



Repertoire & Resources

Children's Choirs



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Children's Choral Repertoire with Highlighted Pedagogical Elements

by Katrina Turman

The world of children's choral music is a worthy and exciting field. Young people are capable of performing with such artistry, and conductors are lucky to guide and witness this transformation. One of the conductor's most inspirational tasks is to seek out innovative children's choral repertoire. As leaders of children's choral ensembles, we have a responsibility to select music of educational and communal value and to provide our students with the best training possible. While discovering interesting and appropriate repertoire for ensembles is an enjoyable responsibility, it is also time consuming. Conductors are asked to fill so many roles: teacher, artist, administrator. Sometimes the work of selecting repertoire can turn into

a daunting or even stressful experience. The purpose of this article is to provide high-quality repertoire options by composers of varied backgrounds and to identify pedagogical aspects within those examples that make them exceptional. The highlighted elements focus on two sub-categories: a progression from unison to multiple part-singing, and a theme of languages/storytelling.

A Progression from Unison to Multiple Part-Singing

Of all the elements a conductor considers when evaluating the difficulty of a piece of music for their ensemble, the number of vocal parts usually comes first. The choral field often considers singing in multiple parts as the definition of success and this pervades children's choral music as well. A beginner group singing in two parts is considered a success even if they do so poorly. When we push our students to sing music that is too complex, frustration and resentment can brew. We also do not want music that does not provide enough of a challenge for the student intellectually. A conductor should aim to program repertoire that is appropriate to the skill level

of the ensemble while still providing the group with artistic and mental stimulation. The following progression highlights elements to discover within repertoire selections that may aid the learning process and help an ensemble find success. The literature progresses from simple unison melodies to multiple part-singing. Once one skill is well-mastered, it may be time to move on to the next. This is not meant as the only sequential progression to consider when advancing a choir's part-singing skills, but it is one option that follows a logical sequence of skill development.

Let's start at the very beginning. Well, not quite the beginning. After the student has had some experience singing short melodies, chants, and games in a classroom setting, they may be ready for a longer choral piece. Sherelle Eyles's *Clouds* is an example of a quality full-length choral song with repetitive material. The strophic nature of the piece, with verses that are melodically nearly identical, will help young students find success in their learning. This is an imaginative work with text that describes the different shapes clouds may take and features optional corresponding animal noises. The text is approachable and will be easy for

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young singers to learn and memorize. The additional elements of a largely stepwise melodic line with supportive accompaniment that doubles the melody throughout create a piece that young students can easily master, without sacrificing quality (Figure 1).

Once an ensemble is somewhat experienced performing full-length, strophic works, a conductor may desire to introduce unison choral songs with more variations. Errollyn Wallen's *I am looking at a map of the world* displays this with little to no repetition of melodic material. The

rhythms of the vocal line are more advanced with tied and syncopated notation. The added element of an accompaniment that does not double the vocal line requires that students become more independent in their rhythm and pitch. This challenging piece is quite short and very approachable for an intermediate elementary ensemble wishing to pursue a vocally more complex piece, while still singing in unison (Figure 2).

Prepping a choir for harmonic singing is a journey and is not achieved overnight. Necessary skills

should be introduced early and practiced often. Consider implementing varied exercises that increase vocal independence throughout the year, such as rounds, call-and-response melodies, ostinato exercises, and short partner songs. These can be integrated into warmups or peppered throughout a rehearsal to break up more intensive work. Part-singing exercises such as rounds are useful throughout a child's choral education and are not defined solely by their usefulness in learning to sing in harmony. As choral educator and prolific author Robert L. Garretson

Figure 1. Sherelle Eyles, *Clouds*, mm. 9–12.

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Figure 2. Errollyn Wallen, *I am looking at a map of the world*, mm. 13–15.

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states, “these activities...should not be considered terminal in nature, but may be continued for as long as they are enjoyable and contribute to the musical development of the children.”¹ Singing these types of songs with friends never gets old or boring!

