

All-State: Theory is AWESOME: Strategies for Integrating Music Theory into the String Classroom

presented by Dr. Brenda Brenner — reported by Connie Aiken

Music Education consists of training students not only to play their instruments but also to understand what they are playing. Without music theory, interpretation is formed by opinion and performance becomes a rote, physical exercise instead of an art. The goal of moving students from being mechanical robots to genuine musicianship by internalizing and comprehending the language of music should shape every rehearsal. In the MNSOTA String Teacher's Workshop, *Theory is AWESOME: Strategies for Integrating Music Theory into the String Classroom*, Dr. Brenda Brenner outlined and demonstrated methods of teaching theory as a daily component of orchestra curriculum. The resources she presented apply to goals that I set last spring when I presented my master's certification project on the effectiveness of online theory instruction in the orchestra classroom. The on-going development of my certification project centers on bridging a theoretical understanding of music theory to intelligent performance. Dr. Brenner's session fits with Mounds View Schools' curriculum directive that focuses on an extensive transfer of memorized facts to application so that students see the real-life value of their learning. This paper will expand Dr. Brenner's framework of theory related activities and will serve as a resource for my next school year.

1. Listening and Movement

Starting class with rhythmic gestures sets an instant atmosphere for work, expands the musical languages (styles) that students have heard, focuses concentration, and reinforces rhythmic pulse. Middle school students can direct their minds away from the distractions they encountered during passing time and begin to think musically. Listening can feature the repertoire that we will be playing that day, string music with alternative styles, or classics that every string student should know. Opening class by listening for tone and moving with freedom also prepares for a warm up characterized by open ears and keen awareness of muscle use. The gestures that Dr. Brenner used can be combined with Janet Horvath's stretches to "play less hurt." My efforts in the past to warm up with a musical stretch have been inconsistent because of lack of planning

as to what to play next. If I have a list to check off and a routine that reigns over the tyranny of the urgent, listening and moving should be more consistent next year. Listed below are 15 recordings per grade level that I have chosen for movement warm ups. This list would be supplemented with recordings of their concert repertoire. Each selection is played repeatedly for about a week. Between the recordings that I choose, students can bring in recordings for extra credit.

Grade 7

Fall: *Autumn* from the *Four Seasons* by Vivaldi; *Brandenburg 5*, 1st movement by Bach; *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* by Mozart; *Surprise Symphony* by Haydn; *Symphony #5* by Beethoven

Winter: *Nutcracker Suite* by Tchaikovsky; *Winter* from the *Four Seasons*. Solo Concertos for each stringed instrument: Mendelssohn *Violin Concerto*; Telemann *Viola Concerto*; Haydn *Cello Concerto*; Bottesini *Bass Concerto*

Spring: *Spring* from the *Four Seasons*; *Orpheus and the Underworld* by Offenbach. Fiddle: Ireland String Quartet. Jazz: Turtle Island String Quartet—*Skylife* or *Julie-O*. Rock: *Viva la Vida*

Last day of school: *Beethoven's Wig* (fun CD for kids with silly words added to the recording)

Grade 8

Fall: Prepare a chamber ensemble "gig" folder that is reinforced by listening. Pachelbel *Canon*; *Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring* by Bach; *Brandenburg Concerto No. 3* by Bach; *Hornpipe* by Handel; *Theme from Masterpiece Theater* by Mouret

Winter: *Hallelujah Chorus* from the *Messiah*. Representative pieces from each period of music history: Renaissance—Orlande de Lassus for Viola da Gamba; Baroque—*Concerto Grosso* in G Major by Handel; Classical—*Symphony No. 40* by Mozart; Romantic—*New World Symphony* by Dvorak; Contemporary—*Fanfare for the Common Man* by Ives

Spring: *Finale from Serenade for Strings* by Tchaikovsky; Mendelssohn *String Symphony No. 5 in D Major*; Mozart *Sinfonia Concertante*. Chamber Music: *Trout Quintet* by Schubert; *American String Quartet* by

Dvorak

Last day of school: *Summer* from the *Four Seasons*

2. Solfeggio ear training

Dr. Brenner transforms singing do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do into a gym workout by tapping eight spots on her body from toe to head establishing a pitch ladder for tonality and intervals. Singing with reluctant string players becomes possible by requesting "say it with me" knowing that eventually it will be easier to sing than to talk. By remaining within an octave from middle C up, she avoids the vocal register break and makes learning to sing more comfortable. A moveable "do" grows a sense of tonality more than a fixed "do" centered on C. There is a progression from general high and low pitches to scales, simple tunes, canons, intervals, and finally chords. Developing an inner ear is nurtured by students singing what she motions. Dictation and "composition" start with specific, limited parameters that can be easily performed by the listener or composer. Transcribing what is heard and sung to written symbols transfers ear training skills to note reading facility.

