A background image of a musical staff with notes, tilted at an angle, appearing to be part of a larger sheet of music.

INSPIRE Music Curriculum:
Creative Music and Composition Projects
for K-12 Teachers and Students

Presented to NAFME Membership from
NAfME Composition Council

Music in Our Schools Month 2025



INSPIRE MUSIC CURRICULUM:
CREATIVE MUSIC AND COMPOSITION PROJECTS
FOR K-12 TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Edited by

LISA A. CRAWFORD

Presented through **NAfME Composition Council**

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CONTRIBUTORS

NAfME Composition Council (2023-2025)

Austin Day, Eastern Division Representative

Dr. Mara Gibson, Southern Division Representative

Maud Hickey, North Central Division Representative

Amy Lui, Western Division Representative

Ryan Main, Southwestern Division Representative

Alex Shapiro, Northwest Division Representative

Dr. Cynthia Van Maanen, Past-North Central Division Representative

Hillary Goldblatt, Member-At-Large Representative

Dr. Daniel Deutsch, Member-At-Large Representative

Dr. Brian Nabors, Member-At-Large Representative

Dr. Lisa A. Crawford, Chair, NAfME Composition Council

PREFACE

Welcome to *National Association for Music Education* (NAfME) Composition Council *Music in Our Schools Month 2025* creating and composition publication for educators working with K-12 and tertiary students! We have prepared these materials that can lead to idea-building for you, your teaching teams, and for your students.

All humans, children, young people and adults can compose. We offer projects in this publication that you may use as-is or revise for your creative work with students. We hope you will share videos and responses to our ***INSPIRE Curriculum***. We also hope that you will offer inspiration to your students, no matter their ages or experience levels and enjoy discovery!

INSPIRE Approach

- 1) **Imagine** new creative ideas that are of interest to you, the educator. Notice first, response to these ideas from your students. Carry these forward as you refine your remarkable presentation designs.
- 2) **Nurturing** each student's process is managed through development of effective tasks that you appreciate as much as students do. All we need to do is identify what these are for our many different groups of students. Provide your basic template and take yourself out of the decisions made by students in their creative process of extension.
- 3) **Special recognition** for creative work is not my focus. Even for all the times that I have been remarkably impressed by a student's composition, recognition is given by providing excellent, thoroughly thought-through, "next" projects. Opportunity to discuss, perform, or share works in some way is always valuable. Each class has different student types. All student groups provide positive feedback to their classmates about what they heard, what they loved, and what adjustments can be considered for the future. Student voice is special and much greater to hear than my voice.
- 4) **Pride** in one's compositional work is built through your strong teaching and discussion supports and through questions such as "do you know why this is an outstanding piece", or, "do you think this is an outstanding composition?", or, "what compositional elements might work in the next piece you compose", or "can you identify what you might revise".
- 5) **Integration** of musical knowledge *and feeling* is an exceptional combination. Work with students to determine their increasing capacity for centering themselves with their work enough to develop expression of emotion as an imperative contribution. This changes most creating and composition efforts.
- 6) **Relevance** is determined by students not teachers. Teachers may invite students to compose a *Suspense Film Intro* identifying that, "screams" do not necessarily create suspense. Students still use screams in their pieces.
- 7) **Ears.** Everyone hears everyone's compositions in our classes. This does not mean that they hear compositions in the same way. While no student has a hearing requirement, an educator's presentation of listening and responding are imperative to every student's compositional process.

(Crawford, L. (2024). Compositional idea selection and development. In M. Kaschub, (Ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Music Composition Pedagogy*, (pp. 233-254). Oxford University Press.

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Music Standards Resources

NAfME Music Standards List: <https://nafme.org/publications-resources/standards/>

National Core Arts Standards: <https://www.nationalartsstandards.org/>

National Core Arts Standards-pdf:

https://www.nationalartsstandards.org/sites/default/files/Conceptual%20Framework%202007-21-16_0_0.pdf

Music Notation & Recording Apps

(Free and Fee-Based)

Students of all ages (K-12-tertiary) may be interested in notation and recording apps. I have found that providing a list of options is useful for students' research on what works best for them and meets their interests.

Free:

[Noteflight](#)

[MuseScore](#)

[ScoreCloud](#)

[LilyPond](#)

[Denemo](#)

[MC Musiceditor](#)

[ScoreCloud](#)

[MagicScore](#)

[Musicnotes](#)

[Notation Pad](#)

[Ensemble Composer](#)

[Maestro](#)

[Blanksheetmusic](#)

[GarageBand](#) for Mac

[GarageBand](#) for PC

[Soundtrap](#)

[BandLab](#)

[FL Studio Mobile](#)

[Music Maker JAM](#)

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[Roland Zenbeats](#)

[Ardour](#)

[Audacity](#)

[Beat Maker Go](#)

[Groovebox – Beat Synth Studio](#)

[LMMS](#)

[Make beats](#)

[Soundtrap: How to Make Pro Beats](#)

[Songify](#)

[Traction Waveform](#)

[Amped Studio](#)

[Animoog](#)

[Audiotool](#)

[Cakewalk Sonar](#)

[Cubasis 3 – DAW & Music Studio](#)

[Avid-ProTools](#)

Fee-Based:

[Flat](#) (Can be used for collaborations)

[Solfeg.io](#)

[Soundslice](#)

[Musink](#)

[StaffPad](#)

[Mustud](#)

[Denemo](#)

[MC Musiceditor](#)

[Sibelius](#)

[PreSonus Notion 6](#)

[Symphony Pro](#)

[Finale](#)

Finale has been replaced with [Dorico](#)

[MusicJOT](#)

[forScore](#)

[Crescendo Music Notation](#)

Section 1: Elementary (K-5)

Rhythm Layering – (Cynthia Van Maanen) (10-15 minutes)

1. Have a group of four leaders take rhythm flashcards with a quarter or quarter rest on one side and two eighth notes or a quarter rest on the other. The group will arrange themselves at the front of the room from left to right to create different rhythms.
2. Holding up the rhythms, have the class perform the rhythms with ‘ta’ and ‘tee tee’. The class can repeat the rhythm and the leaders can flip their card over at any time to create a new rhythm.
3. Add a second leader group and split the class in half. Each group will follow their leaders to create rhythm layering.
4. Optional: Have students compose on the white board using magnetic ‘ta’ and ‘tee tee’ rhythms. Have your class layer the composed rhythms using ‘ta’ and ‘tee tee’ or by implementing classroom instruments.

