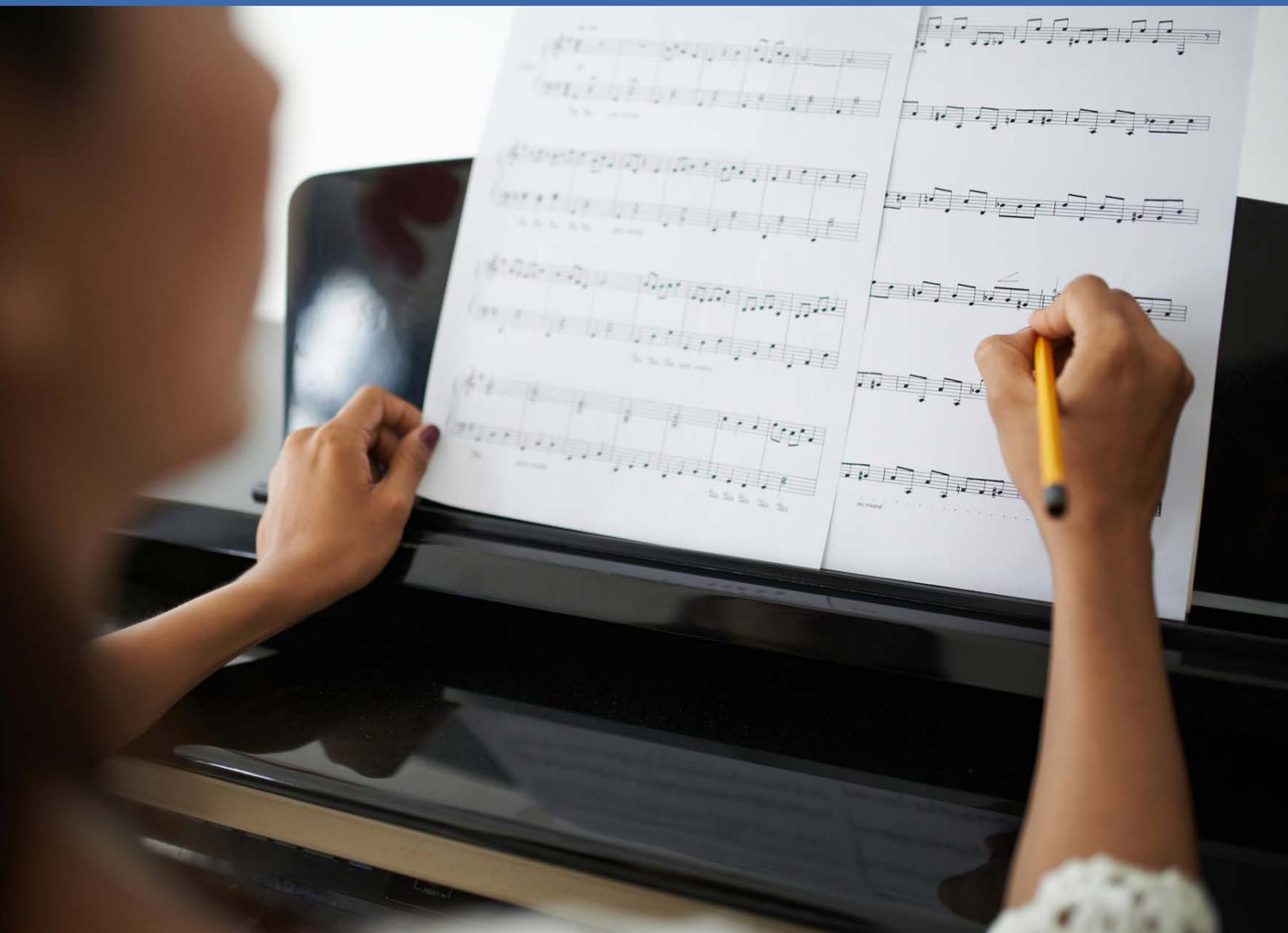


# HOW TO Compose a Piece FOR YOUR *Choir* Tour



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# INTRODUCTION

Looking for something extra special for your touring ensemble to sing? What could be better than a world-premiere?

