From Page to Performance Through Pedagogy: The Choral Legacy of Nancy Telfer

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts, Music Performance

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Abstract

Nancy Telfer (b. 1950) is a celebrated Canadian composer, choral conductor, clinician, teacher, adjudicator, and author. Many of her approximately 240 works are performed internationally; some have become standard North American, European, and Asian festival and competition repertoire. Choral educators and conductors worldwide use her pedagogical materials. Telfer’s distinctive choral style, deeply rooted in her passion as a music educator, makes her works exemplary teaching and learning tools.

Much has been written about Telfer’s choral output and her music. No one, however, has yet explored connections between her pedagogical materials and her choral compositions. First, this study examines Telfer’s choral works and pedagogical materials, highlighting her inventiveness in using choral repertoire as a teaching tool for singers. Second, my research represents the first comprehensive study of Telfer’s choral legacy to encompass both her choral compositions and her choral pedagogy publications. I have worked closely with Telfer to produce an essential guide to her music, articulating appropriate performance practice of her works and illuminating the pedagogical philosophies that support her pieces.
I identified research on Telfer’s choral music and pedagogical writing, catalogued her choral compositions, and completed detailed analyses of representative works in four categories: compositions driven and/or inspired by text; pedagogically-based compositions; compositions evoking imagery; and noted concert pieces. I interviewed the composer to discuss her musical output, compositional process, and educational philosophy. I also spoke with prominent choral conductors who frequently program Telfer’s music in order to further understand the impact of her work. Ultimately, my study provides information on Telfer’s choral output, offers awareness, education, and support for the people who perform her works, bringing her music from the printed page to the performance stage with artistry and musicality.
Acknowledgments

Thank you to Nancy Telfer for her talent, time, and generosity. It has been an honour getting to know her and her music. Her passion for choral arts and music education has made this research a labour of love.

I am especially grateful to my advisor, Dr. Hilary Apfelstadt, for her help and guidance throughout the years of doctoral work and master’s studies prior to this. Her encouragement, feedback, and support is appreciated more than words can express. One cannot find a better mentor.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to choral pedagogues Susanna Saw and Zimfira Poloz for their continued encouragement of my musical and professional goals, and generosity in sharing their time and knowledge. I am fortunate to be surrounded by inspiring teachers.

Thank you to my committee members and recital jurors Dr. Lori-Anne Dolloff, Dr. Cameron Walter, Dr. Darryl Edwards, and Dr. Bina John, each of whom has been very supportive throughout the completion of my coursework, recitals, and this document.

My special thanks to Dr. Deborah Bradley for her support and advice throughout my graduate studies. I would not have been able to complete this project without her expertise in both music education and her editorial work.

I am thankful for the beautiful friendship of my doctoral choral conducting colleagues: Elaine Choi and Mark Ramsay. Their talent, determination, passion, and emotional support spurred me to complete this project. I am grateful that I was not on this adventure on my own, and that we are graduating together.

I thank the Wong and Neo families, especially my parents, Lucy Neo and Kam Hoong Wong, and godmother, Anna Neo, for their lifelong encouragement and support.

Lastly, I thank my partner, Dave Olivares, for his persistence, patience, support, and unconditional love during this process.
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Chapter 1
Introduction: Need for the Study

1.1 About the Composer

Nancy Telfer (b. 1950) is a celebrated Canadian composer, choral conductor, clinician, teacher, adjudicator, and author. Since 1979, she has written approximately 240 choral pieces, many of which are performed internationally, and some of which have become standard festival and competition repertoire throughout North America and in Asia. Choirs including the Hong Kong Treble Choir and Incheon City Chorale in South Korea have commissioned her to write challenging music for them. In addition, Nancy Telfer has published nine choral pedagogy books used by choral educators and conductors worldwide; some of these have been translated into Spanish and Korean. These books cover topics such as sight singing and musicianship development, vocal technique, and performance practice. Her distinctive choral style, deeply rooted in her passion as a music educator, makes her many works exemplary as teaching and learning tools. She writes music “that caters to accessibility of skill for all people, not just for those fortunate enough to be able to study at a good university” (Nancy Telfer, interview, March 2015).

1.2 Purpose of the Study

Much has been written in scholarly articles and dissertations about Nancy Telfer’s choral output, her music and pedagogy books as valuable resources for educators, and the artistry required for the performance of her music. No one, however, has yet made a conscious effort to identify the connections between her pedagogy books and her choral compositions. The goal of my research is to examine how Nancy Telfer’s pedagogical values allow choral conductors and educators to successfully translate her choral music from the printed page to the performance stage with artistry and musicality.
This research serves two main purposes. First, my examination of Nancy Telfer’s choral compositions and pedagogical materials provides choral conductors and educators with information about the uniqueness of her choral output by highlighting its usefulness as a teaching tool for singers. Second, my dissertation represents the first comprehensive study of her choral legacy to bring together her choral compositions and choral pedagogy. By working closely with Nancy Telfer herself, I intend to produce a body of research that preserves her voice and musical intent, articulates appropriate performance practice of her works, and highlights the pedagogical philosophies that support them. Ultimately, my study facilitates the dissemination of information on Nancy Telfer’s music, as well as offer awareness, education, and support for the people who are performing her music and utilizing her pedagogical materials.

1.3 Background of the Study

My keen interest in Nancy Telfer’s choral contributions started in 2015 while I was pursuing a Master’s degree in Choral Conducting at the University of Toronto, where I prepared a seminar presentation on her choral music. During my research, I found it challenging to locate a comprehensive listing of Telfer’s choral works. The Canadian Music Centre has a collection of Telfer’s body of work (piano, strings, voice, choral, etc.), arranged in alphabetical order by title but not by instrument. An advanced search is available to filter the required information, but this does not yield an all-choral listing. This prompted me to develop “The Choral Compositions of Nancy Telfer” (Wong 2016), organized by voicing and which included publishers and performance duration information that could be helpful for choral directors and teachers. I contacted Nancy Telfer to seek further information on her choral works, thus beginning an ongoing correspondence. Telfer provided me with updated information on her compositions, while I made corrections and added works that were not previously catalogued. In addition, she advised me on the format for the compilation, which is categorized by voicing and indicates the relevant publishers and performance durations. The durations listed in the document represent those available from publications, publicly available recordings, and from Telfer herself. Also included in the document is a list of Telfer’s books and publications. I added a discography of her recorded choral works based on the information acquired from the Canadian Music Centre, various online resources, and Telfer’s personal choral audio library. The document does not
represent a definitive collection of her discography, which was beyond the scope of my research at that time.

This definitive compilation of over 240 choral works includes pieces that are available only as manuscripts, as well as those that have been published. Most of this music is available at the Canadian Music Centre or at The Edward Johnson library at the University of Toronto. Of approximately 240 pieces, over 110 were written for treble voices, and 52 are large multi-movement pieces that require larger musical forces (instrument ensemble, orchestra, multi-choir).

The process of compiling her choral catalogue, completed in August 2016, has given me the opportunity to understand and appreciate Nancy Telfer as a unique musician with the ability to combine education and artistry through her choral output, while making it accessible for music practitioners of varying skill levels. As a choral conductor and music educator, I am drawn to Nancy Telfer’s choral music: it is accessible, it is an effective teaching tool, and it celebrates the beauty and strength of the human voice.

1.4 Research Methodology

My research method comprised several steps. First, I identified through a thorough literature review the research that has been conducted to date on Nancy Telfer’s choral music and pedagogical writing. There are seven articles and nine books written by Nancy Telfer on musical literacy and composing for choirs, as well as eight articles from scholarly journals on her choral output and pedagogy. Knowing the existing research allowed me to detect and fill any gaps in the literature. As of this writing, I have found nothing pertaining to the connection between her pedagogical materials and her compositions; therefore, I believe that my work will serve a unique purpose in this respect by drawing a link between the two.

Second, based on my completed (2016) catalog of Nancy Telfer’s choral compositions, I analyzed a selection of her choral compositions and pedagogy books, and conferred with the composer about my choices. The selected repertoire highlighted subsets of Nancy Telfer’s choral compositions as follows: works that were driven and/or inspired by text, works that were pedagogically-based, and works which evoked imagery of sound and compositional ideas.
through voice play. I included repertoire with a variety of voicings: treble voices (sopranos and altos only), mixed voices (soprano, alto, tenor, bass), and repertoire with and without instrumental accompaniment. I also examined Nancy Telfer’s pedagogy books that addressed singing technique, teaching, performance practice, musicianship, and sight singing. In addition, I examined her proposed rehearsal techniques (as outlined in her publications) and their appropriateness for performance of the selected repertoire, using Telfer’s philosophy of sound, vocal production, and performance practice.

Third, I conducted a series of four interviews with the composer to discuss her musical journey, her philosophy of composition and education, and her compositional process. I also interviewed prominent choral conductors who have performed Telfer’s compositions to determine why they selected her music for programming and their beliefs that her music provided an effective teaching tool and aesthetic vehicle. These choral conductors included Zimfira Poloz (Vocal pedagogue and Artistic Director of Hamilton Children’s Choir), Dr. Carol Beynon (Acting Associate Dean, Graduate Education at Western University and Founder and Co-Artistic Director of Amabile Boys and Men’s Choirs of London), and Prof. Victoria Meredith (former Associate Dean [Academic], Chair of the Department of Music Education, and co-ordinator of choral activities at Western University). I selected these conductors based on their distinctive efforts in championing Nancy Telfer’s choral compositions and pedagogy books through their teaching and concert programming with school, university and community choirs. Each of the selected choral conductors completed one interview with me. These interviews took place in participants’ homes and/or locations considered convenient and private for the participants. We conducted off-site interviews via Skype or other on-line conference call programs.

I transcribed all interviews and stored data in a password-encoded laptop; each interviewee was given an opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy. Through my analysis of interview data, I looked for themes that illuminated Telfer’s contributions to the choral arts. An ethics review was conducted and approved in January 2017, and I received agreement from all parties concerned. Both a sample of the informed consent and also a list of interview questions is included as Appendix A and B respectively.
The process of compiling Telfer’s choral output has given me a greater understanding of the composer’s musical journey and has allowed the composer to establish trust in my research output as accurately representing the composer.

1.5 Definition of Terms

A cappella: choral music sung without instrumental accompaniment

Unaccompanied: same as *a cappella*

Treble voices: children’s, boys’, or female voices

S: soprano

A: alto

T: tenor

B: bass

Mixed voice: usually an equal mix of soprano, alto, tenor, and bass voices

Range indicators: Letter names for pitches are alpha-numeric and indicated as such:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\text{Soprano} & \text{Alto} & \text{Tenor} & \text{Bass} \\
\text{C2} & \text{C3} & \text{C4} & \text{C5} & \text{C6}
\end{array}
\]

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1.6 Organization of Study

This dissertation consists of five chapters and several appendices. The first chapter outlines the background of the study, the importance of the research to the understanding of Nancy Telfer’s legacy as a composer and choral educator, and defines the terms used in the study.

Chapter Two begins with Nancy Telfer’s biography. It also presents an overview of Telfer’s style of composition and her approach to pedagogy. I then focus on her scholarship in the form of articles and books, and discuss her workshops that outline her philosophy of choral composition and pedagogy.

Chapter Three articulates the characteristics of Nancy Telfer’s compositional style based on 1: My study of selected prominent choral works by Telfer, 2: Interviews with the composer herself and with noted choral conductors who have championed Telfer’s music in their concert programming and teaching, and 3: Published scholarly writing about Ms. Telfer’s work. It also describes the pedagogical aspects of her work, and how that helps conductors and singers alike achieve musical competency and artistry in performance.

Chapter Four explains Telfer’s pedagogical philosophy in detail, and focuses on her materials which support them. Her viewpoint is rooted in the idea that singers should acquire a complete understanding of their voice and the musical skills that support its development. In order to assist singers in developing their skills, Telfer emphasizes the importance of enhancing one’s performance through a solid foundation in vocal technique, quality repertoire selection, effective rehearsal techniques, and creative and systematic approach to music literacy. In addition, this chapter provides Telfer’s view on the role of the conductor-educator in the singers’ vocal development.

Chapter Five comprises a conductor’s guide to a representative selection of Nancy Telfer’s choral compositions, which have been grouped into the following musical categories: works that are driven and/or inspired by text, works that are pedagogically-based, works which evoke imagery of sound, and compositional ideas through voice play, and noted concert pieces. The selected repertoire also covers a range of choral voicings: treble voices, mixed voices, various difficulty levels, secular, sacred, unaccompanied, and accompanied works. The repertoire analyses highlight key compositional characteristics that make the music an effective teaching
tool and shows how these pieces can elicit artistry in performance. In conclusion, I offer a summary of my findings.
Chapter 2
A Biographical Overview

2.1 Early Life and Education

Nancy Telfer was born in Brampton, Ontario on May 8, 1950, and now resides in Coburg, Ontario. As a child, she taught herself how to play the piano using the piano books at home:

There was a piano at the house when I was growing up. Both grandmothers played piano and [there was] lots of music at home so they helped me with the books. (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017)

As a teenager, she took piano lessons with Jill McNichol, an outstanding piano and voice teacher who lived nearby, who eventually had a significant impact on her. Since McNichol was her first teacher, Telfer didn’t realize until later the influence McNichol had on her or how good she was as a music educator. McNichol was a young teacher at the time, but Telfer felt that McNichol understood the nuances of music and the musical characteristics of different time periods. She provided Telfer with a broad background in music at an advanced level of understanding.²

Telfer knew all along that music was her strongest interest, and made her decision at Grade 11 to pursue it in post-secondary education:

² McNichol attended one of Telfer’s piano workshops many years later and was invited on stage to read through one of Telfer’s piano duets with her: “I knew she would love that; she was a fine performer and I wanted to give her credit for her role in my life (Telfer, personal communication October 20, 2017).
I was academically at the top of school and interested in all subjects (my strongest subject was mathematics). But I felt that I wouldn’t have as interesting a life if I went into math and not music. (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017)

Telfer graduated in 1971 from Western University (WU)\(^3\) with a bachelor’s degree in music education and mathematics, and then attended the Ontario Ministry of Education London Teachers’ College for one year. She worked as a public elementary school teacher from 1972 to 1976, teaching Music, Drama, and Special Education for four years. After a few years as a teacher, she began composing music for voice and piano, and knew that she should be a composer. She returned to WU to pursue a degree in theory and composition, graduating in 1979:

I was really happy teaching, I really enjoyed it. I felt that I was in the right field, but not in the right section of the field. All the things I have learned up to that point—teaching, theory, etc., was useful to me as a composer. So no time was wasted at all. (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017)

Telfer described in detail the various influences on her decision to become a composer:

There were four people [who influenced me as a composer and an educator], all from Western [University]: Deral Johnson, Kenneth Bray, Donald McKellar, and Constance Newland. I was really fortunate to attend that university and learn from the professors there.

Deral Johnson lit the fire for choral music for me. His choir was the first choir I had sung in then, and I was happy to have started in a premiere choir. I learned about rehearsal techniques, conducting, and psychology of choral singing (this was a relatively new way of thinking at that time). He emphasized the continual need of good quality contemporary music by young composers, so this was very encouraging for me.

\(^3\) Formerly known as University of Western Ontario.
Kenneth Bray taught private lessons in composition at WU and did a lot of arranging and some composing. The most important thing he taught me was how to hear what the music would sound like in reality by just looking at the page (without the choir in front of me). He had a good talent for doing that. [Situations] like: what would happen with the performers when I wrote a certain way, and whether each part could be heard through the choral mesh of sound. He was very realistic with his ear—looking at the page and then knowing what will happen. Learning from him was like osmosis; [whereby] I sat next to him at the piano and we discussed the composition. I picked up that [listening skill] from him and gradually got better at that. This meant that my music could be ready for the first performers without me having to make any changes at a rehearsal. The performance would be exactly what I was hoping it to be.

Donald McKellar was the head of Music Education then. He supported and encouraged women students in music education. He was also very keen on the progress of music education in general [and] sharing resources— he helped me to be aware of what was happening with other educators. For example, he would help to send WU students to the Ontario Music Educators’ Association (OMEA) Conference. My view broadened as a composer and a music educator.

Constance Newland was on the voice faculty. I received good, healthy foundation of vocal information and technique (this area was just starting to be recognized then). I also took private lessons [from her]. She was a teacher who was right up to date, creative, and provided good technique.

These are the four people who still remain a good voice of reason [for me]. Sometimes, something they have said would suddenly pop into my mind when it would be the right time for that philosophy and information. (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017)

Telfer received a good foundation from these mentors, and, after graduating from WU, continued to develop, on her own, important skills and values as a composer and an educator: “You just have to go and figure it out for yourself” (Telfer 2017, interview, June 12, 2017). When it came to music education and composition, she realized that she should never settle for less than the
best (quality of output), and she continues to do so by persistently working on a piece or book until she feels that every detail is right, until the material has “the ring of truth: complete in itself, exactly what is intended, and at the same time technically achievable by the choir” (Telfer 2017, interview, June 12, 2017).

2.2 Choral Composition

“When I discovered that I could compose music, I knew that was the area that I should concentrate in; I felt as if I had found my home” (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017).

As a composer, Telfer was highly influenced by conductor Deral Johnson’s philosophy of composition. One tenant of Johnson’s philosophy was the “willingness to experiment with a variety of vocal sounds and combinations while remaining within the realm of healthy vocal demands” (Meredith 2002, 11). With a background as an experienced choral singer, Telfer is comfortable exploring possibilities within a choral medium, which allows her flexibility in her choral compositions. Her interest in such creativity lies in the same vein as her belief that “all music should delight the ears, capture the imagination and feed the soul” (Apfelstadt 2013, 26). Her experience and passion as an educator influence her desire to make interesting and challenging musical materials available for all ages. As such, many of her choral compositions represent teaching and performing vehicles for young singers (Meredith 2002, 11).

Telfer has written approximately 240 choral pieces and has drawn inspiration from several sources. Her interest in the outdoors comes across in some compositions that have focused on the natural beauty of the environment, such as “Butterfly,” “The Blue Eye of God,” and “The Source of the Waters.” She also has written a collection of Canadian folksong arrangements contained in the three volumes of Reflections of Canada (Bray, Telfer, Wuensch, 1985, 1986, 1991). In August 2017, Telfer assisted Cypress Choral Music with the republication of Reflections of Canada, which contained selected arrangements from the previous volumes. Launched at the 23rd International Kodály Symposium in Alberta, this new publication (Cypress Choral Music 2017) consists of two books: Book One for unison, SA, and SSA singing; Book Two for SAB and SATB singing. The repertoire features Canadian folk songs arranged by Telfer, Bray, and Wuensch, was carefully researched and selected by the Kodály Society of Canada (of which Telfer is a member) and is ideal for classroom and school choirs.
Telfer’s travels for choral festivals around the world have also resulted in compositions that draw on various cultural traditions. In Telfer’s choral music, choice of text is of utmost importance:

Most good texts are appropriate for all voicings, but I have tended to use less complex texts for children's voices, even though the message [of that text] might be quite profound. Although I might consider using the same text for men's choir and for women's choir, I would compose the music differently to express the different perspectives of those ensembles and also to make use of the different strengths of each type of voicing. (Telfer, interview, March 14, 2015)

Nancy Telfer has a distinctive style of choral writing, one that is deeply rooted in her passion as a music educator, which imbues her works with wonderful teaching and learning tools. Her music is harmonically driven, requiring clarity in intonation and articulation on the part of the choir. She takes a lot of care in text setting and word painting. As a composer-educator, her focus is clear, and her output of writing is varied and accessible:

From a music educator’s perspective—all ages of students deserve to have music that is of high quality. Giving poorly composed music to students is like feeding them junk food. There is never enough rehearsal/classroom time, so every moment should be used to experience good quality music in some way or another. Students tend to be more impressionable than adults. This means that every detail of a children's piece (in both the vocal and accompaniment parts) affects the children more strongly. If any detail of the music is not musical, then it works against the children's musical experience. Students can learn as much directly from the music itself as they do directly from the teacher. This facilitates and accelerates the educational process. Students have many, many things to learn about music and it is possible for a composer to incorporate these things into various pieces at the student's level of difficulty/understanding and still create real art forms with that music. (Telfer, interview, March 14, 2015)

Some of the characteristics of Telfer’s choral writing include modal harmonic progressions (Figure 1), and changing meters, open fourths and fifths, and driving, repetitive rhythms (Figure 2).
Her writing also shows distinctive contrasts of high energy and rhythmic sections against calm and lyrical ones. In addition, her compositions feature various types of dissonances that the
composer herself described as “knives in the air” or a “halo effect,” depending on the mood of the piece (Meredith 2002, 12).

Telfer’s compositional output consists of a wide variety of vocal combinations. To date, she has written 37 unison pieces, 31 two-part pieces, 42 three-part pieces, 80 four-part pieces, one six-part piece, and 32 large/multi-movement works (all of which could be extracted as standalone pieces).

Chapter Three provides information about her choral compositions (by years, voicing, and instrumentation) as well as further analysis of her style of writing. It also describes the pedagogical aspects and accessibility of her works, and outlines how those features may help conductors and singers achieve musical competency and artistry in performance.

2.3 Choral Pedagogy

I was an educator first before I became a composer. I really loved working with children and I have always valued education. I see it as the strongest determining factor for what will happen in the future of society. It's an exciting field and will continue to be like that—it’s so powerful when it’s done right and well. (Telfer, interview June 12, 2017)

Nancy Telfer believes that singers should have a comprehensive understanding of their voices and how to use them. This includes the basic necessities of diction (pronouncing each consonant and vowel uniformly), building tone (and improving resonance), and singing in a healthy manner. Choral conductors play an essential role in ensuring that singers are receiving this information and singing well, and “he/she should make changes with themselves first before making changes with the singers: posture, conducting gestures, and effective verbal instructions and rehearsal pacing” (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017).

During the 1980s, Telfer began composing for choirs, writing music that was vocally conceived and supported healthy singing. There was still a lack of material at the time to help choral conductors and educators address techniques in choral singing and rehearsal pedagogy, however.
This prompted her to write books on choral pedagogy which included detailed rehearsal technique ideas for selected choral works (both hers and of other composers):

I wrote each book in a way that a teacher in some remote area who had never had the opportunity to study with a good professor could still understand everything that was in each book and use it with their own students. I was very much aware that I should write books for band teachers who are starting to form choirs . . . I used to teach band, so I am familiar with the format and made small adjustments. It would work for choral conductors, too. (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017)

Telfer has written nine method books for conductors and choral educators addressing vocal technique, music literacy, rehearsal techniques, and performance practice. These books have been published in English, Spanish, and Korean by Kjos Music Co. Seven of these have an accompanying Student’s Edition, a simpler guide for students to be used alongside the aforementioned Conductor’s/Teacher’s Edition.

Although Telfer’s choral compositions are not the primary focus of these materials, she created every musical excerpt for her sight-singing and vocal technique books. For example, in the Teacher’s Edition of Successful Sight-Singing, Book 1 (1992), Telfer mentions that the exercises are realistic because they are

Well-crafted, original music—the composer has attempted to make the exercises similar to concert music. There are some unexpected moments here and there so that the singers must actually read the music rather than just sing what might be expected. The music is well-crafted but not predictable. The exercises have been composed in a vocal—rather than an instrumental—style. Singers need to be able to sight-sing vocal music, not instrumental music. (Telfer 1992, 9)

Telfer supports her pedagogical values through the composition of these examples in her method books. She believes that when musical examples and warmups are crafted like concert pieces, musicianship and technical skills will automatically transfer to the choral repertoire, enabling singers to perform musically as they are learning the pieces (Telfer 1993, 40). She stresses that her philosophy on choral pedagogy evolves continuously in order to adapt to the changing choral scene around her. Chapter Four focuses further on Telfer’s philosophy of choral pedagogy, and her materials that support that philosophy.
2.4 Scholarship

2.4.1 Articles

In addition to the choral compositions and method books, Telfer has also published articles in various choral music and music education publications intended for composers and choral educators. These articles provide a greater understanding of Telfer’s pedagogical philosophy and approach.

Telfer (1987) wrote “Getting Your Music Published—Why Bother and How To,” an article focused on the advantages of having music published by a reputable publisher. She mentioned that the greatest benefit is that one’s music becomes more quickly and easily available to performers locally and internationally. This increases the potential for the performance of one’s music as well as creating an opportunity for performers to communicate with the composer for additional music or new commissions. She also explained that published music receives higher visibility, as compositions may be considered for reading sessions and repertoire lists at workshops and music conferences. In the article, composers were reminded to consider, first and foremost, the suitability of their music for publication: is it of high enough quality and is it likely to be of interest to enough performers to make it worthwhile for the publisher’s financial investment? (Telfer 1987, 2). Telfer suggested that composers seek feedback from credible performers/conductors, ensure the text is credited appropriately, and that all editorial markings are consistent. Most importantly, composers need to ask themselves: “Is it my best work? Will I still be proud of it in fifteen years? The publication of music that is less than your best can do more to harm your career than to help it” (Telfer 1987, 2).

Telfer stressed the importance of submitting pieces to the appropriate publisher, as many publishers specialize in certain types and styles of music. She reminded composers that rejection is normal: “You may be rejected many, many times before you submit to the right publisher at the right time, but the final acceptance will be well worth the effort . . . If a publisher has a good reputation, they will do their best to work in your interest . . . they are making an investment in you and your future” (Telfer 1987, 4). Although this article was written three decades ago, Telfer’s advice stands the test of time and is still relevant today.
In “Being A Composer” (1987), Telfer shared her process of composing a piece and explained how she received her inspiration and creative ideas. She explained how she is always surprised by the music she writes as it takes on a direction that is unplanned: “The music changes as I compose. I do not compose what I want to compose. I compose what comes to me . . . I do not know what will come next” (Telfer 1987, 1).

“Composing for Children’s Voices” (1998) was a step-by-step guide to writing choral music for children. Telfer suggested that one should begin with text selection—choosing a poem that the composer loves and that is suited to the interests of children. Then composers can write a melody which expresses the text. Telfer also provided guidelines to melody writing, ideas to use as materials for words (if the composer wishes to write their own), advice on composing an accompaniment, and information on writing two-part music.

Telfer (1993) took a similar approach in “Composing Concert Music for Children’s Choirs.” She emphasized the importance of text: “The words always come first, then the music is written to express those words.” (Telfer 1993, 19) She also provided information on the appropriate range for children’s choirs and the reason why composers needed to adhere to it: “The composer must write music which develops the voice instead of destroying it” (Telfer 1993, 20). When it comes to creating the piano accompaniment, Telfer suggested that composers should keep in mind that the piano part should enhance the sound of the music as a whole so that the singers have some incentive to listen to the piano and be inspired by it. She also stressed the need for more music for children in a contemporary style, and the regular performance of this music: “In this way, they will learn to become active in the wealth of their own changing culture during the rest of their lifetime” (Telfer 1993, 21).

In “The Challenge of Middle School Music Repertoire,” Telfer (1987) shared the feedback she received from middle school music teachers with regard to repertoire. She stated that there was an increase in rhythmic interest among students due to their rapid physical growth—students may have too much energy one day but can barely keep awake the next. Therefore, there is a greater awareness of movement, which leads to an increased interest in rhythmic music. Telfer also mentioned that there was a preoccupation with values; students question everything and “feel they must understand why they are using certain repertoire or there is little point in participating” (Telfer 1987, 1). This was also related to their curiosity about technical detail—the
context of a piece and the reasons musical elements functioned the way they did. Students needed variety in repertoire to sustain their interest: “They are imaginative to the extreme at times and therefore it is sometimes possible to do more unusual repertoire with them” (Telfer 1987, 1). She also mentioned that the vocal ranges of middle school students were often limited, and students needed music that was easily pitched “because they temporarily lose a sense of pitch as their voices grow” (Telfer 1987, 1). When it came to choral repertoire for young women, Telfer stated that “young women are not as comfortable as they could be with much of the fine SA and SSA repertoire, as the music was often composed specifically for treble choirs (boys’ voices) and boys’ voices do not function the same as girls’ voices at this age” (Telfer 1987, 2).

Telfer offered a few suggestions to address these challenges. She proposed that a national committee be formed to aid in providing suggestions of good music from all time periods for band, choral, and strings programs in middle schools. She stressed that the committee should consist of specialists of these ensembles, a composer and “one person particularly concerned with values education” (Telfer 1987, 3-4). She explained that not all composers are interested in composing for this age group, but it would be beneficial to approach composers with a set of criteria for a new composition which included vocal ranges, duration, tessitura, technical abilities, and a list of the ensemble’s current repertoire. Once educators began including new compositions in their repertoire, they were faced with another challenge: not being comfortable interpreting and rehearsing contemporary music. Telfer suggested that educators should learn good rehearsal techniques for new music through professional development workshops. She closed her article with a call to action: “We need good repertoire readily available and directly suited to the needs of our middle school educators now . . . good music is at the very heart of good music education” (Telfer 1987, 5).

