

One Note at a Time: Approaches & Assessment for Teaching Music Composition at the Secondary-School Level

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There is no one “right” way to teach composition; there are simply different ways that work for different students. For educators, particularly those who don’t compose regularly, teaching students how to write music can be an intimidating task, but there are strategies that can make the experience less daunting and, perhaps, even enjoyable!

Loops-Based Compositions

One common method of approaching composition is using pre-fabricated audio loops in software like Apple’s GARAGEBAND® or Image Line’s FL STUDIO®. This enables one to use interesting combinations of pre-written material in unique combinations. Joseph Turco, an educator and musician from British Columbia, created an introductory lesson for GARAGEBAND® that highlights the following activities:

Introduce the concept of audio recording and composition by quickly showing the students large recording studios that were once required for musicians to record their compositions. Next, in front of the students, quickly make a song using the loop browser, MIDI instruments, and the audio-recording functionality of the software. Get a volunteer from the class to demonstrate the audio recording functionality of the software by singing or talking into the microphone to the pre-recorded material (Turco 2010, 1).

By having access to high-quality loops and a user-friendly interface, students can create music that sounds good in a very short time. This method is particularly attractive to kids who are interested in technology and music production, rather than solely in composition. They can easily manipulate the regions of music and tweak their attempts more effectively than if they use pen and paper. Consequently, this is a natural gateway into teaching the concept of form, especially if students can explain the transitions between different sections of pieces of music.

I have used this approach early on in my composition classes, and there is always a point where a student says “I wish I could do _____ instead,” or “I want to make it my own,” and this is the fatal flaw of keeping composition solely loop-based. In Turco’s assignment summary above, he describes using microphones to record voices to add to the looping texture, which is another clear step for students to make the music their own. They can also use a MIDI keyboard or a sequencer to further add original material to their loop-based compositions.

For educators who feel insecure about using music technology, this is a difficult leap (and, at times, an expensive one). The

students are veering away from learning traditional craft and more into using the technology as a “sandbox” and a means to explore sound. This is not entirely a bad thing, and it can often be used as a great tool for sketching, but if the school music program does not have the resources or the equipment, it becomes a difficult means to get a lot of kids writing music at the same time.

Open versus Closed Assignments

Two obvious starting points for beginning composition are what the composer, Barry Milner, calls open and closed assignments. Open exercises give a general structure and broad set of parameters for students to compose music; for example:

1. *Write a piece using Theme & Variations.*
2. *Write a piece using Song Form.*
3. *Write a piece based on how you felt when you first received a gift from someone you love (Milner 1).*

Rather than giving the students a large canvas to work on, closed assignments clearly define the parameters and expectations, focusing the assignment more on craft than on inspiration, for instance:

1. *Using the melody provided, rewrite the melody by using the sequence method. Play the original and play the sequenced version.*
2. *Compose a 2-4 measure melody using the new note we learned in class today. Play it several times. Be prepared to play it in class tomorrow.*
3. *Compose a 4-8 measure melody using this rhythm: (rhythm example given) (Milner 2010, 1).*

Both approaches have their strengths and weaknesses. Closed assignments enable educators to teach craft and line, though they are not very exciting for the students to complete. Open parameters are very exciting for some kids, though daunting for others, particularly if they do not have a strong grasp of form or harmony.

Harmony First

Because our concert-band education paradigm is focused primarily around individual-instrument skill development and concert repertoire, a broad and macroscopic understanding of harmony is challenging for many students. Their sheet music only has one line on it where, generally, they only play one note at a time, as opposed to piano or guitar players where chords and chord progressions are part of their performance, or choir parts where all the vocal lines are on the same page.

While I have seen many educators play chorales and tune chords in their ensembles, I have yet to hear a conductor say anything resembling, “Careful clarinets as we move through that ii6 chord and set up the tendency tone in the dominant at the half cadence.” To be fair, I have never said anything like that either. In the rehearsal space, that is not a part of our language, but it needs to be part of the language at the keyboard or the computer workstation of those who are composing.

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Jon Brantingham, who runs the online blog *Art of Composing*, approaches melody through harmony. This method is an excellent bridge between a student's monophonic instrument and its place in the polyphonic landscape of composing music. An example from his lesson is below. After leading through a brief lesson on interpreting harmony through a linear melody, he suggests:



[Y]ou can approach a composition horizontally, writing a melody first, or you can approach it vertically, writing the harmony first. But, if you really want to make leaps and bounds in your composing, you should practice composing non-ambiguous music, that takes into account both melody and harmony at the same time. This will help you hone your skills, and give you the resources to flesh out what you hear in your head (Brantingham 2011, Web).

This method works well for individual lines and parts, but needs to be supplemented in polyphony. If the students are working in tonality, then a thorough understanding of chord progressions is mandatory. Thankfully, this concept is reinforced in a substantial amount of popular music.

An introductory exercise that I teach uses J. Frank Wilson and the Cavaliers' classic, "Last Kiss," which has a repeating progression of E | C#m | A | B ||. To most students, the more popular recording of that song is by Pearl Jam, released on a charity album for Kosovar refugees called *No Boundaries* (Farley 1999, Web), which transposes it up a minor third: G | Em | C | D ||. Students can easily identify that the first chord in that progression is the tonic just by listening, then they write out the scale from the first chord of each recording:

E	F#	G#	A	B	C#	D#	E
G	A	B	C	D	E	F#	G

If a piano or electronic keyboard is available, this is an excellent time to play diatonic triads above each scale degree, and have the students identify whether the chord played above each pitch is major or minor (or diminished). Consequently, in major keys, the result will be that I, IV and V are major; ii, iii, and vi are minor; and vii is diminished. If students understand that this pattern exists throughout diatonic and tonal music, it is easier for them to identify patterns, which is usually their next "eureka" moment in this exercise.