Our step-by-step guide will help you and your singers create a truly unique, signature work that can showcase your ensemble and its special talents. Whether you decide to focus on where you are from, where you are going, or any other destination of the imagination, singers who compose for their own ensemble will develop a wide range of musicianship skills that will boost their performance and captivate audiences at every stop.

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## AUTHOR BIO



Dr. Michele Kaschub is Professor of Music and Coordinator of Music Teacher Education at the University of Southern Maine. Her passion for composition began with the creation of an original work by the students of her first high school chorus and has grown to include numerous books, book chapters and articles about composition pedagogy. In constant demand as a clinician, she has appeared at numerous conferences throughout the United States and abroad.

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# IDENTIFY YOUR COMPOSITION PROJECT PARAMETERS

## KEY QUESTION 1: WHAT IS IT THAT YOU WANT YOUR CHOIR TO EXPERIENCE?

As with all educational planning, the first step is identifying what you hope your singers will experience and learn as members of the chorus. Make a list of 3-5 things that you would like to prioritize in this experience. These may include musical concepts, vocal skills, interpretive skills, historical or cultural aspects of music literacy, notational literacy, interpersonal skills or other things relevant to your curriculum. Invite students to do the same. Collaborate with students to identify where commonalities exist and finalize learning goals.

## KEY QUESTION 2: WHEN WILL THE PIECE BE PREMIERED?

The calendar plays a big role in creating a timeline for the creation of an original work. Composers throughout history have worked to meet deadlines. Examine your calendar from the first day of classes to the beginning of your tour. The steps of creating an original work will need to fit within this time frame. An ideal schedule for a year-long project is shown on the calendar below. Composition projects can come together more quickly if more time is allotted to the project.

PROJECT CALENDAR						
September	October	November/ December	January	February/ March	April/ May	May/ June
Introduce project, define goals, listen and identify musical ideas	Create a shared product vision with a music storyboard	Compose the music	Edit and refine the score, begin rehearsals	Continue rehearsal and transition to student-conductor, create press release, write program notes	Dress rehearsal, practice student introductions to the audience, premieres and other tour performances	Reflections

## KEY QUESTION 3: HOW MUCH INSTRUCTIONAL TIME CAN BE DEVOTED TO THIS PROJECT?

The amount of rehearsal time dedicated to the composition project depends largely on the pre-existing skills of your singers. Students who are new to composition will need to participate in a few lessons where the teacher facilitates steps in the music creation process. They will also need to do most of their composing in class where they can ask questions and access teacher guidance. Students with some experience in composition may need a quick mini-lesson to outline a plan and get started, but are likely to be able to work in small groups and individually outside of class. More experienced students may be able to complete a lot of generative work outside of class so that rehearsal time is spent testing, organizing and refining ideas that are mostly complete.

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# COMPOSITION STEP 1: INVITE MUSICAL IMAGINATION

## START LISTENING

Start listening to lots of music. Students need to become acutely aware of how choral composers frame and shape musical ideas. Invite students to share music that they love. Encourage them to identify what attracts them to particular sounds and musical ideas within these pieces. Round out student selections with pieces that they may not yet know.

## CREATE ANCHOR CHARTS

Anchor charts are posters (physically hung on your classroom walls or posted on a class website) where students create lists of interesting sounding words that might become part of the songs lyrics, descriptive words that capture the feeling of the songs they like or want to create, or musical ideas (drawn, written descriptions or notated) that might become part of their piece. The anchor charts then become resources when the creation of the new work begins.

## IMAGINE THE FINAL PIECE

Once students have begun to listen and collect their ideas, spend 10-15 minutes brainstorming about the piece. Invite the students to close their eyes, imagine their choir on stage with an audience seated before them. What are they singing? What does it sound like? How is the audience reacting? Gather their descriptions. This exercise often reveals the nature of the piece the group wishes to create. Note any clear preferences, like genre and style, which seem important to the students.

