Creating Compositional Community in Your Classroom

Abstract: In performance-focused ensemble classrooms, students and teachers often work toward convergent solutions (e.g., accurate notes and rhythms, agreeing on interpretation). Hierarchical structures may be in place in which it is considered inappropriate to question or disagree with an interpretation set forth by the leader. Teaching composition, in contrast, calls for both peers and teachers to stimulate divergent thinking that draws out a composer’s expressive intentions and compositional craftsmanship. This type of environment may be less familiar to those who have spent considerable time in performance-centered contexts. This article offers strategies for creating a supportive, safe, and collaborative community in which students and teachers share compositions, provide feedback, promote critical thinking, and encourage composers in developing and performing their work.

Keywords: community, composition, composing, critical thinking, divergent thinking, performance ensemble

“Teachers need not be master composers to engage students in the process of composition. After all, few instrumental music teachers demonstrate performance skills on every instrument that are beyond those of their students. Yet, they are often highly successful at teaching all instrument types to their students.”

—Stephen Shewan

Music teachers often excel at creating community. In schools across North America, students can be found electing to spend their free periods in music classrooms. This positive community is often built around a culture of performance, commonly in large-ensemble environments. While music performance is a worthy goal, this focus reveals a gap between policy and practice that has been documented by researchers: while standards indicate teachers should be prioritizing composition experiences along with other objectives (e.g., performing music, analyzing music), teachers find composition more challenging and less important to teach, and they consider themselves unprepared to teach it. Research also suggests low prioritization of composition is reinforced in teacher education.

Besides a lack of pedagogical training, teachers might also struggle with incorporating composition in music curricula because it requires encouraging students to think divergently; this may be at odds with more traditional roles of music educators who teach performing ensembles. Preparing ensemble repertoire promotes work toward convergent solutions and an

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accurate performance, while creating one's own music requires divergent thinking for which there are multiple correct answers.

This article describes how teachers who have primarily learned and taught in convergent-focused music environments can develop supportive, safe, and collaborative compositional communities in which the students and the teacher share compositions, provide feedback, promote divergent thinking, and encourage composing new work. Teachers who wish to begin fostering compositional community in their classrooms can (1) expand their role beyond the common "performer-teacher" paradigm, (2) use performance repertoire to teach about compositional principles, (3) use divergent thought processes to reinforce convergent goals, (4) encourage students to participate in developing and assessing composition projects, and (5) develop public outlets for student composers to be recognized for their work.

Expanding Teachers' Roles

It is common to imagine music educators as conductors of large ensembles, giving students instructions to realize that conductor's vision for the performance of a piece of repertoire. While this role is sometimes caricatured, providing clear, direct instruction is certainly part of what music teachers should do—but it is only a part. To be clear, this is not to suggest we abandon large ensembles or that a high level of performance is unimportant; however, we need to think more broadly about all that music learning—and by extension, teaching—should comprise.

While many schools of music that prepare our future teachers have the luxury of specialists in composition, education, jazz studies, musicology, and performance, future K–12 teachers will often be a "jack of all trades." Indeed, many K–12 music educators are the only music educator in their school building, or even their school district, and thus must be able to engage students at all levels in creating, performing, responding, and connecting as called for in policy. Preparing future teachers to teach composition along with other skills, and helping in-service teachers expand their skills to include composition pedagogy, requires expanding a music educator's role beyond that of an ensemble director to a facilitator of varied music learning experiences.

Given this context, music educators need to develop pedagogical skill related to a variety of specializations within music. While the notion of "performer-teacher" is often discussed in music teacher education, focusing exclusively on these facets of a music educator's identity neglects others in the panoply of roles teachers are called upon to play in the field. To engage students in the variety of standards-based knowledge and skills called for in our policy, music educators need to become not only performers and teachers but also arrangers, composers, conductors, improvisers, musicologists, and theorists. Specific to this article, it seems logical that it would benefit teachers to develop some level of skill and identity as a composer in order to be effective composition teachers.

Teachers need not have fully developed an expanded identity in order to begin teaching composition to students. Modeling a growth mind-set to students will likely help foster an environment in which it is safe for them to explore their own ideas, develop their skills and expressive capacities, succeed and fail, and feel supported in doing so. This is the type of environment—in which teachers position themselves as knowledgeable experts who are also lifelong learners—that is ideal for students to flourish as composers.