E	F#m	G#m	A	B	C#m	D#°	E
G	Am	Bm	C	D	Em	F#°	G
I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii°	I

The students recognize that, despite each of the two recordings having different chords, the song sounds the same, because the harmonic pattern is identical in both performances. The progression of E | C#m | A | B || or G | Em | C | D || becomes a more logical and sensible I - vi - IV - V. Using the strategies above,

students can then transpose this pattern into any key they want, and it will continue to sound like "Last Kiss," though again, this works with any simple diatonic song.

While this may sound obvious to readers with music degrees or harmony studies in their background, most Grade 11 trombone players have never thought of how these chords fit together, because they have simply never thought about chords in their concert-band music, ever.

Other strategies for teaching music students to think harmonically:

1. Have them learn simple four-chord songs on guitar or piano, then identify the chord progressions.
2. Have them work through the primer level on piano.
3. Select a measure in your concert-band repertoire, and have band members compare notes with other players of their own sections, and identify the chord. (E.g.: "Trumpet 3 has a C, Trumpet 2 has an E, Trumpet 1 has a G. Now, what chord is that, Trumpets?")

Assessment as Direction

While "teaching to the test" can often feel like putting the proverbial cart before the horse, having a clear outline on the assessment can unambiguously illustrate what the students should be working toward. That being said, summative assessments should be done after the students have had ample time to practice what is being expected, and with an abundance of verbal and formative assessment along the way.

In my composition classes, which take place on Monday and Wednesday after school 3:30-5:00 all year, we usually have a "round-table" for the first twenty minutes focusing on a given musical concept (studying a piece, ear training, watching a performance, reading/listening to an interview, learning about instruments, etc.), then spend the remainder of the class on writing. For each assignment, the students usually get two classes to sketch material, working with me as they go.

After the second class, the students present their incomplete sketches (either on piano or in FINALE®) to the class, and we talk about what we hear. This is a great opportunity for supportive peer feedback and formative assessment. The assignment is due the following week, when we present the finished products to one another. Whether the assignment is an 8-bar clarinet trio or a 16-bar string quartet, the pattern of formative assessment is always the same. However, our current educational paradigm requires summative assessment, and that, too, can be used to guide compositional coherence and student achievement.

Maud Hickey, an Associate Professor and the Co-ordinator of Music Education in the Bienen School of Music at Northwestern University (IL), is a firm advocate of rubrics in teaching music composition:

Rubrics not only help teachers to understand and measure students' achievements but also help students to become sensitive and informed critics of their own work (Hickey 1999, 27).

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She created a rubric that focuses the student composition on Aesthetic Appeal, Creativity, and Craftsmanship:

OUTCOMES	RATINGS			
	1	2	3	4
Student creates Aesthetic Appeal	Does not present an effective general impression. Musical ideas do not hold the listener's interest.	Includes at least one interesting musical idea. Yet, the overall impression is not effective.	Includes some interesting musical ideas. The general impression is pleasant and moderately effective.	Strong aesthetic appeal and general impression. Would be enjoyed by many listeners. Keeps the listener interested.
Student work is Creative	Musical idea is familiar or a cliché. No variety or exploration of musical elements (range, timbre, dynamics, tempo, rhythm, melody).	Musical idea is neither familiar nor a cliché. However, there is no development, variety, or exploration of musical elements.	Involves some original aspect(s) or manipulation(s) of musical idea(s). Explores and varies at least one musical element.	Includes very original, unusual, or imaginative musical ideas. Explores and varies at least two musical elements.
Student demonstrates excellent Craftsmanship	Gives no sense of a completed musical idea. Exhibits no clear beginning, middle or end section. Form appears random rather than organized. Musical elements (range, timbre, dynamics, tempo, rhythm, melody) do not connect well or are not used to organize musical ideas or the form.	Presents one complete musical idea. However, composition lacks overall completeness. Fails to use musical elements to organize musical ideas or form.	Ending feels final. Uses at least one musical element to organize the musical ideas and overall form.	Presents at least one complete musical idea. Has a coherent and organized form with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Uses musical elements to organize musical ideas or the form.

(Hickey 1999, 29)

While substantial pre-teaching needs to happen before students can achieve these outcomes, this rubric exemplifies how assessment can clearly identify the direction of a high-level student composition. With regard to Aesthetic Appeal, the class can explore what elements of music “keep the listener interested” and how to utilize them effectively. Students can investigate what makes particular musical ideas “original, unusual, or imaginative.” Perhaps most importantly, students can infer what a “complete musical idea” is by analyzing the work of others or crafting one or more themselves.

Conclusion

Every student is different, and what works for some may not work for others, so it is important to have a variety of approaches and assessment methods where each student feels validated in their creative pursuits, while they also have an objective view of their strengths and next steps. Like the infinite diversity in our students, there are endless approaches to teaching composition, but as long as students are exploring their own musical creativity and expressing themselves in a way that is authentic to their own experience, wherever we are as educators is a good start.

SOURCES

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