



Lifting Up the Littles:

Highlighting Your Youngest Singers

Through Commissioned Works, Effective Rehearsal, Performance Opportunities, and Student Composition

by Jess Edelbrock

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Our youngest singers can do amazing things. They are keenly connected to their inner sense of musicality, they want to be challenged and uplifted, and they deserve opportunities to shine just as much as choirs that sing the most complex repertoire. These are some of the sentiments I hoped to communicate when the Tucson Girls Chorus Bumblebee Singers performed at the ACDA National Children's & Community Youth Choir Conductors' Retreat in January 2022.

The "Bees" are TGC's K/1 choir, and the centerpiece of their set was "Now We Have Rivers," commissioned specifically for the Bumblebee Singers. The whole retreat concert was intended to showcase singers from all ages—from the Bees to the Cadet Choir from Phoenix Boys' Chorus (grades 2-3), to the middle school groups from Chandler Children's Chorus and Tucson Boys Chorus, up through the high school singers from the TGC and Phoenix Children's Chorus. It was an honor to be a part of a concert that was so intentionally crafted to accurately demonstrate the work so many of

us do every day. All of the conductors involved in this concert were so proud to showcase the depth of artistry that all ages are capable of, and we hope this multi-age approach can serve as a model for national conferences and other high-profile performances to come.

In this article we will explore ideas and practical applications for highlighting your youngest singers, setting them up for success, and showcasing their immense capabilities throughout your community.

First, a confession. I was incredibly nervous about bringing the Bees to the retreat and how they would be received. I was worried that the audience (other conductors, in this case!) would see the performance as introductory or cutesy, simply due to the age of the choir and the developmentally appropriate repertoire and tone. The concept of "choral excellence" and its apparent definition throughout the profession was looming in my mind every rehearsal. However, I was also so confident in the importance of showcasing the work of the Bees, and each week they reminded me how eager and capable they were to dig into hard work and artistry.

After the performance, several conductors shared that they felt validated in what they do, which was the absolute best compliment I could have imagined. It is

so easy to feel less important when you conduct the littles. I am here to tell you that your work is just as difficult, just as artistic, just as valuable as those who conduct the most prestigious groups in our field.

Part One: Collaborative Commissioning

Commissioned works are usually reserved for the “top” groups, but what if our kindergartners have this opportunity? What if they get to feel the same excitement and sense of ownership that comes with performing something that was created for and with them?

In 2018, I was preparing for my master’s recital. At the time, I conducted the Tucson Girls Chorus Bumblebee Singers (grades K-1) and Mariposa Singers (grades 6-8). For the Mariposas, I had a hard time narrowing down repertoire since there is so much age-appropriate, high-quality, engaging music available for middle school treble choirs. I encountered the opposite problem for the Bumblebees. While there are many accessible pieces out there for our youngest singers, I personally found too many of them to be either formulaic, intentionally silly, or in need of much adaptation to actually work for the group. There is nothing wrong with programming silly songs or pieces with similar forms (and I do program these things!). For this situation, however, I was looking for something that would engage the Bees on a different level.

Depending on your situation, you may need to advocate for a commission. In my case, the TGC Director (Dr. Marcela Molina) was fully open to the idea from the start. If your administration or director needs some convincing, you can emphasize the huge potential and unique skills that younger singers possess—their imagination, energy, openness, big hearts, and much more. These qualities will certainly shine through a musical project and highlight the organization or school as a whole. Additionally, younger singers are the future older singers, and experiencing the sense of ownership and validation that comes with a collaborative commission project helps retain singers and parents. A commission for elementary singers also provides an opportunity for growth and impact beyond the particular ensemble; you are adding a much-needed piece to the repertoire

that children’s choir conductors around the world can proudly program.

