



# Composition Program

## TEACHER GUIDE

What to Expect, Suggestions, FAQ's, and more.



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# Introduction

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This guide is designed to support educators in facilitating the Sing Me a Story Composition Program at their schools. Our goal is to provide a step-by-step resource that helps you seamlessly plan, execute, and maximize the impact of this meaningful experience. If questions arise along the way, Sing Me a Story Staff are always available to assist you.

This program is an opportunity for music students at every level to experience:

- The healing power of music
- The importance of giving to others
- The joy of collaboration

We hope this project not only serves the child and their family but also deeply impacts your students by helping them connect with music, storytelling, and the power of empathy.

## **How it Works:**

1. A child in need local to the commissioning ensemble writes and illustrates a story about anything they want.
2. A collegiate composition student turns the story into a musical score.
3. The commissioning ensemble meets and works with the composer to learn the piece.
4. The ensemble then performs the piece live for the child and their family, usually as a part of a scheduled concert.

# Program Timeline

*Note: 3 months is the minimum time needed to receive a finished piece. Due to the nature of the work we do and the families we serve, unforeseen circumstances could cause delays in the process.*

Month  
**1**

## Child & Composer Selection

Sing Me a Story will identify both a child and a collegiate composer to work with for this project. SMAS will facilitate a story-writing session with the selected child.

Months  
**2-3**

## Composition Process

SMAS will connect the participating ensemble with the composer and provide text of the written story as well as information about the child. Composer develops the piece, provides a draft at 1 month, submits final version at 2 months.

Month  
**3**

## Handoff to Ensemble

Ensemble receives completed piece to begin rehearsals. The director may request any necessary edits that may need to be made upon rehearsing the piece with their ensemble.

## Rehearsal

Ensemble begins rehearsals. Director has the opportunity to invite the composer to collaborate with the ensemble in person or via Zoom.

## Pre-Performance Meeting

At least 2 weeks before the scheduled performance SMAS staff will set time to meet with the director to go over performance logistics and marketing plans.

## Performance

The song is performed live for the child it was inspired by as a part of a pre-scheduled concert set by the director.

## Post-Performance

After the completion of the project, we encourage educators to share and reflect on the experience with their students.

# Director Checklist

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This checklist is designed to help you stay on track throughout the Sing Me a Story project. It breaks down each phase into actionable steps, ensuring that you and your ensemble are fully prepared for the performance.

## **Step 1: Confirm Participation**

- ☐ Review and sign the Sing Me a Story commissioning agreement
- ☐ Schedule an introductory call with SMAS staff
- ☐ Provide your ensemble's instrumentation and musical level
- ☐ Share your preferred performance date (if known)

## **Step 2: Receive the Story & Meet the Composer**

- ☐ Receive the child's story and background information
- ☐ Connect with the collegiate composer (via email or Zoom)
- ☐ Discuss any ensemble needs or limitations

*Optional Impact Strategy: Introduce storytelling in music through class discussions*

## **Step 3: Composition Process (Month 2)**

- ☐ Receive the first draft of the score at month 2
- ☐ Provide feedback or necessary edits
- ☐ Receive the final version at month 3
- ☐ Confirm that the piece is playable for your ensemble

*Optional Impact Strategy: Have students analyze the draft and suggest expressive elements*

# Director Checklist

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## **Step 4: Rehearsals Begin (Month 3, Flexible and Ongoing)**

- ☐ Start rehearsing the piece
- ☐ Identify any technical issues and communicate with the composer if needed
- ☐ Decide if the composer should attend a rehearsal (in-person or Zoom)
- ☐ Assign a narrator (if applicable)

*Optional Impact Strategy: Discuss how musical choices bring the child's story to life*

## **Step 5: Pre-Performance Preparation (At least 2 weeks before concert)**

- ☐ Meet with SMAS staff to review logistics
- ☐ Choose any extra performance elements (visuals, props, narration)
- ☐ Receive press release and strategy
- ☐ Finalize all technical and concert program details

*Optional Impact Strategy: Organize a student-led fundraiser for a related nonprofit*

## **Step 6: Performance Day!**

- ☐ Meet the child/family at the scheduled meet-and-greet
- ☐ Introduce the piece using the provided script
- ☐ Ensure the performance is recorded (if possible)

## **Step 7: Post-Performance Reflection & Sharing (1-2 weeks after concert)**

- ☐ Share the performance video/audio with the child's family (and SMAS)
- ☐ Reflect with students on what the project meant to them

# Getting Started

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**Objective:** This section will help educators introduce Sing Me a Story in a way that excites students, fosters curiosity, and lays the foundation for a meaningful experience.

