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### HARMONIZING THE WRITING PROCESS WITH MUSIC TRAINING TECHNIQUES

[Nancy Riecken](#)

Dorothy Sayers said, "Students must be taught to think." That's an important goal in the composition classroom. How can I get through to students, however, when their ears contain tiny headphones that are connected to hidden iPods? Their music seems to have much greater charms to soothe them than do my lesson objectives.

Music's charms are often taken for granted. The popular Mozart Effect, coined by Rauscher, Shaw and Ky in 1993, has been incorporated in many academic settings to help improve student comprehension and raise spatial-temporal reasoning scores in standard tests. Can music help students become better thinkers and writers? Over the past three years I have incorporated some basic music training techniques in my classrooms to help me teach the writing process to students who would otherwise click me off. The students have developed clearer thinking and organizational skills and have increased their collaborative and communication abilities as a result. This article first briefly overviews basic research and then offers practical advice for incorporating musical training exercises in the English composition classroom.

A wealth of recent research evaluates not only the effects of music listening on left brain-right brain learning transfers, or spatial-temporal reasoning (see Bower; Campbell; Grandin, Peterson, and Shaw; Habermeyer; Perret and Fox; Rauscher, Shaw and Ky; Young), but also the role of music education in communication processes (see Feller and Gibbs-Griffith; Gruber and Harman; Kumuyi; Suzuki). Musical training, these researchers have found, affects listening, communication, reasoning, and decision-making skills at all levels.

Rauscher, Shaw, and Ky's early studies on the Mozart effect sparked a controversy that has since led researchers both to confirm and deny music's effect on learning at various age levels (Bower; Crncec, Wilson, and Prior; Jones, West, and Estell). Some educators have found that, by introducing a variety of music activities into the classroom, student morale, discipline, and academic achievement is improved (Grandin, Peterson, and Shaw; Feller and Gibbs-Griffith; Young).

Research with a range of students, from elementary to college, does indicate that students of any age who participate in music activities demonstrate stronger communicative and reasoning skills than those who do not. Students who have some form of music training tend to work more effectively in groups and are able to process multiple tasks more efficiently and more effectively than students who have had no music training. This is true whether students have been exposed to formal or informal training over a short period of time or several years, and at varying ages (Feller and Gibbs-Griffith; Gruber and Harman; Suzuki).

In order to do some practical research for the sake of improving my own teaching techniques, I have asked my students to describe their own background in music. Students with hands-on musical experience (playing an instrument, singing in a chorus, or reading music) have consistently demonstrated better listening, communication, and reasoning skills than students whose experience with music is limited only to listening to any form at all, thus confirming in my classrooms the above-cited research. For these students, the experience is both aural and physical. Multiple skills are developed and used at once. Students who can think through a musical score can transfer their skills to the writing process.

Most composition classrooms cover the ground rules of standard sentence structure, the order of composition according to genre, and the collaborative methods employed for effective communication to take place. Music educators parallel this structure when they teach scales, theory, and orchestration techniques. By combining oral and written exercises in my classrooms, I make use of several music training techniques. After all, each of my students has a quality of tone that needs fine tuning and encouragement. Each responds differently to every prompt, and by first sharing those prompts aloud, they tune up to the unique responses of their classmates. They hear alternate ways of expression. Every voice adds to the process; every expression helps the group reach a point of tonal tension that will enable them to perform more effectively.

YouTube presentations, such as the current "[How to Prepare for the Recording Studio: Rehearsing for Music Recording](#)," "[You are the Music in Me Rehearsal Behind the Scenes](#)," "[Sweet Jam Session with Trey Anastasio and Warren Haynes](#)," "[Cuban Music Jam Session](#)," and "[ZVD Peanut Butter Jam Sessions](#)," provide practical examples of working together. My students see the connection between music performance and their own writing environment. Formal performance is preceded by hours of intensive practice. Students connect the process of making music to the process of writing an essay. They connect the performers' needs for collaboration and revision in order to succeed to their own similar needs, from brainstorming through final editing and submission. They see that successful writers practice, revise, and work through the process in a manner much like the musicians in a band or orchestra. Performers sing in the same key and they use the same patterns of rhythm; they begin and end together, and the result is an

enjoyable musical performance.

Collaboration invites variety and creativity. Just as a musician interprets a score by portraying particular tone and tension of notes, and his breadth and style and performance quality are unique to him, specific assignments result in a unique document from each student. A score may be set down by a master, but the musician brings his own interpretation to it. I help my students connect this to their own writing by using the assignment sheet as the musical score. They collaborate in class in order to interpret that score in a manner that displays their unique ability. I preface the first collaborative jam session with an exercise that introduces rhythm.

Tap out eight regular beats on the table in front of you. Have two students join in, and tell them to keep that regular series of beats. Vary the beat with two more students, and then vary it again with two more. Soon you will have eight regular beats underlying two sets of variations. You can make this quite impressive if you have a song in mind ahead of time. Provide the beat variations and then casually start humming the tune. Whether it's "Louie, Louie" "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down," or something a little more impressive (try Rossini's "Finale to the William Tell Overture" or Pachelbel's "Canon in D"), you will impress your students with the idea that, while regular fixed beats can be played at precise intervals, variations can make the hearing of those beats more pleasant to the ear. Their own variations of beats are linked to the variations they can make to their own writing assignments.

