The Toronto Children's Chorus has consistently included Canadian music on its concert programs and recordings, giving the young choristers first-hand experience with their national cultural heritage, and introducing audiences world-wide to a variety of Canadian compositions, many of them commissioned by and for the TCC. The April 28, 2001 TCC concert in Toronto carried on this tradition, but with a unique focus.

The April 28 Voices of Women concert was devoted to music by women composers of a variety of historical periods, beginning with Hildegard von Bingen, and including an impressive number of compositions by Canadian women. The evening's program indicated that Voices of Women was designed to give "choristers and audience alike the opportunity to understand and appreciate the extraordinary contributions made by women composers since the 12th century." The idea for a celebration of the music of women composers grew out of the experience of TCC founder and director Jean Ashworth Bartle, whose students often asked her why so few of the composers they studied were women.

The Canadian music on the Voices of Women program ranged from simple but effective pieces sung by the TCC Training Choirs (e.g., "We Rise Again" arranged by Lydia Adams; "An Irish Blessing" by Eleanor Daley; and "A Great Big Sea" arranged by Lori-Anne Dolloff), to "Adventures in Color," a challenging new work by Ruth Watson Henderson for treble voices and strings, commissioned for and premiered by the senior chorus with string players from the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. Also included on the program were works by Jean Coulthard and Violet Archer, two of the pioneer Canadian women composers of the 20th century. The senior chorus performed "Pippa's Morning Song" from Three Philosophical Songs by Jean Coulthard (1908-2000). Training Choir I sang "The Cow," "How Doth the Little Crocodile," "The Yak," and "Mes Oreilles, Quelle Merveille" from Children Singing by Violet Archer (1913-2000). Nancy Telfer, another of Canada's most prolific composers of choral music for young performers, was also featured on the program ("Sing Me a Song" and "Kyrie"). Other Canadian pieces programmed were Eleanor Daley's "Ave Verum Corpus," Larysa Kuzmenko's "Stars," and Ruth Watson Henderson's "Bless the Lord, O My Soul."

It was appropriate that Ruth Watson Henderson feature prominently on the Voices of Women program, since she has had a long involvement as piano accompanist with the TCC. Her music for youth choirs grows out of 23 years of experience observing and working with TCC singers. Her new work, "Adventures in Color," based on texts from Mary O'Neill's Hailstones and Halibut Bones, was commissioned with financial assistance from the Ontario Arts Council. The composition is described in the program as a portrayal of "the personalities of different colours through the voices of the choir." Henderson herself explains that she has long been intrigued by the links between aural and visual colours, and she chose to explore these relationships in four movements, entitled "Blue," "Gold," "Red," and "White." (She has since written a fifth movement, "Orange.")
The choristers found "Adventures in Color" an interesting and exciting work. Jean Ashworth Bartle described the piece as "clever" and "beautifully crafted," and she told me that the singers were intrigued by the way the composer selected and manipulated various elements of music (e.g., keys, textures, timbres, harmonies, metres, and intervals) in conveying the impressions of colours in sound. The singers enjoyed the challenge of projecting the contrasting styles of the four movements. When asked how they felt rehearsing and performing the piece with the composer right there, one chorister admitted to me that it was "a bit nerve-wracking," but she went on to say that the singers appreciated having the composer available to explain what she intended. Another chorister said the singers were comfortable learning the new piece because they knew that Mrs. Henderson and Mrs. Bartle were used to working together. The choristers I spoke to were enthusiastic in their reactions to Henderson's new composition following the concert. "It was fun!" "What a novel idea!" "We absolutely loved the piece!"