

# TEACHING music

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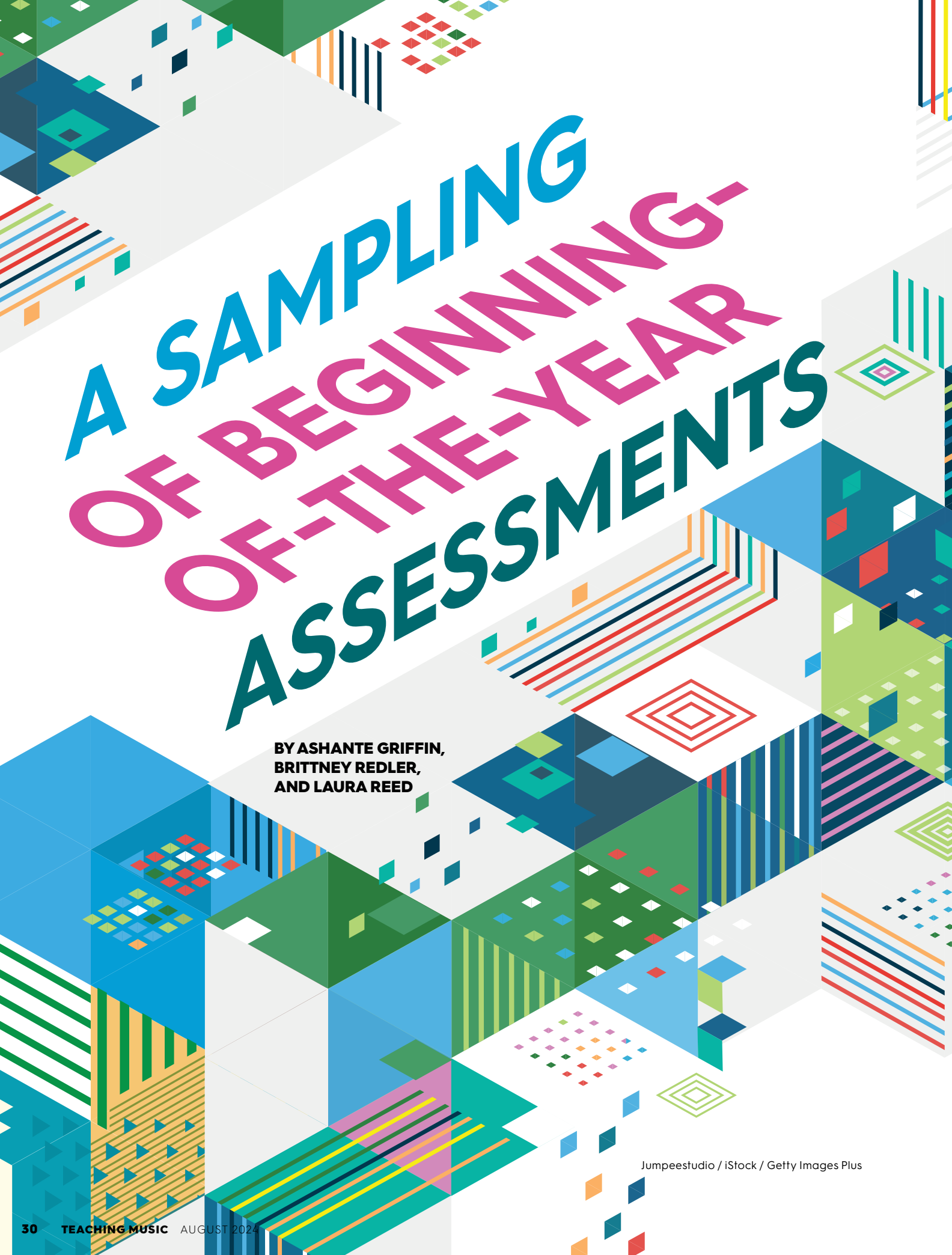
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