

Turning Notes into Music: Rehearsing Children's Choirs

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King of Glory—arr. Kathy Rausch

Ostinato

2-part

3-part

This hymn sums up the life of Christ and shares the whole gospel message. The syncopated Israeli melody is brilliant in its simplicity. The melody of the refrain is minor, the verse is the same melody in a major tonality. The ostinato patterns I've added are based on the second measure of the melody.

This is a rhythm piece, so a steady beat at a quick walking pace is a must. It will tend to rush unless the singers step in place with the beat (lift heels only for appropriate riser motion). Use the consonants (especially the K of King) to communicate energy and excitement.

It can be done in 2 or 3 parts. The song opens with a soloist singing the first refrain. The whole choir responds with the questions in the first verse, and the soloist sings the answer, finishing Verse 1.

If it is done in 2 parts, one part sings the melody, the other sings Ostinato 1 for verse 2, Ostinato 2 for verse 3, and the melody in canon at 2 beats for verse 4. The piece closes with the refrain sung three times, once with Ostinato 2, once with Ostinato 1, and finally by the soloist who sang Refrain 1. The ostinati should be sung alone two times before each verse to give time for breath. After the canon, allow 2 beats (a measure) of rest, with the pickup to Ostinato 2 at the end of the 2nd beat.

For 3 parts: Part 3 sings Ostinato 1 for verses 2 and 3. Part 2 adds Ostinato 2 on verse 3. The choir is divided into 2 equal groups for the canon on verse 4. Then Part 3 begins Ostinato 1 and does it 2 times, Part 2 adds Ostinato 2 the second time, and both groups continue as Part 1 sings the Refrain. Part 1 immediately repeats the Refrain at a softer dynamic, Part 2 drops out, and Part 3 continues Ostinato 1. The soloist ends the piece by singing the Refrain one more time softly.

The music is simple, the only tricky part is remembering who sings at what time. Email me if you want a written out score to follow and I'll send one to you.

The Lord's My Shepherd (Brother James' Air) arr. M. Archer

GIA G-4645 (2 pt.)

This arrangement is simple yet challenging to sing in tune with beautiful musicianship. The accompaniment is extremely well written because it adds interest on verses one and three, and is well suited to a young soloist or solo group for verse two. The only time it doubles the voices is in the last verse, to provide support for the part-singing. The tempo should move along—at about mm. = 60 for a half note pulse, and the piece should be conducted and felt in 3 meter once the singers enter although it is notated in 2/2.

The challenge in this piece is for students to use their lighter register or “head voice”, since the first motive starts in their lower range. For the descant part, only a few voices are needed, so I would assign only those who can sing the high G’s easily to the part. Boys in 4th or 5th grade usually have the best high ranges if they are used to singing, so I would consider them first.

Hush! Somebody’s Callin’ My Name—arr. Brazeal Dennard

2 pt. Arrangement, Shawnee Press EA-144

This song is a traditional African-American spiritual, which means that it comes from a very different singing tradition than our Lutheran heritage brings us. I like to associate this text with the story of Samuel hearing God calling his name (1 Samuel 3), with the implied answer to the song’s question “What shall I do?” being the same answer Eli gave to Samuel in verse 9, “say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’” If we look at the song in this way, the answer to “What shall I do?” is really to listen to God’s Word and serve Him as Samuel did.

I chose this piece primarily because it presents a wonderful opportunity to work on choral diction. Beautiful vowels make beautiful singing, and clear consonants allow the listener to understand the words. The dialect that is appropriate for this song actually has fewer diphthongs, and more pure vowels than our standard American English.

Vowels:

my=mah (same vowel as callin’, no diphthong to the ee sound)

I=Ah (again, the same vowel as we use in the word father, so the diphthong is left out)

Lord=Laud (there’s that ah sound again!)

glory=glah-ry (not quite a pure ah sound, but more open than glO-ry)

do=round oo, avoid eew sound that is easier, but much less beautiful

Consonants:

Hush—Lots of H, and sh should be ‘shuh’, but very short and soft

Callin’—strong K sound at beginning

name—close the m and hum

Part assignment:

For unison—sing the melody, (with changing boys voices down an octave)

For 2 part—leave out the middle note when there are 3 parts

For changing boys voices/lower voices—the melody down an octave is in the right range on this song. It should help reluctant singers to have the melody in a place that fits their voices.

