

Mentoring Young Composers: The Small-Group, Individualized Approach

By Dr. Daniel Deutsch

Why composition is a crucial component of music education

Composition is the creative wellspring of music. When we teach our students to compose, we invite them into the inner world of music. They begin to understand more deeply the intentionality of music, the idea that composers *mean* something when they create compositions. When students use the elements of music to express their own ideas, emotions, and imaginations, they add a new, deeper dimension to their musical understanding. As a result, their critical listening skills and performance ability are enhanced. Imagine that as a child, you had learned to read, but never to write a story, a letter, or a poem – and that you had never learned to improvise your own sentences in conversation. You would not be considered fluent in English. Literacy and fluency require a completed circle of reading, writing, and verbal expression. It is the same with music. Musical literacy requires listening, reading, performing, composing, and improvising. It is said that a test of fluency in a language is the ability to dream in it. That is what composers do: they dream in the language of music, and bring those dreams to life.

All students can compose

Every mother teaches her infant to improvise. As mother and baby coo back and forth, the child gradually learns to navigate the world of sounds and language. All toddlers hum and sing their own vocal improvisations while playing with dolls and toys. Why do most of us lose that ability as we grow older?

Composition should be part of the music curriculum at every developmental stage. When we teach an elementary school student her first three notes on the trombone, we should present them as tones to hear, to play, to improvise with, and to read. As the young trombonist plays her own permutations and combinations of her pitches, she has to make choices, to experiment, and to problem-solve. The instrument is not merely a device to reproduce other people's music, but also a tool for creative self-expression. As she experiments and finds combinations she likes, she begins to find her own authentic musical "voice." The notes *belong* to her. She *means* them when she plays them. She will expand her range as she searches for the other notes her song needs. Because she is not merely decoding written symbols, she will play the notes with better intonation and tone quality. This feeling of authenticity and intention usually transfers to other performance settings.

Composition intrinsically entails choice, and choice inevitably empowers students. Even students facing extraordinary physical, mental, and other learning challenges can compose. The students may just repeatedly choose "high note" or "low note," and create an enjoyable musical experience. They feel the power of their choices. There are appropriate compositional activities for students of every developmental stage and every combination of aptitudes and achievement.

The educational setting

Composition has been successfully taught in every conceivable music education setting, from the kindergarten general music class, to the high school concert band rehearsal, to the fifth-grade cello lesson group. In my experience, the school setting that leads to the highest levels of student engagement and achievement in composition is the small-group lesson, just as it does for instrumental performance. The lesson group may be dedicated to composition or to a combination of composition with instrumental or singing instruction. The small-group lesson provides the opportunity for individual coaching and also for peer interaction and social support. The students learn from their classmates and inspire each other. They can also work on collaborative composition projects. This article focuses on one effective approach to teaching composition in the small-group lesson setting for elementary and middle school students.

The educational setting for improvisation and composition must be supportive, tolerant, and nurturing. Of course, all educational settings should be, but for composition it is absolutely necessary. The path to composition begins with improvisation, experimentation, and just “fooling around” on one’s instrument. Because the improviser is exploring uncharted territory with undetermined outcomes, the activity is inherently “risky.” As the improviser explores the pathways of musical invention, he will take wrong turns and wander down blind alleys. The wrong notes and self-correction are an essential part of the compositional learning process, just as “babbling” is necessary for language acquisition. Students must not fear disapproval or ridicule as they experiment. Another reason for heightened sensitivity to the tone of the educational setting is that student composers are sharing their emotions and ideas, their inner lives. An atmosphere of trust and acceptance is essential. One of the most effective ways to overcome the students’ fear of risk is for the teacher to model improvisational risk-taking for the students.

How to begin

Because composition is a creative activity, the curriculum must be tailored to the specific needs of each student. Each young composer inhabits a real musical world, and has absorbed a culturally determined lexicon and semantics of music. The composition teacher’s role is to enter each student’s musical world and to help make it a bigger world.

