Authentic Assessment in Music Composition

Feedback That Facilitates Creativity

Abstract: Every composition created by a young composer represents a step in the student’s creative path. Assessment, an intrinsic aspect of teaching, fosters learning and propels students forward on their journeys to creative self-expression. Authentic feedback and assessment strategies must be grounded both in the individual musical context of each composition and in the context of each student’s unique profile as a learner and creator. Authentic assessment treats student composition as meaningful musical expression. This article offers guidance for the authentic assessment of precollege student composition. It includes critical commentary on rubrics, offers suggestions for providing meaningful feedback, and gives advice for implementing student-centered assessment of young composers’ works.

Keywords: assessment, composition, creativity, evaluation, feedback, rubric, student-centered

The 2014 Core Music Standards place a great emphasis on the importance of students’ ability to create and compose their own music. The 2014 Standards framework and recent publications offer an array of assessment resources. However, cornerstone assessments and rubrics will not eliminate the need for teachers to exercise subjective judgment and care in the assessment process. Many teachers have had the experience of being impressed or excited by a student’s creative work, only to refer to a rubric and find that their subjective judgment is not in line with the listed criteria. How can teachers capture their enthusiastic response to student compositions in the assessment and use the process to facilitate student growth?

Rubrics and checklists are valuable tools, particularly for tightly specified assignments, but they too readily obscure the fact that musical compositions are more than the sum of their parts. Although rubrics may have great analytical explanatory power, their formulaic structure of communication is not the most helpful medium for enhancing students’ creative development. Teachers can offer the same analytical rigor more effectively through respectful dialogue, interactive instruction, class discussion, and written narrative assessments.

Assessment in Composition

The purpose of assessment in composition is to enable students to better achieve their aesthetic goals. Composition teachers must continually seek to understand their students’ expressive intentions in order to...
provide instruction and feedback that makes this possible. Therefore, assessment should be embedded throughout the teaching and creative process—a procedure commonly referred to as formative assessment.

Right and Wrong

Because composition is an art with no specific universal rules of right and wrong, assessment must be flexible and open-minded. When evaluating jet engines, by counterexample, we need strict assessments with stringent criteria and exacting rubrics, insisting that each engine perform identically and flawlessly. There are clear rights and wrongs in jet engine design and manufacture, and the cost of an error could be deadly.

In composition, on the other hand, not only are the flaws not fatal, there is no single correct solution for every problem. Some issues in composition are objective; for example, it is incorrect to compose outside the range of an instrument or to unintentionally create a clash between melody and accompaniment. But each composition also contains a wide array of subjective aspects that cannot be reduced to objective criteria. Indeed, the most important features of a composition may fall into this subjective category.

Furthermore, one of a composition teacher’s primary goals should be to encourage each student to develop a unique creative point of view and compositional “voice.” While an arithmetic teacher needs all students to agree that two times two is always equal to four, the composition teacher can stimulate creative thinking by quoting Dostoevsky’s narrator in Notes from Underground: “I agree that two times two is four is an excellent thing; but if we’re going to start praising everything, then two times two is five is sometimes also a most charming little thing.” Creative decisions always have an array of “correct” responses, and the best answer is often the least expected—precisely because it is unexpected.

Authentic Assessment

Authentic assessment is the teacher’s response to real-life creative work, grounded in each student’s uniqueness, expressed in a way that motivates the student to persevere and continue to grow. In authentic assessment, teachers rely on their professional judgment to evaluate each composition on its own terms, with the goal of enhancing each student’s creative and musical development. They accomplish this by respecting the creative artistry and potential of each student; they engage in dialogue in which they ask questions and offer a variety of possible solutions rather than dictating one way of proceeding with the work.

Once the compositional process is complete, assigning grades or quality descriptors (e.g., poor, good, excellent) to the musical work can have a negative impact on students at all levels of ability and achievement. Research indicates that specific feedback enhances student development but that numerical or letter grades can inhibit growth and motivation because they encourage “performance mindsets” rather than “mastery mindsets.” The goal becomes scoring high, not expressing oneself musically, and motivation becomes extrinsic rather than intrinsic.

Context and Criteria

Each composition project has its own framework, and each student composer has an individual profile as a learner and as a creator. For assessment to be effective, it must be tailored to fit the project and the student. Composition projects range from open-ended free composition to prescribed exercises, and the corresponding assessment criteria will vary according to the scope and specificity of the project.

While criteria for narrowly defined exercises must be specific and detailed because of the restraints of the assignments, criteria for open-ended composition should be much more flexible and inclusive. If we think of the great variety among all the music we value in our lives, we realize the difficulty of fitting it all under one umbrella of benchmarks.