O Clap Your Hands—Julie Knowles

Jensen Publications 417-15050 (SSA)

The most important part of this piece is its excitement and joy. This will happen with a lively tempo (as marked), and crisp consonants. (Energetic K on "clap" and P on people. A puff of air on the H of "hands" is also good, and will help the syncopated rhythm.) The form of the piece is AABAA with a short coda. This should make it easy for you to teach, since there are really only 2 short ideas in the music. The B section goes from the pickup to measure 17 to measure 24. It should be sung much more smoothly for a contrast with the energetic A sections.

I chose this piece because the parts are very simple, even though there are 4 of them in some places. I also chose it because it has parts that will work well for boys who are not bold enough to sing in their head voices, or who have changing voices. It is VERY important to give these boys a part that fits their voices if we want them to sing for us, so please have them sing what is comfortable for them, even if they are the only one on that part at your school. Just use the keyboard with them for reinforcement. If need be, I would have boys whose voices are in transition learn the S2 part down an octave [Sing the D above middle C as written for the upbeats (word "O" before measure 1 and in measure 8), then they go down to the G below that]. This part has an extremely limited range, which is perfect for them. Then, on the B section, the boys with lower voices should sing the Alto part as written. This means that all of their singing will be between the G below middle C, and the E above middle C. If a note is uncomfortable for someone, have him leave it out, and just mouth that word. From measure 39 to the end, they should sing the A2 part where it is written, leaving out measure 40 if it is too high for them.

The piece can be sung in unison with a keyboard providing the harmony.

For two parts, sing the S1 and A1 parts, but have the lower voice jump from their E to the G-F# suspension that is written in the S2 part (measures 4, 12, 28 and 36). On the B section (measures 17-24), sing the S1 and S2 parts, except on measure 24, the lower voices should again sing the G to F# suspension instead of the A in their own part. From measure 39 to the end, use the S1 and A1 parts. In measure 42, the lower part should sing the A2 note (D) instead of their G, then jump back to the F#s. On the last measure, the S1 part should go down to the B instead of straining for the high G unless you have one or two students who can sing the high G effortlessly.

For 3 parts, leave out the lowest note whenever there are 4 notes.

Principles for Choral Rehearsals

I. Teacher Preparation

PLAN AHEAD! Choose music for the whole year.

Memorize as much as possible BEFORE you introduce the piece to the children.

This improves your own musical interpretation and helps with rehearsal pacing.

Rehearse with the accompanist before you are with the students.

Get a pitch reference each time you begin until your tonal memory is accurate. Students develop long term pitch memory, and will sing a song in the key they have rehearsed.

II. Choice of Music

Evaluate each piece:

- ***Is this music of the highest quality?***
- *Is the text appropriate and appealing to the age and level of the students?*
- *Is the melody charming and singable? Are the harmony parts interesting to sing?*
- *Is there something of interest from the beginning to the end of the song? Is there a well-defined climax? Does the piece touch emotions?*
- *Will the tessitura (most commonly sung notes) contribute to healthy use of the voice?*
Upper tessitura builds ringing tone quality; middle can be breathy and unfocused with a tendency to oversing. A lower tessitura forces the use of the heavier register. Variety is necessary to avoid vocal fatigue.
- *Do the vowels in the text encourage beautiful tone?*
Repeated vowels of the same shape build natural, relaxed tone quality that projects well. The ee and oo vowels are more forward and help intonation. Yawned vowels like ah, oh, and aw are more freeing in the lighter register. The ay vowel is most difficult to tune because of the ee sound at the end. The second sound of diphthongs should be sung at last moment to improve intonation.
- *Do the consonants place the tone and help free the upper notes?*
Well-enunciated consonants bring the tone forward to the front of the face and give it a ringing quality that projects well. Consonant alliterations give emphasis; consonants that can be sung before the beat help with rhythmic unity. Look for long or hard consonants on upper notes to help children sing with a free tone.