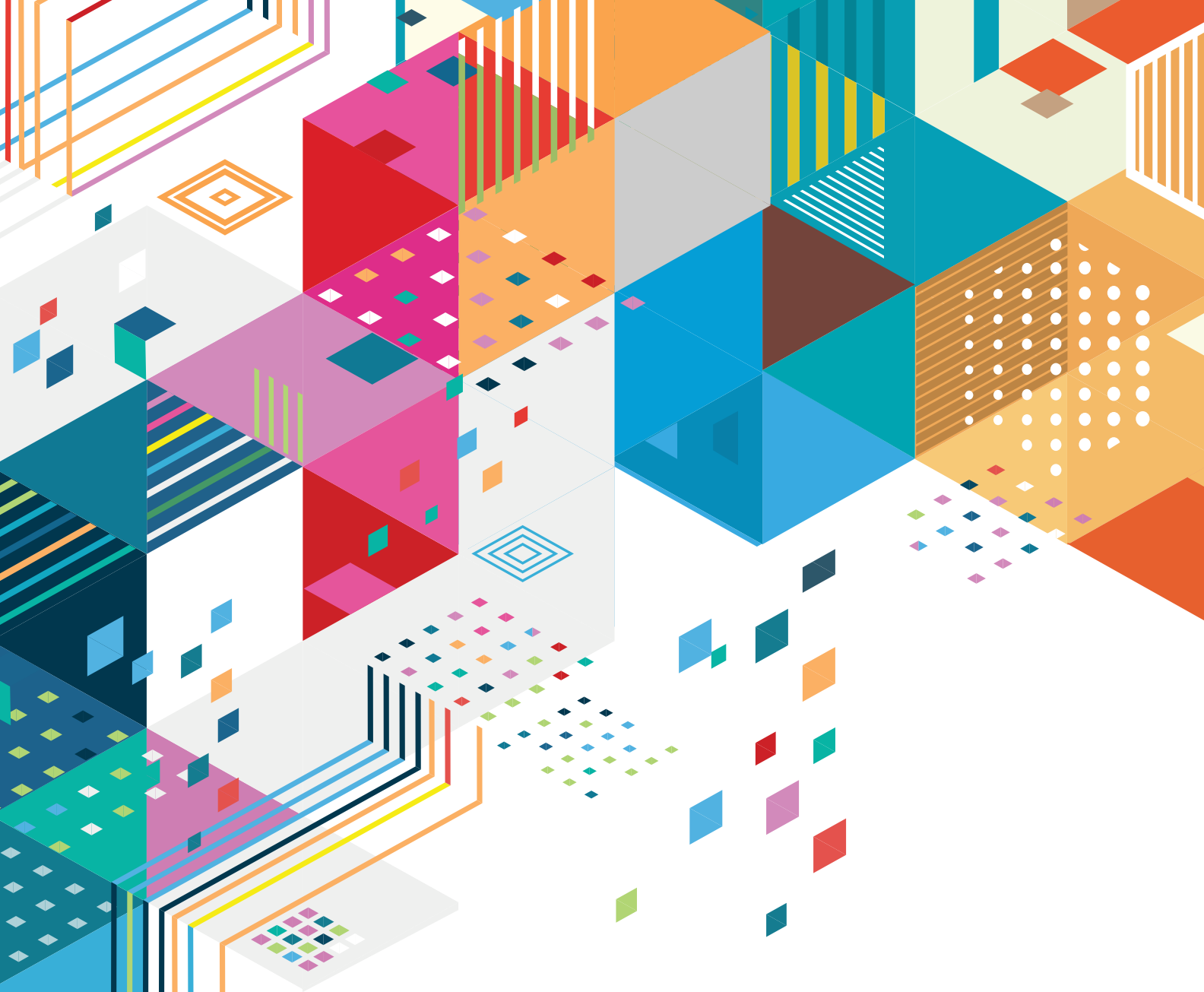
National Association  
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# A SAMPLING OF BEGINNING- OF-THE-YEAR ASSESSMENTS