When designing criteria, therefore, it is wise to recognize that to a certain degree, each piece creates its own norms for evaluation. For example, the general criteria for assessing composition used by the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) Student Composers Competition and the New York State School Music Association (NYSSMA), which I helped to write, use broad terms and qualify conditions by using the crucial phrase “where applicable,” as shown in Figure 1.

Because compositions vary so much in style, genre, and intent, it is important to apply the criteria with discretion. For example, the criteria in Figure 1 include “accuracy and clarity of notation,” but some pieces by young students and some genres of music by older students do not include notation. In a more advanced example, a student might compose a “postmodern” piece that uses radical juxtapositions of style, avoiding the typical norms of “stylistic coherence.” On the other hand, a successful trance-like minimalist composition may challenge the normative criterion of “variety.” Therefore, the assessments should be adapted to the compositions; compositions are written to express musical ideas, not to satisfy a set of criteria that may or may not be applicable.

Little Boxes: Issues with Rubrics

Generalized rubrics for composition—rubrics that are intended to apply to all compositions—often have problems. First of all, not every composition can or should “do everything.” In a simple example, a snare drum duet will not have a melody. But in more complex cases, many masterpieces would score low according to rubrics. See Figure 2 for a satirical illustration of this point.

Of course, the Bach Prelude in Figure 2 is widely considered a masterpiece of harmonic tension and release, one that unfolds through variegated layers of tonal structure, expressed in an exquisite mosaic of arpeggios. It clearly demonstrates how a unique composition transcends the boundaries of a rubric.
Composition Evaluation Criteria

Criteria for Evaluating Compositions
(From NYSSMA and NAI ME Calls for Compositions)

The compositions are evaluated according to three broad criteria:
1. Compositional technique
2. Overall musical appeal
3. Originality.

Compositional Technique includes the following elements, where applicable:
- Organization of pitch elements (such as melody, harmony, and counterpoint)
- Organization of rhythmic elements
- Formal design
- Accuracy and clarity of notation
- Appropriate writing for instruments and/or voices.

Overall Musical Appeal includes the following aspects:
- Stylistic coherence (regardless of the particular style)
- Effective handling of unity/variety and tension/release
- Effective use of dynamics, articulations, and expression marks
- Interaction of all the elements (atmosphere, mood, direction, and flow of the music).

Originality refers to aspects of the piece that reveal the composer’s individual "voice," and distinguish the piece from a musical exercise or a direct imitation of another piece.

Note. NYSSMA = New York State School Music Association (https://www.nyssma.org/); NAI ME = National Association for Music Education (www.nafme.org)

Printemps was composed in an "inappropriately" high register for the instrument. Mozart continually changed the subject in his Fantasias compositions, making the pieces lack the “unity” that most rubrics would require. Most rubrics would miss the crucial points in all of these cases. In fact, one trait admired in great composers is their ability to stretch or break with the conventions of their time.

A teacher may object: "But breaking the rules is for real composers. We are just evaluating student composers here." First of all, student composers are real composers. Furthermore, composition teachers should always be on the lookout for innovation and greatness in their students’ music, and their evaluations must always strive to encompass these qualities. Otherwise, we risk being merely the wardens of the old guard, eclipsed by the invention that moves music history.

Rubrics do have a positive side. Particularly in evaluating prescribed technical exercises, rubrics can hold students accountable to the requirements of the assignment and can highlight the strengths and weaknesses of student work. Rubrics can have great analytical power, reminding teachers and students of the many salient features of a composition.

In fact, the NYSSMA and NAI ME criteria listed in Figure 1 can be encoded into a rubric. In that form, however, they will likely be interpreted by students as mere checklists to be ticked off on the way to assignment completion. This is unfortunate. It leaves little room for more meaningful communication between teachers and students and may even prevent young composers from learning that composition should emerge from expressive intent—from an idea, concept, emotion, sound, image, process, or pattern—not from a list of items to check off on a list. As part of learning to compose, students must learn to believe in their pieces by purposefully shaping sound to create authentic artistic communication.

