

Discovering the Magic of Children's Voices

Composing and Programming for Elementary Choirs

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If you've ever been in a rehearsal with elementary singers, you know they work hard and have lots of fun (sometimes too much fun, right?) taking part in a musical experience with friends. Helping children discover the magic in their voices and watching them share their music with the world is an incredible privilege. The important work of guiding a developing choir is aided by high-quality repertoire for young singers. As composers writing for children, and as directors selecting music for children, we must approach our repertoire task with thoughtful purpose.

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Dr. Mark Patterson is a composer, choral director, and sought-after clinician. Mark's warmth and intentionality in working with singers, particularly developing singers, is inspiring. He infuses that same spirit into his compositions for children. Because Mark lives in both worlds—as a composer and conductor—I asked him about his core belief when writing and selecting music for young singers. Mark responded, “Children need opportunities to experience beauty. They deserve to sing artfully-crafted music that says something significant and meaningful.” As we seek out repertoire that allows our young singers to experience something beautiful, significant, and meaningful, let's take a close look at three building blocks of a well-crafted anthem for children's choirs...

A beautifully crafted line.

Harmonies that add depth.

A message that resonates.

A Beautifully Crafted Line

Whether you are composing music for children's voices or selecting music for your children to sing, we need to start with what is essential. Reflect on the children who will be singing the music and assess the following:

- What are my singers' capabilities?
- Where do their voices sound the very best?
- What topics will resonate deep within them?
- In what ways could this group of students show musicality?
- What elements of a choral piece will help my singers connect and succeed?

A beautiful melody becomes a stunning melody when written in the sweet spot for children's voices. Be attentive to the age and capability of your singers when establishing the vocal range. Within that range,

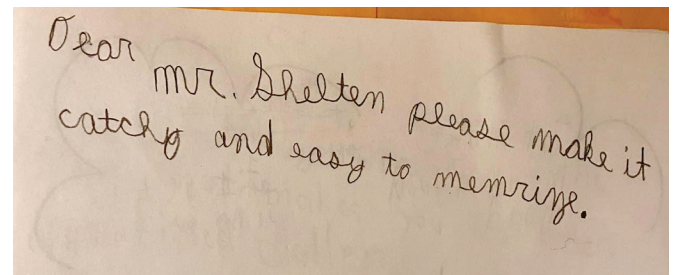
think about where a choral piece lives in the voice of the child. For example: we might assign a complete range of C(4) to F(5) for elementary choristers (ages 8-11). How much of the piece is spent at the bottom and top of the range? Within your established range, don't spend too much time at the extremities. Seek the sweet spot in a developing voice. Choosing a comfortable tessitura with a few challenging moments will lead to enjoyable rehearsals and rewarding performances.

Helen Kemp trained children and their teachers in the art of choral singing for six decades. A prolific composer, conductor, and clinician, she had this to say about children's voices:

To my ears, the most beautiful children's vocal range for tones that can soar and spin is from C(5) to G(5). These notes are ideally written as the climax of the singing phrases, and should not be confused with the tessitura (the average position of the notes) of the music you choose. Most of the notes of children's music should lie in the comfortable range, but the wonderful tonal beauty of the upper tones should also be experienced and enjoyed. In choosing your music, observe how the high notes are approached. It is often easier to sing an interval of a third or fourth or fifth up to a high note than it is to ascend upward, step by step.¹

So ask yourself: does this piece give the children a few opportunities to soar?

Composer and ACDA past president Tom Shelton asked his young choristers to give him some advice for his next composition. One singer gave this solid counsel:



Keep in mind that elementary singers are often

learning by rote, even if they're holding music in their hands. Until they are competent note-readers, a skill that requires practice and experience, sheet music will still be a basic guide and teaching tool for most elementary singers. Consider how well the melody and text can be caught. (Tom's singer was right on the money when they advised him to write a song that was catchy!) Here are two important clarifications:

- Catchy doesn't mean trite or childish. A beautifully crafted line can, indeed, be catchy. A well-crafted melody that's fun and memorable engages young singers, making it easy to "memrize." Strive to select and write music that is child-friendly, not childish. Does the road map make sense to a fourth-grade student? Does the rhyming scheme flow naturally to a second grader? Is the melodic idea interesting to a sixth grader?
- Dr. Heather Potter had this to say about a well-crafted unison line: "Basic and simple do not mean the same thing." Our musical choices must keep our children's basic skill level in mind, but it doesn't mean we should dumb-down our craftsmanship or oversimplify elements, stripping them of beauty and meaning. A well-crafted melody engages the singer while encouraging them to grow and stretch their musicianship.

