

SWCS Carol Competition 2020

Composing your Carol – brief guidance

Your carol will have new music which you have composed.

Junior composers will write their own words.

Senior composers and mixed-age pairs can choose whether to write the words or use some existing words.

If you write your own words...

you can do this at different stages :

- **before** composing the music
 - **at the same time** as composing the music
 - or **after** composing the music – fitting them to the tune you've already made up.
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- When making up words for a new carol, try to find an original 'angle'. It can be about the Christmas story, or about Christmas celebrations, but think carefully before you combine the two e.g. it is not a good idea to include Father Christmas along with the baby Jesus!
 - If you make up your own words, use the language you speak most
 - Carols often have a refrain or chorus – which could be several lines of verse or just one line which comes back each verse.
 - You will probably need at least two verses – maybe three.
 - The lines of the verse or chorus don't all have to be the same length – it can work well to mix longer and shorter lines. The chorus can have a different rhythm. In fact a contrasting chorus can pave the way for musical contrast between verse and chorus. which will work well
 - Your first verse and first chorus will be the pattern for all the verses so be careful to keep the pattern of line lengths, metre and rhythm the same across all the verses – so they will all fit the same tunes as verse 1 and chorus 1.
 - Some songs might have another contrasting section when that verse pattern might change before returning later. You might decide to do this – but most existing carols stick to a verse and chorus structure.

Seniors - If you decide to set existing words to music ...

- If you don't want to write your own words, you can choose the words to an existing carol or poem and set these to music.
- It is important to make sure they are *out of copyright*. Generally this means they were written by someone who died 70 years or more ago (1950 or before).

- If they've been translated – that copyright rule applies to the translator as well.
- If the writer is still alive or died after 1950 you will need written permission from the copyright holder before you set it to music. Send this evidence to us with your entry.

Atmosphere and character

Whether they're your own words or not, aim for words with a recognisable atmosphere and character, which you can reflect in your music.

Learn the words by heart

If words come before music (as they often do for many song-writers) it can be good to learn the words completely by heart first. This can let your mind work on the words even when you're not aware of it! It means you can really think about the rhythm of the words and how you want to turn them into music.

Play around with the word rhythms

- Notice which syllables in your words need to come on accents/strong beats in the bar. In English poetry and language, sentences and lines often begin on unstressed words – the first accent often comes on the second syllable. Make sure your tune takes account of those natural word rhythms.
- Try speaking your words against a steady beat (in your head or out loud).
- You might decide to stretch out some important words with a long note over several beats.
- Or you might want to find a particular interesting rhythm for a word or phrase – which could suggest the rhythmic character for your whole carol.

Words into Music

- Then you can turn your speaking of the poem into a tune – this is best done by singing and experimenting with your voice.
- If you use an instrument to help you make up your new tune, keep checking with your voice to make sure the tune is still good to sing.
- Good tunes often have a high point – which generally fits with an important word. It can work well to arrive at this point in the second half of a tune rather than too near the beginning. The third quarter is a good place for this high point.

Write down your music as far as possible – in music notation if you can, or perhaps just letter names. We will look at this in conjunction with your recording.

Beware computer notation software

– especially while you're actually composing the music.
Unless you're experienced at using it, this is unlikely to help you, and may actually hinder your composing. Once you have already made up the music it can be a useful way to write it down – but only for students who already read music.

Keep track of any help you receive

If you need help to write down the music you have made up – you need to tell us exactly what the help was and who it came from.

Make a recording of you singing your carol

- 1) If your carol is a tune you can either submit a recording of unaccompanied singing or singing with additional accompaniment.
- 2) If it's a piece for larger forces e.g. mixed choir – we realise this may be difficult at the moment. Record some of it if you are able.

More detailed guidance is also on the SWCS website for those who want it. This may give you some more ideas about how to work. It includes the ranges of Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass parts for those students wanting to write for a mixed voice choir.

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