### Sample Anchor Chart: Techniques for Creating Unity and Variety

UNITY	VARIETY
Repeat a melodic idea	Using a different voice/range
Create a bass ostinato/chant pattern	Build sound layers one at a time: B sings 4 measures, repeats and T joins on own idea, etc adding A and S
Repeat text	Maintain melody, but alter text
Use only one key	Travel to related key
Continue to add more descriptors as students observe/discover them	

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# COMPOSITION STEP 2: LYRICS

Group composition is easiest when there is a single focal point that all composers can refer to as they work. Lyrics serve this purpose in choral composing by providing a framework that both shapes and is shaped by the music that students will compose.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD LYRICS

The most important characteristic of potential lyrics is the ability to prompt the musical imagination. Lyrics need to want to be sung. This often means that the lyrics are simple and open to further elaboration. Poems that tell a story, contain some repetition or have some other unifying textual idea, are also good candidates for song composition.

## STUDY MODELS OF TEXTS SET TO MUSIC

To learn more about the characteristics of good lyrics, have students examine the lyrics from music already in their choral folders. How do the texts come to have meaning? How did the composer partner musical sounds with the words of the poet? What are the characteristics of the lyrics that are found to be most appealing? The time spent on this activity not only informs the compositional work ahead, but also contributes to the choir's shared understanding and interpretation of other works being prepared for performance.

## FIND YOUR LYRICS

The lyrics for your ensemble's composition can come from any number of sources.

**Feature a foreign language.** If your tour plans include international travel, consider looking for lyrics in the language of your destination. Poems that tell an important story, describe a local point of interest or feature some other aspect of your destination's cultural history or identity will allow your students to gain some first-hand knowledge of their destination before the journey begins.

**Have a contest.** Initiate a lyric writing contest and invite students to submit original poems. Ask your colleagues from English Language Arts/Foreign Languages to select the top five poems. Remove author names from the submissions and review each one with the choir. Discuss the musical potentials of each candidate and then hold a vote to pick the text that students find most inspiring.

**Write together.** Engage the full ensemble in the creation of lyrics. Brainstorm to identify a topic. Have every student write one line about the topic. Collect all the lines, remove author names and distribute in one document to the ensemble. Experiment with the use of different lines and different orders, testing and editing, until a poem emerges. Conversely, you may ask for a small group of volunteers to rework the collected lines into lyrics.

**Use existing lyrics.** Poems and other texts that exist in public domain are readily accessible and free for your use. Permission must be gained from the publisher/author of materials under copyright. Fees vary but are often nominal.

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# COMPOSITION STEP 3: STORYBOARD THE MUSIC

Establishing a shared “big picture” vision of the composition helps all members of the ensemble understand the scope of the project. Storyboards, similar to those used for planning a movie, are a very efficient tool for documenting thoughts about form, character and specific musical ideas.

Storyboards for choral music are graphic pre-notational scores in which lyrics provide the general form. Begin by creating a “frame” like the one shown below for each line of the song. Enter a single line of lyrics.

<b>S:</b>		
<b>A:</b>		
<b>T:</b>		
<b>B:</b> Lyrics		
<b>FI:</b>	<b>ME:</b>	<b>AC:</b>

Invite singers to consider the general emotion or character to be conveyed with this line. What do they want to evoke in those who listen to this piece? Their answers constitute the compositional capacity of “Feelingful Intention.” Enter words that describe the mood in the “FI” portion of the storyboard.

Next, consider the musical function of this line. Does it invite the listener to feel more motion or stasis? Does it create unity or variety within the overall work? Who is making sound and who is silent (voicing) and what is the quality of the sound being made (timbre, dynamic, articulation)? Does the line contribute to developing tension or does it offer release? And finally, is this line creating a sense of stability or instability? These five pairs (Motion-Stasis, Unity-Variety, Sound-Silence, Tension-Release or Stability-Instability) constitute the compositional capacity of “Musical Expressivity.” Add these to the “ME” box of the storyboard.

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## STEP 3 (CONT'D):

With Feelingful Intention and the parameters of Musical Expressivity imagined, consider what tools and techniques of Artistic Craftsmanship, the third compositional capacity, will be used. Will a solo voice, single voice part, the full chorus or some other configuration of voices deliver this line of text? What texture will be used? Will there be block chord “oos and ahhs,” a unifying ostinato, a duet or a descant? Note these in the “AC” box.