A rubric can distract from this core principle as students cobble something together to satisfy the normative...
Assessment Tips for Student Compositions

- Shape assessment to match each student’s unique profile as a learner and creator.
- Treat the composition as true artistic expression, not merely as academic exercise.
- Remember that each piece creates its own norms for evaluation.
- Encourage the student to begin with a clear intention: mood, emotion, narrative, and so on.
- Ask questions throughout the learning and teaching process to understand the student’s intentions.
- Encourage risk taking by accepting “error.”
- Avoid notation at the beginning of the compositional process.
- Introduce concepts of music theory as the issues are raised by the student’s work.
- Help the student examine his or her ideas in order to extrapolate and develop them.
- Offer multiple scenarios when giving specific advice.
- Help the student assess the flow, trajectory, and structure of the composition.
- Help the student balance musical continuity with surprise and suspense.
- Draw the student’s attention to detail and accuracy in compositions that are noted.
- Encourage revision.
- Plan for the performance of compositions in class or other public setting.

Formative Assessment

Formative assessment is an essential ingredient of teaching while students are at work on their compositions. Through formative assessment, teachers mentor students and provide the scaffolding they require. As students progress through a series of phases in their work on a composition, the nature of the formative assessment should also move through a series of stages in synchronization with the evolving composition.

The Beginning of the Process

At the earliest stage of formative assessment, teachers can help students get off to a successful start by encouraging them to begin with a clear intention: a mood, emotion, or a concept. This provides a unifying principle for the work and gives it character. In addition, it increases the student’s attachment to the composition because the music is true musical expression—not merely an academic exercise.

Teachers and students should engage in informal dialogue throughout the compositional process. It is helpful to include classmates in these discussions. Sincere and respectful discussion among a group of student composers usually increases their enthusiasm and motivation. Students often learn as much from each other as they do from their teacher.

As students begin to plan and compose, teachers should encourage them to experiment and explore on their instruments or with their singing voices. Most students have acquired a natural “tunefulness” that enables them to create melodic phrases that “make sense” tonally and rhythmically. Just as students can speak and make up stories before they study grammar, they can compose melodies before they study theory.

It is a good idea for students to avoid notation altogether in the beginning steps of a composition because it often disrupts the flow of compositional thinking. Notation often leads students to focus on each note rather than coherent musical phrases. Using notational

expectations of the teacher. Many students will reverse-engineer their music to fulfill the rubric superficially rather than reaching deeper for more profound meaning. When students heed the call of the rubric rather than their own creative passion, the composition becomes less purposeful and meaningful and therefore less musical. Indeed, the students’ notion of what composition is may become distorted and much less attractive to them. Is it a performance task (schoolwork), where they must supply at least one example of each criterion, or is it a mastery task (real art), where they grow skill through aesthetic passion and purpose? Which model will make students more likely to create attractive music?

The reductionism of the rubric, with its panoply of indicators, gives the illusion of objectivity, but there is always a subjective element in aesthetic evaluation that cannot be explained away. The best rubrics include criteria like originality, creativity, surprise, or élan. However, these vital aspects are the most difficult to convey within the confines of a rubric. They require verbal or written narrative communication from a supportive mentor.

The rubric attempts to reduce subjective judgment, but subjective understanding is essential in composition teaching. The rubric ensures a uniform response to all students for the same work, but each student requires a unique response according to his or her intention, ability, experience, effort, and confidence. Rubrics separate the constituent elements of a work, but the synergy of elements working together is a higher-level measure of excellence. Rubrics clarify standards and expectations, but composition teachers should encourage and welcome unpredictable outcomes.

The flat grid pattern of most rubrics is logical, but it is a cold and static method of communication. Students do not need a snapshot rating; they need information that helps them improve. For example, if a student’s work is mundane or too predictable, how can the teacher better stimulate more creativity? Put a low score in the creativity box or ask the student a question like “How does it feel to score a goal in soccer?” and, after listening to the student’s response, encouraging growth with a “Let’s hear that in your next piece!”
software at early stages of composition can lead young composers to input notes without truly “hearing” them or meaning them. A better way to preserve ideas at early stages is to make audio recordings of exploratory efforts.

Particularly at this early stage, teachers and students should strive to accept “error” as a necessary ingredient in the learning process. Composition begins with exploration or improvisation, and the creative process inevitably includes false starts and wrong turns. School life is full of penalties for errors, so the composition teacher must work hard to convince students to accept the faltering steps that lead to progress.

Emergent Curriculum

As students show their ongoing progress, their work inevitably raises specific issues for assessment and instruction. Teachers can help all students make progress by using an emergent curriculum. In an emergent curriculum, the sequence of topics for instruction is generated by the student work itself. By entwining assessment and instruction, the teacher acts as a coach, providing lessons in direct response to the student’s work on topics such as melody and harmony; unity and variety; tension and release; phrase, form, and structure; texture and instrumentation; dynamics, expression, and articulation; and tonal, modal, and atonal theory, as appropriate.

