

Letters On Music Learning

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From the Come Children Sing Institute

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Song Writing

Dear Colleagues,

As musicians we have a limited view of the composing process. We see only finished products. We do not see the composer's struggle, the discarded drafts, the ideas that did not work. We are led to believe that composers are masters of lyric melodies and endowed poets, and we tend to doubt our own potential to write a song.

If writing a song could keep me from having to go through yet another stack of music, it was worth a try. Through the years, I have written many songs for children. As both my students and I continue to develop through Gordon's music learning theory, the need for new song material has increased, and I am finding within myself a greater resource for writing songs. I have surprised myself with a continuous outpouring of songs in various tonalities and meters for children of all ages. In the process of writing these songs, I began to observe the process itself. Perhaps this account will dispel some of the misconceptions we have about song writing and stimulate music educators to tap their own creative potential.

We assume that the composer confidently approaches the task of writing a song with the form, text, and shape of the melody predetermined by inspiration. Every time I sit down to write a song, I feel a kind of panic. I don't know how to start. I don't know what to say about a topic or how to say it. I don't know what the song might turn out to be or if one will turn out at all. I fear the text or melody will be trite or the melody will sound like one I have written before. I fear that the well may run dry. Yet each song blooms unique. The insecurities are part of the experience of writing a song. Some composers are gifted, but the greater gift may be the determination to find the sculpture in the block of stone.

Song writing is a process. Trial and error, frustration, and moments of ecstasy are all part of the process. There are no magic formulas. The more songs we write, the more we get in touch with the choral art. Each new song becomes a piece of choral sculpture.

A song can be generated from a word, a text, an idea, a feeling, a rhythm, a melodic fragment, or from out of nowhere. There are as many different songs to write as there are photographs to take, with as many choices of different angles. A song about an elephant

might be from the perspective of the elephant, another animal, or a child. It might highlight the elephant's size or trunk, the word elephant itself, or the way the elephant sounds or moves. It could be in any tonality or meter or any combination thereof. It could be logical, imaginative, or clever; wordy, lyric, or rhythmic. How do we decide?

Get out of the way and let the elephant decide. The more we try to control, structure, and manipulate the process of writing a song, the more stilted our compositions become. Rather than trying to figure out what to say about an elephant, listen to what the elephant has to say to us. He will provide the text, rhythm, melody, harmony, and accompaniment.

We do not write a song; the song writes us. It is already there in perfect artistry but it is up to us to find its every nuance. The composer is as surprised by its text, rhythm and melody as is any audience. We don't construct a song, we uncover it.

A song, like a developing photograph, emerges. Our initial impression is no more defined than the fuzzy image of a print in the making. As with the photograph, details will become clear as the song develops.

To allow a song to become is a challenge, as we want to control the process. For a song to emerge, the song itself must be in command. Clever text, lovely poetry, vowel colors, percussive language and lyric lines happen as we let go of our need to be in control and allow words to freely interact with tonality and meter. The more we get ourselves out of the way of a fledgling song, the more it takes flight.

We have to restrain our thinking self, that part of us that wants to order, formulate, and manipulate the process of song writing, and allow our artist-in-residence to take over. When the thinking self becomes subordinate to the artist-in-residence, a lovely song can emerge. If the thinker maintains control, a contrived song will result.

The artist-in-residence plays with words, tonalities, and meters as a child plays with sand, creating and recreating with the whim of the moment. He needs to explore with the same abandon as the child in the sand, freely mixing sounds of words with sounds of rhythm and melody.

The artist-in-residence needs the thinking self to give him material to play with—a few words, perhaps a tonality or meter—and then to serve as coach, reflecting on the creating with a running monologue throughout the process. "I like that line. I'm not sure about the rhythm. Maybe it needs different words. Ooh, that was interesting. Go back to that first line and see where it goes from there."

The monologue of the thinking self reflects on the play of the artist, providing arbitrary options for him to play with and guiding choices in relation to a developing artistic whole. While the song develops, the monologue jumps back and forth from text, melody, and rhythm like a stream of consciousness. The artist internalizes the reflections of the thinker, developing his sensitivity to the medium. As the artist becomes more sophisticated in his creations, the thinker becomes more sophisticated in reflecting, and together their artistry grows.