Haunted House Conducting (K-2) (Daniel Deutsch)

This activity has two layers of creativity. The first layer occurs when all students create their own versions of eerie or spooky sounds. They are not precisely reproducing vocal material they have been taught. Instead, the students have options, and they exercise creative control. This helps even the youngest students to realize they are creators who can express their own ideas in vocal performance. Because the subjects have emotional resonance due to the fear and humor factors, their vocalizations have emotional impact—they are not just pitches and rhythms.

The second layer of creativity occurs when individual students take the conductor’s seat. They shape the entire group’s performance by sculpting the sound with their arms. They tend to create wave effects that slide the sound from side to side. They also expand and contract their span, which creates dynamic shifts. It is always amazing to see the students’ grasp the intensity of the power they hold in their hands, especially when they spread their arms wide and create an enormous wall of sound!

Important tip: Teach them right away that conductor’s hands together or on lap means silence!

1. Capture the spooky autumn spirit with our youngest students!
2. Students sit in a semicircle with the teacher seated in a conducting position.
3. Workshop—as an entire class or in small groups—vocalizing the sounds of a haunted house (eerie ghosts, black cats, witches laughs, etc.).
4. Teach a “wedge conducting” process: The conductor extends both arms forward and varies the angle between the two arms and the direction of the arms. All students within the angle make their sounds. If they fall outside of the angle, they are silent.
5. The conductor sculpts the sound by spreading and contracting the angle between his or her arms and by panning left and right.

6. (Conductor's hands together or on knees means silence!)
 7. Now, who else wants to conduct?! Allow student volunteers to sit in the conductor's seat and sculpt the sound.
 8. The students experience an intense feeling of power and creativity as they shape the sounds of peers.
-

BoxComps™ (K-2; 3-8; 9-12; Tertiary) (Lisa A. Crawford)

Title: BoxComps (Box Compositions)

Grade level/ensemble: K-12

Compositional context: Individual, Partnered, Small Group, Whole Class

Materials: Google doc or Handout (Physical handout works well)

May precede my work with Orff, Kodaly, recorders, ukuleles, use of hand-held instruments, drums, found sounds, and introductory vocal and instrumental work.

Overview: I have a wonderful collection of world instruments, hand-held instruments, and numerous drums. Students are introduced to experiential learning through Box Comps, generally a 4x4 empty box frame that begins music teaching and learning with one sound per box but most often becomes much more. Also available are 1x4 and 2x4 Box Comps.

Activity: Music educators train ears! In my classes, all students begin by thinking about and developing how sounds work together to create an atmosphere through use of world instruments, body percussion, vocal sounds, or text. You may have other ideas. Most importantly, students may have other ideas.

Students learn to develop communicative “Keys” so performers know how to perform classmates’ *Box Comps*. We also video and record projects as they are performed. Areas covered: Singing; Playing instruments; Composing and Arranging; Listening; Revision; Communication; What is a beat?

Other: I discuss Compositional Devices throughout my curricula in *Beginning with Composition* (Crawford, 2025) in the context of *Sequences*. Box Comps may precede or be a part of your presentations about sequences. In the development of any project, I ask students to consider (among others) motive, sequence, dynamics, tempo, and form. Taking careful note of each student’s way of managing composition projects, I develop next composition projects based upon who is in the room with careful observation of new ideas and discussion.

1x4 Box Comp

Create a symbol for one sound per box!

Discuss counting!

Perform independently or with another student's Box Comp!

--	--	--	--

2x4 Box Comp

Create a symbol for one sound per box!

Discuss counting!

Identify how two sounds are performed at the same time as well as sounds applied to symbols.

Perform independently or with another student's Box Comp!

4x4 Box Comps

I have used preparatory examples of sound boxes but in my classes invite students to do their own Box Comps *before* trying examples prepared by others (Hunt, P. (2001). *Voiceworks: A handbook for singing, Bk. 1*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. See Figure 1 and 2).

Figure 1.

a) Finger pop rap

?		?	Sh!
•	?Sh!	↔	
	↔	?Sh!	•
Sh!	?		?

-  = one finger-pop
-  = Sh ~ ~
-  = one clap
-  = overlapping whistles (low to high, high to low)
-  = silence

Figure 2.

b) Ooh aah crunch!

CRUNCH		That's cool!	Yeah!
Ooh!	CRUNCH		Zoom
	That's cool!	CRUNCH	Zoom
Ooh!		Aah!	CRUNCH

CRUNCH
(as if chewing into a light bulb!)

That's cool!
(accompanied by a clicking of fingers)

Yeah!
(enthusiastically)

Ooh!
(sound surprised!)

Zoom
(like a fast car roaring by)

Aah!
(with relief)

Questions when working with Box Comps? What do I put in each box? Is each box worth one count? Do I put notes in each box? Do I perform all parts in each column at the same time? What types of sounds can I use? How will anyone know how to perform my box composition? These are some of the questions you may hear.

