the alto melody is immersed with the choir as harmonic support. A similar method of synthesis occurs in *The Risen Lord*, only instead of a soloist against the choir, Sowerby uses a quartet of singers. Interestingly, Sowerby chose to assign the bulk of the text to the choir, and the quartet of soloists often responds to the primary themes of the choir with repetitive text like "Alleluia" or "Praise Him." Considering that *The Risen Lord*

was Sowerby's second anthem ever composed, this decision is even more striking.³ The organ parts in these earlier works are either only printed for rehearsal purposes or provide support for the singers by either doubling their parts or by providing interlude material between sections of text. The earlier anthems show an emphasis of color on the surface of the music that is orchestrated from a fundamentally traditional foundation, which is most often expressed through harmonic substitutions and creative uses of voice leading. Other musical elements like melody, key, rhythm, and texture serve to keep the listener grounded in what is familiar.

Works from Sowerby's middle period of compositions

The year 1934 was important for Sowerby, as he received an honorary doctorate from the Eastman School of Music, and his compositional output in all genres was booming.⁴ Sowerby published *Now There Lightens Upon Us*

in the same year, and with it he exhibits some striking harmonic changes. The harmonies themselves are not all that different; however, Sowerby achieves a new language through non-conventional voice leading. In general, Sowerby adheres to traditional part-writing principles, and when he does break them, as shown in the previous examples, the logic of the voice leading remains relatively clear. *Now There Lightens Upon Us* utilizes extensive use of parallel motion to create progressions. When the voices enter in measure 12, they sing a series of parallel harmonies in root position: G major, A minor 7, B minor, C major 7; before moving to an F-sharp half-diminished seventh chord. Sowerby is not concerned with parallel fourths or fifths in this texture, and the effect unifies the choir more than in his earlier works (Example 5).

The key areas of these middle-period anthems are pushed more thoroughly than before. *Now There Lightens Upon Us* is in the key of G major, but the harmonic treatments make the key center

less obvious. From the same opening passage, the F-sharp half-diminished 7 does not resolve as expected to G major, but rather, it resolves deceptively to B minor. The rest of the phrase works its way to a cadence on C major. Later in the piece, the opening text is repeated, but Sowerby tonally transposes the phrase to begin on A minor. Here Sowerby almost appears to answer the cadence to C major with a cadence to G. This is the first strong cadence to G at the end of a phrase that we get in the piece, showing a broader scale depiction of key than seen previously in Sowerby's works. In Example 6 I provided a second line of Roman numeral analysis in A to highlight the similarity in progression used in measures 12 through 20.

Sowerby skews the nature of G major by moving to other key areas for considerable amounts of time before establishing clear arrivals to the tonic key. Additionally, the extended harmonies on cadences such as the G major add 6 in measure 55 make tonic less stable.

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Twentieth-century American choral music

Sowerby's 1939 anthem *Blessed Are All They That Fear the Lord* expands the bounds of tonality further through his uses of harmony and melody. It is during this time period that we see the composer occasionally stray away from tertian harmonies in favor of those built on fourths and fifths. In terms of melody, Sowerby has also made some notable changes. According to Burnet C. Tuthill, Sowerby composed two kinds of melodies. The first kind of melody is what Tuthill refers to as "sprightly 'tunes,' characterized by a pungent rhythmic vitality and drive."⁵ The strong melody sung by the solo alto from *I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes* is a great example of this category (**Example 7**).

These tunes are easy to recognize in any texture and maintain tonal clarity that allows for innovative harmony to thrive without deconstructing the tonality of the piece. Tuthill describes the second kind of melody as an "extended flowing line which at times seems capable of infinite continuation."⁶ I believe the opening melody shown in **Example 8** in *Blessed Are All They That Fear the Lord* mostly falls under the first category but has a certain wandering quality to it. The melody is bold and would constitute a "tune" as Tuthill defines it, but the voice leading tendencies that we saw in Sowerby's earlier anthems manifest themselves melodically. The pitches outside the key of C major in this tune create a level of ambiguity that keeps the listener wondering what will happen next. Unlike the accidentals found in the harmonies of *The Risen Lord* or *I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes*, these accidentals do not have the benefit of instant resolution due to their placement in a single line; however, their resolutions still occur, though in a staggered fashion. From a linear standpoint, this melody is actually two different lines occurring at once. Example 8 is a reduction of the organ part from measures 1 through 7. This melody is doubled by the choir beginning in measure 6. The slurs and stem direction indicate the two different strands present in the melody.

The tune's affinity for Tuthill's second melodic category comes from Sowerby's use of chromaticism. The chromaticism in the melody along with its embedded counterpoint gives it a slight motivic quality similar to that of the German composers, a point that Sowerby himself would reject in a letter to the *Music News, Chicago*, when they attempted to compare an earlier work of his to Schönberg in 1915. Sowerby claims that he gained the most influence from Vincent d'Indy.⁷ I agree with Sowerby's assertion; the chromaticism in his works always serves a broader tonal or modal framework and only works to enhance the color of what is fundamentally pitch-centric. The motivic element in this example aids the wandering quality that is often found in impressionist works.