Most of us first learned composition in theory class, so it is natural to think that theory is the best starting point for teaching composition. If by theory we mean intervals, scales, chords, and harmony rules, then theory may not be the best starting place for creative composition. Let’s borrow another example from language literacy and creative writing. To help a child write a story, we do not start with grammar, with nouns and adjectives. We start with events, character, motivation, emotion. The story reflects the student’s real interests and feelings. The compelling “reality” of the child’s story thrusts the narrative forward with excitement. The teacher facilitates by asking questions about the urgency of the plot and the motivations and reactions of the characters. If the child is old enough, at a later stage of the process we teach technical details of grammar, spelling, and punctuation, in order to facilitate a more finished literary work. But that is certainly not the place to begin. Many typical introductory composition assignments sound something like “Compose an eight-bar melody in C major. Begin and end on middle C, and use only half notes, quarter notes, and eighth notes.” While this may be a useful

puzzle or exercise, it is not the gateway to “real” composition. It leads students to believe erroneously that composition is the manipulation of symbols and conformity to set rules. The resulting compositions are usually of little aesthetic interest and the child’s attachment to the product is usually weak.

A more authentic approach begins with idea, emotion, and meaning. “Kids, we are going to have a great time inventing our own music. We already have fun playing music written by other composers, but now we get to express our own ideas, feelings, emotions, and imaginations in music that can be created only by YOU!” An introductory conversation follows, in which the teacher asks students to select particular emotions, and the teacher improvises phrases that illustrate the given emotions. Students typically suggest feelings such as sad, happy, excited, and angry; but sometimes they go off the beaten track with confused, isolated, triumphant, and so forth. Depending on the level of the students, the conversation can turn to how specific musical elements combine to produce the given emotion. “Now it’s your turn. Come back next week with some music that expresses YOUR emotion or idea. Don’t worry about writing it down; just play it or sing it to us next week.” By casting such a wide net, the assignment encourages students to rise to their own highest possible level right from the beginning. The students return with a wide array of responses. At one extreme is the pianist who comes in with a complete piece of Chopinesque chromatic harmony. At the other extreme comes the student who could not think of anything at all. In between lies the full spectrum of all other possibilities. Many students come up with a first phrase, some create a theme or motive, and some have just a couple of notes they like. But with the exception of the student who comes up empty (and we will solve that problem soon), all of the students share something very important: They are *attached* to their musical ideas. The ideas are authentic, real, musical expression. The teacher takes the students seriously and treats them respectfully as true composers who just happen to be less experienced.

Helping each student grow

The teacher faces a challenge. How do I help all of these diverse students to grow as composers? The students have different levels of ability, different histories of musical experience, and different tastes and preferences. Every student requires a different kind and degree of scaffolding. Fortunately, although each student is unique, there are thematic strategies and tactics the teacher can use to mentor them.

When the students play or sing their first phrases, the teacher can invite everyone in the group to say something positive about the music. All of them usually think of something kind (and true) to say. The students’ first musical ideas tend to present a customary array of challenges. Many are disorganized, moving abruptly from one idea to the next. Others have the opposite problem, and are extremely repetitious. The students usually notice perceptively and comment on these problems. Therefore, a good topic for the second lesson is “Unity and Variety.” Students are quick to grasp the concept if the teacher illustrates it in spoken language. Tell a story to the students in which the characters and setting change abruptly in every sentence. “What is wrong with this story?” Then tell a story in which the same sentences recur over and over monotonously. The students enjoy the satire and grasp the point. Show them a clear example, like Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy,” in which repetition and variety of simple elements lead to an eloquent musical statement. The student who has too many unrelated motives receives

good news: “You have enough ideas for eight pieces! Which ones do you like the best? Let’s try to use those more and get more mileage out of them. But save all of the others for other pieces.” Demonstrate how the student’s favorite motive can take wing through repetition and sequence.

Another student might bring in a melody that consists of only an ascending and descending major scale with no rhythmic differentiation, or a series of diatonic arpeggios rising by step. Once again, first the good news: “You have written a wonderful exercise. Let’s all play it together. Now, if you want to make more of a song out of it, what should we do? How are songs different from exercises?” The other students will usually offer useful suggestions. Show how making some of the notes longer stops the mechanical repetition and creates the periodic flow of breathing in phrases. Show how shaping contour by changing direction adds more interest.

As most educators know, the impact of adult words is very powerful on young ears. Criticism at the early stage can have a crippling effect. Insincere praise can also slow or even halt progress as the student wonders why the teacher has to disguise reality. Often, the most effective teacher responses to student work are phrased in the form of questions, such as “Do you want the phrase to end suddenly?” or “How high should it go before it stops?”

