

Tailor Made: Composer Collaboration in the Independent Voice Studio

By Jessica Saunders and Lisa Neher

We've all experienced the challenge of selecting a song for our younger students, particularly if we're looking for a song that doesn't revolve around the common tropes of flowers, pirates, or romance. In our experience as voice teachers, our students often don't understand or relate to these topics, and many of the older song texts include insensitive references in terms of race and gender roles. Voice teachers can take the lead in expanding the repertoire by working with living composers to create student-centered pieces for their students and the broader vocal community.

How did we do this? It helps if the Voice Teacher (Jessica Saunders) is very good friends with The Composer (Lisa Neher). Our process began in the summer, giving us plenty of time to collaborate. We started with a thorough discussion of the parameters of the songs we wanted to create. We were inspired to create new Halloween songs together because Jessica puts on a yearly Halloween recital and wanted a wider variety of songs to assign. We discussed the age range of the students (elementary to middle school), song length (1 1/2 – 3 minutes), and vocal range and tessitura. Difficulty level in the areas of melody, harmony, pitch support, phrase regularity (preference for regular 2- to 4-bar phrases), and form, as well as piano accompaniment difficulty, were best addressed using examples. Jessica shared study scores of pieces her students had success with in the past. This is important because composers in university programs rarely study educational repertoire. They primarily study complex, groundbreaking, contemporary masterworks written for professionals, not music for kids! Voice teachers are valuable educators and resources for composers, and they can direct them to quality sample repertoire to study. Finally, we made a timeline for the project, including setting a delivery date for the scores.

Lisa recruited her frequent collaborator, Kendra Preston Leonard, to write lyrics for the pieces. Again, Jessica's



Lisa Neher and Jessica Saunders

score samples were useful to demonstrate appropriate text length. Kendra primarily writes non-rhyming poetry, so we decided to run an experiment and write some songs with rhyming lyrics and some without, to see if students expressed a preference. In the end, they did not, and the non-rhyming songs were not more difficult to learn, likely because Lisa structured the music in question-and-answer phrases that "rhymed" musically. Kendra's poetry was both playful and more sophisticated than many songs geared toward this age group. Students benefited from

poetry that did not talk down to them but instead incorporated literary and mythological references to Medusa, Gorgons, and more. The poems introduced students to new vocabulary. To facilitate the learning experience, Lisa included short definitions and IPA pronunciation guides in the music for words that were less familiar.

During the writing process, Lisa shared drafts with Jessica so that she could catch any difficulty concerns early and she could adjust the music accordingly. Jessica also consulted on score layout: was it better to use repeat signs or write music out to incorporate the modest changes between verses? Lisa sent final PDF scores along with mp3 practice tracks generated from her notation software: one version with the piano part only and another with the vocal line included. These were useful practice tools. In the final versions, Lisa hired a pianist to make a high-quality accompaniment track.

Jessica chose students to work on these songs who had been studying with her for many years and who had intermediate musical and singing skills. While she had students in mind for this project, Jessica waited to assign pieces until after she received the first drafts from Lisa. Once Jessica received the songs from Lisa, she sang through all of them and one of the pieces made it very clear which student should sing it. She let one of her other students choose between the other two and then assigned the third piece to a student she thought

NEHER & LEONARD: *Speaky Songs for Singing*

Kendra Preston Leonard dedicates this song to Luca Steinberger

Growl and Howl

Lisa Neher (ASCAP)

Kendra Preston Leonard (ASCAP)

♩ = 144 Fierce and Rhythmic

mf fierce!

I'm gon-na be a were-wolf...

mf

spoken: (not pitched) (sim.)

Grrr... and I'll howl! Wool! I'll

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Be informed of all performances at lisanehermusic@gmail.com.

Kendra Preston Leonard



Allison Bovy

"This is a unique and empowering experience for students, putting them in the driver's seat and empowering them as artists to shape the final version of the songs. They also had the chance to meet and talk to a living female composer, expanding their picture of who composes music, and hopefully inspiring them to write their own songs in the future."

would be a good fit. It was important to have permission from students and parents to share the premiere videos on social media.