One of my colleagues in my master’s program, Matt Carlson, happened to be a great composer who was interested in writing exactly what I was looking for: accessible music for less available voicings that was still just as crafted as the most complex SATB divisi piece. Matt’s skills and aesthetic were just as much an impetus for this project as the need for a great Bumblebee piece. If you don’t already have a colleague in mind as a composer for your commissioning project, reach out to other children’s choirs, your state ACDA board, or a local college or university. (You could also reach out to Matt!) Chances are, somebody knows somebody who would be a good fit. Be sure to listen to some of the composer’s previous works to get a feel for their style.

For “Now We Have Rivers,” Matt and I were both open to each other’s input throughout the process. He was the expert in composition; I was the expert in exactly what my choir needed to be successful. We also agreed that this piece must be well crafted and provide a vehicle for the Bees to tap into their fullest potential. Most importantly, we agreed that the project would be a collaboration between each other and the singers. Including your young singers in the composition process can be daunting, but if we position ourselves as facilitators and allow our students to have a voice, truly beautiful things can emerge.

The first step was settling on a topic. Start with what you know! For the Bees, we decided to write about something unique to our home in Southern Arizona: the monsoon. Each summer, it is scorching hot for a couple months and then this glorious series of storms rolls in and gives us rain, cooler weather, and familiar scents of the earth.

Singers writing or contributing to the text is an accessible and powerful way to involve them in the process. After spending some time talking about the monsoon and some of the ways it looks, sounds, smells, and feels, we asked the singers to write a haiku about the monsoon with the help of their parents. We opened this portion up to all K-8 TGC singers. This was for both the practical reason of gathering many options from students of various language skills, and for the social/emotional aspect of collaborating across choirs.

Matt and I worked together to combine the haikus into what would become the song lyrics. Instead of using full haikus from one singer, we pieced lines together into 3 sections: before, during, and after the storm. Once the lyrics were finalized, Matt began composing the music.

I

streets baked like clay pots Elsa, Ladybug (2nd grade)
thunder is like distant drums Amelia, Bumblebee (1st grade)
clouds build humid hot Waimea, Bumblebee (1st grade)

II

dark skies, whipping wind Chloe, Ladybug (3rd grade)
lightning flash, crackling thunder
slashing monsoon rains

III

<i>watching through windows</i>	Elsa, Ladybug (2nd grade)
<i>as it rains on thirsty soil</i>	Amelia, Mariposa (7th grade)
<i>now we have rivers</i>	Elsa, Ladybug (2nd grade)

In the spirit of collaboration, I'm thrilled to include Matt's insight on his compositional process:

Writing for the Bees was such a joy! I felt honored to write music that created a sophisticated choral performance opportunity for our youngest singers. The text that TGC created for this piece was full of vivid, tactile imagery that lent itself beautifully to being set to music. I chose to take each of these haikus and turn them into “mini-movements” of about one minute each. Short sections with quick transitions and lots of variety keeps these young singers engaged in the piece, especially when these sections combine into a continuous narrative. They can be storytellers in addition to performers, which is a lot of fun for the choir.

I put much consideration into writing the vocal parts. I wanted the sound of this piece to be something that was more elevated than typical songs for five- and six-year-old singers. At the same time, however, I wanted to be sure that they could feel successful while performing, and avoid asking them to do things that were not developmentally appropriate. I placed the vocal lines in

a limited range that provided many opportunities to access their head voice. Melodies make frequent use of descending minor thirds, borrowing from the most common interval used in children's songs. The rhythmic writing is kept mostly to quarter and eighth notes, which was designed to be both age appropriate and provide opportunities to introduce these rhythmic elements to the singers.

Within these guidelines, there is still plenty of high-level music making to be had! This piece is full of dynamic contrast, varied articulations, tempo changes, and unvoiced sound effects to sound like the monsoon winds and rains. As opposed to simple block chords that one might expect from music for beginning choirs, the piano and percussion accompaniment adds layers of complexity that does not take away from the vocal line. It complements and challenges the singers while painting the imagery of the text.