Telfer (1988) wrote “Understanding New Music for Choirs” to guide choral educators with their musical interpretation and preparation of new music for rehearsals. She stressed that one should begin by thinking about the lyrics alone without reference to the music, “then look at the music to see how the composer has expressed those words in his or her own way” (Telfer 1988, 12). When it came to tempo considerations (such as “Not Too Quickly”), Telfer suggested that the tempo is usually at the speed at which the choir can sing each phrase clearly without undue strain. She also encouraged singers to listen intently to the accompanying music; it is usually closely linked to the words as may help the singers understand the music better. Telfer stated that
new music features “unusual sounds . . . strange lyrics . . . extended harmonies, or a floating sensation freeing up the sense of time” (Telfer 1988, 12). She encouraged detail in balancing sound; important sounds should be established in the foreground. A common mistake is to perform all the sounds at the same dynamic level, which makes the music sound messy or boring. Telfer mentioned close harmonies and tone clusters as another feature of new music and reminded educators to refer back to the lyrics to understand the composer’s intent in setting the music that particular way.

Besides writing about choral compositions, Telfer has also written articles on choral pedagogy and the development of musicianship skills. In “Sight-Singing in the Choral Rehearsal,” Telfer (1993) offered choral educators general principles of integrating sight-singing into the choral rehearsal. She emphasized that the educator’s goal “is to build similar skills in all choir members so that they can contribute equally” (Telfer 1993, 39) and that this task be done in a systematic fashion through appropriate materials and effective methods for using those materials. She emphasized the importance of practising silent singing to teach the inner ear to audiate, analysis of music to help with the mental organization of the music, identifying the tonic and dominant pitches, and keeping an inner pulse. Telfer also suggested that sight-singing sessions should be short, concentrated, and consist of materials which include lyrics. She felt that it was imperative to have students utilize sight-singing exercises which are similar to real music so that the skill “will automatically transfer to rehearsal situations. If the exercises are miniature works of art . . . the singers will want to perform musically as they learn to sight-read. Then sight-singing becomes not only a skill but also an art” (Telfer 1993, 40).

Over a decade later, Telfer (2004) reiterated the value of such knowledge in “Musical Literacy: Reading the Music Between the Notes.” She asserts that “[m]usical literacy means more than just reading the pitches and rhythms. It means reading the meaning of the music: understanding the way that each musical detail in the notation brings the music alive” (Telfer 2004, 1). Through an understanding of the basic elements of each piece, Telfer stated that singers are able to breathe life into their repertoire more quickly. She pointed out the importance of relating pitch, melodic contour, and phrasing to the mood and intent of the music. She also suggested that singers physicalize rhythm through body movement in a rehearsal in order to understand the character of that rhythm. That way, singers are able to express and perform it more musically. Telfer believed
that singers should also identify the form and style of the music, as it may provide them with an overall sense of direction and view of the music.

Throughout all of her writings, one finds that Telfer reiterates her values consistently: every singer must receive good music pedagogy to support their musical development, and such pedagogy can be provided through the creation of well-crafted music that is designed to teach specific concepts and skills. In her approach, Telfer regards pedagogy as the vehicle for musical development and artistic excellence.

2.4.2 Workshops and Festivals

Nancy Telfer has been invited to adjudicate at numerous music festivals and present workshops in Canada and internationally on music education, professional development, conducting, and choral performance. She was a Kodály course instructor at Western University in 1991, 1992, and 1993; she taught graduate level music education courses at University of Tel Aviv, Israel, in 1997; and taught conducting and analysis at St. Joseph’s University, Macau, in 2012. She was also a featured clinician at the First International Seminar for Youth Choir Conductors, Germany, in 1998 (Telfer, personal communication, October 23, 2017).

When I was giving workshops around the world, each place asked for help in a different area of pedagogy, so this kept me constantly experimenting and developing new teaching techniques. I also developed new techniques while working at festivals. There seem to be no end of different types of situations so new ideas are always needed. (Telfer, personal communication, October 20, 2017)

In many situations, Telfer found herself experimenting with, and improving on, her teaching methods to enable students to approach musical and pedagogy skills more efficiently, and usually within the limited amount of time of her visit. She was always curious about the learning methods and behaviours of students, as it helped her make informed decisions about devising ways to teach them various musicianship skills:
The evening before I started teaching sight-singing pedagogy at the University of Tel Aviv, I was in the kitchen of an Israeli conductor, chatting. I noticed that the writing on the fridge notes appeared to be from right to left rather than left to right as it is in English and music reading. She confirmed that Hebrew runs from right to left, so I knew that the beginning students would need special physical exercises to develop the eye muscles for that movement; the eyes would be used to going in the opposite direction. I asked the conductor if she had a very small ball, and I invented an exercise right then and tried it out on her. Holding the ball in my hand, I moved it in the correct direction from left to right from the students’ point of view as if I were bouncing the ball in the air on each beat (as the eyes should move when reading music). At the end I quickly hid the ball behind my back so that they could relax their muscles. I repeated several times with a different number of beats and a different tempo. This was a great warm-up exercise before they practised sight-singing each day. And it also sped up sight-singing with students in North America.

Years before that, on my first trip to Hong Kong, I wondered if Chinese students would have an advantage because they learn to read younger and they have to move their eyes up and down with the Chinese characters, which is so helpful in reading words and music together. I watched carefully when I started to teach the Chinese children and adults and found I could teach more quickly for some aspects of sight-singing than with non-Chinese students. I recommended that they start teaching sight-singing at an earlier age. (Telfer, pers. comm., October 23, 2017)

Telfer continues to be sought after, both in Canada and internationally, for her innovative and creative approaches to music pedagogy. Through her constant work with, and support of, composers and educators, she advocates for quality choral composition and education.

Her approach as a conductor, teacher, singer, and pianist really helps people understand not just her music but music in general . . . I think she is very strongly situated along with Ruth Watson Henderson (for example) and Eleanor Daley . . . that group of Canadian composers who have been well-established for a long
time. She will continue to play a role in the history and development of Canadian choral music. (Meredith, interview, July 5, 2017)

Anybody who works as a choral director and educator at the university or in the community has the greatest respect for Nancy Telfer’s work—for all that she’s done for music in Canada. Nancy has always been a quiet, pleasant, unassuming sort of person, and I think her talent speaks for itself. (Beynon, interview, June 13, 2017)

For her outstanding contributions to Canadian music, she received an award by the Ontario Choral Federation (1996), the Canadian National Conservatory of Music conferred an Honorary Licentiate in 2004, and she is included in UWO’s Wall of Fame (2008). Telfer is also an Associate of the Canadian Music Centre.
Chapter 3
Nancy Telfer’s Choral Compositions

I compose because I must. The music darts inside me like a bird until I let it free. And each day is the same and yet different – the music always there, but always changing, always asking to be released. (Telfer 1987)

The following chapter articulates the characteristics of Nancy Telfer’s compositional style based on my study of her selected prominent choral works, interviews with the composer, interviews with noted choral conductors who have championed Telfer’s music in their concert programming and teaching, as well as being published scholarly writing. It also describes educational aspects of her works, and how those help both conductors and singers achieve musical competency and artistry in performance.

3.1 Philosophy in Composition

Many scholars have described Telfer’s compositions as having high artistic quality, as well as educational and accessible, yet interesting. Victoria Meredith enjoyed conducting Telfer’s music because it contains musical interest:

She would have musically—and vocally—interesting writing in all of the voice parts. She didn’t just leave the altos sitting on G forever. I have found that, for the types of choirs that I work with (primarily university and advanced level university music students), I was able to find repertoire that met that challenge of having high quality Canadian repertoire to include and be challenging to the singers (Meredith, interview, July 5, 2017).
Telfer believes that it is always best to be true to herself:

I feel very close to the performers, and as I write I aim to produce music that is technically feasible, that they might find desirable. Rather than following a traditional theory or philosophy, I concentrate on how the music should ultimately sound. Sometimes music looks good on paper, and follows all the rules, but it may not sound good. I tried to start by considering the sound first and creating my music from that perspective. So, I did not really fit in with the trend current at that time. I wrote avant-garde material occasionally, but always worried more about how it would sound rather than how it looked. (Hopkins 2015, 12)

Telfer’s overarching philosophy in composition is twofold: 1. Compositions should encourage performers to experience success in their musical development and their performance, and 2. Any composition should have a balance of artistry, pedagogy, and accessibility.

3.1.1 Encouraging Performers to be Successful

Telfer’s background and passion as an educator shows in her compositions. She encourages performers to be successful musicians by writing in a manner that aids their development of artistry, technique, and musicianship. The topic of “success” is a recurring theme in her scholarly writings, pedagogy books, written descriptions in her music, and interviews:

“Success” can be thought of: how they [the performers] do it, or how they feel it. [It occurs] when an individual continues to keep improving their own skills within a group, understanding music better, and expanding their enjoyment of music. [It happens] when an ensemble can communicate the spirit of the music to the audience using healthy vocal technique. [It takes place] when singers learn from the ensemble around them as well as the conductor and the music . . . and gets hooked on music for life. (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017)
When composing a piece, Telfer considers the skills that singers need to develop to perform the music. For example, she firmly believes that

performers sing more musically if they have a musical line. The music itself teaches them how to be musical. [For example,] if the phrases are of an appropriate length, the singers will learn good breathing habits. Its phrase leads in a musical way to a high note, the singers can experience how to produce good tone on a high note. (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017)

Telfer indicates that the way in which she integrates the elements of her writing helps singers achieve success in performing her music, while using healthy vocal technique and gaining musical knowledge at the same time. One such example of this is writing an appropriate length for word-packed fast music, or high pitches on long phrases—“not too long, but long enough to stretch their skills” (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017).

Telfer also wrote music such as “Doubletalk” (1984) and “Bay Dooka” (1992) (Figure 3) specifically for singers with changing voices who needed to feel greater musical success during their process of voice change. She took her inspiration from the natural speaking voice (which goes up and down in pitch as a person speaks) and replaced the traditionally notated pitches with spoken parts that are performed in high, medium, and low pitch inflections. This resulted in new contemporary choral music for changing voices. Although there was a lack of notated pitches in such music, Telfer’s writing taught singers the fundamentals of part singing and also encouraged singers to be very expressive in phrasing and rhythms.
Telfer stresses that performers learn from the music itself and sing more musically if each choral part is musically written. She has written some music that was technically easy but musically challenging because she believes that good choirs “sometimes tend to do too much difficult music (because they can), but this does not necessarily develop their musicality to a high level” (Telfer, pers. comm., October 4, 2016). “Bay Dooka” serves as a prime example—the elimination of notated pitches renders the piece vocally easy, but the detailed rhythm and articulation provides the singers with other challenging musical elements.

3.1.2 Balancing Artistry, Pedagogy, and Accessibility

The balance of artistry, pedagogy, and accessibility in Telfer’s music comes from her belief that the music (any music) should be sufficiently technically challenging so as to engage the singers and stretch the singers’ abilities, but still be easy enough so that they can sing musically rather than just “correctly.” “So (singers are) not bored, but (are) still (able to) sing musically” (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017). Telfer further stresses that musical elements such as dynamics,
tessitura, and rhythmic intensity need to be varied enough to ensure that the work does not strain the voices. The difficulty level should be fairly consistent within a piece, rather than having just one bar or section which is far more difficult than the rest of the piece. She also feels that the length of a piece should be appropriate for the age level, the topic that is being sung, and the use of the piece in a performance.

When it comes to accessibility for the audience, Telfer believes that the music has to be able to communicate the ideas within the text. It is then that the audience will be able to react and experience the music (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017).

If the meaning of the text is universal and the music expresses the text well, then the music is accessible for the audience. If the text presents an idea that may be new to the audience, then the music has to present it in a way that gives the audience a chance to understand that idea (i.e. repetition, tempo, interludes to give reaction time, various ways of emphasizing a particular detail, using comedy to make a point. (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017)

Telfer takes pride in writing choral compositions in a voice-friendly way: “Everyone could tell that I was a singer” (Telfer, personal correspondence, October 4, 2016). Zimfira Poloz, children’s choir conductor and pedagogue, agrees with that comment: “you can tell from the music that it was composed by a singer, for singers. Telfer teaches singers through her music” (Poloz, interview, March 16, 2017).

Apfelstadt (2013) stated that in each of Telfer’s choral compositions, the composer has “attempted to bring some new kind of experience to the performers so that their lives might be more meaningful and more enjoyable” (Apfelstadt 2016, 26). Apfelstadt also commented that there is variety in Telfer’s choral output: “She uses the voice in multiple ways, for speaking as well as singing, and overlapping timbres and musical ideas. These present unique challenges that develop independence in singers” (Apfelstadt 2016, 32).

Telfer admits that striking a balance between artistry, pedagogy, and accessibility of music is challenging but nonetheless integral to observing the ring of truth as a composer. There is always self-evaluation on her part throughout her writing process: “Is this (what I am doing) right? How is the audience going to react to this part?” (Telfer 2017, interview, June 12, 2017). Section 3.3
explores the characteristics of Telfer’s compositional style in detail and how it responds to the composer’s philosophy in composition.

### 3.2 Compositional Process

The accompanying notes to “Stress” (1992) inform readers that Telfer begins composing a piece by blocking out all the sounds from the outside (i.e. traffic, dogs barking) and then all the sounds from inside her head (i.e. music by other composers, voices of friends). It is then that she begins to hear her own music (Telfer 1992). In a 2014 interview with Mark Hopkins, Telfer mentioned that she writes at the piano and always imagines the piano as whichever ensemble she is writing for.

If it is an orchestral composition, my piano becomes the orchestra, and I don’t hear the piano as I write, I hear the instruments of the orchestra. My Kawai piano has a neutral tone, which makes it easier for me to hear the colours I want to hear while using it to compose. (Hopkins 2015, 13)

Telfer does not always rely on the piano to write, however. Sometimes compositional ideas form in her mind quickly without going to the keyboard:

Imagine a group of people standing at the far end of a football field, talking among themselves. That is what the music sometimes seems like to me at first. Gradually, as I get closer to them, I start to hear more details, to understand the conversation better. That is often what happens when I compose—the sound gradually becomes clearer and clearer to me as I work on it. At other times, the complete sound comes right away. (Hopkins 2015, 13)

Telfer studied composition with Kenneth Bray at Western University and credits him for helping her develop her inner hearing and awareness of quality writing by showing her examples and describing them in detail. She also stresses that she does not follow a fixed compositional routine and is able to write at any time of the day or night, usually sketching the skeleton of the music immediately and leaving out what can be easily filled in later.
Telfer’s scholarly articles about composing for choirs reflect her own approach to composition as well as the rationale for her methods. She always begins by choosing the right text: “the words always come first; then the music is written to express those words” (Telfer 1993, 19). She then writes a melody that follows the rhythm and the pitch inflection of the spoken words. When writing in parts, Telfer makes sure that the words in each vocal part make sense on their own: “they should present a complete thought or phrase by themselves. You cannot expect singers to sing musically if you give them texts that do not make sense” (Telfer 1993, 20). In order to ensure that each choral part is musically written, Telfer always proofreads and sings through each part separately when composing.

When writing piano accompaniments for her choral works, Telfer believes that the piano “should provide cues which are obvious to the singer but part of the natural fabric of the music” (Telfer 1993, 21). She stays away from long piano introductions and interludes: “In the case of inexperienced singers, continuous singing enables their sound quality and musicality to improve and their confidence to build. For experienced singers, too much stopping and starting is physically and psychologically tiring” (Telfer 1993, 21).

### 3.2.1 Commissions

For commissioned works, Telfer tries to visit the choirs in order to get to know the teachers, conductors, and singers. This enables her to have a clear idea of the technical level of the ensemble and allows her to write more effectively for them:

> I just want to be sure I nail it right on, that they get something they can (perform) and really respond to. I think the results should be a reflection of what that group would compose for themselves if they could, a true fit in every way. (Hopkins 2015, 13).

Telfer enjoys meeting the choirs before she starts to compose.⁴ “This is nice because the choir already has a connection with me before they receive the music, and this builds up the

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⁴ In some cases, she has known the choir long before she was commissioned to write for them.
excitement even more. I (also) tell them something personal (about me) to build a stronger connection” (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017). Telfer understands that a choral director usually has a reason for the commission, so she discusses that with the choral director and confirms the expected deadline. Such information provides Telfer with the general outline for the project. Telfer also asks the choral director for technical information:

any weaknesses (like a lack of tenors), or any range restrictions. I find out what the strengths of the choir are so that they will have an opportunity to be used in the music. (Also,) the conductor may wish to stretch the choir in some ways. (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017)

Besides gauging the technical ability of the ensemble, Telfer strives to discern what they have that is unique, such as a strong affinity towards languages, or a strong soloist “to showcase what they can do . . .” (Hopkins 2015, 13). She composes music with the intent to make it special for each ensemble and believes that she must make her music match the personality of each ensemble: “Every ensemble has a unique personality. If it is for them, the music should match some aspect of their character, so they can really own it” (Hopkins 2015, 13).

It is not always possible for Telfer to hear or meet a choir before writing her commission, however. In this case, she senses an idea of the choir’s personality through her interactions with the conductor and all the other information given to her (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017). In some instances, the music is commissioned with a broader perspective in mind: “a conductor wants something that will be useful to many other conductors, too . . . some type of music that is not already available. So that would be kept in mind as I compose” (Telfer, interview, March 14, 2015). She also believes that a choir’s past repertoire and the director’s description of the choir’s strengths and weaknesses are the two most helpful sources of information and are more revealing than a recording (Telfer, personal communication, March 24, 2018).

The Canadian Music Centre assisted school boards in commissioning new Canadian choral music for students as part of the “Creating Music in the Classroom” program. Telfer’s expertise in writing quality and educational contemporary works was recognized when she was commissioned to write several choral compositions: “Explosion” (1992), “Bay Dooka” (1992), and “Sidewalk Game” (1992) were commissioned by the East York Youth Choir (conducted by Mitchel Bondy), with financial assistance from the East York Board of Education; “First Snow”
(1991) was commissioned by Perth County Board of Education. “As a whole, these pieces were inspired by the need for middle school children to have an opportunity to sing each of the main features used [in each piece] in avant garde music. It was an introduction to these styles, so each piece had to be interesting for them and not too difficult and not too long” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017). The above-mentioned pieces are analyzed in greater detail in Chapter 5, highlighting their pedagogical benefits.

International choirs and conductors knew of Telfer’s compositions when Telfer traveled extensively as a judge and clinician at international choir competitions and conferences. She began writing new music for them because she was “inspired and influenced by the performance quality and interesting repertoire of a variety of international choirs” (Telfer, interview, October 4, 2016). For example, “De Profundis” (2001) was written for Incheon City Chorale after she was inspired by the work and depth of the musicality of their conductor, Hak Won Yoon.

Although Telfer’s compositional process comes across as well planned, she emphasizes that she is not entirely strict in her approach to writing and gives in to the spontaneity of the process:

The music changes as I compose. It stretches out in one direction and relaxes in another. (Sometimes) I do not compose what I want to compose. I compose what comes to me (or through me) and the only choice I have is what to write down on paper and what to toss to the winds. (Telfer 1988, 11)

It sounds as if I am always planning each detail and the effect of each detail as I write. However, there are often times when things happen that surprise me. The music comes out a different way than I thought it would; I had no idea that particular idea or feeling was within me and there it is, suddenly appearing in the music. And there are other times when composing music is like having a ride on the back of a huge bird; you don’t have any idea where the bird is going but it is all wonderful and the composer is just along for the ride. What happens in the subconscious mind cannot always be explained. So, the composer takes these spontaneous experiences, writes them down and then makes sure that they work practically for the choir. (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017)

Throughout her development and experience as a composer, Telfer has learned to work and write quickly “because there are always interesting things yet to do” (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017).
She has learned what makes a piece excellent by studying the iconic works in choral literature and analyzing the many ways composers craft them.

I did not leave the piece until I understood the answers to the questions: Why is this such a great piece of music? How did the composer do that? I also used the recording library (while studying at WU). There was quite a bit of contemporary choral music there. I heard composers who were not yet known in Canada or were a little older but had not yet gotten worldwide recognition, but should have. I used the same approach of analyzing music with the above two questions. Perhaps this developed my ear more when I could not have a (music) score to refer to. (Telfer, personal communication, March 2015)

Ultimately, she listens carefully to the music she writes and uses what sounds right to her ear, even though that may not always conform with the rules of theory that apply to the music of the past.

3.3 Compositional Style Characteristics

Telfer has written in different styles, but considers her overall style to be neo-romantic: “Even for the pieces that are avant-garde, there is still a neo-romantic sound to them. Its tone would be romantic (as it would be) emotional and wide-ranging. (Nonetheless, my composition is) always driven by text” (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017).

Telfer’s choral composition shows clear commonalities in her style of writing. Comments on these characteristics have been organized into the following categories: text, melody, harmony, rhythm, vocal appropriateness, creating imagery and acoustical effects, setting a cappella works, and piano accompaniment. The order derived from how Telfer described her approach to composing; for example, she always starts with melodic ideas based on the text. Descriptions of characteristics are based on a combination of my own analysis, interviews with the composer, and scholarly writings about the composer.
3.3.1 Texts

Apfelstadt (2013) stated that text setting is an important element in Telfer’s music, and attention to word stress evident in her music (Apfelstadt 2013, 32). Telfer reiterates that text always comes first:

Generally, I listen for the music within the text; some words are beautiful to sing, and the flow of the language can be very conducive to music making. I avoid words that are awkward to sing. I chose texts which were appropriate for the particular interests and expressive abilities of the voicing and the age level. Some can be custom made for a particular choir or for choirs. Some texts were particularly of interest to males or to females. (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017)

Telfer believes that the text must be a work of art itself as it is the combination of the text and music that creates the total art form: “You cannot expect to compose great music if the text is not of high quality” (Telfer 1993, 19). She encourages composers to read the text aloud in order to feel the natural rise and fall in pitch and the flow of its rhythm. This approach helps her to discover words that could be set a certain way in her music.

Some texts sound as if they should be spoken or sung aloud. They have a certain taste in the mouth, a certain rhythm, a certain shaping of vowels and consonants which are meant to be heard rather than just read silently. (Telfer 1993, 19)

From the technical point of view:
1. A text must not be too long for the project in mind.
2. Some words are not musical-sounding, so I would avoid a text with that problem.
3. Some texts have rhythms, colourful vowels/consonants, forms that are artistic, good climaxes and interesting beginnings and endings that cause those texts to sound “musical.” (Telfer, personal communication, March 14, 2015)

In her early years of composing, Telfer used a lot of Canadian poetry in her music: “it has been so lyric in nature (and has) the connection with nature and the environment” (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017). “Canadian audiences feel a closer affinity to those poems, whether or not they realize they are written by a Canadian” (Telfer, personal communication, March 14, 2015).
Telfer emphasized that the vocabulary level of the text should correspond to the age of the singers, and the text should be on a topic that is of interest to those singers. Telfer writes in a way that singers are encouraged to experience new ideas or emotions, or a different perspective on a topic of interest. For example, in “The Swallow” (1992), Telfer references the familiar Newfoundland folk song, “She’s Like the Swallow” by writing a piece that expanded on the image of the swallow. Figure 4 shows Telfer highlighting the distinctive flight pattern of the bird (alternating between gliding and fluttering) in her musical setting of the text: the first musical idea (“flies so high”) is sung legato and stretched out, like the gliding of the bird; the second musical idea (“swallow fly”) contrasts with the first, creating a great sense of motion and burst of energy, like the fluttering of wings.


Telfer instructs singers to “listen to the gliding movement in measures 26 to 29 (Figure 5) and sing crisply and quickly through the “fl” to the vowel sound in order to give a “send-off” to the gliding movement.

A similar approach is used in “Butterfly” (1988) (Figure 6):

Figure 6. Nancy Telfer, “Butterfly,” mm. 36-43, used by permission, earthsongs copyright 1992.

Telfer ensures that the length of the text is appropriate to the age of the singers. For instance, younger singers have a shorter attention span and have more difficulty preparing a long piece of music or a complicated text. Therefore, Telfer believes that patterns of repetitions in the text help young singers keep a focus on the music (Telfer 1993, 19).

Telfer started writing her own texts when she realized that “there are many ideas that should be expressed in music, but poets were not writing about those things” (Telfer, personal communication, March 14, 2015). Telfer has also encouraged composers to write their own words to their music to create a piece that is uniquely theirs:

There is nothing new under the sun, but your feelings or perspective will make an idea seem fresh and new to others. Take a well-known story or idea and view it from a different perspective (i.e. write about Christmas from Mary’s perspective rather than from our present-day view). (Telfer 1988, 7)

I started writing my own texts because poets were not writing about some contemporary topics that are of great meaning to choirs (e.g. the significance and benefits of music); poetry about societal changes were often not suitable to be set to music. There is a lot of good children’s poetry written in Canada but not great when set to music. Singers should not be denied the opportunity to sing about topics that are important to them. (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017)
“Stress” (1992) provides an example of a piece for which Telfer wrote both the music and the lyrics. Set for sopranos, altos, and piano, the piece is intended for younger singers to experience contemporary choral works through non-traditional methods of composition, as well as lyrics which relate to current issues. Telfer referred to the psychological changes of the twentieth century in her lyrics and explained that the texts describe “a normal person’s reaction to a very stressful situation” (Telfer 1992, 4). The following is the text which Telfer has written for this piece:

Tension! Tension!

Stomach in a knot, pounding in my heart;
Time is running out, too many things to think about.
Stress!
I must keep my head above the water,
Hands sweating, vision blurred, stomach knotted, heart pounding;
Stress!

Tension is expressed in this piece through dissonance: “In the twentieth century, technology has advanced much more quickly than in earlier time periods. Because of this, people have felt more rushed in everyday life and composers have written that is less agreeable-sounding to the ears” (Telfer 1992, 4).

In 2010, the Co-Curricular Activities Branch of Singapore’s Ministry of Education commissioned Telfer to compose a theme song for the 2011 Singapore International Youth Choral Festival. Telfer composed “We’ll Sail Away” for SATB with piano and made versions for SSA and TTBB as well. The words and music are the composer’s own, and suggest the journey that choirs experience as they leave their cities and towns to travel together for a choral event, which is relevant to the growing trend of choir tours in the twenty-first century:

We’ll sail away on a beautiful boat;
We’ll sail away for a day, for a month or a year;
We’ll sail away with the sea all around and the sky above.
You and I could sail away and we’ll leave all our cares behind.

At night our boat could glide
and we could watch the stars.
In the morning light we could ride the waves
And then have tea in the afternoon
And laugh and sing and tell tall tales
While we leisurely sit on the deck.

We’ll sail away on a windy day;
We will taste the salt in the spray;
(Oh, the swell of the waves,
the roaring waves…
The sky so dark)
The wind is stiff in our faces;
The salt air bites; the roar is fierce;
Our feet won’t hold to the deck.

And when the wind becomes too rough,
We will guide our boat to a quiet cove
and anchor beside a rocky shore
Or find a beach with the softest sand
And then, when the sea calls us again,
We’ll climb abroad; we’ll sail away.
(Telfer, “We’ll Sail Away,” © 2010 Kjos Music Press)

Telfer has always been interested in topics about “the big questions of life, and also the pleasure of small details” (Telfer, personal communication, October 4, 2016). She also enjoys exploring texts that cover personal growth, education, and entertainment. Ultimately, when it comes to choosing texts for a composition, Telfer stressed that every text should have “singable” words.
3.3.2 Melody

“Fashions in music change from time to time but there has always been something in the human psyche that loves a good melody” (Telfer 1993, 19).

Telfer believes that a melody often follows the rhythm of speech patterns and the pitch inflection of the voice. For example, the pitch patterns for “up and down” and “all through the town” may be conceived as:

![Figure 7. Nancy Telfer (1988). "Composing for Children's Voices," 7.](image)

The natural speech patterns also inform Telfer of the choice of rhythm, as shown in Figure 7 above. Occasionally, the composer plays with the texts and goes against the natural speech patterns (Telfer 1993, 20):

![Figure 8. Nancy Telfer (1993). "Composing Concert Music for Children's Choirs," 20.](image)

Telfer also responds to texts by crafting melodies to express the general mood or ideas in the words: “For instance, a melody about a long boring day would be repetitious and would lack interesting rhythms” (Telfer 1988, 7). A melody’s interesting musical shape will capture the imagination of the performer and the audience and should flow naturally “when one phrase begins at a pitch close to where the phrase before ended” (Telfer 1988, 7). Repetitions may be used to allow the performers and listeners to create a bond with the music. At other times, variety is required to stimulate and retain interest, as well as to enhance the art form (Telfer 1993, 20). For example, a quick change in mood may be created by writing a leap in the melody, but Telfer
is quick to caution: “When a leap is used, it should fit into the flow of the melody so that the singers will be able to anticipate the pitch” (Telfer 1993, 20).

Regarding word painting, Telfer manipulates pitch, rhythm, and articulation to emphasize the motion and action of words that are deemed important. In “If You Should Meet A Crocodile” (1987) (Figure 9) for unison treble voices, Telfer accentuates the chomping action of a crocodile (“munch munch”) using short, leaping musical ideas in the higher register of the voice. She also sets the nibbling motion (“nibble, nibble, nibble, nibble”) to notes that are sung smoothly in a slightly lower part of the voice, moving stepwise. The contrasting melodic ideas bring out the varied actions of a hungry and dangerous animal.

Figure 9. Nancy Telfer, “If You Should Meet A Crocodile,” mm. 25-34, permission granted by copyright holder, Leslis Music Supply Inc.

