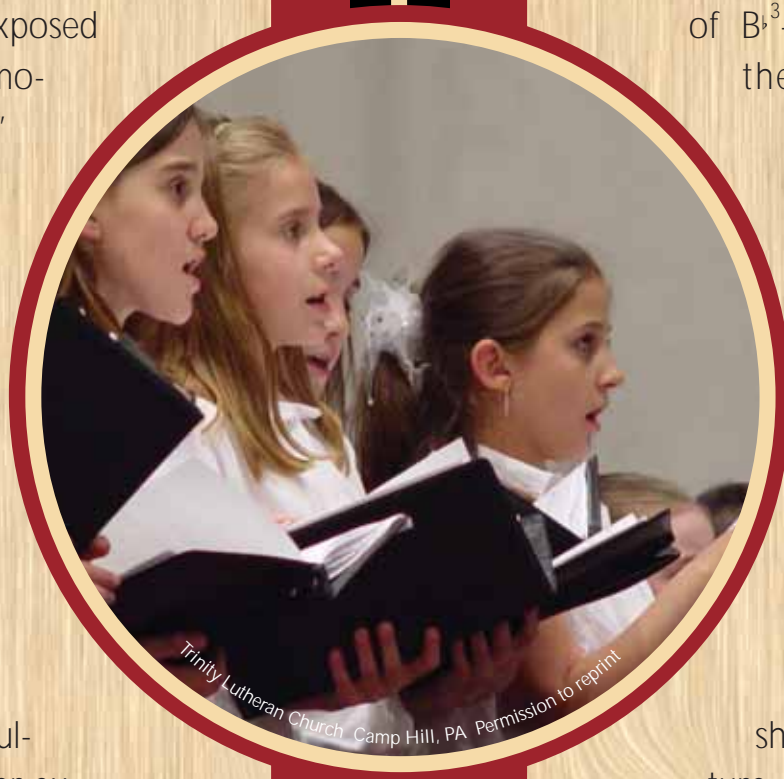




Some
Thoughts on
Arranging
Music
for the
Children's
Choir

Clara Levy

The purpose of this article is to provide guidelines for arranging repertoire for the children's choir derived from the review of the literature. In one of the very few sources found on this specific subject, Goetze stresses the musical and pedagogical responsibility of writing music for children, who should be exposed to a "variety of emotions and ideas," which may "lead them to find means of validating and expressing their emotional life—emotions and feelings which do not find expression through other means in today's culture."¹ Based on her experience as an educator and composer, Goetze recommends that when writing and arranging for young singers, the text should have a suitable topic and "appropriate language."² The melody should be

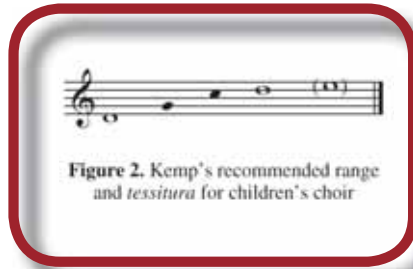
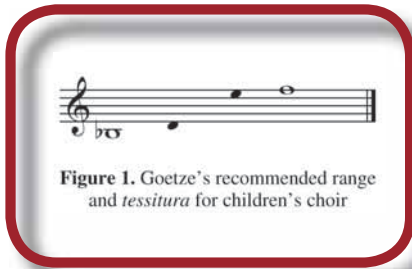


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'singable;' "make musical sense;" have a "clear formal structure" with "repeated phrases, sections, or refrains;" and its themes and motives should be "consistent throughout the piece."³

Both words and melody should be compatible in mood. Goetze recommends a vocal range of B³–F⁵, with most of the notes between D⁴ and E⁵ (Figure 1). The composer reminds us that conjunct melodies are easier for inexperienced singers and that high notes are more freely sung on open vowels. The accompaniment should be light in texture and dynamics and should not double the vocal lines. Goetze suggests considering replacing or combining the percussive quality of the piano with another instrument.

In the same vein, Kemp suggests considering an "interesting" accompaniment with "optional instruments in addition to keyboard," and the use of instrumental interludes



in order "to avoid continuous wordiness" and "accommodate need for inhalation."⁴ Among her guidelines provided for composers of children's choir music, Kemp recommends a range from D⁴ to D⁵, "with possible upper E" and a tessitura between G⁴ and C⁵ "to encourage head voice singing"⁵ (Figure 2). The vowels used on high notes (D⁵ and higher) should be carefully considered. The form should include some repetition of text and music "to aid in teaching/learning," and the melody should be appealing and avoid repeated "consecutive upper notes, especially when each note is sung on a different

syllable."⁶

Further guidelines are offered by Telfer, a Canadian composer, who begins by selecting a text of high quality that has a "certain taste in the mouth, a certain rhythm, [and] a certain shaping of vowels and consonants."⁷ The "vocabulary level" of the text, as well as its length, should be age appropriate. Its topic should be interesting and enable the singers "to experience some new idea or emotion or a different perspective."⁸ Telfer points out that "patterns or repetitions in the text are often successful in helping young choirs keep a focus on the music."⁹ Like Goetze, Telfer

suggests that "the melody should express the general mood or ideas of the text."¹⁰ The composer recommends a good balance between repetition and variety since repetition allows the performers and the listeners to "form a bond with the music" while variety is necessary "to stimulate and retain interest and enhance the artform."¹¹

Telfer, like Goetze, recognizes that conjunct melodic steps are usually easier to sing, though she observes that "leaps are more dramatic and more interesting and particularly effective with children because of the natural flexibility of their voices."¹² Like Kemp, Telfer recommends a tessitura from G⁴ to C⁵ and the use of a limited range for younger singers. When writing for children's choirs, Telfer uses the range D⁴ or E⁴ to E⁵ or F⁵¹³ (Figure 3). Regarding other vocal demands, the composer advises that a person be aware of the harmful effect "of prolonged repetition of words or phrases, of extremes of range, of long passages consisting entirely of a single vowel sound and of continuously loud or continuously soft passages"¹⁴ on the children's voices.

