



## Composer Interview: Angélica Negrón

Time markers: :05, :10, :15, :20, :25

Lyrics: SAN ANGELO, SAN ANGELO, SAN ANGELO, SAN ANGELO

Performance instructions: *mp*, *p*, *gliss. ad lib*, *cresc. poco a poco*

- Always let vibrate unless otherwise specified

By Daniel Felsenfeld, New York Philharmonic Teaching Artist

I was happy that Angélica Negrón — who many of you might know as one of the Lead Teaching Artists at the New York Philharmonic, but who I know best as a truly original composer, performer, and songwriter (as well as a Lead Teaching Artist!) — agreed to share a few words about her piece *I Shouldn't Be Up Here*, written for the San Francisco Girls Chorus and the Living Earth Show. You can read all about the composer on her [website](#).

To start, please listen to the piece [here](#).

**Danny Felsenfeld:** I loved so much about “I Shouldn’t be Up Here,” but I wanted to start, as I imagine you did, with the words. These words are beautiful and gutting and I am wondering how you chose them, how you assembled them.

Angélica Negrón: *I met the wonderful singers from the San Francisco Girls Chorus last year at their summer camp before writing this piece for them and we talked about issues that they felt passionate about. At the same time, I've also been following and being constantly inspired by the words and actions of young women activists from around the world advocating for change and rising to speak up about issues that are important to them. Many of these issues were also brought up by the girls in the chorus like climate change, education rights, immigration, gun control, and social justice so I wanted to create something that compiled words and phrases said by the young activists for the text of my piece. I started by researching speeches and transcribing some from YouTube and then highlighting words and phrases that resonated with me and felt meaningful and powerful. Then I put up these words on my wall along with pictures of the faces of the girls who said them and started working with the phrases like a puzzle seeing what made the most sense in terms of order so that even though they were all said by different people they felt like a united voice. The words in I Shouldn't Be Up Here come from Emma González, Malala Yousafzai, Severn Suzuki, Greta Thunberg, Leah, Marley Dias, Sonita Alizadeh & Autumn Peltier and were said between 1992 to 2019*

**DF: Once you put them together, can you tell me a little about how you went about composing the music? Start to finish? Or did you write something first and work around it?**

AN: When I'm writing vocal music with a text I often do it from start to finish. For me, the text is always the guiding light of the piece and tells me where I should go musically. I like to surround myself with the words physically (on the walls in my studio), sonically (saying them in my head constantly) and musically (singing them in different ways). I like to sing all the parts and try different ideas until something feels right. It's hard to explain but I could be singing a phrase many times until something just clicks and then I know that's the right one.

**DF: The commission from the San Francisco Girl's Chorus involved not just the chorus, but an ensemble called The Living Earth Show, and some choreography. How did this factor into your composing decisions?**

AN: For this piece, I started with the instrumental part for the Living Earth Show. They're a really cool duo of percussion and electric guitar and I knew I wanted the percussionist to play live electronics. I wanted the sounds in the electronics to have a strong and commanding presence and be the rhythmic and textural backbone of the piece. The first sounds we hear in the electronic percussion are the heart of the piece along with the text.

I also worked in collaboration with a brilliant choreographer Vanessa Thiessen who I also met at the summer camp and before the ideas for the piece were clear she gave me a page with drawings for ideas for different formations in the choreography. I also had this in my studio as I was working so some of these drawings informed some of the compositional choices I made particularly the idea of alternating between solos and full chorus.



**DF: One of the things I think is so effective is how you use solos and build the chorus as, well, a CHORUS—of voices, crying, lamenting, screaming. The part, later in the piece, where the soloist sings the words “I am afraid they will take my mom” and when the chorus returns, it’s chilling. How did you pace this?**

AN: For this piece, I wanted to organize all these phrases that were said by many girls as one united voice to highlight the power of the collective but at the same time I wanted it to feel at times intimate and like I could feel the individuality in each voice. This gave me the idea to play with the contrast of solo voice and full chorus. From the very first line of the text “I am just one”, I knew I wanted to make that a solo that then took over the chorus to underline that even though sometimes you can feel like you’re alone in something there’s always other people out there who feel the same and share the same struggles.

I also remember being stuck on the piece at some point and asking my friend composer and violinist Darian Thomas to listen to it to see if he had any thoughts on where I should go next. He listened to it and he said “why don’t you set them free and release them from the rhythms next” and with those few words I knew exactly where to go. That’s what the piece needed at that moment was to literally let them scream in any way they wanted to, free from the barlines and the counting. Then I knew that after that I needed to come back to something very simple but also striking and the words just guided me on what to do. That line (“I am afraid they will take my mom...”) felt like it needed to be a solo, like I needed to really be focusing on this one girl and her voice. The pacing for me always comes from the text. The text is always in charge.

**DF: I know it is a cliché question, but as this is for a program called VERY YOUNG COMPOSERS, I want to know if you have any words for young composers?**

AN: Don't forget to try new things and always stay curious. Try to compose every day if possible (even if it's for a few minutes) and don't put pressure on yourself that you always have to make something great. Some days you'll write music you like and some days you won't and that's ok and totally normal. Give yourself enough time to allow for these things to happen and to not stress you out. If you're feeling stuck, call a friend you trust and ask them for their thoughts and support. Composing often feels like a lonely activity but when you reach out to others you can have new perspectives on your music and try out things you would never think of by yourself. And never forget what made you want to become a composer in the first place.