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A Principled Approach to Teaching Music Composition to Children

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Abstract

Building on an apposition of the theories of neurobiologist Antonio Damasio and music theorist Heinrich Schenker, we posit a new model for developing composition instruction based upon the organic connections between humans and music. Parallels are drawn between Damasio's theory of consciousness in which meaning arises from the relationships between body, emotion, and feeling; and Schenker's theory of musical structure in which opportunities for meaning making are revealed between the ursatz (background), mittelgrund (middleground), and vordergrund (foreground) layers of a musical work. The resulting principles-based approach to instruction reprioritizes the roles of elements and compositional techniques to foster greater expressivity in children's compositions.

Angelina swings her teddy bear through the air singing a little tune "teddy bear, teddy bear, flying way up, up, up." She continues to play wrapping her bear in a fluffy blanket and stuffing it into a small toy swing. She sings her melody again with some small changes, "teddy bear, teddy bear, swing up high, fly up high." Angelina is three.

Carlos races through the yard waving a spaceship through the air. His spaceship is of his own creation, built with small plastic blocks. He stops to explain how it transforms from spaceship to underwater ship to car and then returns to his play. As his ship transforms he makes a variety of mechanical sound effects and then a traditional blasting off sound. As he continues to play he hums and sings interchangeably making a soundtrack for his play full of characteristically heroic motives. Carlos is five.

Third graders Susanna, Ariuaj and Chang enter the front of the classroom carrying metallophones, maracas, triangles and hand drums. As his partners set up the instruments, Ariuaj turns to the audience of classmates, parents and siblings to offer a brief introduction for the piece entitled, "Rainy Saturday." Ariuaj then rejoins Susanna and Chang to perform their composition paralleling the onset, tempest, and conclusion of a southwestern rainstorm. Appreciative applause follows and the third graders grin their satisfaction. Susanna, Ariuaj and Chang are eight.

Micah sits in the school computer lab in front of a screen exhibiting a sequencing program. He is clicking on the mouse and dragging sound samples onto a grid. After a few minutes of work, he plays his piece. A Jamaican-inspired drum line underpins the piece with guitar swirling above. Micah pauses, cuts the guitar lick in half, merges it with a short piano motive and plays the entire piece again. Micah then opens another program that reveals a short movie that he has filmed and edited himself. He drops the music onto the film and waits as the computer processes the information. After a few moments, he plays his movie and soundtrack nodding his satisfaction. Micah is 11.

Denim and sequin clad Larkin plops down on a furry hot pink butterfly chair in her room.

She plugs in her electric guitar, adjusts a few dials and begins to strum. She sings a quietly reflective song of heartbreak. After singing through the refrain, Larkin pauses to scribble some words in a notebook of her own poetry. Each page is covered with arrows, scribbled out text, chord symbols and other notations. Larkin glances again at the flyer announcing the school district's "Songwriter's Contest" and the concert night for winning songs. She adds a few words to her notebook page and starts searching for a verse. Larkin is 16.

These vignettes reveal only a small portion of the rich landscape that can be the musical life of children who compose. We see through their work that the act of assembling sounds meaningfully is both a natural and desirable activity for children. But what is it about the act of composing music that is so desirable and even necessary for human beings? And how does it contribute to comprehensive musicianship?

We regularly engage in three dimensions of musicality—creation, performance and reception—but the creation aspect that is so easily observed in children's daily activities is often overlooked in educational settings. Yet, it is in the act of creating, or making something completely new and original to ourselves, that we evidence our capacity to shape, manipulate, and reveal our musical understandings. In order to fully explore why we are drawn to music—and specifically to the creation of music—we must consider what music composition is, why we seek to create music, and who can be a composer. It is the answers to these questions that will reveal why music composition is an artistic engagement worthy of time, study and financial support within our school music programs.

What is composition?

The Encarta World English Dictionary (1999) offers these definitions, among others, of composition: 1. the way in which something is made, especially in terms of its different parts; 2. the way in which the parts of something are arranged; 3. the act or process of combining things to form a whole, or of creating something such as a piece of music or writing; 4. something created as a work of art, especially a piece of music. From these definitions it is clear that composing is always about a process of combining that leads to some sort of product. Indeed, much of the research on composing has focused on the products children create and the processes they use to create them (Barrett, 2003; Burnhard, 2000; Burnhard & Younker, 2004; Campbell, 1995; Daignault, 1996; Davies, 1992; DeLorenzo, 1989; Hickey 1995; Kaschub, 1999; Kratus, 1989; Marsh, 1995; Savage, 2003; Wiggins, 1994 and 1998; Wilson & Wales, 1995; Younker, 2000).