Balance programming for the year:

- *Select music of all periods.* Renaissance (for pure, clear tone); Baroque (accuracy, warm tone); Classical (musical forms); Romantic (vocal technique on long phrases); Famous composers (quality repertoire, historical value); Contemporary composers (Music is a living art); Hymns (texts are foundations of faith); Folk songs (beautiful melodies, most singable); Contemporary Christian (develops heavier range)
- *Select music that is contrasting in style.* Energetic and marcato, elegant and legato, etc.
- *Select music to develop singing skills.* Build headtone, Improve diction, Emphasize pure vowels, Encourage legato singing, Enhance the blended range, Expand the heavier register (with care to promote healthy singing),

Produce musical accuracy, Stress articulation and dynamics, Develop partsinging (list from Marie Stultz, *Innocent Sounds*)

- *Occasionally select music in a foreign language.* Begin with Latin then German (or a language native to your congregation). This contributes to tone and artistry, makes historical music of the highest caliber accessible, and brings understanding of other cultures.
- *Consider including a few favorite numbers that are revisited each year.* Since the notes and texts will be familiar, more time can be spent on musicianship and vocal skills.

III. Ears Before Eyes

- Music is aural, not visual. The notation is a representation of sound, or “translation”. Make musical decisions based on what sounds right.
- Some songs are “Melody pieces” some are “Rhythm pieces”. (Alice Parker’s categorization) **Melody pieces** need some rhythmic flexibility to shape phrases and emphasize important melodic turns. Vowels and legato are often most important in melody pieces.
Rhythm pieces need a precise and steady beat at a suitable tempo. Crisp consonant articulation is usually more significant in rhythm pieces.
- Conduct the beats that match the flow of the music, not necessarily the time signature. This is especially true of 3/4 and 6/8 times. The meter frequently changes, especially within Renaissance and contemporary pieces, but the changes are often notated in the rhythms themselves rather than in the time signatures.

IV. Introduce Songs Musically

Students need to hear songs as a whole. However, they sing with more accuracy when they can practice short motives and phrases first.

Students should hear a phrase at least 3 times before they are asked to sing it.

Here are ideas for balancing listening with singing to keep attention focused as you teach new music.

- Sing a short, catchy part of the song a few times. Let the kids practice it, then ask them to fill in that part when you cue them. Now you can introduce the whole song without losing their attention.
- Give students something to listen for as you sing the whole song. It can be something in the text (easier) or something in the music (more challenging). Those that find it the first time can “check their work” the second time through as those that didn’t get another chance. Have students show you when they hear it (raise hands, thumbs up) the third time through.
- If there are predictable rhymes at the end of lines, students can “fill in the blank” on cue after hearing the song the first time. That way they have to be on their toes frequently, yet they do more listening than singing.
- If the song is a “call and response” form, just teach the response, then get right to singing—you take the “call,” they do the “response.”

- Add sign language or other hand motions to the song if appropriate. Have the students imitate you on the motions after the first time through as you sing alone a couple more times.
- Give the students something physical to do as they listen. It could be clapping a short rhythm ostinato, or walking to the beat and changing directions at the end of each phrase. This builds musical skill and understanding as new music is learned in a fun way.
- Choose sections to rehearse rather than teaching or practicing songs from beginning to end. 7 to 10 minutes is more than enough rehearsal time on any one section or song. (I often avoid rehearsing a piece from beginning to end until a couple of rehearsals before a performance.)

V. Use the Text

"The words are the most important element in holding interest. Therefore, they must be given every possible advantage in making the song an experience of beauty."—Mabelle Glenn

Vowels

- Each singer must have the same vowel sound as the others for the note to tune and project in the room.
- Pursing lips slightly helps to warm the tone, to make it more resonant and to project the sound.
- Vowels within a phrase should also match each other as much as possible to keep tone quality consistent. This takes a while to learn, but makes a huge difference in the beauty of choral singing. This is the purpose of all the exercises that include "ee, ay, ah, oh, oo."

Consonants

- In general, consonants should feel like they are pronounced at the front of the mouth, with the tip of the tongue and front teeth. This keeps the tone focused, which helps intonation and resonant sound.
- Unvoiced plosives like k, p, t, and ch help air flow and create rhythmic interest. Have fun with them!
- Make the most of voiced consonants like ng, mm, nn, and zz. Elongate them so they are understood.
- Consonants that are felt in the throat like guh, rr, ll, th, and d can cause intonation problems. Skim over them if they are affecting the tone quality.