“Butterfly” (1988) represents another example of a choral piece where Telfer wrote both the text and the music. Set for unaccompanied SSA voices, the piece describes the metamorphosis of a butterfly. The first section of this piece is full of word painting: In the beginning, the voice parts take turns singing the melody, beginning with altos, then second sopranos in measure 5, then finally first sopranos in measure 6 (Figure 10). The pitches here are mostly stepwise and long-held to convey the “motionlessness” of time.
Measure 8 to 13 (Figure 11) continues in similar fashion, and further develops with the melody slowly ascending to suggest the opening of the cocoon. The word *gently* in measures 14 and 15 is sung slurred and smoothly. Telfer then creates melodic interest and variety by introducing a sudden upward triplet motive for “feeling the sun, feeling the warmth,” depicting the butterfly’s new experiences.
Telfer shows rhythmic variety in her melodic writing to emphasize the meaning of the text. In the beginning of “Sidewalk Game” (1992), the line “Don’t step on the cracks” is sung three times but with varied rhythmic patterns and time signatures (Figure 12):

Telfer’s use of sung pitches and words creates playfulness in the music: “The rests show the child hesitating while he decides how to maneuver through the next section of the sidewalk” (Telfer 1992, 5). She advises singers to shape phrases even if a rest comes in the middle of a phrase, so that the silent parts will sound like part of the whole phrase.

In other instances, melodic lines are broken into smaller ideas in Telfer’s aleatoric writing. “The Swallow” (1992) provides an example of this. The final section of this piece shows the bird flying higher into the sky whereby each phrase “swallow go higher fly” is set by rising pitches and ascending sequences (Figure 13):

![Figure 13. Nancy Telfer, “The Swallow,” mm.45-50, © 1992 Neil A. Kjos Music Company.](image)

Telfer develops this further by distributing the melodic line among all four treble parts in canonic fashion. Singers are instructed to sing each “box” at a different time and tempo from the singer next to them, and to repeat the melodic idea until the next downbeat by the conductor (Figure 14 and 15). Essentially, this effect results in a multi-voiced round.
The melodic writing in Telfer’s music shows the composer’s knowledge of the voice and experience as a singer. Telfer successfully uses this knowledge as a foundation for her creative writing, which allows performers to sing artistically and with healthy vocal technique. Her melody writing is driven by the natural phrasing of the spoken text. Music with mixed meters is
used to set text that is deemed rhythmically free, or not symmetrical, as a way of honouring the natural rhythm of the text when it is spoken. Melodic ideas are a reaction to the story of the text, be it drama, excitement, agitation, or tension.

3.3.3 Part-Writing

Telfer’s choral pieces are appreciated by conductors and singers for their part-writing. “You can tell that she (Telfer) sings through every voice part . . . each part is musically interesting for the singer” (Poloz, interview, March 16, 2017). The composer’s choices in setting parts to her music are determined by their usefulness to the singers and their function in the overall musical intent. For less-experienced singers, Telfer cautions:

Use two parts only where it is musically appropriate; some music only sounds good in unison. If two parts will better express the ideas in the words, then decide whether polyphony or harmony would be most suitable for these particular words. Simple, harmonious ideas should not be complicated by using a polyphonic setting.

Both parts should have lots of singing (i.e. no long rests). Make sure that the alto part has a melody of its own even if its main function is to provide harmony. To make it easier for the choir and more easily understood by the audience, you may wish to start a piece fairly simply and then the relationship of the parts can gradually become more complex. (Telfer 1988, 7)

Telfer believes in nurturing the part-singing skills of children through polyphonic writing:

When children first start singing in parts, they can usually hold their parts more easily in counterpoint than in harmony. It is easier for young singers to hold their own part if they have a melody to sing. Rounds, the simplest form of counterpoint, are the easier form of part-singing. (Telfer 1993, 20)
An example of this can be found in “The Unicorn” (1992), the first of two pieces from the set, *Mystical Creatures*, for which Telfer wrote the music and words. Although set for two-part treble choir and piano, the piece is predominantly sung in unison. The melody is established in the beginning (Figure 16):

![Figure 16. Nancy Telfer, “The Unicorn,” mm.1-8, permission granted by copyright holder, Leslie Music Supply Inc.](image)

The melody is later reinstated in the form of a canon, followed by a call and response of the same theme (Figure 17 and 18):

![Figure 17. Nancy Telfer, “The Unicorn,” mm. 44-47, permission granted by copyright holder, Leslie Music Supply Inc.](image)
In discussing harmonic music, Telfer states that “singers tend to sing more musically and learn music more quickly if they have an interesting musical line to sing” (Telfer 1993, 20). Telfer writes vocal parts that have their own melodic shape, even if the part’s role is to provide harmony. “Composing each part musically is a crucial element in the craft of composing” (Telfer 1993, 20).
In the last section of “Butterfly” (1988), Telfer weaves in and out of harmonic and polyphonic writing, much like the fluid flight of a butterfly (Figure 19). Polyphonic sections show voice parts entering canon-like (measure 82) or layering in harmonies (measure 89). Each voice part then develops melodically towards well-shaped harmonic statements (measures 87 and 90).

![Figure 19. Nancy Telfer, “Butterfly,” mm. 79-91, used by permission, earthsongs copyright 1992.](image)

When writing close harmony and tone clusters, Telfer prepares each voice part through easy voice-leading, as “it is quite difficult for singers to move by leap into the harmony of a minor second or a major seventh” (Telfer 1993, 20). An example for this writing approach can be found in “Kyrie” from *Missa Brevis* (1983) wherein all voices sing in unison and then fan out stepwise to a cluster chord (Figure 20).
The same approach may be seen in the opening of “Sicut Cervus Desiderat” (2000) (Figure 21).

Figure 21. Nancy Telfer, “Sicut Cervus Desiderat,” mm. 1-5.
3.3.4 Vocal Appropriateness

“Not every choral composer is also a singer. Telfer comes at it from both sides—she writes in a way that, although the music is challenging, is approachable” (Meredith, interview, July 5, 2017).

Telfer believes that her music “supports healthy singing because it is usually vocally conceived” (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017). Her experience and training as a choral singer informs her approach to setting music for voices:

it is healthy vocal writing, and parts that move in all of the sections…she understands the choral experience as she sang in choirs herself, and she can explain the compositional side of it from a singer’s perspective. That makes it so much more meaningful (Meredith, interview, July 5, 2017).

Her music promotes healthy singing by way of bringing out the natural qualities of the voice (e.g. resonance, unforced tone) while building on its technique at the same time. For instance, Telfer assigns texts with open vowels to long phrases and higher pitches to encourage freer singing. She also intersperses her more energetic pieces with the occasional long notes:

Placing a long note within each phrase gives younger and older singers an opportunity to work on the quality of tone. Using more sophisticated phrase shapes for experienced choirs helps stretch their concept of musicality and their ability to express themselves in different ways (i.e. not just using the traditional rising phrase that descends a bit at the end). (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017)

An example of this approach can be seen in “We’ll Sail Away” (2006) (Figure 22) where “stars” is sung across three bars. There, the crescendo and decrescendo remind singers to shape the phrase as well as produce good vocal tone by supporting the ascending notes.
Another example may be found in “The Blue Eye of God” (1989) (Figure 23). The descending eighth note pairs in the Soprano 1 and Alto 1 line show the higher of the two pitches being sung with “ah,” which encourages singers to prepare higher pitches with more space in their mouth and with a relaxed jaw, and ultimately singing with ease.
Telfer is known for her high-quality writing that is suitable for young voices: “She has a great understanding of the voice— a great understanding of the child’s voice for developing the head voice, (as well as) a great understanding of the high school SATB voice” (Beynon, interview, June 13, 2017). When it comes to composing for a younger age group, Telfer reminds herself:

The composer is not just composing music, she is composing music for children, and children’s voices are very different from adult voices. The range and tessitura of children’s voices certainly vary from region to region depending on the local gene pool, but the composer must always use a limited range for younger singers. As the singers grow older and become more experienced, the range is gradually extended upwards and downwards.

A good tessitura for children’s choirs is from the G above middle C to the C above. Most of the pitches should fall within the tessitura, but it is important to use pitches throughout the full range from time to time so that the quality of the voices improve with experience in the outer parts of the range and so that the music will be enhanced by the variety of colour available in different parts of the range.

It is so important not to take a chance on straining children’s voices in the vulnerable growing years. The composer must be aware of the effect of prolonged repetition of words or phrases, of extremes of range, of long passages consisting entirely of a single vowel sound, and of continuously loud or continuously soft passages. The composer must write music which develops the voice instead of destroying it. (Telfer 1993, 20)

Telfer recommends that composers seek more information about the voice from good choral conductors and vocal educators who can provide quick suggestions, such as not writing long notes with consonants and awareness of tessitura:

Even if they are good composers, they may not know how the voice works. When a composer visits a rehearsal (before they have written a piece of music and trying to learn how the choir works), they need to sit behind the conductor and hear what
the conductor hears. They can then listen to the whole thing, see things, without asking questions (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017).

In order to evaluate the quality of their own writing, Telfer believes that composers need to sing the music themselves. She also encourages exchange of information on vocal production: “Vocal production is different in different cultures because of different aesthetic cultural values and also because the physical formation of the body parts that affect vocal quality is different. Each culture has some advantages and some innate problems” (Telfer, interview, March 14, 2015).

3.3.5 Creating Imagery and Acoustical Effects

Telfer’s music challenges singers to explore the spectrum of their vocal tone; she believes that “many singers are willing to create sound effects with their voices or bodies” (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017). According to Victoria Meredith:

Telfer would often use non-traditional sounds (like in “Blue Eye of God”) and that appeals to me, and I find it is interesting to an audience to hear it as well. They are interesting challenges. When you’re working with university music majors, you want to keep teaching and challenging them, so I find that her music is very good for doing that— in challenging them and stretching their ability. (Meredith, interview, July 5, 2017)

Telfer provides descriptive words and directions in her music to give singers a mental image of the piece. She believes that “singers react well to suggestive mind images and can create their own ways of expressing the sound when they understand what emotion is needed” (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017). Meredith confirms:

She has so much mental imagery of music that she writes in the voices. I had her work with my choir before they premiered “Blue Eye of God.” She described the opening of the piece with dissonant chords as such: “There are two kinds of tone clusters— the ethereal halo effect, and knives in the air . . . this one is more like knives in the air!” It is a biting sound. She has a very interesting and descriptive
vocabulary—it helps to find the sound that she’s looking for. (Meredith, interview, July 5, 2017)

In “Dies Irae,” the second movement of Requiem Aeternam (1995), Telfer indicates “mechanical” and “cantabile” in alternation to create contrasting articulation and expression on the part of the singers (Figure 24). Singers are instructed to sing bars 15 to 21 mechanically on the text, “While our eyes have been mesmerized by the flowers and stars, we have been poisoning insects and polluting the skies,” suggesting a deadpan tone which represents human’s indifference to their destruction of nature. The repeated and stationary chords further emphasize this mechanical effect. This is followed by more passionate, cantabile singing in bars 22 to 27 on the text, “What can we plead? Innocence through ignorance? Innocence through arrogance?” The sweeping phrases, sung in unison and parallel octaves, suggests a sense of urgency coupled with a more vibrant tone.
Figure 24. Nancy Telfer, "Dies Irae," mm.15-27.
Besides descriptive performance directions, Telfer also creates imagery through the vocal setting of her music. One example is “Chasing the Northern Lights” (1997). In this piece, Telfer uses a combination of syllables, harmonic ideas, and varied tone qualities to create a musical representation of the Northern Lights. The concept was to create an abstract experience: “I was working with shapes of sounds throughout this piece rather than phrasing, rhythm, harmony, or pitch. The shapes are evocative of the Northern Lights” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017). The text consisted of syllables and vocables and were created for their sound and vocal effects. For example, “ah” produces a free and light sound, “ma” engages vocal resonance and bright tone quality, while “mo” creates a darker tone. The harmonic sections evoke washes of colour, while the contrasting polyphonic middle section creates an image of flurried streaks of colour. At certain sections, she instructs singers to cup their mouths when singing or gradually move their hands towards or away from their mouth to create a muted effect (Figure 25).

Figure 25. Nancy Telfer, “Chasing the Northern Lights,” mm.27-32, permission granted by copyright holder, Leslie Music Supply Inc.
Another example is “First Snow” (1991), which highlights the sights and sounds of nature through the use of thematic ideas, vocal sound effects, and original text (Figure 26). Telfer uses words invented by students to describe different types of snow. The different rhythmic ideas convey the many types of snow: larger snowflakes have longer note values, tinier ones are shorter, and crystallized flakes have a mixture of both short and long note values. She reminds singers: “The snow is cold, but the hearts are warm. Use a warm tone to make each phrase beautiful” (Telfer 1991). There is also a mixture of spoken and sung words. Telfer instructs singers to perform spoken words in a short and rhythmic manner, because “vowels are not stretched out as much as in warmer climates” (Telfer 1991).

Figure 26. Nancy Telfer, “First Snow,” mm.27-35.
In “The Swallow” (1992), Telfer employs an aleatoric setting for the familiar folksong and explores the idea of chance happenings in music. The piece alternates between the familiar melody and aleatoric sections, creating a contrast between fantasy and reality (Telfer 1992). The final section of the piece involves performers singing the melodic idea (consisting of six short phrases) as a four-part round. Singers repeat each phrase until the next downbeat is indicated by the conductor. This creates the effect of swallows flying towards the audience, increasing in number and sound as they get closer (Figure 27).
Figure 27. Nancy Telfer, “The Swallow,” mm.43-50, © 1992 Neil A. Kjos Music Company.
When it comes to encouraging performers and conductors to be creative, Telfer states:

Singers are more brave when it comes to aleatoric music. They can create their own ways of expressing the sound. All they need is to understand the emotion that is required; [then] they react very strongly to the emotion that is required. [It is a] different type of psychology. Along those lines, singers react well to suggestive mind images. The voice is versatile, more so than instruments. There are lots of opportunities to try out new ideas as far as trying new choral techniques and subtle details. A lot of my music is closely connected to the imagination. It loosens singers up – opens them up. They continue to move creatively in that vein. [Their different perspectives will] give different creative results. They are shaken or loosen up in a different world, freer to make new music. Give choirs a palette of colour. (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017)

Chapter 4 includes a full analysis of the pieces discussed briefly in this section.

3.3.6 A cappella Works

At the time of writing, approximately 26% of Telfer’s total choral output is made up of a cappella works. Her a cappella writing presents unique challenges that develop independence in singers. Frequent modulations in the a cappella writing require diligent listening of singers and conductor; and her penchant for homophonic textures necessitates keen attention to balance as well as to text stress and phrase shaping (Apfelstadt 2013, 32).

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5 Refer to Figure 37 and Table 1 in Section 3.7 for the quantitative data related to her choral output.
For instance, the *Missa Brevis* (1983) features frequently changing meters as well as driving, highly rhythmic passages that alternate with slowly moving lyric sections (Figure 28). The texture is primarily homorhythmic in this three-part *a cappella* piece for treble choirs; “however, interspersed within this basic texture are passages that feature short motives treated in a freely imitative fashion. Harmonic devices include clusters of successively stacked seconds and a *Sanctus* composed completely of parallel root-position triads” (Guelker-Cone, 1992, 36).

![Figure 28](image.png)

*Figure 28. Nancy Telfer, “Gloria,” from Missa Brevis, mm.45-50, permission granted by copyright holder, Leslie Music Supply Inc.*

This is similar in “Sicut Cervus Desiderat” (2000). Changing time signatures correspond to the natural flow of the text and their syllabic accents (Figure 29). “At many cadence points, the use of seconds is present. This challenges singers’ intonation, as do occasional unison passages” (Apfelstadt 2013, 31).
The middle section of this piece (Figure 30) is slower. Here, the imitative and chant-like setting breaks away from the homophony that preceded it.
A cappella music falls into a special category. The difficulty in tuning an a cappella piece is often closely related to the balance of the directional motion of the music. Rising music tends to get gradually sharper; falling music tends to gradually flatten. A mixture of rising and falling patterns in the choir as a whole and within each vocal line helps greatly to stabilize the tuning. With balanced music, the choir does not usually have to struggle to retain good intonation (Telfer, 1993, 20).

Telfer mentions that a cappella pieces are usually shorter than accompanied ones and advises conductors and educators to program a cappella music sparingly and with care: “A series of repeated pitches (can) go out of tune . . . if the choir’s intonation gets off in an a cappella piece during a performance, it is difficult to correct” (Telfer, 1993, 20).

Figure 30. Nancy Telfer, “Sicut Cervus Desiderat,” mm.36-44.
3.3.7 Works with Piano Accompaniments

Telfer has a large output of solo piano works, many of which are listed as piano examination pieces in the Royal Conservatory of Music’s Syllabi for various grade levels. Her proficiency in this respect is evident in the exciting piano accompaniments she writes in her choral music. Her depth of knowledge of both the voice and the piano can be seen in the sensitivity of her writing of choral music with piano accompaniment, making her choral compositions appealing to the musicians who perform them. “The piano part should be a work of art so that it enhances the total sound of the music, and so that the singers have some incentive to listen to the piano and to be inspired by it” (Telfer 1993, 20).

Telfer stresses the importance of the piano accompaniment in contemporary choral works:

Make sure that the singers’ opening pitches are obvious in the accompaniment. If there is any doubt about intonation in the singers’ voices, provide lots of bass sounds to help them tune more easily; high pitches are helpful to assist singers in hearing the melody line. Long notes should be supported by an accompaniment which continues to move onward. (Telfer 1988, 7)

A prime example may be seen in the opening of “Dies Irae,” the second movement of Requiem Aeternam (1995) (Figure 31).
The piano accompaniment prepares singers for the minor second dissonance in the vocal parts. The A and B-flat pitches are played separately on the lower and upper register of the piano, allowing singers to find their starting pitches accurately. This approach happens again later in the same piece (Figure 32): in bar 36, the cluster chord in the choral parts is outlined in the piano part as a broken chord. The piano accompaniment then sets up the next chord cluster for the voices by playing their exact pitches but does so an octave lower for musical interest and intensity, rather than merely providing starting notes for the singers. “The piano should provide cues which are obvious to the singer but [be] part of the natural fabric of the music” (Telfer 1993, 20).

Figure 31. Nancy Telfer, “Dies Irae,” from Requiem Aeternam, mm.1-4.
In “Agnus Dei,” the final movement of Requiem Aeternam, the singers’ long-held notes are supported by an actively flowing piano part which drives the music forward (Figure 33).
Telfer also uses the piano accompaniment to set the mood of the music before the entry of the voices: “Sometimes the accompaniment is the setting or the scenery for the words; it may provide sound effects of mood-creators. If you want to give more freedom to a melody (i.e. more rubato), use a recitative-style accompaniment” (Telfer 1988, 7).

When writing for younger singers, Telfer will occasionally double the notes of the vocal parts in the piano part. This is crucial, especially in her contemporary music, as the piano becomes a pitch reference for those who are beginning to learn part-singing.

The piano part should be relatively simple compared to an accompaniment for adult choirs. It should match the lighter quality of the voices and the simplicity of the ideas. The sound should be scored sparingly in the range where the voices are singing. (Telfer 1993, 20)

Through the simple yet effective piano writing in “Magnify,” (1992) (Figure 34) Telfer guides singers towards accuracy in pitch, rhythm, and tempo: the sustained notes mirror the vocal parts, and the repetitive E an octave higher provides a steady pulse that reminds singers of the tonality. In addition, the setting of the piano part in the upper register of the instrument complements the light vocal quality of the young singers.

Figure 34. Nancy Telfer, “Magnify,” mm. 13-16, © 1992 Neil A. Kjos Music Company.
To build intensity towards the end of the piece, the piano accompaniment is in a chordal style that covers a wide range of the piano: “Much of the piano accompaniment should include some writing in the bass range to help the tuning and to aesthetically balance the sound of the high voices” (Telfer 1993, 20). Here (Figure 35), the piano part supports the singers’ long-held notes by filling in rhythmically, and also outlines the 7/8 rhythmic pattern to ensure that singers change notes accurately.

Figure 35. Nancy Telfer, “Magnify,” mm. 65-72, © 1992 Neil A. Kjos Music Company.

Telfer approaches this from another angle in “The Dragon” (1989) (Figure 36). Although the doubling of parts between voice and piano is not as straightforward due to the vocal counterpoint, the piano accompaniment is still able to support the vocal melodic and harmonic
ideas. In bar 63, the main eighth note beats of the right hand piano part outline the opening melodic entrance of each voice part. The left hand piano part fills in any pitches of the vocal parts that are left out by the right hand. Telfer is able to combine this method of developing singers’ part-singing skills without taking away from the artistry and drama of the piece.

Figure 36. Nancy Telfer, “The Dragon,” mm. 62-67, permission granted by copyright holder, Leslie Music Supply Inc.

Telfer stresses that the younger the singers are, the more care is needed to provide efficient cues in the piano accompaniment:

If the music is difficult to tune because of dissonances or modality or other reasons, it should not continue too long without a piano interlude, even if it is just
a few notes long. This gives the singers an opportunity to hear the tuning of the piano clearly without distraction.

How much should the piano be used without the choir? Young singers do not have the patience for long introductions or interludes. All singers love to sing; they should not be left too long standing silently. Inexperienced singers need to sing fairly continuously because they have difficulty finding the timing and pitch of their entries. If they sing fairly continuously, their sound quality and musicality improves as the piece goes along and their confidence builds. Experienced singers find too much stopping and starting physically and psychologically tiring. (Telfer 1993, 20)

Telfer believes that singers should listen intently to the piano accompaniment’s introduction, interludes, and coda because these help the singers to understand the music as a whole and further link together the choral and accompaniment parts. “With this understanding, the choir’s entries and ending of phrases become more musical and appropriate in context to the music as an entire work of art” (Telfer 1988, 12).

When it comes to weaning the singers from reliance on the piano as an aid, Telfer mentions that “rehearsing without the piano accompaniment improves singers’ independence, general listening skills, tuning, and the singers’ relationship with the conductor. However, a good accompanist can help in other ways (e.g. just playing chords to the beats to improve precision in turning)” (Telfer, personal communication, March 24, 2018).

3.4 Composition Categories

Telfer is of the opinion that singers should experience different choral music styles from all time periods, and that good quality music is needed at all levels of education. When children work with poor quality music, they learn bad habits which lead them to sing with poor tone and without musicality and they also learn to accept and expect low standards. (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017).
Her contemporary choral writing embodies this philosophy. She writes with these values in mind and offers singers a variety of styles to explore new concepts of choral music. For example, *Steps to the Future* (1992) represents a collection of different styles of contemporary choral music addressing *aleatoric* settings, speech-based compositions, harmonic dissonances, changing time signatures, and dramatic setting of text.

Upon close examination of Telfer’s body of contemporary choral output, I have identified compositional characteristics that represent the composer’s signature style of writing: her music is text driven; it is pedagogically-based; it evokes imagery of sound, and it is appropriate for concert programming. Chapter 5 offers a conductor’s guide to a representative selection of Nancy Telfer’s choral compositions, which have been grouped into categories:

- Compositions driven and/or inspired by text
- Pedagogically-based compositions
- Compositions which evoke imagery
- Noted concert pieces

These categories form the parameters for analysis of Telfer’s music in Chapter 5. One should note, however, that each of Telfer’s choral compositions incorporates more than one of these ideas. The decision to categorize the selected repertoire is based on the predominant compositional and musical features, as well as on additional background information from the composer.

### 3.5 The Composer as Pedagogue

Telfer was an educator before she became a composer. Her passion for music education can be seen in her compositions, which are appropriate for classroom teaching: “I have always valued education. I see it as the strongest determining factor for what will happen in the future of society” (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017).

Since 1985, Telfer feels that there has been an increase in the number of Canadian composers who have become interested in composing music for teaching purposes:
This type of music is more difficult to compose than regular concert music because there are more restrictions on the criteria, but composers that are interested improve as they work at it. The future should be okay in that respect, as far as the interest is concerned (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017).

In her letter to James McCormick (1987) about composing for middle school students, Telfer mentions that it is important not to overlook young composers, “particularly in your own geographical area, who may be looking for opportunities [to compose].” She also comments that creating a body of good and newly composed music is a long-term project, but one that is much needed:

We need good repertoire readily available and directly suited to the needs of our middle school educators. You know how exciting it is to be able to work with good literature. After all, good music is at the very heart of good music education (Telfer 1987, 5).

Most importantly, Telfer believes that conductors and singers grow musically and vocally as they rehearse new music (Telfer 2005, 5). For example, Telfer wrote the music and words to “On the Back of an Eagle” (1990), which describes and expresses the fantasy and wonder of flying with an eagle. The accompaniment is smooth and suggestive and helps spark children’s imaginations (Reeve, Beatty & Shand, eds., 2012, 31). The setting of the music encourages singers to develop their skills in singing long phrases and interval leaps, within a musical and imaginative context.

Chapter 4 focuses on Telfer’s approach to choral pedagogy by presenting her philosophies and the printed materials which support them.

3.6 Responding to Changing Times

Much of Telfer’s choral output was shaped by issues in society current at the time, particularly those happening in the choral scene during each decade (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017). She observed trends in the choral scene and wrote music that filled a void in voicing, subject matter, or emotional content.
I have been affected by many diverse people and events in my life, including the world-music movement and aboriginal music. There is a large mix of influences that shape any composer’s creative output, including lifestyle, family, people one happens to meet, other musicians, conversations…anything that starts you thinking in different directions. (Hopkins 2015, 13)

Ultimately, her music represented a response to the choral, musical, and social concerns around her. She pointed out, however: “I was writing as a response to all those changes but without necessarily always being conscious of this at the time” (Telfer, interview, October 4, 2016).

### 3.6.1 Choral Concerns

Telfer was committed to writing choral music that was appropriate for specific voicings, especially if there was a lack of repertoire in that area. For example, she wrote music that sounded right with high voices which could be sung by either women’s, boys’, or girls’ choirs, rather than writing music that would only suit one of those. “Missa Brevis (1983) was the most famous example of that. I remember being in Europe—someone in Sweden mentioned that it was a standard repertoire for many female choirs in the country” (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017).

She also wrote music for young male students in the process of voice change. She believed that it was possible to have more advanced music available for these singers who may not feel vocally successful during voice change due to pitch limitations. Examples of pieces written specially for this reason include “Doubletalk” (1984), “Doubletalk II” (1987), and “Bay Dooka” (1992). The words for these pieces were set to a three-line staff and spoken using a voice that is high-pitched, medium-pitched, or low-pitched. The challenge lies in the variety of rhythmic patterns, articulation, and dynamics required of the singers.

*Requiem Aeternam* (1995) is suitable for advanced women’s choir because of its technical challenges and concept which requires emotional maturity of the performers. There are also contrasting sections in each of the five movements, from lyrical and anguished to rhythmic and joyful.
Telfer believed that singers should be introduced to the concept of contemporary choral music from a young age. She wrote “If You Should Meet a Crocodile” (1987) and the collection of six pieces from *Steps to the Future* (1992) that featured aleatoric singing, dissonance, and mixed meters in a systematic approach that was both musical and educational.

Telfer acknowledged the improvement in the quality of choral music for children; she felt that many decades ago the music was not always written in an appropriate way for this age group.

Some music tended to be music (for adults) that was voiced in the range of children’s voices. Then composers started to write more appropriate music for children. As society changes, different needs arise in educational materials, so composers need to adjust to those changes. (Telfer, interview, March 14, 2015)

3.6.2 Musical Concerns

Telfer did not entirely adhere to the musical trends of society at any given time. She preferred to identify a void and write music to fill it. Therefore, her body of composition is a response to what she deemed the role of choral music should be at the time: providing high quality and appropriate text, delivering well-crafted melodies for singers, developing part-singing skills of young singers, setting music with vocal appropriateness, and exploring the tone and colour of the human voice. The characteristics of the composition style introduced in Section 3.3 addresses these areas of concern in detail. For example, she composed “Bay Dooka” (1992) for boys with changing voices because she felt that there was a lack of choral literature for singers facing such vocal challenges. She also introduced, in small increments, new contemporary styles to audiences:

When I first started writing music (circa 1980), audiences could only tolerate short pieces in a contemporary style, so I did not write longer pieces (but broke up long pieces into short sections) until much later when audiences were able to handle them. (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017)

Telfer’s compositions also served as a response to choral conductors who were keen on trying new choral ideas. As more Canadian choirs traveled out of the country on tour, “Canadian
performers were eager to display music they relate to (which was a shift from British to Canadian and multi-cultural music)” and tried to define Canadian identity in their musical offerings (Telfer, interview, October 4, 2016). She also listened to concerns of all types from choral conductors and teachers, which helped her to match up repertoire difficulty with the conductor’s understanding of new music.

3.6.3 Social Concerns

A portion of Telfer’s writing is a response to issues pertaining to the environment, war, and religious faith. “The Blue Eye of God” (1989) and Requiem Aeternam (1985) are examples of pieces that expressed people’s fears for the environment. Telfer points out its relevance in the present times: “Now, people are still concerned, but not fearful. There is a sense of urgency. So, people want to hear such music, and sing such music, and be a part of it” (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017). In contrast, Telfer also wrote music such as “When a Child Lights a Candle” (1985) that gives hope in times when peace seemed inconceivable.