## 1 Setting the Stage: What is Sing Me a Story?

Before jumping into the project, take time to introduce the concept of turning stories into music. Help students see the connection between storytelling, music, and emotion.

### Discussion Starters:

- *Have you ever heard a song that told a story? What made it powerful?*
- *How do composers use music to express feelings like joy, sadness, or excitement?*
- *Why do you think music could be meaningful to someone going through a difficult time?*

### Maximizing Impact Strategies

- Music and Emotion:
  - Play short excerpts from different musical pieces (e.g., movie soundtracks, classical music, pop songs).
  - Ask students to describe the emotions they hear and what elements (melody, dynamics, tempo, instrumentation) create that feeling.
  - Relate this to how they will later use music to bring a child's story to life.



# Getting Started

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## 2 Introducing Sing Me a Story's Mission & Impact

### Key Talking Points:

- Sing Me a Story connects young storytellers (children in need) with musicians to turn their stories into original musical pieces.
- The program helps students experience the power of music to heal and inspire.
- They will collaborate to compose, perform, and gift a musical story to a child, creating something truly meaningful.
- Emphasize that this project is about more than just performing, it's about making a difference.

### Maximizing Impact Strategies

- Zoom with Sing Me a Story Staff
  - Reach out to SMAS staff to schedule a time for them to join your students via Zoom for a Q&A session about their work, mission, and program.
- Show Past Examples
  - Show video clips or audio recordings of past performances so students can see and hear real-world examples of what they will create. Examples can be found [here](#).
  - Encourage them to analyze the music:
    - *How does the music reflect the story?*
    - *What choices did the composer make?*
    - *How do you think the child felt hearing their story turned into music?*



# Getting Started

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## 3 Generating Student Buy-In: Why It Matters

### Generating Student Buy-In: Why It Matters

Many students will connect more deeply with the project if they understand why their participation matters.

#### Possible Reflection Questions:

- *How do you think this experience will be different from a regular concert performance?*
- *How might this change the way you think about music and storytelling?*
- *What excites you most about this project?*

#### Journal Prompt (Optional Assignment):

- *Write about a time when music made a difference in your life. How did it help or change your emotions?*

# The Process Step-by-Step

## 1 The Child

Using the information provided by Sing Me a Story staff share about the child with your students.

### Maximizing Impact Strategies

- Empathy & Awareness:
  - Reach out to SMAS staff to schedule a Zoom call with the non-profit partner affiliated with the child. Host a live Q&A with a member of the non-profit so your students can learn more about what the child might be affected by (rare disease, cancer, etc.) and the work the organization does to support the community.
- Understanding Illness & Challenges (Age-Appropriate Approach):
  - Without focusing too much on medical details, introduce the concept of challenges that children may face (e.g., long hospital stays, missing school).
  - Discuss how art and music can help people cope with difficult situations.

### Possible Reflection Questions:

- *How can music be used to bring joy, hope, or strength to someone facing challenges?*
- *How does understanding the child's story help us create a more meaningful musical piece?*
- *What emotions do we want to highlight in our performance to honor their story?*

# The Process Step-by-Step

## 2 The Story

Introduce the importance of story-telling to your students. Then, read through the story together.

### Discussion Starters:

- *Why do stories matter?*
- *How does storytelling help us connect with others?*

### Key talking points below:

- Storytelling connects us, offering a glimpse into others' hearts and reminding us of our shared humanity.
- It enhances communication, literacy, and problem-solving skills.
- It fosters community by strengthening relationships and social understanding.
- It helps process difficult experiences, fears, and uncertainties.

### Maximizing Impact Strategies

- Music Brainstorming Exercise:
  - Ask students: What kind of music fits this story?
- Story Analysis:
  - Discuss the structure of the story.

### Reflection Questions:

- *How does the mood of the story influence the type of music we choose?*
- *What musical elements could enhance the storytelling?*

*Note: Children's stories may not follow traditional structures, as Sing Me a Story encourages free expression. For example, a child affected by blindness wrote about his favorite thing—police cars—and a composer and choir transformed it into a song. [\*\*Watch Here.\*\*](#)*

# The Process Step-by-Step

## 3 The Composer

Introduce the participating composer to your students.

