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MIDDLE SCHOOL STRING IMPROVISATION AND COMPOSITION:
A BEGINNING

By

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B.S. in Education, Northern State University, Aberdeen, SD, 1995

Professional Paper

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Middle School String Improvisation and Composition: A Beginning

Committee Chair: Dorothy Morrison

This project involved of a middle school orchestra teacher's first attempt at teaching improvisation and composition. The journey began by teaching the basic steps in playing a twelve bar chord progression. Improvised rhythms played on one note were integrated into the progression. The students discovered how to create an improvised melody by playing two notes in a rhythmic pattern. Additional notes were added gradually. The students were asked to notate their improvised melodies and create new compositions using the same technique. After completing their composition, a narrative was written describing their melody and their experiences while composing music. A performance of their melody, with the orchestra accompanying, completed the project.

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PROJECT INTENT

The intent of this project was to present to my middle school students the necessary tools to enable them to improvise, compose, and present music in its symbolic form. My hope was that this project would instill a greater confidence in my students' musical creativity. Through this project they were exposed to unfamiliar musical styles which gave them a greater understanding of musical culture.

My intent as an educator was to take a risk in teaching a concept in which I have not been trained. My experience prior to this project was limited, so I hoped to gain a deeper understanding of improvisation and composition and their educational benefits. As a classically trained violinist, I also hoped to achieve a deeper level of comfort in improvising and creating melodies.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

In addition to playing violin in traditional string and symphony orchestras for twenty-four years, I have taught elementary and middle school orchestra for the past ten years. However, my experience in playing and teaching string improvisation has been minimal. The decision to explore string improvisation and composition with my students stemmed from a desire to explore national standards in which I had minimal training. The third and fourth standards of the National Standards for Music Education¹ state that students should be taught

- Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments
- Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines.

As a result of these standards, an alternative style of string playing has made its way into string programs across the country. While attending the American String Teacher Association's 2005 convention, I attended several sessions on improvisation. Many of the sessions focused on how to build a program centered on improvisation or how to develop individual players' fiddling techniques, such as note and rhythm patterns, ornaments, and listening. I must admit, I left the sessions feeling overwhelmed and inadequate. Not being trained in improvisation myself, I had difficulty embracing how I could teach it to my students. Indeed, as I researched this project, I still found it difficult to find a concrete approach that would fit into my current curriculum.

This project was chosen partly as an impetus for me to take the leap I should have taken some time ago. My research included reading Julie Lyonn Lieberman's,²

¹ MENC: The National Association for Music Education. National Standards for Music Education.

² Julie Lyonn Lieberman is an improvising violinist, singer, composer, educator, recording artist, author, and producer. Formerly on faculty at Juilliard, New York University, and The New School University's Jazz Program, she now teaches privately in her NYC studio.

Alternative Strings: the New Curriculum and watching the DVD, *Techniques for the Contemporary String Player*, also by Ms. Lieberman. *Alternative Strings* provides a detailed history of many types of fiddle playing such as Bluegrass, Acadian, Celtic, Blues, and Jazz. The book also includes a list of artists who excel in each area with examples of CD's exhibiting their technique. In *Techniques for the Contemporary String Player*, Ms. Lieberman demonstrates different bow hand and left hand techniques used in various styles of fiddling. While these resources provided much needed background in improvisation, they did not provide concrete examples for how I could teach it to my students. I tried using the *Fiddler's Philharmonic* curriculum written by Andrew H. Dabczynski & Bob Phillips but felt using this printed approach to improvisation wouldn't fulfill the creative intent of this project. Thus, I shared my frustrations with the band instructor at my middle school, Gary Hansen. His suggestion for an approach using the 12-bar blues made sense. It was practical and applicable to what I was trying to achieve: teaching my students how to create a melody on top of a chord structure. Moreover, in "Teaching Improvisation in the School Orchestra: *Classical Practical Approaches*", Dr. Robert Gillespie³ suggests using a chordal approach to improvisation that supported Mr. Hansen's approach. Bob Phillips'⁴ article *Developing Improvisational Skills in the String Orchestra* concurs.

This was a process I felt I could master and one in which my students, who have little or no improvisational experience, would find success. My students and I completed this project in May 2007.

³ Bob Gillespie, professor of music, is responsible for string teacher training at The Ohio State University, which has one of the largest and most extensive string pedagogy degree programs in the nation.

⁴ An expert in the use of folk fiddling and jazz in the string orchestra, Bob Phillips taught twenty-seven years in the Saline Area Schools, building a string program with over 700 students that is a national model of excellence in both classical and alternative music.

STUDENT BACKGROUND

This project was created for and taught to fifty-five students in my seventh and eighth grade orchestra classes at West Middle School in Rapid City, South Dakota. The majority of students began playing their instrument in fourth grade orchestra. Three students began at a younger age through the Black Hills Suzuki School. Nineteen students study with a private instructor in addition to their participation in school orchestra.

Classes in the fourth and fifth grade are held twice a week. The students come to orchestra five days a week beginning in sixth grade. Techniques are taught through scales, exercises, and musical literature. Students participate in a holiday concert in December, a city-wide orchestra festival in March (Strings In Concert), Solo and Ensemble in April, and conclude with a Pops Concert in May. A guest clinician works with the Strings In Concert orchestras, and the students are required to audition for their chair. Music for each event is chosen with the express purpose of furthering the orchestra's technical ability.

Few, if any, students had been exposed to the level of improvisation and composition this project afforded.

PROJECT PLAN

The following is the lesson plan progression I followed to teach the unit on improvisation and composition.

The unit was taught to students in 7th and 8th grade orchestra during a two week time period. The orchestras met during two separate class periods, and so the lesson was taught twice; first to the 8th grade and then the 7th grade.

I had the following objectives for my students:

1. Learn the 12-Bar chord structure.
2. Improvise rhythms on one note.
3. Improvise using two notes.
4. Compose using four notes.
5. Compose using all eight notes of the scale.
6. Listen to examples of Bluegrass, Irish, and Jazz string improvisation for style characteristics.
7. Add ornaments, if desired.
8. Write the composed melody on staff paper.
9. Write a narrative about the created melody.
10. Perform the melody for the class.

The students were given a handout with the notes of each chord written in octaves. Included on this handout were numbered scale degrees of the D-Major scale and the 12-bar chord progression. The progression is

I – I – I – I – IV – IV – I – I – V – IV – I – I

The creative unit began with teaching the 12-bar chord progression. The students were asked to play each chord as one measure in a 4/4 time signature. They were asked to create a rhythm the class then played for 12-bars.

The students progressively added notes on top of the chords, making sure to use scale degrees that fit the chord. Volunteers demonstrated their creations, and we played it as a class. As they become more comfortable with the process, they played their creation

as a solo, with the rest of the class accompanying. They were asked to write their composed melodies on manuscript paper. Various ornaments were demonstrated, and the students added them to their melodies if they desired.