Outside of the realm of children's compositions, musical products are often viewed in terms of the roles that they fill in human life. Some compositions are considered purely works of musical art and are displayed through performances in venues suitable to their individual natures. These works are comparable to the music created and being created by Susanna, Ariuaj, Chang and Larkin. Other musical artworks are created and used to support private, public, religious, political or other ceremonies such as the songs created by Angelina, Carlos and Micah. Each type of musical work, regardless of its eventual use or original intent, may live within a variety of cultural contexts. Though we give different names to musical products (symphony, song, chart, chant, jingle, blues, raga, fado, capeira, rembetika etc.), the processes used "to construct a sequence of intrinsically meaningful sounds" (Reimer, 2003, p. 221) have some surprisingly similar characteristics: the composer decides what and when to create; the composer works to select and combine sound materials meaningfully; and finally, the composer decides when a composition is complete. Though the finer details of this process may differ significantly from composer to composer, or even product to product, the essential nature of creating a musical work remains the same. But what is it about the act of composition that is so

compelling to humans? And how do composed sounds become meaningful to others?

Why do human beings compose music?

The fields of philosophy and sociology continue to thoroughly examine the relationship between humans and music. (See, for example, Reimer, 2003; Bowman, 1998; Jorgansen, 1997; Elliott, 1995; and Martin, 1997; Small, 1977; Blacking, 1973.) Only recently, however, have neurobiologists been able to uncover physical evidence that supports some of the earlier theories that draw connections between the mind and the body (Langer, 1951; Meyer, 1956). Evidence emerging from studies in neuroscience suggests that closer attention to the interactions of mind and body illuminate the human need to create, and by extension, our need to create music. These findings, together with theories of how music is constructed, yield an increasingly detailed picture of the relationship between people and music. Moreover, how people physically and emotionally experience music is becoming ever more clear.

Perhaps the most widely recognized recent thinking on the relationship between mind and body is found in the work of neurobiologist Antonio Damasio. Beginning in Descarte's Error (1994) and continuing in The Feeling of What Happens (1999), Damasio brings to fruition a biologically based theory of consciousness built upon the connections between a person, an event, a bodily-based emotional response, and a feeling that invites consciousness. Introducing his theory with an explanation of the body as a fixed entity, Damasio (1994) suggests that human bodies all possess a set of basic operations including everything related to biological homeostasis. These fundamental operations serve as a baseline against which all other events or changes are measured. Damasio suggests that when any change occurs, it is noticed because it is out-of-synch with the fundamental operations of the body.

In Damasio's theory, emotion is defined as some disturbance of the status quo of the bodily state (Damasio, 1994, p. 131). Emotion is literally something moving, changed, or altered, and thus noticed against the unchanging background of the body. The cognitive recognition of an emotion, of a change in the fixed conception of the bodily state, is feeling (Damasio, 1994, p. 145). Damasio explains, "That process of continuous monitoring, that experience of what your body is doing while thoughts about specific contents roll by, is the essence of what I call a feeling...In other words, a feeling depends on the juxtaposition of an image of the body proper to an image of something else, such as the visual image of a face or the auditory image of a melody." (Damasio, 1994, p.145). Consciousness, then, arises from a disturbance of a bodily state and the brain's recognition and labeling of that disturbance.

Does music, too, have fixed entities that yield emotion and the awareness of experience that we call consciousness? What if our experiences with music allow us to engage with what music quite literally embodies, that which disturbs our bodily state? Music, then, would be a humanly created sound-based entity paralleling the biological mechanisms of humans' bodily-consciousness. Music could allow us to safely examine the brinks of experience. As an entity paralleling human biological mechanisms, music could afford us the opportunity to explore the unfamiliar, unattainable, and the uncomfortable as directly as possible—but at a bodily-safe distance. From this vantage point, experiences of music would yield a type of knowing exemplifying the foundational processes of consciousness. If such experiences are possible, then the identification of music's component parts and an explanation of how their functions correspond to the mechanisms of human thought should also be possible. To do this, we turn to the work of music theorist Henrick Schenker (1868-1935).