If an ensemble has experienced some of this harmonic preparatory work and has displayed independence in their singing of unison repertoire, they may be ready for a multiple part choral work. One way to successfully introduce two-part singing is to find repertoire that uses partner songs. This is when two (or

sometimes more) differing melodies are performed together in harmony. The strength of each melody helps students stay on their vocal line rather than being swayed to the other.² *Giant of the Forest* by Glyn Lehmann is a beautiful example of this technique. The two main themes are introduced separately, by both piano and voices. Eventually the two melodies are performed together in a triumphant and heroic melding. The environmental background behind the music is an appreciated bonus. Centurion is the name of a 500-year-old tree in Tasmania that has survived countless

trials, including wildfires and human logging. While this piece contains a more difficult polyphonic section in 6/8 meter, the moment is short, and the music again returns to the partnering of the two main themes (Figure 3).

A canon with accompaniment or a piece that utilizes canonic polyphony in its structure is an additional helpful element to aid in the learning of multiple part-singing. This is especially ideal if a choir has extensive practice in singing canons or rounds. It is best if there is as consistent of imitation between the voices

Figure 3. Glyn Lehmann, *Giant of the Forest*, mm. 57–70.

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as possible. When imitation is varied slightly, whether by pitch or rhythm, young students have more difficulty.³ *Wau Bulan*, arranged by Dr. Tracy Wong, uses this technique. With only a few moments of actual harmonic singing, this piece could easily be taught in a call-and-response manner. One teaching idea would be to use the call-and-response melodic material during warmups, first with the conductor leading and eventually having students come up and lead the ensemble themselves. The Malaysian text is repetitive and phonetically very accessible to non-native speakers. *Wau Bulan* is accompanied

by unpitched percussion instruments, necessitating an ensemble capable of maintaining relative pitch (Figure 4).

New arrangements of traditional choral works are always welcome and B.E. Boykin's arrangement of *Joshua fit the battle of Jericho* is no exception. This arrangement is wholly appropriate for ensembles developing their part-singing skills as it is largely in unison with minimal harmonic splits. The harmonic structure of this traditional African American spiritual allows young singers to experience this important work in an accessible way. Consider-

ing the history of the spiritual and the religious text, this work should be taught in an informed way, ideally with the advice and guidance of an African American spiritual music expert (Figure 5).

After much time with the above described styles, it may be time for an ensemble to tackle a two-part homophonic work. With a less advanced group, it is most advantageous to focus first on homophonic works in which the voices move in parallel 3rd or 6th motion. There has been dispute regarding repertoire that heavily features parallel 3rd/6th motion with less experienced ensembles due

11 **B**

S
le-h, E-wah bu - leh, E-wah bu - leh te - ra - ju ti - go, E-wah e -

A
E-wah bu - leh, E-wah bu - leh, t'ra - ja ti - go

Figure 4. Dr. Tracy Wong arr., *Wau Bulan*, Traditional Malaysian, mm. 11–14.

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71 *rit.*

Jo-shua fit the bat - tle of Je - ri - cho and the walls came

Figure 5. B. E. Boykin, *Joshua fit the battle of Jericho*, mm. 71–73.

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to the harmonic similarity between the parts.⁴

Young singers may have difficulty hearing the difference between the voices if they are aurally not prepared or if they learn completely by rote. This can be mitigated if this type of repertoire is taught on solfege or in a literacy-forward manner. It is also helpful if the two voices begin in unison and then break out into parts, allowing the students to visually see the contour of their line compared to the other.

Once a choir has mastered parallel motion with more expected harmonies, conductors can look to

compositions that hold more complex intervals between the voices and feature oblique and contrary motion. *Peyi Mwen*, a Haitian song by Pierre Rigaud Chéry & Yves Lavaud and arranged by Sydney Guillaume, displays this more advanced voicing still within a homophonic setting. While lengthy, the piece is repetitive and has many moments of unison between the voices, which would allow a chorus to “check back in” with each other before again moving away in harmony. There are a few moments of polyphonic singing, but these are composed in a comprehensible call-and-response

style. The Haitian Creole text would likely be difficult for most non-native speakers, so conductors should anticipate spending a good amount of rehearsal time working text. *Peyi Mwen* is challenging in language, rhythm, and duration, so adequate preparatory work and time must be dedicated to ensure mastery of the work while still maintaining the enjoyment of the process (Figure 6 on page 62).

