



Selecting, Adapting, Writing, and Publishing Music for the Middle School Choir

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“My choir has one tenor and two basses. Neither of them is confident enough to carry their own section against the sopranos and altos. What should I do?”

“Looking for an upbeat, mostly unison piece for my sixth-grade choir—nothing cheesy, can contain a few splits but very minimal and easy. Multicultural would be cool, but I’m having a hard time finding something without extra instrumentation.”

“I’m in my first year at a school, and I have no music budget. Also, my digital piano is missing keys. What do I do?”

Unbalanced choirs, the perfect work for a beginning choir, no budget—these are the themes we often see on social media. One thing has changed from decades ago when I started teaching is that the middle school choral director has many options for choosing repertoire. Composers and publishers offer specialized series for middle school ensembles. ACDA and other organizations now offer honor choir opportunities and repertoire recommendations. If anything, it can seem like there are too many choices.

This article is adapted from a session I presented at the

2019 ACDA National Conference in Kansas City. The four areas of concentration—selecting, adapting, writing, and publishing—are related, but they are all rooted in the basic elements of music selection.

Selecting Music

Know your singers and their voices. Range and tessitura should be appropriate for the singers’ ages and development.

- Emphasize basic vocal technique. Music should encourage healthy vocal production.
- Teach music literacy. Students should sight read daily, using a sequential method.
- Plan well-balanced programs. Students should sing music of all styles, periods, and genres.
- Determine the most appropriate ensemble groupings for your singers. Group students appropriately in ensembles best suited to encourage success based on school and district policies. These may include treble voices,

the emerging low voice choir, and mixed voices.

- Get the singers in the door and get them singing. My very first published piece of music was “The Drunken Sailor,” published by Jenson Publications (HL #42304012) in 1980. Some current opinions have said that this song is not appropriate for children to sing. In 1979, my sixth graders loved it when I went to the piano and played a loud D minor boom-chuck while they sang rowdily “Hooray and up she rises!”

These kids signed up and sang and stayed in the choir. From that point, they trusted me and sang whatever I put in front of them. Not every first work you choose needs to be “The Drunken Sailor,” but over time and with the help of trusted composers and colleagues, I began to notice certain qualities in the entry-level works (and beyond) that were most successful with students. They often led to continued participation in singing.

Music for your singers should be:

- Well-crafted
- Use appropriate ranges
- Employ smooth voice-leading
- Contain interesting vocal lines
- Have a melodic vocal part for emerging low-voice singers. Treble parts can contain a bit more complexity and occasional divisi or descants.

Text

Texts may vary widely from serious to whimsical, but it is important that they be authentic and not perceived as too babyish. Try these guidelines:

- A certain level of sophistication or intellectual challenge
- Poetic texts
- Languages other than English

- Diverse cultures
- Folksongs
- Romantic love if in third person or general in content
- Broadway-type music such as “Seasons of Love” or “The Greatest Showman” are often more successful than the latest pop hit.

Texture

Textures should be varied and may be either accompanied or a cappella. Since students’ voices are light and developing, a cappella music works better with call-and-response phrases, closed position harmonies, and unison lines. The addition of percussion or other student-played instruments provides interest and motivation. Accompanied songs should not double voices or get in the way of voice parts. The accompaniment should be interesting and be able to stand alone. It should support and complement vocal lines.

Adapting Music

No matter how carefully we choose music for our middle school singers, the reality is that their voices will evolve and develop over time. Because of voice change, we may not have the same choir at the end of the term (or the end of next week!) as we currently have. Directors should closely monitor singers’ voices and be willing to:

- Transpose
- Double parts
- Pencil in alternate pitches
- Pivot between parts
- Make cuts in voice parts
- Write alternate harmonies
- Lower the key of the song

Writing Music

As you understand your choir's unique character and situation, perhaps you can't find the right music for them. Maybe you have a theme or a motive or a chord progression that speaks to you. You may want to try your hand at writing music. If so, try to keep your choir's vocal abilities and strengths in mind as you compose.