Telfer wrote music using sacred text that expressed faith from her own perspective. One example is “Kyrie” from Missa Brevis (1983): “What is usually written and set beautifully, I have done pleading and urgently for our times. Lord have mercy now” (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017). Requiem Aeternam (1985) contained both sacred text as well as Telfer’s own interpretation of it in English: “Throughout the music both sacred and secular images are included to link humanity’s understanding of nature with an understanding of the spiritual” (Telfer 1995). “Ninety-Nine Names of God” (1985) was written to open up people’s minds to new spiritual insights (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017).

Telfer is of the opinion that composers need to stay abreast on societal changes in order to create music that is flexible in part allocation and that is pertinent to the students’ present living situation:

The demography of middle school classes has changed dramatically. Now more cultures and languages are represented in each class. In some classes, the facility with English/French is not as high because of recent immigrants. These changes can all be used as positive factors if a music teacher (and composer) is creative
and flexible. A wider variety of styles is needed. There are lots of opportunities to make use of musical features that are present in many cultures (e.g. ostinatos) rather than restricting music to a narrower, more specialized perspective. (Telfer, interview, March 14, 2015)

Telfer acknowledges that a very high percentage of school choral directors recognize the importance of Canadian choral compositions and are eager to use it with their choirs and choral classrooms:

They feel a real pride in being able to use Canadian materials and they want their students to have an experience of this part of the Canadian culture. This indicates a definite awareness of “Canadian content.” They feel that the music is a valuable asset to their own programs. Any good musical work provides a wealth of pedagogical value, and this is as true for Canadian music as for any other music. (Telfer in McCormick 1986, 103)

3.7 The Evolution of Telfer’s Compositional Style

“Over the years my work has been like an upward moving spiral, continually returning to explore melody or harmony or some other aspect again and again in more depth (but at a higher level)” (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017). Since writing her first compositions, Telfer has constantly explored different possibilities for approaching harmonies, melodies, rhythmic movement, form, texture, and text. This method has continued throughout the years as a gradual evolution:

I have had different opportunities because of the nature of various commissions over the years, and this has affected my composing. For example, in the last few years, I was commissioned to compose a set of four longer pieces for SATB and SA youth choir accompanied by piano, oboe, and flute, each piece being fifteen to twenty minutes in length. (Telfer, interview, March 14, 2015)

With each piece, Telfer experimented on something new that she had not tried before. This meant that her composition skills constantly grew, and she was able to write in different ways. Her treatment of text has evolved from using ready-made poems to creating her own, and also
branching out to non-English and sacred text through the artistic use of vocables. “Improving on old ones, and (attempt) something completely new” (Telfer, interview, June 12, 2017). She also mentioned that personal life experiences have affected her work (Telfer, interview, March 14, 2015). For example, “Butterfly” (1983) was composed while she was pregnant—her awe of human life was captured in this piece that describes the emergence of a butterfly from its cocoon (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).

Technological advances have also affected her work in the last thirty years. When she first began composing music, Telfer constantly checked on the development of music writing software to see if it would work faster than what she could write by hand. “They never got that fast. I wanted to write as much as possible and did not want to be slowed down” (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017). Eventually, she realized that the available music writing software improved dramatically to the level where it was capable of handling band music or uncomplicated popular music, but not enough for the intricacies of her writing or for the speed at which she was producing new works. The technology of music notation software has improved tremendously since, but if Telfer relied on this, her output of music would have been significantly lower: “That would have slowed me by a third. I just gave publishers my manuscripts and they processed them, which helped. But (when it came to writing pedagogy books), I never would have been able to write so many without computer data processing. It is so much faster than a typewriter!” (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017)

Figure 37 depicts the level of compositional activity by decade:
Telfer composed her largest number of works between 1980 and 1990, and her output has decreased since then. She wrote the greatest number of pieces for high voices (111 pieces for Unison, SA, SSA, and SSAA), followed by mixed voice choirs (105 pieces for SATB, and SAB).

The information above is displayed in the following (Table 1):

Figure 37. Telfer’s choral compositions by voicing and decades of composition, © 2018 Tracy Wong.
Table 1. Telfer’s choral compositions by voicing and decades of composition.

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<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unison</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-part</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>treble / SA</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td></td>
<td>7</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>SATB</td>
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<td>39</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSSAAA</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Choirs</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
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<td>(large)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 below shows that Telfer has written more pieces with instrumental accompaniment than <i>a cappella</i> pieces.

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<sup>6</sup> This total does not include individual pieces or movements that make up multi-movement works. For example, Telfer’s *The Creatures Speak*, a set of five pieces for SATB and piano, is counted as one work.
Table 2. Telfer's choral compositions by voicing and setting (a cappella or accompanied).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Voicing</th>
<th>A cappella</th>
<th>Accompanied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unison (37)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-part (31)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA or 2-part mixed</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Choirs</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA or 2-part treble</td>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-part (41)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSA</td>
<td>21</td>
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<td>SAB</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSA or SAB</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-part (80)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSAA</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SATB</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TTBB</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-part (1)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSSAAA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-movement / large / anthology /</td>
<td>Unison / SA / 2-part treble</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tables 1 and 2, and Figure 37 in this dissertation are derived from the author’s unpublished “Compilation of Nancy Telfer’s Choral Compositions” (2016).

### 3.8 Summary

Nancy Telfer’s compositional style is based her philosophy that choral music should encourage performers to experience success in their musical development and their performance, and that any composition should have a balance of artistry, pedagogy, and accessibility. Her process of composition shows sensitivity in writing with the performers in mind. She does this by ensuring her music provides high-quality texts, contains well-crafted melodies and part-writing, and encourages performers to be creative. She also takes great care to ensure that the setting of her music is vocally appropriate for the intended singers, supported with appropriate and idiomatic piano accompaniments. Telfer composes as a response to changing times, resulting in a style that constantly evolves. At the end of the day, the educational and artistic aspects of her works help both conductors and singers achieve musical competency and artistry in performance.
Chapter 4
Nancy Telfer’s Choral Pedagogy

This chapter explains Telfer’s pedagogical philosophy in detail and focuses on the materials that support that philosophy. Her viewpoint is rooted in the idea that singers should acquire a complete understanding of their voices and the musical skills that support its development. In order to assist singers in developing their skills, Telfer emphasizes the importance of enhancing one’s performance through a solid foundation in vocal technique, quality repertoire selection, effective rehearsal techniques, and creative and systematic approach to music literacy. In addition, this chapter provides Telfer’s view on the role of the conductor-educator in the singers’ vocal development.

4.1 Nancy Telfer’s Pedagogical Philosophy

Telfer believes that singers should have a comprehensive understanding of their voices: “All singers should learn the basic necessities of voice in detail, and they should also know about their own voices and how to use them” (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017). She believes that the fundamentals of the singing voice include correct pronunciation of consonant and vowels, resonance, and healthy singing. Conductor-educators must be knowledgeable about each of these in order to guide their singers to succeed:

When the singers are not doing well, it is usually the conductor’s fault, so he/she should make changes with themselves first before making changes with the singers (in terms of) posture, conducting, tuning, verbal instructions, and rehearsal pacing. (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017).

Telfer is of the opinion that there needs to be a greater emphasis on the aesthetic understanding of choral pedagogy as well as a balance of pedagogy and artistry in the choral setting:
That is the fastest route to teaching a piece. All information (should be introduced) at the beginning of the teaching process (such as articulation and phrasing). If (singers) knew the song is about a river, they would sing in *legato*. This also affects how fast they learn. (Telfer, personal communication, August 12, 2017)

Telfer believes that “singers need to learn to take responsibility for their own contributions to the choir, operating as individuals and as team players simultaneously” (Telfer, interview, October 4, 2016). Good teaching on the part of the choral educator that utilizes appropriate pedagogical materials to support the singers’ overall musical development facilitates this. When new skills are acquired, “singers learn how to enjoy music more” (Telfer, interview, October 4, 2016).

### 4.2 Telfer’s Pedagogical Materials

Telfer has written nine pedagogy books and numerous scholarly articles\(^7\) that support her philosophy of choral pedagogy. Table 3 shows a list of Telfer’s choral pedagogy books:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Sub-title or Description</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Contemporary Warmups</em> – ideas for choral conductors and solo singers</td>
<td>Tone production, flexibility, breathing, ear training.</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Leslie Music Supply, Inc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^7\) Refer to Chapter 2 for a list of these articles.
Telfer’s method books and scholarly articles cater to the accessibility of skill for all people. These materials indicate that elements of her pedagogical approach could be extracted and adapted to suit the individual and situation at hand. The books clarify issues of choral pedagogy and offer multiple strategies to address them. Both teachers and students can utilize sections of the books according to their own needs without having to go through the entire book in order to understand a particular chapter or topic. Telfer’s method books include additional tips, guidelines, and strategies for teaching (e.g., singing in tune, developing the upper range of the voice, week-by-week warmups and rehearsal plans, and addressing the choral culture in rehearsal and performance settings) as well as offering general tips and reminders on efficient and productive rehearsal techniques (usually listed in point form at the end of a chapter). These give instructors/conductors a clear “blueprint” for supporting the type of learning processes that Telfer advocates for choristers.
4.2.1 Background of Telfer’s Pedagogy Materials

Telfer created nine choral pedagogy books in response to choral educators who needed greater support for teaching choral music more effectively in classrooms. “Before [these books], this was not happening [and there were no resources]” (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017).

The titles of Nancy Telfer’s pedagogy books imply the desired outcome of success (Successful Warmups, Successful Sight-Singing, Singing High Pitches with Ease), while the related subtitles suggest the clear objectives and target readers of each book (Strategies & Solutions for Conductors, Conductors-in-Training, & Voice Teachers, A Creative, Step-By-Step Approach).

All of the materials support Telfer’s passion for enabling choral singers to succeed through structured pedagogy, emphasizing the role of teachers and institutions in the learning process.

Telfer focuses on developing musical literacy and vocal technique, aimed at singers between the ages of seven and nineteen with limited vocal technique and music reading skills, and who are singing in a school or community choir. The intended learning outcome or goal is for choristers to develop increased aural awareness as well as greater proficiency in vocal technique and music reading.

The books include detailed rehearsal technique and teaching ideas and were written in a way that “a teacher in some remote area who had never had the opportunity to study with a good professor could still understand everything that was in each book and use it with their own students” (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017). Telfer was aware of the need for band teachers who are starting to form choirs to have these books. Therefore, she designed the books’ offerings in a format that was similar to that of a method book for band music. Telfer’s experience of playing French horn as an undergraduate at Western University meant that she was familiar with the format of method books for band music: “So [I made] small adjustments [for my books], and it would work well for [these new] choral conductors” (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017).

Telfer made sure that her books provided ample options and ideas for choral-educators of different levels to address a variety of challenges in the choral rehearsal: “Everyone knows or figures out something different in music, so I wanted these books to have many things in them that would be useful for our best conductors but would also work for beginning conductors”
Most of the activities shown in the books are either ones that Telfer developed herself, or modifications of techniques that were evolving at the time, which then guaranteed that much of the content would be brand new to all conductors. “The idea is to share the information as easily as possible to as many people as possible” (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017). Before sending the manuscripts of her books to the publisher, Telfer shared them with several educators to obtain their feedback and to ensure the usability and accessibility of her books:

I had one outstanding conductor and one beginning conductor read everything to make sure everything was understandable and to add anything that they thought should be expanded. That was my test, and that made a difference. While I was writing [the books], I was also thinking about those tests – so those would be my goals. (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017)

Telfer herself wrote every musical excerpt and exercise in each of her method books. She included text in singing examples in order to make the excerpts as similar as possible to a piece of choral music. Her excerpts and exercises are flexible enough for singers of all voice types: single line melodies can be sung in unison, at the singer’s comfortable octave; SATB exercises may be sung in unison or in two parts (by singing the soprano and alto parts only, and tenors and basses have the option of singing these an octave lower) (Telfer 2005, 4).

4.2.2 Description of Telfer’s Pedagogy Materials

Successful Sight-Singing (1992, 1993), Successful Warmups (1995, 1996), and Successful Performing (2005) all come in Conductor’s and Singer’s Editions. Each series consists of two books. (Table 3) Telfer states that “each singer should have a copy of the Singer’s Edition . . . so that they do not have to share; they can concentrate on the concepts without distractions from the proximity of a partner” (Telfer 2005, 4). She recommends the following:

In each class period, use the Singer’s Edition before working on repertoire (e.g. warmups, then sight-singing practice, then performance practice). Introduce a new set of tips each week:
1. In the first period each week, teach all the tips using the instructions in the Conductor’s Edition. Then quickly review these tips in the other class periods that week. This method starts each week with a strong sense of purpose and then reinforces each tip later in the week. Or,

2. In the first period each week, teach half of the tips. Teach the other half later in the week. This takes less time and introduces something new and interesting in two different periods. (Telfer, 2005, 4)

The Singer’s Edition provides a short weekly musical example that students may practice on their own, and the Conductor’s Edition provides instructions so that each tip may be used effectively. Telfer reminds conductors to reinforce these ideas by using them alongside the repertoire that is being rehearsed. The additional rehearsal suggestions included in the Conductor’s Edition bring “students up to a higher level of success” (Telfer 2005, 4).

Regarding the definition of “success,” as indicated on the titles of these books:

> Success can be [approached from the perspective of]: how they [the singers] do it, or how they feel about it. [It is success] when an individual continues to keep improving their own skills within a group, understands music better, and [continuously] expands their enjoyment of music and gets hooked on music for life. (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017)

*Contemporary Warmups* (1985), *Singing in Tune* (2000), and *Singing High Pitches with Ease* (2003) are handbooks for choral educators. Unlike *Successful Sight-Singing* (1992, 1993), *Successful Warmups* (1995, 1996), and *Successful Performing* (2005), these books address particular areas of interest within the topic. Designed for choral educators, they provide solutions and quick references to topics that will be the most useful for their particular singers.

Telfer believes that “it is not necessary to approach the method books chronologically” (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017). She structured the books in a friendly way for educators: the books are all cross-referenced so that a teacher can start at any page or find something of interest in the index and take out just that information from the book. “Often times, teachers may just need something really simple when they are out of ideas” (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017). The lesson suggestions contained in the method books are set up fairly simply, so that a teacher could
also assign a student to give instructions for warmups or sight-singing lessons. This creates varieties and possibilities in learning methods in the classroom, especially when there might be reduced hours per week in the arts programs of some schools.

Telfer’s choral pedagogy output addresses her key interests in enhancing choral performance, developing vocal technique, and developing musical literacy. Although each of her method books is dedicated to a specific pedagogical concern, there are overlaps among them, as Telfer suggests that one element benefits the other. For example, some matters of choral performance can be addressed with proper vocal technique, and vocal technique can be improved by selecting appropriate performance repertoire. Her method books on performance also contain tips for teaching sight-singing.

The following sections will focus on Telfer’s choral pedagogy goals in detail—enhancing choral performance, developing vocal technique, and developing musical literacy—with reference to her pedagogy materials.

### 4.3 Enhancing Choral Performance

Telfer believes that “every aspect of performance is inter-connected, so all things (tuning, tone quality, etc.) need to be addressed separately and also as part of the whole. That means that it is productive to teach multiple skills simultaneously at times” (Telfer, interview, October 4, 2016). This is seen in the contents of *Successful Performing* (2005), which covers the following topics:

1. Choosing music that will inspire a choir to perform their best.
2. The conductor’s interpretation.
4. Rehearsal tips for conductors.
5. Bringing out the potential of your singers.
6. Planning a successful concert.
7. Getting the choir psyched up for the concert.
8. After the concert: looking to the future.

Telfer reasons that conductors should consider the singers’ academic, artistic, emotional, and psychological aspects of performance in their teaching. This can be addressed through
appropriate repertoire selection, effective rehearsal techniques, and understanding the role of the conductor-educator.

4.3.1 Repertoire Selection

As a music educator, Telfer believes that students of all ages deserve to have music that is of high quality:

Giving poorly composed music to students is like feeding them junk food. There is never enough rehearsal/classroom time, so every moment should be used to experience good quality music in some way or another. Students tend to be more impressionable than adults. This means that every detail of a children's piece (in both the vocal and accompaniment parts) affects the children more strongly. If any detail of the music is not musical, then it works against the children's musical experience. (Telfer, interview, March 14, 2015)

Telfer believes that choosing appropriate music will inspire choristers to perform at their best, as high-quality music enlightens singers as they rehearse and perform. She suggests using reliable sources: publishers with a choral collection that is consistent in the type and quality of music published; pieces by composers that conductors respect; and recordings and concert programming of reputable choirs. She also encourages conductor-educators to attend events where they can find information about new publications:

Participate in a choral reading session. As you read through the choral music, you can judge the difficulty level of each piece and get an idea of the overall sound. Concerts at music conventions will give you an opportunity to hear a variety of repertoire. Conductors try to use their best repertoire when they perform in front of their colleagues. Conventions also provide good opportunities to exchange ideas with other conductors. Take advantage of sharing experiences and repertoire. (Telfer 2005, 6)

It is also beneficial to be a member of an organization for conductors and music educators such as the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA) and Choral Canada. “Some organizations
have selected repertoire lists prepared by members and conductors of honour choirs that may be suitable for your choir” (Telfer 2005, 7).

Telfer urges conductor-educators to concentrate on selecting repertoire that has the proper voicing and ranges for their choirs. “The repertoire must be of a good quality. If not, it works against the singers, making it difficult for them to learn choral skills at a higher level” (Telfer, interview, October 4, 2016). She stresses that it is important not to confuse difficulty level with the quality level. “Easy pieces can have a high-quality level, and all difficult music is not necessarily good music. It is the conductor’s job to determine which pieces are worthwhile” (Telfer 2005, 7).

One method that conductors can use for selecting quality repertoire is to look for any problems in the printed music itself. Telfer encourages conductors to seek interesting and meaningful lyrics that are appropriate for the performers and the audience, interesting melodies, comfortable vocal ranges, adequate cues for entries, and accompaniment that is artistic and appropriately matched with the lyrics (Telfer 2005, 8). Then, conductors can play the pieces on the piano to listen to the overall sound and discover special features of each piece: “Do you like the effect of the music? Does it sound interesting and artistic? Is there a pattern that makes the harmonic movement sound interesting?” (Telfer 2005, 8) When it comes to arrangement of folksongs, Telfer believes that a good arrangement should retain and enhance the original spirit of the folksong (Telfer 2005, 8).

Telfer also encourages conductors to examine choral parts for craftsmanship: “if each choral part is musically written, the performers learn from the music itself and sing more musically” (Telfer, interview, October 4, 2016) but “if the parts are poorly crafted, your singers will have difficulty making the music sound good in performance” (Telfer, 2005, 9). She suggests that melodically-based music is easier for children than harmonic music because children can follow their own melody. With harmonic music, they can easily become lost in the harmony and start singing another pitch in the chord. Youth and adults find harmonic music easier than polyphonic music. Perhaps their “herd instinct” is further developed and they find it more natural to harmonize. (Telfer 2005, 11)
The artistry of the accompaniment also serves to determine the quality of the repertoire. Telfer encourages conductors to look for an accompaniment that encourages a musical performance from the choir, as it can enhance or destroy a good choral setting. This is dependent on the experience of the singers; a contrasting accompaniment can be distracting for inexperienced singers but is aesthetically interesting for experienced singers (Telfer 2005, 11). Also, styles of accompaniment are so varied that each style must be studied and appreciated for its own merits (Telfer 2005, 9). In the end, the real test of a good piece of choral music is time:

A piece of music that is artistically presented and has meaningful lyrics becomes more and more interesting as you rehearse it. If you take the time to choose your repertoire carefully, you will save a great deal of time and sorrow during your rehearsals. (Telfer 2005, 9)

Telfer believes that singers in a choir will also improve quickly when they are given the opportunity to work on several pieces at different difficulty levels:

Easy music gives the singers an opportunity to improve tone quality, breathing, precision, etc. Difficult music requires more concentration and encourages singers to be self-disciplined to craft the finer details of the music. Some music helps singers to become more successful with both technical and musical elements. (Telfer 2005, 10)

Telfer points out that the difficulty of a piece can be affected by the lyrics, “especially with singers who do not have as much experience with language (e.g. younger singers)” (Telfer 2005, 10). Other times, a piece may be difficult because “the technical aspects of the pitches, rhythms, or harmonies challenge the ears of the singers . . . or the pitches and rhythms in a piece may be easy, but the music may have difficult vocal challenges . . . or can be challenging in an aesthetic sense” (Telfer 2005, 11-12).

It is imperative to select repertoire that helps singers’ vocal production to improve, as good choral repertoire is crafted specially for the voice. Telfer states that poor quality repertoire works against the voice by using
inappropriate ranges and tessituras, short vowels on high pitches, awkward diphthongs, shapeless phrasing, poor timing of breaths, melodies which encourage swooping, and melodic lines which are not very kind to the voice. Every time a conductor uses poor quality repertoire, it destroys some of the work they have been doing to build up the voices through warmups. Then they have to spend time re-teaching the good habits. (Telfer 1995, 244)

In terms of programming for a choral concert, “a good concert program is like a good piece of music: it needs variety and unity” (Telfer 2005, 13). Telfer urges conductors to think about their singers’ experience in this respect:

Many choirs enjoy preparing music that is new to them, but it is also good for a choir to repeat some familiar music because it solidifies their confidence and provides a different kind of pleasure for the singers. There is also the opportunity to bring the piece to a higher level of performance. However, when a piece is performed too often in concert, the singers do not listen as carefully, and they may grow tired of it. (Telfer 2005, 13)

Telfer also encourages conductors to think about the reaction of the audience: “Balance the number of pieces with a familiar style with those that have a style that will be new to the audience. An audience enjoys hearing familiar music or a familiar style, but new sounds add excitement to the program” (Telfer 2005, 13).

Telfer points out that one should also consider repertoire that would make good use of the acoustics of the performance venue:

Slow phrases that end with long notes project beautifully in a church with live acoustics. For an outdoor concert, use lighter music that has a fairly simple form with some repetition so that all of the details will not be lost as the sound dissipates in the open space. When performing in a shopping mall, choose pieces with characteristics that can cut through poor acoustics (e.g. rhythmic, not too soft, melodies that project easily, etc.), and request in advance that any music on a public sound system be turned off. (Telfer 2005, 14)
In essence, Telfer believes that good repertoire selection is part of good pedagogy, because “students can learn as much directly from the music itself as they do directly from the teacher. This facilitates and accelerates the educational process” (Telfer, interview, March 14, 2015).

Telfer chose a collection of her choral compositions for the Successful Sight-Singing Performance Selections, a series of concert pieces that correlated with the Milestones in the Successful Sight-Singing books (Milestone 1 is the easiest; Milestone 8 is the most difficult).

This series includes music of high quality from Renaissance to the Twentieth Century and multi-cultural music for a variety of voicings. At the front of each Performance Selection are written notes for the singers. This information is designed to help them understand the music better and to perform it better. At the end of each piece are rehearsal tips for the conductor. Topics include: vocal production, rehearsal techniques, conducting tips, teaching strategies, and suggestions for interpretation. (Telfer 1995, 246)

One example of this series is Steps to the Future (1992). Chapter 5 provides more information on this collection and includes in-depth analysis of the individual pieces within the collection.

4.3.2 Rehearsal Technique

Effective rehearsal technique is a recurring topic in Telfer’s books, which suggests its importance in supporting the learning process of developing choristers and the repertoire at hand. This includes good warmup preparations, effective rehearsal of a new piece, having a solid accompanist and good quality accompaniment, and seating arrangement.

4.3.2.1 Good Warmup Preparations

Telfer believes that effective rehearsals begin with good warmup preparations—warmups should prepare the singers’ minds, ears, and voices for the repertoire they will rehearse. Specific musical elements from the choral repertoire should be extracted and used during each warmup session (Telfer 2005, 150), which means that specially designed exercises should be similar to the repertoire to facilitate transferal of the skills to repertoire (Telfer, interview, October 4, 2016). Details on Telfer’s warmup strategies can be found in Section 4.4.1: Warmup Preparations.
4.3.2.2 Effective Rehearsal of a New Piece

When introducing a new piece, Telfer suggests that conductors place stronger singers who are fast learners in positions where they can influence the most singers: “you can change the seating later to get the best possible sound for your concert” (Telfer 2005, 151). Conductors should also begin working with the aspect of the piece that will help singers learn the music most quickly. For example, “if rhythms are the major force within a piece, begin working on them first” (Telfer 2005, 151). Also, any errors in pitches and rhythm should be corrected as soon as possible while the singers are still flexible with the music (Telfer 2005, 151). Telfer provides these additional tips for first rehearsals (Table 4):


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Musical Idea</th>
<th>A Good Strategy for the First Rehearsal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Melody</td>
<td>Beginning with the first few phrases, work with the spirit of the melody as your choir learns the pitches and rhythms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhythm</td>
<td>Work on the right spirit for one of the rhythmic sections that is fairly easy or repeated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form</td>
<td>Learn similar sections first. For example, learn section A, then omit section B, going directly to the next section A or A.'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texture</td>
<td>Work on a short section until the texture sounds musical.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyrics</td>
<td>Share any interesting background information about the lyrics as you look at them together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articulation</td>
<td>Learn the first phrase with appropriate articulation. Ask your singers to transfer this style to later phrases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Musical Idea</td>
<td>A Good Strategy for the First Rehearsal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamics</td>
<td>Ask your choir to observe basic dynamic markings even though they may be making some errors in pitch or rhythm. The dynamics help to give an overall idea of the spirit of the music. Errors should be corrected once the choir has read through each section.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phrasing</td>
<td>Mark all breath marks before the first reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mood</td>
<td>Read the lyrics aloud together, expressing the mood by the manner of speaking.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Telfer believes that knowledge about performance practice of the selected repertoire will motivate choristers to connect with the music they learn, which then allows opportunities for the development of the choristers’ vocal technique, musicianship, and reading skills. They may also understand the composer’s emotions or intent and relate to their own experiences, breathing life into the music (Telfer 2005, 158).

Telfer stated the following about working with children:

some teachers underestimate the emotional depth of children. Children approach emotion in a less abstract way than adults. Emotions are very real to them, but when a teacher describes an emotion, children do not necessarily feel that emotion. Before they can express that emotion in their singing, they must connect the name of the emotion to a life experience. (Telfer 2003, 71)

Telfer also reminds conductors to regularly “take rehearsal temperature” by watching choristers for reactions (e.g., fatigue, restlessness, anxiety) at various points of the rehearsal and adjust the pace and activities in the rehearsal accordingly.
4.3.2.3 Offering Variety and Good Pacing in Rehearsals

Telfer points out that singers tend to renew their energy with each new experience and change of pace. Therefore, conductors need to employ variety and good pacing to create a rehearsal that is more interesting (Telfer 2005, 163). She offers the following rehearsal tips:

1. Schedule ten or fifteen minutes for each piece. This gives enough time to produce some substantial results, but keeps the pace of the rehearsal moving, and gives the singers enough variety to keep up their interest. In a two-hour rehearsal, eight to ten short pieces can be rehearsed.
2. When rehearsing a longer work, schedule ten or fifteen minutes for each movement.
3. Rehearse pieces in an order that will contrast each piece with the next: fast and then slow, choral [homophonic] and then contrapuntal, etc.
4. Regularly change the seating position of each singer within a choral section (e.g. each alto) to encourage independence.
5. Give singers an opportunity to move physically during each rehearsal.
   Rehearse in sitting and standing positions, and use short breaks to stretch, give back massages, etc.
6. Watch your singers for reactions. Adjust the pace and the activities in the rehearsal accordingly. (Telfer 2005, 163)

Telfer believes that singers should go through five main stages of learning new music over a period of several weeks, and conductors need to listen diligently and apply the appropriate teaching methods according to those stages. According to Telfer, the five stages are:

First stage: Experiencing the general idea of the music and learning correct pitches and rhythms.
Second stage: Adding more musical details.
Third stage: Putting all the sections together to create the overall shape.
Fourth stage: Keeping details consistent.
Fifth stage: Polishing the overall effect. (Telfer 2005, 163)
Telfer points out that many conductors have the tendency to omit any one of those stages, resulting in a less satisfactory performance (Telfer 2005, 163).

4.3.2.4 Accompanist and Accompaniment

A solid piano accompanist enhances a conducive environment for learning and can assist the choir with the technical aspects of the music by emphasizing features that will help the choir (Telfer 2005, 156). In addition, a good accompaniment can help singers with cues, tempo, harmony, intonation, and articulation (Telfer 2005, 154). Telfer suggests that conductors frequently remind choristers to listen for specific aspects of the music in the accompaniment. When a conductor works closely with an accompanist, the choir may progress more quickly in rehearsals, and the concerts are much more satisfying (Telfer 2005, 155). In the early stages of the rehearsal process, Telfer suggests that the piano should be situated to help the choir as much as possible, and as the singers become less dependent upon the piano, it may be moved to a location that is suitable for the concert (Telfer 2003, 66). Telfer provides further tips for rehearsal and concert situations:

Rehearsals

- It is better if the piano is not too far from the singers who have the most difficulty tuning.
- If the entire choir has intonation difficulties, the piano may be centered in front of the choir.
- Some conductors position (the lid of) a grand piano so that the sound is projected into the choir during a rehearsal.

Concerts

- The piano should provide enough sound for the choir to tune properly.
- There should be a good balance between the choir and piano from the perspective of the audience. (Telfer 2003, 66)
As singers become more aware of the importance of the accompaniment as part of the total art form, they become more involved in the music making (Telfer 2005, 154). Telfer advises that a compromise may need to be made with the above goals, “and if a sacrifice must be made, it is good to remember that most audiences prefer good intonation to good balance” (Telfer 2003, 66).