It was also important to me to use this piece as an introduction to part singing. Kids can sing in parts at this early age, and they were excited to use these techniques to further paint images from the text; the clouds building on the horizon, lightning flashing in the distance, the flurry of monsoon rains coming at the audience from all angles. These moments of part singing are always first introduced as a unison motive, which is then repeated in two parts shortly afterwards. Starting with unison and immediately building to parts is an excellent way to introduce more advanced choral skills to our youngest singers. See Figure 1 on the next page for an example of a unison motive developing into a two-part texture. Figure 2 on page 35 is an example of a simple echo that creates a three-part harmony (the Bumblebees omitted the G-sharp; the open fifth was enough of a challenge for this group).

So now you are ready to commission a piece for your elementary group! As you work with the composer, you can specify or have conversations about the following:

- Vocal range
- Voicing strategies for successful two- or three-part singing

35 *p*
 slash - ing mon - soon rains slash - ing mon - soon rains
p
 slash - ing mon - soon rains slash - ing mon - soon rains
 ||
pp
 37
 slash - ing mon - soon rains slash - ing mon - soon
 slash - ing mon - soon rains slash - ing mon - soon rains
pp
 39
 rains slash - ing mon - soon rains slash - ing mon - soon *ff*
 slash - ing mon - soon rains slash - ing mon - soon rains *ff*
 mute head
f
 (hold fermata as long as it takes for the decay to decrescendo)
 42

Figure 1.

- Special musical elements (e.g., adding body percussion, highlighting an instrumentalist from one of your groups)

- Musical concepts to focus on

- Accompaniment style

- Flexibility: what options are there to simplify the piece further if needed?

Here are some ideas for involving your singers in the process:

- Writing lyrics through individual submissions or as a group project

- Choosing what the piece is about

- Choosing specific musical elements, like which percussion instruments to include

- Composing the first line of the melody for the composer to draw from

- Choosing the overall form of the piece

Part Two:

Intentional and Effective Movement

Many of us utilize movement in the rehearsal to attain and reinforce musical concepts, to increase student engagement, and to help unlock healthy sounds through connection with the body. These movements are often dropped for the performance or turned into “choralography” that has less to do with the desired musical effect. However, creating movement that both aids the singer and works for the stage is essential for nearly every piece the Bees rehearse and perform. This approach serves many purposes: harnessing the group’s energy, increasing focus, allowing space for singer input and creativity, and providing consistency between rehearsal and performance spaces.

Specific movements within “Now We Have Rivers” were developed to encourage specific tone, articulation, rhythm, and dynamics. They are not written into the score; rather, they emerged organically throughout the score study and rehearsal process.

The first step to creating intentional movement as a conductor is to know the score well. Sing through every part multiple times and notice the many layers within each phrase (dynamics, rhythm, cut-offs, text, vocal technique challenges, etc). Choose a phrase and focus on one musical detail (perhaps dynamics first), loosen up and let yourself move in a way that helps you physically emphasize that concept. Sing through again, focusing on a dif-



46 **Flowing** ♩ = 80 *p*

Now we have riv - ers

p

Now we have riv - ers

Flowing ♩ = 80 *p*

Figure 2.

ferent musical detail and a different movement. Now, is there a way to combine those movements to help your singers with both goals through kinesthetic connection?

For example: in mm 11-15 of “Now We Have Rivers” (Figure 3), the singers begin by crouching down slightly as they sing “clouds build,” stand and raise their arms along with the crescendo. They also pulse their hands open on the beat to internalize the length

of the note and to achieve an accurate release.

You can repeat this process to try and work in as many musical concepts as possible. Prioritize which portions of the movement to keep or remove if it starts feeling too awkward or becomes counterproductive for your singers. In the same excerpt (“clouds build”), we began rehearsing starting with a complete crouch to the ground and a clap above the head on the release.