The very same artistry that creates an exciting choral performance creates an exciting song. Music becomes a vehicle for the expression of text and text becomes a vehicle for the expression of the music. Through musical rhythm we express the rhythm of the words, a rhythm of the statement, and a rhythm of meaning. Through melody we express the tone of vowel color, a tone of line, and a tone of feeling. Text, melody, and rhythm become one expression.

Each word and tonal or rhythm fragment presented in song influences the direction of the developing song. In both sound and meaning, each word presents its own color palette, as does each tonality and meter. Text, rhythm, and melody often develop simultaneously, as a few words may suggest a melodic line or the direction of a melody may suggest a line of text. We have to listen to the developing song and take it where it wants to go.

A song has a mind of its own. One song may call for couplets with rhyming words and verses. Another will require just one verse and no rhyming words. One will demand repetition of a line, whereas another might repeat text but not melody, or melody but not text. Some songs develop more quickly than others. Some develop first as a sketch. Some require numerous revisions. Some dictate an accompaniment. Some demand to be without accompaniment. Each song is a creation unto itself, and each song spins its own yarn in the creating.

There is no need to force the text into rhyming couplets. The musical line carries out the completion of a phrase, with or without rhyming words. The music rhymes; the text doesn't have to.

We don't have to force a song into a given meter. If we let the text take the meter where it needs to go, and let the meter take the text where it needs to go, we find ourselves comfortably writing in unusual meters and in different meters within a given song. The various meters facilitate rather than limit the expression of text when we approach them as horizons rather than boundaries.

A full palette of tonalities and meters provides the greatest assurance against writing trite songs. Even a trite rhyming couplet can become artistic in lydian. The pensive sounds of phrygian, the beauty of dorian and aeolian, and the joy of mixolydian open the world of artistry in songs for children. Similarly, the vitality of unusual meters makes songs for children come alive.

Range and difficulty of a song will be dependent upon the intended singers, though a developing song may not turn out as expected. A song intended for inexperienced children may not be able to express itself in a limited range, or one intended for developed singers may turn out more appropriate for the young singer. An artistic song is right, whatever the original intent.

Text is always a challenge. Both the thinker and the artist-in-residence deal with words, compounding the task. The artist-in-residence is the poet. He plays with the sound and imagery of words. The thinker gets in the way with his concerns for the literal. He wants to find the right words. The artist-in-residence lets the right words find him. The

thinker wants to capture precisely how the elephant moved. The artist-in-residence captures how the elephant moved him.

Setting a poem to music, whether the poem is original or that of another author, can free the artist somewhat during the composing process, as it disengages the thinker from his compulsion to manipulate words. Songs without words provide still more freedom from the thinker, but the experience of discovering the music that delivers text stretches the composer to new expressions with and without words.

A text for children need not be wordy. Children have difficulty with multiple verses. Repeating a sensitive little song provides greater intimacy with the song. With the addition of a short piano introduction and interlude, a repeated song can be striking in performance.

Words to a song do not have to be chosen for their appeal to children. Children relate to the beauty of sound. If the text grows out of the music and the music grows out of the text, the artistic expression in sound will appeal to children. Like our own artist-in-residence, children relate to the sensitive combination of text, melody, and rhythm. It is only when we do not engage their artistry that their own little artists-in-residence become subordinate to their young thinking selves who look only for the literal appeal of words.

Our students provide a laboratory for field-testing our compositions. Their sound on a given song, the ease with which a line might flow, and the realization of text, rhythm, and melody give us live feedback about our composing process, validating our artistic decisions or suggesting additional editing.

The finest editing is done by the artist-in-residence without the interference of the thinking self. The artist-in-residence and the song become inseparable. The artist involuntarily takes the song everywhere he goes and sings it repeatedly, both out loud and in audiation, adjusting any line, word, or rhythm necessary to fit the artistic whole.

When the thinking self attends to the revision of the song, he resumes his role of reflecting on the work of the artist-in-residence. He knows when the song is finished, as he becomes so compelled by the artistry of the song that he becomes one with the artist-in-residence. Together they sing the song repeatedly in artistic performance, savoring every nuance, turning every phrase, and reveling in the choral art. Together, they become the song.