4.3.2.5 Seating Arrangements

The responsibility for good intonation is shared between the conductor and the singers. In addition, the conductor is responsible for a good physical and psychological environment to make good intonation easier to accomplish (Telfer 2000, 69). During rehearsals, Telfer states that a conductor may wish to use a formation and seating plan designed to help intonation, specifically, a curved seating formation:

Sound travels in straight lines. When the sound is projected from a singer’s mouth, it tends to travel forward in a funnel shape. As one singer sings, the singers on either side can hear the edges of the funnel (Figure 38) When the choir is seated in a curved formation, the funnels overlap more, and singers farther apart can hear each other’s voices better (Figure 39). This, of course, helps more singers to tune more easily with each other.

Figure 38. Nancy Telfer, Singing in Tune, p. 69, © 2000 Neil A. Kjos Music Company.
Sometimes, singers are not able to stand shoulder to shoulder due to limited space in rehearsals and concert. In this case, Telfer suggests singers turn slightly toward the center (Figure 40).

The head of each singer should be facing the same direction as the body, even though it may not be facing the conductor. If the face is turned sideways, the neck will be tense. A singer’s face should be in line with the body, but the eyes may turn toward the conductor. (Telfer 2000, 69)

It is also better to have singers sit in several long, curved rows than many short rows (Figure 41).
Figure 42 shows the general seating arrangement used by SATB choirs:

![Diagram of SATB seating arrangement]

Figure 42. Nancy Telfer, *Singing in Tune*, p. 70, © 2000 Neil A. Kjos Music Company.

Telfer is agreeable with this formation for several reasons:

1. Because of the nature of the vocal types, many sopranos and tenors have a tendency to go sharp, and many altos and basses have a tendency to go flat. If sopranos and tenors are placed together, they tend to “encourage” each other to go sharp, while altos and basses “encourage” each other to go flat. When sopranos and basses are placed together, they tend to balance their natural tuning tendencies and can stay in tune more easily. The same is true for altos and tenors.

2. Sopranos and basses form the harmonic framework in music that is harmonically based. If these singers are close together, it is easier for them to solidify the tuning. (Telfer 2000, 70-71)

4.3.3 The Role of the Conductor-Educator

In her pedagogy materials, Telfer highlights the significant role of the conductor-educator in developing singers’ vocal, artistic, and musicianship skills, thus bringing out the potential of the singers. She devotes a chapter of *Successful Performing: Conductor’s Edition* (2005) to also explain the role of the conductor in building an ensemble that works well together, which in turn motivates individual singers in the choir.
Telfer believes that the conductor-educator is the main support of the developing chorister’s process of learning. When addressing the development of skills, Telfer suggests conductors work with choristers in three areas: awareness (choristers should learn to identify problems as they occur), analysis (after developing knowledge of the causes of problems, choristers can learn how to determine the reason for specific issues in a place of music), and correction/prevention (choristers can learn strategies that will help them correct a problem or even prevent such a situation from arising in the future) (Telfer 2000, 5).

In order to successfully convey the style of any choral piece to the singers, a conductor must often act as a detective by searching for clues in each detail of the music. Telfer believes that “by combining the clues with general knowledge, the conductor can better interpret the music. (And) if a conductor understands the music before presenting it to the choir, the singers will learn the music more quickly” (Telfer 2005, 15). Telfer provides a quick checklist on interpretation for conductors:

1. Read the title and the lyrics first to find the most obvious clues.
2. Connect any background information to the music by determining the musical time period of the piece and finding the general characteristics present in the music. Also, examine the style of the composer and look for any traits indicative of the composer’s nationality.
3. Determine the main musical element and examine it in detail. This includes:
   a. Melody
   b. Harmony
   c. Texture
   d. Structure
   e. Phrasing
   f. Rhythms
   g. Tempo
   h. Articulation
   i. Unity
   j. Time Signatures
   k. Musical form
1. Dynamics
   m. Tonality and Modality
   n. Examine the artistic contribution of the accompaniment. (Telfer 2005, 15)

A conductor-educator with good rehearsal technique will yield a productive rehearsal. This is addressed in the previous section: Section 4.3.2 Rehearsal Technique.

Telfer urges conductors-educators to identify their strengths and weaknesses and to keep a balanced rehearsal schedule:

   It is easy to work hard at your favourite aspect of the music and ignore other elements. For example, a performance that is beautifully expressive is not a great performance unless the choir sings in tune, but a choir that has remarkable tuning does not create a great performance unless they also sing musically. (Also), encourage singers to take individual responsibility for each performance. The success of a performance is then the success of each member of the choir. (Telfer 2005, 164)

In order to bring out the potential of singers, conductors are required to build an ensemble that works well together: “Music is a holistic experience. Everything is related. When every member of an ensemble works together, an energy field is created that can be so powerful that it makes the rehearsal or performance unbelievably exciting” (Telfer 2005, 168).

Conductors are able to provide a positive psychological environment by being personable, respectful, not overloading choristers with instructions, using a pleasant speaking voice, and balancing hard work with more relaxing activities (Telfer 2005, 168). When giving directions to the choir, conductors should use positive words that express the nature of good ensemble effort (e.g., cooperative, sensitive, supporting, inspiring) and let choristers know how much they have improved. Telfer also suggests the following:

   1. Set goals that your choir can achieve, but make each goal challenging enough that the choir will have a feeling of accomplishment.
2. Keep your standards consistent. It is much easier to sustain a good reputation than to create it.

3. Do not waste time explaining the reason behind every concept or instruction in detail, but there are times when an explanation will take your singers to a higher level. (Telfer 2005, 168)

When it comes to motivating individual singers in the choir, Telfer reminds conductors that each person has some special talent and that a good musical team accentuates the strength and minimizes the weaknesses of each performer (Telfer 2005, 169). Outstanding individual musical contributions can be recognized with a few words of praise; when singers feel that their contribution is important, they will develop confidence and a positive attitude to learning, and ultimately, the level of music making rises (Telfer 2005, 169).

Telfer also suggests that the results of a chorister’s effort (e.g., good singing tone) is subconsciously affected by the subtle physical cues from the conductor in front of them:

A conductor who looks relaxed will elicit a relaxed tone quality. A conductor who appears confident assures the choir that everything is going to go well. Singers can even see the mood of the music in the posture of the conductor. Without a word, the conductor can shape the way the singers breathe, the overall rhythmic nature of a piece, and the dynamics. (Telfer 2005, 153)

As well, exemplary vocal modeling on the part of the conductor provides developing choristers with sonic references of the desired production of sound.

Section 4.4 covers Telfer’s suggestions for conductors for developing vocal technique, and section 4.5 addresses Telfer’s recommendations for developing musical literacy in detail.

4.4 Developing Vocal Technique

The study of vocal production is a discipline and an art (Telfer 1996, 4).

Telfer urges conductor-educators to think of music as a life-long activity and to remember that each voice has special natural qualities of its own: “Each voice is a signature of the person who
owns it. The conductor or voice teacher helps the singers to develop these natural qualities. The beauty of a good choral sound comes from the combination of voices within the choir” (Telfer 1995, 4).

Telfer believes that singers’ ultimate goal should be to become responsible for their own musicality and the proper use of their voice in ensemble or solo work (Brendell & Telfer 1997, 28). It is the role of the conductor-educator to cultivate this habit by providing feedback that enables singers to individually assess what they hear.

Singers of all ages have difficulty knowing when they sound good, because it sounds so different inside their head. So, they need someone to tell them when their tone improves. Then they memorize the sound and the physical sensation. Sometimes, I ask the singers to produce a bad sound briefly, just for contrast. The singers gradually become better at assessing their own voices when I give them tasks such as taking a snapshot of the sound. Each week, the singers fill in a self-assessment chart, so they are always aware of their progress. (Brendell & Telfer 1997, 28)

Telfer advocates for the singers’ overall foundation in vocal production and vocal health:

Conductors should note what vocal challenges arise in the repertoire and make sure they are covered very well in the warmups. Singers should get a well-rounded knowledge of the voice and develop skills whether or not they are demanded in the repertoire. Teachers are preparing students for a lifetime of singing. Singers should learn how to take care of their voices. Then they can do anything. (Brendell & Telfer 1997, 31)

There is a diagnostic chart in the last section in Telfer’s Successful Warmups books. This is intended to be a quick reference for choral-educators on any vocal issues which may arise in a rehearsal. Figure 43 provides an example:
Appropriate vocal modeling is helpful in conveying the conductor’s musical intentions. But sometimes, Telfer believes that conductors do not necessarily need a good voice to be able to teach how to develop a good voice, and modeling is not necessary if one draws on a wide variety of methods to teach and achieve results (Brendell & Telfer 1997, 31). She cautions that learning about the voice is not the same as imitating someone else:

Whether you have a good voice or a bad voice or even if your voice is fantastic, you do not want your singers to sound like you. As soon as you start to model, they start to pick up on your quality of voice. Learning about the voice is bringing out the best qualities in each individual’s voice, learning how the voice works and making the most of it. I see nothing wrong with doing some modeling...
occasionally. You just want to avoid excessive modeling that might cause inappropriate emulation. The conductor can model in other ways, too. The conductor’s posture, for example, makes a huge difference in the quality of the sound. (Brendell & Telfer 1997, 31)

The following sections provide details on the key areas in developing vocal technique according to Telfer’s method books and scholarly articles: effective warmups, singing in tune, and singing high pitches with ease.

4.4.1 Effective Warmups

Telfer considers warmups to be an excellent way to teach singers about vocal production for the following reasons:

1. Get the voice, ear, and mind working well quickly.
2. Introduce vocal concepts needed to improve the quality of sound.
3. Correct problems in vocal production.
4. Build up vocal endurance for strenuous rehearsals and concerts.
5. Prepare the singers for music that is vocally challenging.
6. Help the singers to establish healthy singing habits that will last them a lifetime.
7. Build discipline for group singing.
8. Make the singers more sensitive to other voices and vocal parts in the ensemble.
9. Encourage listening skills needed for choral music.
10. Help the singers to focus their attention at the beginning of the rehearsal.

(Telfer 1995, 4)

Telfer puts great effort into developing warmup exercises that go beyond understanding of the technical and pedagogical aspects of the voice. “Exercises should be musical, so that every warmup is a musical activity and not merely a technical, mechanical exercise” (Brendell & Telfer 1997, 29). She also believes:
Singers can learn most new skills and solidify familiar skills faster with exercises specially designed for that purpose than through repertoire. The exceptions would be things like pacing which require longer passages of music. Specially designed exercises should be similar to repertoire to facilitate transferral of the skills to repertoire. A good three-minute exercise saves a lot of rehearsal time that can be used for other things. (Telfer, interview, October 4, 2016)


1. A warm, full, natural sound.
2. Well-developed resonance.
3. Good projection.
4. A tone quality pleasing at all dynamic levels and throughout the entire range.
5. Vocal flexibility.
6. A sensitive ear.
7. A knowledge of good vocal health to last a lifetime. (Telfer 1995, 4)

These books are designed to be flexible enough for singers of all ages, from children’s community choirs to university choirs and soloists. Telfer also believes that warmups should not be restricted to the beginning of the rehearsal:

A short warmup in mid-rehearsal may be used just before starting on a new piece where the singers need the particular skills covered in the warmup; as a “change of pace” between pieces to freshen up the singers; while the choir is moving to a new physical formation (but be sure to select a warmup which will work well when the body is moving). (Telfer 1995, 5)

*Successful Warmups, Book 1* (1995) is an introduction to the basic foundations of singing. The warmup exercises are designed to give singers an opportunity to practice skills, week by week, in gradually more advanced aspects of singing. Singers begin by concentrating on one major concept. As well as learning how to produce the sound properly, singers learn what to listen for. Gradually they can focus on more than one thing at the same time: “Eventually they are able to
diagnose their own problems; they will notice when the choir is singing flat or not projecting, and make the appropriate adjustments” (Telfer 1995, 6).

Telfer explains how the singers learn to produce a good quality sound throughout their full range:

> Singers need to develop their mid-range pitches before they begin to work seriously on the outer parts of the range. Throughout the first year, most of the warmups are in mid-range so that the singers will have a solid foundation for building up the voice. In each following year, the beginning warmups work on the middle part of the range. The outer parts of the range are gradually introduced as the singers become more experienced. (Telfer 1995, 7)

*Successful Warmups, Book 2* (1996) is a review of the foundations offered in Book 1, but from a different perspective. It reinforces the work on basic vowels and consonants, works in more detail on short vowels and diphthongs, teaches the techniques needed for more difficult music with leaps and melismas, opens up the voice to the use of different timbres, and uses a more detailed approach to other aspects of vocal production (Telfer 1996, 4).

Telfer states that every warmup exercise in the *Successful Warmups* books is a lesson in aesthetics, because the process of learning about vocal production is an aesthetic process: “The singers are learning how to make something beautiful, how to appreciate beauty, how to understand the aspects of beauty in tone quality, in articulation, etc.” (Telfer 1996, 5).

The following are some of Telfer’s tips for effective teaching strategies in warmups:

1. Encourage singers to take their warmup books home and work on the warmups by themselves.
2. Singers use better vocal production when they are standing. Slowly build up the singers’ capacity to sing in a standing position for longer periods of time.
3. For *a cappella* warmups, use the piano only when necessary to teach a new warmup quickly or to temporarily help with tuning or momentum.
4. Always sing musically during the warmup. (Telfer 1995, 10)
To sustain singers’ interest and further increase vocal development in rehearsals, conductors have to avoid utilizing the same warmup exercises for months at a time.

The singers get so used to that warmup that they quit thinking about what they are doing. They are not growing with new ideas, and they are not even physically warming up their voices very much because their minds are somewhere else. (Brendell & Telfer 1997, 29)

Telfer recommends the use of physical gestures in warmups; the body works with the voice to help the voice improve. Also, body and arm movements can take away the tension from the throat.

For example, if the arms sweep down and out (followed by a) change of direction, the muscles firm up in the abdomen, giving lots of support. Also, when singers sweep their arms down, the jaw automatically drops open and the throat opens. The body tends to work all together, so one body movement causes a reaction in another part. An additional benefit is that some of these gestures get the attention and the tension away from the throat. (Brendell & Telfer 1997, 29-30)

Imagery and analogies also work in the same manner as gestures because they achieve dramatic results, work quickly, and last a long time.

For example, to help focus a breathy tone, I ask singers to imagine that they have just had a spoonful of horseradish sauce or hot peppers. They have experienced that feeling, and it is a very strong image for them. Placement is a feeling, a physical sensation: forward, in the middle, high in the mouth, or low in the mouth. Teachers should use whatever image or physical action they can to change the placement, so it is where they want it. Then singers memorize that feeling, so they can duplicate the placement and the sound at other times. (Brendell & Telfer 1997, 30)

When it comes to expecting results, Telfer believes that each warmup has short-term and long-term goals (Telfer 1995, 18). She believes in the efficiency of her materials and states that choirs will see noticeable improvements for short-term goals: “The singers will show a big
improvement at the beginning and then continue to gradually grow better and better as they work toward the long-term goals” (Telfer 1995, 18).

4.4.2 Singing in Tune

Telfer states that good intonation is an invaluable asset to the choir—it is essential for the creation of an inspiring performance:

> When a choir sings out of tune, the audience is intensely aware of the problem. Even though the phrasing may be beautifully shaped, the tone quality heavenly, and the diction excellent, intonation problems can eat away at the pleasure the audience would normally experience while hearing such accomplishments. Although some singers seem to have natural tuning skills, good intonation is actually an acquired skill: singers learn how to tune their voices. Even singers with good general intonation have general problems. (Telfer 2000, 5)

The conductor is responsible for consistently keeping the standard high in this regard:

> A conductor who constantly listens to the intonation develops a taste for well-tuned music. Whenever the choir sings out of tune, it reinforces poor tuning in the ears of the singers. When the conductor insists on good intonation, the singers become accustomed to producing and hearing music in tune; they soon learn to accept nothing but the best. (Telfer 2000, 5)

As a great deal of concentration and energy is required to practice good intonation, Telfer suggests that choirs work on this by alternating between a number of short, productive sessions on tuning and focusing on other musical works (Figure 44).
Telfer instructs conductors: “when an intonation problem has been identified, it is important to understand the cause(s) of the problem. When the strongest factor (affecting intonation) is corrected, the other factors may automatically adjust” (Telfer 2000, 7). *Singing in Tune* (2000) contains chapters which outlines strategies to correct intonation problems in a variety of situations. Figure 45 provides an example of the quick reference list in this book:
Table 1: Potential Causes of Poor Intonation and Their Solutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Topic for Solutions</th>
<th>Cause of Poor Intonation</th>
<th>Solutions Appear on Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accompaniment</td>
<td>Unaware of accompaniment</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Piano not ideally located</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accompaniment is overly complicated</td>
<td>25-26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organ registrations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acoustics</td>
<td>Poor acoustics</td>
<td>26, 72</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>Unaware of a problem</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cannot distinguish flat tuning from sharp</td>
<td>13-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conductors</td>
<td>Tense choral environment</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inappropriate gestures</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poor conductor’s posture</td>
<td>43, 71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamics</td>
<td>Singers are too loud to hear other parts</td>
<td>14, 21, 23-24, 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Faulty concept of <em>forte</em> or <em>piano</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Faulty vocal production</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Slow tempo</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changing dynamics</td>
<td>53-54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Loud, rhythmic music</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment (Physical)</td>
<td>Too hot, too cold or humid</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tight clothing or shoes</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overcrowding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flat Singing</td>
<td>Slouching body</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vocal production problems</td>
<td>17, 27, 29-36, 61-62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vowel color</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Position of the mouth</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Soft dynamics</td>
<td>47-51, 72</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diminuendo</td>
<td>53-54</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of energy</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Descending music</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seating plan</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conductor’s posture</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Telfer explains that singers may have difficulty with intonation because they are unable to hear their own voices when singing with others in a choir. She suggests that conductors give singers opportunities to hear the true sound of their voices by using “elephant ears” (Telfer 2000, 16). This works by extending the size of ears by cupping the hands behind the ears and bringing the ears slightly forward (Figure 46):
Telfer suggests the following (Figure 47) if the singer’s vocal placement is too far back in the head, causing the pitch to be flat:

a) Place the hands at the sides of the face with palms facing inwards.

b) Sing a phrase while moving the hands slowly forward.

c) Repeat without using the hands but imagining the hand movement.

d) Alternate phrases with and without hands, trying to keep the voice forward without using the hands.

Singing in Tune (2000) lists other issues that affect poor intonation and provides strategies to overcome them. Topics include posture, repertoire, navigating harmonic music, flat and sharp singing, pronunciation, singing soft and loud music, music with sustained notes, high and low pitches, ascending and descending passages, rhythmic music, and tempo. Telfer asserts that
time spent developing good intonation is a wise investment. With good tuning, singers enjoy the rehearsals much more, have better general stamina (out-of-tune singing can tire the ears more quickly than any other problem), can learn music at an interesting level of difficulty, and will have the freedom to concentrate more on other aspects of the music. (Telfer 2000, 6)

4.4.3 Singing High Pitches with Ease

Telfer wrote *Singing High Pitches with Ease* (2003), a handbook containing strategies and solutions for conductors, conductors-in-training, and voice teachers. She proposes four goals for the development of high pitches:

1. Extend the range to higher pitches.
2. Build a feeling of relaxed confidence.
3. Create a good quality of tone.
4. Keep the vocal mechanism healthy. (Telfer 2003, iv)

She mentions that “when singers have developed the foundations of singing in the middle part of the range, they are ready to start gradually extending the range to higher pitches” (Telfer 2003, iv). Telfer believes that this can be achieved with vocal exercises that are specially designed to extend range.

To encourage vocal health, it is imperative that conductors provide clear guidance for their singers when they are singing high pitches. Telfer’s suggestions for maintaining vocal health are covered in her book. One method is making sure to warm up singers properly before asking them to sing high pitches. “Until a singer has warmed up the middle part of the range, it is very stressful to sing high pitches” (Telfer 2003, vi). Another tip is to encourage singers to keep their vocal folds hydrated. “It is much less stressful to sing high pitches if the vocal folds have been well hydrated with water. Because it takes less energy to activate the vocal folds, the higher pitches start more easily, are generally more relaxed and are less prone to injury and viruses” (Telfer 2003, vi). Most importantly, Telfer reminds conductors to avoid having singers sing high pitches for too long at a time. “The conductor is responsible for the quantity of high pitches sung in a rehearsal. Continuous high pitches can be very stressful for the voice and may cause
hoarseness or other vocal problems” (Telfer 2003, vi). Telfer stresses that singers need specific information and strategies to be able to correct the vocal problems they might have now or in the future. “Every conductor should be prepared to teach the singers about the workings of the vocal mechanism. If singers understand how the vocal mechanism works, they can help their own voices do what they want them to do” (Telfer 2003, vii).

When it comes to demonstrating high pitches, Telfer understands that many teachers may find some difficulties to do so, even if they have good voices. She points out that teachers should be aware that their voices do not have the same positive vocal characteristics or the same problems as the students’ voices. “Singers should be working to develop the natural beauty of their own unique sound rather than simply trying to imitate the teacher’s voice” (Telfer 2003, vii). Also, singers may find it challenging to connect with a teacher’s voice that is much more mature:

Occasional teacher demonstrations may be helpful, but it is good for singers to hear a variety of good quality voices as they develop their own palette of timbres, rather than being inundated by the sound of one model. Singers naturally notice the better sounding voices within their choir. And they often develop ideas for other timbres as the teacher explains the mood or spirit of each piece of music. Singers should never be limited by one model. (Telfer 2003, vii-viii)

Instead of using their own voices, Telfer provides the following suggestions for teachers:

1. Singing exercises specially designed to make high pitches easier.
2. Activities to help singers develop the physical aspects of singing (i.e. vocal placement, breathing, etc.)
3. Strategies to keep voices relaxed.
4. Physical motions to change the way the vocal mechanism functions.
5. Mind images to improve the quality of tone. (Telfer 2003, viii)

Telfer encourages the use of vocal psychology on the part of the teacher in order to place singers in the right frame of mind so that they are relaxed enough to be able to work on the physical aspects of singing high pitches:
Many singers worry about high pitches because of previous negative experiences. To feel confident and relaxed with high pitches, singers need to be comfortable both physically and psychologically. From a physical point of view, singers feel more comfortable when the vocal placement is good, the throat is relaxed, and the air pressure is controlled. As singers become more proficient with these physical aspects of singing, they also become more comfortable with the psychological aspects of high pitches, and the singers’ general attitude becomes more positive. The reverse statement is also true. (Telfer 2003, iv)

In terms of intonation for high pitches, Telfer believes that everything is easier to tune when the voice is warmed up properly. Singers should also keep the throat relaxed when singing: “Poor tuning on high pitches is often the result of tension. When a singer works hard, there is a tendency to become tense and the tuning becomes distorted.” Short sessions on high-pitched music are best” (Telfer 2000, 57). Telfer suggests that conductors isolate the aspect of the music with high passages using the following strategy (Figure 48):

- **Strategy:** When intensive rehearsal is needed on high passages, isolate the aspect of the music that actually needs the work (e.g. rhythms, phrasing, pitches, dynamics, etc.).

- **Activities for singers:**
  1. Have the singers speak the rhythms.
     
     *Speak:* 
     
     \[\text{And Lord of Lords} \quad \text{and Lord of Lords,}\]

     *excerpt from Hallelujah Chorus by G.F. Handel*

     2. Have the singers sing the music an octave lower to learn the melodic contour and pitches.

     *Sing:* 
     
     \[\text{And Lord of Lords} \quad \text{and Lord of Lords,}\]

     *Instead of:* 
     
     \[\text{And Lord of Lords} \quad \text{and Lord of Lords,}\]

Telfer points out that the conductor’s gestures may affect the success of singers when singing high pitches: “It is easier for the singers to keep the jaw relaxed and down with the throat open if the conductor uses a gesture positioned at a lower level. When the conductor’s hand is position at the level of the diaphragm, the singers often find it easier to provide more diaphragmatic support for high pitches” (Telfer 2000, 60).

Telfer addresses the present-day trends in mass media and its effect on children’s voices:

current fads in children’s entertainers feature singing artists who sing in the low part of their range with poor tone; they may never sing any high notes at all. Children sing along with these artists or internally vocalize with the low pitches and acquire a very strange idea of what singing is really about. (Telfer 2003, 70)

She suggests that children should instead be given the opportunity to explore and develop their range so that they can learn how to access their high, middle, and low registers. In addition, categorizing children as sopranos or altos at a young age can be detrimental to their vocal education:

No one can predict whether a child will become an alto, a soprano, a bass, or a tenor later in life. It is a disservice to label a child at an early age. Instead, the teacher can divide the choir into two parts, having half the children sing the alto part in one piece and the soprano part in another piece. (Telfer 2003, 70)

Telfer believes that the educator plays an essential role in the development and direction of a child’s vocal journey:

All children should be encouraged to work towards their potential without prejudice, and without limited expectations of the teacher. Each child is naturally equipped with a vocal mechanism for high pitches and can be taught to produce a beautiful tone for [it]. If a teacher believes in a child, the child will learn. (Telfer 2003, 70)

Specific strategies should be in place to teach young voices about singing in their upper register; for example, there is a need for concise and precise information on the part of the educator:
Because of the shorter attention span of children, it is best to use quick demonstrations, uncomplicated images, and short explanations. If children do not have enough information, they will not reach their potential, but too much information at one time can confuse children. Whatever becomes written in a child’s head is difficult to erase. Teacher should correct problems as soon as possible. (Telfer 2003, 71)

Telfer also stresses that children are receptive learners and are quick to react musically to a teacher’s choice of word and concept. Many children, however, have a challenge with the idea of transferral, but can be taught to develop this skill:

[Children] do not naturally take what they have learned in one part of the music and apply this to another part of [a piece]. If they are asked to do transferral tasks regularly, they begin to acquire the habit of transferring skills to appropriate places in the music without being asked. Each child can take on the thrilling responsibility of helping to mold the performance without waiting for direct instruction about every single detail. (Telfer 2003, 71)

Telfer points out that children approach emotion in a less abstract way than adults and that many teachers underestimate their emotional depth: “You may be surprised at the depth of feeling if [you ask them to express emotion in their singing]. The resulting sound can be incredibly powerful” (Telfer 2003, 71).

An understanding of lifelong healthy singing is vital, especially for young singers. Telfer reminds teachers that children’s voices are not indestructible, and that prolonged use of bad habits is detrimental to children’s vocal development:

Because a child’s world is more limited in the gradation of details, children may interpret piano as meaning “whispered” and forte as meaning “shouted.” Whispering and shouting are both very stressful for the voice. Many problems with adult voices were created during childhood singing. It is a mistake for children to sing music that is too low-pitched because they develop bad singing habits, and they never have an opportunity to learn how to sing high pitches properly. Young choirs should begin with music that concentrates mainly on
medium-high pitches; this is a healthy and natural pitched level for the vocal mechanisms of children. Unfortunately, because some young children have already been singing along with the low-pitched voices of parents or entertainers, they may need specific instruction even to sing medium-high pitches. As children’s voices develop more fully, they will be able to produce a beautiful quality of tone without straining. It is important for children to understand that the quality of sound is more important than the volume of the sound. (Telfer 2003, 74-75)

Singing High Pitches with Ease (2003) includes general rehearsal tips for children’s choir conductors (77-78). There is a quick guide to the relevant chapters in the book for addressing common issues pertaining to training voices to sing high pitches.

4.5 Developing Musical Literacy

Telfer emphasizes the importance of musical literacy as part of the singer’s overall music education. She reminds educators that:

    musical literacy means more than just reading the pitches and rhythms. It means reading the meaning of the music: understanding the way that each musical detail in the notation brings the music alive. Musical symbols on the printed page reveal a great deal about the musicality of a piece and, with a little guidance, your students can learn to decode this information. (Telfer 2004, 1)

Recurring topics in her method books and scholarly articles include sight-singing and a comprehensive understanding of the printed music.

4.5.1 Sight-Singing

Telfer believes that it is the goal of educators to build similar skills in all choir members so that they can contribute equally. “Although the process is a time-consuming and complex one, the task can be addressed in a systematic way” (Telfer 1993, 39). She provides some general principles for teaching sight-singing:
1. Sight-singing sessions should be short and concentrated. Exercises should progress sequentially, with each short example designed to teach and reinforce a separate skill and to build on previously learned skills.

2. All materials for sight-singing should include lyrics. If singers become accustomed to reading words along with pitches in very easy examples, the skill is easily transferred to the actual repertoire being rehearsed.

3. If singers are going to read music of their own time period, they must have an opportunity to work with materials employing contemporary characteristics (e.g., changing time signatures) beginning with very easy examples (Figure 49).

4. Practice silent singing to teach the inner ear to audiate.

5. Use the full score to spot changes of texture, cues, and other helpful information located in other vocal parts or the accompaniment.

6. Mentally organize the music into phrases or other musical units so that sight-singing will never be just a mechanical act.

7. During sight-singing sessions, change the seating arrangement of singers within the choir. This prevents complacency and checks independence.