Stephen Shewan, a high school instrumental music teacher in western New York, offers this encouragement: "Teachers need not be master composers to engage students in the process of composition. After all, few instrumental music teachers demonstrate performance skills on every instrument that are beyond those of their students. Yet, they are often highly successful at teaching all instrument types to their students." Similarly, a teacher who wishes to begin engaging his or her students in composition may have experience limited to four-part writing or model composition assignments in college theory classes. Much as a teacher whose primary instrument is oboe might be challenged by teaching secondary trumpet students armed only with a semester or two of brass techniques, a teacher new to composition can seek out help from colleagues and gain experience while beginning to help students develop as composers.

Strategies for Music Teachers

A teacher who is interested in incorporating composition in his or her teaching but lacks experiences in his or her own education needs more than good intentions to begin engaging students in composition. In this section, I offer practical suggestions (listed, with additional examples, in Figure 1) for creating a sense of community around composition in your classroom. These suggestions are offered neither as answers nor as replacements for performance-based instruction; rather, I hope these ideas provoke thought about their application to your unique setting and about ways to include composition as another way of being musical in your classroom community.

Performance Repertoire and Composition

Study and perform repertoire that you think has musical merit, and help students understand why you are making these choices. When (or if) you choose to invite them to participate in selecting repertoire, guide them in thinking through why a piece is (or is not) worth studying and performing. Students are likely to bring different perspectives than yours, and they will surprise you with their thoughtful reflections.

Carefully study the repertoire you are teaching, and help students understand how that repertoire is put together. Why does it matter that the opening
FIGURE 1
Strategies for Music Teachers

Use performance repertoire to teach about composition.

- Study how Gustav Holst manipulates the eight-measure theme in the first movement of his First Suite. What effect, for example, does inverting the theme create? What do melodies from other repertoire, folk tunes, or pop songs sound like when inverted?
- A choir and orchestra working on Mozart’s Requiem might study the double fugue in the “Kyrie.” With guidance, students could follow each subject through its development and compare this double fugue with other types of fugues. Some students may be interested in composing fugues of their own.

Use divergent thought processes to reinforce convergent goals.

- In the opening of Chance’s Variations on a Korean Folk Song, the melody is stated in concert A-flat, then modulates by what interval? (A fourth.) Why does this modulation to D-flat work so smoothly? (The melody starts on the fifth scale degree.) Where else is a modulation by a fourth commonly found in music written for wind and percussion instruments? (At the trio in a march.) To develop students’ technique and aural skills, assign them to learn “Arrang” in all twelve keys, modulating through the circle of fourths. This assignment could be extended to assign students to find another tune that begins on the fifth scale degree (e.g., “Happy Birthday,” “Amazing Grace,” “The Muffin Man”) and learn it in twelve keys by moving through the circle of fourths.
- In Lincolnshire Posy, Grainger harmonizes the fifth and sixth measures of the melody for “Horkstow Grange” in four different ways, “with a heightening of dischordant intenseness each time.” Provide students with a copy of the full score, and guide them in creating a reduction of these measures. This offers students opportunity to practice transposition skills, better understand how the pitches they play fit into each of those harmonizations, and see how composers (and arrangers) use consonance and dissonance in reharmonizations to generate musical interest.

Encourage students to participate in developing and assessing composition projects.

- Some students find parameters helpful; others find them stifling. Invite each student to develop a rubric for the composition assignment they plan to complete.
- Assign each student in your choir a composition project, culminating in a reading session in which students sight read and discuss their peers’ music.

Provide public outlets for student composers.

- What existing opportunities (e.g., concerts, festivals, community events) could be expanded to include performance of student works?
- What new opportunities or benefits might emerge as students compose their own music (e.g., interdisciplinary collaboration, increased student ownership)?

1Percy Aldridge Grainger, Lincolnshire Posy, assembled by Frederick Fennell (Cleveland, Ohio: Ludwig Music, 1987), p. 79.

theme comes back later in the piece with a different tonal center? How does the composer create such a variety of colors throughout his or her composition? What are the tonal implications of that F-sharp that your trumpet players continually play as F-natural in the key of G major?

Find ways for your students to engage with composers of the pieces they are studying. Technology makes it possible for students to interact face-to-face with the person who wrote their music. If it is not practical for you to interact with these composers, consider commissioning and collaborating with composition students or faculty at a nearby university. Students not only tend to become more motivated to play repertoire well because they have met the composer, but they also see that composers are “real people” just like them.

