



Creating in the Music Classroom

by: Kim Holster

Music is one of the creative arts. To create, according to Webster's New World Dictionary, is to originate or give rise to something new. But most music students spend the majority of their time in music class working with someone else's music under yet another person's direction. Whether the music is from a long dead famous composer's repertoire or the music teacher's curriculum, students work on literature that is not their own. They have little say in how it sounds. They spend very little time creating. Yet when asked, most students will tell you that their favorite part of class is when they get to compose their own music. As teachers, we need to help students find ways to make their own music so that they can interact with music independently outside the confines of the music room and music class.

Can we walk into class at the beginning of the year, semester or marking period and expect that students will be successful composers? Yes. If we don't believe this we do our students a great disservice. They will need help, but everyone can create music in some form. We do need to structure and scaffold lessons so that students are given the tools needed to make their own music. We need to take time to study the music of others. Thinking about an existing piece of music is a terrific learning tool. But we need to take the lesson one step further and ask students to create their own music based on what they've already learned. For example, if students are studying music in the call and response form, then let them create their own call and response. By actively creating music, they will make call and response their own and remember it much better than if we were to simply present a listening lesson or teach a rote song.

So how do we help students create successfully? Breaking down the process into manageable steps is one way to

accomplish this goal. The creative process is a general umbrella under which composing falls. The steps described below can easily be adapted to the specifics of other disciplines as needed.

1. Brainstorming

It is difficult to create if one doesn't have a place to start. So begin by brainstorming and experimenting. There is real value in giving students time to just play instruments to see what they can do. The same is true for their voices. How many different sounds can they make? High sounds? Low sounds? Harmony? Unconventional sounds? How many different sound effects can students get from a single sheet of paper? Let students have fun. Remind students to jot down ideas so that they will be able to use them later. This is where the process of creation begins.

2. Composing a Rough Draft Part I

Staring at the blank page is the most difficult part of composing. The empty space looks daunting and it stares back daring the composer to put some kind of a mark on it. But once the page is no longer blank, the initial fear of "I can't do this" goes away. Give the students some parameters to help them get past the blank page. Ask students to use some of their brainstorming ideas. How can they expand upon some of the ideas they've already written down? The rough draft doesn't have to be in conventional notation. It just needs to be in a form that the students can use to organize some of the musical thoughts from brainstorming. They need to know that they have permission to make as many mistakes as necessary to achieve the desired sound. Remind them to arrange and rearrange the sounds, change octaves, add harmony and the like. And remember, nothing is set in stone at this point.

3. Editing

Once a rough draft is complete, it is helpful to get feedback from others. This is where editing is important. The composer needs to go over the work to make sure that everything is organized, as the composer wants. The composition also needs enough structure to be able to be interpreted by someone else. Asking students to peer edit is one method for students to check their work and exchange ideas. Constructive criticism is a good way for students to catch mistakes and make improvements to the piece. Finally, the teacher may want to take a look to make sure that the students have followed the parameters of the project and the music is notated in an acceptable form.

Rough Draft Part II (and Part III and Part IV...)

Once editing is completed, it is time for the composer to play around with some of the suggestions given by others. A guideline to follow: keep what works and change what doesn't. Students quickly realize that there is more than one answer regarding what sounds good and what doesn't. (Arguments and discussions during the editing process will provide numerous examples for class discussion.) Students also learn that there is more than one possible "correct" way to improve the composition. Allow students time to make any desired changes and then edit again. At this point, the teacher needs to step back from the project. Students need to take ownership of the music. They need to be in charge of making the decisions, the good ones and the bad ones. The teacher might not make the same choices as a student composer, but as long as the parameters of the project are fulfilled, the composer needs to be in charge. Sometimes, making bad decisions are the best learning experiences.

Final Copy

Once editing is complete, a final copy of some form needs to be completed. In aural tradition, nothing would be written down. Teaching others and sharing the music is the final copy. However, most music of today is notated. Whether it is hand written or printed on a computer the music needs to be in the agreed upon format and legible enough to be shared with others. It does not necessarily need to be in standard notation. However, the notation does need to follow the parameters of the project.

Sharing

Sharing compositions could be as formal as a public performance or as informal as everyone seated in a circle on the floor in a classroom. There are, of course, varying degrees of performance practices in between these two opposites. Whatever the forum, students need to take sharing their compositions seriously. Respect for the music and the hard work of the composers is essential.

The creative process does not have to be complicated. However, in its musical form, students may be asked to complete a task that is new to them. In order to encourage success, students need to have a model that they can refer to when composing. An authentic model is one in which the students watch as the composition process unfolds before them. Using the steps described above, the teacher can demonstrate for the class how to compose a piece of music using the same parameters requested of the students.

A good method of demonstration is to pretend to be an actor and create a monologue that allows the students to hear what the teacher is thinking while the composing is taking place. Try to anticipate questions that students might have as they are composing and "think out loud" about some of them during the monologue. "How many beats does that note get?" "Which fret on the guitar is C?" "How do I write out these notes if I want them to happen at the same time?" There is no way to anticipate every question, but just by posing them and demonstrating how to find the answers, students will begin to understand that they do not need to have all of the answers to be successful.

During the editing portion of the demonstration, ask the students to edit the composition. Play it or sing it and ask the

students to critique what they heard. Make some mistakes that they could help fix. Perform other parts well so that they have some compliments to share. Once the class has discussed some of their observations, incorporate some of them into the composition. Repeat drafting and editing process a few times, as time allows, so that students understand the editing process. Class dissension is good. It provides the opportunity to discuss the idea that there is more than one opinion about the music and that ultimately the composer must decide whether to accept or reject the suggestions given.

Demonstrate how the final copy should look and sound. If it is to be finished on the computer, make sure the students know how to use the software. If hand written copies are to be turned in, then students need to know where and how notation is to be placed on the page.

For some classes, demonstrating the entire composition process all at once works well. For others demonstrating each step in the process individually over a series of class days is more successful. Knowing the learning style of the students in the class will help determine which approach to take. Like composition itself, there is more than one "right" way to teach.

Composition is a process to be used throughout the year. Not all compositions need to be long. Nor do they necessarily need to follow as formal a plan as the one stated above. Start with composing two or four measure phrase endings as a class. It is a small composing activity that will preview other projects throughout the year. Like any other skill, students need to practice regularly to improve.

As teachers, we have to do more than to create a passive audience for the future. Today's students need to believe that have the power and creativity to contribute to the music of tomorrow. From movies, to TV, radio and video games, music is in the media. From sports to different therapies, music is in the mind and the body. From lullabies in a baby's bedroom to a concert stage, music is in our hearts. Let's help students be a part of shaping the future of music by helping them learn how to create it.

Kim Holster teaches general music in Mansfield, MA. She is a member of the MMEA Editorial Board, and edits the "General Music" column of the Massachusetts Music News.

Resources for Composing in the General Music Classroom

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