When I was in seventh grade, "I'm Goin' Up a-Yonder" (Hawkins/Sirvatka) was a conference festival piece that our school choir kept in our concert repertoire that year. I would sing this song all day, every day. The melodic movement felt natural and comforting, and I loved the way my voice felt as I sang it. The long phrases in this song were not easy, but required me to utilize my full breath capacity. I learned what my body was capable of as I prepared for each phrase. The rise and fall of each phrase showcased the wonderful resonance and sparkle of a developing voice. The song allowed me to sing in my sweet spot, communicating a musical message about embracing faith and purpose: a combination that made my heart soar.

Harmonies that Add Depth

Once singers are able to create a beautiful unison together, developing choirs will be ready to journey into part singing. Likewise: once a beautifully crafted melodic idea is in place, composers are ready to add harmonic depth. First, let's address various ways young singers can be introduced to the wonderful world of part singing.

- 1) Echo songs
- 2) Ostinatos (rhythmic or melodic)
- 3) Independent descants
- 4) Partner songs
- 5) Canons and rounds
- 6) Parallel harmony

This is not an exhaustive list, as there are other creative ways we can build part-singing skills with our ensemble (like chain phrases, call-and-response, staggered harmony, complementary melodies, vocal chording, etc.). Assess your singers and determine which type of harmonic structure is a good fit for your ensemble's skill level. In the above list, number 1 is an accessible intro to part singing, perhaps the first type your children may encounter. Number 6, parallel harmony, is an advanced part-singing skill.

The majority of harmonic depth in unison/two-part music may not be present in the vocal parts. It is, instead, provided by the accompaniment. Whether it's a secular concert piece or a sacred anthem for worship, the first few bars of a piece establish character. Is this something new and unique that piques the interest of the audience and compels us to keep listening? How does it set the tone for the piece as a whole? Piano interludes can be similarly assessed; be sure they propel the musical story and don't simply act as a filler.

Strong children's anthems have accompaniments that strike just the right balance between too little and too much. Use the following questions to evaluate the accompaniment of a children's piece:

- Does the accompaniment effectively lead into the choir's entrance? For example: an up-tempo piece

Discovering the Magic of Children's Voices

for early elementary voices might incorporate an aural cue just before the singers enter—a specific, recognizable rhythmic or melodic pattern.

- Does the accompaniment double the melody too often? Give young singers more credit and trust directors to prepare their singers well. Make room for singers to create a melodic line, not just double it.
- Does the accompaniment overpower a unison line? Be aware of how dense your accompaniment is, or becomes. Can young voices be heard over the accompaniment? Can you use inversions to create a different color in the keyboard, or can you utilize a different octave to get out of the way of the vocal timbre and allow it to shine?
- Is the accompaniment too simple to support a unison line? When young voices feel anchored and supported, they will do amazing things. Look for an accompaniment that provides a solid foundation for developing singers.

Composers, research the part-singing continuum (hierarchy) and make an intentional choice regarding the types of harmony you choose to include in your composition. Spend as much time crafting the accompaniment as you do the vocal parts. Remember: any harmonic voice (including the piano accompaniment) should enhance the singer's experience.

A Significant, Meaningful Message

In my work as a choral editor, hundreds of scores pass my desk each year. The first thing I review in a new submission for children's choirs is the text. I use three questions in my evaluation:

- Is this a message *worth* singing?
- *Does* the text sing (actually sing, in this setting)?
- Is the text *relevant* to a child's experience?

I admire poets and wordsmiths and the craftsmanship it requires to compose a text. This type of creative work does not come naturally to me, so when I compose children's anthems, I most often seek out the words of others—a hymn text, a poem, or a quote. My husband is a copywriter, and his clever mastery of language and communication leaves me speechless at times. He can look at a paragraph and find a way to capture its essence in one sentence. When we seek to write or program music for our children's choirs, take a keen eye to the text. Does it offer a clear, concise message worth singing? Does it inspire, challenge, or build? Does it spark imagination, communicate truth, or cause one to reflect? Does it encourage children to wonder, to be brave, or to embrace their full selves?