Because emergent curriculum guarantees that the teaching is geared to the student’s concerns and offers solutions to the student’s real problems, it engages interest and creates a collaborative interaction between teacher and student. It makes the learning relevant and memorable. It also allows advanced students to progress rapidly at the same time that less proficient students can move ahead at a slower pace, with more scaffolding.

One of the first topics in the emergent curriculum is usually a lesson in unity and variety because many—perhaps most—student compositions at first suffer from one of two divergent woes: they either lack cohesiveness or they are overly repetitive. If a student’s emerging composition does not have motivic integrity, but wanders from idea to idea, the teacher can help the student by asking which of the musical ideas the student likes best. The teacher can then demonstrate various ways that the idea can be extended through repetition and transformation and further illustrate the point using examples such as Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” or the Beatles song “Yesterday.”

Another effective technique to avoid random-sound melodies is to encourage students to sing their tunes. Singing a melody greatly increases the chances that it will achieve musical integrity. On the other hand, if the student’s music is overly repetitive or dull, the teacher should illustrate techniques of variation and transformation, showing the student how to alter rhythm, contour, and register to achieve more contrast.

As the Composition Progresses

The focus of formative assessment shifts as the composition process progresses. Students usually arrive at their first ideas intuitively, but they require more technical advice as the piece moves forward. The teacher should help the student understand the potential and the implications of his or her own ideas by analyzing them together with the student and showing how they can be extrapolated. How can the musical motives be transformed and developed? How can contrasting elements be unified? Where does the music “want” to go?

To gauge the student’s intentions, it is frequently necessary for the teacher to ask questions: “Where do you want this phrase to end? Do you want it to end abruptly or to ease into the next one? Is this phrase the question or the answer? What feeling are you after here?” When the teacher emphasizes and respects the student’s intentions, the chances are much greater that the composition will have expressive power.

When giving advice, teachers should offer multiple scenarios so the student has a range of choices. Students should know that they can take suggestions or reject them and that it is perfectly acceptable for them to change their minds later. The idea that a composition is in flux and is malleable enhances progress because it reduces self-judgmental trepidation and anxiety.

Part of the formative assessment process is helping the student to surmount obstacles that impede progress. The causes are not always readily apparent and may include extramusical factors: “Are you stuck here? Do you need some more instruction, or do you just need more time to work?” A helpful technique is to ask students to verbally articulate their next steps to determine if they know how to move forward. Otherwise, they may nod happily at the teacher’s advice but not understand how to incorporate the knowledge on their own. The teacher can also help the students to devise strategies to balance competing demands on their time. Situating the composition in a plan for public performance and publication is a great motivator of progress.

As Compositions Near Completion

When the composition nears completion, the focus of formative assessment shifts again, essentially making a transition toward summative assessment. The assessment perspective widens to consider the composition as a whole. At this stage, the teacher should help the student assess the overall shape and structure of the piece: Do certain sections need to be expanded or truncated? Are the flow and dynamic trajectory of the piece convincing? Did the student create the moods and atmospheres he or she intended? Does the piece balance the stability of continuity with the freshness of surprise and suspense?

Notation software playback is often misleading when it comes to timbre, texture, dynamics, and orchestration. However, it can be extremely helpful in assessing the overall contour and structure of a composition. By listening repeatedly, the student can better gauge
the proportions of the work and assess the placement of key structural components such as section breaks, transitions, and climaxes.

At the end of the compositional process, in addition to expanding the assessment focus to see the piece as a whole, the teacher and student should concentrate attention on details. For a notated piece, the score should be checked painstakingly for accuracy and clarity. If the work is for an ensemble, the student should review the part for each instrument or voice and observe it from the performer’s point of view. Each part should have sufficient markings to make the composer’s intentions clear and should be musically attractive enough to engage the performer’s interest. At this stage of the process, students can often make minor tweaks to remove unnecessary performance difficulties. Removing such difficulties maximizes the efficient use of rehearsal time.

Different students have different thresholds for revision. Some are capable of reworking a piece extensively after it seems complete. Others need to move on more quickly and learn their lessons in the next composition.

### Summative Assessment

When students complete compositions, summative assessment is an important component of the reflection experience that helps students understand their work in the broader context of their educational and artistic development. Because the composition teacher’s goal is to enhance continuing growth and progress, “summative” assessment is actually formative assessment, but on a larger temporal level. Each project, each year of growth, each stage of development is part of the formative trajectory of students’ growing mastery. Ultimately, the students who rise to the highest level will supersede their teachers and become the next generation of leaders. In the end, the only assessment that is truly summative is one’s epitaph.