Students are also encouraged when they see their teachers learning with them. In that spirit, consider bringing in finished or in-progress projects of your own to share with students. Let them hear you struggle with a transition you dislike, a musical gesture that you think sounds contrived, or three different ways you are considering ending your B section.

Divergent Thought, Convergent Goals

Use divergent thought processes to reinforce convergent goals. Compose music inspired by an attribute of repertoire you are studying. This attribute could be related to compositional craft elements. For example, you can say, “Everyone create a melody that modulates from [a minor key] to [a major key] just like [this
Student Participation

Encourage students to participate in developing and assessing composition projects. Provide a menu of compositional projects of varying length, parameters, and context. Just as a good restaurant’s menu offers items with varying portion sizes that accommodate dietary needs and adventurous (or not) diners, this approach lets students determine what entry point(s) into composition best suit them. Teachers can then gently prod students in new directions over time, perhaps with a “three-course” project, in which students choose from several options in three different categories designed to engage them in varied tasks.

As an example, consider the William Billings tune “Chester,” which might be performed as a choral work or in the context of William Schuman’s arrangements for orchestra or winds (see Figure 2). A menu of projects for “Chester” might include tasks listed in Figure 3. This list of possibilities offers entry points for students with a variety of skill levels and willingness to take risks.

Just as students might have a role in determining the scope of their composition project(s), they might also be given a voice in providing feedback to their peers. Students will need coaching and modeling in giving feedback—just as they would to become more proficient at any other aspect of their musicianship—but can learn to give feedback and ask questions in ways that will benefit the composer. (If you as the teacher need help learning to give feedback on compositions, a number of researchers and practitioners have published resources that may be helpful.) Michele Kaschub, a professor of music at University of Southern Maine, reminds us,

In many cases, the most valuable feedback that teachers can provide occurs in the form of a question. Carefully phrased questions allow the composers to gain further insight into their own thinking processes, intentions, and musical choices. The ability to ask probing questions without implying that there is a single correct answer, or a specific answer that will satisfy the teacher, requires constant attention and practice to become habitual.

To help students improve their skills in giving feedback, consider providing guidelines to ensure students are (1) providing feedback on a range of attributes, (2) are sharing things they like as well as those they do not, and (3) providing their feedback appropriately. For example, Kaschub and Smith suggest a
FIGURE 3

Project Menu for Chester

(a) Compose a new final phrase in the melody that fits with the other three existing parts.
(b) Compose a new final phrase in the melody that fits with the other three existing parts, and starts and ends on DO (as Chester does).
(c) Compose a fifth part (e.g., a descant) that fits with the existing chorale.
(d) Reharmonize the melody by replacing the other three voices in four-part chorale style.
(e) Reharmonize the melody for instruments/voices of your choice.
(f) Compose a new first, second, and/or third phrase in the melody.
(g) Compose a variation on this melody for instruments/voices of your choice.
(h) Find another tune similar to Chester and use it as a point of departure for your own composition.

framework of “three stars and one wish,” describing three things they find effective about someone else’s composition and one thing they wish they better understood or wish the composer had done differently. Another guideline for feedback you might consider: if you are going to be critical of something that is subjective, you are required to provide an alternative idea. This does not permit a student to write, “I think your ending is boring,” but would allow them to write, “I think your ending sounds boring. What if instead of repeating what you wrote in the first statement of the theme, you added a tag?” The second example of feedback, which offers a possible solution for the student to explore, would be received better than the first, which might feel like knee-jerk criticism.

As a group, critique a piece of music you are learning to perform. While you are hopefully trying to study and perform the best repertoire you can find, there are things about every piece of music that you—and your students—will not like or will wish were done differently. Model thoughtful music criticism to your students, and seek out good examples of music criticism discussing works they are performing.

Provide Public Venues

To strengthen a community around music composition in your classroom, consider creating ways to help students be recognized for their compositions just as they would be for their performance. For example, several state music education associations have developed programs to encourage and recognize young composers; this model has been extended to the national level through collaboration between the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) and the European American Musical Alliance. A strength of a number of these programs is that every student who submits a piece of music receives a detailed written evaluation. While these events may include an honors concert sharing exemplary works, they are not competitions designed to identify “winners.” Written evaluations are certainly valuable for student composers; they can also be educational for teachers who may feel inexperienced in giving feedback to student composers.

