



School Orchestra

Composition in the Orchestra Classroom

More than just meeting the Graduation Standards

by Michael Watson

Imagine a Language Arts class where students only read books, but never wrote any papers. Students would not have as deep an understanding about what they read unless they understood what went into writing the book; students need to learn to write to deepen their understanding about what they read. National and State Standards are challenging us all to add composition to our music curriculum, but most of us have never done composition ourselves. Fortunately, it is not difficult to add composing to the current curriculum, and composing helps students better understand the music they read and perform on their instrument.

In my elementary orchestra classroom, I begin composition at the same time students are learning to read notes. When they have learned to play the D string notes, students write a solo for their instruments using the notes of the D string. I have learned to keep the assignments simple and very specific. Students have shown very creative ways to use these very simple requirements. I have also learned to include the following checklist of elements they need to include in their composition:

1. Your instrument's clef
2. Sharps or flats (the key signature for the piece)
3. Time signature
4. The correct number of beats per measure
5. Last note must be open D (for D string assignment)
6. Give the piece a Title when done

Their piece is not complete until it has all of these elements. Students are also encouraged to edit their piece until it sounds musical to them. Some students prefer to experiment on their instrument before writing out their composition. Others prefer to write

something on paper first and then play the composition and edit it to make it sound good. Once a student's composition is complete and they are satisfied with the way it sounds, I have them perform the piece in groups of four or five students. We discuss what they like about the piece and also make suggestions for improving the composition. As students advance you can provide rubrics for evaluating compositions. These rubrics can help guide the composition process and focus discussion about the composition. There are several excellent articles by Maud Hickey listed at the end of this article describing how to create effective rubrics.

Throughout the year students are required to use whatever notes and rhythms are newest to them in their compositions. For beginning students this means that their ability to compose grows with their ability to play their instrument and read music. However, some students come to the school program already playing their instrument. These students usually need to begin composing very simple pieces that are below their playing ability. Once they are comfortable with the basics of composing, I add more complexity until they are composing at their playing level. In my composition packets I use the following sequence for the first few assignments:

1. Compose 4 measures on D string using quarter notes or quarter rests.
2. Compose 4 measures using the notes of the D Major scale and quarter notes or rests.
3. Compose a variation on one of our concert songs using eighth notes and quarter notes.

By the second year students are writing assignments like these:

1. Compose a duet, trio or quartet for

- you and a friend or friends to play.
2. Compose a melodic variation over the following chords.
3. Compose a twelve-measure piece in the style of one of our concert songs.
4. Compose using unusual sounds you find on your instrument with a notation system you invent.

Students enjoy coming up with their own notation system. This can be a great way to get students thinking about how music notation came about. When students create their own notation methods, I like to record them performing their pieces. I also have them teach their notation system and composition to someone else. There are several examples of student created notations in the Uptis' *Can I Play You My Song? The Compositions and Invented Notations of Children*.

Students also enjoy making up fun sounds that they don't normally play. In an assignment I use, the students are required to come up with at least three different sounds and use those sounds in a composition. When using unusual sounds students use non-traditional notation that they create for each sound. There are several examples of this type of assignment in Paytner's *Sound & Structure*.

Spotlight on Strings by Gazda and Stoutamire is one of the few method books that include composition assignments. However, it is very easy to create your own composition assignments to supplement whatever method you use. While composing helps students learn important concepts, it is really about students writing music that they enjoy. Duke Ellington said it best, "when it sounds good, it is good."

Resources for more information:

Hickey, Maud. "An Application of Amabile's Consensual Assessment Technique for

Rating the Creativity of Children's Musical Compositions." *Journal of Research in Music Education* 49 (3), pp.234-244

Hickey, Maud. "Assessment Rubrics for Music Composition." *Music Educators Journal*. January 1999. pp. 26-33, 52

Hickey, Maud. "Teaching Ensembles to Compose and Improvise." *Music Educators Journal*. May 1997. pp. 17 to 21

Paytner, John. *Sound & Structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992 (contains excellent lesson plans)

Upitis, Rena. *Can I Play You My Song? The Compositions and Invented Notations of Children*. Portsmouth, NH:

Heinemann, 1991

Internet Resources:

Creating Music - <http://www.creatingmusic.com/>
Tools for creating and exploring music. Students can compose online and listen to their composition.

Finale Notepad - <http://www.codamusic.com/coda/np.asp>
Free music notation software.

MICNET - <http://collaboratory.acns.nwu.edu/micnet/index.html>
Sample lesson plans. Students can also post their compositions online and receive feedback from other educators and music education students.

Michael Watson is an elementary orchestra teacher in Eden Prairie Schools, a member of the Hamline University music faculty, and teaches private bass students at his home in North Oaks. He is also an active performer and has performed with numerous groups including the Minnesota Opera, Plymouth Music Series and Minnesota Sinfonia. Michael is a graduate of the Eastman School of Music, the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, and St. Cloud State University. ‡