Students learned the music and coached the songs in lessons with voice teacher Jessica. After a few weeks, composer Lisa zoomed into lessons to meet the singers and to workshop the pieces. Students provided input on what they liked and what was challenging, leading to additional edits and adjustments. This is a unique and empowering experience for students, putting them in the driver's seat and empowering them as artists to shape the final version of the songs. They also had the chance to meet and talk to a living female composer, expanding their picture of who composes music, and hopefully inspiring them to write their own songs in the future. This hits home for Lisa, who did not know of any female composers until she went to college. She was the only woman in her undergraduate and graduate composition programs and only worked with a woman composition mentor in recent years. We hope this process helps all of our students see that anyone can compose!

Preparing the new songs with the students required a bit more time than usual, as they didn't have a recording to reference for the melodies. Jessica guided the students through

the intricacies of each piece — exploring tricky sections, deciphering the score's nuances (such as repeats), and delving into the extended vocal techniques that Lisa incorporated, including sound effect noises (howls, growls, ghost noises), spoken words and phrases and body percussion (clapping and stomping). This was the first time most students were introduced to extended techniques, and they expanded their idea of what art song can be and gave them the chance to explore their voices in new, fun ways. Gradually, the students spoke the lyrics and then added pitches and rhythms.

The students enjoyed the poetry and the fact that the music and poetry both came from female artists. The absence of rhymes in the poetry intrigued them, yet they marveled at how Lisa's text setting united the song into a seamless whole. The students cherished the opportunity to interact with Lisa, eagerly sharing their diligent efforts.

These songs were created in the early days of the pandemic, so the final product was a video premiere performance with the professional accompaniment track. Students were incredibly creative, dressing up and even using props in their performances. We released the videos (with student and parent permission) as Facebook and YouTube premieres, and they

were shared with Jessica's studio in their online Halloween recitals. These recordings are also available on Lisa's webstore so that singers can preview the music before they purchase sheet music. Across two years, we have created five songs: "Growl and Howl," "The Ghost of the Wych Elm," and "The Witches' Party" in 2020 and "Spider-Dog" and "What Will You Be This Halloween?" in 2021.

"We hope this process helps all our students see that anyone can compose."

For composer Lisa, an important impact of this project was developing her skills of creatively writing music with the needs of younger singers in mind. She added music to her catalog, which can now be purchased on her website as downloadable PDFs with accompaniment tracks and a studio license so that teachers can use the songs with their students for years to come. The project raised her profile in the voice teacher community, as one song, "Growl and Howl," was selected for publication in Dana Lentini's "Singing Kid's Songbook Level 1" published by Hal Leonard. On a personal level, she reconnected to her younger self, remembering what it was like to fall in love with music in the first place. It was rewarding and fun to step outside the pressures of writing for the professional concert stage and serve the needs of young musicians and their teachers.

For Jessica, this project proved instrumental in helping overcome any apprehensions she may have had about collaborating directly with a composer, even one who is a close friend. Moreover, it provided her students with a delightful and engaging activity that served as a much-needed respite during the challenging times of the pandemic. Notably, the inclusion of these pieces in their repertoire satisfied the students' desire to sing about topics that resonate with them, while also featuring compositions by a living female artist and adding to the overall teaching cannon for young voices.

The success of this collaboration has paved the way for further artistic endeavors between Lisa and Jessica, particularly "Bye for Now," a setting of voicemails from Jessica's departed loved ones in a five-song set for voice, cello, and piano. Jessica premiered "Bye for Now" at Kirkwood Community College in Ames, Iowa, in March 2022 with cellist Christina Craig Gentzsch and pianist Joseph McKinley.

Our goals for the future are to continue filling gaps in the repertoire for young singers and expand the topics and themes addressed in art songs for this age group. Our next projects

will include art songs on a wide variety of subjects beyond Halloween and spooky songs, including secular winter songs, art songs for high school contest solos, and a series of duets.