Schenker's work is of interest in this context because he began the thirty-year evolution of

his system of tonal analysis by considering how people listen to music. Although Schenker asked this question as a music theorist, it is the same question considered by countless composers as they have contemplated what their audiences would hear, feel, notice, or react to as they engaged with composer's music. From Schenker's observations of music listening, he theorized that music was constructed of three layers that unfold simultaneously. These layers are termed the ursatz (background), the mittelgrund (middleground), and the vordergrund (foreground) (Schenker, 1935/1979) and they seem to directly parallel areas of Damasio's theory.

Schenker's listening layers constitute a music-based example of the relationship between feelingful experience and conscious awareness. First, like Damasio, Schenker identifies a constant with a predictable nature, to serve as a "fixed entity" against which changes can be detected. Damasio posits this "fixed entity" as the root of all perception in that there must be a juxtaposition of information in order to detect change. Musically speaking, composers want listeners to be able to hear changes in a composition. To achieve this end, composers must establish a context, a fixed entity, a background, or employ a unifying element of some type that listeners can use as an anchoring constant for their listening experience. Without this "background" listeners are lost.

Schenker and Damasio also seem to concur that an awareness of new information or change results in some type of action. The ability to make connections between background and foreground is the action that Schenker labels the middleground. Similarly, Damasio identifies this middle step as the emotive layer that connects the experiences of the body to consciousness - what underlies is connected to those things of which we are most readily aware. In the case of music listening and composition, new information or change constitutes variety. They serve to make music more interesting. Composers use change to invite our curiosity and shape our listening experiences. As listeners we try to predict upcoming events in relation to what we have already experienced. Changes support or refute those predictions. In both instances, the middle ground provides access to information that shapes our experiences.

Schenker places melody and surface features as the foremost layer of his listening based theory. Musical items that quickly draw our attention and which are memorable reside here. Similarly, Damasio places consciousness here and indicates that meaning is found in the "feeling" of what happens as we notice changes in the body. In both theories, meaning is being drawn from that which arises as we uncover the relationships (background to change), or juxtapositions between the layers of experience.

Just as Damasio worked with the tools of neurobiology to understand the workings of the brain, Schenker used the tools he best understood – those of musical analysis – to discover how people interact with music as listeners. These two approaches subsequently provided some insights to the strategies used by composers. Indeed, Lehrer (2007) has noted that artists constitute a specialized branch of neuroscientists. He suggests that artists can often be credited with discovering the activities of the brain well in advance of the technologies necessary to evidence their theories. In this case, Schenker's fascination with listening and its relation to musical structures eventually led to the discovery that composers unknowingly create music which both matches and facilitates the complex pathways between mind and body.

Framing connections and discovering principles

Comparison of the theories of Schenker and Damasio allow us to see that the phenomenological approach addressing how we experience music greatly anticipated what we now know factually from cognitive science and neurobiology. The mind requires a fixed entity against which to make comparisons and determinations. Exactly what serves as the

"fixed entity" in music is reflective of the nature of each piece of music itself. As Leonard Meyer (1956) suggested in his writings on expectation and fulfillment, meaning in music is expressed in the relationship between stability and instability. These relationships may be best understood within culturally defined musical parameters (Seeger, 2002). This is why we can usually recognize music from any culture as MUSIC, but may have difficulty in deriving meaning from unfamiliar musics.

The concept of stability as characterized in Schenker's work with music parallels Damasio's work emphasizing stability within the body. As humans encounter music, they employ monitoring patterns that echo how the workings of the human body are observed. Stability exists as a point of measurement against which all other changes, be they in music or in the body, can be determined. Within music, stability has taken many guises. In some musics it is a tonal center or the formal structure. In other musics it is a rhythm or a defined length of open silence. Similarities between human beings and music allow music to serve as a portal to understanding the self both at the level of biology and the level of consciousness.

The explanations of human consciousness and music's internal milieu are each predicated on human experience and require juxtapositions between at least two entities. It is in these juxtapositions that we find what it is about music that appeals to humans: a set of qualities that can be used to discover meaning in our felt experiences. The critical meaning holders of music are its principle components, not its individual elements. Music educators traditionally have identified the elements of music as units of time (form, meter, rhythm, tempo), pitch (tonality, melody, harmony, range) and expression (dynamics, texture, articulation, timbre). However, the mere absence or presence of any of these elements is insufficient to give rise to feeling in and of itself. Rather, significance is found in how the elements of sound are crafted to reveal principle relationships. The balance between stability and instability, sound and silence, unity and variety, tension and release, and motion and stasis forms the foundation for music's expressive power. These principles are the starting point for an alternative view of teaching composition.

