

# Composing a Carol – detailed guidance

There are many different ways of working, but if you're not sure how to begin, here are some ideas to get you started.

## Method 1 - Start with the words

If you're writing your own words, think of a Christmas subject or angle - ideally one you can say something new about! It could be about the Christmas story, or about Christmas celebrations, but think carefully before you combine the two. It is not a good idea to include Father Christmas along with the baby Jesus!

Aim to write verses and a chorus. Not all carols have a verse and chorus but this form will help you to introduce musical contrast. The chorus might have much simpler words, maybe with some repetition.

Write a verse that 'scans' but your verse doesn't need to be completely regular. Sometimes it works to introduce repeated lines or varied line lengths.

Aim to write at least one verse of words and have an idea for the chorus before you start working on the music. When you have added music to these you will be able to write additional verses which fit to the same tune.

## Finding a tune for your words

Speak or chant the words over and over - trying them out with different rhythms and beats.

### Try these ideas:

- Chant them to a steady pulse - try this faster and slower. At this stage it will be a bit like rapping. If you are composing as a pair you could take it in turns to beat out different pulses and chant the words.
- For the beat use two different sounds (e.g. clapping and clicking) - one for the strong (first) beat and another for the others - e.g. **oom** cha cha, **oom** cha cha, **clap** click click, **clap** click click etc
- For the chanting - aim to keep to the natural stress of the words. Be aware that phrases, lines of poems, sentences etc. do not have to begin *on* the beat. They often begin just *before* it.
- If you're composing on your own, try chanting or whispering your words while keeping the beat going.
- Try chanting against a metre of
  - 2 (tap click tap click tap click etc)
  - 3 (tap click click, tap click click) and
  - 4 (tap click click click, tap click,click click tap click click click.)

How different do the words feel against different metres? Don't decide straight away which you prefer - just explore all the options.

## Ways to make your rhythm interesting and suitable for the words:

- You might introduce a long note on one of the words or syllables - perhaps at the most important word. Try extending it over several beats. Later you will need to make sure there's an important word at that point in each verse.
- If it suits the mood of your words you could add some syncopation (*jazzy rhythms which stress the off-beat*).
- You can repeat lines or phrases, words or even syllables if necessary to make a satisfying rhythmical shape.
- Think about whether a bouncy, uneven rhythm or a smooth one works best with your words.

## What next?

At this point, don't worry too much about how to write your music down - concentrate mostly on what it sounds like.

When you're happy with one of your chanted versions keep repeating it and introduce more pitch into your chanting until you are singing. Experiment with different tunes.

You may prefer to use an instrument to help you find a good tune for the words.

## Remembering your music between composing sessions

It can be useful to write down what you've made up so you can pick up with the composing when you come back to it. You could use

- note names written against the syllables of the words
- music notation if you are familiar with it

or ask a music teacher to help you with notation, or even make a recording.

Computers can be helpful if you understand notation already, but are not recommended if you don't and have no expert help on hand.

## Method 2 - Start with the tune

Some songwriters make up a tune first. Here are some common shapes of tunes – with each letter representing a musical phrase - so this shows some patterns of repeated phrases and new phrases:

AABA ABAB ABAC ABCA

When you add words to an existing tune you will need to think very hard about the emphasis of the tune and what words will fit it. Make sure your important words come on important notes - e.g. longer notes, higher notes, notes where the phrase 'arrives', notes on a strong beat, or (if the tune is jazzy) notes on an accented off-beat.

Don't just stick with your first thoughts; keep working away at the words until you are happy that the words and tune are a perfect fit. Change the tune if you need to

## Advice for all

Your carol will be more original if you try to avoid really common Christmas rhymes - the ones that appear in well-known carols.

Make your verse and your chorus contrast in some way:

Think about:

- Contrasting moods
- High/Low
- Major key/Minor key
- Smooth/Separated
- Long notes/Short notes
- Loud/Quiet
- Tune moving by step/tune leaping
- Changing metre (e.g. 2 in a bar to 3 in a bar, or compound time to simple time or vice versa)

*(Compound time has a skipping/galloping rhythm, simple time has a walking/running rhythm)*

Do try to sing your carol on your recording - either on your own or with a friend. This does not need to be accompanied - especially at junior level.

In the senior category you will be adding accompaniment or harmony to your tune – record this as well if you're able to.

## Common Problems

### Beware Computers

Using a computer notation package if you don't understand music notation, and have no expert help is very unwise. You can easily end up with an unmusical result. Even if you do understand notation we would advise you not to do the actual composing with the computer. Make up the music first with your voice or maybe a recorder, glockenspiel or piano etc.

### Downbeat or upbeat to start?

Deciding whether your tune begins on the first beat of the bar or just before it is important. (This is one of the many questions a computer cannot answer for itself.) Many tunes begin near the end of a bar, and the silent beats beforehand don't need to be written down. If your first strong syllable isn't at the very beginning make sure it comes after a barline.

### A tune that goes round and round

Some tunes seem to be stuck - circulating round and round the same few notes and never really going anywhere. A good tune generally goes somewhere - and comes back again. In a four-line verse the climax (arrival point) often comes in line 3. Try moving the music higher at that point and coming back down again in line 4.

### Not enough repetition or too much repetition

If every line of the verse has a new tune it may not hang together.

If every line of the verse is the same the tune will be boring.

Good tunes have a balance of repetition and change.

### Things to add if you're feeling ambitious

A harmony part - either above or below the tune (a descant for the last verse may work well.)

An accompaniment - perhaps an ostinato (*a repeating pattern*) or some guitar chords

An introduction - music that sets the scene and leads into the beginning of the sung part

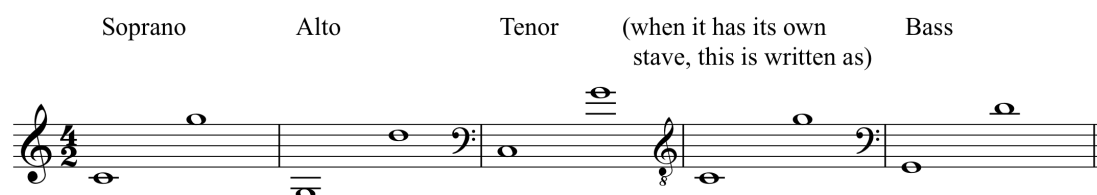
A coda or ending - if you have lots of verses or choruses it is good to mark out the ending of the last one - to make it sound more finished.

You could:

- change the melody e.g. go up rather than down at the very end
- repeat the penultimate line, or the last line.
- stretch out the very last line of words - e.g. use much longer notes

The choral society is a choir generally singing in four voices (Soprano Alto Tenor and Bass). You could have a go at writing some or all of your carol for this combination.

### Approximate ranges of choral parts



Also check out the SWCS website for additional brief guidance on composing a carol

**Good luck and have fun composing your carol!**

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