Sowerby exhibits a notable change in texture in his middle works. Earlier anthems favored homophony and melody-and-accompaniment, and while those textures continued to be regular tools for Sowerby, the composer experimented more with unison doublings, heterophony, and polyphony. The bulk of *Blessed Are All They That Fear the Lord* places the choir in unison, and when homophony does occur, it sometimes follows a parallel harmonic progression similar to that of *Now There Lightens Upon Us*. Sowerby composes a brief double canon from measures 16 to 24. Another notable case of polyphony begins in measure 26 in *Psalms 122: I Was Glad When They Said Unto Me*, published in 1941 (**Example 9**). Sowerby word paints by creating a fugue on

the text, "Jerusalem is built as a city that is at unity in itself." The fugue's subject begins on C in the bass voice and is given a real answer by the tenor voice on G. The alto and soprano voices follow the same pattern with the alto entering on C and the soprano on G. The fugue then becomes a canon in measure 36 with the subjects in the bass and alto and the answers in the tenor and soprano unifying respectively. This canon quickly collapses into homophony in measure 40 and ultimately unison in measure 41. In essence, Sowerby has composed a modulation of texture to represent the unification of Jerusalem.

The organ part plays a much more independent role in the texture than previously heard in the earlier anthems. In the fugue from *Psalms 122: I Was Glad When They Said Unto Me*, the organ not only doubles the entrances of the voices, but also includes its own melodic and harmonic material, usually in counterpoint against the subjects.

In comparison to his earlier anthems, these compositions are much more adventurous in terms of textural variance and tonality. Key areas are expanded, and it is not uncommon for these works to contain lengthy introductions that lead to the tonic key or mode without beginning in it. *Psalms 122: I Was Glad When They Said Unto Me* is in the key of F major. Sowerby makes this point clear with his opening key signature, yet F major is not clearly established until the authentic cadence in measure 18. Until that point, the piece is best analyzed in F minor, and even then challenges arise in establishing stability due to the chromaticism and mode mixture of certain harmonies. While some of these motions between harmonies are not functional, these are secondary to motions of harmonic substitution through deceptive resolutions (V–III instead of V–i as seen in measures 13 and 14). The half cadences in measures 13 and 16 also serve to keep the listener grounded in the key of F.

Sowerby's later anthems

Much like the transition from his early to middle anthems, Sowerby's later works continue the trend of expanding on his earlier practices; however, the differences here are no longer completely rooted in traditional harmony. As previously discussed, the colorful harmonic progressions in his middle works maintain, though sometimes distantly, a foundation in tertian harmonic principals. His later works never abandon tonality, but his affinity for quartal and quintal harmonies and avoidance of tonic make the pitch center unstable.

His 1954 anthem *The Armor of God* is in the key of A minor. The only pieces of evidence available are the lack of a key signature, the emphasis of the pedal E that often implies dominant prolongation, and the final Picardy third harmony on A major at the end of the piece. Aside from these, the key is nearly impossible to identify. Sowerby uses two tools to accomplish this effect: unconventional but smooth voice leading and a shift in the primary harmonic sonority to quartal and quintal harmonies. **Example 10** shows the opening organ solo from measures 1 through 10. The complete absence of a strong A-minor triad is striking, and the listener is left with uncertainty to what will occur next.

The only instances of an A-minor triad appearing in this introduction are in the third beat of measure 1 and the second quarter note of measure 5, both of which are rather weak examples to emphasize A minor as the tonic sonority. Most instances of accidentals are either

Example 7: *I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes*, measures 2 through 8

Example 8: *Blessed Are All They That Fear the Lord*, measures 1 through 7

Example 9: *I Was Glad When They Said Unto Me*, measures 26 through 30

Example 10: *The Armor of God*, measures 1 through 10

Example 11: *The Armor of God*, measures 10 through 14

chromatic passing or neighbor tones or the result of parallel (or planed) harmonies. Much of the harmonic language highlights chords built on fourths and fifths, even when they manifest as triads. The first harmony in the second measure is a B-flat major seventh chord with an E pedal. The spelling of the harmony organizes the pitches by the two perfect fifths that appear in the chord: B-flat to F and D to A. Perhaps the E pedal could be interpreted as the fifth above A, but its status as a pedal tone is a stronger explanation here. Other harmonies, such as the fourth chord in measure 6, are best explained as quartal/quintal sonorities. Sowerby's use of parallel fourths in measures 6 and 7 represent a characteristic of his later style.