The job of a composer is in large part about communication. Maybe your pop songs get better and better with each passing year you compose, but you began somewhere. For me, it was curiosity about my family's piano. Age two and three is young to be creating chords on a piano because our hands are still small, and muscles are undeveloped. But that was me. What is you? I invite students to perform box compositions others have created. These are fun and everyone performs them differently. In fact, leadership skills can be created through defining how *your* box comp might be performed. And it's true that even with box compositions, students ask "how it's supposed to be done". It is completely up to each of them.

I invite students to consider a box composition from the perspective of their individual and collaborative interests. How do YOU want to perform this? In response to "what is this sound supposed to sound like?", I respond with "what do YOU want it to sound like?" I am not the judge. I am not the leader of your ideas. Your ideas will be different than mine. That is what music is all about. Different ensembles perform established works differently-- which is precisely why we hear different ensembles play the same pieces we have heard many times before. (Taken from Crawford, Lisa. (forthcoming). *A Definitive Guide for Harmonizing Creativity: Empowering Music Educators for Composition & Creative Music Teaching*.)

Sequences (K-12; Tertiary) (Dr. Lisa A. Crawford)

Use of **Box Comps** can lead the way for more formal work with sequences in creating music. Inviting students to follow leading ideas with the understanding that they may create what they choose, *Four Notes Four Measures* is one example of how we might begin with any age group.

Four Notes Four Measures

Label here the four notes you have chosen to use in your composition: _____



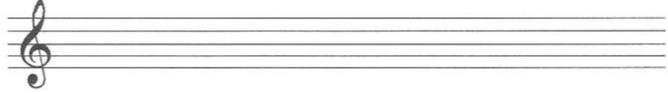
Decades of work with music students, music educators, and administrators has taught me that students' ideas are endless. The more I have left outcomes to students, the more interesting students' compositions have been. I do find that setting preliminary exercises gets ideas percolating! It is a form of hands-off leadership that works.

The next Section of ideas consider the importance of thinking about the basics of ideas creatively. For example, what is a simple melody really? Well, create one and share it with your peers. What this process does is gradually removes the nervous energy of the beginnings of sharing one's creative work, which, no matter one's age, all humans experience. Numerous opportunities may be given to ensure students work through these types of feelings that may block how far a student may really be able to go musically!

SEQUENCE

Welcome to **Project A: Developing a Composition -Thinking about the Basics**. Before we think about the entire piece, we are thinking about a sequence or catchy hook that will draw in the listener. Compose the following aspects of traditional music theory known as compositional devices. You may also use a blank sheet of music paper.

Motive - Simple melody



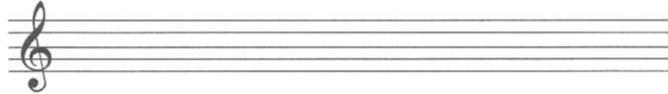
Repetition: Simple motive/melody repeated



Sequence: Same pattern beginning on a higher or lower pitch:



Retrograde: Same simple melody written backwards:



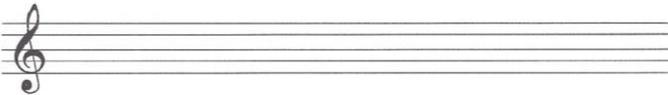
Rhythm: Check the rhythmic aspects of your motive and adjust here if you would like:



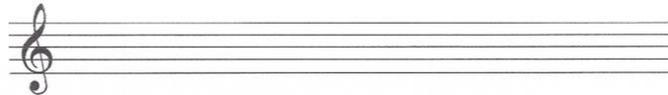
Time: Consider your time signature and double-check measure markings. Add here.



Tempo: Tempo markings belong at the beginning of a piece and can change throughout the piece. Select a tempo.



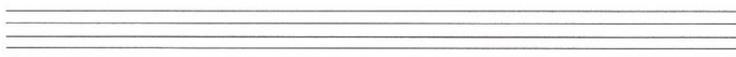
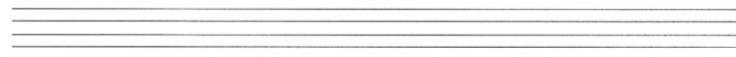
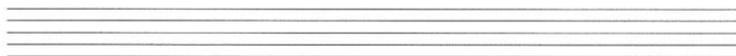
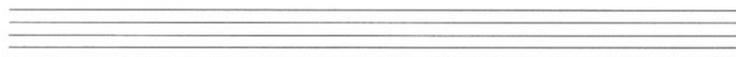
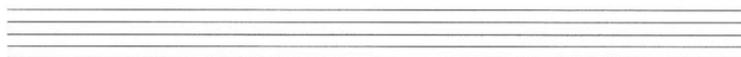
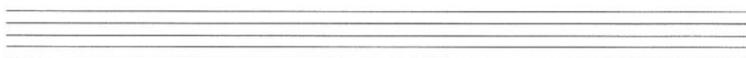
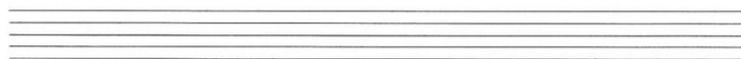
Dynamics: Select dynamic marking/s for your motive.



DEVELOP YOUR MELODY

Welcome to **Project B: Develop Your Melody**. Adding different sounds to your motive or piece actually goes a long way to develop a piece of music. You may wish to begin with a rhythmic foundation. You may want the sound of your piece to represent a song with text and vocal with band or synth instruments or make it an instrumental piece. Begin by working on a measure or two composing 2-4 parts. Work independently or with a partner. You may also use a blank sheet of music paper.

