Abstract

In the world of choral music, quality elementary-level literature is some of the hardest to find, compose, and teach. Compositions for elementary choir are full of necessary considerations that address range, lack of experience, content, music theory rules and guidelines, and simplicity in performance; as a result, much of elementary choral literature is similar in style, mood, and theme with very little variation from the typical “sound.” Using new poetry accessible for young children, I compose four pieces in a set entitled “Sweet as Any Bird” that explores uncommon genres, articulations, moods, and themes. The final product is a suite made up of four individual movements: “Blue Heron,” “Hummingbirds,” “Cedar Waxwings,” and “Sweet as Any Bird.”

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Eleanor Trawick for advising me through this project. The guidance and support I received both throughout the creation of this project and in the preceding semesters were vital to the success of the composition.

I would like to thank my grandmother for being my inspiration. Her poetry, though she may not realize it, speaks volumes about her heart and the simple joys that we can find in viewing a rare sight if we just take the time to look around.
Process Statement

Beginning with inspiration from my grandmother’s poetry, this creative thesis evolved from a mutual love of literature and music. Upon reading some of my grandmother’s “greatest hits,” I began to visualize a union of music and literature that also satisfied a need relevant to the semester of student teaching that would end my education at Ball State University. As a result, the idea unfolded to use my grandmother’s poetry in a composition for children’s voices in two parts. My composition would explore genres and styles unlike those in other children’s choral literature. As I have learned and read in numerous articles, the repertoire must be stylistically diverse and distinctive to form the centerpiece of an encompassing choral education (Rao, 1993). Having taught and worked with children’s choruses for many years, I had begun to notice that much of the choral repertoire for young students fits the same, redundant mold. Generally, children’s repertoire is either “cutesy” in a pop style or based on a folk tune with little harmonic interest. For children’s choruses, the purpose of choral literature is to facilitate music education through the use of specific repertoire (Rao, 1993). Understanding that the chosen repertoire must be diverse and educational is necessary to success in the choral classroom. Combining these three areas of interest – personal, educational, and pedagogical – I decided to create my own set of compositions that would explore genres outside the canon through the use of my grandmother’s poetry.

From the beginning, I knew there would be many challenges in making this project come together. First, I had very little compositional experience. Aside from short melodies composed for other classes, my musical creation skills were limited to a single arranging class. While I had composed original piano accompaniments in that class, I had never before created an entire piece
from scratch, including the melody, harmony, and accompaniment. Another added challenge was the specific demands of the age group I was writing for. I have worked with elementary choirs for many years, and I know many of the accommodations music must make to be successful at that level. Helping young students find their notes in the accompaniment, giving frequent opportunities to breathe, not using words that are too complicated, and writing harmonies in closed position for ease of hearing were all considerations that needed to be addressed in my compositions (Ostrander & Wilson, 1986). From the very beginning, I was challenged to use the knowledge and practical advice I had received in teaching young students in order to create my set of compositions.

My first step in beginning the process of composing was to select poems from my grandmother’s collection that worked well in terms of rhythm and rhyme, but also were unified in theme. I explored a number of options ranging from poems on childhood innocence to weather before finally settling on the many she had written about various birds. My grandmother has always cherished birdsong and has shared with me many exciting moments of viewing a rare bird for the first time. In the same way those rare birds inspired her poetry, so did they inspire my song. This choice was a long one and needed to be very deliberate because not only did the content need to be relevant to children who may potentially sing the work, but also needed to have personal meaning to both myself and my grandmother. I chose birds as the theme not only because they mean so much to my grandmother, but also because the subject is one that is easily accessible to children and also can translate well to composing. Birdsong is, essentially, a type of music; therefore, I was able to take a thematic idea of the subject and transfer it to my product.

Because my grandmother’s poetry was generally not titled, choosing appropriate poems from the category of “birds” was a challenge. I started with the poem I refer to as “Blue Heron”
because it painted such a clear image of the bird and the scenery behind. Specifically, I was drawn to the fact that this poem did not rhyme, yet had a clear structure that suggested a beginning, middle, and end. Immediately after reading this poem, I knew where I wanted the composition to begin and move towards. I next found the poem “Sweet as Any Bird” and decided that would be the final piece. The decision of which piece would be last was important, as it needed to tie the previous poems together thematically. “Sweet as Any Bird,” then, was chosen because of its final stanza that compares birds to music. To me, this choice made perfect sense in connecting the medium and theme. The other two poems, which I refer to as “Hummingbirds” and “Cedar Waxwings,” were chosen because of their meaning to my grandmother as well as their simplicity. In each of the four poems, I found a simplicity both in content and in structure that would transfer well to children’s literature.