When you are selecting or writing music for children, seek out a text that is truly brought to life through song.

Mark Burrows is a composer, conductor, and educator who is a master of writing texts worth singing. His music has been used to build bridges and bring messages of welcome and empowerment to communities around the world. Even Mark's choral warm-ups contain meaningful messages! In his new collection, *The Little Book of Ups*, Mark provides vocalises, rounds, and ensemble songs that feature community-building and self-affirming texts. Using the familiar scale-degree warm-up, Mark composed the text in Figure 1 on the next page.

In this warm-up, purpose meets intent. Sequential scale degrees are transformed into an affirming message that cultivates acceptance, love, and community. That is a message worth singing.

I asked Mark what piece of advice he'd give to composers and directors of children's choirs, and he said: "Understand that children experience, and need to express, an entire range of emotions—joy, sorrow, frustration, anxiety, wonder, compassion. It's so helpful when the music we write can reflect that range, sometimes

Composing and Programming for Elementary Choirs

with more than one emotion in a piece.” Like the Pixar movie “Inside Out,” Mark noted that “sometimes the richest memories are tinged with multiple colors and feelings.”

As composers and directors, we play an important role in helping children discover the music within themselves. Have you ever programmed a piece that didn’t connect with your singers? In these situations, the message falls flat because it fails to resonate with the child’s experience. When you are selecting or writing music for children, seek out a text that is truly brought to life through song. Study the pairing of melody and lyric; does the musical setting complement the lyric structure and enhance the text? Young children are both literal and imaginative. In much of what I program for early elementary students, the lyrics are understandable, encourage children to wonder, and rarely provide static answers.

rest for a while, then come back with clear eyes to self-edit or ask an editor to review your work. Your initial idea may be quite different than the finished product; but through the hard work of editing and evaluating and rewriting, you’ll uncover hidden potential in your piece. Remain open to feedback from trusted friends and mentors; road test your piece with a small group of singers to see if it really sings well. Children deserve our very best, and the time we spend crafting our music will be worth it.

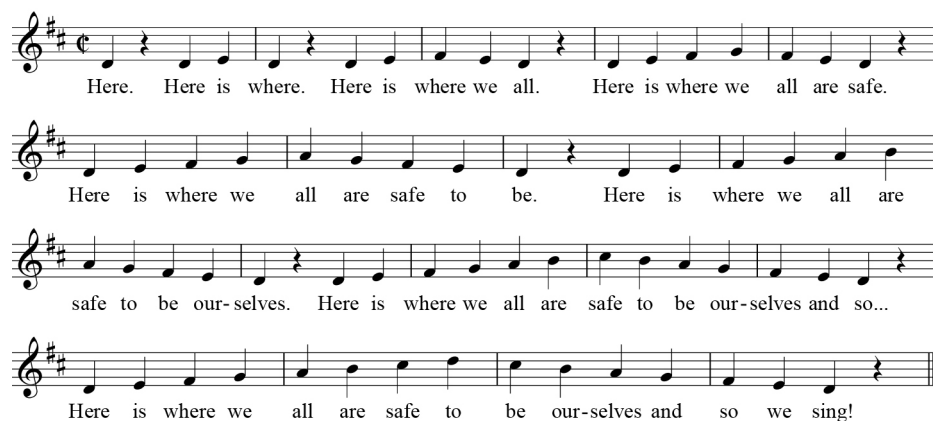
What a gift to walk alongside young choristers as they discover their voices! As we continue this important work, may we all seek to bring our best to the ones we teach and shepherd. When we give our children opportunities to experience and create beautiful music, we help instill a lifelong love of music that remains long after we’ve left the rehearsal room. ©

A Final Word

To my fellow composers: we have to be willing to let go of ideas that don’t work. I often end up with stray phrases, melodies, and accompaniment figures that hit the chopping room floor during editing. Let your piece

NOTES

¹ Helen Kemp, *Of Primary Importance, Volume II*, Choristers Guild (1991).



Here. Here is where. Here is where we all. Here is where we all are safe.
Here is where we all are safe to be. Here is where we all are
safe to be our-selves. Here is where we all are safe to be our-selves and so...
Here is where we all are safe to be our-selves and so we sing!

Figure 1

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