Text Ideas (if desired):



Birds on a Wire (Dr. Lisa Crawford, 2017)



(Credit for most photos: Kim Bishop, Music educator)

Birds on the Wires: <https://www.jarbasagnelli.me/synchro/birds-on-the-wires>
Website: The Art of Jarbas Agnelli, <https://www.jarbasagnelli.me/>



Article Introduction: A man made a song using the exact location of these birds sitting on wires as musical notes. One morning while reading a newspaper, Jarbas Agnelli saw a photograph of birds on an electric wire. He cut out the photo and was inspired to make a song using the exact location of the birds as musical notes. He was curious to hear what melody the birds created. Jarbas Agnelli asked himself, “I saw this picture of birds on the electric wires, so I cut out the photo and decided to make a song, using the exact location of the birds as notes. I was just curious to hear what melody the birds were creating.” He sent the music to the photographer, Paulo Pinto, who told his editor, who told a reporter and the story ended up as an interview in the newspaper. It ended up Winner of the YouTube Play Guggenheim Biennial Festival.

Birds on a Wire-Subject: Creating and Composition

Grades: All Ages; This Lesson plan directed toward Elementary (K-5)

Concept / Topic to Teach: Using pictures of birds sitting on wires to develop an original piece of music

Required Materials: Pictures; Blank or music staff paper

Music National Core Arts Standards: <https://www.nationalartsstandards.org/>

English Language Development (ELD) Standards:

<https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/ml/documents/eldstndpublication14.pdf>

General Goal(s): Development of creativity through observation and development

Anticipatory Set (Lead-In): Research to find your pictures of birds on wires or, take your own pictures of birds on wires

Step-By-Step Procedures:

1. Conceptual introduction (videos, pictures, readings); May read article above to students or student may read the article to class; Research Google for pictures of birds on wires; Take pictures of birds on wires and bring to class
2. Project: Design notation based on what student sees in selected photo simply using pencil and music paper (or online App such as Noteflight)
3. Each student shares composition with class and receive positive feedback from three peers
4. Performance of original works!



SECTION II: Middle School (6-8)

Musical Soundscapes (K-12) (Dr. Maud Hickey)

Musical “soundscapes” are to the ear as visual landscapes are to the eye, and soundscape compositions provide fun and easy entryways into musical composition. I like to call this work “ear-magination,” as the ears hear sounds, as opposed to images for the eye. Soundscape compositions work best when few parameters are given, and students are allowed to let their “ear-maginations” soar. Students can ear-magine spaces that are real (sounds heard in the school hallway during passing time and after) or imagined (sounds that might exist on Mars). This activity requires students to carefully listen (and deepen their listening) to the sounds of environments all around them and use these possible sounds to inspire a composition. ANY sound sources can be used (classrooms instruments, band or orchestra instruments, voices, or found sounds). Soundscape compositions can also be done using Digital Audio Workstation such as *Garageband* or the web-based *Gridsound* (www.gridsound.com).

The following soundscape assignment would work well in a classroom that has access to a variety of instruments/sounds.

1. Arrange students into manageable groups and assign (or let them choose) a variety of instruments.
2. Instructions:
 - a. Imagine a very snowy winter blizzard in Wisconsin.
 - b. Work within your group to create a musical composition that depicts this scene.
 - c. First discuss and brainstorm the sounds you might hear here. Choose those you will use and find appropriate instruments to depict them.
 - d. Organize, plan and practice your composition.
 - e. It should last between 30 secs and 1 minute.
 - f. Notate it on a blank sheet of paper so you can remember it.

Variations:

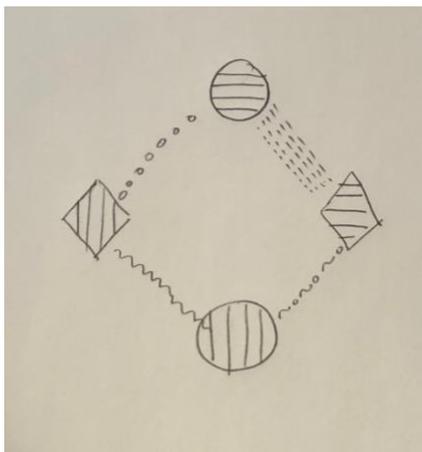
- Give each group of students a different “scape” (e.g. winter blizzard, water park, rainstorm) and have other groups listen to see if they can identify the scape.
 - Have students record interesting sounds from their environment and collect them in a digital sound bank. Use these as material for a digital soundscape composition.
-

Improvised Harmony (3-5 minutes) (Cynthia Van Maanen)

- In an ensemble setting, have students sing or play a well-known melody together in unison. Have the students repeat the melody while improvising harmony along with the melody.
 - Optional: During an additional repeat, ask students to improvise descants or countermelodies.
-

Group Interpretation of a Graphic Musical Score (Dr. Daniel Deutsch)

When the late great composer, artist, and acoustic ecologist R. Murray Schafer served as Composer-in-Residence at the New York State School Music Association conference in 2004, he led a group of young composers and conference attendees in an activity that I have replicated many times, especially in music theory classes. He drew a geometric image on the whiteboard, and with almost no explanation he announced that it was a graphic score to be performed. He divided the participants into three groups. Each group had about 8 members. The group members ranged in age from approximately 8 to 80. I forget his exact image, but I have used images like this:

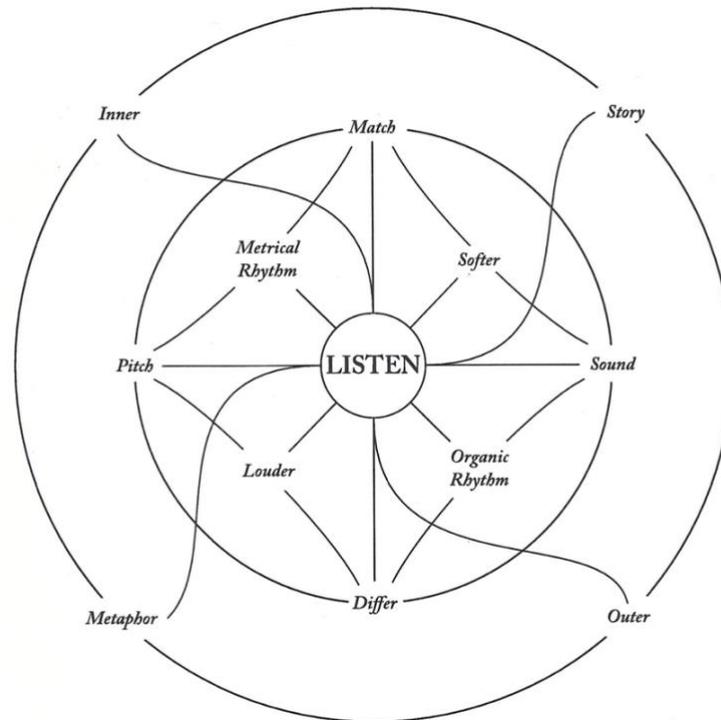


Each group copies the image on a sheet of paper, finds a safe place to work, and takes about 20 minutes to create a performance that realizes the graphic score. I have always done it without instruments. The groups then come back into the main room and perform for each other. This experience has delighted my students, aged 9-18. It is particularly gratifying to hear how diverse the three groups' interpretations are. Keeping the instructional element to a bare minimum increases the students' ability to surprise each other creatively.

Listening and Creating Music through Oliveros' Sonic Meditation (Dr. Mara Gibson)

Larger group option:

1. Ask your students to define music and discuss. Provide a few definitions after they have tried to come up with their own definition. (5 minutes)
2. Lead students through Pauline Oliveros' Sonic Meditation (my personal favorite is Movement 7. (15 minutes with preparation) <https://blogthehum.com/2016/09/13/pauline-oliveros-sonic-meditations-1974-the-complete-text-and-scores/>)
3. Depending on the age group, lead a discussion about what happened musically and mentally for every-one involved. Ideally, her diagram should be shared (projected) after the meditation. Listening is the most important aspect to unveil. How did students listen? How did they match or differ from what was going on around them? What was the most important aspect of listening for the students? (10 minutes)



4. Return to a piece you have been studying/practicing in class. Notice how this exercise changes the listening patterns of your ensemble or group.
5. Accompanying listening assignment: George Crumb's "Voice of the Whale." You need not play the entire piece. Select a section and ask students to identify what they hear. Then, show them the score.

Listening and Creating Music through Oliveros' Sonic Meditation (Dr. Mara Gibson)

(Cont'd)

Smaller group option (especially younger piano students)

1. Introduce students to all aspects of the piano (keys, inside strings, pedals, knocking on the side, etc.).
 2. Ask students to think of a storm. Have them draw one out roughly.
 3. Ask them to share with one another.
 4. Select a few students to share realizing their composition. Then you demonstrate how you created a storm.
 5. Accompanying listening assignment: play *Voiles* by Debussy from *Piano Preludes Book 1*. Explain that it translates as *sails*. Of course there is a lot to discuss harmonically in this piece, but focus on having the students identify the materials of the piece, that is, what part represents the water, the sail, the wind, etc. This exercise will help students understand that musical materials can be abstract and need not be a conventional melody to function as musical material.
-

SECTION III: High School (9-12)

Setting Music to Video Clips and Games (Amy Lui)

Integrating with English Language Arts (ELA) and media arts to help absolute beginner music students to think critically and plan out their process of creating.

Setting music to a short clip: It is important for students to write out their approach by thinking about what the selected video is conveying, its tone and meaning. Drawing on their background knowledge, students can outline what sounds might compliment or help convey this perceived meaning for a short video clip the teacher or student selects.

Setting music to a video game: I have worked with AP computer science classes to take their capstone projects (coding a video game) and setting music to it. A) Computer class students take a short screen recording of themselves playing the game. B) This recording is sent to the music class to create music. C) The file is then sent back to the computer science class to move music created into the game. Here are some student samples along with the curriculum layout: <https://www.polyhighmusictech.org/composition-licensingpublishing-supervision.html>

Moods - Composing a Melody - Ensemble setting (Dr. Ryan Main) (15-30 minutes)

1. Give students a short phrase, such as “I love sunny days and warm summer nights” and ask them to turn it into a singable melody or to capture the spirit of the phrase on their instrument by composing a melody.
2. Change key words of the phrase while maintaining syllabic structure and ask students to change their melody to capture the new meaning. For example, “I love rainy days and dark winter nights”.

Optional: Have students work in small groups to create harmony or additional parts to accompany each melody.

EARTH, the BRINGER of _____ (Hilary Goldblatt)

Have students listen to Holst's *The Planets*, not each movement in entirety, but with a game approach in mind. They are told that each planet is the bringer of something, but they are to GUESS the intent of the composer. So, Jupiter.... Hmmm... What is the emotion here? They keep listening until someone in the class guesses Joy or Happiness or whatever you think is close enough to "Jollity." Repeat with Mars, which most groups have no difficulty guessing means War, then Venus, Bringer of Peace, then some of the more obscure ones like Saturn, Bringer of Old Age, and Neptune, the Mystic, Mercury the Winged Messenger, and Uranus the Magician. You can present a few or all seven.