8. Begin by sight-singing easy exercises with just two pitches, the tonic and the dominant.

9. Use the inner pulse as an aid with unusual meters or changing-meter music.

10. Keep the head in a proper position for good singing. Unsuccessful sight-singers tend to sing with their music down and their heads in a position that makes the accurate singing of pitches and leaps very difficult. Poor posture handicaps the singer physically, kinaesthetically, and psychologically. (Telfer 1993, 39-40)
Telfer believes that sight-singing exercises should be as similar as possible to real choral music so that the skills will automatically transfer in a rehearsal situation.

If the exercises are miniature works of art in a variety of styles and moods with lyrics, dynamics, and expression markings, the singers will want to perform musically as they learn to sight-read. Then sight-singing becomes not only a skill but also an art. Should not every moment in our classes and rehearsals (even sight-singing sessions) be spent in music-making? (Telfer 1993, 40)

When it comes to creative and systematic approaches to music reading, Telfer advocates for continued encouragement when sight-singing. Her books on Successful Sight-Singing (1992, 1993) provide a step-by-step guide to help singers learn and develop their sight-singing skills through a series of exercises that increase in difficulty. The singer’s edition includes instructions for independent practice outside of the rehearsal room, while the conductor’s edition contains
strategies to teach Telfer’s approach to sight-singing in systematic fashion. In addition to her sight-singing method books, Telfer encourages regular sight-singing during rehearsals in the form of “Survival Sight-Singing.” According to Telfer, “sight-singing” means to read through new music, and “survival sight-singing” means that choristers can decipher the music well enough to keep singing, even though there may be quite a few errors (Telfer 2005, 87). When it comes to feeling successful, Telfer feels that it is important for singers to experience this with each new piece—sight-singing at a “survival” level represents a great accomplishment for many singers who have not yet learned to sight-sing well. “They know that they are not reading the music perfectly, but they can feel pride in their ability to decipher some of the piece by themselves and know that their sight-singing will improve with practice” (Telfer 2005, 89).

Telfer suggests good sight-singing can be encouraged by reading through as much of a new piece as possible during the first rehearsal so that the choir will hear the overall idea; singers are more likely to bond with a new piece if they have a sense of the music as a whole. The instructor/conductor must stop choristers at a point before the choir becomes discouraged, however. When the singers have difficulty with the music, they should be given a few moments to determine the problem and choose a suitable solution to overcome it. Ultimately, singers should end the first reading with a feeling of success.

In order for choristers to achieve a desired outcome, Telfer suggests regulated and/or structured patterns of learning. For example, to gain improved sight-singing abilities, she recommends weekly use of her sight-singing books; the exercises provided are grouped according to difficulty level. Her guided materials also suggest flexibility in their usage, encouraging choristers to move on to more advanced exercises as they are ready.

4.5.2 Reading the Music between the Notes

Educators need to ensure that their students are literate musicians. They can help students recognise a variety of musical components in a piece in order have a greater connection to the music.

Educators can highlight the importance of pitch by identifying the tonic of the key: “If they perform every pitch in the scale with equal status, the music will lose its sense of direction and
start to sound ambiguous or boring and the audience will feel lost. A strong tonic brings them home” (Telfer 2004, 1). She also highlights the importance of melodic contour:

How does the melodic contour affect the mood of the music? A rising line tends to be exciting or uplifting while a descending line may sound sad or more relaxed. A smoothly shaped phrase will sound calm, beautiful, confident, etc. but a phrase with a jagged contour might sound restless, dangerous, or humourous. Knowing this expressive tendency of pitch contour helps students to immediately start working with the mood of the notation instead of against it. They also have the intense satisfaction of experiencing the total effect of the mood as a phrase rises or falls. (Telfer 2004, 1-2)

Phrasing is also crucial for understanding a piece in more depth, as it can only be understood by seeing it in its totality, rather than by individual notes:

The heart and soul of the expression is not found in individual notes but in the way that the notes are grouped together. For example, the length of phrases is a crucial bit of technical information for singers and wind players so that they can pace their breathing, but the length of phrases also tells your students something about the spirit of the music. Expect music with long phrases to sound tranquil, majestic, soaring, suspenseful, etc., but short phrases indicate that the music will probably sound exciting, hurried, breathless, disturbing, etc. A glance at the phrase can set the mood for the performer. (Telfer 2004, 2)

Telfer encourages students to explore rhythm through physical movement so that they will be able to perform each rhythmic idea more musically:

When students read each rhythm, instead of just calculating the mathematical components of the rhythm, they should be able to feel the intrinsic essence of the rhythm. That means that they are actually reading the musical meaning of the rhythm. The rhythmic strong notes in choral music often coincide with the strong words in the lyrics. Encourage choral students to use the natural rhythms of the words to help them sing more rhythmically. Yes, the lyrics are part of the notation . . . and can provide a host of clues to the meaning of the music! (Telfer 2004, 3)
When singers understand the structure of a piece, they are able to recognize repetitions, new musical ideas, and patterns in the music. This is accomplished by encouraging singers to identify the form of a piece of music:

> When students notice contrast, they have spotted a clue that not only must they sing or play different notes or rhythms but, equally important, a change in the whole approach to the performance is needed. For example, a sudden change in dynamics could signal a new section of the form, a change in mood, a surprise, or an opportunity to emphasize the next phrase. That means that every contrast shown in the notation must be observed so that the spirit of the music can successfully change direction. When students identify repetition and contrast, they are actually sorting out the form. When they know the form, they know where the music is going. There is more sense of direction in their performance; they can present the familiarity of each repeated section and then present the different features of each contrasting section in an obvious way for the audience. (Telfer 2004, 3)

Telfer challenges educators by comparing reading music to reading a book: “When you read a book, do you just read the letters and words, or do you read the meaning from the book, too? When your students read music, are they literate musicians? Or do you read the meaning for them?” (Telfer 2004, 3-4)

### 4.6 Summary

Overall, Telfer’s pedagogical values allow developing choristers to learn in a supportive social environment led by the conductor and reinforced by the learning materials and repertoire. This enables choristers to develop greater appreciation of the choral arts. Their successes then influence group dynamics and result in improved ensemble quality (through musicianship, technique, and artistry). “Most pedagogy needs to be done in a way that keeps the singers relaxed enough to be able to develop and sustain healthy vocal habits” (Telfer, interview, October 4, 2016). The overall outcome is successful “when an ensemble can communicate the spirit of the music to the audience using healthy vocal technique, when the singers learn from the ensemble around them, as well as the conductor and the music” (Telfer, interview, June 19, 2017).
Telfer realizes that her pedagogical philosophy makes way for an aesthetic experience that goes beyond rehearsals and performances, wherein choir is a place where memories are created and shared history strengthens relationships. It also provides ample opportunities for individual and group successes. She further stresses that, in order for this experience to yield positive results, “each person has a job to accomplish—the actions of the conductor and the response of the singers are equally important” (Telfer 2005, 168).
Chapter 5  Nancy Telfer’s Choral Music: A Conductor’s Guide

This chapter offers a conductor’s guide to a representative selection of Nancy Telfer’s choral compositions, which have been grouped into the following musical categories: works that are driven and/or inspired by text, works that are pedagogically-based, works which evoke imagery of sound, and compositional ideas through voice play, and noted concert pieces. The works marked with an asterisk (*) are those which were included in my lecture recital at the University of Toronto with the Women’s Chorus on February 4, 2018. Teaching suggestions for those pieces are based on my observations and lived experiences during the rehearsal process.

- Compositions driven and/or inspired by text: “Butterfly”* (SSA, unaccompanied), Two Mythical Creatures (Unison treble voices and piano), and “Sicut Cervus Desiderat”* (SSA, unaccompanied).
- Pedagogically-based compositions: Steps to the Future* (multi-movement work for treble voices and keyboard), and “Doubletalk” (two-part rhythmic speaking piece, unaccompanied).
- Compositions which evoke imagery: “Blue Eye of God” (SSAA, unaccompanied), “Chasing the Northern Lights” (SSA, unaccompanied) and “First Snow” (Unison treble voices and piano).
- Noted concert pieces: “De Profundis” (SATB, unaccompanied), “Fireworks” (SSSSAAA, unaccompanied), Requiem Aeternam* (multi-movement work for SSAA, piano, percussion, and mezzo soprano), and “We Sail Away”* (SSA, piano). These advanced works are selected for their quality and popularity in concert programming for choral festivals and competitions.

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8 “S” and “A” denotes Soprano and Alto respectively. The number of voice parts for each piece is indicated by the number of “S” and “A.”
The above categories are based on Telfer’s distinctive style of writing: text setting and word painting, the inclination to create imagery or acoustical effects through vocal production, and developing performer’s skills in both musicianship and artistry. Although the selected repertoire is categorized according to the list above, there are overlaps in these categories, as Telfer’s writing in each piece encompasses more than one characteristic. For example, pieces that are text-driven also evoke imagery, and pedagogically-based compositions can be inspired by text. The decision to categorize the selected repertoire was based on their predominant compositional and musical feature as well as on additional background information provided by the composer. Some of the repertoire choices are based on Telfer’s own recommendations, while the rest are my own. The composer approved this final list of repertoire and its categorization.

The selected repertoire also covers a range of choral voicings: treble voices, mixed voices, various difficulty levels, secular, sacred, unaccompanied, and accompanied works. Each piece is given an annotation number, assigned by the author of this study for organizational purposes. Compositions driven and/or inspired by text are labeled “T,” pedagogically-based compositions are labeled “P,” compositions which evoke imagery are labeled “I,” and noted concert pieces are labeled “C.” The repertoire analysis highlights key compositional characteristics that make the music an effective teaching tool and shows how the pieces can elicit artistry in performance. Ultimately, this chapter is meant to function as a conductor’s guide to the teaching and performance practice of Telfer’s choral pieces.

5.1 Compositions driven and/or inspired by text

5.1.1 T1: “Butterfly”

Title/Date of composition  “Butterfly” (1988)
Publisher:  earthsongs
Commission / Dedication:  N/A
Voicing and Range:  SSA, unaccompanied
S1: D4-A5
S2: B3-E5
A: A3-E5
Soloist(s): N/A
Accompaniment: Unaccompanied
Text source: Composer’s own text.
Text designation: Secular
Duration: 03:30
Dynamic range: piano to forte
Musical features: This piece describes the emergence of the butterfly from the chrysalis at the final stage of its life cycle. The piece has two main sections: it begins with stillness, followed by the unravelling of the butterfly; the second quicker section suggests the butterfly taking flight and exploring the world around it. This piece may be programed in nature- or spring-themed concerts, and may also be interpreted as a celebration of new life, change, and freedom. Written for three-part treble, it challenges the ensemble with its close harmonic writing. Although mostly tonal, the piece has harmonic dissonances that, when performed with unified vowels and good intonation, create a shimmering effect that suggests the movement of a colourful butterfly breaking out of its cocoon or taking flight. “Butterfly” is a high-quality concert piece for high school and university treble ensembles of various sizes. Its beauty lies in the simplicity of the text and how rhythmic and harmonic devices heightens that text.

Compositional characteristics:

Text: Telfer wrote her own text for this piece, which is common in her body of music—“I started writing my own texts because poets were not writing about some topics that I thought would be of
interest to singers. Every text should have singable words” (Telfer, interview, October 4, 2016).

**Rhythm**: Telfer employs word painting by using long held notes to create an air of stillness at the beginning of the piece. She gradually introduces moving eighth notes and triplets to suggest movement of the butterfly. Later, a flurry of eighth notes followed by longer note values represents the alternating flapping and soaring of the butterfly’s flight.

**Pitch & tonality**: What begins with voices in unison and narrow harmonic intervals soon becomes wider in range to mirror the “unwrapping of the butterfly” (Telfer 1983). Although the piece moves from D major to A major, there is a lack of a tonal centre in the tonic chord. Telfer removes the root of the chord to create a sense of lightness in flight, and replaces it with the second note of the chord to create a slight dissonance that results in a shimmering effect when sung. In homophonic sections, Telfer sets most of the chords in first inversion to carry through with the idea of lightness. The predominantly homophonic piece breaks into a slight polyphony at the end, providing a heightened sense of movement in the piece.

**Expression**: To depict the butterfly taking flight, the tempo becomes much quicker. Telfer also responds to the text “Flitter, flutter, flit . . .” through the use of short articulated notes.

**Part-writing**: The predominantly homophonic piece features close harmonies and tone clusters, a signature of Telfer’s compositional style. She utilizes this technique to reflect the feelings in the text and showcase the ecstasy of warm sounds close together (or the feeling that a “halo” has been formed around the singers: where pitches are so close together that they blur like a vibrant halo). (Telfer 1988, interview, November 27, 2017). In the first part of
the piece, Telfer prepares the singers for dissonance by starting all voices on unison pitches and then fanning out to a dissonant chord. In this manner, Telfer explicitly teaches singers how to sing tone clusters by going from the known (unison) to the unknown (dissonance). Telfer composed the piece at a time when dissonance was perceived by many to be a negative quality. The individual parts of the polyphonic section begin on the same note, which helps singers align in tonality. Each vocal part is very singable and facilitates vocal exploration within a wide range.

Singers’ challenges: Singers will need to focus on good intonation when it comes to singing long held notes and repeated pitches, singing in unison, as well as locking in the dissonance in chords. Singers are expected to maintain a tonal centre amidst the quickness of notes and tone clusters in the music (as well as without the reliance of an instrument) through the underlying tonic or dominant pitches throughout the piece. There should also be clarity of text and articulation in the quicker sections.

Teaching and Rehearsal Suggestions: Related warmup materials from Nancy Telfer’s books:

- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 2—Building endurance for breath (pp. 28-29)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 3 & 18—Working the tongue & Consonants (pp. 34-35, 80)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 6—Tuning repeated pitches (p. 46)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 15—Tuning sustained notes (pp. 71-72)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 2*: Warmup 45—Even tone with leaps (p. 162)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 2*: Warmup 51—Tone cluster (pp. 179-180)

Singers should have a good understanding of diatonic chord structures due to the homophonic features of the piece. This will
help singers have a clearer sense of chord quality and encourage listening when tuning with the ensemble. Vowels and syllables with diphthongs (such as “fly”) need to be aligned to encourage good intonation.

Composer’s notes: “The music gradually evolves from a few notes stretching higher and higher in pitch just as a new butterfly stretches to reach its full size. After each stretch, it relaxes back so it takes some time to stretch fully out. Then I tried to capture the excitement of the new butterfly with a faster tempo until it finally disappears into the distance. I felt the excitement of creating a new creature as I was writing because I was pregnant with my second child.” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017)
5.1.2 T2: “The Unicorn”

Title: “The Unicorn” (No. 1 from Two Mythical Creatures) (1992)

Publisher: Leslie Music Supply, Inc. (No. 2070 Leslie Choral Series)

Commission / Dedication: Commissioned by the Waterloo County Board of Education.

Voicing: Unison or SA choir; E4 – E5

Soloist(s): N/A

Accompaniment: Piano

Text sources: Composer’s own text

Text designation: Secular

Duration: N/A

Dynamic range: piano to mezzo forte

Musical features: This piece draws on children’s imagination of a magical creature. Young singers will be attracted to its text, which describes the unicorn’s beauty, magical powers, and mythologies. According to Telfer, “the ABA (form) lengthens a piece without adding much more rehearsal time, and this is important for young singers” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017). The piece can be programmed together with “The Dragon” as part of Two Mythical Creatures or performed as a standalone piece. An optional divisi for two-part singing means this piece is able to accommodate less experienced young singers who may prefer to sing in unison, as well as ensembles who are ready to begin part-singing.
Compositional characteristics:

**Text:** Telfer’s descriptive and engaging text encourages young singers to explore expressiveness in their singing. Word painting is evident and provides drama and excitement for children.

**Rhythm:** Entirely in compound time, the piece has a distinctive dotted rhythmic pattern that mimics the galloping of a horse and which serves as the unicorn’s theme in the A sections. The contrasting B section uses flowing eighth notes that allow the narrative lyrics to be sung and enunciated with ease. Telfer sets up the return of the A section with a four-bar piano interlude playing the same rhythmic pattern of the unicorn.

**Pitch & tonality:** The piece is melodically-driven and follows the natural inclination of the words (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017). The A sections are in B minor while the B section is set in E minor. The key changes are facilitated, as the well-written piano accompaniment guides singers. The unison piece is set at a comfortable range for emerging treble voices, and high notes are paired with syllables containing open vowels to further aid healthy singing in the upper register.

**Expression:** Telfer develops word painting in this piece through varying dynamic levels and functional piano accompaniment. In the first A section, the piano plays minimal accompaniment in the upper register, and vocal and keyboard dynamics are *piano*, giving the beginning of the story a hushed sense of awe and wonder. The music and texture swells in the B section and continues growing in parallel with the developing story of the unicorn. The return of the A section uses two-part singing, making the music more rhythmically active. Finally, the piano accompaniment thins, scored in the upper register again), and the vocal parts have a brief
call and response that decays in dynamics all the way to the end of the piece.

**Part-writing:** Telfer introduces part-singing to young choral singers by ensuring that material is taken from thematic ideas that have been established. For example, the sections of part-singing are in canon and last only four bars. The final section is a call and response that has one voice part finishing the melody of the other.

Singers’ challenges: Singers will need to focus on accuracy and good vowel formation to avoid vocally scooping at the start of phrases, many of which begin with a high pitch. The range of notes may be a slight challenge, but this can be addressed with a well-prepared onset. There should also be clarity of text and articulation.

Teaching and rehearsal suggestions: Related warmup materials from Nancy Telfer’s books:

- *Singing High Pitches with Ease*: III. Healthy Warmups for the Voice (pp. 9-18)
- *Singing High Pitches with Ease*: VIII. Diction for High Pitches (pp. 39-42)
- *Singing High Pitches with Ease*: X. Phrases Starting on a High Pitch (pp. 47-51)
- *Singing High Pitches with Ease*: XIV. Good Intonation for High Pitches (pp. 63-66)

Composer’s notes: “The topic was my inspiration for a light, rhythmical piece. I researched information about unicorns before I started to write the text and that gave the music more depth and more atmosphere” (Telfer 2017, interview, November 27, 2017).
5.1.3 T3: “The Dragon”

Title: “The Dragon” (No. 2 from *Two Mythical Creatures*) (1992)

Publisher: Leslie Music Supply, Inc. (No. 2071 Leslie Choral Series)

Commission / Dedication: Commissioned by the Waterloo County Board of Education.

Voicing: Unison or SA choir; B3 – G5

Soloist(s): N/A

Accompaniment: Piano

Text sources: Composer’s own text

Text designation: Secular

Duration: 4:10

Dynamic range: *piano to fortissimo*

Musical features: This piece is about the relationship between a girl and her pet dragon. The people in her village feared that the beast would harm their children and called for its killing. The girl defended the dragon, saying, “he was my first friend” and described the many gentle and beautiful aspects of her pet. The villagers stood their ground, which prompted the girl to fly away with her pet dragon. It is much more dramatic than the first piece in *Two Mythical Creatures*, “The Unicorn.” “The Dragon” is bold, rhythmic, and set in a style that is similar to musical theatre. It is suitable for treble choirs who are comfortable with two-part singing; the challenge comes from the changing time signatures and tonality.
Compositional characteristics:

**Text:** Telfer sets the text to be sung as well as spoken. A three-line staff is used for spoken parts to indicate whether the spoken voice for each syllable should be high pitched, medium pitched, or low pitched. Spoken parts are rhythmically-set, and represent sound effects that correspond to the text that is sung. *Glissandi* are also indicated in spoken parts.

**Rhythm:** Rhythmic patterns are straightforward and repetitive in some parts of the music to create a consistent drive. There is some mixture of duplet and triple patterns, and changing time signatures.

**Pitch & tonality:** The piece begins in E minor, ends in G minor, and goes through a few key changes in between, especially in the B section. The piano accompaniment sets this up well for the singers’ ears through small interludes, subtle doubling, or a *fermata* break in the music to allow time for singers to prepare for a sudden key change. Both singing and speaking pitches allow children to explore a wider singing range without being confined for too long in any particular register.

**Expression:** The dynamics, range, and rhythm suggest how a phrase should be performed—for example, a phrase that has soft, long held notes at a lower pitch may be sung in a “scarier” manner. The singers get to play the role of the village adults, a girl, and a narrator, all with different perspectives and different tone qualities. (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017)

**Part-writing:** There is a mixture of unison, homophonic and canonic singing. The music usually begins in unison at a key change before branching out into two-part singing to help singers successfully establish a new tonality.
Singers’ challenges: Singers will need to establish clean key changes by listening to the piano accompaniment and mentally preparing ahead of the music. Singers will also need to focus on expressiveness in singing by discussing the text, establishing characters, and experimenting with various tone qualities at the early stages of learning the piece. Distinct articulation of text is essential to storytelling. Due to the musical theatre nature of the piece, there should be an overarching reminder to maintain healthy singing and avoid any unnecessary belting or shouting that might happen as a response to the drama of the music.

Teaching and rehearsal suggestions: Related warmup materials from Nancy Telfer’s books:

- *Singing High Pitches with Ease*: VI. Vocal Placement (pp. 29-33)
- *Singing High Pitches with Ease*: VII. Listening for Tone Quality (pp. 34-38)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 35—Tuning with the harmony of the choir (p. 120)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 46—Tuning a melody with framework pitches (p. 152)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 2*: Warmup 33—Articulation (p. 124)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 2*: Warmup 34—Matching the entry with the piano (p. 128)

Composer’s notes: I felt (at that time) that most choirs don't communicate well with an audience, so this piece goes overboard providing lots of drama to help singers develop better communication skills. Also, at that time, stories about girls weren't often about their brave acts. So, this was a fun way to let children do story-telling that made sense in modern times. Once I had written the words of the story, it was not difficult to write music that fit each section. As I wrote the music for each section, I was imagining I was the speaker in that
section and how I would tell the story and that shaped the music.
When the dragon flies away, the music lightly intertwines it with
the girl in triple time. (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017)

5.1.4 T4: “Sicut Cervus Desiderat”

Title:  “Sicut Cervus Desiderat” (2000)
Publisher:  PH Publishers (Germany) (PHP 301 528)
Commission / Dedication:  For Dr. Eui-Joong Yoon and the Seoul Ladies’ Singers.
“Dr. Eui-Joong Yoon asked me to compose this piece. He has a
very warm, often gentle personality and is good with musical
nuances and those attributes are featured in the music” (Telfer,
interview, November 27, 2017).

Voicing:  SSA, unaccompanied
S1: C4 – G5
S2: B3 – D5
A: A3 – D5
Soloist(s):  N/A
Accompaniment:  Unaccompanied
Text sources:  Psalm 42:1 (“As the deer desires water, so does my soul desire
you, O God.”) (Telfer 2000)

Text designation:  Sacred
Duration:  3:15
Dynamic range:  piano to forte.
**Musical features:**

This piece is composed using notes of the pentatonic scale. It begins with a tranquil mood that is suggestive of a deer looking for a stream. “At times the music is stronger as it expresses an intense longing to appear before God. During the middle section, there is a gentle echo and the piece ends with a personal appeal to God” (Telfer 2000). This *a cappella* piece is suitable for more experienced female choirs and can be paired with “Butterfly” in a concert program—there are commonalities in style and setting, as well as contrasts in mood and musical intent.

**Compositional characteristics:**

**Text:** There are different types of musical repetition to display a variety of meanings as the Latin words offer so much depth in meaning. (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017)

**Rhythm:** The rhythmic ideas are straightforward. Changing time signatures correspond to the natural flow of the text and their syllabic accents. In many instances, note values are shorter or set in eighth note triplets, giving the music a forward movement that flows in waves throughout the piece.

**Pitch & tonality:** The piece, in ABA form, shows a tonality of A major in the A sections, and a contrasting F major / D minor in section B. Each vocal part is very singable; parts take turns carrying the melody, helping each singer explore a wide range of her voice.

**Expression:** In her performance notes, Telfer states: “at the beginning, each phrase can be gently shaped, keeping a relaxed mood, saving the intensity of desire until the crescendo (that occurs later)” (Telfer 2011). The intensity continues to build “as singers wonder when they will appear before God . . . the last phrase of the section (section A) gives a more thoughtful
presentation of the text” (Telfer 2011). Section B should be performed more freely in the style of chant. The return of section A shows the mood of the music changing from an appeal to an acknowledgement of the glory of God (Telfer 2011).

**Part-writing:** This is similar to “Butterfly,” in that the primarily homophonic piece features close harmonies and tone clusters. This technique is Telfer’s response to the intention of the text. Telfer develops new musical ideas by setting the voices in unison at the beginning of a phrase, and gradually widening the harmonic intervals between voices as the music develops. The result is her signature “halo effect,” which produces a blur of cluster pitches in an ethereal way. The dissonant harmonies have a translucent shimmer in soft sections, and a brilliance in louder ones.

**Singers’ challenges:** Singers should respond to sections with repeated text by being sensitive to the musical intent of the piece and providing the appropriate tone colour in each section. Singers will need to focus on good intonation when it comes to the accuracy of repeated pitches and chord dissonances.

**Teaching and rehearsal suggestions:** Related warmup materials from Nancy Telfer’s books:

- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 2—Building endurance for breath (pp. 28-29)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 6—Tuning repeated pitches (p. 46)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 15—Tuning sustained notes (pp. 71-72)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 35—Tuning with the harmony of the choir (p. 120)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 2*: Warmup 45—Even tone with leaps (p. 162)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 2*: Warmup 51—Tone cluster (pp. 179-180)
Composer’s notes: “I was experimenting with the relationship among the three voicings, sometimes having one voicing highlighted and then another and sometimes using SSA as a single unit. This produces a wider experience for the singers in all parts” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).

5.2 Pedagogically-based Compositions

5.2.1 P1: “Doubletalk”

Title: “Doubletalk” (1984)

Publisher: Leslie Music Supply, Inc.

Commission / Deication: Information on commissions, if available

Voicing: Two-part rhythmic speaking, a cappella

Soloist(s): N/A

Accompaniment: Unaccompanied

Text sources: Composer’s own text

Text designation: Secular

Duration: 1:00

Dynamic range: piano to fortissimo

Musical features: Like “Bay Dooka,” this piece features spoken inflection using words that are fun to say, made up by the composer. The rhythmic and dynamic interest makes for an effective teaching piece in the
classroom as well as a creative piece for performance. “Middle school choirs with changing voices really needed repertoire at a high musicality level but not hampered by the difficulties presented by changing voices. They could continue to develop their musicality at a high level, and they would feel successful and they would have something different/special to perform.” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017)

Compositional characteristics:

**Text:** The text suggests sound effects based on familiar English words, e.g. *dip, rip*; colloquial words, e.g. *watcha*; expressions e.g. *hey, yah!*; and vocal percussion based on consonants, e.g. *sh, k, t*).

**Rhythm:** Besides the text, rhythm is the driving force of this piece. Rhythmic ideas correspond to the inflection of the text, providing a variety of interest. As the piece is void of notated pitches, it features slightly more challenging rhythmic patterns such as syncopations, triplets, and unexpected rests.

**Pitch & tonality:** The piece is not set on a standard stave, but on a three-lined stave. “The lines indicate whether spoken voice should be high-pitched, medium-pitched, or low-pitched for each syllable” (Telfer 1992). *Glissandi* indicate sliding from one pitch line to the next.

**Expression:** The piece suggests an animated conversation between two groups of people, with moments of call-and-response. Articulation and dynamics enhance the drama and provide singers with ideas on creatively interpreting the text.

**Part-writing:** Telfer utilizes imitation in the two-part writing, with one part echoing the other. There is no evident structure to this piece, which makes it come across as an improvisatory banter.
Singers’ challenges: Singers need to focus on diction and articulation to emphasize expression. This includes ensuring consonants are placed in the upper, middle, or lower part of the voice, but not pitched in unison. This piece requires good ensemble work when going back and forth between Parts I and II.

Teaching and rehearsal suggestions: Related warmup materials from Nancy Telfer’s books:

- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 24—“k” and “g” consonants (p. 94)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 39—Rhythmic Dictation (pp. 131-132)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 59—Precision in Diction (p. 187)

Composer’s notes: “I was trying for enough repetition but lots of expressive moments. The contrast between low and high spoken parts is intentionally funny. The process was a bit like improvisation (because I explore and work with a single idea in different ways) that was then crafted like composition.” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017)

5.2.2 P2: “Explosion”

Title: “Explosion” (No. 1 from *Steps to the Future*) (1992)

Publisher: Kjos Music Company (8732)

Commission / Dedication: This music was commissioned by the East York Youth Choir conducted by Michel Bondy, with financial assistance from the East York Board of Education and the Canadian Music Centre through its “Creating Music in the Classroom” program.
Voicing: SA choir, accompanied
S: C#4 – F5
A: C4 – A#4

Soloist(s): N/A

Accompaniment: Keyboard

Text sources: “All the lyrics are created from the word *explosion* and divided into three syllables: ex, plo, and sion” (Telfer 1992).