Repeat until the full song appears in storyboard. Display where all singer-composers can reference as necessary as they work on the project.

Note: For more information on musical and compositional capacities, see Kaschub, M. & Smith, J. P. (2016). The Big Picture: Developing Musical Capacities. *Music Educators Journal*, 102(3), 33-40.



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# COMPOSITION STEP 4: CRAFT THE COMPOSITION

## SAVE EVERYTHING

Good ideas are everywhere, but great ideas are slippery and disappear in a flash! Before your singer-composers utter even the first note of music, have a plan for preserving all aspects of project work. Audio recordings are unobtrusive to make, take up little storage space and work can be recorded on any smart device or tablet and sent to a web-based project folder. Record everything – all ideas, every idea that is sung to test its usefulness and fit, all discussion - all of it! As soon as someone forgets to turn on the recording device, the best idea in the world will escape. Notations can also be very helpful. Some students may verbally note musical details or draw pictures that represent their musical thinking while others may be skilled at traditional notation. Regardless of notational system, make notes to boost memory and preserve ideas as the project unfolds.

## PICK A STARTING POINT

It is tempting to approach composition in a linear fashion, working from start to finish until the piece is complete. However, this is not always the most efficient way to approach composition. Consider the formal organization of the work that has emerged from storyboarding. Are there sections that repeat? If the song has a verse/refrain organization, consider starting with one or the other. Once one section is composed, it can be copied to its other locations. This will help the project gain a sense of momentum. Another motivating activity is to work on the passage in the piece that is the most exciting or intense. Students will have lot of ideas about how this should sound and will invest deeply in making it “just right.”

## SING THE MELODY INTO EXISTENCE

The voice is the perfect tool for composing meaningful, expressive melodies because it is rooted in the body and it feels the music. Regardless of where you start, begin with creation of the melody.

- Invite every singer to invent a melody for a single line of the lyric
- Ask for volunteers to share their ideas
- Have the choir echo sing every idea that is shared
- Once four or five ideas seem to be strongly liked by the choir, review each idea – naming them A, B, C, etc., so that they are not tied to a particular ensemble member
- Vote to select the one that seems to be most captivating
- Remind students that composers tend to invent and discard more ideas than they can use
- Save all shared ideas for possible future use so that every student feels that his or her individual contribution, chosen or not, is of value

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# STEP 4 (CONT'D):

## ADD MORE VOICES

It is tempting for the music educator, trained in music theory, to worry about chord progressions once the melody is present. Refrain from acting on this thought! Instead, invite a particularly expressive singer to perform one line of the melody and to sing it while being mindful of the Feelingful Intention identified for this passage of the song. Have the full choir echo sing this interpretation. Have the lead singer repeat the passage several times while all other singers experiment with joining in. Does the melody invite an answer, the matching of voices, a partnership or commentary? Listen for particularly expressive ideas. Invite the second voice to join the lead singer in modeling the idea for the choir. Repeat with a few more singers. Again, vote to select the best sounding match. Repeat to add other parts. Try as many ideas as time allows. Test, retest, tweak and repeat until the phrase feels right and sings naturally.



## ALL TOGETHER - THEN DIVIDE & CONQUER

Once the full ensemble has worked through a phrase or two of the song and understands the compositional process, it may be possible to distribute remaining phrases to small groups for initial drafting. Divide the choir into groups of 4 to 8 singers so that each vocal part is covered. Once all groups have drafted their individual sections, stage a mini run-through to test what is being created. Line groups up in lyric order and have each composition team sing their section. Discuss what is working and what can be adjusted to improve flow. Give students time to revise. Some groups may need to work together in order to “bridge” musical ideas from phrase to phrase. Depending on the nature of the work, this process may take some time. Balance small group work with large group discussion of how each idea is working within the context of the whole.

## ABOUT ACCOMPANIMENT

Accompaniments are always tricky in choral writing. If the choir decides to add a piano to their song, you may be able to group a few student pianists together to draft accompaniment ideas. This will also work if the choir decides to add guitar, string quartet, solo flute or kazoo! When possible, invite students to contribute the full breadth of their musical expertise. If there are no students with the skills required to compose an accompaniment, you may encourage a cappella singing, write the part(s) yourself or invite your ensemble’s accompanist to join in the fun.