After selecting the four poems, I did a metric analysis of the poetry in order to find the stressed and unstressed syllables. Syllable stress and meter are something literature and music have in common: When we sing music, stressed syllables tend to fall on stronger beats in the music, while less important words and syllables fall on passing or weak beats. In order to avoid awkward emphasis of unimportant syllables, a metric analysis enabled me to make decisions about which words were most important to the phrase and which words should receive less emphasis metrically. The metric analysis made the structure of the poem clearer and also made the phrase structure of the music evident. The phrase “A blue heron stands tall on a spit of sand,” for example, was analyzed so that the high point of the phrase were the words “stands tall.” The words “a,” “on a,” and “of” were marked as metrically unimportant, in comparison, and assigned note values smaller than the important words. Thinking of the unaccented words as “passing words” helped me to find the rhythm of the poetry and song.
After analyzing the poetry, I had to look at the poems holistically and decide the mood of each in order to choose a style of composition. A detailed study of the written source is necessary to better understand the relative mood and poetic components (Ostrander & Wilson, 1986). Reading the poetry again and again, my goal was to match lesser-used genres in elementary choral literature to the written text. I knew from the beginning that I wanted to include jazz and “medieval-sounding” music, but I also needed to facilitate the needs of the poetry. After some discussion with my grandmother about the thoughts behind some of the textual choices, I assigned specific genres to each of the four poems: “Blue Heron” to jazz, “Hummingbirds” would be a lyrical ballad, “Cedar Waxwings” would be inspired by open sonorities and “medieval” harmonies, and “Sweet as Any Bird” would be a unifying culmination of the previous three movements as well as an exploration of articulations not common in choral repertoire. “Sweet as Any Bird” itself would be a longer piece than any of the previous three in order not only to revisit the previous ideas, but also to feature contrasting sections and ideas of its own.

When I began the process of composing the four pieces, each had its own successes and struggles. The first piece, “Blue Heron,” came to me immediately. I knew that I wanted to explore genres uncommon to elementary choral literature, so I pursued jazz-inspired articulations and styles within the accompaniment of the piece. As I began “Blue Heron,” I had a clear vision of where the melody, harmony, and accompaniment would move toward. This piece flowed, and I managed to begin and finish it in the span of about eight hours. In this piece, I learned that it can be very enjoyable and easy to write down what is inspired. In many ways, it felt as though my fingers could not keep up with the speed of my creative flow. The other three pieces, however, would not be as easy.
Having outlined the general moods of each of the four movements, I started on the next with the goal of creating a lush, lyrical ballad. I struggled with composing even a melody for this piece, but had the persistent idea that I wanted it to be a partner song. In a partner song, the first voice part presents the first melody, followed by the presentation of the second melody by another part. Finally, the two melodies are combined and sung at the same time. Essentially, this means that the piece is made up of two melodies that complement one another and can be sung at the same time. This provided an extra challenge because it forced me to compose two melodies I liked and thought appropriate for young students instead of only one. Unlike “Blue Heron,” “Hummingbirds” went through many drafts, each drastically different from the previous. Interestingly, I struggled so immensely with creating a pleasing melody that I gave up the idea of a partner song midway through the process. It was only after this that my writer’s block was broken and suddenly I found the two melodies for the piece. In this way, “Hummingbirds” epitomized the idea of knowing where to go, but not knowing how to get there. I explored many different melodies, harmonies, accompaniments, and textures before finding even one small fragment that I liked, but trial and error was necessary in finding the product. The path that I took in writing this piece was much less direct than the first, but it challenged me to look critically at my creations and salvage the pieces that I liked.

The third and fourth pieces were a mixture of inspired and methodical creation. In many ways, I began thinking that my “creative juices” were no longer flowing and I was running out of ideas. I had begun the project with much enthusiasm, brimming over with creative plans for the composition. After about eight weeks of composing, however, the ideas came more slowly. There were moments of inspiration, but other times I would sit in front of a computer screen for hours trying to create an eight-measure melody. Dr. Trawick had warned me that the creative
process doesn’t work on a schedule, but experiencing this for myself was frustrating. I learned to write down any ideas I had at any moment, even if they were fleeting or seemingly random because composition had become a process of logically combining ideas rather than spontaneous creation (Ostrander & Wilson, 1986). I also learned not to try to force the creative process. When I tried to force myself to compose, as I tried with “Sweet as Any Bird,” I finished with a product I did not like. While the notes and rhythms were written and the piece was “done,” it felt incomplete and without personality. Instead, I learned to let creative moments happen instead of trying to plan for “composing time.”