The students were asked to write a narrative describing their composition. The narrative included a story inspired by the melody and describes the individual's thoughts and feelings regarding improvisation and composition.

A performance for the class of their composition completed the unit. Reading the narrative was omitted if the student felt uncomfortable sharing.

PROCESS

Using the Project Plan as a guide, the following is a detailed account of each step of the plan.

Learn the 12-Bar Chord Structure

The students were given a handout (see Appendix A on page 26 for handouts given to each instrument) on which I wrote the notes of each chord in octaves, the notes of the D-Major scale with scale degrees, and the 12-bar chord progression. Figures 1-3 below show the notes of the chords.

Figure 1. Notes of the “I” chord in treble clef



Figure 2. Notes of the “IV” chord in treble clef



Figure 3. Notes of the “V” chord in treble clef



The three notes of the chord were identified as the first, second, and third note of the chord. We began by playing each chord on the rhythm found in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Quarter note rhythm



The students were instructed to choose either the first, second, or third note of the chord to be played for the duration of the measure. The students had difficulty choosing

which note to play, so I assigned each instrument a note. The cello and bass players were asked to play the first note of the chord, the viola and some violin players played the second note, and the rest of the violins were asked to play the third. We played the chord progression several times with success before I asked them to try choosing notes again. They then played the progression with ease.

Improvise Rhythms on One Note

After successfully playing the progression using the rhythm in Figure 4 on page 7, students were asked to play the same progression using a new rhythm shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. New rhythm



We found that bowings⁵ needed to be added to play the rhythm with the correct articulation. Therefore, I modeled several bowings, and the class decided which would work best for them. The progression was played accurately with the new rhythm and bowings. Again, students were asked to remain on one note for the duration of the measure.

Next, the students were asked to create a new rhythm and share it with the class. Several students played rhythms, which I notated on the board complete with bowings (see student created rhythms in APPENDIX B on page 30). We played the chord progression as a class with the improvised student rhythms. I was surprised at their level of enthusiasm. The 8th graders picked rhythms that were well-known but the 7th graders

⁵ Indicates which direction the bow will move: down or up. A “down bow” is used to create an accent whereas an “up bow” is chosen for a note that is not accented.

pleasantly surprised me by picking more complex rhythms. The creativity of the 7th graders suggested that they were perhaps less inhibited than the 8th graders.

Improvise Using Two Notes

After successfully creating a rhythm using one note, I asked the orchestra to improvise a melody using two notes in a rhythm each student created. The students were asked to “solo” their melody while the orchestra played the chord underneath. We started with the “I” chord. I asked them to pick a note of the chord, choose another note with a scale degree of 1, 2, 3, or 5, and play the two notes in an improvised rhythm. This proved to be a mistake. There was no masking the confusion on their faces. Some students valiantly tried to improvise, but most failed.

So, I changed course. Instead, I asked them to play a note of the chord and improvise using a *neighboring note* and a rhythm of their choosing. I demonstrated by playing a two-note melody on my violin while the orchestra played the chord using the rhythm in Figure 4 found on page 7. Time was given for the students to create a two-note melody. We started playing the chord, and I asked for volunteers to play their melody. One or two students volunteered, but the rest remained committed to only playing the chord. I stopped the orchestra and asked how many students were afraid to play their melody for fear the other students would laugh at them. A few students raised their hand. I asked if they didn’t want to play their melody because they thought their improvisation wasn’t very good. Practically everyone raised their hand. I shared with them my own insecurities about improvising. I told them that I didn’t think what I had demonstrated was anything special, but when we improvise, we have to take a risk. Improvising involves no wrong answers!

Following this, I asked the orchestra to play the chord again but this time, instead of asking for volunteers, I called individual students to play their melody. Everyone participated, and I made a special point to tell each student how fabulous their melody sounded.

Many students chose to improvise using a rhythm that had been demonstrated earlier, despite my encouragement to try something new. At the conclusion of the lesson, the students were asked to notate what they had played and create new two-note melodies at home. When they returned the next day with completed compositions, a few students volunteered to play their creations for the class. The improvised melodies were creative.

Compose Using Four Notes

Following the success of improvising using two notes, I took the class through the next step of improvisation and composition. This step added two additional notes to an improvised rhythm.

The rhythm in Figure 6 was written on the board.

Figure 6. Improvised Rhythm



Next, I wrote the numbers 1, 2, 3, & 5 on the board and had the class copy it onto the handout given previously (see Appendix A on page 26). I asked the students to find notes with scale degrees 1, 2, 3, or 5 on their handout and point to them. These were the notes they could use to create a melody on a “I” chord. Figure 7 illustrates the notes.

Figure 7. Scale degrees 1, 2, 3, & 5 in treble clef



To demonstrate for the students, I played the rhythm on my violin using the scale degrees in the order written on the board (1, 2, 3, & 5). Then, I played the rhythm with the scale degrees in a different order (i.e. 3, 1, 5, & 2) and explained that the order of scale degrees could be changed to create a different melody. To help the students understand, I explained that in Math the sum of $1+2+3+5$ is 11, but that the sum of $3+1+5+2$ also equals 11. The chosen order of the scale degrees wouldn't matter because in the end, they all made up a melody in the "I" chord. This made sense to them!

The students were then asked to write a combination of scale degrees on paper and then play the combination on their instrument using the rhythm provided. After a few minutes, I asked every student to play their combination with the rest of the orchestra accompanying on the chord. The newly composed melodies were creative, and the students were excited. I pointed out in the chord progression, the "I" chord is used in four consecutive measures. I asked if they thought they could create four different combinations of notes. They all agreed they could. Then, I asked if they thought they could create a different rhythm for each measure. They thought this was possible as well. The class was showing more confidence in the process than previously observed. This suggested they were ready to proceed to the next chord.

I wrote "IV" on the board with the numbers 4, 5, 6, & 8 next to it and asked if they could create a measure with these scale degrees. Figure 8 portrays the notes.

Figure 8. Scale degrees 4, 5, 6, & 8 in treble clef



Most went right to work creating a new pattern. A few students played their creations for the class.

The “V” chord uses the scale degrees 5, 6, 7, 2. Figure 9 depicts the notes. Again they were asked to create a melody for the “V” chord.

Figure 9. Scale degrees 5, 6, 7, & 2 in treble clef



Pointing to the 12-bar chord progression, I explained that their homework for the evening was to create a different melody for each measure using the chords as their guide. When asked if anyone was confused, only a couple of students raised their hands. As they left class talking with one another about their compositions, I was elated. We had made progress with improvisation and composition.