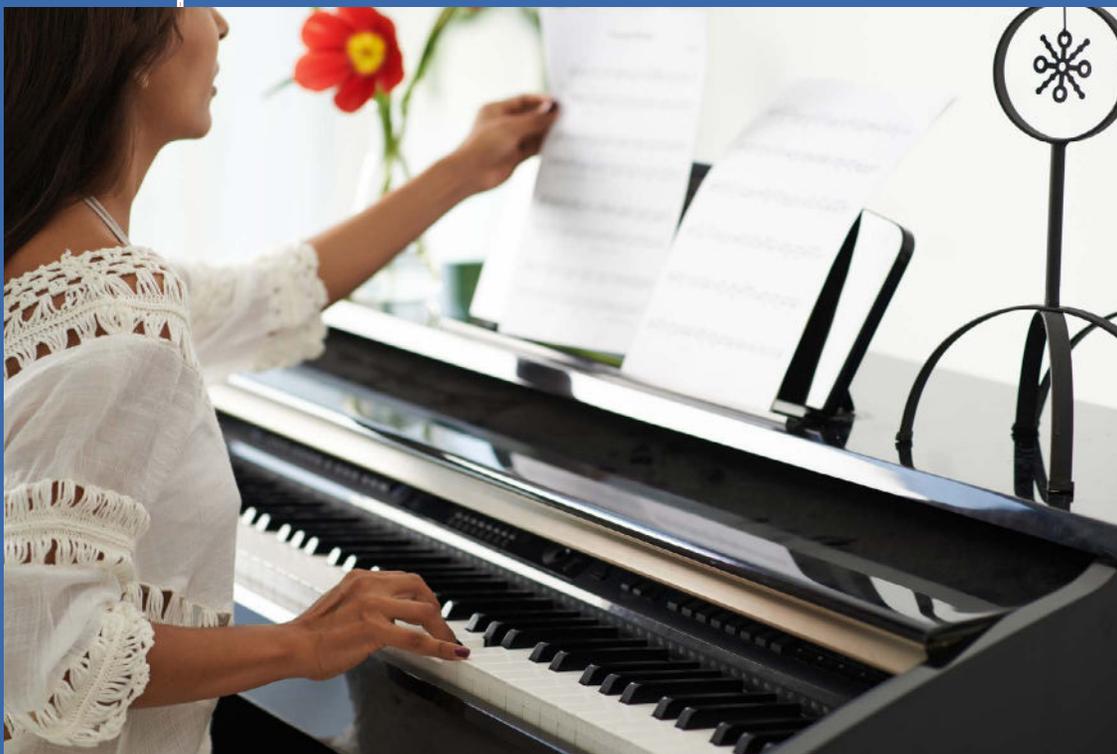
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# COMPOSITION STEP 5: FINALIZE THE SCORE

The score is a work in progress throughout the composition process. It will emerge in single measures and phrases as ideas begin to solidify. The following practices may be helpful in creating the final score:

- Make a recording of each phrase as it is completed. Distribute this to students so that they can see the sounds they are singing.
- If students are just learning to use traditional notation (remember that reading notation and notating what you have heard are two distinct skills), the teacher may need to transcribe recordings.
- Encourage students with established notational skills to notate what they are singing and to help students with less developed skills sketch their vocal lines. Even a rough drawing of up and down in dots and dashes that represent duration will advance the work of a transcriber.
- Students who are familiar with notational software or apps can further their aural skills by transcribing recordings.
- Distribute a draft of the score to the full ensemble and sing through it. Appoint 2-3 scribes to make notes on their copies of the score as the choir reviews and discusses score instructions such as dynamic markings, breath marks, articulations and so forth. The scribes' scores should then be used to guide final revisions to the score before it is printed and distributed for rehearsal.