The musical score for Figure 3 consists of four systems of staves. The first system (measures 11-13) includes Part I, Part II, Percussion, and Piano. Part I and Part II have lyrics 'Clouds' and 'build'. The Piano part includes a 'loco' section. Dynamics include *p*, *pp*, *mf*, and *f*. Rhythmic patterns include triplets and eighth notes. The second system (measures 14-15) continues the vocal parts and the Piano accompaniment, ending with a double bar line. The Percussion part continues with a steady eighth-note pattern.

Figure 3.

This turned out to be too exaggerated for some of the Bees. Many would use the crouch as an opportunity to fully sit on the floor, and the clap encouraged some of them to yell the final consonant. We attempted to fix the issue by *explaining* that they should crouch instead of sit, and sing the consonant instead of yell, but a simple adjustment in the movement (standing from a slight bend and pulsing hands on the beat) proved to be much more effective.

Another way to hone in on effective movement is to involve the singers in the process. Young singers naturally move in ways that make sense to them, but they will need guidance to refine their ideas into something that will achieve the desired effect for the whole ensemble. Begin by playing or singing a large portion of the piece—singers can move either in their own space or around the whole room. Ask them to match the music using their whole body, then only their feet, only their arms, only their fingers, only their face, etc. Each time you repeat the exercise, prompt students to focus their attention on one of the musical concepts you would like to emphasize within a phrase or section (or ask them what they would like to listen for!). When you notice a motion that could help the group, ask the singer to demonstrate and have the whole group give it a try while singing the short phrase. You can then follow the same process as above to refine the movement into something that will help the singers best express and achieve the musical goal.

Your singers can be beautifully expressive, and they can also be very silly! Allowing moments of silliness through movement can help establish a culture of fun, trust, and validation. Young students are often told to calm down or focus (which is sometimes necessary), but providing a space for them to be themselves and explore the possibilities of musicmaking can both help them feel affirmed as a goofy young person and aid in their focus in the long run. Including movement in the rehearsal in both structured and less-structured ways harnesses our little's energy to help them achieve great things in a positive and naturally motivating way.

Transferring the wonderful work you do in rehearsal also becomes easier when you keep movements consistent between practice and performance. Singers will feel more comfortable with the familiarity and internal-

ized concepts, and are more likely to produce the same sounds they worked so hard to perfect if the associated movement is kept for the performance.

Part Three: Lifting Them Up

All of our singers deserve exciting and meaningful performance opportunities. When a prestigious or highly visible opportunity comes up, organizations and school programs often send their top or oldest group. There is nothing wrong with giving top ensembles wonderful opportunities, but our youngest and least-experienced singers should also be considered. In doing this it is essential to set our young singers up for success through appropriate repertoire, effective and engaging rehearsal, and high expectations enforced with kindness and encouragement.

As conductors of our young ones, we have the opportunity to educate not only singers but audiences. When you think of a typical outstanding choral performance, what comes to mind? Polished, uniform execution, professional stage presence, impeccable transitions? While these things have their place, it may be time to redefine success on the stage in order to be truly representative of the work we do as educators, singers, and human beings.



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To do this, you must be brave. You must be proud of your non-conducting, because your singers may not need a beautiful legato 3/4 pattern; they may need you to do the movements with them. You must not apologize for the singer who is going to wave to their mom between pieces or literally sit down in the middle of a song (both of these things happened on stage at the National Retreat!). You must embrace mistakes while urging improvement. You must be proud of performing a set of just two or three pieces because they are high quality, challenging, and well done. You must name the fact that what the kids are doing is also art. You must spell that out and then you must let your singers show them what you mean.

Our singers know when we believe in them and when we are truly proud to show them off to the world. They will rise to the occasion, they will give you their whole hearts, and they will surprise you in the most meaningful ways. We simply need to give them the space to do it. Your work as conductors of the littles is so important. You are building the foundation for their musicality, their openness to new experiences, their sense of self-worth and teamwork, and their idea of what choir can be and who it's for. You already know that they can do amazing things; let's show the world!