Once an ensemble is comfortable with part-singing, a conductor may look for a varied piece of music which features moments of all of the elements discussed above: uni-

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son, call-and-response, homophonic singing, and polyphonic entrances. *Migaloo* by Australian composer Annie Kwok is one such piece. The song features more complex voice relations, suspensions, moments of unison, and largely homophonic singing with extra challenging polyphonic sections. The option of an SSA version provides programming flexibility to the conductor and the dynamic accompaniment brings tex-

ture and a virtuosic element for the accompanist. *Migaloo* is about Australia's most well-known humpback whale and was thought for a time to be the world's only all white whale. The underlying message of having courage to be different is universal and a great conversation topic for choristers of any age (Figure 7).

Ikan Kekek is another great example of a two-part work that contains diverse and varied compositional

techniques. Throughout this Malay children's song, arranged by Singaporean composer Zechariah Goh, singers will experience unison texture, canonic imitation, parallel homophonic motion, and partner song technique. The largely pentatonic melody lends itself to being tonally accessible for all singers. This work is extremely sight readable, with no added accidentals and easily identifiable rhythmic patterns, allowing

Figure 6 is a musical score for the piece 'Peyi Mwen' by Pierre Rigaud Chéry and Yves Lavaud, arranged by Sydney Guillaume. It starts at measure 29. The score features two vocal staves (Soprano and Alto) and a piano accompaniment. The vocal parts are in a homophonic texture, with lyrics in French: 'pou mòn yo... ka-pab i - li-mi-ne, fò nou plan - te... an - pil pye-bwa. Fò nou plan - te an - pil pye - bwa'. The piano accompaniment consists of a right hand with chords and a left hand with a simple bass line.

Figure 6. Pierre Rigaud Chéry and Yves Lavaud, Sydney Guillaume arr., *Peyi Mwen*, mm. 29–31.

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Figure 7 is a musical score for the piece 'Migaloo' by Annie Kwok. It starts at measure 62. The score features two vocal staves, Soprano (S) and Alto (A), in a two-part setting. The lyrics are: 'Mig - a - loo, White Fel - la, Have the cou - rage just to be'. The Soprano part has a melodic line with some suspensions, while the Alto part provides a harmonic accompaniment. The piano accompaniment is not shown in this excerpt.

Figure 7. Annie Kwok, *Migaloo*, mm. 62–65.

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conductors to utilize the material in a variety of pedagogical ways. One could explore the different compositional tools, having students identify where the work is canonic vs. homophonic. There is a key change from G major to B-flat major, which could be an excellent time to explore key relations, with discussion regarding the interval between a G and B-flat and what similarities those two keys may or may not have. The change in key plus the diatonic nature of the work also makes *Ikan Kekek* an ideal piece to learn on solfege (Figure 8).

Languages and Storytelling

Text and language provide their own set of challenges to the choral repertoire selection process. The English language, though it is typically the first spoken language for many American singers, can be surprisingly difficult to pronounce for young students. The wordier the song, the quicker the rhythms, and the more advanced the vocabulary, the more trouble a conductor and student are bound to have. The thematic content of a piece, no matter

the language, is equally as important to consider. The stories and voices a conductor chooses to represent can strongly affect the experiences of both singers and audience members. The following section goes through teachable elements as they relate to language and storytelling, and criteria one may use when selecting repertoire based on the skill level and age of the ensemble.

With young singers, it is a good idea to choose a piece with a relatable or interesting storyline. All the better if the story lends itself to kin-

The musical score for 'Ikan Kekek' is presented in three systems. The first system covers measures 34-36, the second system covers measures 37-39. Each system includes staves for Soprano (S) and Alto (A) voices, and a grand staff for piano accompaniment. The lyrics are in Malay: 'kan ke - kek I - kan ke - kek Hoi I - kan ke - kek.' and 'kek Hoi I - kan ke - kek I - kan ke - kek Hoi I - kan ke -'. Dynamic markings include *mf* and *f*. The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes.

Figure 8. Zechariah Goh arr., *Ikan Kekek*, Malay Children's Song, mm. 34–39.

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esthetic motions that can be used by the conductor or singers to help with learning the text. Katherine Ruhle's *A Barnyard Lullaby* exemplifies this. The genre itself, a lullaby, is comprehensible to young singers, an underrated benefit. The text describes a variety of animals falling asleep at a farm and the singers also get to perform animal sounds that correlate to the different characters. Movement to accompany the piece would be easy to teach and may help students remember the text. The motions could easily be chosen by students themselves. The easy to understand story, enjoyable animal sound effects, and the supportive arrangement all make *A Barnyard Lullaby* an excellent choice for young elementary-aged ensembles (Figure 9).