Composing Using All Eight Notes of the Scale

The students returned to class the next day with a few measures written but not the entire 12-bar melody. I realized I should have given them more time to create. Nevertheless, we proceeded with the next step in the process. I wrote the scale degrees for the “I” chord on the board and asked the students if they thought the 1, 2, 3, & 5 notes were the only notes that could be played during the “I” chord. They looked confused, so I played them the first measure of the Brandenburg Concerto #3, Second Movement, which contains an entire G-Major scale played on a “I” and a “V” chord. I asked if the measure contained notes other than the ones listed for the chords and if so, if it worked within the chord. They agreed that it worked. I wrote the scale degrees 4, 6, & 7 underneath the other numbers and called them “non-dominate”⁶ notes. Figure 10 below shows this.

⁶ This is a term I created and should not be considered a technical improvisation term. A better term would be researched before presenting the unit again.

Figure 10. Non-dominate notes in the “I” chord



Next, I explained that in a “I” measure *all* the notes of the scale can be used as long as the *strong beats* of the measure used the 1, 2, 3, or 5 scale degrees. The class still looked confused, so I provided an example. Using a new rhythm, I played the notes in the order shown below in Figure 11.

Figure 11. Scale degrees played in order



Figure 13. Non-dominate scale degrees in the “IV” chord



Figure 14 shows the non-dominate scale degrees in the “V” chord which are scale degrees 1, 3, & 4:

Figure 14. Non-dominate scale degrees in the “V” chord



At the conclusion of the lesson, the students were asked to re-write some of their measures to include the “non-dominate” notes. One student asked if she actually had to re-write what she had already written because she liked what she had and didn’t want to change it. I told her what she had was like macaroni and cheese from a box. Sure, it tastes good, and she enjoys it but wouldn’t it be fun to go to a nice restaurant and get even better macaroni and cheese that had more than one cheese and fancy spices added to it? She smiled, and said she’d change some measures. The students’ melody, narrative, and performance would be due within five to six days, and they were expected to have a few more measures prepared for the next class period.

Listen to Examples of Bluegrass, Irish, and Jazz String Improvisation for Style

Characteristics

For this project, CD excerpts were played throughout the course of the unit, demonstrating the styles of Bluegrass, Irish, and Jazz string improvisation. The orchestras were exposed to pieces played by masters of their craft. As we listened, I asked the students to pay particular attention to characteristics in each improvisational style.

In *Heartland: An Appalachian Anthology*, I played pieces that contained not only fiddle solos but also cello and bass solos. Classical violinist Joshua Bell and cellist Yo-Yo Ma joined crossover artist Edgar Meyer and roots-based musicians to compile this CD. I felt it was important for the students to hear classically trained artists excel at improvisation. The students identified the following characteristics of Bluegrass music: 1) rhythms are played primarily on the beat, 2) ornaments such as slides and multiple note grace notes are used, 3) double-stops (thirds, fourths, and sixths) are used, and 4) drones⁷ are commonly added for depth of tone.

Regina Carter's CD, *Rhythms of the Heart*, was used to introduce jazz fiddling. I picked the piece, "Oh, Lady, Be Good!" because it includes virtuosic solos by violinist Carter, guitarist Rodney Jones, pianist Werner "Vana" Gierig, bassist Peter Washington, and drummer Lewis Nash. The song begins as a slow ballad and then bursts into a full-blown Jazz extravaganza. I asked the students to pay particular attention to the accompanying instruments and what they were doing to support the solo. The students identified the following Jazz characteristics: 1) syncopated rhythms are predominating, 2) swing rhythms are used, 3) accents are placed on the off beats, and 4) ornaments include the use of a slow slide.

To hear traditional Irish fiddling, students listened to Kevin Burke's CD, *Sweeny's Dream: Fiddle Tunes from County Sligo, Ireland*. We also listened to excerpts from *Swagger* by Flogging Molly so they could hear the use of fiddle in Irish Punk. Mr. Burke plays a multitude of fiddle tunes to perfection and the students enjoyed listening to him, but what really caught their attention was Flogging Molly. They were thrilled to hear a fiddle play in a punk song. "This is the kind of music we listen to," one student

⁷ Drone: a continuous low tone produced by the bass strings of musical instruments.

exclaimed. The students identified the following characteristics of Irish fiddling: 1) triplets are used often, 2) multiple-note grace notes are used often as ornamentation, and 3) the up bow is often used on a strong beat as opposed to a weak beat.

Add Ornaments, If Desired

Following instruction on adding all notes of the scale to their composition, ornaments and their use in melody were explained.

Trills, single-note grace notes, multiple note grace notes, slides, and glissandos (ornaments) were demonstrated, and the students were given the option of adding them to their melody. I told the students that a musical ornament is just like a Christmas ornament: you add an ornament to an existing melody just as you add an ornament to an existing tree. A melody is beautiful with or without ornaments as is the tree. They were encouraged to choose a style for their melody – bluegrass, Irish, or jazz – and should add ornaments characteristic of that style. Each student was free to add ornaments as long as their use didn't distract from the beauty of the melody.

Write the Composed Melody on Staff Paper

At the conclusion of the instruction on improvising rhythm and melody, and the use of ornaments, the students were asked to notate their composition.

The students were given staff paper to compose their melody. After the steps of the process were completed, they were asked to submit a rough draft to me for corrections and suggestions. I played through each melody with the student present and made any necessary corrections in rhythm and notation. I also made suggestions of different note choices if the notes in the measure didn't follow the chord progression. I

played what they had written and then played a suggested change and asked them to choose which they preferred. Some students took the suggestions, while others chose to stay with their original melody. They were asked to write their revised final draft on a Final Assignment Sheet (see Final Assignment sheet in Appendix C on page 31).

Write a Narrative about the Created Melody

A song often tells a story and the students' newly created melodies were no exception. They were instructed to write a brief story that was inspired by their melody or by the process of creating their melody (see the instructions in Appendix D on page 33). I told them the story need not be more than a paragraph but it had to be about their song. I also asked them to include a paragraph describing their experiment with improvisation. They were asked to answer the following questions:

- Were you excited or nervous when we began the unit on improvisation? Did you “freak out” at all?
- Were Ms. Schnittgrund's explanations easy to understand?
- Were you confused and if so, what did you do to end the confusion?
- How did you feel after completing your 12-bar melody?
- Were you pleased with the finished product?
- Will you continue writing music?

I wanted to know how this project personally affected them. A space was provided on the Final Assignment Sheet (see Appendix C on page 31) for them to write their story and personal experience. I knew from my own history that the act of creating something new can be a frightening and confusing experience. Creating is deeply personal, and for students in middle school, putting yourself in front of others can be an overwhelming experience. I felt it was important for them to process the experience.

The students' stories were brief yet entertaining. Several students wrote a detailed story and others wrote little. Their individual response to the experience was intriguing. Several students admitted the project intimidated them, but acknowledged that after instruction was given, they were less afraid. A fair number of students were pleased with their final project, while others felt their composition wasn't very good. Some students said they would continue writing, but quite a few surprised me by admitting they didn't wish to continue writing music.

Performance

A performance was scheduled for the students to play their melodies with an orchestral accompaniment. We began by rehearsing the 12-bar progression, using the rhythm in Figure 4 on page 7. The students were given an opportunity to practice with the orchestra accompaniment. After several rehearsals, they were asked to play their melody.