Principles of compositional praxis

The first principle of compositional praxis is that of stability and instability. This is perhaps the overriding concept in all of musical composition. Children often prefer a great deal of stability in their music. Young composers' first compositions usually draw on familiar music before they begin to extend and change what they know to create something new. Angela, from the first vignette, is composing her tune using familiar words and rhythms. The repetition is predictable, and therefore stable. Composition activities in schools can encourage instability by expanding the definition of what music is within the cultural context familiar to the children. Helping young composers expand their definitions of what music is and can be encourages growth. Work by R. Murray Schaefer (1967) in the mid-twentieth century provided suggestions for using non-traditional sound sources in creative ways. Working with familiar materials in unfamiliar ways is one way of creating musical instability and inviting children to expand their personal definitions of music.

Conversely, more experienced composers often strive to create new forms of instability. For example, John Cage explored instability by calling the nature of silence in music into question. By offering audiences the piece 4'33" with no prescribed sound—just the framework of a span of time—Cage challenged listeners to discover that true silence was difficult, or perhaps even impossible, to achieve. In the discovery that total silence would offer no detectable changes to be perceived, Cage took thinking about music to an ontological "brink" creating instability in the widely accepted definition of music.

This leads to our second principle, sound and silence, which is derived from the very

nature of music itself. The presence and absence of sound is a regular occurrence in most aspects of life. While true total silence perhaps never occurs naturally, there are episodes of relative silence that humans recognize when a familiar sound no longer is present. It is the relative occurrence and absence of sound to which we refer.

Teachers often engage in sound exploration activities in classrooms that include focused listening for one minute and then noting a list of everything heard in the environment. Rarely is this taken to a level where environmental sounds become a part of a musical composition. However, it is easy to imagine a scenario in which some recurring classroom sound (computer hum, pencil sharpener, air conditioner, pages turning, tick of the clock) becomes a part of an organized musical work. Similarly, there can be exploration and discussion of the effect of a pause or silence in the midst of a composition. What is the effect on the listener? Why did the composer leave that silent space? This leads to our third principle.

Leonard Meyer's (1956) view that the relationships within a musical work give rise to expectations that are fulfilled, postponed or denied suggests that the brain music encounter an identifiable musical thread. This thread holds the piece together connecting idea to idea, feeling to feeling, in a manner that becomes expected. When this thread is dropped or replaced within the work, variety is achieved. Thus, a principle worthy of attention is that of unity and variety. The interplay between unity and variety within a piece of music is one important component of a musical work that gives rise to expectation. Of course, these musical expectations are culturally grounded and must be understood by those interacting with the music in order to have their greatest impact.

In their rainstorm, Susanna, Ariuaj, and Chang use the natural order of a storm as an organizing factor to unify their piece. Micah's movie provides a similar bases as does the text of Larkin's love song. As children expand their compositional abilities, they can be encouraged to vary their ideas in interesting ways. Such expansions allow students to enhance their abilities as composers as they grow more musically expressive.

Our fourth principle of compositional praxis is that of tension and release. The notion of interplay between tension and release is supported by the work of Veronika Cohen (2005) in her discussion of how the energy contours of music are revealed by listeners as they move responsively to music. Jody Kerchner's (1996) study of children's mapping techniques and kinesthetic responses while listening to music reveal similar findings. We expect that future work in neuroscience exploring motor response and perception at the level of brain chemistry will clarify how the body responds to musical tension and release. In western cultures cadences may provide a clear example of tension and release. While very young children (and others who have not been enculturated in Western musics) perhaps do not experience the tension that arises from a half cadence, many children will notice the effect if the teacher plays a familiar tune and stops before the final cadence. People expect and want the music to "finish." Again, the teacher can point out how the affect invoked by this harmonic tension and discuss why a composer might choose to heighten or avoid tension at different points within a composition.

Our final principle is that of motion and stasis. This principle reflects the temporal dimension of life. Lakoff & Johnson (1999) describe time as "directional and irreversible because events are directional and irreversible" (p. 138). They also describe time as "continuous because we experience events as continuous" (p. 138). Music, by its unavoidable temporal dimensions, is likewise directional, irreversible, and continuous. One frequently heard comment from students is that something is "boring." This can easily lead to a discussion of motion and stasis of many kinds and why a particular musical event was perceived as "boring." Was there a lack of motion, lack of emotion, lack of familiarity, or perhaps, too much familiarity?

