

# All-State: Using Noteflight to Teach Composition in Orchestra

presented by Dr. Sarah Miller and Dan Mollick — reported by Sarah Duffy

Dr. Sarah Miller, composer and teacher from the MacPhail Center for Music, and Dan Mollick, orchestra director at Valley View Middle School in Edina, presented a session on how to use Noteflight to teach composition in orchestra. Noteflight is an online music writing application. Dan hires Sarah to come in and work with his students on a composing project each year.

They started their presentation by answering the basic question, “Why should I teach composition to my students?” Their reasons were quite compelling. Composition helps students move beyond the thinking of music as an artifact, instead seeing it as something organic and always changing. Students will start to see more things in the scores they play, such as dynamics, articulation, and form, and therefore they will play more musically. Students will develop a deeper and more meaningful understanding of music. By making their own choices as composers, they will be able to think more critically about the decisions other composers have made. Composition encourages the highest order thinking skills—process and create. Students will get to create their very own “magic,” and they enjoy hearing performances of their own pieces.

Next, they explained why they chose to use Noteflight. As said above, it is an online music notation application. It works on all devices, including Chromebooks. This is ideal for schools where students have access to a variety of devices at home and at school. Gone are the days of walking your class down to the one computer in the lab in the building that has Finale installed on the computers. Instead, students can access their work from any device, at any time. Teachers are also able to view student work “live,” and create templates for students to use through the Noteflight Learn.

Noteflight Learn <https://www.noteflight.com/learn> charges a fee per student for one year of access. The teacher is able to set up a private site for a class, which only members of the class can view. Students can then share their scores within the group for feedback or collaboration, or they have the option to keep their scores private. Subgroups can also be created, and students can be assigned to them by the teacher. The setup process is quick and easy, and login is easy on the student end, too.

This is the pricing information from the Noteflight Learn website: “Noteflight Learn is sold as an annual subscription. The price is \$69 for 10 users, and each additional user is only \$2. Content Libraries can be added for an additional \$5 per user.”

Dan and Sarah shared some keys to success. One, step-by-step instructions are essential. Next, the first assignment should be simply to copy something into Noteflight from their method book. This will give students a chance to practice note entry before tackling something more creative. Encourage the students to help one another. Some students are more techie than others. Make it a rule that students have to ask another student before asking the teacher.

Set clear parameters for the students so they have some direction. Dan uses a rubric that is fairly technical, but he has found that it is very helpful to the students. Students can still be creative within the framework, but there isn't any penalty for being a novice composer. The students benefit from having very clear guidelines that they can grab onto.

Lastly, teach students how to use some simple and easy shortcuts. There is a full “cheat sheet” available online, but it can be overwhelming for some students. Dan and Sarah recommend creating your own document that highlights only the most common

shortcuts your students will need to use.

Next, Dan and Sarah discussed the end products and the workshop process.

The final product for students in 7<sup>th</sup> grade is an ABA melody with ostinato. 8<sup>th</sup> grade students write an eight-measure melody with chords. In 9<sup>th</sup> grade, the students compose an ABA melody with chords in four parts—violin, viola, cello, bass. The students also have the option to add an introduction and/or a coda.

Sarah creates a “Telling a Story” chart where students set up the characters for their song. She suggests having five characters/moods, and then eight parameters—mode/key, register, pitch variation (steps, skips, repeats), speed, rhythm variation, meter, articulations/grace notes, and dynamics. The example we ended up exploring was “JOLLY,” and this is what our group came up with. The process of discussing these elements could be very useful for any student group:

- Character name/type: JOLLY
- Mode: G major
- Register: high
- Pitch variation (steps, skips, repeats): skips
- Speed: medium-fast or fast
- Rhythm variation: mixture
- Meter (regular or irregular): 2/4
- Use of articulations (slurs, staccato, accents) and grace notes (“is it smooth or bumpy?”): bumpy!
- Dynamics, variations in dynamics: mf

After the group comes up with the parameters, it's time to let students start composing their “jolly” melody.

The students discuss the nature of notes within a scale. The stable tones are 1, 3, 5. The active tones are 2 and 6. 4 and 7 are the “wild children.”

After the melody is composed, enter the scale degrees above each note. Dan and Sarah provide a chart for students that shows what chords will work with each scale degree, and then the students go through and write in Roman numerals, usually one-two chords per measure.

Then, the students use another chart showing the chord notes within their given key. They add a bass clef line and then use the keyboard to enter chords—“make a snowman.” By using keyboard note entry, the students don't need to know the clef. They only need to know that they need a “G,” or whatever note is needed.

The students then work on voice leading. The song should start and end on root position chords. Students are encouraged to “smooth out” the chords for the rest of the song. They can usually do this visually, without worrying about the “rules” of voice leading.

Then, the students add the additional parts needed. They copy the chords into the other lines, and then delete the applicable notes for that instrument (such as, delete the top and bottom notes for the viola, and leave the middle).

Dan has found that it is most useful to do small amounts of work on this project each week, as opposed to trying to do a lot at one time. Giving students a full class period can lead to less productivity. It is also helpful to give ideas some time to “percolate,” and it gives students more time to be successful. He strongly encouraged teachers to bring in a composer-in-residence, such as

Sarah, if possible.

As we worked through the process ourselves, it was easy to see why this experience could be so valuable for students at all levels. It teaches musicianship, theory, form, expression, etc. etc. in a deep and meaningful way. Students are forced to engage with music at the highest possible levels, leading to increased knowledge and understanding. Their examples are from a unit for students in grades 7-9, but it would be easy to adapt these lessons for older and younger students,

or adapt it from a school environment to a studio environment.

Noteflight is a wonderful program that is easy to use and access across many different devices. Students enjoy collaborating, sharing, and exploring each other's works. Noteflight Learn might be cost-prohibitive, depending on how many students you have, but there is a free option that works well.

This session was a good reminder of the importance of teaching composition in a performance-based class. If we really want

our students to be independent, creative, and knowledgeable musicians, this is an absolutely essential part of our lessons. I look forward to exploring the ideas shared by Dan and Sarah in my elementary classes this year.

*Dan Mollick can be reached at [daniel.mollick@edinaschools.org](mailto:daniel.mollick@edinaschools.org). Dr. Sarah Miller can be reached at [miller.sarah@macphail.org](mailto:miller.sarah@macphail.org). Sarah Duffy teaches elementary school in the Mounds View District. †*