Why do this? Because music has a pattern, and music is something most students can identify with on some level. If they understand that a good piece of music follows a regular pattern of key signature, rhythm, and either verse/refrain or instrumental movements, they can understand that a good piece of writing also requires a regular pattern in order to communicate effectively. Within the framework, however, there is plenty of room for variation. An essay needs an introduction to invite the reader into the topic, and it needs a conclusion in order to bring closure to the argument. Between the introduction and the conclusion is a body of clear points with appropriate details that move the reader through the communicative process in a manner that makes sense and shows connection. Students who learn the basics are able to collaboratively develop clearer essays. This requires creative thinking on our part in order to produce it in the minds of our students.

Students are more open to creative writing prompts once you've introduced them to the concept of creativity with regard to music. I also remind my students that their "unique ability" is one that requires practice. Good students show up on time for class and engage with fellow learners, just like any good musician needs to make the practice session work before playing the gig.

We also build "scale" strength through practicing a variety of writing forms. Students become open to new activities and new stretching exercises when they see them as opportunities to grow rather than potential measures of failure. Shiniko Suzuki, founder of the Suzuki violin method, often pointed out that "Practice makes permanent" (32). Like practicing scales, writing strengthens students' abilities to listen to instructions (hear the correct "tone), read instructions (follow the music score), and follow through with clear answers (perform musically). Zofi and Meltzer, writing about the varied needs for communication among age groups, point out that "good listeners engage in active listening, which means that they consciously strive to hear the message and encourage two-way communication based on it" (70). I connect musical forms to various essay constructions, such as the cause and effect essay, the comparison contrast essay, etc.

Many students struggle with basic sentence structure, subject/verb agreement, and noun/pronoun use. This difficulty can also be overcome by showing a clear connection between music and language. One of the most unusual and most successful activities in my classroom is transposing chords, which is associated directly with pure music theory.

I explain chord transposition by telling my students to hold up a hand and count off, starting with the thumb as #1, then 2, 3, 4, and make the little finger #5. The thumb is strong, so it's the major chord of C. Say the alphabet from C across the fingers to the 4th finger (C, D, E, F). F is the second chord in the key of C. Next to F is G, on the little finger. That little finger needs help, so we call it a G7. That's the third chord in the key of C, so the key of C is made up of C, F, and G7. Remember that the thumb represents the major chord, the fourth finger represents the next chord in the key, and the little finger represents the last chord. You can find the three chords for any key by just counting on your fingers. This is transposition. We transpose to A (A, b, c, D and E7), then G (G, a, b, C, and D7). Students find this pretty exciting. I use this exercise to demonstrate that sentences must have subject/verb agreement, or that nouns and pronouns must agree. While such grammar review seems elementary, many adults have forgotten simple concepts that can be easily taught by making connections.

During the semester, when they're struggling with some writing concept, I teach them how chords are formed and how to transpose to minor keys. They memorize the order of sharps and flats. My main objective is to help everyone learn how to be better writers. The order and logic of basic music theory is connected to the order and logic of clear and complete sentence structure. We transfer our discussions of music's order, rhythm, and progression to essay formatting and construction. By recognizing orderly processes in one creative form they are able to see the sense of the argument claim, support, and warrant. They are better able to use authoritative sources to support their claims. All we're doing is making logical connections between one area of knowledge and another.

A good essay, like music, really is another form of creative expression, but we should beware of using music theory and music scale techniques if our purpose is only to get students to write. Excellent writing, like excellent music, works a change in its audience. We see the look on their faces when they "get it," when we praise them for a well-turned sentence, or when their effort results in a successful essay. When this happens they have taken a great step toward thinking for themselves.

One music educator has argued "I believe we should be advocating music education because it teaches things about being human that we cannot learn from any other subject...let's not forget that we teach music first and foremost for music's sake—for its beauty and power" (Stewart 10). Don't we want our students to appreciate the beauty and power of the written word in a similar way? Following is one interpretation of the education process. I suggest that you insert "literature" or "writing" in the place of music:

This is why we teach music. Not because we expect you to major in music. Not because we expect you to play or sing all your life. Not so you can relax. Not so you can have fun. But so you will be human; so you will recognize beauty; so you will be sensitive; so you will be closer to an infinite beyond this world; so you will have something to cling to; so you will have more love, more compassion, more gentleness, more good, in short, more life. Of what value will it be to make a prosperous living unless you know how to live? That is why we teach music! (McNeal n.p.)

Music tension keeps instruments in correct pitch. Effective writing is best appreciated when its elements are under a

similar tension. Both employ techniques of theory, exercise, revision, and performance. Both require the development of an "ear" through collaboration, where members explore new ideas and play them off of each other, working together to build a synchronic whole. This "handling of tension" makes beautiful music in the composition classroom.

You and I are not music instructors. However, we can employ many of the same methods of the music classroom in our English composition classroom, and we can expect the same good results: 1) clearer thinking and organizational skills through directly focusing on particular standard processes and the rules inherent in the outworking of those processes; 2) confidence combined with ability to communicate more effectively through text analysis that can be directly compared to analysis of musical theory; and 3) interest in collaborating on projects that lead to better writing skills both individually and as a group through correlating group writing activities with orchestral participation. Getting students to clearly think for themselves is a major problem on college campuses today, but we can begin to solve that problem by including musical reasoning skills into our writing processes.

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**Nancy Riecken** is Assistant Professor of English and Assistant Program Chair of English (Division of Liberal Arts and Sciences) at Ivy Tech Community College's Region One Campus in Gary, Indiana. This paper was presented in part at the CEA National Conference in St. Louis in April 2008.

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