Text designation: Secular

Duration: 1:30

Dynamic range: *piano to fortissimo*

Musical features: Telfer is very interested in acoustics, the study of musical sound. She tries different combinations of sounds to create an “experience” for the performers and the audience. She may begin a piece by slowly arousing the curiosity of the audience; or she may “grab the audience by the throat.” In “Explosion,” she begins with a slow rumble of sound. The music builds into a series of explosions. Some of it sounds pretty strange; some of it is quite beautiful. Keep in mind that it is almost time for the twenty-first century to begin. These are the steps to the future.” (Telfer 1992)

I planned this piece to build up slowly to each climax so that the explosion would be more interesting. I wanted to start with something mysterious but not human-sounding, something more mechanical or robotic in nature, so I chose a really easy aleatoric idea. The loud spoken words near the end were used for the same effect. (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017)
Compositional characteristics:

**Text:** The text is derived from the word *explosion*. This is interspersed with the sound effects that correspond with it through consonants, eg. *ssss, shhh*). Some of the text is sung while others parts are spoken according to the rhythm indicated. The syllables are spoken by using a voice that is either high-pitched, low-pitched, or gliding from high to low.

**Rhythm:** Syllables from *explosion* are manipulated in a way that suggest a particular sound effect. For example, *plo* is set to repetitive eighth notes to indicate successive bursts of sound; *sh* is stretched out for 8 beats before it arrives at *on* to suggest a mighty explosion.

**Pitch & tonality:** The piece does not have a fixed key, but utilizes G, D, and C as general tonal centres. Notes are either repetitive, or move in half steps and minor thirds. Pitches are predominantly in the comfortable middle range of young singers.

**Expression:** Besides manipulating text, Telfer creates other ideas for sound effects using choral forces: For “surround-sound,” she instructs the conductor to slowly move his / her hand from one side of the choir to the other side, and the singers begin singing repeated pitches (at a different time than their neighbor) when the conductor’s hand points towards them. For “stereo,” the music indicates voice parts singing alternatively, which creates “sound bouncing back and forth between two side of the choir” (Telfer 1992). There are gradual build ups of dynamics “so that each explosion will reach a real climax” (Telfer 1992). Some other reminders from Telfer, as indicated in the music:

- To maximize the suspense, each note should last the full duration as written. Do not shorten a note that comes before a rest; keep the energy alive in the voice.
• For all spoken parts, each singer should use their high or low speaking voice as shown in the score. Do not try to speak the parts at the exact pitches shown on the staff. For a different kind of acoustics, try this piece with:
  o The choir surrounding the audience, or
  o Half the choir along one side of the audience and the other half along the other side of the audience.
• For a performance in a large hall with very “live” acoustics, leave a physical space between the sopranos and altos so that the directional sound may be heard more easily.

**Part-writing:** To help singers build their part-singing skills in contemporary music, Telfer balances the familiar with the unfamiliar. For example, pitches sung in unison are sung in aleatoric fashion or with detailed articulation; a challenging chromatic tuning is doubled on the piano or set to a repeated call-and-response motive to help the singers aurally prepare for the pitches.

**Singers’ challenges:** In this piece, singers learn the skills required not only for contemporary pieces, but those which can be applied to other styles of music: pitch accuracy, rhythmic stability, detailed articulation, and musical expression. Particularly, there is need for greater contrast in dynamics and between spoken and sung text.

Singers also need to focus on the accuracy of chromatic pitches and listen to the piano accompaniment for tuning. “Most of the drama in this piece is created by dynamics. A chromatic scale creates tension and suspense. The voices and piano are a team, and the children can gain strength and concentration by listening to the piano as they sing” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).

**Teaching and rehearsal suggestions:** Refer to the score for detailed background information, rehearsal tips for the conductor, and reminders for the singers. This piece also correlates with Telfer’s (1992) book, *Successful Sight-Singing*, Milestone 3.
Composer’s notes: “As a quick composition lesson, I had already asked other children to use the sounds making up a single word, rather than just saying the word itself, to create a musical phrase. The word “explosion” sounds like its meaning, so it was a good choice to use to compose a whole piece from a single word. The word itself was my inspiration” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).

5.2.3  P3: “Bay Dooka”

Title: “Bay Dooka” (No. 2 from Steps to the Future) (1992)

Publisher: Kjos Music Company (8727)

Commission / Dedication: This music was commissioned by the East York Youth Choir conducted by Michel Bondy, with financial assistance from the East York Board of Education and the Canadian Music Centre through its “Creating Music in the Classroom” program.

Voicing: Two-part (spoken), a cappella

Soloist(s): N/A

Accompaniment: Unaccompanied

Text sources: “The lyrics were invented (by the composer) for this piece; they were created for their sound, not their meaning.” (Telfer 1992)

Text designation: Secular

Duration: 2:30

Dynamic range: piano to forte

Musical features: This piece features “spoken inflection . . . made-up words that are fun to say, like a private language. Most children like to ‘act’ with their spoken voice, imitating other people” (Telfer, interview,
November 27, 2017). “The music sounds like two people talking at
the same time” (Telfer 1992). The middle section of this ternary
form suggests a ping pong match between the two people. This
piece provides young singers with skills in two-part singing by
excluding notated pitches, focusing instead on interesting rhythmic
ideas based on humorous text.

Compositional characteristics:

Text: Telfer “believe[s] that laughter is one of the best gifts from
God. When she uses nonsense words, she adds some humour to the
music” (Telfer 1992). Besides being light-hearted, the text also
suggests an intended sound effect or vocal percussion. For
example, ch ch sounds percussive and bop implies the animated
sound of a brief nudge or jab.

Rhythm: In addition to the text, rhythm is the driving force of this
piece. Rhythmic ideas correspond to the flow of the original text,
providing a variety of interest. As the piece is void of notated
pitches, it features slightly more challenging rhythmic patterns
such as syncopations, triplets, duplets, and running sixteenth notes.
On the last page, these rhythmic ideas are placed one after the
other, creating a flurry of activity which drives the music to a
close.

Pitch & tonality: “In the twentieth century, composers have
experimented with spoken parts. The natural speaking voice tends
to go up and down in pitch as a person speaks. In the music, this
inflection is exaggerated. The words are spoken by using a voice
that is high-pitched, medium-pitched, low-pitched, or gliding from
high to medium pitch… Each voice will naturally sound at a
slightly different pitch for the ‘normal’ middle line, creating a kind
of spoken tone cluster.” (Telfer 1992)
**Expression:** Articulation and dynamics enhance the drama and provide singers with ideas for creatively interpreting the text. “Have the choir imagine that two groups of aliens are meeting for the first time. Have Part 1 face Part 2; each singer should look directly at the eyes of a singer on the other part. Say the words very expressively so that the other aliens will understand the ‘message.’ This formation adds another dimension to the performance” (Telfer 1992).

**Part-writing:** The two-part writing is mostly canonic or is set in call-and-response.

**Singers’ challenges:** Singers with a limited vocal range, or male singers in the process of voice change, are able to benefit from a piece that continues to develop their musicianship, as it does not contain notated pitches. Rhythmic accuracy and attention to detail in articulation and dynamics is imperative. Singers also need to be creative with their interpretation of the storyline and drama of this piece.

**Teaching and rehearsal suggestions:** Refer to the score for detailed background information, rehearsal tips for the conductor, and reminders for the singers. This piece also correlates with Telfer’s book, *Successful Sight-Singing*, Milestone 1 (1992).

**Composer’s notes:** “The inspiration was the need for another spoken choral piece like ‘Double Talk.’ The idea of ping pong came from memories of ping pong with my brother as a teenager. Because I thought it should be a longer piece, it made sense to compose it in ABA form so there would not be too much new material in this single piece. I started with the opening line and each line after that followed naturally” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).
5.2.4 P4: “Stress”

Title: “Stress” (No. 3 from Steps to the Future) (1992)

Publisher: Kjos Music Company (8734)

Commission / Dedication: This music was commissioned by the East York Youth Choir conducted by Michel Bondy, with financial assistance from the East York Board of Education and the Canadian Music Centre through its “Creating Music in the Classroom” program.

Voicing: SA choir, accompanied.
S: E4 – E5
A: E4 – A4

Soloist(s): N/A

Accompaniment: Keyboard

Text sources: Composer’s own text

Text designation: Secular

Duration: 0:45

Dynamic range: mezzo piano to forte

Musical features: This piece draws on the increased anxiety and tension faced by people in the twentieth century. “Very little music at that time was being written about current society. There was lots of stress at that time so this was more relevant to teachers and singers than songs about fairies” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017). Telfer creates a sonic interpretation the emotion of stress by using dissonance, articulation, and word painting.
Compositional characteristics:

**Text:** “Psychology has taken an important role in the twentieth century. The text to ‘Stress’ describes a normal person’s reaction to a very stressful situation” (Telfer 1992).

**Rhythm:** Telfer alternates long and short note values to create a “slingshot” effect in the music: for example, long-held notes on the word “stress” suggest built-up frustration, and the brisk eighth notes on the word *tension!* immediately after feels like the breaking point of the stress. Busy passages of running eighth notes represents the “noise” and “buzz” in one’s mind under stress. “The repeated eighth notes create a steady hammering sound, appropriate for stress” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017). There is also rhythmic drive in “Stomach in a knot, Tension! Pounding in my heart, Tension!” that is similar to a chant of an angry mob of people.

**Pitch & tonality:** The word *stress* is mostly set with rising pitches, suggesting that the situation is becoming worse and is far from being resolved. The piece utilizes E minor has a tonal centre, but with a flatted second and fifth note of the scale, creating an unsettling tonality that mirrors the mood of the piece.

**Expression:** “Notice the steady, relentless pounding of the beat. Sudden accents add to the ‘headache’ effect. To make the most of an accent, stretch out the note for the full duration. Use crisp consonants to create a biting effect. Go quickly through the consonants to put the vowel on the beat” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).

**Part-writing:** “I planned to start with consonance and then change into dissonance and go back and forth between the two. The
dissonance never lasts for long, so it is very obvious it can be tolerated” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).

Singers’ challenges: “Dissonance is used in music to express sorrow, hatred, or conflict. Each singer must sing squarely in the center of the pitch so that the dissonance will be very definite. If the singers constantly listen to the piano part as they sing, it helps them to focus on the steady, pounding beat, and their tuning. Do not rehearse this piece for too long at one time; the tuning may sharpen and the voices may tighten because of the tension in the music” (Telfer 1992).

Teaching and rehearsal suggestions: Refer to the score for detailed background information, rehearsal tips for the conductor, and reminders for the singers. This piece also correlates with Telfer’s book, Successful Sight-Singing, Milestone 4 (1992).

Composer’s notes: “Up to this point, almost all singers had hated dissonances, so choirs needed a piece that clearly showed a good reason to use dissonances as an expression of the meaning of the words, to stop singers from backing away from dissonance and to let the close pitches make sense to express negative thoughts. The piece had to be short or everyone would start hating it” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).

5.2.5 P5: “The Swallow”

Title: “The Swallow” (No. 4 from Steps to the Future) (1992)

Publisher: Kjos Music Company (8735)

Commission / Dedication: This music was commissioned by the East York Youth Choir conducted by Michel Bondy, with financial assistance from the East York Board of Education and the Canadian Music Centre through its “Creating Music in the Classroom” program.
Voicing: SSAA, accompanied
S1 and S2: D4 – G5
A1 and A2: C4 – C5

Soloist(s): N/A

Accompaniment: Keyboard

Text sources: Based on the Canadian Newfoundland folksong “She’s Like the Swallow,” with additional text by the composer

Text designation: Secular

Duration: 1:50

Dynamic range: piano to mezzo forte

Musical features: Telfer employs an aleatoric setting for this familiar folksong and explores the idea of chance happenings in music: “Each decade in the twentieth century has brought incredible new change. Life has not been as predictable as it was in earlier centuries. Sometimes people feel that things seem to happen by chance. No performances would sound the same” (Telfer 1992). This piece is a good introduction to aleatoric choral music for young singers, or singers with limited experience in this style of choral music, as it alternates between the familiar folk song and unison singing, and the freer aleatoric sections. “The contrast between the two styles alternates between fantasy and reality” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).

Compositional characteristics:

Text: “Telfer begins the piece with a quotation from the beautiful Canadian Newfoundland folksong ‘She’s Like the Swallow.’ Then the composer has written original music (using words from the folksong) to expand on the swallow image” (Telfer 1992). Singers’
crisp articulation of text is important for the word painting of this piece. For example, the word fly needs to be sung quickly through “fl” to the vowel sound, as this will give a send-off to the gliding movement.

**Rhythm:** Rhythmic patterns correspond with the flight pattern of the swallow, which alternates between fluttering (shorter notes) and gliding (long held notes). In the aleatoric sections, singers are instructed to vary the tempi of the rhythmic patterns to either stretch or elongate the musical idea.

**Pitch & tonality:** Telfer keeps the folksong setting simple to establish the mood. In the aleatoric sections, the seventh note of the chord is included in both the vocal and piano parts to create the composer’s concept of fantasy. On the alternating styles of setting the music, Telfer states, “A continuous use of aleatoric music would have been far too difficult because this was and still is the first aleatoric piece that most singers sing. By placing long notes in between the aleatoric sections, the singers get a break and the music is given a thrust forward with the long notes after each static aleatoric section” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).

**Expression:** “The fluttering piano sounds help to create a picture of a swallow. I could see the swallows in my mind as I wrote the aleatoric parts, whereas I could only see one swallow as I wrote the folksong setting at the start. Such a piece needs a very strong climax that builds slowly” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017). Telfer closes the piece by having voices sing the final melodic idea (consisting of six short rising phrases) as a four-part round. Singers repeat each phrase until the next downbeat that is indicated by the conductor. This creates the effect of swallows flying towards the audience, increasing in number and sound as they get closer.
**Part-writing:** Telfer teaches young singers part-singing skills in a contemporary style by having them perform a multi-voiced round. She instructs half of the singers scattered in the same voice part to be “first singers,” while the others are “second singers.” “(First singers) enter randomly with the downbeat or shortly after the downbeat, each singer at a different tempo. They continue to repeat the phrase until the downbeat of the next measure. Sing the measure several times; it sounds a bit different each time. Add the second singers. Each second singer listens to a first singer standing nearby and begin singing the phrase when the first singer sings their part halfway. Second singers also continue to repeat the music until the next downbeat” (Telfer 1992).

Singers’ challenges: Singers need to focus on singing independently in a mixed voiced setting. They should also be prepared and aware of the conductor’s musical changes. “The conductor must constantly make decisions about how long each aleatoric section should last because it is never sung exactly the same way each time” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).

Teaching and rehearsal suggestions: Refer to the score for detailed background information, rehearsal tips for the conductor, and reminders for the singers. The piece also correlates with Telfer’s book, *Successful Sight-Singing*, Milestone 2 (1992).

Composer’s notes: “The folksong itself was my inspiration. To combine such a beautiful melody and create the sound of swallows within the same piece was a wonderful challenge” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).
5.2.6 P6: “Sidewalk Game”

Title: “Sidewalk Game” (No. 5 from *Steps to the Future*) (1992)

Publisher: Kjos Music Company (8728)

Commission / Dedication: This music was commissioned by the East York Youth Choir conducted by Michel Bondy, with financial assistance from the East York Board of Education and the Canadian Music Centre through its “Creating Music in the Classroom” program.

Voicing: SA choir, accompanied
S: D4 – F5
A: D4 – E5

Soloist(s): N/A

Accompaniment: Keyboard

Text sources: Composer’s own text

Text designation: Secular

Duration: 1:30

Dynamic range: *piano to forte*

Musical features: This piece introduces young singers to changing time signatures, rests in unusual places, and unpredictable timing, in a playful way which embodies a child’s game. “In everyday life, people move in changing time signatures naturally in certain situations, although most of the time they move in duple time as they walk. When you watch a child trying to avoid the cracks in a sidewalk, they continually change metres as they move, so the changing time signatures fit the topic” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017). The piece reminds children to “sing precisely together with the rest
of the choir. If you sing in the wrong place, you’re stepping on the cracks!” (Telfer 1992).

Compositional characteristics:

**Text:** “The words fit very well with each time signature, so this makes it fairly easy for the singers to sing. To read it, they need to count in a few places but then just follow along with the words” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017). “When children walk along the sidewalk, sometimes they try not to step on the cracks. They may say, ‘Don’t step on the cracks or you’ll break your mother’s back. When the cracks are very close together, the children have to take giant steps to get over that section. Sometimes the only place to go is sideways; sometimes they may jump or hop between the cracks” (Telfer 1992). The text itself feels like the directions of the game, which keeps the interest of the children when learning the piece.

**Rhythm:** Telfer mirrors the speech pattern of people in her music: “when people talk, the rhythms and metres shift again and again within a single sentence” (Telfer 1992). Pulses are grouped in twos or threes according to the syllabic accents of the words. The piano accompaniment acts as a guide and allows for easier shifts of metres.

**Pitch & tonality:** The music is tonal throughout and set in a comfortable range for children’s voices. There are wide intervals which reflect the text (e.g. “giant steps”) and descending octave *glissandi* (e.g. “break”).

**Expression:** Articulation and dynamics enhance the drama and provide singers with ideas on creatively interpreting the text. “There is a playfulness in this music much like that found in ‘Bay Dooka.’ This time, Telfer uses sung pitches and real words instead
of spoken nonsense words. To maximize the rhythmic effect, each quarter note should last one whole beat. Do not shorten a note that comes before a rest. The long notes help to create suspense in the game. Feel the sound moving forward during each long note.” (Telfer 1992)

**Part-writing:** This piece is set for unison voice and piano, with three bars of simple *divisi* towards the end.

**Singers’ challenges:** The rests make this a good piece for singers to develop precision and clarity of diction. “The rests show the child hesitating while he decides how to maneuver through the next section of the sidewalk. If a rest comes in the middle of a phrase, shape the phrase so that the silent parts will sound like part of the whole phrase” (Telfer 1992). Singers should also maintain a steady tempo and keep an even eighth-note pulse throughout the piece, especially in transitional measures of changing time signatures.

**Teaching and rehearsal suggestions:** Refer to the score for detailed background information, rehearsal tips for the conductor, and reminders for the singers. The piece also correlates with Telfer’s book, *Successful Sight-Singing*, Milestone 3 (1992).

**Composer’s notes:** “The piano sets up a solid intro for each change until the last page, when the singers are already used to all the changes and can manage without the piano prompts. I wrote the relationship between the piano and the singers in a way that would help the singers to be able to do fairly well the very first time they read through this piece. This piece is easier for children than for adults because children move to different time signatures in everyday life a higher percentage of time than adults” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).
5.2.7 P7: “Magnify”

Title: “Magnify” (No. 6 from Steps to the Future) (1992)

Publisher: Kjos Music Company (8733)

Commission / Dedication: This music was commissioned by the East York Youth Choir conducted by Michel Bondy, with financial assistance from the East York Board of Education and the Canadian Music Centre through its “Creating Music in the Classroom” program.

Voicing: SA, accompanied
S: C4 – F#5
A: C4 – E5

Soloist(s): NA

Accompaniment: Keyboard

Text sources: Composer’s own text

Text designation: Secular

Duration: 2:00

Dynamic range: pianissimo to fortissimo

Musical features: “(This piece) has a strange sense of wonder about it—as though the music begins ‘through the looking-glass’” (Telfer 1992). Telfer features the whole tone scale to create this sense of wonderment.

Compositional characteristics:

Text: “The idea of magnifying something seems quite magical. Something rather ordinary can be transformed into something quite spectacular. A drop of water becomes an entire world; a sunbeam becomes a raging fire; hopes and dreams becomes the future reality” (Telfer 1992). The word magnify is repeated multiple times
throughout the piece as it goes through a series of tempo changes, rhythmic ideas, and harmonic ideas.

**Rhythm**: The music gradually develops to a fast, rhythmic dance, signifying a celebration of the magnification of hopes and dreams.

**Pitch & tonality**: “The sound of a whole tone scale sounds suspenseful to me. It sounds unstable because you lose the strong feeling of a tonic, so you don't know where it is headed to get ‘home.’ There is some sense of triumph in making it to the top of the scale” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).

**Expression**: The suspense slowly builds at the beginning of the pieces. Telfer reminds singers: “Stretch out the vowel in each of the longer notes, letting the sound spin forward through the air to the next note” (Telfer 1992). The wide range and gradual build-up of dynamics emphasizes the idea of *magnify*: “it is fun to experiment with dynamics” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).

**Part-writing**: The simple two-part writing begins with voices singing in unison, then gradually expanding in harmonic intervals to build on the theme of this piece. From there, harmonic writing is mostly in thirds. There are moments of unison singing and canon-like part-singing interspersed.

**Singers’ challenges**: Singers need pitch accuracy in singing the notes of the whole tone scale. Telfer suggests: “Begin the first rehearsal by having the choir sing softly along with the piano accompaniment, so that each singer can get an accurate sense of the pitches in the whole tone scale” (Telfer 1992). In the fast-paced section of the music, singers should be consistent in their rhythmic intensity by emphasizing the strong beats in each rhythmic grouping. They should also maintain the excitement in the music throughout long-held notes: “Mark the
score with arrows as reminders to move the sound forward towards each accented note” (Telfer 1992).

Teaching and rehearsal suggestions: Refer to the score for detailed background information, rehearsal tips for the conductor, and reminders for the singers. The piece also correlates with Telfer’s book, *Successful Sight-Singing*, Milestone 3 (1992).

Composer’s notes: “I felt it was better to go up the scale very slowly at first so that the singers only have to think about going one tone at a time. Once they have done that, it is much easier to do something rhythmic with it, so why not celebrate? But some repetition was needed or there would have been too much new (material in this piece)” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).

5.3 Compositions which evoke imagery

5.3.1 I1 “The Blue Eye of God”

Title: “The Blue Eye of God” (1989)

Publisher: earthsongs

Commission / Dedication: “Commissioned by ‘Les Choristes,’ the award-winning women’s choir at Western University. Their conductor, Victoria Meredith, is known by the high standards of her choirs, particularly in the areas of interpretation and vocal production” (Telfer 1989).

Voicing: SSAA choir, *a cappella*

- S1: D4 – G5
- S2: D4 – Eb5
- A1: G3 – D5
- A2: G3 – C#5

Soloist(s): N/A
Accompaniment: Unaccompanied

Text sources: “The Blue Eye of God” by Barbara Powis

Text designation: Secular

Duration: 4:00

Dynamic range: piano to forte

Musical features: This is a dramatic piece for an advanced women’s chorus, based on the environment. It expresses the suffering of animals, due to the pollution and killing caused by man. “Each section expresses the words in a different way—sometimes dramatic with all voicings combined, but most often using one voicing for the text and the other singers providing accompaniment, so I wrote the melody first in each section” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).

Compositional characteristics:

Text: The text is by Barbara Powis, a Canadian poet from British Columbia who died in her forties from cancer. All her poems present a vivid image of the outdoors: movement, colour, and a strong sense of life (Telfer 1989). The words dolphin and heron are repeated (almost chant-like) in accompanying voices while one part sings the melody. The piece opens and closes with an air of mystery and intensity with voices whispering “The animals, the winged and swimming creatures …” and “shwah-wah-wah-wah,” imitating the sound of the wings of a large bird passing over.

Rhythm: The lyrical melody is stretched out over the ostinato-like rhythmic accompaniment. This allows the melody to stand out amidst the busy-ness of the other parts.

Pitch & tonality: The piece is in G minor, although no key signature is present. Voices have long, held notes towards the
ending of the piece, with intervals of half or whole steps, resulting in dissonance that creates an air of tension as it leads to the whispered texts at the end.

**Expression:** According to Telfer’s performance notes (1987):

- The opening chord should be quite dramatic. The sound should be powerful, and the dissonance among the voices should convey great anguish.
- The whispered part will not be clearly heard but will sound more like murmuring from a crowd of people. The sung part must be enunciated very clearly so that the audience will catch the words. The hummed part is background to this.
- In general, exaggerate the dynamics throughout the piece so that the contrast will be great. This will give the music a slightly raw effect in places.

**Part-writing:** The melody is in one voice part, with three other parts accompanying. All voices take turns singing the melody. The accompaniment consists of pairs of leaping notes in fourths or fifths, increasing and decreasing in dynamics to create waves, like “a warm living, moving kind of effect” (Telfer 1987).

**Singers’ challenges:** When transitioning from the whispered section to the sung section, singers need to be familiar with the starting pitches. Singers also need to concentrate on keeping notes exactly the same in pitch (especially the leaping fourths and fifths) as they sing accompaniment. The text needs clear articulation in order to convey the intentions of the music.

**Teaching and rehearsal suggestions:** Related warmup materials from Nancy Telfer’s books:

- *Successful Warmups, Book 1:* Warmup 54—Tuning dissonance (pp. 172-173)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 1:* Warmup 59—Precision in diction (p. 187)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 2:* Warmup 16—Consistent tone quality for small leaps (p. 70)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 2:* Warmup 33—Articulation (p. 124)
Composer’s notes: “I felt that more music should be written about the environment. Barbara Powis was a Canadian poet who gave me permission to use her poetry. I had just finished writing some pieces using her poetry when she was on her deathbed. Her choral friends came in and sang them for her the best they could from the manuscript copy. The quality of my composition was inspired by the quality of Victoria Meredith's work as a conductor” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).

5.3.2 I2: “Chasing the Northern Lights”

Title: “Chasing the Northern Lights” (1997)

Publisher: Leslie Music Supply, Inc.

Commission / Dedication: For Ruth Schiller and the Hillsborough Girls’ Choir

Voicing: SSA choir, a cappella
S1: E4 – G#5
S2: C#4 – D#5
A: Bb3 – D5

Soloist(s): N/A

Accompaniment: Unaccompanied

Text sources: Composer’s own text

Text designation: Secular

Duration: 2:30 – 3:00

Dynamic range: pianissimo to forte

Musical features: Telfer uses a combination of syllables, harmonic ideas, and varied tone qualities to create a musical representation of the Northern Lights. “The music creates an abstract experience; it transports the
audience into a scene very different from a concert hall. Some
listeners might imagine the Northern Lights as they listen . . . I was
working with shapes of sounds throughout this piece rather than
phrasing, rhythm, harmony, or pitch. the shapes are evocative of
the Northern Lights” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).

Compositional characteristics:

**Text:** Text consists of syllables and vocables and were created for
their sound and vocal effects. For example, “la” suggests the
sudden, light laughter of children; “ah” is free and light; “ma ma”
engages vocal resonance and produces a bright tone quality; “mo
mo” creates a darker tone. “It is difficult to sing the same syllable
for too long, so I varied the vocal syllables. Some syllables are
more playful than others so that changes the mood” (Telfer,
interview, November 27, 2017).

**Rhythm:** Except for the slow introduction, there is a consistent
pulsing eighth note pattern that drives the music. This also helps
re-energize syllables that are sung on repeated pitches.

**Pitch & tonality:** There are no key signatures for this piece and
there are many key changes. It begins in Lydian mode on E and
later goes through a series of transitions: A-flat melodic minor, F
natural minor, Lydian on C, Lydian on E, and ending in B major.

**Expression:** According to Telfer’s performance notes (1997):
- The singers use a hand in front of the mouth to control
dynamics and create a muted sound. The crescendos show
the fluctuation of light.
- The conductor has a wide choice of tempo. A slow tempo
requires a great deal of control, but the dynamics change
more gradually. A choir with a light quality of sound may
wish to choose a fast tempo and use the musical energy to
shape the phrases.
- “La” should sound a bit like the sudden, light laughter of
children. The sound should ring clearly. When “la la”
alternates with rests, the music can sound a bit breathless to create an impression of running. Each choral voicing can playfully throw the “la la” toward the other singers as is done in Inuit throat singing, but a light, good quality of tone should be maintained.

**Part-writing:** The piece weaves in and out of unison and part-singing, creating textural interest. Three-part harmonies are mostly tonal, with brief episodes of clustered chords. If the harmonic section evokes washes of colour, the contrasting polyphonic middle creates an image of flurried streaks of colour.

**Singers’ challenges:** This piece requires singers’ stamina in breath control, vital to maintain the forward direction of the music as well as to sustain pitch accuracy in repeated notes. Unity in vowel production also ensures accuracy in pitch and harmony. There is a need for lightness in tone to recreate the fluidity of the Northern Lights. A solid understanding of the changing tonality will ensure singers’ secure intonation and harmony.

**Teaching and rehearsal suggestions:** Related warmup materials from Nancy Telfer’s books:

- **Successful Warmups, Book 1: Warmup 2**—Building endurance for breath (pp. 28-29)
- **Successful Warmups, Book 1: Warmup 6**—Tuning repeated pitches (p. 46)
- **Successful Warmups, Book 1: Warmup 35**—Tuning harmony with the choir (p. 120)
- **Successful Warmups, Book 1: Warmup 54**—Tuning dissonance (pp. 172-173)

**Composer’s notes:** “Two inspirations: my visit to work in Labrador and hearing about people chasing the Northern Lights there; my admiration for the Canadian conductor, Ruth Schiller, who could get children to sing anything beautifully with meaning” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017). “In some northern Canadian communities, people go out to chase the Northern Lights during the night. It is a magical time and people of all ages participate. The adults start to feel more like children as they drive their cars and snowmobiles to follow the
movement of the lights. Everyone becomes gentle through the magic” (Telfer 1997).