Copyrighted music

Check publishing rights and get permission first. Most publishers have information on their website regarding obtaining permission. Keep in mind that whatever arrangement you choose does not belong to you. Any arrangement is a derivative work that belongs to the copyright holder.

Public domain

Folksongs are not always folksongs! Check your sources and do the necessary research. If you are setting a poetic text, be sure the poem is in the public domain. If not, contact the poet (if living) or the poet's estate. Be prepared to pay a fee for the poem.

Original words and music

If you have the interest and the skill, this can be an immensely fulfilling process; however, if you are writing specifically for your middle school choir, avoid a text that is too personal. You may love your spouse to the moon and back, but having your middle school choir sing about that love might create a certain "ick" factor you want to avoid.

Crafting your music

All the criteria for selecting music apply here. Make your music interesting and unique but not too weird or quirky. Write an interesting accompaniment. Sing all parts yourself to see if they are interesting and have good voice-leading.

Get feedback

Invite your choir director friends over for pizza and coax them into reading through your music. Listen to their comments. Try your music with your choir and assess their reaction. Perform it on a concert and evaluate the audience response. Share that music with your peers and get their response either by visiting their rehearsal or concert or through video sharing.

Publishing Music

Traditional Publishing

Eventually you may want to distribute your music more widely. Despite what you may have heard, many publishers are looking for new music, especially accessible pieces of quality for younger and developing choirs.

As you decide where to submit your music, study publishers' catalogs and identify those that are aligned with your composing focus. Try to make a connection with a series editor or a publisher's representative at a conference or a reading session. Use this opportunity to make a connection, engage in conversation, and exchange business cards.

This is not the time to give that person a package of your scores. Based on his or her willingness to receive new scores, send your music to him/her, preferably electronically. Be prepared to wait for a response. Check back periodically. Publishers are busy and sometimes only review new music at designated times during the year. If you are successful and your work is accepted, be flexible, collegial, and open to an editor's suggestions. Be willing to promote your works and others in the publishers' catalog.

Publishing may give you wide distribution, nationally and internationally, and if your work sells well, you may attain recognition as a choral personality. In addition, most publishers handle all aspects of commerce and rights administration which is a plus for you. (Note: be sure to register with a performing rights organization such as ASCAP or BMI. You will split your income with your publisher for broadcast, recording and performances.)

Publishers pay royalties once or twice a year. You may not get rich, but over time, royalties can provide welcome supplemental income.

Self-Publishing

These days, composers and arrangers have opportunities to self-publish both original works and arrangements. Here are several sites to consider. All of these sites have different requirements and royalty rates. You'll be responsible for marketing your own music.

- **Noteflight Marketplace** - Noteflight is a free online software program that allows premium members to create, adapt, and sell music. Over a million copyrighted songs are available for licensing through the affiliated Arrange Me site, which has a vibrant online community at <https://www.noteflight.com/>

marketplace

SMP Press - This site allows members to post their PDF scores for sale and handles commerce for all sales. Again, the affiliated Arrange Me offers easy options for licensing copyrights online. Go to <https://smppress.sheetmusicplus.com/>

J.W. Pepper My Score - This is a service that allows member composers to post their music for sale digitally or in printed editions through the J.W. Pepper site. Go to <https://www.jwpepper.com/myscore>

MusicSpoke - MusicSpoke describes itself as “artist-owned sheet music.” It is a distribution platform for self-published composers. MusicSpoke vets composers, not specific compositions, and seeks composers who are accomplished, established and looking for a platform that will represent them professionally. MusicSpoke does not take the copyright for any particular work, so composers are free to adapt their own works for different voicings and instrumentation. Go to <https://musicspoke.com>

Final Thoughts

My career has spanned four decades of teaching, conducting, composing, editing, and managing a choral publishing division. I continue to be amazed at the energy, the passion, and the dedication of choral directors at the middle school level. Don't get tired; the choral profession needs you! 