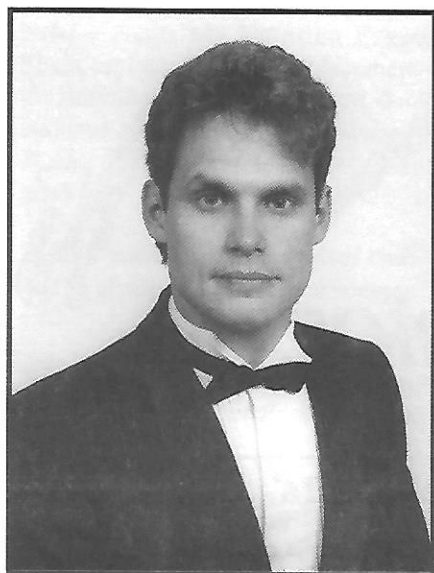


The How and Why of Teaching Student Composition

by Anthony Susi



I'm a director of a large ensemble. WHY should I teach composition to my students?

As music educators we all know that the process is always as important as the final products. Though it is unlikely that one of your student's compositions will win a Grammy, it is not unlikely that through the process of composing, all your students will gain an increased un-

derstanding and awareness of the elements of music. By actively experimenting with creating their own melodies, concepts such as time signatures, key signatures, note/rest values, phrasing, harmony and form become more significant to them and are reinforced. The students' creativity and problem solving ability will also be enhanced through the compositional process.

We only rehearse 2 or 3 times a week. HOW am I going to find time?

This is a situation many of us are faced with. After researching several articles and books on the subject, I designed a series of seven worksheets that focus on one component of music at a time. Each page contains four or five exercises that give students the opportunity to successfully create original music, but in small durations (four to nine measures in length). Each exercise introduces students to a specific compositional skill used to create phrases that can be developed into larger pieces. They are sequential in relating new knowledge to existing knowledge presented in previous exercises. A complete set of these worksheets, available for C, Bb, Eb, F & Bass Clef instruments, can be obtained through the CMEA publications editor (see end of this article for details)

WHERE and WHEN do I start formally teaching composition?


Music must be taught like any other language. We learn to speak before we learn to read and write. It is important to lay the foundation for compositions through improvisation. Because we learned to

speak through imitation, it is sensible to do the same in the beginning stages of improvisation. Have the students echo simple three note phrases with solfege and then try playing on their instrument what they sang. Also challenge them to mirror rhythm patterns and then translate them orally to rhythm syllables, eventually moving to pencil and paper dictation. Allow students to become the leaders for the echo exercises. I found the sequence and materials in the teacher's guide to "Jump Right In" to be very helpful. With enough repetition, these melodic and rhythmic patterns become ingrained in their ears, minds and fingers which they will ultimately include in their improvisation.

Initiate improvisation using a scale they know by memory; for band this would most likely be concert Bb Major. The accompanying progression can be a two measure (I - ii/V) or four measure (I - iii7 - ii7 - V) vamp. These fool-proof chord qualities allow a novice to create spontaneous melodies using only one major scale throughout. Next I suggest introducing the blues scale and other major and minor pentatonic scales because any of them, unchanged, can be used in a broad range of interrelated chords. I prepared a sheet of **Blues Riffs**, all within a one octave range, which can essentially be repeated in any order over the changing harmony of a standard blues chorus. These riffs aid the students in designing their own blues phrases, developing a vocabulary for future spontaneous retrieval.

All the above ear training, dictation and improvisation exercises can be incorpo-

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rated in your regular rehearsal warm-ups and used as occasional full class lessons. There are many other group activities designed to enhance student creativity through experimentation with sounds before moving on to formal composition. However, due to limited space and time, I will have to share these with you in a future article.

Before we learned to spell and add we practiced drawing numbers and the letters of the alphabet. So to with music, students should learn how to draw the necessary symbols before attempting to write a piece. My **Notation Practice Sheet** explains the correct placement on the staff of clefs, time signatures, double bar lines, note heads & accidentals, stem & flag direction as well as articulation markings.

WHAT composition exercises can young students experience success with?

The first concept to establish is knowing what the tonal center or "homebase"

of a melody is so the students will know how to end, or "cadence" their musical themes. 1. **Homebase/Cadence:** I composed the first four measures of a theme and the students are given two possible endings to choose from, one ends on "do" and the other doesn't. We discuss why the majority of every class prefers the ending with "do".

The easiest form of improvisation and composition involves writing a variation of a common tune. 2. **Theme & Variation:** Students are given the theme to "Twinkle, Twinkle" and then asked to compose a variation by changing only the rhythm of the tune to create more interest.