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# BRING THE MUSIC TO LIFE

The long-range rehearsal plan for this new work is very similar to the plan made for any piece in the choristers' folders, with one very important caveat: minor adjustments will continue to emerge even though the score is now seemingly complete. This is the exciting reality of working with living composers. Your students' musical ears will continue to grow and evolve as they come to know the piece from the perspective of



performers. Similarly, their compositional insights will inform their interpretation. Embrace refinements, listen to their interpretative wishes, but discourage major re-writes.

If you have an assistant conductor in the choir, this is the time to let him or her take the reins with your careful guidance. A student-composed work performed by students and under the baton of a student-conductor is going to have high-impact value. Take a deep breath and find a seat with a good view. You will never have a better experience as a member of an audience.

In preparation for the performance, build public awareness. Invite students to write a few sentences about their experiences as composers. Write a press release that describes your upcoming tour, explains this special project that the ensemble has undertaken and include a few of the student quotes. Distribute the press release to the school newspaper, local papers and public radio via the ensemble's webpage and other social media sites.

The concert program should also contain program notes about the piece and process that was undertaken to create it. Share several models of program notes with students and have every student write a short paragraph, just 6-8 sentences, summarizing the work in a way that might offer the audience some unique insight. Select the most well-written program note for use in the program or consider using excerpts from several strong examples to create one "master note." Better yet, print and display each student's writing to document what has been learned throughout the process.

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# PUBLICICIZING THE PREMIERE

Once your premiere is scheduled, getting an audience is the next essential step.

Here are some proven strategies for obtaining an audience:

- Talk to your tour company to discuss ways in which they plan to promote the performance for you
- If possible, try to book your performance in a place frequented by locals/tourists or following an already existing performance (such as a follow-up to a church service)
- If possible, try to include a local group as an opening act and publicize this group to the locals
- Promote the newly composed piece as a "world-premiere"
- Ask a local state/city representative or even a local celebrity to be in attendance and advertise this on your promotions
- Design posters that highlight your piece and ensemble and ask your tour company to help distribute
- Contact the performance venue to see if they offer any promotions for the concert and send them any necessary publicity materials
- Offer a free reception post-concert to meet your audience and advertise this!
- Send a press release of the performance to local media outlets
- Set up a Facebook event and invite people in the area
- If budget allows, set up a "boosted" post on Facebook advertising the concert to a targeted list of music lovers near your performance venue
- On your Twitter account, try to promote the concert on local music/concert discussions. You may wish to do paid advertising targeting the local music lovers
- Look into local concert and event calendars near your venue and post to these channels
- If possible, keep your concert free or use ticket sales as a donation to your favorite charity - publicize this!
- Ask friends, family and colleagues to help promote the concert



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# THE PERFORMANCE

Highlight the special nature of the project. Large group collaborative composition is rare. Take time to inform the audience about the educational and musical opportunities that the students have had in creating a work that is uniquely their own.

Engage the audience as participant listeners. While you and your singers know this piece inside out, the audience is just hearing it for the first time. Knowing what to expect and what to listen for can help an audience connect with your piece and make the performance experience for your singers even more enjoyable.



Have one or more students share a few details about the piece. What might the audience listen for? Is there a recurring theme? A funny story about how the bass line came about? An explanation for the choreography in the middle of the work? Details that help frame the upcoming experience will allow your audience to become more deeply engaged with the music your ensemble has created.

Enjoy the applause! Audiences – particularly those filled with parents, grandparents, siblings and art supporters – tend to go wild when students perform music that they have composed themselves. Expect a lengthy bout of appreciation.

# AFTER THE AFTERGLOW

With successful performances now part of the history of the ensemble and the tour, take a few minutes to engage in some post-performance reflection with the singers. Listening as an audience and listening as a performer involve very different types of attention. Listen to a recording of one or more your performances and discuss it with the students.

- Did the performance(s) go as planned?
- How did the audience(s) react?
- What worked well in the piece?
- Did the performance of the piece change as the group gained experience singing the piece in multiple concerts? How?
- What did you learn as you participated in the composition project?
- If you were going to undertake another composition project, what might you do differently? Why?
- And other questions that reflect the unique nature of your work with students and their experiences as composers and performers of this piece.

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# IMAGINE TAKING YOUR CHOIR TO *New Places*



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