Another discussion that can aid young composers is to encourage them to consider where

their piece “is going.” Asking questions such as, “What were you thinking about?,” “What are you trying to communicate?,” “What are you going to do next?.” “Is this idea leading you somewhere?” or “Is this the end?” can prompt young composers to think about the role of motion and stasis in their own pieces.

The elements of music can continue to ground some aspects of music instruction. They are particularly useful for labeling what students hear and for focusing attention on the technical aspects of music. However, they do not provide music with expressive power until they are combined in ways that employ the principles described above. We suggest that these principles should become a focus of instruction at all levels. We find them especially relevant and important for helping children think about composition. These principles are an outgrowth of our dynamic human nature and experience. As such, they are natural resources for composers to draw upon in the creation of music.

How composers apply these principles

Composition begins with intention and does not occur by accident. This intention may be based upon a feeling, a memory of a feeling, a projection of a feeling, the context of a feeling, a feeling being experienced at the moment or even a non-musical connection or connotation. However, a composer must move beyond mere connotation or current experience. A composer must be able to capture a “feeling memory” – the experience of having felt something. She or he must also consider how a feeling comes into conscious being (sound and silence). She or he must simultaneously consider how the feeling shifts (motion and stasis) as it is introduced and recurs (unity and variety) and how it intensifies and subsides (tension and release). Finally a composer takes into account how the feeling is singular, yet connected to a larger body of feeling in its relationship to all things felt. Because a composer gives careful consideration to these things either consciously or subconsciously, the product may shift from its original conception at the time of “product intention” to a product of another shape or design. The creator’s interactions with the sounds created through the use of compositional devices make the birth and growth of music possible.

When the composer has successfully balanced the principle relationships within a composition, when the performers have fulfilled their role of breathing life and sound into the blueprint, and when the listener has been mindfully present, all have potentially explored the capacities of this musical endeavor. It is these excursions to the brink of human feeling that are created by the composer, performed by the musicians, and sought by the listener that give rise to “musical experience”—the goosebumps and chills that result when the perceived stability of the body is challenged or questioned. It is not simply that the sounds of music give rise to feelings which are like feelings experienced by people, but that the totality of music has been created in a parallel form to the very essence of human life. Suzanne Langer (1951) used the term “analogous” to describe music’s relationship to the feelingful aspect of human experience. Writing in the mid-twentieth century, she lacked the physical evidence which neurobiology has since been able to identify, but her ideas captured the essence of the similarities. Given the combination of the philosophical, neurobiological and musical, we can now understand that emotion, feeling, and consciousness are all present in music. All three are required for humans to interact meaningfully with music. All three are necessary for any person to know music through such interactions. However, none of these experiences can take place unless someone creates the music.

Who is a composer?

The western notion of a "great" composer is usually associated with names such as Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. Yet it is important to question why these men are used to define what great music has been and should be. First, were they great because of some special gift that set them apart from other composers, or were they great because they were allowed and encouraged to develop that part of themselves that brings unity to sound and feelingful experience? What exposure did the music of these composers gain which others may have not had? What financial, educational, and social structures allowed for their "greatness"? What happened to the music of composers not afforded these same opportunities? Baumel & Baumel (1994) have noted that "economic and political conditions cannot create talent, but they certainly can either inhibit or provide opportunities for its exercise" (p. 172).

Given an ever-expanding palette of compositional tools that allow for more people to quickly engage in the creation of original music, we are faced with new questions. What happens if everyone composes? Will there suddenly be a flood of music? Will it become too difficult to determine quality (and does that challenge directly correspond to the diversification of popular and other musics in the early 1900s)? What is gained by having all children compose and by presenting all students with the opportunity to study composition? This notion is rapidly becoming a technological reality. Students in many schools as well as at home have access to hardware and software that allows them to create music and share any of their compositions with whomever they wish. However, this use of technology inevitably influences the sounds and types of music that is created. There is a world of sound within and beyond the computer waiting to be explored and crafted into new forms of musical expression. This is our current reality.

The western classical concept of the single composer creating music reflecting only a single composer's voice (albeit influenced by the cultural milieu) has been expanded as the influence of world musics in western culture has grown. Music creation featuring more than one composer or multiple simultaneous composers does indeed exist and in some musics is more the norm than the exception. The concept of multiple creators should stand on equal footing with the concept of the single composer in discussions of music composition. Students can compose singly, in pairs, and groups at school and in other environments. How, then, can music educators facilitate these experiences and encourage interested young musicians to grow and develop as composers?