A few students met with me privately and expressed fear in playing their melody in front of the class. I agreed to play alongside them if it would help. Several students in my orchestra struggle to keep up with the rest of the class. Their melodies were good, for the most part, and I wanted to maintain their feeling of accomplishment. The last thing I wanted was for them to feel discouraged by their performance. I am extremely proud of their work.

I am not entirely pleased with the students' final performance of their melody for several reasons. First, they were not prepared to play in front of the class. They weren't

prepared either because they hadn't practiced, their melodies were beyond their playing ability, or they hadn't taken the performance seriously.

Second, nearly half the 8th grade class procrastinated and never learned how to play their "thrown together" melody. One 8th grade girl said she didn't feel she had enough time to complete the assignment. However, I was confused why five days (including a weekend) hadn't been long enough. To be honest, this frustrated me. I had given them plenty of time to complete the assignment; however, they'd waited until the last minute to work on it. In contrast, those that completed the assignment immediately after it was assigned said it was easy: they didn't have much trouble at all. This half of the class shared their joy in learning improvisation and composition.

A third reason for my disappointment was that the melodies contained inaccurate rhythms. Despite my efforts at editing, some student's final work still contained errors.

Finally, playing with the orchestra accompaniment proved difficult. One student in particular had written a lovely melody that was rhythmically accurate on paper, but when she played it with the class, she wasn't able to keep up. This was true especially for 7th graders. I volunteered to play with many students so they could complete the performance with pride and dignity.

Those students who knew their melody played beautifully. I was delighted to hear students who struggle in class play something they had written. Despite the difficulties, I am extremely proud of my students for standing up in front of their peers to play something they created. It takes a great deal of courage to present something so intimate to a group of teenagers.

CHALLENGES

The unit on improvisation and composition was taught throughout the course of two weeks. The students were asked repeatedly if they understood everything presented to them. I didn't want to proceed if the current topic wasn't crystal clear. A few students came to me privately to discuss concepts that were confusing to them, while others asked their questions in class. I was grateful for the opportunity to end their confusion and advance with confidence. We had covered most of the major steps of the process by the end of the first week, and used Friday's class period to discuss anxiety and writer's block. What I didn't realize at the time was that many students were struggling with rhythmic notation. At the end of class, an eighth grade student approached to show me her composition. The first measure contained only three beats whereas the second measure had six beats. I quickly explained to her that each measure could only contain four beats, so she needed to choose note values that fit the measure. Next, I made a hasty announcement to the class, asking them to double check their rhythms making sure each measure contained four beats. Then, a 7th grade cello player (and a percussionist in the band) showed me a rhythm with which she was struggling. The measure contained five beats! I helped her adjust the rhythm and again reminded the orchestra to double check their rhythms.

My heart began to race as I contemplated having two orchestras come to class Monday with flawed rhythms. I tried to recall where my teaching had taken a wrong turn. The students had done a beautiful job of creating rhythms for the class, and I'd even written them on the board. But not everyone had volunteered a rhythm, and I hadn't asked them to record anything in their notes. It was such a foolish mistake. I had

assumed the students would be able to notate a rhythm, but this was something that hadn't been taught. A question burned in my brain: Should I wait and see what happened Monday or help them by providing rhythms they could plug into their piece? I opted for the latter.

I had already prepared a computer document with the rhythms they had created (see rhythms in Appendix B on page 30) and decided to give a copy to them. Of course, they had already been to class that day, so I wouldn't see them again. An announcement at the end of the day indicated they should report to the orchestra room to receive a handout. Many seemed relieved to have the rhythms provided for them, so I felt a bit better about their upcoming final products.

However, if the students couldn't notate rhythm, I should have realized they would have difficulty writing notes with stems, flags, articulation, dynamics, and such. On Friday, a student showed me her melody which had the stems of each quarter note placed on the wrong side, pointing in the wrong direction. I hadn't anticipated the students having difficulty with music notation. But in retrospect, I realized the few times the class had been asked to use musical notation was when I had written something on the board; they had merely copied it onto their paper. Months earlier, they had completed theory worksheets but had apparently forgotten the concepts. So, a "Notation Cheat-Sheet" (see Notation Cheat Sheet in Appendix E on page 34) was provided on Monday, in manuscript form, for their consultation. I went through the sheet in class explaining all the notations. The students were now equipped with proper tools to accurately articulate their melody.

Discipline problems were minimal with the exception of one student. From the outset, this student seemed disinterested in the project and extremely interested in getting other students to pay attention to him. I called him aside and asked if he would prefer completing his project in the Alternative Discipline Room. He chose to stay in class and stopped his disruptive behavior, but he still refused to participate in the assignment. I called his parents to explain the situation and express my concern. His mother was very supportive and informed me that her son would complete the assignment. He called me later that evening for directions and promised to have something to turn in the next day.

Unfortunately, this student was not the only unprepared string player in the group. When checking their rough drafts, I was dismayed to find a handful of students hadn't completed their assignment. They had been given five days to complete their melodies but had waited until the last minute to finish the assignment. I wondered if the instruction had been confusing for them and asked for feedback. For the most part, they had procrastinated. I suggested simple solutions to finish the assignment on time and encouraged them to submit whatever they had. Every student submitted a final assignment.

Despite the challenges, all students were able to complete the assignment.

CONCLUSION

The intent of this project was to present to my students the necessary tools that would enable them to improvise, compose, and present music in its symbolic form. My intent as an educator was to take a risk in teaching a concept in which I have not been trained. This project was a success on several levels.

First, the students were able to complete a melody with the given instructions. Every student that participated in the instruction produced a melody and a narrative⁸ (see Student Examples in Appendix F beginning on page 35. For reasons of privacy, the student names have been omitted). The completed works are inventive and fun. While most of the melodies are not perfect, they are a creation of each individual student. I believe their melody will be a hallmark of their experience in middle school orchestra.

Second, they were excited about improvisation and composition. One student told me he was excited to learn how to write a melody because he had been trying to write something on his guitar but didn't know how. He later told the class that he was glad he learned the steps because he thought a progressing musician should know how to do higher level skills such as composition. After the first class, a cello player said, "I like your projects, Ms. Schnittgrund! They're fun!" Not only were they excited but, they were proud. They presented their melody with pride and self-satisfaction. I was surprised to learn how many kids enjoyed (and valued) learning how to write a melody.

Third, the students explored different musical cultures. Only a handful of students had ever heard Bluegrass, Irish, or Jazz fiddle playing. They were asked to think of their melody in terms of style and relate it to a story. Sarah, an eighth grade violinist, told me she had "Goggled" Natalie McMaster to hear more Irish fiddle playing. So

⁸ One student did not complete the assignment because she was not present for the entire instruction.

perhaps, even for just two weeks, they thought of music in terms of more than one culture.