“Sweet as Any Bird,” specifically, taught me that the smallest changes can make the largest difference in a composition. When I took the first draft of the finished movement to Dr. Trawick, I was uninspired by what I had and felt that it did not have the personality the other movements possessed. We discussed how to improve it by adding more harmonic interest and rhythmic movement in the piano, but I was not happy with the state of the piece. The next week, as I was trying to improve the piece by changing small details, I decided to change the entire mood of the piano line in the third section. This was a good decision as it somehow made the entire piece lock together. This decision also led me down another creative path: using the piano motive from “Cedar Waxwings” to end the set of pieces. This single change of making the piano line more dense and harmonically interesting made the difference in connecting this piece to the previous three, thereby connecting the set musically and thematically.

Beyond exploring genres uncommon to children’s literature, I also wanted to use my compositional and arranging knowledge to make a set that was thematically unified. Knowing the importance of birds to the theme and to my grandmother, I decided to make specific, recurring motives that appeared throughout my pieces based on birdsong. The process began
with some basic research on birdsong, during which I listened to and analyzed the sounds we hear and associate with certain birds and identified the difference between birdsong and bird calls (Mosco, 2017). A problem I immediately found, however, was that many bird calls do not transfer well to our own music. Birdcall is inherently non-melodic in the sense that it does not sound as though it has a tonal center, meaning specific melodies could not be taken from the audio recordings I referenced. Instead, I took relative intervals and applied them to my compositions. In order to further address this challenge, I also turned to other defining characteristics of the birds and to the rhythms of the birdsong.

In “Blue Heron,” for instance, the call of the title bird was too quiet and without pitch to be put into song (Weiland, n.d.). The bird’s call did not match the jazzy mood of the composition. I turned, then, to the defining physical characteristic of the bird. The long neck of the blue heron, which can extend and retract, greatly changes the height of the large bird. This was the characteristic that became the central motive of “Blue Heron.” Mainly in the left hand of the piano, I used large intervals and leaps to symbolize the extension and retraction of the bird’s neck (Example 1). This motive lasts throughout the entire piece and aids in creating the jazzy mood through short, dry articulations not usually found in elementary choral repertoire. In this piece, the short notes in the piano contrasted with the next movement while also supporting the jazzy, articulate style. In the end, I felt as though this movement was extremely successful at bridging the two goals of incorporating the title bird and the specific genre into a single, unified unit.
Example 1. “Blue Heron” motive, m. 5.

The same problem of transferring birdecall to music also persisted into “Hummingbirds.” Though there are many types of hummingbirds, their calls tend to be very quick and rhythmic with little pitch (Weiland, n.d.). As a result, I again turned to more of a visual component to create an appropriate motive. Hummingbirds are known for the extreme speed at which they flap their wings, which creates a humming sound audible to the human ear that gives them their name. From this, I took two ideas that were present throughout the piece. The first motive was to have the vocal parts hum parts of the first melody as a type of special sonority (Ostrander & Wilson, 1986). This was done to emulate the humming of the wings. The second motive is a brief but persistent piano figuration (Example 2). Seen occasionally in the right hand, the quick rhythmic motive of the sixteenth notes was created as a musical analogue to the quick flapping of

Example 2. “Hummingbirds” motive, m. 5.
the hummingbird’s wings. The combination, then, of the humming and the piano motive created the full image of the hummingbird for the listener.

When listening to the call of the cedar waxwing, I was struck by the birds’ consistency in singing the same note over again. As in many other bird calls, the rhythms were very quick and pointed, but the cedar waxwing was unlike other birds in that its calls had a tonal center (Weiland, n.d.). The motive that recurred throughout “Cedar Waxwings” was therefore tonally stable in order to emulate the bird call. To create the same tonal consistency as the bird call, I used a quick rhythmic pattern in the right hand of the piano that started and ended on G (Example 3). Even when I developed the motive in mm. 21-26, it always had a note that it “returned” to in imitation of the cedar waxwing call. Some problems arose, however, in that it became difficult to create harmonic interest in the composition when I was forced to always return to the same note. As a result, this movement sounds somewhat modal because of the strong pull to tonic and dominant harmonies. This actually aided the “medieval” and open harmonies that characterized the piece’s mood. In the end, I was pleased with the motive in this movement because I felt it fittingly represented the call of the title bird and also made sense to the rest of the work.