**BY ASHANTE GRIFFIN,  
BRITTNEY REDLER,  
AND LAURA REED**

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**B**eginning-of-the-year assessments are essential for curriculum planning and differentiated instruction. Here is a sampling of practices of music educators around the country.

What is the purpose of assessment? Brandon University Associate Professor of Music Education Sheila Scott offers three roles for assessment: assessment *of* learning, assessment *for* learning, and assessment *as* learning. She details these types of assessments in her 2012 *Music Educators Journal* article “Rethinking the Roles of Assessment in Music Education” (vol. 98, no. 3; <https://doi.org/10.1177/0027432111434742>).

Assessment *of* learning at the beginning of the year is to comprehend what students know to effectively plan curriculum and differentiated instruction. Assessment *for* learning allows teachers and students to use the information from the beginning of the year to determine if

each learner has improved their level of mastery. Assessment *as* learning aids students in reflective thinking to improve continuously.

Armed with their own expertise and experience, music educators must consider many factors when choosing when and how to pre-evaluate students at the beginning of the year, as evidenced in the following accounts. What do educators consider important when choosing an assessment path? What are the similarities and differences in assessing students across disciplines and student ages? How do educators mindfully choose the material and medium of assessment to best suit their classrooms? Here are some ideas and practices of music educators from around the country.



Denese Odegaard

### Start with the Standards

“Having a standards-based curriculum and well-thought-out assessments in place are key to measuring what students know and can do,” says retired Fargo, North Dakota, Public Schools Orchestra Teacher and former NAFME President **Denese Odegaard**. “Assessing students in the fall is a means to determine proficiency of the previous year’s standards.



Edward Sailer

“My playing assessment covered intonation, tone, reading music, and posture. Sometimes it was as simple as playing the notes on one string to discover the cause of intonation issues. I could determine if it was the hand position or finger spacings. A simple sight-reading assessment of material learned the previous year told me if students transferred what was in the key signature to their fingers,” she explains.



Ramielle Mooror

Some music educators administer assessments determined by their school districts, as Quincy, Illinois, Public Schools Associate Director of Bands **Edward Sailer** describes: “At the beginning of the school year, students take a written, district-approved music assessment that covers past knowledge that was taught in the previous year. For performance, students prepare a short playing assessment of scales and an etude. For sight reading, students are given the same eight-measure etude in a simple key and time signature, which is graded on a district-approved music rubric. We use the scores to map out the strengths of the ensemble and what needs to be retaught during the first quarter.”



Richard Laprise

Riverdale, Georgia, Middle School Chorus Teacher **Ramielle Mooror** uses the Selmer Music Guidance Survey to assess her students at the beginning of each school year. “In this assessment, students hear various pitch sequences and are asked to identify the relationship between them. I have conducted this assessment in whole-group settings and independent work settings. It can easily take a class period to complete,” she says. While out of print, the Selmer Music Guidance Survey is available from a variety of websites, such as *bandrecruitment.com* and *scribd.com*. The Gordon Musical Aptitude Profile (MAP) is another commercially available assessment instrument, published by GIA Publications.



Cynthia Navarro

“My assessment process begins well before the start of the school year,” says Old Rochester Regional Junior High School General Music and Band Teacher **Richard Laprise** of Mattapoisett, Massachusetts. “I proactively engage with the elementary teachers to gather insights into the strengths, weaknesses, and progress of each incoming student.” This information is documented on a shared spreadsheet.

### Know Your Community

Equity and access issues must also be considered when planning assessment strategies at the beginning of the year, says **Cynthia Navarro**, a middle school band director in the Gresham-Barlow School District in Oregon and the DEI Co-Chair for the Oregon Music Educators Association. “Many of my students live in multigenerational homes, in apartments, and with family members who work the night shift. Students may not have access to a practice space at home.

“I start every year with the understanding that the last day of school was the last time instruments were touched,” Navarro says. “That’s why I typically don’t do any type of assessment with second- and third-year players until one month after school starts. Everything starts with square one, and we review fundamentals,” she continues.

“My students get a choice of either recording a video or booking a time slot to perform live for me after class,” Navarro explains. “Each student is assigned a Chromebook and is welcome to use a practice room during class or their recess. This way, the students are not being penalized for their living situations.”

# A Call to Rethink Music Assessments



"The term *assessment* comes from the Latin word *assidere*, which means 'to sit beside,'" says **Timothy Brophy**, University of Florida Professor of Music Education and founding chair of the

International Symposia on Assessment in Music Education (ISAME). "This Latin root suggests that music educators should work to reform their assessment practice to rebalance more equitably the inherent power structure between teacher and student. Rather than prescribe how students should be assessed, teachers might ask, 'how can you best show me what you know and are able to do?'"