5.3.3  I3: “First Snow”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title:</th>
<th>“First Snow” (1991)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Publisher:</td>
<td>Kjos Music Company (6259)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commission / Dedication:</td>
<td>Commissioned by Perth County Board of Education with assistance from the Canadian Music Centre “Creating Music in the Classroom” Program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voicing:</td>
<td>Unison (optional two-part), D4 – F5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soloist(s):</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accompaniment:</td>
<td>Keyboard (optional tambourine)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text sources:</td>
<td>“The lyrics were written by Nancy Telfer using words invented by students from Shakespeare and Avon Public Schools in Stratford (Canada) during a brainstorming session with the composer. Each word of the lyrics describes a different type of snow because the first snow of the season can be any type of snow” (Telfer 1991).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text designation:</td>
<td>Secular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration:</td>
<td>3:10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic range:</td>
<td>pianissimo to mezzo piano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musical features:</td>
<td>This piece captures the excitement of the first snow in winter. It also highlights the sights and sounds of nature through the use of thematic ideas, vocal sound effects, and original text. Young singers will enjoy singing text that was invented by children their own age and exploring a variety of tone colours, sound effects, and characters which depict different types of snow.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Compositional characteristics:

**Text**: The made-up words represent various types of snow—tiny dots, large and wet flakes, powdered granules, huge and fluffy flakes, crystalized flakes, and snow that is packed hard. There is a mixture of spoken and sung words. Telfer instructs singers to perform spoken words in a short and rhythmic manner, as “vowels are not stretched out as much as in warmer climates” (Telfer 1991). “I chose the order of the text, word by word, as I was actually writing the music” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).

**Rhythm**: A variety of rhythmic ideas convey the different types of snow. For example, larger snowflakes have longer note values, tinier ones are shorter, and crystallized flakes have a mixture of both short and long note values. “Each word had a natural rhythmic value or sound effect that could contribute right then to the music” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017). The ostinato rhythm of the tambourine and the steady piano accompaniment provide a consistent beat which supports the active vocal line.

**Pitch & tonality**: The musical ideas in this piece constantly change—“each word seemed to point to the next word; I let the music unfold naturally, moving quickly from one idea to the next, rather than over planning it” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017). The piece begins in D minor and ends in G minor, both in the natural minor mode.

**Expression**: Telfer reminds performers to think of “the music between the notes”:

- When the weather is very cold, there is a certain “humming” sound in the air. Let the introductory humming sizzle quietly.
- People generally move more quickly (to keep warm). Consonants should be crisp, formed with a tiny movement at the front of the mouth.
- The snow is cold but the hearts are warm. Use a warm tone to make each phrase beautiful.
- With spoken words, vowels are not stretched out as much as in warmer climates. Staccato should be very short and focused. Use legato phrasing unless it is marked staccato.
- Small sounds carry great distances in the cold. Soft parts should be just as clear as loud parts.

(Telfer 1991)

**Part-writing:** Predominantly sung in unison, the simple two-part sections suggest that Telfer is introducing young singers to the fundamentals of polyphonic singing. When one voice part sings an extended *legato* phrase, the other part speaks text in a short and rhythmic manner. There is adequate musical contrast in both voice parts to reduce any part-singing confusion among less experienced singers.

**Singers’ challenges:** This music has many expressive markings. Singers need to emphasize the articulation and dynamics of the piece to create the different characters of snow. “As you sing, think of the fun of playing in the snow. You will rehearse this music many times but it must sound fresh and new in performance— as clean as the first snow” (Telfer 1991).

**Teaching and rehearsal suggestions:** Refer to the score for detailed background information, rehearsal tips for the conductor, and reminders for the singers.

**Composer’s notes:** “I always really enjoy the first time it snows each winter. It is so unreal. I notice that other people act differently than they usually do when the first snow comes, so the music would have to be magical. I wanted to start with a quiet sound that showed pleasure so "mm" was the best choice. I was also careful to retain the lightness of texture and rhythm to fit with the idea of the first snow” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).
5.4 Noted Concert Pieces

5.4.1 C1: Requiem Aeternam

Title: Requiem Aeternam (1995)—a work in five movements

Publisher: PH Publishers (Germany) (PHP 302 630)

Commission / Dedication: Commissioned in memory of Valera Lusk Lee by the Peninsula Women’s Chorus, Patricia Hennings, Director

Voicing: SSAA choir, soprano solo, piano, percussion

S1: C4 – G5
S2: C4 – G5
A1: G3 – D5
A2: F3 – C5

Soloist(s): Soprano solo: F4 – G5

Accompaniment: Piano and percussion

Text sources: A combination of sacred text and composer’s own text

Text designation: Both sacred and secular. According to Telfer, “both sacred and secular images are included to link humanity’s understanding of nature with an understanding of the spiritual” (Taken from the inside cover of the score)

Duration: I. “Requiem aeternam” 3:25
II. “Dies Irae” 3:45
III. “Offertorium” 1:30
IV. “Sanctus and Hosanna” 1:35
V. “Agnus Dei” 3:45
Total 13:40

Dynamic range: pianissimo to fortissimo
Musical features: The piece begins with images of the long process that nature needs to create a beach: a picture that suits the eternal nature of a requiem. The images of light (lux perpetua) help to convey the celebration of Valera’s life. The choir is located near San Francisco on the west coast of the United States, where whales are a source of curiosity and symbol of ageless continuity. In “Dies Irae,” people are encouraged to take responsibility for the destruction of nature. The repetition in the “Offertorium” accompaniment is more meditative in nature to fit with the choir’s chanted parts. One of the images that the choir contributed was a description of years without birds and then, without warning, flocks and flocks of them suddenly arriving on the shore, and then the sea creatures coming back, too: an incredible renewal of nature. That excitement is captured in the “Sanctus and Hosanna.” The image of waves was saved for the last movement because it is, perhaps, the most eternal image of all. (Telfer 1995)

Compositional characteristics:

Text: “Throughout the music, both sacred and secular images are included to link humanity’s understanding of nature with an understanding of the spiritual” (Telfer 1995). In the second movement, Telfer provides a choice of lyrics to suit the environmental issues of the location of the performance. In the third movement, “solo speakers are used to add some drama as well as focused sincerity to the pledge” (Telfer 1995). Here, there is a choice of speaking the lines in the singer’s native language, and “each speaker should have a voice that is distinct from the other speakers” (Telfer 1995).

Rhythm: Telfer used rhythm to emphasize the mood of each movement. In the second movement, the throbbing eighth notes and repeated ostinato in rhythmic sections add some urgency to the
request for mercy. In the third movement, the alternating long and short notes imitate the movements of birds, creating an air of excitement.

**Pitch & tonality:** “Lots of chant-like measures (chant has an eternal sound which goes well with this text). Short, fluttering phrases like angel wings” (Telfer 1995). The *cantabile* section in the second movement shows deep concern and anguish. The punctuating dissonance that recurs throughout the entire work gives a sense of urgency. The last movement “begins with a single voice, slowly growing in confidence and repeating the same words with a beautiful melody while the choir presents the main message (of grant us peace)” (Telfer 1995).

**Expression:** “Dissonance is used for strength and for pain. The interpretation of a requiem is pro-active (e.g. promises are made; heaven and earth are connected and experienced by participation, not by observing from a distance)” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017). “The dynamics create an ebb and flow in the sound. Sometimes the melody is passed from voice to voice, each line a slightly different shape, like the waves. The piano part is crucial to the overall effect. Although the percussion is optional, it adds many sounds that are evocative of nature on the shore” (Telfer 1995).

**Part-writing:** “I found it interesting but difficult to write a piece that could be done with a soprano soloist OR an SSAA choir. It means that S2 gets some great parts, which is a nice change, but it is always more difficult to get a middle voicing to cut through. I left a window open for the soloist's pitches so that the other parts would not be competing and wiping out the sound of the soloist/S2” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).
Singers’ challenges: This piece is suitable for advanced female choirs because of its wide vocal range, technical challenges, as well as the content, which requires the emotional maturity of the performers. Singers need to be able to perform contrasting sections, from lyrical and anguished, to smooth and chant-like, to sounding full, glorious, and with excitement. There needs to be stability in singing dissonant harmonies and ease in phrasing wide leaps of notes.

Teaching and rehearsal suggestions: Related warmup materials from Nancy Telfer’s books:

- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 2—Building endurance for breath (pp. 28-29)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 59—Precision in diction (p. 187)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 2*: Warmup 16—Consistent tone quality for small leaps (pp. 70-71)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 2*: Warmup 33—Articulation (p. 124)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 2*: Warmup 63—Rhythmic patterns with accents (p. 211)

Composer’s notes: “This is also inspired by the environmental movement, at the suggestion of the singers in the commissioning choir. The singers came from all walks of life, and I had already heard them in concert singing passionately, so I knew this topic would be right for them” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).

According to Telfer’s program notes: “*Requiem Aeternam* was commissioned in memory of Lee, a choir member who had died. I asked the choir to brainstorm for visual images that they might connect with this former member. The images helped me to become familiar with both the choir and the deceased member and I was inspired by the images to write the lyrics” (taken from the inside cover of the score).
5.4.2  C2: “De Profundis”

Title: “De Profundis” (2001)

Publisher: Edition Music Contact (EMC 101529)

Commission / Dedication: For Dr. Hak-Won Yoon and the Incheon City Chorale

Voicing: SAATBB Choir, *a cappella*

- **S:** D4 – G5
- **A1:** A3 – C5
- **A2:** A3 – C5
- **T:** D3 – G4
- **B1:** A2 – Bb3
- **B2:** F2 – F3

Soloist(s): N/A

Accompaniment: Unaccompanied

Text sources: Psalm 130 (entire Psalm) (Telfer, 2001)

Text designation: Sacred

Duration: 3:55

Dynamic range: *pianissimo to forte*

Musical features: “This composition offers a dramatic representation of the text ‘Out of the Depths’ that begins with low murmuring voices, builds to an energetic 7/8 dance, and concludes almost imperceptibly. The ranges, vocal control, and tone colours required make it well suited to adult voices” (Meredith 2012).
Compositional characteristics:

**Text:** Telfer sets the music around the sacred text—a lament in eight verses. The various sections of the music are structured to mirror the emotion and message of each verse.

**Rhythm:** There is a dramatic contrast between the driving, repetitive rhythm and the dance-like 7/8 section.

**Pitch & tonality:** The piece goes through a series of key changes: Phrygian in A, C minor, Phrygian in C, and B-flat minor. The flattened second degree of the scale gives the piece a dark and unsettling feeling throughout. The wide range of notes demands technical facility on the part of the singer.

**Expression:** The exceptional musicality of Dr. Hak-Won Yoon and the Incheon City Chorale inspired Telfer to create the expressive ideas of this piece. Telfer uses the extreme ranges of the voice to create depth, and to punctuate emotional intent. She creates a menacing and dark opening by having the low basses sing an ostinato at the bottom of their range, and are later joined by the altos. Sopranos sing “I cried to you” with upward leaps toward the upper part of the register. Cries are also expressed through downward glissandi. Telfer creates “depth” by having *divisi* among altos and basses but not sopranos and tenors.

**Part-writing:** This piece features dissonance and alternation between counterpoint and homophony. Telfer also creates thicker texture at times by splitting some voicings. “Depths” can mean how deep something is, but it can also mean how complex something is” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).

**Singers’ challenges:** Singers require independence in rhythm, security in their own parts, and “careful attention to details of the score. Divided parts, changing meters, extreme dynamic contrasts, low ranges, and
overlapping entrances make tuning and text projection a challenge, while at the same time effectively tone painting the text ‘Out of the Depths’” (Meredith, 2012).

Teaching and rehearsal suggestions: Related warmup materials from Nancy Telfer’s books:

- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 2—Building endurance for breath (pp. 28-29)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 6—Tuning repeated pitches (p. 46)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 35—Tuning harmony with the choir (p. 120)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 54—Tuning dissonance (pp. 172-173)

Composer’s notes: “I have structured the parts to show both meanings, complex in some rhythmic sections and a deep, rich sound in some other sections. The climaxes are particularly important; Dr. Yoon is very good at those. He is also good at gentle endings” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).

5.4.3 C3: “Fireworks”

Title: “Fireworks” (2004)

Publisher: Edition Choris Mundi (ECM 11.01.149)

Commission / Dedication: N/A

Voicing: SSSAAA choir, *a cappella*

S1: D4 – B5
S2: B3 – G5
S3: C4 – E5
A1: B3 – E5
A2: B3 – C5
A3: G3 – A4
Soloist(s): N/A

Accompaniment: Unaccompanied

Text sources: Composer’s own text

Text designation: Secular

Duration: 5:25

Dynamic range: piano to fortissimo

Musical features: This piece is a vocal representation of fireworks, accomplished through articulation, contrasting dynamics, exploration of a wide vocal range, and Telfer’s invented text. Due to its technical demands, this piece will be appropriate for advanced female ensembles in festival programming.

Compositional characteristics:

Text: Text consists of syllables and vocables that were created for their sound, and vocal effects that mimic fireworks. There are speaking and whispering parts throughout the piece, usually on hard and plosive consonants (e.g. “krak,” “kikapaka,” “ss-shwa”) to create the crackles and fizzes of fireworks. The text of running passages provide an underlying pulse and energy (e.g. “wa wa wa,” “dipa dipa”). The contrasting hums represent the fading out of fireworks.

Rhythm: A wide variety of rhythmic patterns show the different lengths of a firework’s activity, both in the duration of the colours in the sky and the variety of its energetic bursts.

Pitch & tonality: The piece is set in G major throughout. Spoken text is notated on the same five-line staff, but not sung. Instead, notes to performers indicate speaking the section in certain
inflections: downward, upward, undulating, or monotonous. Sung sections go through a wide range of the voice.

**Expression**: *Staccato* is used to show quick bursts, *legato* for long blooms of colour, and *glissandi* are used to show the swift movements of light. There is little repetition in this piece, as it is a “series of fireworks. Each explosion had to be followed by a different, contrasting explosion. I imagined fireworks I had seen as I composed each explosion” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).

**Part-writing**: This piece features chord clusters, and alternation between counterpoint and homophony. As there are more *divisi* in this piece, there are sections which show counterpoint among the sopranos while altos sing in homophony. Another section suggests a two-choir approach, with the three soprano parts and three alto parts singing in anthemic fashion.

**Singers’ challenges**: This piece requires singers to have evenness in vocal tone to execute the wide-ranging *glissandi* (the widest being an interval of a 10th). Singers also need to be able to keep repeated high pitches light and energetic. *Staccatos* on both repeated pitches and in running passages should have consistent weight and accurate intonation. Singers are also required to be flexible in switching between *legato* singing and *staccato* singing.

**Teaching and rehearsal suggestions**: Related warmup materials from Nancy Telfer’s books:

- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 2—Building endurance for breath (pp. 28-29)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 6—Tuning repeated pitches (p. 46)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 15—Tuning sustained notes (pp. 71-72)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 2*: Warmup 45—Even tone with leaps (p. 162)
• *Successful Warmups, Book 2*: Warmup 51—Tone cluster (pp. 179-180)

• *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 54—Tuning dissonance (pp. 172-173)

• *Singing High Pitches with Ease*: X. Phrases Starting on a high pitch (pp. 47-51)

• *Singing High Pitches with Ease*: XIV. Good intonation for high pitches (pp. 63-66)

Composer’s notes: “I was inspired by the incredible work happening with choirs in mainland China. I chose the topic of fireworks because fireworks are popular there, and the complexities of fireworks provides an opportunity to compose something difficult” (Telfer, interview, November 27, 2017).

5.4.4 C.4: “We Sail Away”

Title: “We Sail Away” (2006)

Publisher: Kjos Music Press (6362)

Commission / Dedication: Theme song commissioned by the Co-Curricular Activities Branch of the Ministry of Education for Singapore International Youth Choral Festival 2011

Voicing: SSA

S1: E4-G5

S2: D4-E5

A: A3-C5

Soloist(s): N/A

Accompaniment: Keyboard

Text sources: Composer’s own text
Text designation: Secular

Duration: 2:45

Dynamic range: *piano to forte*

Musical features: This represents one of Telfer’s many nature-themed pieces. Written for the 2011 Singapore International Youth Choir Festival, “We Sail Away” resonates among choral singers as it represents the choirs’ journeys and experiences in choral festivals, concerts, and tours. The idea of sailing is shown in the compound meter and triplet grouping of notes. All voice parts take turns to lead as the melody line dances from one part to another. The contrasting sections of this piece encourage performers to expand their musicality and expressiveness in word painting, articulation, phrasing, and dynamics. This piece is also available for mixed voices (SATB) and male voices (TTBB). “It can be performed together by several choirs with different voicings so it is useful for big choral events. But it also works well for just one small choir” (Telfer, interview, January 21, 2017).

Compositional characteristics:

**Text:** “I wrote the text using ideas about the sea that are common in many countries around the world, so that singers in many places could use this music. My goal was to let singers experience the tempting pull of the sea and the feeling of being part of this environment which is nothing like anything on land” (Telfer, interview, January 21, 2017).

**Rhythm:** The vocal and piano parts take turns to keep a steady triple eighth note rhythmic pattern throughout the piece. The long-short (quarter note and eighth note) pattern provides the rollicking feel of the waves.
Pitch & tonality: Unlike many of her other pieces, “We’ll Sail Away” is generally tonal throughout. It begins in A major and shifts to the tonic minor (A minor) before returning to the original key in the final section. Word painting is crucial in bringing out the intention and emotion of the text: “The roaring waves” is sung by the altos at the lower register of the voice; “Glide” is extended over a few bars to show length; “Away” is sung in repetition and traded by the different voices to show distance.

Expression: Telfer uses vocal effects to create the sound of wind and waves by having altos breathe “oo… hah…” while sopranos sing, “we’ll sail away on a windy day.” Contrasting dynamics provide information on the interpretation of the text. A mezzo forte passage (e.g. “We’ll sail away on a beautiful boat”) followed by an immediate piano (e.g. “We’ll sail away…”) suggests a statement followed by an afterthought. Breath marks are clearly shown in this piece, showing the composer’s sensitivity to the singers’ breath and phrasing.

Part-writing: Counterpoint and homophony alternate in this piece. The melodic line weaves through each voice part, providing each singer the opportunity to lead as well as to harmonize. Similar to the theme of a voyage, the part-writing consists of waves of alternating unison and three-part singing. This provides the singers with unison moments to “rest” ears, and the audience experiences a variety of vocal textures. Dissonances and cluster chords are minimal.

Singers’ challenges: Singers will need to be attentive to the balance between vocal parts by being aware of their changing roles in singing the melody and the harmony. Text clarity is vital in the story telling of this piece: consonants should be crisp and vowels should be unified.
Teaching and rehearsal suggestions: Related warmup materials from Nancy Telfer’s books:

- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 2—Building endurance for breath (pp. 28-29)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 2*: Warmup 33—Articulation (p. 124)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 1*: Warmup 35—Tuning harmony with the choir (p. 120)
- *Successful Warmups, Book 2*: Warmup 45—Even tone with leaps (p. 162)
- *Singing High Pitches with Ease*: XIV. Good intonation for high pitches (pp. 63-66)

Composer’s notes: “Many generations ago, my ancestors were fishermen, and I still feel the call of the sea, and I still like to live close to the water. The changing dynamics and the rollicking triple time really bring the music and text alive. Each vocal part is important. Although the pitches and rhythms are not difficult, this piece provides many opportunities to develop musicality. Although much of the piece is lightly rhythmic, there are sections that are more intense or calmer, where vocal colour can be used to help portray the text. It is good to have some music about the sea that is not limited to the experiences of male sailors!” (Telfer, interview, January 21, 2018).

5.5 Summary and Conclusions

Nancy Telfer is a unique musician with the ability to combine education and artistry through her choral output, while making it accessible for musicians of varying skills and abilities. Her values as an educator informs her approach to her compositions, which are useful as teaching tools for singers. Furthermore, she is aware that choral educators are always looking for high quality repertoire and makes sure that she produces works with the educators and students in mind.

Through the in-depth study of Telfer’s choral music, the author has found Telfer’s compositions engaging, appealing, musical, and pedagogically-sound. As stated earlier in this document, Telfer’s ability to encourage performers to be successful by balancing artistry, pedagogy, and
accessibility in her music is extraordinary. She writes as a response to the changing choral, musical, and social concerns of the time, which makes her a musician that is constantly evolving. In addition, Telfer’s pedagogical offerings tackles challenges in choral performance, developing vocal technique, and improving musical literacy.

The choral pieces annotated in this document demonstrate Telfer’s ability to write for a variety of choral voicings, themes, and ensemble skills. The author has also linked appropriate warmup strategies from Telfer’s pedagogy books to each piece, and included the composer’s additional notes on those pieces for more context.

The process of writing this document has given the author a greater awareness and appreciation of Telfer’s choral legacy thus far. It has also allowed the author to make direct associations between Telfer’s compositions and pedagogy materials: her compositions are effective teaching tools, and her pedagogy materials develop the singers’ artistry.

I completed the final chapter (the analysis of selected pieces) of this document while I was preparing the University of Toronto Women’s Chorus for my lecture recital on the topic of this thesis. This has provided many benefits: My active rehearsal of the pieces informed my written analysis, and my written analysis enhanced my approach and interpretation of Telfer’s music in the rehearsal process.

I have also discovered that Telfer’s compositions encouraged teamwork. For instance, a few of her aleatoric pieces required singers in perform in mixed position with staggered entries of a melodic idea. This could only be achieved if singers focused on listening to those around them in order to sing at the right moment. It also meant that singers are responsible for their own clarity of singing to provide the appropriate cues for those around them. Another social aspect of Telfer’s music can be found in the compositions of made-up languages. The humourous text allowed singers to share light-hearted moments in rehearsals.

I met Nancy Telfer in August 2017 at the International Kodály Symposium in Alberta where she was presenting, and was impressed by her generosity in sharing information as well as her clarity and efficiency in conveying her ideas to symposium delegates. The encounter motivated me to invite her to workshop her pieces at one of the Women’s Chorus rehearsals as I believed that the singers and I would benefit from learning from a fine clinician who is both a composer and a
pedagogue. The workshop confirmed my interpretation of her pieces, and solidified areas which only a composer could influence such as context, encouragement, and technical and artistic refinement. Watching Telfer work for two hours was a masterclass in efficient and artistic teaching for all of us.

An area for future research would be an analysis of Telfer’s large choral-orchestral works, and examining whether Telfer brings to these the same sense of pedagogy for instruments that she does for voices.

Ultimately, Nancy Telfer’s choral legacy is successful in helping choral educators and singers to transition from the printed page to the performance stage through pedagogy while celebrating the beauty and strength of the human voice.
Bibliography


Musical Scores


Dear Ms. Nancy Telfer,

Thank you for agreeing to be the subject of my Doctor of Musical Arts research on your musical career and choral contribution. As part of the procedures of my research, I will need your official consent to pursue this study. My research aims to provide choral educators and conductors with greater access to your choral music by showing the accessibility of your choral output and its implications for structured teaching of choral music beyond your body of work.

A series of up to eight interviews will take place between January 2017 and September 2017. We will do these in person and/or by telephone, with any additional e-mail and/or other online communication that facilitates the process. You will be interviewed about your musical background and your music, your thoughts on choral compositions, your pedagogical output, and your views on choral music education. At the most several two-hour sessions will provide the necessary information. We can follow up by e-mail as needed, if further clarification is required. I will take notes during the interviews as well as record the content for verification. Audio records will be kept for up to seven years and destroyed after. You will have access to the transcripts and the right to edit or delete any recorded material. As the subject of my research, your identity will be revealed. Nothing of a personal nature that you wish to keep confidential will be divulged. It will be deleted from the manuscript. Data collected during the interview process will be stored in a password-encoded laptop, accessible only to me, and used in my research.

Your participation is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time. You are free to answer any or all of the interview questions. There is no remuneration for
your time, but you will make an invaluable contribution to this research for the choral community if you are able to participate.

Please sign below if you agree with the conditions of the study.

Thank you.

Tracy Wei Wen Wong

DMA Choral Conducting Student

Faculty of Music, University of Toronto

I, ______________________, consent to participate in the DMA research, “From Page To Performance Through Pedagogy: The Choral Legacy of Nancy Telfer”, conducted by Tracy Wei Wen Wong. I am aware that interviews will be recorded on audio. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signed ______________________  Dated ______________________
APPENDIX B: Sample Interview Questions for the Composer and Other Participants

Sample Interview Questions for Nancy Telfer

On musical background:
1. Who were your mentors/role models as a young composer? How did they influence your musical output?
2. What were some of the most important skills and lessons you learned in your development as a composer?
3. Who are the champions of your music? Who can I talk to/interview?
4. What drew you to be a composer? Why compose for choirs?

On composing for choirs:
1. You have composed for a long period of time. Have there been changes in your style of writing and approach to composing for choirs? If so, what has changed? Why?
2. How do you choose texts for your compositions? How are choices affected by voicing?
3. What are your criteria for accessibility of your music?
4. How did your writing allow performers to be successful?
5. You write an impressive amount of music (both choral and otherwise) in a short period of time (eg. multiple works in one year). What is your motivation?
6. Please share your philosophy on writing music from an educator's perspective.
7. I read your correspondence with James McCormick (Nov. 1985) for his dissertation research on CMC, where you talked about the need for more works specifically composed for teaching purposes (because of a lack of interest on the part of composers). How do your beliefs in 2016 relate to this?
8. Do you have a preferred voicing that you love writing for? If so, what draws you to that?
9. How have changes in technology affected your work in the last twenty years?
10. Regarding commissioned works: what is your process in collaborating with choral directors and choirs?
11. Why did you begin writing choral works for international choirs?
12. You have written over 200 pieces for choirs. What would you consider your best works for: children’s choirs, treble choirs, mixed voice choirs, etc.? Which are the most meaningful works to you and why?
13. You mentioned: “Much of my work was shaped by what was happening in society and particularly what was happening in the choral scene during each decade.”
a. Please elaborate on that.
b. How do your works reflect the changing times?
c. How does your writing respond to pedagogical / musical / choral / social concerns of the times?
d. What were examples of works that came out of that?

14. What are your current projects?

On choral pedagogy and rehearsal techniques:
1. What are your expectations for the singers you work with and how do you hold singers accountable for meeting those?
2. What are some pieces that are pedagogically driven? Please elaborate how they are so.
3. What is your philosophy on choral music pedagogy? How does your philosophy inform your compositions? How do your compositions inform your philosophy?
4. You have written books on choral pedagogy as well as attached detailed rehearsal technique ideas to choral works (both yours and of other composers). How was this conceptualized? What was the process that went into the books and how did it reach international choral educators?
5. You encourage a pedagogical approach that allows conductors, educators, and singers to be successful. What is your definition of “success” for the individual and for an ensemble?
6. I will be analyzing specific works as a part of my research. Please provide a selection of works that you feel should be highlighted.

On choral trends:
1. What changes in the choral art in the last twenty years do you consider important?
2. What trends and challenges do you anticipate in the choral art in the next twenty years?
3. There seems to be a growing trend in composers being conductors, and vice versa. What are your thoughts on the Conductor-Composer?
4. As an educator and composer who has travelled to many countries to conduct workshops and clinics, kindly share your observations of the teachers, vocal ensembles and choral directors.
5. There seems to be a greater interest for composers to write instrumental works as opposed to choral works (“not serious enough” is the usual adage). What would you suggest to choral directors to increase the “appeal” of choral music to composers?
Sample Interview Questions for Choral Conductors

1. What has been your experience with Nancy Telfer’s choral music?
2. Please share your experience in collaborating with Nancy Telfer (eg. performances, commissioned works, workshops, research, etc.), if any.
3. If you have utilized Nancy Telfer’s choral pedagogy books and/or rehearsal technique guides, how were they helpful to your development as a conductor and educator?
4. If you have performed Nancy Telfer’s works as a chorister and/or conductor, how does her music inform and influence your artistic approach as a conductor and educator?
5. Why did you choose Nancy Telfer’s music for your choirs? What are the artistic and pedagogical considerations that informed your decisions?
6. Nancy Telfer believes in a pedagogical approach that allows conductors, educators, and singers to be successful. How do you feel her music allows for both the individual and the ensemble to be successful?
7. Where do you place Nancy Telfer’s music in the context of the Canadian and world choral scene?
8. What, if anything, do you feel is unique about Nancy Telfer’s contribution to the choral arts and community?
APPENDIX C: Analysis Template

Title: Includes year of composition.

Publisher: The name of publishing company. Publisher’s number is provided when available.

Commission / Dedication: Information on commissions, if available.

Voicing: Choral forces are listed by abbreviations for voice parts. For vocal range, pitches indicated by letter names and numeric register, e.g. C4 = middle C.

Soloist(s): Indicates soloists by voice parts and/or instruments, if available.

Accompaniment: Type of accompaniment. “Unaccompanied” if no instruments are listed.

Text sources: This may include authors, titles, and dates.

Text designation: Sacred or secular.

Duration: An approximate performance duration based on information provided by the composer or available recordings.

Dynamic range: General scope of dynamics.

Musical features: Includes the following:
- Occasion
- Type of choir
- Difficulty level

Compositional characteristics: Identifies characteristics that are pedagogical and an effective teaching tool towards artistry. Also addresses how the composer’s pedagogical philosophy informs her writing.
• Text
• Rhythm
• Pitch and tonality
• Expression
• Part-writing

Singers’ challenges: Identifies vocal and musicianship issues pertaining to the learning process and performance of the piece.

Teaching and rehearsal suggestions: Warmups and suggestions from related pedagogy materials.

Composer’s notes: Nancy Telfer’s thoughts about the piece.