Next, let students know that Gustav Holst did not compose a movement about planet Earth. It's up to each student to decide what EARTH is the BRINGER of. Could be their favorite hobby, or technology, or traffic, or rainforests... Really, it's up to each student to decide what to convey with their piece. They need to fill in the blank (Earth, Bringer of _____) before starting to compose, so they have a clear intent in mind. Since this is a bit complex, it would help if students have some prior composition experience.

Instruments in Disguise (Hilary Goldblatt)

Communicate with students that Camille Saint-Saens had a lot of fun having many instruments in the orchestra play take on disguises. In his piece, *Carnival of the Animals*, each instrument has a chance to become an animal! Play parts of several movements from *Carnival of the Animals*, asking for volunteers to guess which animal is the instrument is disguised as. Begin the recording without telling the students the title of each movement! Educators can give clues, like, for example, if they are stumped about the Kangaroo, asked them to think outside the box and about other continents... And for the Fossils, they really must think outside the box to animals who lived long ago and are now bones. Discuss the ways that the composer uses the specific aspects of each instrument to express its most notable characteristics.

Cello= Swan- what makes this sound graceful and gliding?

Flute= Bird- how does the high-pitched range of the instrument give you a sense of the size of the animal?

Bass= Elephant- how does the tempo give you a clue to the disguise?

Low Strings=Roaring Lion from Introduction- how are scales helpful to create a roar/rumble? What other ways might you use sound to "roar?"

Piano= Kangaroo- how do the intervals or skips work to create the effect of hopping?

Violins and Piano=Fish in Aquarium - what special effects (harmonics) can you hear that create a sparkly or underwater sound?

Xylophone=Fossils- how does the timbre of each instrument influence the expression? Would this sound the same on another instrument? Why/why not?

When the listening is complete, invite students to each choose one instrument to give a different "costume" - can they successfully make the instrument sound like another animal? I might share with students that personally, as a flutist, it gets a bit boring to always have to be the bird... so many composers choose to make the flute play bird calls. Is anybody up for the challenge of writing a flute part that sounds like another animal?

Give the students some ideas of other "costumes" to give each instrument. What about some popular animals that Saint-Saens didn't write movements about... The sloth? The whale? The penguin? Ideally, students will write for their own instrument, since they are familiar with its range, techniques, etc.

Finding Music Vocabulary and Compositional Craft Through Listening (Dr. Cynthia Van Maanen)

Timing is 2-3 months for this learning to be grasped; During a single class, time needed is the length of the piece being listened to and the time it takes to discuss that piece.

Overview: By using some prompts and gradually stepping students into the use of musical vocabulary; you can have students not only moving beyond statements such as “I like it, it’s pretty” but also seeing and hearing in scores the physical things the composer is doing to create those sounds. Students begin to recognize that they can emulate these ideas and feel empowered. You can choose from either of either/both of thinking routines (from Harvard University’s “Project Zero”) with links here:

[CSI: Color, Symbol, Image](#)
[See, Think, Wonder](#)

1) Spend time walking students through listening and having them describe the music in the ways the routines suggest. I sometimes use these for a month or two before moving on—until I feel the students have gained a sense of confidence in talking about the music they hear.

2) Once that confidence in describing music with everyday language is gained, move into music vocabulary. Introduce ideas such as form, theme, texture, etc. Look at the same scores again, but now using the music vocabulary to describe what is observed and heard.

This will demystify craft and help students understand how compositions are put together by composers.

Putting the E- in Ensemble (Alex Shapiro)

If you're looking for a way to creatively engage music students in an online or hybrid format, below are the links to my "Putting the E- in E-nsemble" syllabus.

I created this course in mid-March 2020 at the invitation of University of Washington's Director of Bands Timothy Salzman. Tim and I discussed the need to keep his band and orchestra students playing their instruments, and the desire to keep them engaged with each other through an ongoing online collaboration— knowing full well that synchronous audio was not yet an option. We also talked about opening their minds to additional musical skills of composition, improvisation, and recording and engineering technology that they may had yet to experience. The result was an ever-expanding curriculum now used by over 100 schools around the U.S., that encourages students' personal creativity and makes them better musicians all around. When instrumentalists learn the inner workings of motivic development by organizing sound themselves, they will never again look at a score the same way, and will forever hold an affinity to the process, and structure that frames the repertoire they play.

Please find materials here through the NAFME link: https://www.alexshapiro.org/Shapiro-E-ensemble_Syllabus.html Username: Herewego Password: bereallycreative!

QuickWrites™ (K-12; Tertiary) (Dr. Lisa Crawford)



QuickWrites™

Building Musically Creative Composing Muscles

Objective: 15-30 minutes to compose, produce, and mix a (fifteen-seconds to one-minute) cue and then present to class before leaving. What I have found is the time process itself supports the thinking process for preparing for work writing cues in any aspect of the music industry.

Lesson Plan Title: **QuickWrites™**

Grade Level: K-16

Ensemble: All ensembles

Compositional context: Individual, Partnered, Small Group, Whole Class Collaborations

Materials: May be completed with online notation applications and DAWs or students may receive a physical sheet of music manuscript paper.

Overview: *QuickWrites* are :30 (thirty-second) pieces (or may be any defined length for each assignment) that must be completed in 30 minutes (or other defined time limit) and presented in class same day. Sometimes *QuickWrites* include video requirements wherein the music created is added to a video accessed online. One *QuickWrites* example is a :30 advertisement with spoken text by the composer and music that shares the composer's feelings about an experience.

Samples of Completed QuickWrites

Example Assignment: *Compose for a Holiday Celebration on Mars*

Your choice of celebration and in fact, you may invent one!