### Maximizing Impact Strategies

- Composer Q&A:
  - Arrange a Q&A meeting with the composer in person or via Zoom.
  - Have your students prepare questions for the composer.
- Sketch Your Own Version:
  - Have students sketch a few melodic ideas.

### Reflection Questions:

- *What choices might the composer make to reflect the child's story?*
- *How would you set this story to music?*

*Note: These pieces are composed by **student composers**, not professionals. This project is a learning experience for them, just as it is for your students. We encourage directors and ensembles to provide **constructive feedback**, helping these composers refine their craft and grow.*

# The Process Step-by-Step

## 4 The Piece

Begin rehearsals of the piece with your ensemble. If there is a narration aspect, it is the director's responsibility to identify a narrator.

### Maximizing Impact Strategies

- Composition Play-through:
  - Have students play through the piece and identify any sections that may need adjustments. This could include parts that are out of range, too challenging, or too simple for their instrument. Providing this feedback helps refine the composition while reinforcing musical analysis skills.
- Composer Engagement:
  - Invite the composer to attend a few rehearsals.
  - Have your students prepare additional questions for the composer about their composition process.
- Creative Additions:
  - Consider incorporating visual storytelling. Are there any props you can add to make this more engaging and age-appropriate for the child?

### Reflection Questions:

- *What parts of the composition stand out?*
- *How can we further bring the child's story to life through our performance?*

# The Process Step-by-Step

## 4 The Performance

Begin rehearsals of the piece with your ensemble. If there is a narration aspect, it is the director's responsibility to identify a narrator.

### Maximizing Impact Strategies

- Composition Play-through:
  - Have students play through the piece and identify any sections that may need adjustments. This could include parts that are out of range, too challenging, or too simple for their instrument. Providing this feedback helps refine the composition while reinforcing musical analysis skills.
- Composer Engagement:
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# The Process Step-by-Step

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## Resources Provided by Sing Me a Story for Directors

During the pre-performance planning meeting, Sing Me a Story staff will address any questions or concerns about the upcoming concert. To support directors in their preparations, we provide the following resources:

- **Performance Introduction Script** – A prepared script to introduce the piece, explain the project, and share brief details on the composer and child to personalize the performance.
  - *Note: Another thing to consider is where the song sits in the order of the concert. SMAS strongly suggests placing it at the beginning.*
- **Press Release & Local Press Outreach** – A curated press release and assistance with reaching out to local media regarding the project.
  - *\*Provided the child/family is comfortable with press.*
- **Slideshow of the Child's Illustrations**
  - *\*Provided if the child created illustrations. Illustrations are not mandatory.*
- **QR Code for Story & Song Access** – A scannable QR code to the Sing Me a Story website where the child's story and/or final recording can be viewed. Directors are encouraged to include this in their program.
- **Meet-and-Greet** – Assistance in arranging a pre-concert meet-and-greet with the child/family and your students.

Examples of all of these materials can be found [here](#).

# Participant Highlights

## 1 Creating an Impactful Performance

Below are all ways previous school participant have made their performances more impactful (*all optional*).

### Visual Storytelling

- George Ranch High School Choir brought their child's story to life by dressing up as characters, acting out scenes on stage, and even throwing candy to the audience. [Watch Here.](#)
- Marion Community Schools enhanced their performance of 7-year-old Elliott's pirate-themed story by having students wear pirate hats, adding a fun and immersive element to the storytelling. [Watch Here.](#)
- Iowa State University Choir transformed 11-year-old cancer survivor Blake Bonta's superhero story into a 10-minute musical composition. Choir members portrayed different characters from Blake's narrative, acting out scenes on stage to bring his story to life. They finished the concert with the entire audience chanting Blake's name. [Watch Here.](#)

### Inviting the Child On Stage

- Some schools have welcomed the child on stage after the performance, giving them a chance to say a few words or receive applause.
  - \*This is dependent on the child's personality but feel free to consult with SMAS staff to make sure this is a good fit.
- One ensemble presented the child with a certificate or honorary conductor role, making them part of the event.

# Participant Highlights

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## **Presenting a Physical Gift**

- Schools have gifted families a framed copy of the musical score, signed by the performers and composer.
- Some have given the child an age-appropriate gift related to their story, such as a stuffed animal of one of their characters, a themed book, or a small keepsake that reflects their story.
- A few ensembles have also presented handwritten notes or drawings from the students, expressing what the project meant to them and their appreciation for the child's story.

## **Giving Back Through Fundraising**

- Students have organized bake sales or other fundraising events to support the nonprofit that helped the child.
- Schools have also used this project to raise awareness for the child's cause, inviting nonprofit representatives to speak at the event or host a booth in the lobby.