Scan the QR code to see the full movements for "Now We Have Rivers." <http://www.mattcarlson.co/now-we-have-rivers.html#/>

Student Composition for Young Choirs

Since this article was published in 2022, the TGC Bees have composed and premiered three original works, and the process has been immensely rewarding. In addition to commissioning works for our younger singers, I invite you to consider embarking on a group composition journey with your littles. This can be a daunting task when first starting. Many of us have little to no training on how to teach composition. It's even more rare to see examples of student-led compositions performed in the same set as established composers. In my experience, however, this process is less about for-

mal compositional techniques and more about what we do best as choir teachers: facilitating a culture of trust, guiding students to know when to lead and when to follow, and encouraging our singers to share their voices without fear.

The methods outlined below include suggestions based on the trial and error that we have already gone through at TGC, and are our current best practices:

1) **Source the Text.** For early elementary students, consider partnering with older students to create lyrics. Our littlest singers have complex ideas, but their language does not always reflect the depth of what they are thinking. Collaborations with older students can empower both littles and bigs! Some ideas for text creation:

- a. After selecting a theme, send prompts home and invite siblings/parents to help their young singer to put their big ideas into words
- b. Adapt a book (it doesn't have to rhyme!)
- c. Create a set of haikus by combining various students' ideas

2) **Choose the Form.** Working within a preset structure can be very helpful!

- a. Classic song form is a great place to start. We love a good V1-C-V2-C-B-C-C tag (or any shortened version of that). Students can then see that once they write the chorus they are halfway done with the song!
- b. For a less rigid structure that works well when using a book as a text source, first identify a central idea or single lyric to use as your "chorus." Then, select other lines/pages of text to place in between "choruses." Don't be afraid to move things around or cut parts of the book. (Do be sure to credit the author appropriately.) Complete this with as much student input as you'd like. The Bumblebees select the chorus and some of their favorite lines, and I put them into an order that

makes sense for our group.

3) **Melodic content.** Let them flow.

a. In the Bumblebees, I serve as the translator; we speak a short phrase until it's in our heads, then I play a D or E major chord to give us our tonic and choose a few students to sing me whatever is in their heads for that phrase. Then I repeat (with real-time "autotune") so the whole class can sing it back. *We always draw the melodic contour in the air while we sing.* We do this with several ideas and then choose which one. Sometimes I truly let the girls choose, and sometimes I select one idea or another to emphasize certain concepts.

b. It is common for one singer to suggest a melody and then all subsequent suggestions are exactly the same because that's what is in their ears. To break this up, I ask a lot of questions:

- What is this sentence/phrase about? What is the feeling for this phrase?
- What would music sound like that is sad, happy, bouncy, silly, etc.
- What if our highest pitch is on this word or that word?
- What should the longest word be? The shortest?

4) **Notating their Creation.** At TGC we are fortunate to have accompanists who can sketch out much of the basic notation of the singers' ideas in real time. They also can harmonize it quickly. However, you can sketch the notation in small chunks (use solfège, a staff, whatever works best for you) and harmonize it later using your choice of instrument.

a. Super quick harmonization 101: Pick the note in the melody you want to harmonize, play it as the root of a triad, the third, then as the fifth. Students pick what they think sounds best!

A few additional considerations as you embark on this creative journey with your students:

- Plan more time than you think you will need. Encourage every idea at first.
- Scaffold well with small, structured steps.
- Embrace unexpected detours. The Bumblebees unknowingly composed secondary dominants, and most recently, a mixolydian melody!
- Incorporate musical concepts all the time, not just at the end. Every step is an opportunity to explore articulation, dynamics, tone, etc.
- Adding movement is a high-impact way to enhance any piece, including an original composition! This is another great avenue to include student input!



View "Be a Tree" performed by the Tucson Chorus Bumblebee Singers.
<https://youtu.be/8YTieLqU1BE>

As the Bees like to say, "you never know until you try." Consider this article permission, encouragement, a call to action to incorporate student-led practices—including composition—in your youngest choirs. 

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