Tips for starting your own collaboration:

- Work with composers and poet/lyricist colleagues you know, or ask fellow musicians for suggestions.
- Work with living poets to take advantage of writing fresh ideas specifically for this age.
- Discuss parameters (length of song and lyrics, difficulty level, melody, harmony, piano support, piano difficulty level) and give examples before music and lyrics are written.
- Share drafts of lyrics and songs in progress for feedback.
- After students have had time to learn the nuts and bolts of the songs, workshop pieces via Zoom or in person, elicit and incorporate student and teacher feedback.
- Create a final product (with student and parent permission) as a video (ideally) or audio recording that the composer can use to market the piece.
- Share the finished music with colleagues and watch your impact grow! (Composers: be sure to have the pieces ready for purchase on your website.)
- Consider how you want to pay for services. Lisa and Jessica did this as an exchange of services, rather than as a paid commission.

Specific tips for composers:

- If you're coming from a university program, you may find yourself needing to "unlearn what you have learned" when writing for student singers. Irregular meters ($\frac{7}{8}$, $\frac{5}{8}$, etc.), changing time signatures, irregular phrase lengths (3-bar phrase followed by a 5-bar phrase followed by a 2-bar phrase, etc.), extensive chromaticism, atonality, etc., are not familiar to student singers.
- Balance tricky moments in a song or challenging parameters with stretches of music or other parameters that are easier to learn. One new concept is often enough for a student.
- Keep memorization in mind. Voice students in private studios typically memorize music for recitals and contests. This is different from the complex contemporary repertoire you have likely studied, which is not intended to be memorized.
- Young singers tend to sing by ear: they have to hear the tune and learn by listening and repeating it back. Thus, music needs to be catchy and memorable, and typically tonal.
- Provide mp3 accompaniment and vocal guide tracks to help students learn. If you can employ a pianist to record the accompaniment as well, this is a desirable addition to the composition package for many teachers.

- Consider writing piano accompaniments that are simple enough (notes, rhythms, key signatures, complexity) that the average voice teacher can sight-read the part in lessons.

Specific tips for teachers:

- Think about the gaps in the current repertoire that you need filled and work with a composer to create those compositions. Chances are, if there are gaps you need filled in your studio, other teachers need these types of pieces as well.
- Get student and parent permission in advance for how the final product of this project will be shared.

Remarkably, our project unfolded amidst the peak of the pandemic, serving as a captivating escape from the confines of their academic pursuits. Although the students may not have fully realized the extraordinary nature of premiering a brand-new composition and collaborating directly with the composer, it remains crucial to nurture such experiences for young minds. By normalizing these opportunities, we empower them to actively pursue their artistic passions — perhaps even inspiring a future generation of teachers, songwriters, composers, or gifted lyricists.

Listen to the [playlist](#) of all 5 spooky songs.

Soprano **Dr. Jessica Saunders** (she/her) owns Saunders Vocal Studios, co-owns Dynamic Music Studios, and teaches

applied voice at Kirkwood Community College. Saunders is the Audition Chair for the Central Region and a member of the Speakeasy Cooperative. Saunders is passionate about working with young singers and has been featured on The Full Voice Podcast, discussing her innovative virtual recital offerings during the pandemic. Saunders has showcased her talent in notable productions such as Messiah with Opera Quad Cities, and Sunday in the Park with George, Bridges of Madison County, Ragtime, and Funny Girl with Revival Theatre Company. Learn more at dynamicmusicstudiosia.com and saundersvocalstudios.com.

Dr. Lisa Neher (she/her) is an award-winning composer and new music mezzo on a mission to transform audiences through sound, story, and vulnerability. Praised as “a small woman with a very big voice” and “especially alive” (Oregon ArtsWatch), Neher’s musical-theatrical fluency and passion for contemporary music have led to engagements with Third Angle New Music, Experiments in Opera, Portland Columbia Symphony Orchestra, New Music Gathering, the Resonance Ensemble, Opera Theatre Oregon, and the International Saxophone Symposium. A “visionary composer” (Willamette Week) and “maestro of beautifully wacky noises” (Oregon ArtsWatch), her music is commissioned and performed across the world. Learn more at lisanehermusic.com.

Kendra Preston Leonard is a lyricist and librettist whose collaborations with composers tell stories about women, resilience, and compassion. She is inspired by history, language, nature, and myth. Her dogs howl at her when she sings “I’m gonna be a werewolf” to them.

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