Telfer admires the flexibility of children's voices and hearing. "They can sing rhythms, unusual time signatures, leaps, and atonal music more easily by ear.... They tend to be more experimental with vocal sounds; [and] they love to imitate unusual voices and other sounds around them."¹⁵ When composing for more than one part, the author reminds us that it is easier to hold a voice in counterpoint than in harmony, and that each vocal part should be musical and its words should make sense. For Telfer, the piano accompaniment should "provide cues" to the singers, be "relatively simple," and "match the lighter quality of the voices and



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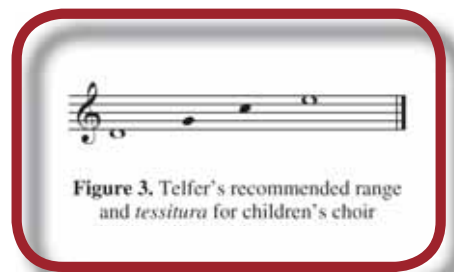


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the simplicity of the ideas."¹⁶ While sparingly scored in the singing range, it should "include some writing in the bass range to help the tuning and to aesthetically balance the sound of the high voices."¹⁷ Telfer gives several reasons to avoid long piano introductions and interludes. In the case of inexperienced singers, continuous singing enables their sound quality and musicality to improve and their confidence to build. For experienced singers, "too much stopping and starting [is] physically and psychologically tiring."¹⁸ Telfer suggests considering the possibility of a different color sound by writing unaccompanied music or spoken parts for the choir.

Barbara Harlow, a choral director, accompanist, and the president and owner of Santa Barbara Music Publishing, provides useful advice by addressing the choral composer and arranger as an artist and a businessperson.¹⁹ Harlow recommends becoming familiar with the kind of choir for which one is arranging, and analyzing the best-selling pieces in that medium in terms of difficulty, range, and style. Vocal technique should be a primary consideration and all the voices should be "equally challenged," giving each voice part a "chance to be the star."²⁰ When selecting a text in a foreign language, Harlow suggests using the original language, creating an English version that maintains the original meaning, and providing a pronunciation guide along with a literal, word-by-word translation.

If choosing to arrange a song, Harlow suggests making the selection from music in the public domain, researching the origin of the piece carefully "to avoid copyright entanglement,"²¹ finding out what arrangements of the title are available, and determining if your idea is original enough. The challenge, according to the author, is "to maintain the flavor of the original while adding some new dimension of interest."²²

When the song is from another culture, the arranger faces additional considerations such as respecting the integrity of that culture. Due to a worldwide interest and concern for multicultural music education for several decades, music educators have come up with suggestions and recommendations to ensure the integrity of a culture when teaching and performing the music of that culture. The following is a summary of those

suggestions and recommendations relevant to the arranger of children's choral music:

- Consult with tradition bearers and experts.
- Include biographical information about the contributor(s), including their personal comments on the selections.
- Read widely about the music and the culture in the scholarly literature.
- Include contextual information about the music and culture.
- Use the original language, listen to a live or recorded native speaker's pronunciation, and include pronunciation, literal translation, and "interpretation of deeper meanings or layers of meaning."
- Avoid biased lyrics and musical stereotyping.
- Since cultures are dynamic, consider contemporary as well as traditional music.
- Use preferably authentic instruments or reasonable reproductions.
- Listen carefully and repeatedly to performers from the culture to perceive nuances in pitch, duration, tuning, performance style (degrees of vocal tension, vibrato, tremolo, accentuations, pulsations, surges, volume, slides,

ornamentations, nasality, and so on), and other factors that make a culture's music distinctive and are lost in western notation transcriptions.

- Consider including an audio recording featuring native singers.

This article has provided several considerations and recommendations derived from the literature for arranging music for the children's choir. Directors have often referred to the importance of the repertoire in the development of both the singing voice and the love and appreciation of music. It is composers and arrangers who are the creators of such repertoire. In their hands lies a responsibility and a great opportunity to advance children's vocal and musical skills and to provide an artistic and meaningful music making experience.

NOTES

¹ Mary Goetze, "Writing and Arranging for Young Singers," *Choral Journal* 29 (March 1989): 36-37.

² *Ibid.*, 37.

³ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴ Helen Kemp, quoted in Christine Bordeaux Farrior, "Body, Mind, Spirit, Voice: Helen Kemp and the Development of the Children's Choir Movement" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1993), 175.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.

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⁷ Nancy Telfer, "Composing Concert Music for Children's Choirs," *The Recorder* 36 (December 1993), 19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹² *Ibid.*, 20.

¹³ Nancy Telfer, quoted in Rodger James Beatty, "Unison Canadian Choral Compositions: Selection and Analysis for Schools" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1999).

¹⁴ Telfer (1993), 20.

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¹⁵ Ibid., 20.

¹⁶ Ibid., 21.

¹⁷ Ibid., 21.

¹⁸ Ibid., 21.

¹⁹ Barbara Harlow, *How to Get Your Composition*

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²⁰ Ibid., 32.

²¹ Ibid., 18.

²² Ibid., 20.



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