Example 3. “Cedar Waxwings” motive, m. 20.
Finally, “Sweet as Any Bird” proved to be a compositional challenge. I initially expected this piece to be easier because it featured different birds in the poem, including the goldfinch and grackle, but I was challenged by the fact that adding so many different motives made the piece seem clutched. After struggling with this movement for two or three weeks, the creative process suddenly clicked and I realized I wanted to revisit each of the bird motives of the first three movements, as well as to introduce as many hidden bird calls as possible. The flute, then, was an addition made specifically for the purpose of providing the birdlike sounds and being free to play melodies and figures reminiscent of birdcalls. In the end, I managed to include the heron motive (mm. 66-67), the hummingbird motive (m. 49), and the cedar waxwing motive (m. 41) as well as to add in new birdcalls including the cuckoo (mm. 69-70), the cardinal (m. 65), the oriole (m. 66), and flute sounds reminiscent of the “twittering” of birds (mm. 67, 71). I finished this movement with the success of achieving my goals of turning birdsong into music, exploring genres otherwise unusual for elementary chorus, and paying homage to my grandmother’s poetry through my music.

Overall, I feel that this project served as a synthesis of the learning I have done and is something I am passionate about and can use in both my student teaching and future career. I was challenged throughout by many factors, including pushing my creative skills, analyzing poetry and music, and considering how my compositional decisions would affect the way the pieces would pedagogically be approached if taught to an ensemble of young singers. This project is something I can use in my own career, but also something that impacted my personal life by giving me a greater connection to my grandmother and her poetry. This project was appropriate for what I have learned both musically and educationally about how to teach young students in a choral setting, address musical ability, and teach new concepts. The challenge of
this thesis caused me to grow and learn skills that will benefit me throughout my life and professional career.
Sweet As Any Bird

A collection of four pieces

Emily Arndt
Text by Linda Marshall

For SA chorus, piano, and flute
A blue heron
stands tall on a spit of sand
at the creek's edge,
facing west into the sun
of a September afternoon.

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Hummingbirds return,
their feathers drenched
with spring rain.

Heavy spring rains:
Pools everywhere
where none were yesterday.

After spring rains,
the lilacs are beaded
with shining drops.

---

Through the window
the cedar trees
were simply filled
with cedar waxwings,
birds I'd never seen
except in bird books.

Bits of orange and yellow
and crests upon their heads

A delight

---

Spring morning--
goldfinch at the feeder
perches a moment.

Concert in spring--
song of the violin
sweet as any bird.

A grackle
plays tug of war,
the rope a worm.
Blue Heron

Linda Marshall

Emily Arndt

I

Pno.

Unison

mf

A blue her-on stands

Pno.

I

tall on a spit of sand

Pno.
A blue heron stands at the creek's edge.

Facing west into the sun.

to the sun.
A blue heron stands on a September afternoon.
noon. September afternoon.

noon. September afternoon.

Pno. 46

Pno. 50
Hummingbirds

I

Unison

After spring rains

hummingbirds return.

Pno.
After spring rains

Humming birds return,

Feathers drenched

Hummingbirds return,

A tempo

Rit.

A tempo

Gain.

Hm.

Rit.

Hm.

A tempo
Cedar Waxwings

Through the window the cedar trees were simply filled with cedar waxwings,

birds I'd never seen except in my bird books.

Piano

I

II

Pno.
Bits of orange and yellow and crests upon their heads.

Birds I'd never seen except in my bird books.

rit.

Books.
fore!

fore!

ff
Sweet As Any Bird

Linda Marshall

Emily Arndt

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Fl.

Solo Voice

Pno.

Spring morning

Goldfinch

there.

Goldfinch perches moments there.
Fl.

I

II

Pno.

Tutti

Spring morning gold-finch at the feeder, Gold-finch

Spring morning gold-finch at the feeder, Gold-finch

Gold-finch perches a moment there.

Gold-finch perches moments there.

Gold-finch perches there, perches moments there.
Fl. I II Pno.

Fl. I II Pno.

Fl. I II Pno.

Fl. I II Pno.

Fl. I II Pno.

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

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Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A

Lightly A
grackle plays tug of war.
The rope a worm.

grackle tug of war.
The rope a worm.

Sweet as any spring, song of the violin. Sweet as any spring, song of the violin. Sweet as any spring, song of the violin. Sweet as any spring, song of the violin. Sweet as any spring, song of the violin. Sweet as any spring, song of the violin. Sweet as any spring, song of the violin. Sweet as any spring, song of the violin. Sweet as any spring, song of the violin. Sweet as any spring, song of the violin. Sweet as any spring, song of the violin. Sweet as any spring, song of the violin. Sweet as any spring, song of the violin. Sweet as any spring, song of the violin. Sweet as any spring, song of the violin. Sweet as any spring, song of the violin. Sweet as any spring, song of the violin. Sweet as any spring, song of the violin.
Sweet as any bird. Song as sweet as any bird!

Sweet as any bird. Song as sweet as any bird!

Sweet as any bird! Song as sweet as any bird!

Sweet as any bird! Song as sweet as any bird!
Bird song!

Bird song!
References