And fourth, an educator was able to teach an unexplored technique with success. I am pleased with the project's progression and end result. Granted, some things didn't produce the desired results, but for the most part, the concept was successfully taught and understood. I am pleased that I took a risk in teaching something outside of my area of expertise and it was a success.

Several aspects of this unit will be changed before presenting it again next year. First, I will teach this unit over the course of the entire school year and never try to pack it into two weeks. In all honesty, I waited until every concert was over so I could focus entirely on this project and nothing else. Also, even though my classes were at the top of their playing abilities (for their grade level) it was too much to pack into two weeks.

Second, I will have students play solo creations often but informally. Nothing as fancy as a 12-bar progression played in front of the class, but something simple. I believe a portion of the difficulty we faced in performance was due to lack of courage in their creation.

Third, I will teach the meat of this unit in 7th grade and refine and add detail to it in 8th grade. One thing I learned from this experience is the younger students were more willing to accept direction and do the assignment. The 8th grade was much more stubborn. The two classes received equal lessons, but had different outcomes. I believe if the 8th grade has the tools when they arrive in September, it will be easier to embellish their melody.

Fourth, band teacher Gary Hansen tells his jazz band to KISS, Keep It Simple, Stupid. In contrast, in orchestra, we got way ahead by adding ornaments, syncopation, and such. The kids couldn't play their own melodies because they were too hard! Again, this unit will be taught in an appropriate amount of time to allow the students to absorb one concept before moving onto the next.

Finally, I will teach music notation consistently. I plan to focus on improving my students' notation capability. Next year, I will stock each folder with staff paper so when we improvise a melody, the students can write it out on paper.

This project laid the groundwork for my students to plant their own seeds in improvisation and composition. It gave them the tools to plant a beautiful garden. I wish I had been given the opportunity to do this when I was their age. My hope is they will take this experience and "put it in their back pocket". Perhaps then they will remember it, take it out, and realize they created something from nothing. That is truly amazing.

APPENDIX A: HANDOUT PER INSTRUMENT

Figure 15. Violin handout

VIOLIN

The image displays a handwritten musical handout for a violin. At the top, the word "VIOLIN" is written in large, capital letters. Below this, there are several musical staves. The first staff is labeled "I" and shows a treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It contains a series of notes with various fingerings indicated by numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. The second staff is labeled "IV" and shows a similar treble clef and key signature, with notes and fingerings. The third staff is a fretboard diagram for the violin, showing the first seven frets with fingerings for each note. The fourth staff shows a sequence of fingerings: I, I, I, I, IV, IV, I, I. The fifth staff shows a sequence of fingerings: I, IV, I, I. At the bottom left, there is a small logo for "Alfred" with a stylized "A" and "F" inside a square.

Figure 17. Cello handout

CELLO

The image shows a handwritten musical score for Cello, titled "CELLO". It consists of two systems of staves. The first system has two staves, with the first staff labeled "I" and the second staff labeled "IV". The second system has two staves, with the first staff labeled "V". The score includes notes, fingerings, and fingering charts. The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 4/4. The first system shows a sequence of notes with fingerings: I (1, 2, 3, 4) and IV (1, 2, 3, 4). The second system shows a sequence of notes with fingerings: V (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8/1) and a final sequence of notes with fingerings: I (1, 2, 3, 4) and IV (1, 2, 3, 4). The score is written in a clear, legible hand.

I

IV

V

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8/1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8/1

I I I I IV IV I I

V IV I I

Alfred

APPENDIX B: STUDENT IMPROVISED RHYTHMS

Figure 19. Student improvised rhythms

Violin

The musical notation is written on four staves in treble clef, D major (one sharp), and 4/4 time. The first staff contains measures 1-5. The second staff, starting at measure 6, contains measures 6-10. The third staff, starting at measure 11, contains measures 11-15. The fourth staff, starting at measure 16, contains measures 16-20. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns such as quarter notes, eighth notes, and sixteenth notes, along with rests and dynamic markings like 'V' and 'mf'.

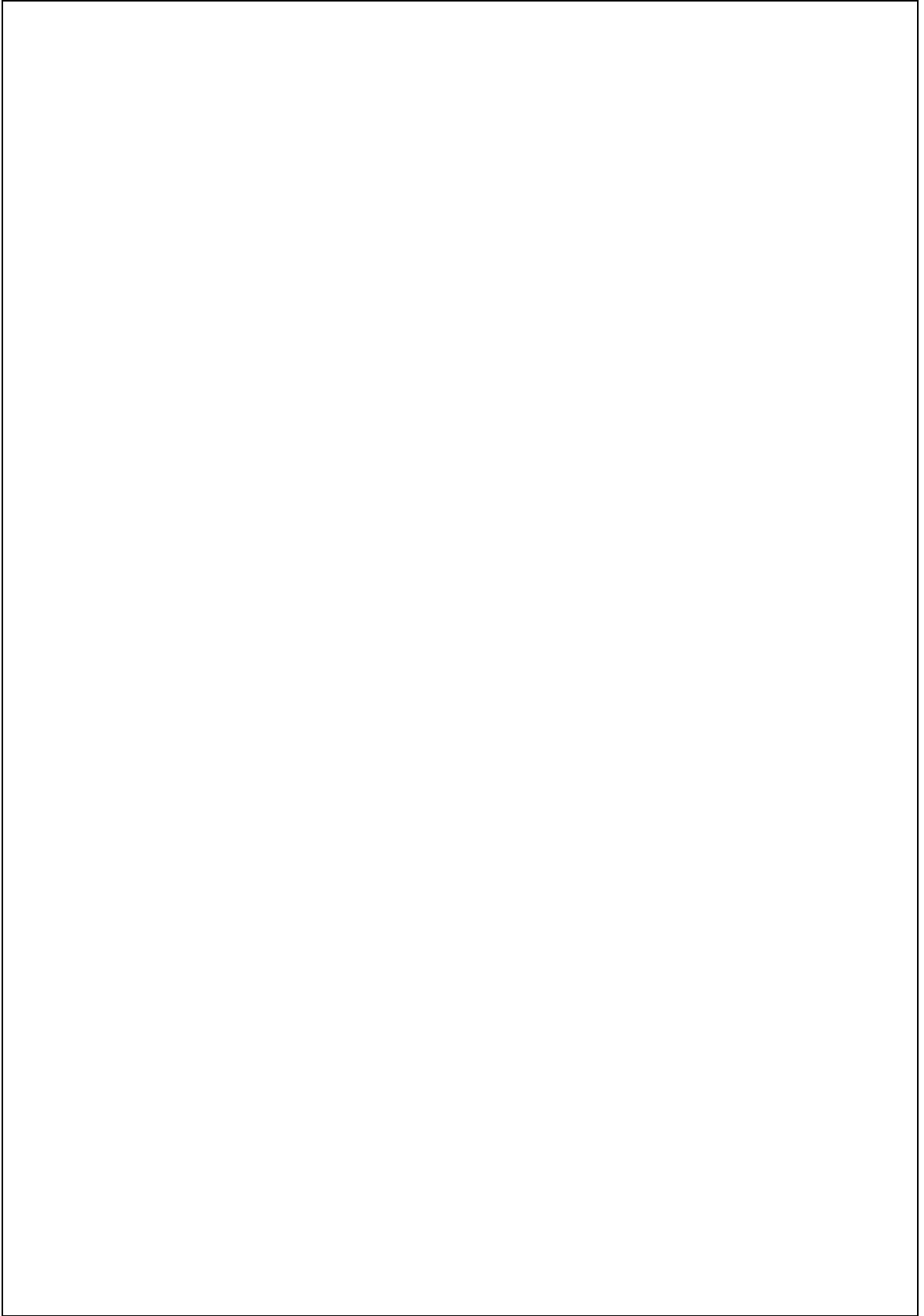
Note: The measures were played individually and not as a unit.