How can we help the student who cannot think of any opening idea, or who is too shy to really try? One higher order response is to ask the student what kind of mood or style she wants for her piece. When the student picks a mood, ask “Can you hear a little tune that sounds like that?” Often that is enough to jumpstart the process. But sometimes the student cannot even say if she wants to create a happy or sad piece, a fast or slow piece, a jazzy or classical piece. Then it is time for a series of guaranteed fail-safe ice-breaking activities. Start well within the student’s comfort zone. “What is your favorite scale?” Have the student play the scale normally, and then lead her gradually through a series of transformations. First, the student can vary the dynamics of the notes randomly, then the articulation, then note duration. After that, she can choose to repeat notes, or not, and to change direction in the scale. In the few minutes that this process takes, almost every student will discover a satisfying musical idea, something that “clicks” as aurally authentic. The student is then ready to rejoin her classmates in their path forward.

Just as the story-writing teacher’s essential question is “What happens next?” the composition teacher’s essential question is “What sounds good after that?” Most student composers pass through a series of ebbs and flows in the creative process. Sometimes the ideas grow naturally and effortlessly; sometimes they stall. It is helpful to have the blocked composer temporarily assume the role of a passive listener. “I am going to play your piece for you. You don’t have to say anything; just imagine what would sound good next.” This often frees up the composer’s imagination. If not, play the music and have classmates take turns improvising the singing of the next phrase. This is also often successful. If aural imagination does not work, the teacher can turn to theoretical analysis, and show the student an array of possible solutions to the impasse. When offering specific suggestions, it is a good idea to offer alternative scenarios, so that the student exercises choice even when at an impasse.

If the music seems drab or lifeless, an effective tactic is to appeal to the real-life emotions of the student. “How do you feel when you score a soccer goal? Wouldn’t it be

fun to put that in your piece?” This process makes the music more interesting, and also increases the enthusiasm of the student for his composition.

Sometimes the student’s ideas are difficult to comprehend. Is she trying to create something avant-garde, or is she simply confused? Do not judge too swiftly. It is wise to record the music and listen to it several times before you next see the student. Once again, questions are the teacher’s best vehicle. Ask “Do you mean this, or this?” as you bend the phrase slightly in one direction or another. “Some of my favorite music is unusual. Are you trying to create something unusual, or are you just not sure what you mean or how to play it?”

The student who rises to an advanced level needs yet another set of responses. The teacher can help him understand the theoretical implications of his ideas and extend that knowledge, through exercises and analysis, to provide leverage for progress. Guide the student to participate in regional, state, and national programs and competitions so that he can interact with his compositional peers. If a regional or state composition program does not exist in your area, consider joining together with colleagues to create one, as teachers in several states have done successfully.

All of the students, at all of the various achievement and aptitude levels, must leave each lesson with hope and optimism, and with a sense of how they are supposed to move forward that week. “Are you feeling hopeful about your piece? What is your plan for this week?” If they do not articulate a positive answer, the lesson is not complete, so the teacher should always leave a few minutes at the end of the session to help propel the student through a creative trajectory toward the next lesson. In direct response to the students’ weekly progress, the curriculum spirals up through a series of topics that recur at rising taxonomic levels: melody and harmony; tension and release; phrase, form, and structure; texture and instrumentation; dynamics, expression, and articulation; and tonal, modal, and atonal theory, as appropriate.

Notation

Should students notate their pieces? Should they write manuscript by hand or on the computer? The answers to these questions depend on the age and developmental level of the students. For most students, notating too early in the compositional process often stifles the creative musical flow. Students can invent their own notational language as a memory aid, or they can make audio recordings of their improvisations. For those who know how to read music, after the students have composed a few phrases, the teacher can introduce notation. In combination with the traditional methods for teaching notation, which are analogous to phonics, the teacher can use a “whole language” approach. Simply show the student what the first phrase looks like in proper music notation. Most students can extrapolate their way forward, although almost all of them will make rhythmic errors from time to time.

Learning to notate music by hand with a pencil is a valuable experience for young composers. They learn proper notation because the computer is not automatically correcting every error, and they take ownership of every single note. The experience greatly increases their music reading ability. More advanced students may use notational software, but I advocate that young students use the software only after they have composed the music. Composing directly on the computer can cause musical problems. It is too easy to click on notes without “hearing” or feeling them. Students tend to cut and

paste too much. Pieces with more than one voice that are composed within the notational software often have a “sedimentary” feeling; the lines are deposited above each other, but do not interact responsively with each other.