Before trying to create an entire tune, it's often easier for beginners to finish a song that has already been started for them. 3. **Complete the Tune:** The students are asked to create the missing second and fourth phrases of an eight measure song, using only the six note range given in the pre-composed first and third phrases. This exercise helps to reinforce the con-

cept of returning to "homebase" that was introduced in exercise #1.

Developing a song involves altering an idea produced through exploration; some aspect of the original idea (such as the rhythm) remains the same while another part (the melody) is changed. Limiting the number of melodic choices for young composers reduces the exploration time necessary to develop a tonal pattern. This is the basis for 4. **Create a Melody:** by using the rhythm outlined under each measure and 5. **Compose a Song:** using the pitches outlined under each measure. Another approach to this concept is to ask each student to write a two measure rhythm pattern (provide restrictions) and then give it to another student who will create a melody using a set of designated pitches. These melodic patterns can then be linked together to form an extended melody. Ask your drummers to write a percussive accompaniment.

Composers need to consider the overall direction and relaxation of each musical line. This is the premise behind 6. A

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Shaped Song: Students are asked to write a melody that sounds like the example looks (curved lines appear above the staff indicating the shape).

Listening to and performing instrumental music of various styles is essential to expanding their creativity. I like to play the class samples from my own CD without revealing the title of the song. Because there are no lyrics, students have to really analyze what the music is trying to portray and come up with their own title. Through discussing what elements in the music led them to their conclusion, students generate ideas for their own compositions. **7. A Kangaroo's Tune:** Given a set of pitches, students are asked to write a melody that suggests the characteristics of a kangaroo.

8. Progression for Rhythmic Improvisation: Students are asked to create some rhythmic interest for a stagnant melody made up of all whole notes. A bass line accompaniment for the rest of the band to play is provided. Students can further enjoy manipulating rhythm by trying to match the rhythmic style of a drum machine with this exercise.

Harmony concepts are presented by teaching three basic chord structures: I, IV & V7. For **10. Harmonic Progression:** students are provided with an eight measure chord sequence and are asked to create a melody following the format of chord tones given. In much the same way, **9. Composing a Round:** asks students to compose three different three measure phrases using the chord tones outlined below each measure.

11. Meter Variation: Another approach to composing a variation can involve giving the students a simple tune in 3/4 time and asking them to rewrite it in 4/4 time.

Learning how to create sequences is another important compositional technique. The ability to transpose a melodic pattern through a key diatonically is a useful improvisational skill as well. **12. Repeating Rhythmic Patterns:** This exercise has four phrases. Students are asked to compose a second phrase using the same rhythm as in the first pre-written

tonal pattern. The last phrase is also supposed to be created using the same rhythm as the tonal pattern given in the third phrase. **14. Motif & Sequencing:** Students are asked to develop a 2 measure melodic pattern (motif) into an 8-measure melody by repeating the motif three more times, always starting on a different pitch within a specified Major scale.

13. A "Minor" Adjustment: To experience the changing mood of the minor mode, students are asked to rewrite the major mode song they created for exercise 12, lowering the third and sixth scale tones a half step.

15: Melodic Improvisation: This activity expands on the manipulation of rhythm experienced in exercise #8. Two chord tones are given in each measure of the solo line and an accompanying bass line is provided for the band. Give the students time to explore a variety of tonal patterns based on these pitches so they can select the patterns they believe would form the best melody.

Once the students understand how melodies are derived from chord tones and how chords can accompany a melody, they are ready to use passing tones **16. Passing Tones:** General guidelines for using passing tones are given for students to write a melody derived from a simple harmonic progression which also includes the "ii" chord.

17. A Tune for Two: This exercise introduces two new concepts, countermelody and form. Students are asked to compose a tune in AABA form incorporating repeat signs and D.C. al fine. After completing this task they are asked to create a rhythmic and harmonic accompaniment avoiding repetition of the same chord tones as the melody in each measure.

18. Style Expression: Given a tune, students are asked to enhance the melody by adding articulation and dynamic marks.

19. Rhythm of the Words: A prerequisite to writing lyrics should involve some

analysis of poetry. Using familiar rhymes students are asked to find the meter and rhythm of the words. Once it has been established, students are asked to set the poem to music, staying within the given pitch boundaries.

I hope you will find these exercises to be an effective way for your students to learn how the elements of music interact to create expressive results. As mentioned earlier, if you would like to receive a copy of these composition worksheets, you can request them through Laura Lovich, CMEA publications editor at (860) 676 - 0429.

Resources

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