A lesson plan goal of using a minute of solfeggio each day seems feasible in my classroom. In the past, my instruction using solfeggio in ear training has been minimal: a brief explanation, labeling of *Joy to the World* in their theory book, and then telling the group that they will work on solfeggio in greater detail in high school and college. A conceivable curriculum outline for grade 7 would be to sing high and low in conjunction with stretching, introduce the "Sunflower Song" body motions for solfeggio, sing scales and, by the end of the year, simple tunes. Listed below are simple tunes that kids might enjoy singing in solfeggio. Grade 8 would increase their expertise to include intervals (in this order: octave, m2, M3, P5, P4, m3, M6, M7, M2, TT, m6, m7), dictation, and outlining chords. My reticence to include solfeggio in our rehearsals was challenged by Dr. Brenner's conviction that solfeggio exercises open the ear and internalize theory concepts. Since most college theory programs utilize solfeggio, and our school's mantra now is to prepare students for post-secondary success

in all subjects, I need to try to include some solfeggio each day.

Tunes for Solfeggio:

Twinkle; Adam's Family; Merrily We Row Along; Ode to Joy; O When the Saints; O Susanna; In the Jungle from Lion King; Buffalo Gals; In Dreams from Lord of the Rings; Here Comes the Bride; Yankee Doodle; Old MacDonald; Long Long Ago; Simple Gifts; BINGO; On Top of Old Smokey; Heart and Soul; Baby Bumblebee; My Favorite Things.

Between well-known tunes, I hope to insert movie and pop tune fragments that the kids know or suggest.

3. Rhythmic ear training

Indiana University uses the Chev  system of ta's and ti ti's and with eurhythmics to teach rhythm. I was surprised to hear that a highly esteemed university would use a system for children instead of the traditional 1e&a 2e&a number system. In teaching rhythm, I have found syllables to be more effective in teaching students without a natural feel for the beat and without strong spatial reasoning ability to decipher and perform rhythms. Since my job is to prepare students for high school, I will defer to the new high school orchestra teacher's preference in teaching rhythm. We are meeting before school starts to discuss alignment between middle school and high school curriculum. After hearing Dr. Brenner, I am open to the Chev  system. With whatever counting method we choose, the intermediate step of using speech based syllables before moving to numbers makes

sense to me and fits with my experience in teaching students with a broad range of backgrounds.

4. Additional theory resources

Once students have an experiential foundation in theory, Dr. Brenner moves them into traditional written theory or to web based methods. *From Sight to Sound*, a book by Nicole Brockmann on applying improvisational skills to the classical student's training, was highly recommended by Dr. Brenner. I ordered the book and look forward to using this resource. She also mentioned a theory game modeled after Hangman called AWE-SOME that would be easier to use in small classes and a non-competitive atmosphere than in my classroom at Chippewa. The idea of using a game to reinforce theory learning would be very motivating, even if it is not AWESOME. In my beginning years of teaching, another colleague used a variation on Jeopardy. A contest for saying letter names fastest originates with basketball's "Around the World" free throw practice. A few theory websites, Staff Wars and Tonic Tutor, were suggested to review letter names on the staff. Flipped instruction, videotaping a lecture at home and working on problems in class where there is help to apply the lecture, is becoming a normal method of delivery for theory classes. At Indiana University, all theory classes will soon have online components in their curriculum. The way theory is taught is changing at all levels. Even with advanced concepts, Dr. Brenner supplements with a kinesthetic approach.

Written assignments and computer tools are helpful, but music is sound in motion. Active learning has much merit.

5. Conclusion

Theory taught by movement, singing, solfeggio, rhythm syllables, online interactive websites, and theory games should help students make concrete connections with abstract concepts. I look forward to trying many of Dr. Brenner's ideas in the next school year. When students are fully engaged in learning, their retention rate for new knowledge is high. Not only was material presented to help me fully engage my students, Dr. Brenner fully engaged my concentration. Attending a session where almost everything that she taught us has immediate application in my classroom is rare and greatly appreciated. I am thankful to MNSOTA for arranging this workshop and inviting Dr. Brenner to present her ideas.

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