All composers know that notation can be a tedious process. Creating and distributing a publication of the students’ pieces is a very positive motivating force for students to complete the process. When students know that a composition book is going to be published, they all want their written pieces to be part of the book. The publication creates an exciting sense of community for the students as they eagerly try to play the compositions by the other students. Teachers can also use technology to foster the sense of community online with podcasts and websites that gather and share student work.

Performance

Performance is an indispensable component of the compositional process for student composers. Having a composition concert or festival scheduled on the calendar of the school year gives students a goal that directly shapes their motivation and work. The concert brings the compositional process to its natural culmination, a public affirmation of the musical expressiveness of the young composers.

Some of the compositions reflect the personality of individual composers so clearly that people who know the students can guess who wrote each piece. But equally rewarding are the moments when a very quiet, shy student presents a heroic piece, or a husky athlete performs a tender or tragic piece. If the students have been encouraged to follow their own muses, one of the most strikingly appealing qualities of the composition concert is the sheer variety of the music: a country fiddle tune; a calypso for alto sax, piano, and percussion; a Bartokian duet for tuba and baritone horn; a piano boogie-woogie; a classical string quartet; a spooky piano piece with 12 singers hidden behind the back curtain; a heart-felt graduation song. When the parents witness the degree of expressive authenticity and excited engagement, they become enthusiastically supportive.

The student composition concert is a concert like no other. The music emanates from the inner lives of the students. It reveals their musical understanding more than any standardized test ever could. The patent pride and self-affirmation of the students that is visible in the performance of their creative work further underscores the success of the concert.

Reflection

Throughout the compositional process, formative assessment helps to guide the students through cycles of creating, reflecting, and revising. When students complete the process from inception to publication and performance, they and their teacher benefit from a summative reflection session. At this time, pose questions such as “What was it like to compose your own music?” and “Did it change the way you think and feel about music?”

Most students say that the greatest part about composing is the freedom and power it gives them. “Composing my own music was like being the President,” said one fifth grader recently. A classmate said, “Before composition, whenever I saw a piece, I’d just play the notes without thinking how the notes are placed. Now, sometimes I think, ‘Wouldn’t it be better to put this note over here?’” Another classmate said, “Playing my

own compositions in front of people made me feel like I was free.” And another put it this way: “When I play my own music, my soul is released. I can fly. I’m special.”

Composition strengthens the respect students have for other composers, as revealed in this statement by a sixth grader: “Now I think about the composer who wrote the music. I know how hard it is. I know he put the dynamics in for a reason.”

Experience in composition transforms many students’ concept of their instrument. A sixth grader said, “I no longer think of the piano as an instrument; rather, I think of it as a creative tool.” A young oboist in the class said, “It made me think as if my instrument was my voice, letting out my feelings and emotions.” Another classmate added, “Now when I play piano, I can feel notes forming inside my head.”

Students also recognize the impact of composition on their emotional life. “Composing this piece was my anger management for the year!” declared a sixth grade student. Another wrote, “Every time I add more notes to the piece, there is this energetic and ecstatic feeling. And when I play, I feel proud of me and my music.” By giving an aesthetic dimension to a student’s emotional world, composition can help students overcome emotional pain. A student who composes an elegy for a lost family member uses the transformative power of music to turn her sorrow into a work of beauty and remembrance.

Conclusion

As music teachers, we have a wonderful opportunity. We get to teach the “whole” student: left and right brains; cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains; technical and spiritual spheres. Composition is an activity that unites all elements of the student’s musical life. Bloom’s revised taxonomy lists the following domains: creating, evaluating, analyzing, applying, understanding, and remembering. It is difficult to conceive of a program that helps students to grow in these areas more vitally than music composition. The small-group, individualized approach to mentoring young composers offers an effective means to this end.

Additional Resources:

Hickey, M. (ed.) (2003). *Why and How to Teach Music Composition: A New Horizon for Music Education*. Reston, VA: MENC.

Kaschub, M. and Smith, J. (2009). *Minds on Music: Composition for Creative and Critical Thinking*. Lanham, MD: R&L Education—A Division of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., in partnership with MENC: The National Association for Music Education.

Wiggins, J. (1990). *Composition in the Classroom*. Reston, VA: MENC.

Music Publishers’ Association and MENC. (1993). *Standard Music Notation Practice*. Available from NPC Imaging. <http://www.npcimaging.com/books/MPA.htm>

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