"My goal now is to offer students alternatives for the assessment of what they have learned," says Brophy, who has published numerous books and scholarly articles on music education assessment. "Standardized assessment has never comported with student learning in the arts."

In 2021 Brophy was one of the organizing chairs for the World Alliance for Arts Education's 10th World Summit, which focused on developing international principles for arts assessment. "At that event, 220 educators from across the world showed great interest in the decolonization of arts assessment and the development of assessments that are socially just, implemented with fidelity, and sustainable," he says. "Music educators often operate under the belief they must use psychometrically based methods of measurement that were developed in the early 20th century to achieve data parity with standardized assessments in other subject areas. This is, simply, not true."



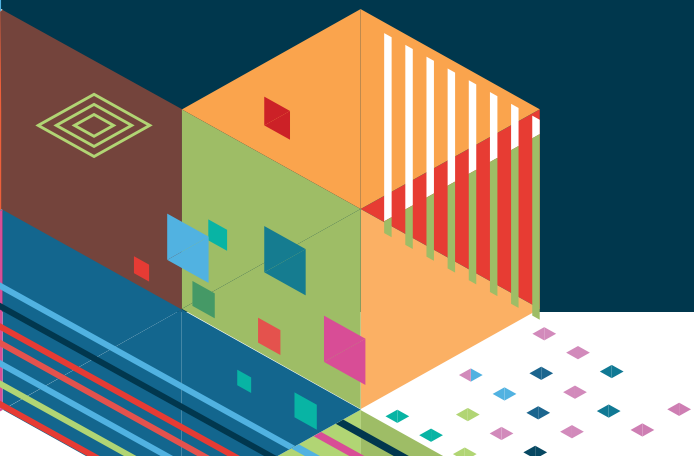
"One of the challenges that we run into is that music educators often do not have clear goals to define what constitutes student learning and what students should be gaining from their music classes," says **Marshall Haning**, Associate

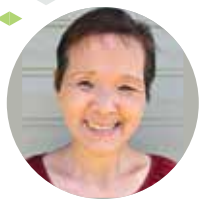
Professor of Music Education at the University of Florida in Gainesville and now chair of the ISAME. "Your assessments always start with your goals," Haning says. "The assessments that are used to measure students' musical creativity are different than those used to measure students' ability to put on an impressive concert." Similarly, in many places around the world, judgments of musical quality are based on its ability to bring joy to the learners and those around them rather than on some sort of external measure of quality. "If you don't know what your goals are," Haning adds, "developing high-quality assessments will be difficult or impossible."

"We need to refocus our assessment work as much as possible on individualized growth over time," Brophy says. While an elementary teacher in Memphis in the 1990s, he filled out developmental profiles for his 600 students every nine weeks, as he described in the 1997 *Music Educators Journal* article titled "Reporting Progress with Developmental Profiles" (vol. 84, no. 1; <https://doi.org/10.2307/3399082>). Rather than trying to translate individual progress into a number or letter grade, he maintains that these individual profile reports give students a much better picture of progress, as well as inform parents of what their children are learning.

"The conflation of assessment and grading is a huge challenge that we run into," adds Haning. "Assessment is a process of gathering information about what students can do, so that we can better understand their abilities and needs. That is often diametrically opposed to giving them a grade, which is often about ending the learning process and encapsulating student achievement at a specific point."

"We can learn a lot from other cultures, in particular those where *assidere* shapes teaching, learning, and assessment" Brophy says. Ultimately, both Brophy and Haning agree: When used correctly, assessment should be a process and a tool, not an end point.





Kristi Lee Higuchi-Delos Santos



Brian Moore



Damian Johnson



Erica McCants

In addition to technique, aural skills, and music literacy, beginning-of-the-year assessments can help measure socio-emotional characteristics, helping to establish relationships with students. Hawaii Music Educators Association President **Kristi Lee Higuchi-Delos Santos** teaches at Mililani High School and HVLN Hawaii Online Courses in Hawaii. Throughout her career, she has taught Kindermusik, general music, band, choir, piano, music theory and technology, and AP music theory. She says, “One simple question provides me with the greatest insight on how to best serve students during the year.”