Instructions

Select an already available or student-created video, AI app, or a video representing when you went to Mars last year. You may create your own video with any AI application (Ex. <https://deepai.org/>) You may not create your music with AI.

Elements you *must* share before leaving class TODAY for the Jazz Party:

Length: Precisely 2:30

Voices: Trombone and French Horn; Anything else in addition

Atmosphere: Celebration rather than suspenseful (due to being on Mars).

Examples of completed pieces

(This QuickWrite is preparation for “the next project” writing for Trombone and French Horn.)

1. William: [William QuickWrites Example](#)

2. Lorenzo: [Lorenzo QuickWrites Example](#)

Philosophy Statements from NAFME Composition Council Members

Amy Lui (Western Division Representative)

How I came to teach composition, music technology and industry studies

Ever since I first blew into an alto saxophone in my 6th-grade beginning band class at the age of 10, I knew I wanted to become a music educator like my teacher, Mr. Anthony Espinoza. For the next 18 years, I pursued traditional, Euro-centric music education with tireless dedication. My career path seemed clear until the unexpected challenges of my first year of teaching during the 2019–2020 school year turned everything upside down. Like so many educators, I found myself navigating uncharted waters when we transitioned to distance learning in March 2020.

Up until that point, my focus had been solely on traditional ensembles and performance because that was all I knew. My knowledge of music technology and electronics was nonexistent. I vividly remember cupping my hands around my mouth and shouting announcements like, “THIS FIRST GROUP! IT’S SECOND PERIOD BEGINNING ORCHESTRA! SECOND. PERIOD. ORCHESTRA!” to the audience at my first winter concert because I did not know how to connect the auditorium microphone or what cables the speakers required. By the spring semester, I began to feel a restless tug—an inkling that there had to be more to music education than rehearsing for performances and preparing for the next concert.

Just before the pandemic hit, I developed a desire to expand my role beyond teaching performance skills. I longed to collaborate with teachers across disciplines and help students connect what they were learning in the arts to other subjects and the wider world. However, when we shifted to distance learning, the challenges became immense. Students stopped signing up for band and orchestra, and teaching instrumental music over unreliable internet connections felt almost impossible.

Then, in April 2020, my moment of reckoning arrived. My community school coordinator organized a virtual music career fair featuring industry professionals from live music, marketing, public relations, and more. The students came alive, asking question after question about songwriting, music production, and creating opportunities for themselves. To my astonishment, I discovered many of my students had been writing their own songs—something they had never shared with me before. I was bewildered and felt completely out of my depth. “What’s a producer? Is that like a DJ who sits down?” I remember wondering. “Send songs to an A&R? Is A&R the name of a company?” As my students demonstrated a fluency in modern music and industry terms that I did not share, I felt so ashamed. How could I, with both bachelor’s and master’s degrees in music, be so disconnected from the very world my students were passionate about? It was a humbling wake-up call that made me question not only my expertise as a musician but also my ability to truly connect with and serve my students.

After a period of self-doubt, I decided to hunker down and use this as an opportunity for growth. I enrolled in grad school to study music business and immersed myself in the modern music landscape. I built connections with local professionals who broadened my understanding of what music education can be—especially for students living in the entertainment capital of the world. What followed was a transformation—not just of myself but of the music program I was building. Today, my program goes far beyond traditional performance to incorporate technology, composition, and production while offering students insight into the music industry and its career

pathways. More importantly, it fosters meaningful connections across disciplines, empowering students to see how the arts intersect with other fields and their own lived experiences. It is a program rooted in collaboration, creativity, and the belief that music education should prepare students, especially those from historically underserved communities, to pursue and thrive in a global industry and beyond.

Unlocking opportunities in music technology and production

After speaking with numerous music educators new to teaching music technology and production and reading countless discussions in forums and social groups, it is clear many feel overwhelmed. This is often because we did not experience these types of classes in middle school, high school, or even college. Add to that the challenge of figuring out “what to teach next” and scrambling for lessons or tools, and it is easy to lose sight of a reliable planning strategy: *backward design*. By starting with the skills and learning outcomes we want students to achieve at a specific stage in their journey, we can create a more structured and meaningful curriculum.

Adopting a personal philosophical approach to modern music education can also provide clarity. For example, after exploring various definitions of “technology,” I have come to understand music technology as “*the application of knowledge in the field of music as it relates to life, society, and the environment.*” This perspective helped me see that it is not about having the most expensive tools or equipment—it is about access to enriching and relevant resources.

Peter Webster (2018) emphasizes this in his book *Experiencing Music Technology*, noting, “*The shift away from installed software on devices to online applications and the cloud for storage has opened entirely new ways to engage students. It becomes less about stuff you have to buy and more about the creative content.*” This shift levels the playing field, allowing educators to focus on creativity over gear.

Additionally, connecting with industry professionals who are eager to give back to the next generation of music creators can provide transformative opportunities. By building bridges between students and professionals, we can create collaborative, real-world experiences that extend far beyond the classroom. These partnerships not only inspire students but also help them see the tangible pathways into creative industries, fostering a stronger connection between education and their future.

Curriculum ideas driven by student needs assessment data

After teaching many students who have never enrolled in a music course before, I have identified several key gaps in knowledge that need to be addressed in my curriculum:

1. **Limited Ability to Identify Dissonance:** Many students struggle to recognize when sounds are dissonant or harmonically complex. This can often limit their ability to appreciate more advanced musical structures or compose music with emotional depth.
2. **Misconception of Music Notation:** Some students believe that music is written vertically, where each note is assigned individually to a separate instrument or track. As a result, they often create disjointed, unmelodic lines rather than structuring musical ideas into cohesive, flowing melodies that align harmonically. This misconception can hinder their ability to write or perform in a more complex, polyphonic style.

