Introduction (Sarah’s perspective)
I’ll never forget the day that Marissa’s email came across my inbox. We met briefly during a presentation on creativity in ensembles classrooms and collaborated for our local state-run festival. After emailing me about some festival logistics, she said, “I attended one of your workshops at the D11 In service day. I loved it and am actually doing a composition/improvisation unit and performance this spring because of it.”

After hearing so many teachers tell me that they would love to incorporate creativity in the classroom but felt overwhelmed, I was intrigued and excited. “Can I interview you and hear about your experience?” Marissa agreed, and we embarked on a two-year journey to better understand how and why ensemble teachers incorporate creativity in the classroom.

We know that creativity is essential. We understand that all music we play results from an artifact that someone created — and we have standards from organizations like NAfME encouraging us to put creativity at the forefront of our curricula. All of this is true, yet many of us still struggle to incorporate creativity into our classroom culture, especially at the ensemble level.

After Marissa and I connected over our passion for creative risk-taking, we realized that this work needed to be expanded. As a 12th-year teacher, I had many opportunities to try (and fail) in this arena. Conversely, Marissa was only a 2nd-year teacher when she began this creative project, and she was teaching at a new school. So, what were the supports and experiences that led us to re-imagine our curricula? And, what is holding other teachers back from doing the same?
Why Is It So Hard to Create? (Marissa’s Perspective)

It’s interesting to examine why creating music with our students is challenging. However, the answer is quite simple: Music educators are not trained to teach creativity, and the product of creative work is often undervalued compared to polished, public performances. In examining my own training as a young musician, it was pretty clear that my task was to reproduce already composed music to the highest level possible.

However, it is during these formative young years that students are most willing to create. By the time music students become music teachers, creating is often a foreign activity that is not only forgotten but actively discouraged by school systems. Fortunately, NAfME and other governing bodies of music education have realized this deficit in our music education systems and have now included creating and improvising in the National Standards. While this is an excellent first step, and changes are being slowly made in collegiate and K–12 settings, there are generations of teachers who are untrained and unequipped to teach their students to create in the 21st century. (So, if you feel ill-equipped to create with students, please know it’s not necessarily your fault.)

In my experience, creating music was and continues to be an incredibly uncomfortable task. However, I have been immensely inspired by the work of other teachers and the results their students share when being musically creative. Through careful thought, exposure to activities, and some basic research, I realized that my discomfort as a teacher should not get in the way of student learning, so I decided to jump in with both feet and start creating. I will admit that it doesn’t go as planned every time. Sometimes, I try something and it fails miserably, while other times, it’s a smashing success. Other times, my students love an activity and gain a lot from it, but there are also days when they strongly dislike what I’m asking them to do and therefore produce little to no results. Experimentation became the name of the game with my exploration of creative activities in a secondary setting.

Creativity in teaching and learning opens up something magical in our classrooms. Students and teachers begin to feel free to create, improvise, and reimagine education. Creativity is the key to unlocking the journey of just how transformative learning is and can be.

— FRANKLIN WILLIS, ELEMENTARY MUSIC INSTRUCTIONAL COACH

As you assign creative work to students, think about how you can provide the floor, but not the ceiling ... give students the basic requirements, then let their creativity soar!

— THERESA HOOVER, MUSICIAN, EDUCATOR, AUTHOR
orchestra classroom. Over time, I developed activities that work with a range of students of all ages, abilities, and interests while still engaging them in this vital learning experience.

The other piece that I had to grapple with was time. How in the world would I fit more into my schedule of already limited time? Once I started merging creativity with the music we were already working on in class, I found the answer. I asked, “How could basic musicianship skills needed to perform composed music transfer to creative activities?” Despite the barriers that get in the way of creativity, we have found some common supports that do work when embracing creativity in the ensemble classroom. We offer three suggestions for starting this year off creatively and finding spaces to encourage student agency and ownership.

1. **Tip from Sarah:** Find your group.

When Marissa and I first started incorporating composition and improvisation into our classrooms, it directly resulted from the incredible work that we saw others doing. There were many times when I wondered, “But what would X person think of this project?” Or, “What will my school community think if we take non-traditional approaches?” What Marissa and I needed when those doubts crept in was personal cheerleaders. Find like-minded educators who are passionate about creativity and draw from them as a source of inspiration. Social media forums can be a great place to start. And, you can connect with authors and educators who have incorporated creative practices into their teaching, like Franklin Willis, Theresa Hoover, David Getz, and Alice Tsui. We have a group chat with a few other orchestra teachers with similar philosophies. We regularly text each other when we have a win in the classroom or a struggle that we need to overcome.

Experimentation is the name of the game when exploring creative activities. Connecting virtually is fantastic, but connecting in person can be amazing as well. What if you had a monthly “teaching for creativity” meetup and shared strategies, ideas, and wins? Or, if your district allows, try to take one or two professional days to observe programs that incorporate creative action regularly.

_When students walk into the music classroom, they should sense a creative atmosphere, a place where adventures are ordinary, mistakes aren’t viewed as impenetrable barriers, and their unique learning styles are encouraged to thrive._

— **DAVID GETZ, MUSIC EDUCATOR, COMPOSER, PERFORMER**
2. **Tip from Marissa:**
Get uncomfortable.

Remember that learning is often found through trial and error, attempts, and failure before one eventually finds success and gains knowledge. We often preach this idea to our students. Have you ever known a student never to make a mistake? When a student does make a mistake, do we tell them they have no future in music, or do we correct them so they can learn and then apply this new knowledge? Teachers too often forget this process of learning. However, we are all human and all learn through trial and error.

The uncertainty of not knowing if a new activity will work with your students can be terrifying. However, imagine yourself as a student of creativity. What would you like to explore? What would you like your students to explore? How can you find these answers both as a teacher and a student?

So, how does a teacher approach this problem? We suggest learning along with your students. Don’t pretend to know something you don’t. It’s OK to turn your classroom into a laboratory of creative activities. Move off of the podium and sit with students. Of course, this means that you’ll have to work to build trust and community in and through the classroom. In our book, The Creative String Orchestra, we recommend several ways to encourage creativity from day one by establishing a supportive environment.

Discomfort is not bad — it indicates curiosity and growth, so embrace it and get uncomfortable!

3. **Tip from Sarah:**
Re-imagine your trajectory.

When Marissa piloted a composition project with her students, she did more than have them work on the process; she re-imaged what the “product,” or sharing of work, would look like. Instead of a traditional concert, she helped students transform their cafeteria into an intimate performance space where students premiered their compositions. Students took ownership of the process and included program notes and details about their composition process.

Instead of trying to augment a staple in their program (like a traditional spring concert), she imagined an entirely new performance opportunity. When you look at this upcoming school year, think: “How can I provide creative performing opportunities that are supportive and authentic?” I’ve personally found that hallway informances after school are a great way to share creative work. Or, you could have students record projects and create a virtual performance gallery (many of us did this during the COVID-19 pandemic). Once you have a plan for a way to share creative work, it is much easier to work backward and create a plan and system for regularly engaging students in creating, improvising, songwriting, and more.

**Closing Thoughts**

Once you open your classroom to creative possibilities, you will see students thrive in ways that you didn’t believe were possible.

Moving our ensemble spaces from music factories to music laboratories can be overwhelming. But, there are so many possibilities! Find support. Start small. And, above all, consider your students. We have found the most incredible results when we let the students lead.

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**Creativity is within us all, and when we listen to our students share their voices, we can allow our youth to activate their creativity in music-making experiences.**

— ALICE TSUI, PIANIST AND MUSIC EDUCATOR

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**Find More Resources on Creativity Here**