Delving into foreign language pieces brings another set of fun challenges. Foreign languages or songs with nonsense words should be introduced early on to normalize the process. Nonsense syllables are a fun option when looking to

perform outside of the English language. Memorization of sounds rather than meaning is an essential part to singing in a non-native language. Young children are often singing and making up songs in a made-up language from a very early age.⁵ This "music babble" lends itself to choral repertoire when the piece contains nonsense syllables as text.⁶

Integrating English and a foreign language can be another helpful step into building comfort with performing foreign text. Whether there is non-English text in the choruses alone or the verses switch between two languages, as seen with Andrea Ramsey's *Puer Natus Est*, this type of work can be less daunting to an ensemble not used to singing in a foreign language. *Puer Natus Est* is based on a sixteenth-century plainchant and the text alternates between Latin and English. *Puer Natus Est* features handbells and an optional second vocal part, allowing for much performance flexibility (Figure 10 on page 65).

Once an ensemble is ready to perform fully in a foreign language, conductors should attempt to find literature that has a short and repetitive text. A foreign language piece, no matter the difficulty of the language, that repeats a small amount of text numerous times will be easier for a less advanced group to perform.⁷

Cangoma is a traditional Brazilian piece in Portuguese. Though Portuguese can be an intimidating language to English speakers, *Cangoma* is highly repetitive and allows singers to easily develop a comfort with the text. Composed in a circle sing style, with the voices building from unison all the way to three-part, this arrangement would be easy to teach by rote in a call-and-response form. Singers will be challenged by the tied and syncopated traditional rhythms, but the repetition of rhythmic patterns similarly allows for singers to be comfortable with the style easily. This spirited folk song arrangement features optional percussion accompaniment and

21
Pup-py dog, pup-py dog, bow, wow, wow. Kit-ty cat, kit-ty cat, meow, meow, meow.

Figure 9. Katherine Ruhle, *A Barnyard Lullaby*, mm. 21–24.

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would make a great concert opener or closer. Dr. Elisa Dekaney, one of the arrangers of *Cangoma*, was born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. When searching for folk music to perform, it is best to find works arranged by people of that culture (Figure 11).

The makeup of your choir can

strongly affect the ensemble's interest in the languages a conductor chooses to introduce. When choosing repertoire based on text, consider a foreign language that is relatable to your students. Look not only at what languages they may speak at home, but also what languages they

may be studying in school.

Spanish is the second most commonly spoken language in the United States and is a commonly taught subject in schools.⁸ A Spanish piece, such as *Nido de Amor* [Nest of Love] by Mexican composer Lilia Vázquez Kuntze, would work well with a more advanced elementary ensemble. There is no melodic repetition, but each phrase is delicately built to practice extending the vocal range and contains almost exclusively quarter and eighth-note rhythms. The accompaniment does most of the rhythmic driving and both piano and voices get to explore bird calls with trills and animal sound effects. With a work such as this, one could ask Spanish speakers in the ensemble to help with teaching the pronunciation and giving a

unis. mp

1. Pu - er na - tus est no - bis, al -
 (2.) child is born in Beth - le - hem, al -
 (3.) er na - tus est no - bis, al -

Figure 10. Andrea Ramsey, *Puer Natus Est*

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25
S
A
Ta - va du - ru - min - do Can - go - ma me cha - mou "Dis -

29
S
A
se, le - van - ta, po - vo, Ca - ti - vei - ro ja - 'ca bou." "Dis

Figure 11. Dr. Lon Beery and Dr. Elisa Dekaney arrs., *Cangoma*, Traditional Brazilian, mm. 25–32.

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translation, providing an easy leadership opportunity (Figure 12).