Initiate an annual award to recognize an outstanding young composer. For instance, many schools issue the John Philip Sousa Band Award or National School Choral Award. Consider developing a comparable award to recognize an exemplary student composer.

To provide student composers with visibility within your community, consider programming student compositions on your concert programs. This could take a variety of forms, including student chamber works in the lobby before performances or between groups in the concert hall. As composition becomes an increasingly central part of your music classroom culture, a long-term goal might be to program a student piece on every concert.

Another possibility would be to start a composition-centered music festival; this might involve collaboration with faculty in other disciplines. Two examples of which I am aware are the Buffalo/Williamsville Poetry, Music, and Dance Celebration and the River Bend Chamber Music Festival.

Student composers whose music is performed might also be given authentic experiences of talking and writing about their music (e.g., writing program notes, introducing their piece at a concert), and processing the variety of feedback they may receive about their pieces. At some point, they will likely encounter some negative critical feedback; these students will need to be made aware that such feedback is a possibility. Modeling and practicing providing feedback on others’ music in class will help student composers understand that not everyone is going to love every piece and that some persons may not know how to articulate their reactions as well as they do (just as there are some concertgoers who still need to work on concert etiquette!). You might also share written music criticism to let students see that (1) sometimes critics are harsh, (2)
sometimes multiple critics disagree with one another, (3) it is helpful to suggest other possibilities, and (4) critics have sometimes been wrong (e.g., a piece they doomed to be a failure ended up a staple of the repertoire).

Increasing availability of recording technology might make it practical to create an annual student composition CD. This could benefit your school music department or a worthy cause in your community. Consider how much more fun—not to mention musical—this would be than selling fruitcake, chocolate, or bed sheets!

Similarly, reports to administration, teacher/department web pages, and social media offer other opportunities to promote student composers and their work. With appropriate permissions from students, families, and your school, it could be possible to (1) share news about students who participate in state/national composition events, (2) show clips from rehearsal of student pieces, (3) record interviews with student composers (perhaps in collaboration with students and faculty in other departments), and (4) share recordings of student compositions. Imagine the sense of pride for parents, administrators, and students sharing this sort of news in their own networks!

Encourage students to participate in composition events on the school, regional, state, or national levels. Possibilities include PTA Reflections, events sponsored by your state music educators association, and programs sponsored by NAfME on the division and national levels.

Another possibility is developing a Composer’s Club or similar afterschool program, collaborating with other schools in your district to facilitate exchange among composition pen pals, or developing a relationship with a composer in residence. A composer in residence might be found in your local community or may join your community virtually using technology available in your school.

A final public outlet for student composers might be opportunities for collaboration within and beyond their school. Collaborations within a school might be formal (e.g., compose jingles for the student television station, curricular collaborations with other teachers) or less formal (e.g., connecting students with interest in cross-disciplinary collaboration to work together outside of school, helping interested students identify collaborators in a community maker space). Beyond the school, music teachers are often contacted by community organizations seeking music. For example, a local bank might call and request a brass quintet to perform for the grand opening of its new branch. A teacher might ask the bank to commission a young composer to write a fanfare—perhaps to be performed by students for the occasion.

Start Somewhere, but Start!

What can we empower students to express through composing music? Students who compose music find meaning in conveying varied and profound emotions through their music. For example, in my role as chair of NAfME’s Council for Composition, I have the privilege of scanning hundreds of student compositions each year while sending them to evaluators. The most recent group of compositions I reviewed were inspired by a variety of topics, ranging from a scene in a particular place, to an exhilarating experience, to a high school peer’s tragic death. Researchers have described similarly meaningful experiences for persons outside of K–12 music education. Hickey suggests that “[c]omposition has the potential to be more powerful than other musical activities students experience in schools. Composition gives students a chance to express their thoughts and emotions without having to explain anything to anybody.”

It is my hope that this article has offered ideas that you might consider as points of departure in your own setting. Creating a compositional community within your classroom offers students opportunities to engage with the human impulse to create by participating in one of the most complex dimensions of musical thought we can offer our students.

Notes


“Now to consult the rules of composition before making a picture is a little like consulting the law of gravitation before going for a walk. Such rules and laws are deduced from the accomplished fact; they are the products of reflection.”
—Edward Weston, 20th-century American photographer, quoted in brainyquotes.com