3. **Inhibitions and Self-Limitation:** A significant number of students limit themselves because of inhibitions, whether from a lack of confidence, fear of failure, or the pressure to conform to traditional methods. This prevents them from fully exploring their creativity, trying new techniques, or taking risks in their musical expression.

To address these gaps, the curriculum should focus on:

- **Ear Training and Active Listening:** Incorporating exercises that help students identify dissonance and consonance, enabling them to make more informed musical decisions.
- **Music Theory and Notation:** Teaching students how to write music that flows organically, connecting melodic lines and understanding how to create harmony through horizontal and vertical relationships between notes.
- **Encouraging Creative Confidence:** Creating an environment where students feel safe to experiment, make mistakes, and grow. Offering opportunities for collaborative projects can help foster a sense of community and allow students to take creative risks without fear of judgment.

By responding directly to these needs, we can create a curriculum that nurtures musical growth, enhances creativity, and builds confidence in students, especially those who are used to consuming music but are new to creating it.

Dr. Ryan Main (Southwestern Division Representative)

Anyone can be a composer. Anyone can be a songwriter. Anyone can be a creator. Creating music is, and should be, accessible to all. The skills required to create music are not innate gifts but teachable tools, with the right scaffolding and guidance. Every student has the potential to unlock their creative voice, given opportunities to explore, experiment, and express themselves.

Teaching composition begins with achievable, bite-sized goals that spark interest and build confidence. Students can start with short, focused exercises, such as writing 4 to 8 bars of music that need not be notated or composing collaboratively with peers. These approaches reduce the intimidation of the blank page and provide manageable steps toward larger projects. For example, encouraging students to harmonize a pre-written melody allows them to focus on developing harmony skills, while collaborative songwriting fosters teamwork and shared creativity, which can be especially engaging for students who thrive in group settings.

The skills of composition can be taught incrementally: melody writing, harmony, rhythm layering, form, foundational theory, ear training, and expressive elements. These can be tailored to students' age and experience, incorporating diverse musical styles such as classical, pop, jazz, or EDM. Teachers can also introduce students to creative tools like software to engage students in contemporary approaches to creating music. By scaffolding these skills, educators empower students to explore and develop their unique musical voices while learning critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration skills with far-reaching applications beyond the music classroom.

Mentors and role models play a vital role in inspiring students. Sharing examples of composers and songwriters from diverse backgrounds and skill levels reinforces the idea that creating music is for everyone. By seeing themselves reflected in the stories and successes of others, students gain the confidence to try, fail, and ultimately succeed. Through creating, students not only gain a means of self-expression but also grow in confidence and resilience, preparing them to navigate challenges both in and out of the musical world.

Dr. Mara Gibson (Southern Division Representative)

My teaching encompasses a variety of musical skills, including composition, performance, theory and history. As a composer, I believe that without the merger of all these media, the language of music is unbalanced and can potentially sway toward the overly intellectual or creatively unchallenged. Some curricula separate these elements; however, as musicians, we draw on these various musical experiences in tandem, recognizing how each subject reinforces the others.

To prepare students for what is required of musicians and critical thinkers, I provide students with tools to think about these seemingly separate aspects of music simultaneously. In addition to following the more traditional music curriculum where the student takes theory and ear training, history, piano, and their primary instrument and/or specialty, I synthesize these “independent” subjects into each class or lesson by taking various slants using each musical skill depending on what the student needs.

By actively practicing what I encourage my students to do, students discover a fundamental skill for music and scholarship: how to learn through doing. Teaching students how to ask questions and find solutions is more valuable than teaching textbook facts. In creative fields, the answer is most always found in the question. If a sincere answer is to be discovered, the student can be the only one to ask the question. I help promote asking questions by explaining to students why I give them certain assignments, by discussing solutions I have found and by encouraging students to work and communicate together. Teaching demands dedication similar to that of writing music and playing an instrument. I believe that a balance between being a musician and a teacher strengthens knowledge and encourages inquiry on behalf of both student and the teacher. The most successful atmosphere for the student and teacher exists when both parties are thinking, creating and being stimulated by one another’s ideas and artistic solutions.

My job as a teacher is to structure learning experiences that challenge students to pursue wisdom, growth in judgement and the ability to discern their musical choices. I aim to inspire in students a sense of purpose; I aim to stimulate them to work hard and make critical appraisals of themselves, their peers and the community around them. Students have an undeniable right of empowerment, and my job is to facilitate their development into aware, thoughtful, and principled musicians who take charge. I tell my students, “I am here to help you achieve your goal of becoming an effective and creative composer. I will guide you, but you assume personal responsibility for the quality of your experiences.” Excitement about learning must be generated by creating a nurturing environment in which students have trepidation, thrill and the satisfaction of thinking and acting by themselves.

A few principles I find help me to be a better teacher and artist include:

Directly engage and challenge the student, treating them as a valued colleague and an active participant rather than a member of an audience. The student receives by giving. The teacher gives by asking, encouraging, and exhorting. The same goes for composing music.

Give learners something memorable on which to hang the most important point. I liberally employ vivid examples and humorous stories from my collage of musical experiences to help them retain their ideas. Likewise, I draw upon experiences that other composers have shared through not only listening but reading and interviewing. We also deeply analyze and critique craft which includes a variety of techniques actively and passively.

It is learning, not teaching, that matters. The best teaching is transformational: it affords a surprising “Aha!” to the student that makes a lasting difference. Such teaching transforms the teacher as well. The aspect I find most rewarding is observing and participating in human and musical development.