“As each new school year begins, the first experience students have in my class is to answer the question: Why did you take this class, and what do you hope to gain out of it? I have found that this question provokes wide awakenings for both students and me and provides many answers to the type of impact I am expected to make on the year ahead and in life,” Higuchi-Delos Santos continues.

“The most important byproduct of asking this question is that I begin to forge a relationship with the students, and they understand the building of relationships. Through this question, I hope that two journeys are started—my journey as teacher and their journeys as students,” she explains.

Some music educators learn about their students through personal interviews, as **Brian Moore**, Choir Director at Contoocook Valley Regional High School in New Hampshire:

“For voice part and section placement, each student has an informal interview with me to talk about their past choir practices, experience, and culture, which helps me place students correctly both vocally and from a socio-emotional perspective. I assess various vocal aspects such as range, passaggio, and head/chest/mix, and we collaboratively identify comforts and points of growth during the 10- to 15-minute interview.

“For returning students, these interviews are abbreviated, but I check for changes from the previous year,” Moore continues. “I also make sure their identity matches their vocal identity, especially for my LGBTQ+ students, so that they can address any vocal dysphoria they may have at any time.

“These interviews happen throughout the year for every student at their request or as needed as their instruments change and grow. Students are then collaboratively placed into sections with the seating determined on an anchoring system where

the most skilled singers are the anchor in the center of rows and sections and the newer or more inexperienced singers are placed around them.”

## Logistics of Individual Student Assessment

Some music educators, such as Ed Sailer from Quincy, Illinois, can assess students one on one because they are part of a team of co-teachers. Not all music teachers are in this situation, however.

Kansas Music Educators Association President-Elect **Damian Johnson** is Director of Bands at Eudora Schools in Kansas, where he teaches sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade band classes as well as a large high school ensemble: “I teach sixth- through twelfth-grade band by myself every day, so I do not have an assistant to lead my classes while I teach.”

Johnson has his students play alone in front of the class: “Since I teach multi-instrument band classes, I try to make sure students are playing for other students quickly. The sooner this happens, the more comfortable the students are, and it is much easier for me to assess the students,” he explains. “We foster a respectful and encouraging environment, and rarely does the process create anxiety for students. If anxiety is an issue, we come up with an alternative assessment on a case-by-case basis.”

Greenwich, Connecticut, Academy Middle School Music Teacher and Upper School Choir Director **Erica McCants** takes a different approach with her incoming fifth graders: “For the singing portion, I’ll start with warmups and a simple song to get a sense of their pitch. I never have them sing alone because I know that they can be very self-conscious. They gather around the piano while we are learning a song, so I am easily able to assess their pitch and range.”

Richard Laprise also prefers to assess students in small groups: “Once the school year begins, the ensemble sight-reads a theme and variation composition I designed to assess fundamental concepts and skills expected at the junior high level. To further refine my assessment, I facilitate smaller group evaluations by dividing the ensemble based on various criteria, such as instrument sections, rows, birthdates, or first letter of last names.”

“We know there are students who can play in front of anyone and there are those who would rather perform in front of just the teacher,” Denese Odegard points out. “I believe teachers



should allow students the flexibility to choose how they want to be assessed. Select a varied level of assessment material in which the students can choose what they feel comfortable performing for the assessment. The student feels successful playing, and the teacher has one more layer to determine the proficiency level.

“Short assessments are more manageable for the student and time efficient for the teacher,” Odegaard continues. “Students without access to instruments over the summer and who have anxiety or get nervous also need the opportunity to repeat the assessment, eliminating the feelings of failure and building teacher-student rapport.”

“Assessment for us can be as simple as one or two notes or as intense as a sight read for the entire class,” Damian Johnson agrees.

### Classroom Management during Assessments

Lengthy individual assessments during a rehearsal can often lead to classroom management problems. One option is to have students submit recordings that can be evaluated outside of class. Riverdale Middle School Chorus Teacher Ramielle Moorer says she asked students to use SmartMusic, now called MakeMusic Cloud, and FlipGrid, now called Flip, to submit videos but has abandoned that method: “Sound quality is a deterrent. I found it cumbersome to troubleshoot microphone use and devise compatibility.”

