

# Folk Music Unit for Girls' Chorus

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This unit, called “**Folk Music**”, has been designed with a medium to advanced ability level high school girls' chorus in mind. The unit is spread throughout the year and will include five different examples of folk music across American sub-cultures. In this unit I hope to introduce the choir to different styles of folk music, engaging in conversation along the way about how folk music originates and is preserved within cultures. In this unit we will cover many of the 9 National Standards for Music Education: 1) Singing, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music; 3) Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments; 5) Reading and notating music; 6) Listening to, analyzing, and describing music; 7) Evaluating music and music performances; 9) Understanding music in relation to history and culture.

Title: Bright Morning Stars  
Composer: Arr. Jay Althouse  
Publisher: Alfred Publishing  
Voicing: SSAA  
Price: \$1.75/copy

Paragraph description/explanation: "This Appalachian folksong, arranged for a cappella voices, has a contemplative, spiritual quality. Opening and closing with a female trio, it's a wonderful example of the old-time American music style." I like this piece because it's an example of Appalachian folk song, and mountain music is its own sort of genre that often gets ignored. It provides an opportunity for us to dive into that culture. This piece is written in a major tonality, so although it's written for four parts students aren't distracted by complicated harmonies or difficult key changes. The work also has a few interesting musical elements – an ostinato-style chant in the lower parts in a few sections, and opening/closing trio, and great examples of word painting.

Activity: Because this song is fairly well-known and has actually been covered by a few popular folk music groups (The Wailin' Jennys, Gillian Welch, etc.) I want my students to complete a performance and interpretation project. This will be one part of a greater discussion on folk music's flexibility. Each small group will choose two video or audio performances of this work (maximum of 1 choral recording) and compare the interpretive and artistic differences. Projects will ideally be presented as 5-minute summaries in front of the class and be accompanied by a short written report summarizing the differences.

Link: <http://www.jwpepper.com/10069050.item>

Title: Shenandoah  
Composer: Arr. James Erb  
Publisher: Alfred Publishing  
Voicing: SSAA  
Price: \$1.65/copy

Paragraph description/explanation: "An absolutely stunning setting of this beloved folksong. This arrangement appears on festival lists year after year in its original SATB voicing, and is destined to do the same revoiced for SSAA." This piece is a staple of American folk. I have hardly met a choir singer who hasn't sung one arrangement or another of this song in his or her lifetime. I like the Alfred arrangement because it has some tonality changes to keep the melody interesting, but it's accessible by a choir of this level.

Activity: Many have sung this song without knowing what the "Shenandoah" really is. With this song, I want to talk about the many different origins of folk songs. Students will be asked to research the Shenandoah Valley and important contexts surrounding this song. Findings will be presented in any format the student chooses, including web page design, oral or written report, visual presentation, song, etc.

Link: <http://www.jwpepper.com/1278258.item>

Title: Hey Ho, Nobody's Home  
Composer: Greg Gilpin  
Publisher: Carl Fischer LLC  
Voicing: Three-Part Treble  
Price: \$1.65/copy

Paragraph description/explanation: "With vocal accents, folk style and rhythmic energy, Greg Gilpin has created a show-stopping arrangement of this traditional folk song round. Written for three-part voices in any combination, this piece is perfect for choirs of all ages and provides excellent teaching opportunities for vocal technique development. Published in open score, this round is the perfect road map for part singing and harmonization. Ideal for any concert setting!" This arrangement is probably not one I would have immediately picked, but an important part of many folk songs is their form. Because this one builds to a round, it provides a great opportunity for my choir to explore form and tonal patterns used in the folk song that work well as layers over top of one another. I also like the rhythmic accent and minor key used in this work, which will both be different from the previous two pieces.

Activity: I would love to explore form and arrangement more deeply through this song with my choir. A song like this with so many overlapping harmonies and a short length would be a great opportunity for students to try their hands at arranging a work. I'd have to reduce the music to just the melodic line, but then I would ask students to write an arrangement or two using a few different forms from a list given to them. We would have to discuss the other forms used in folk song (found on the list) in class time or I could direct them to an outside resource.

Link: <http://www.jwpepper.com/3300983.item>

Title: How Can I Keep From Singing?

Composer: Arr. Andy Beck

Publisher: Alfred Publishing

Voicing: SSA

Price: \$1.75/copy

Paragraph description/explanation: "The cherished American folk hymn is treated lovingly in this easy yet poignant setting. Simple and reverent, it gracefully captures the early American feeling of the original. "My life flows on in endless song above earth's lamentation. I hear the real though far off hymn that hails a new creation..." Exquisite!" This is another extremely well-known folk piece. Particularly memorable in this song is its beautiful text, which is what we will focus on in our study of this piece: How can we best reflect the text in our expression and dynamic choices? (Note: This arrangement is probably not the one I would have chosen, but because it's the only suitable one on JWPepper I've used it.)

Activity: This activity will be two-fold: First, students will write a brief paraphrase of the lyrics of this song and do a dramatic reading or drawing of them for the class. Second, in order to spur discussion on the lyrical content of folk songs, students will be asked to print and summarize the lyrics from one other contrasting folk song not studied in class and present them in addition to the first paraphrase.

Link: <http://www.jwpepper.com/10047101.item>

Title: All The Pretty Little Horses

Composer: Arr. Earlene Rentz

Publisher: Brilee Music Publishing Co.

Voicing: Two-Part

Price: \$1.65/copy

Paragraph description/explanation: "Here is a haunting arrangement of the familiar American folksong that is in the style of a lullaby. The accompaniment is supportive, yet has its own delicate character. The melody has an easy, soaring quality in this tastefully crafted arrangement!" The conductor of the Women's Chorale at Calvin often chooses two-part songs, and I think even though the technical difficulty of a song like this may be easy for my choir, this particular arrangement will still be beautiful even in two parts. I like the fact that this is a minor-key arrangement of the lullaby with a good accompaniment part. It would be fun to do this piece with the lights low at a key moment during the concert, singing to the audience as if they were the child being lulled to sleep.

Activity: With this piece we'll again cover context. This lullaby has a particular story behind it that I want my students to research and talk about in class. There could also be some good tie-ins with other lullabies as folk songs – what lullabies do you remember from your childhood? Look them up, learn them, and sing them to the class, possibly in groups of two or more.

Link: <http://www.jwpepper.com/3701621.item>