Phrasing

- If the piece is a melody piece, read the text aloud and listen for places that will need some tempo flexibility. Also play or sing the melody without the text and listen for where the music encourages a slight slowing or quickening.

VI. Add Visual Interest

Music is aural, but audiences hear what they see.

- Practice keeping choristers' eyes focused on the director, and eliminating distracting movements.
- Teach students to stand with an energized posture and to make their faces expressive.
- MOVE with the music! It is impossible to stand still and to be expressive at the same time! Motion is necessary for healthy, supported singing because the whole body supports the sound.
- Use choralography (movements that can be done on risers). sign language, or other hand motions, especially with young children. They will sound much better because they will sing more freely.
- Try singing in different formations and locations in the sanctuary.
- The text will be understood more clearly if the congregation can see the children's faces

VII. Conducting is a Reminder of Rehearsal

Less is more. Encourage students to listen to each other and sing musically without a conductor in front of them for some pieces.

Conduct only what is necessary. Breaths, entrances, and dynamic changes or articulations are most important. Let your hands reflect the sound you want.

Cues should be given a beat ahead so the response is on time. (Practice in front of a mirror.)

Have students use large motor movements to encourage free singing in rehearsal. Evoke those same sounds by using those movements yourself in performance.

Only use a beat pattern if you know it well and know where you are. Strong beats always go down. Showing strong beats can be enough.

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Children's Choir members from Bethany Lutheran School, Kenosha, WI

Annie Beck	David Moldenhauer	C.J. Siddiq
Marisa Capobianco	Katie Mulligan	Kristen Thompson
Elliot Jones	Darcy Perry	Loren Thompson
Ian Jones	Hannah Rehberger	Jacob VanSant
Joshua Kopp	Monica Rehberger	Jordan VanSant
Liam Kopp	Rebecca Rehberger	Lucas VanSant
Amy Moldenhauer	Kim Sjuggerud	

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- Phillips, Kenneth H. *Teaching Kids to Sing*. ©1992. Schirmer Books. ISBN 0-02-871795-3.
- Stultz, Marie. *Innocent Sounds: Building Choral Tone and Artistry in Your Children's Choir*. © 1999. MorningStar Music Publishers. MSM-90-900. ISBN 0-944529-30-5.

Additional Resources

- Bartle, Jean Ashworth. *Lifeline for Children's Choir Directors*. G.V.Thompson, 0-7715-7250-6.
- Leck, Henry. Video: *Vocal Techniques for the Young Singer* Plymouth Music Publishers
- Rao, Doreen. *We Will Sing* (Textbook) Boosey & Hawkes, TXB 81; (Resource Kit TXB 82)

Sacred Music Collections

Parker, Alice. *Creative Hymn Singing*. Hinshaw Music. HMB 103.

A collection of some of the best hymn melodies with suggestions for simple part-work by one of the best music arrangers of our century.

Pooler, Marie, arr. *Unison and Two-part Anthems*. Augsburg Fortress 11-9517

18 anthems that are very well suited to young singers and the Lutheran service, www.augsburgfortress.org

Recommended Choral Music lists

American Choral Directors Association,
<http://acdaonline.org/R&S/worship/reading.shtml>

The King of Glory Comes

(Singer's copy)

Israeli melody arranged by Kathy Rausch

for the Pacific Northwest Lutheran Elementary School Music festival, Spring 2000

Refrain

1 Solo

The King of glo - ry comes; the na - tion re - joic - es.

5

O - pen the gates be - fore him; lift up your voic - es.

Verse

9 Tutti

Who is this King of glo - ry? How shall we call him?

13 Solo

He is Im - man - u - el, the pro - mised of a - ges.

2. In all of Galilee,
in city or village,
He goes among his people,
curing their illness.

3. He gave his life for us,
the lamb of salvation;
He took upon himself
the sin of the nations.

4. He conquered sin and death;
He truly has risen,
And he will share with us
his heavenly kingdom.

Ostinati

1

King of glo - ry, King of glo - ry,

2

The King of glo - ry comes! The King of glo - ry comes!