Evaluating these recordings outside of class can be time-consuming for teachers. “Assessing in large group rehearsals during a break or at the end of the rehearsal, one section at a time and in person, takes the least amount of time,”

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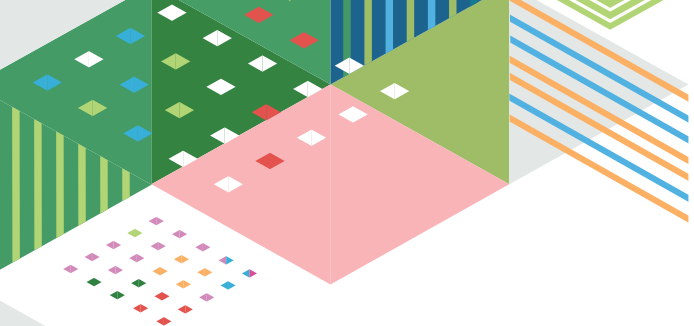
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Ana Morel



Erica Zimmerman



Jeaneau Julian

Denese Odegaard advises. “Be sure to provide the remainder of the students targeted areas to practice or other activities to do while assessing.”

**Ana Morel**, Choral Director at Wakefield High School in Massachusetts, recommends these assignments to keep students busy while she assesses individual voices and skills:

- Handbook escape room Google Form: The students are tasked with finding the answers to questions using the Choral Handbook and given some sort of reward at the end, so the task becomes like a game. This is usually done in small groups.
- Get-to-know-your-section assignment: The students are tasked with creating a short presentation about the members of their section, allowing the whole ensemble to get to know each other.
- Stations that small groups of students move through (requires help from student officers): One station is with me, one station involves decorating a music note with their name on it to go on the wall, and one station is where their music and folder are assigned. Another station consists of computer work—joining Google Classroom, making Sight Reading Factory and Noteflight accounts, and filling out various questionnaires.

### Elementary General Music Assessments

Beginning-of-the-year assessment for younger students is often more informal. “I like to make sure assessment is effortless and mostly unknown to my students,” says **Erica Zimmerman**, K-5 General and Choral Music Teacher in Larchmont, New York. “I don’t want students to feel on the spot or uncomfortable, so I assess often.

“Because I only see each class a maximum of 32 times a year, I try to include a small assessment in each class,” Zimmerman says. “Examples can be solo rhythmic or melodic decoding for a two-measure pattern or games like walk the plank, poison pattern, feel this, and think at the clap, allowing students to be the teacher, beat-keeping on a specific instrument, and so forth. These are ways I weave assessment in each class.”

As an elementary music teacher in the Little Rock, Arkansas, and Tacoma, Washington, school districts, **Jeaneau Julian** worked with her colleagues to “create common formative assessments based on the elements of music to be given throughout the year at each grade level.”

In Little Rock, “These were to be given to at least one class per grade level so there were

commonalities in our elementary classrooms across the district,” says Julian, who is currently serving as Vice President of the American Center for Elemental Music & Movement. “A second- and fourth-grade assessment was also created to be given during the first quarter and fourth quarter to see how students in those grade levels progressed throughout the year.”

She also recommended the following resources for elementary music teachers looking for premade assessments:

**QuaverEd** (<https://www.quavered.com/>) has a pre-test and post-test for each grade level built into its 36-lesson curriculum. It is not as user-friendly for younger students and non-readers but works well for students in grades 3 through 5. Assessments are embedded for every three lessons.

**MusicplayOnline** (<https://musicplayonline.com/>) has a menu option of types of assessments. Games and interactives are embedded within the curriculum so teachers can choose what and how to assess their students at any given time.

### A Snapshot

Beginning-of-the-year assessments depend on many factors, including socio-economic conditions of students, age, ensemble type, district mandates, and preferences. The constant for all music educators is to use the data you collect to adjust your curriculum and instructional practices, to differentiate instruction for individual students, and to communicate progress to students and their parents. ■



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