Singing has always been a vehicle for communication. From the storytelling bards of early music, to moral-imparting folk songs, to the more modern social justice literature, it is important to discover text that is meaningful and impactful. Music for music's sake is fine, but the message you impart to your singers with the texts you choose can thoroughly affect their response to the music. Ivo Antognini's *Excuse me, I don't understand* [*Pardon, j'ai pas bien compris*] is a powerful two-part treble piece that discusses hunger and violence in a modern world, and the desire for peace. While the text may be considered controversial due to the se-

rious thematic content, as educators, it is better to lean into these tough subjects rather than shield students from them. This work is available in French and English. The piece is highly teachable, with largely homophonic texture, supportive accompaniment, and a memorable melody. Antognini cleverly clears the way for the text to shine in this poignant and heart-wrenching work. Much discussion could occur in an ensemble about the social injustices in our world and what we as musicians can do about it (Figure 13).

The field of a choral conducting is as enjoyable as it is important. Conductors work in their passion and get to affect change by imparting that joy on to generations of music-makers.


Of course, the work is imperfect and there are hardships. There seems to never be enough time or resources and this can bleed into a conductor's efforts in searching for appropriate repertoire as well. The provided list of pedagogical elements to discover in children's choral repertoire is not meant as a short cut, but a helping hand to make the task of literature research less daunting. The repertoire examples are high-quality works and are written by up-and-coming composers in the children's choral field. These composers hail from all over the world and provide a diverse array of repertoire for young singers to perform. It is hoped that the elements within the featured repertoire will aid educators around

The musical score for Figure 12 consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in a treble clef with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a 6/8 time signature. It begins with a rest for six measures, then enters with the lyrics "Es un ni do de a mor pí an ya las". The dynamics are marked *mp* (mezzo-piano) for the first part and *mf* (mezzo-forte) for the second part. The piano accompaniment is in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with the same key signature and time signature. It features a melodic line in the right hand and a more rhythmic, accompanimental line in the left hand. Trills (tr) are indicated above several notes in the right hand. The piece concludes with a *mf* dynamic marking.

Figure 12. Lilia Vázquez Kuntze, *Nido de Amor*, mm. 6–9.
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The musical score for Figure 13 shows two vocal parts: Soprano (S) and Alto (A). Both parts are in a treble clef with a key signature of two flats and a 3/4 time signature. The lyrics for both parts are "I am hun - gry, help me, my friend." The Soprano part begins with a rest for one measure, then enters with the lyrics. The Alto part begins with a rest for one measure, then enters with the lyrics. The piece concludes with a fermata over the final note of each line.

Figure 13. Ivo Antognini, *Excuse me, I don't understand* (*Pardon, j'ai pas bien compris*)
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the country in their teaching and will inspire them to explore more deeply their repertoire selections in the future. See below for ways to contact these musicians directly. 

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NOTES

¹ Robert L. Garretson, *Music in Childhood Education* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 172.

² Linda Swears, *Teaching the Elementary School Chorus* (West Nyack, N.Y.: Parking Publishing Company, 1984), 163.

³ Angela Broeker, “Developing a Children’s Choir Concert,” *Music Educators Journal* 87, no. 1 (2000): 28.

⁴ Swears, *Teaching the Elementary School Chorus*, 163.

⁵ Patricia Shehan Campbell and Carol Scott-Kassner, *Music in Childhood: From Preschool through the Elementary Grades* (New York: London: Schirmer Books; Prentice Hall International, 2014), 68.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷ Broeker, “Developing a Children’s Choir Concert,” 27.

⁸ “Detailed Languages Spoken at Home and Ability to Speak English for the Population 5 Years and Over for United States: 2009-2013,” <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2013/demo/2009-2013-lang-tables.html>.

Music Reference and Contact Information

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Sydney Guillaume (*Peyi Mwen*) – sydneyguillaume.com

Annie Kwok (*Migaloo*) – singscore.com.au/annie-kwok

Zechariah Goh (*Ikan Kekek*)

muziksea.com/composer/10-zechariah-goh

Katherine Ruhle (*A Barnyard Lullaby*)

www.katherineruhle.com

Andrea Ramsey (*Puer Natus Est*)

andrearamsey.com

Elisa Dekaney, Lon Beery (*Cangoma*)

brileemusic.com, Catalogue Number: BL 1041

Lilia Vázquez Kuntze (*Nido de Amor*)

Youtube: “Lilia Vázquez Kuntze,” www.facebook.com/l.vazquezkuntze/

Ivo Antognini (*Excuse me, I don’t understand [Pardon, j’ai pas bien compris]*) – ivoantognini.com