Summative assessments of compositions are key punctuation points in a student’s growth. Each project is a step forward in the evolution of a student’s craft and knowledge. Therefore, summative assessment should emulate the developmental perspective of its formative counterpart.

A central pillar of summative assessment is public performance of the composition, which can take place in the classroom, a school concert, or a festival beyond the bounds of the school. Performance fulfills the raison d’être of composition: to communicate original musical ideas to an audience. The listeners’ responses validate the authenticity of the work. Because the compositions express heartfelt ideas and emotions, composition performances epitomize one of the highest forms of communication in the educational setting, and parental appreciation is enormous. As one mother wrote, “We, the parents, have learned more about our children through their work” in composition.13

Useful formats for summative assessment include circle discussions among students and teachers, reflective essays and self-assessments written by students, narrative evaluations written by teachers and outside experts, and young composer workshops and coaching sessions at conferences. NAFME and several state music educators associations conduct evaluation programs that provide summative feedback. The participation of mentors other than the teacher can create a broader perspective that enhances student understanding, and teachers as well often learn a great deal from the evaluations written by outside experts.

### Guidelines for Written Evaluations

The aim of written evaluations is to nurture students, affirm their achievement, provide constructive criticism, and encourage them to keep composing. This is easier when evaluating music written by one's own students, but it is also possible for outside mentors. The following list provides a set of guidelines used effectively by the author and other teachers:

- **Use a supportive and optimistic tone in voicing student work.** The tone should evoke the character of a person-to-person conversation, and the evaluator should seem more like a collaborative artist than a judge.
- **Remember how you felt when you were the age of the composer.** Composition is quite personal, and most students are very vulnerable to criticism. It is easy for students to become discouraged.
- **Begin and end with positive comments.** Most students begin reading their evaluations with a feeling of anxiety, so the evaluator should break the ice. Especially with very young composers, positive comments should outnumber critical points.
- **Focus on the future.** In most cases, the composition being evaluated feels to a student like part of his or her past, so it is helpful to spin learning toward the next composition. Particularly when serving as an outside evaluator, include statements like “You may have already tried this, but in a future piece you could . . .”
- **Clearly differentiate between objective and subjective elements.** For example, it is an error to write outside the range of an instrument, but it is not required that a first theme return in the tonic or even return at all. For subjective points, helpful phrases include “you may wish to” or “you might consider.”
- **Phrase comments in the form of questions sometimes.** This approach avoids sounding overly judgmental, and it encourages the student to think and wonder. For example, if there is no chance for a singer or a wind player to take a breath in a phrase, ask the student where the best place for a breath would be.
- **Explain the terms you use.** Most students have a limited grasp of technical terms. If the composers are not your own students, encourage them to discuss the terms with their teacher.
- **Teach each student his or her own composition.** Many students compose intuitively, so it is helpful for
the evaluator to embed an analysis of the form and technique of the composition within the evaluation.

- **Highlight emerging shoots of success when addressing problems.** For example, if the composition lacks variety, find a few examples where the student does achieve variety and explain how those techniques could be extended.

- **Include musical notation in written evaluations.** It is often helpful to musically illustrate comments and suggestions and to demonstrate correct notation.

- **Recognize your own spheres of expertise and limits of knowledge.** For example, you may not be the best judge of a hip-hop composition or big band jazz chart, so you should seek guidance when needed.

- **Suggest musical repertoire for study.** Guiding the students to relevant scores and recordings can effectively support the written evaluation by providing models that nurture and encourage their creative growth.

This piece of paper is gold to [my daughter], and through your wisdom, as displayed, she will strive to continually develop and continue her composition writing. Your critique of [her] work was done with great effort, has provided a positive effect, and is thoughtful and helpful.

Finally, a teacher said, "The teachers’ comments were excellent, and specific and instructive, and I appreciate their having taken the time to learn and understand the pieces. I will review and follow-up with [my students]."

### Meaningful Expression

With authentic assessment, teachers treat student composition as meaningful musical expression, not merely as a school exercise. They accomplish this by shaping assessment and instruction in response to the musical intentions of each composer within the context of each composition. Rubrics and checklists, on the other hand, reinforce a mindset that can make composition seem more like schoolwork than true musical communication.

From day-to-day coaching, to summative evaluations, to educational and career guidance, teachers mentor on many levels. Students are best served by assessment that provides momentum for future creative problem solving rather than by freeze frames that label success or failure with discrete descriptors. If the aim is continuing student compositional progress, assessment should be framed in models that inform and inspire.

### Notes