APPENDIX C: FINAL ASSIGNMENT SHEET

Figure 20. Final assignment sheet

Name & Instrument:

--



APPENDIX D: NARRATIVE INSTRUCTIONS

Figure 21. Narrative instructions

1. Notate your improvised melody on the staff. Make sure to include your name, instrument, clef, key signature, and time signature. Include bowings and dynamics.
2. Please write a brief story inspired by your melody in the space provided below.
3. Include a paragraph describing your experiment with improvisation:
 - Were you excited or nervous when we began the unit on improvisation? Did you “freak out” at all?
 - Were Ms. Schnittgrund’s explanations easy to understand?
 - Were you confused and if so, what did you do to end the confusion?
 - How did you feel after completing your 12-bar melody?
 - Were you pleased with the finished product?
 - Will you continue writing music?

APPENDIX E: NOTATION CHEAT-SHEET

Figure 22. Notation Cheat-Sheet

NOTATION CHEAT-SHEET!

STEMS:
 Below middle line } Above middle line
 stems on the right point up } stems on the left point down.

NOTES & RESTS

quarter beat, eighth (one flag), two eighth (connect w/bar), sixteenth note (2 flags), four sixteenth notes (connect w/bar), half note (don't fill), dotted half note, Whole note

VIOLIN VIOLA CELLO/BASS
 V = upbow, D = down bow

single grace note, multi-note, slide up, slide down, Glissando, Trill

slur, tie, staccato, accent, tenuto

ledger lines, crescendo, decrescendo

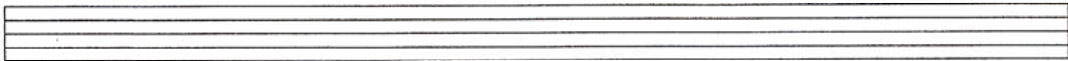
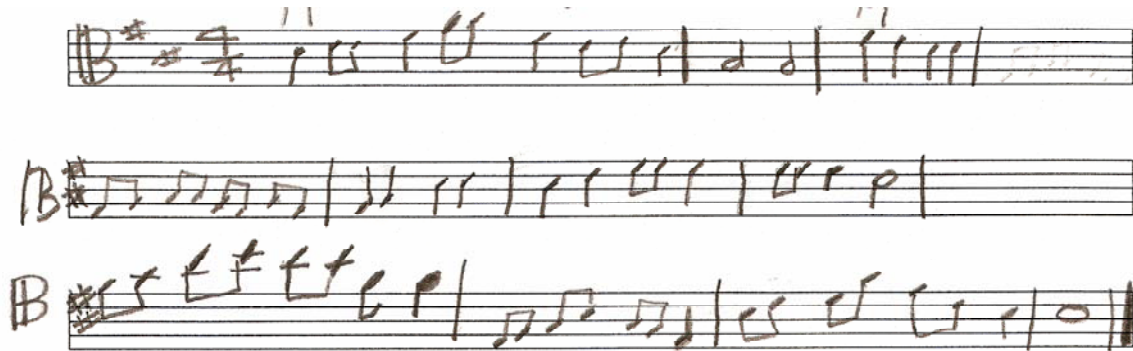
DYNAMICS
 pp p mp mf f ff

triplet beat, drag triplet 2 beats



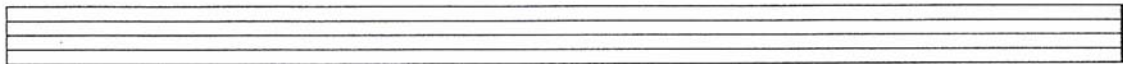
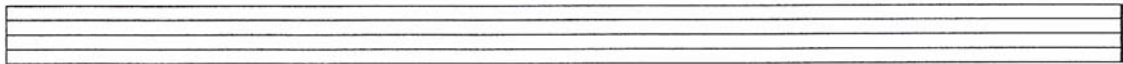
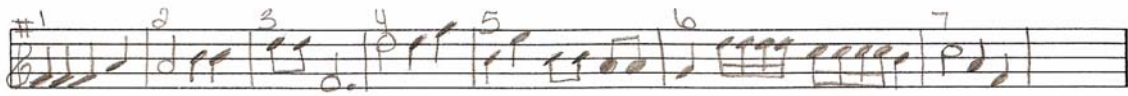
APPENDIX F: STUDENT CREATIONS

Figure 23. Student A



I thought writing it was hard at first.
But later on it got easier.

Figure 24. Student B



magical feelings

I can honestly say I did freak out at the end when we had to preform for the class. I was not to hip on having to write our own melody. Yes they were pretty easy to understand on my part. I was confused when we first started with the cords then I caught on. I felt ok I felt I could do better though. I was pleased just I felt I could of done better. No I don't think I will continue writting or playing.

Figure 25. Student C. "A Song to Billy Joe"

The image shows three staves of handwritten musical notation. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#), and a 4/4 time signature. The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes. Dynamic markings 'p' and 'mf' are written below the notes. The second staff continues the melody with similar note values and dynamic markings 'p' and 'mf'. The third staff features a more complex rhythmic pattern with many beamed eighth notes, followed by quarter notes. Dynamic markings 'mp', 'mf', and 'mf > p' are present. Below the three staves are two empty staves.

Once upon a time there was a young boy named Bob. Now Bob was a very kind brother and a friend and he loved doing kind things for his friends and family. So one day he decided to write a song for his friend Fred. You see, his friend Fred was having a very interesting life right then. A lot of things were going wrong for him so Bob decided to help him out by writing an encouraging melody for Fred. Little did he know that Fred was also composing a song to give to him. The day Bob decided to give the melody to Fred, Fred decided to give the song to Bob. This is the song they wrote together, using parts of their own melodies. And in the end they gave it to their best friend in the whole world, Billy Joe. So without further ado, a song to Billy Joe.