Composition's Role in Music Education

We should teach music composition in schools because composition allows people to engage in meaning making in a medium that is designed to parallel that of the human experience in multiple aspects. People enjoy and need to create music. We use music to extend and express ourselves. Composition is a way of sharing one's self and one's felt experiences with others. Composition presents us a means by which to share things too precious and too intimate to be limited by words. Most importantly, regardless of an individual's background, propensities or skills, composition can contribute to personal development within each of those aspects. At no point is a musician more vulnerable than when composing and sharing the results with others.

Music education can serve to assist students in developing an awareness of design that enhances all of these abilities and experiences. By creating works of one's own, students come to better understand the works of others. It is the nature of music to express principles through interrelation of the musical elements. This is achieved by the use of compositional devices. All of these—principles, elements, and devices—can and should be taught to children to foster greater compositional expressivity. This is what we mean by "principled praxis."

In educational settings, music composition may be employed as a learning strategy to promote musical thinking and understanding. Music composition is a complex, recursive, dynamic, nonlinear process that involves product intention, experimentation, sketching/trial performance, revising, editing, premieres and repeated performances. Composing draws on all other areas of musical learning. In every sense it is constructivist. When children are constructing their pieces, especially in groups and other school settings, they clearly exemplify Vygotsky's (1978) social learning. In these settings they frequently provide scaffolding for each other (Wiggins, 2001; Kaschub, 1997).

Another major reason why composition is such a valuable tool for developing musical thinking is that composition requires crafting and relating all of the parts to make the whole. Performers follow a trail on a map; composers build the roads and draw the map. However, composing contributes to performance ability. Students who compose become more aware of the score and more committed to the accurate interpretation of other composer's intentions (Kaschub, 1997). When composing, the composer must supply everything: the right relationship between the timbres, textures, rhythms, the order of the sounds, their form as they are to be performed by musicians and their order as they are to be heard by listeners. Moreover, composing – perhaps more so than any other direct engagement with music—can lead to personal breakthroughs in understanding the language and emotion of music and to ever deepening refinement of those understandings.

Successful composers are able to make connections between global qualities, principles and specific elements. The development of these skills can benefit from education. Contemporary thought about children's composition often suggests that what is created in the act of composing is a music product, which is only a partial truth. The act of composition also creates the composer. It is in the act of composing that the individual works with sound and determines, ascertains, and constructs how those sounds come to have meaning within a newly created context. These interactions with sound undoubtedly are influenced by prior interactions with other people (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 1990) and the music of others (Kaschub 1997, 1999). Those influences serve as frames of reference or models, like Papert's scripts (1993) for what to do in similar situations. The exact actions taken, however, may be new. These actions may rely on previous models for structure, but they call upon other types of prior knowledge and experience to originate material new to the composer. It is through these interactions with sound and musical principles that individuals self-construct their musical world. This is a peak intersection of social learning theory and the individual development of self-identity. It is the examining of one's own feelings, knowledge, and intuitions that serves as a basis for meaning making in music. At the same time, this broadens the student's view of what constitutes reality.

Finally, schools are where many children receive their education. As long as this remains true, school is a place where composition should be taught. The purpose of composition instruction is not to create the next "great" composer, but to allow all children to experience what music has to offer them as human beings. Teaching composition can be an efficient way to accomplish this because it is so all encompassing. It can be included in all types of music classes: general music, performing ensembles, small group lessons, music technology and keyboarding classes.

The Principled Approach

In our attempts as teachers to ensure the creation of successful products we have perhaps overlooked a key factor in the creative equation—the motivation and intentions of creator. Once we knew what children could do (based on research on their products and processes), we planned instruction accordingly. However, this predominantly quantitative analysis often ignored why the children were composing and what their intentions were.

Composition is not an extension of theoretical study, but an exploration of self through the creation of another—music. An approach which focuses on principle relationships encourages the development of thinking in sound where theoretical rules are often revealed post-creation rather than as serving as the starting point for creation.

Teachers often include units or activities in composition, but these experiences are likely to be disconnected across grade levels. Addressing all music instruction through principle relationships allows for continuity across many settings and takes into account the child's current level of skill and understanding. We believe that experiences with music should be activity based. We know that students must have sufficient time to fully engage in each activity. We also believe that composition should be viewed in partnership with listening, sharing (process and product), discussion, and evaluation and other co-compositional activities. Finally, and most importantly, we feel students should be encouraged to identify and solve compositional problems – including those they themselves choose. To that end we present our principles-based approach for designing compositional lessons for children.

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