After a recent visit to Chicago's Shedd Aquarium, I set out to write a set of songs for children's chorus with each song capturing the essence of a different fish. I wanted each fish to be in a different tonality with some in unusual meters. Feeling the usual insecurities, knowing that I can't control the process of writing a song, I put my line in the water to see what kind of songs I might catch. After reeling in a dorian dolphin, a mixolydian seahorse, and a phrygian anemone, I went fishing for a starfish in lydian waters.

The word "starfish" suggested a lyric song, but I couldn't come up with any words to play with. The dolphin offered a lot of possibilities with his jumping out of the water and walking on his tail, but the starfish didn't do anything except sit there and look like a star. I referred to the encyclopedia to stimulate anything about the starfish or offer a few

related words that might have poetic potential. How the starfish spawns and eats, however, just didn't fit with the beauty of the word "starfish." I still had nothing to say about this creature that looked like a star.

While my thinking self flustered, trying to find words, my artist-in-residence was playing in the sand singing, "Starfish, do you twinkle in the sea?" And the monologue began.

"Hey, I like that. That is certainly more poetic than how the starfish eats. I think lydian will work. I'm not sure what meter we're in, but I like that rubato line. Where will it go from here? Ooh, that was nice, going back to the starfish motive. How about a second question to the starfish? Where is this melody going? I can't seem to stay in lydian. What else can I ask the starfish? How does one relate to a starfish? Maybe that is the song—how to relate to something that just sits there in the sea looking like a star. What else does a star do?"

The artist-in-residence goes on singing, "Starfish, do you light up the darkness?" And the monologue continues.

"Hey, that is really quite effective. I like questioning the starfish from the wonder of a child. Where is that melody going? Why am I having such a hard time staying in lydian? I feel like I don't even have a sense of tonality with this melody. What if I take it this way? No, it doesn't go that way. It has to go the other way. But that doesn't make any sense in the tonality. The melody is really beginning to emerge. What else can I ask a star? Something about the sun or moon?"

The artist-in-residence continues to play with the reflections of the thinking self. "Starfish, are you bright like the sun—fish?"

"Well, that's interesting. Is there such a thing as a sunfish? Does it have any relation to the sun? I liked the way the question to the star related to the sun, with 'fish' being somewhat of an afterthought. That adds to the innocence of the child relating to this creature as a star rather than a fish. What do you know, the encyclopedia says there is not only a sunfish, but it is bright-colored.

"What is with this melody? Why can't I hang onto it in lydian? It is so well defined, as if the song just has to go that way, but I'm having such trouble with it. Is the resting tone shifting? Let's see if the piano helps. How can that be? I am in lydian but the song is in aeolian. No wonder I couldn't hold onto the melody in lydian. Boy, now I am beginning to feel the power of this melody.

"Better get this down on paper. My dear starfish, what in the world are you doing with meter? Are you in triple or duple? How can the repeated 'starfish' be first in triple, then in duple? Your slow tempo adds a challenge, but how can such a flowing melody be shifting meters? I can't even notate what you're doing. I don't believe this. When the melody is in triple, the divisions of the micro beats are in twos. When the melody is in duple, the divisions of the micro beats are in threes. Heaven help me if I had to read this song rather than compose it!

"Does the final question fit the whole? Is 'oh' better than 'and'? Is 'you' better than 'I'? Should I ask a different question? The melody and rhythm work well and came about with those words, but I don't know if I like that question. It does fit with the child's battery of questions. I like ending the song on the word 'starfish,' with 'fish,' again, being an afterthought. We'll see if I come up with anything better for the last line.

"Well, a draft of the song is done. I had a big fish on the line and had a hard time reeling it in."

The artist-in-residence did the editing. I questioned again the last line, and we agreed on some changes. When the song began to compel me, I knew it was nearing completion. I finally became one with the artist-in-residence and one with the song. Like Pinocchio, who was swallowed by a whale, I was swallowed by a starfish—that little creature that did nothing but sit there and look like a star.

Starfish

MARY ELLEN PINZINO

Star - fish, do you twin - kle in the sea?

Star - fish, do you light up the dark - ness?

Star - fish, are you bright like the sun - fish? Oh,

how do you catch a fal - ling star - fish?

Yours truly,

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