-Kristianna Blackler-

Tuesday, May 22, 2007

At the beginning of this unit I was nervous because I didn't understand any of it. Now I understand it and I am not nervous as much. I didn't really freak out unless I didn't understand what she wanted us to do. Ms.Schnittgrund's explanations were easy to understand once I got a hang of what she was saying. I was not confused because she did explain very well. After I have written this 12 bar melody I feel satisfied and I feel I could write a song if I really felt like doing so. I was pleased with my finished product and with my others trials as well. I think that I might consider continue writing music, it was fun and interesting and I really like playing so I should try writing as well.

Figure 26. Student D. "12 Bar Moods"

NAME & INSTRUMENT.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a 12-bar piece. It consists of three staves of music in treble clef, with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The first staff begins with a piano (p) dynamic marking. The second staff starts with a forte (f) dynamic, followed by piano (p) markings. The third staff ends with a piano (p) marking. The music features various note values, including quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, as well as rests and slurs. Above the notes, there are several 'p' and 'f' markings, and some notes have small 'v' or 'n' symbols above them. Below the three staves, there are two empty staves.

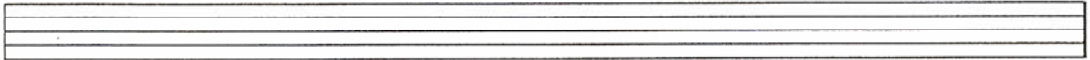
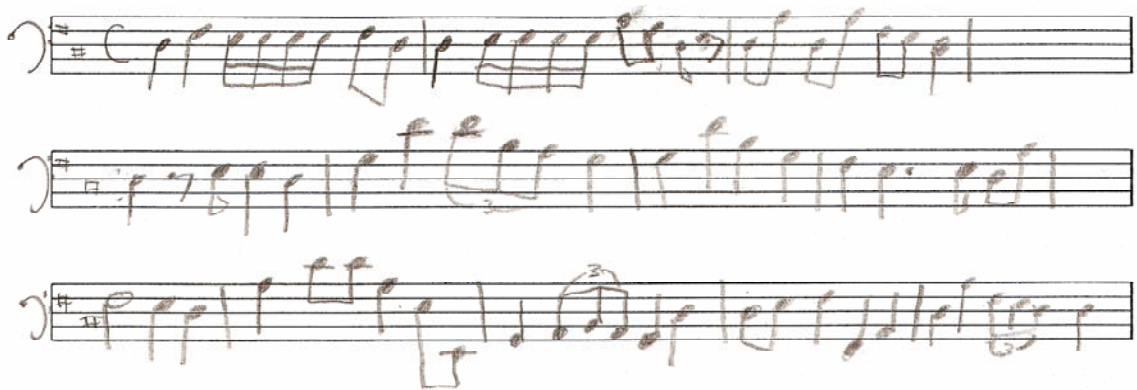
This is a story about a boy who loved to play celtic music and jazz. One day when he was walking in the woods he lost his way. After he got home this is the song he played.



I was excited when we began the unit. I didn't quite get it at first when we got the project, but when I came in before school I knew exactly what to do.

In the end I like my melody, I'm pleased with it. I probably will continue writing music.

Figure 27. Student E



This is the story of a teenage boy who is writing a song but is just putting down random notes in hopes that the song will turn out O.K.

I wasn't nervous about this project until I saw Ms. Schnittgrund's camera to record us with. Her explanations were easy to understand and didn't confuse me. I felt pretty good with my finished product but probably won't continue writing music.

Figure 28. Student F

NAME OF INSTRUMENT: _____

1st

My story consists of a carnival. There is a lot of excitement at the beginning. Two lions were running around the little track and then there is suspense. The lion puts his head in the lion's mouth. Everyone is worried and nervous for his life. At the end though he takes his head out and everyone applauds.

I was very nervous for this. I didn't think that my song would be the best in the class but it turned out it was.

Ms. Schnittgrun's explanations were really easy. She told us what to do very easily so it wasn't hard to make.

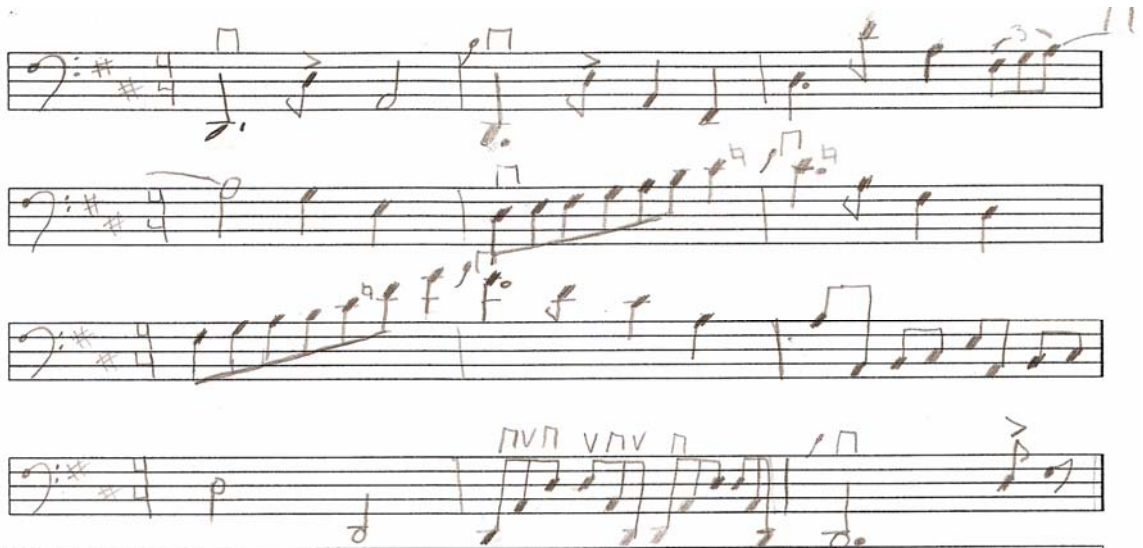
I was never confused.

I felt that my song was very bad but it sounded good when Ms. Schnittgrun played it on piano.

I was very pleased but I thought I wouldn't be.

I probably will try to but I might not succeed with Ms. Schnitt's instructions.

Figure 29. Student G



Since it is so close to summer this song makes me feel like summer, It is very upbeat and happy. It sounds like you're starting your day and you got off on the RIGHT side of bed. It continues in the happy mood and ends on a happy trio of notes. I really like how this sounds.

I was kind of nervous and a little excited when we started this improve section. Mrs. Schnittgrund's instructions were a little confusing at the beginning but as we progressed it became more clear. I felt very independent after completing my melody. I was very happy with my final product. I probably won't continue writing music because it takes a lot of creativity and I don't really have that.

Figure 30. Student H



My song was inspired by the only thing I know— Music. My mom played the guitar and sang. She got me started in my music. There honestly was no story behind my 12 measures of music because when I write I don't think, I just play. It just comes from the heart. Music is my escape, my other world. This is the product of my world. It's my masterpiece.