# Funding the Commission

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The cost for private and public ensembles to commission a piece of music through our program is \$1,750. This fee supports the creation of an original composition tailored to your ensemble, collaboration with the composer, and participation in our unique program. Most participants fund this through their annual arts budget.

## **Tight Arts Budget? Here's How Other Ensembles Have Funded This:**

We've seen schools and organizations successfully cover the commission fee through a variety of sources:

- Local arts grants
  - Many municipalities, counties, and regional arts councils offer grants that support music education and cultural initiatives.
    - Explore potential funding in your area through the [NEA's State Arts Agency Directory](#).
- Booster clubs
  - Music booster organizations often fundraise specifically for special events like commissioning projects.
- Local business sponsorships
  - Small businesses and community sponsors are often excited to support local arts projects and gain recognition in concert programs and social media.

## **Interested but Facing Financial Constraints?**

If you're enthusiastic about participating but the cost is a barrier, please reach out to us. We may be able to connect you with alternate funding opportunities.

# FAQs

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## General Questions

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- **How is the child selected?**
  - Sing Me a Story typically partners with local non-profits to identify a child and family in need. In some cases, school social workers or special education teachers may nominate families. There have also been instances where a director nominates a child from the community.
- **Can we pick the cause, organization, or child?**
  - Yes and no. We welcome input on the causes, organizations, and children we support. However, after 13 years of running this program, we've developed expertise in selecting participants. We ask to be included in the conversation to ensure the best fit.
- **What is my role in the story-writing process?**
  - The story-writing process is entirely handled by SMAS.
- **Can we combine ensembles?**
  - Yes!

## Composition & Edits

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- **Can we pick the composer?**
  - Yes, you can select the composer you'd like to work with.
- **Can the piece be written for my ensemble's level?**
  - Absolutely! The composer will tailor the piece to your ensemble's skill level.
- **What happens if my ensemble struggles with the piece?**
  - Please inform SMAS and the composer as soon as possible so we can make any necessary adjustments.
- **Can I communicate directly with the composer?**
  - Yes, you're welcome to communicate directly. We just ask that you keep SMAS staff CC'd so we're aware of the project's progress.

# FAQs

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- **What if my students want to contribute musical ideas to the composition?**
  - If the composer is open to it, we are too! This can be a great opportunity for collaboration and student engagement.

## Rehearsal & Performance Logistics

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- **What if our concert date changes? How does that impact the timeline?**
  - Please notify SMAS staff as soon as possible so we can update the composer and the family accordingly.
- **Is there a standard way to introduce this piece at our concert?**
  - Yes! SMAS will provide a script that you can use for the concert introduction.
- **Are there cases where the child is unable to attend? What do we do then?**
  - If unforeseen circumstances prevent the family from attending, SMAS will notify you immediately. We'll work together to find a suitable alternative.

## Marketing & Promotion

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- **Can I invite local media, or is that handled by SMAS?**
  - SMAS typically handles press releases, but we're happy to collaborate with your district's marketing or communications team.
- **Are there any restrictions on sharing videos or photos from our performance?**
  - No, there are no restrictions.



# FAQs

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- **Can we fundraise for the child and their family?**
  - Each song that is created as a part of our program will have a fundraising campaign attached to it. The money raised from the song is split between the non-profit organization the child is a part of and Sing Me a Story. We don't fundraise for particular families as we never wanted that to be the incentive to participate in our program.
- **What should I do if I want to fundraise for the child's nonprofit?**
  - You're absolutely welcome to do so!

## Funding the Commission

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- **What is the total cost?**
  - \$1,750
- **Where does the budget go?**
  - The **\$1,750 commission fee** covers all aspects of the project. **\$100** is allocated for supplies and shipping, including books and materials for the family. **\$250** goes to the composer's stipend. The remaining **\$1,400** supports SMAS staff and resources, covering the 28+ hours of coordination required per project. This includes partnering with a non-profit, identifying and connecting with the child and family, handling legal documentation, and facilitating the story-writing session. Staff also identify the composer—conducting interviews and reviewing resumes—before pairing them with the ensemble. Throughout the process, SMAS staff serve as the central point of communication between the family, composer, ensemble, press, and any other stakeholders. We also manage timelines, oversee revisions, schedule the live song reveal, and handle media outreach to ensure a seamless and meaningful experience for all involved.



For any additional questions or concerns contact  
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