For the vocal parts, Sowerby continues many of the innovations that he explored in his middle works, but to a greater extent. The proclivity toward perfect fourths and fifths found in the harmony greatly affects the overall sonority. One way Sowerby accomplishes this new sound is by rarely completing harmonies in the chorus. Often triads and seventh chords will be incomplete, and he usually omits the third of the chord, highlighting

fourths, fifths, and seconds.⁸ The opening verse in *The Armor of God* beginning in the pickup to measure 11, shown in **Example 11**, achieves an open texture through the use of unison doublings and fewer contrapuntal lines. Some complete harmonies occur, but they are not metrically emphasized as strongly as the open harmonies. The cadence in measure 14 melodically resolves to E and A, which could be part of an A-minor triad, but the chord is completed in the organ part, which completes the harmony as an F-sharp minor seventh add 4. Again, the tonic key is subverted.

Sowerby's 1963 anthem *Be Ye Followers of God* contains a similar pedal tone in its organ introduction. Like *The Armor of God*, this work avoids the clear establishment of its home key of D major, but in a less overt way. Tonic triads appear much more often in this work, and the vocal entrance in measure 11 better establishes the key by beginning with a tonic triad in root position. Unlike the previous piece, *Be Ye Followers of God* uses far fewer accidentals, which gives the work more of a modal quality. Perfect fourths and fifths continue to remain prominent

Example 12: *Be Ye Followers of God*, measures 65 through 73

sonorities in the texture, even with triadic harmonies.

The nature of modulation in Sowerby's later works is much smoother and unpredictable. In earlier anthems we heard extended harmonies modulating to traditional areas such as to the relative, parallel, dominant, or subdominant key. The middle anthems largely maintained traditional relationships between key areas, though Sowerby occasionally ventured into more distant areas such as the supertonic, diatonic mediant, or subtonic key. With the extended harmonic palette offered in the later anthems, Sowerby is able to move smoothly yet swiftly into distant keys. In *Be Ye Followers of God*, Sowerby modulates from the home key of D major to two chromatic mediant keys: F-sharp Major and F major. **Example 12** shows the transition from F-sharp major to D major with a brief tonicization of F major in between.

In his later works Sowerby favors a combination of unison doublings and polyphony, often imitative polyphony. One texture Sowerby employs in his later anthems is a duet between pairs of voices. In both *The Armor of God* and *Be Ye Followers of God*, Sowerby creates soprano-tenor and alto-bass pairs that engage polyphonically. These pairs may be imitative, such as in measures 55 through 59 in *The Armor of God* or free counterpoint found in measures 65 through 73 in *Be Ye Followers of God* (as shown in Example 12). The pairs do not always need to double as a unison, and Sowerby expresses a sense of freedom in this regard by changing the texture in subtle ways regularly. **Example 13** shows a textural modulation from imitative polyphony between soprano-tenor and alto-bass pairings to homophony. Gradually, the pairings separate into their own lines within the homophonic texture. For ease of reading, I have omitted the text in this example.

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Though not nearly as extreme as other composers of the twentieth century, Leo Sowerby exhibited notable changes in his style over the course of his lifetime. Early characteristics reveal the composer's desire to expand harmonic possibilities while still needing a foundation in traditional harmonic function. The homophonic texture that was often present made the emphasis on Sowerby's extended harmonies more prominent. As Sowerby progressed through his career, he gained enough technique to extend his originality into deeper layers of the musical structure. Texture is more deliberately handled, and new quartal/quintal sonorities replace the dominantly tertian language. Additionally, conventional key relationships are expanded to incorporate more distant keys. By the time he composed his later anthems, the composer showcased a masterful command of the

pitches and harmonies at his disposal, allowing a free and regularly changing texture and meter to flow through the music seamlessly.

Incredibly, Sowerby was able to achieve new advancements in his style without losing his charm. It is hoped that this introduction into his anthems warrants further study into his music. ■

Notes

1. Timothy Sharp, "The Choral Music of Leo Sowerby: A Centennial Perspective," *Choral Journal: Official Publication of the American Choral Directors Association* 35, number 8 (March 1995), pages 9–19.
2. Ronald M. Huntington, "A Study of the musical contributions of Leo Sowerby" (master's thesis, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, 1957), page 163.
3. Wayne B. Hinds, "A Biography and Descriptive Listing of Anthems" (Ed.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, 1972), page 167.
4. Hinds, page 106.
5. Burnett C. Tuthill, "Leo Sowerby," *The Musical Quarterly* 24, number 3, page 252.
6. Tuthill, page 252.
7. Sowerby, Letter to *Music News-Chicago*, January 6, 1915.
8. I include seconds because it is a common interval that occurs in quartal/quintal harmonies. For example, a sonority containing the pitches E, B, and F-sharp will contain a second between E and F-sharp.

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Example 13: *The Armor of God*, measures 59 through 71

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