I was very excited about this. I was also nervous. I've only written on my piano not my violin. I think the explanations were easy to understand. I was confused but not about what to write it was about what theme should I write.

I decided to just write and see where it led me. I created a Bluegrass-Jazz Song. I felt great after completing my 12 bar melody. I feel very pleased with my finished product. I will definitely continue writing music.

Figure 31. Student I

The image shows a handwritten musical score for three staves. The first staff is marked "Andante" and "mp". The second staff has "mf", "mp", and "f" markings with dynamic curves. The third staff has "mf" and "mp" markings. Below the staves are two empty staves.

Hello, my name is Ben Hillard + I play the violin. My piece was entitled "The Rain", because I had written it during a rain storm, hence the many descending notes. Then, I didn't think that name fit, so it is currently, + probably forever will be, untitled.

When Ms. Schnitt told us we were doing improv, I sort of went, "Dang it! I'm going to suck!" But once we started it, I found that it was alot easier than it sounded. Her explanations really helped out. I didn't use much of the stuff she taught us, but I plan to use it in other songs I'm going to wright.

When I finished my melody, I didn't think it was very good. But when I played it for the class, I thought it was good. I was very happy with it. It has really encouraged me to write my own music.

Figure 33. Student K

mf

I like this song it is happy in some parts and sad and slow in others. I wrote when my sister came home from collage. It is about how she comes home and then it is happy. But then she decides that she is going out with her friends so then it turns sad and slow. Finally she decides to come back to spend time with her family, and the song turns happy again. It took me a long time to make this song because I felt restricted by the notes I could play. I feel that if I could have used all of the notes I would have made a great song. I felt that the improvisation was easy until it came to my song then I got writers block.

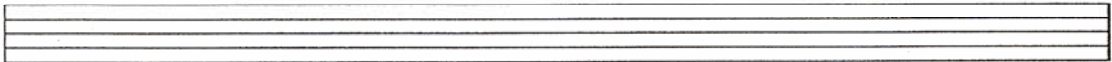
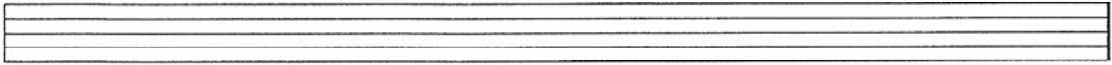
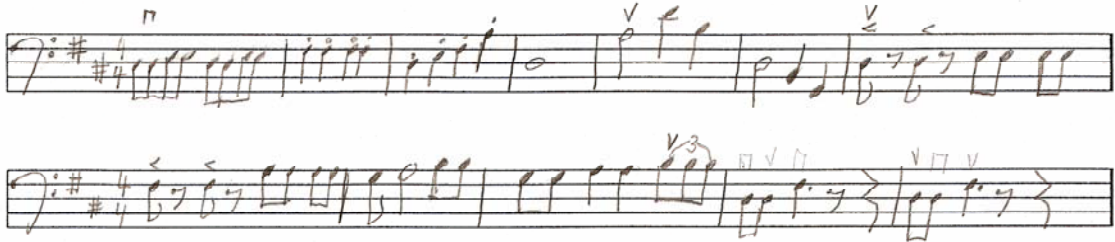
Figure 34. Student L

Name & Instrument:

The musical score is a handwritten composition for a 12-bar melody. It is written in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The score is organized into four staves. The first staff contains the main melody, starting with a mezzo-piano (mp) dynamic, followed by a forte (f) dynamic, and then a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The second staff provides a bass line with a forte (f) dynamic. The third staff continues the bass line with a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The fourth staff concludes the piece with dynamics p (piano), mf (mezzo-forte), and f (forte). The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

When I found out that we were going to write our own song, I was excited but a little nervous. I didn't know exactly what I was going to do or how it was going to sound. Ms. Schnittgrund's explanations were a little hard to understand at first, but when she went over them more times, they slowly started to make sense. The only part that confused me at first, was when Mrs. Schnittgrund first explained what chord progression notes we could use in certain measures. I felt nervous & proud at the same time when I finished. I am proud of how it sounds, but nervous because I have to play it in front of the class. Over all, I am pleased with my 12 bar melody, because I worked so hard on it. Making the song stay was hard for me because the measures don't really fit together. I got ideas by listening to other Celtic fiddle songs, and I might continue to write music. It seemed hard at first, but once I got started, it came easier.

Figure 35. Student M



My name is Taylor Linn, this song is about my Uncle Dan & how he never stops talking & rarely stops to take a breath.

When told about this I was excited & nervous because I had just wrote a song for piano & it was kind of hard. The way Ms. Schnittgrund explained it was really easy to understand. The assignment wasn't hard to understand. I felt good after completing something on my own. I am really pleased with my finished project. This summer I will most likely write music.

Figure 36. Student N

The image shows a handwritten musical score for three staves. The key signature is G major (one sharp). The first staff is marked with a forte 'f' dynamic and contains a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The second staff is marked with a mezzo-forte 'mf' dynamic and contains a bass line with eighth notes and rests. The third staff also contains a bass line with eighth notes and rests. There are various musical notations including slurs, accents, and dynamic markings throughout the score.

When we began this unit on improvisation I was nervous because I thought it was going to be hard and confusing. I kind of freaked out because I didn't think that I'd be able to write a song that sounded okay.

Ms. Schnittgrund's explanations were confusing at first, but after a while I got them.

Yes, I was confused at first as to what notes I could use and what rhythms worked best, but after a while I understood that too.

When I finished I felt that my song wasn't very good, and I was nervous to play it in front of the class.

No, I wasn't completely pleased with my finished product, but I wasn't completely displeased with it either.

I think I'll continue to write music, but I'll follow my own rules though.

Figure 37. Student O

Handwritten musical score for three staves in 7/8 time with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The first staff contains a melodic line with dynamics p, mf, mf, p, p, f, mf. The second staff contains a bass line with dynamics f > p, p < f, f > p. The third staff contains a bass line with dynamics f, f > pp. There are also some handwritten annotations like a downward arrow and a lightning bolt symbol.

I was sneaking my way past the guards, like James Bond. Quickly moving against the wall, going down the stairs, running towards the door then SMACK! I ran into the door and died.

I was very excited because i love to just play around with notes and put things together randomly on my cello but i never wrote anything down. Ms Schnitt was awesome explaining it. It came to me very easily but i wasn't too fond of sticking to a bluegrass/celtic theme.

Figure 38. Student P. "Snowboard Blues"

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a piece titled "Snowboard Blues". The score is written on four staves of music paper, all in treble clef. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The first staff begins with the handwritten instruction "Swing rhythm" and a dynamic marking of "mf". The music consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, with various articulations such as accents and slurs. The second staff continues the melody with similar rhythmic patterns. The third staff features a dynamic marking of "f" and includes some slurs. The fourth staff concludes the piece with a final note and a fermata.

"Snowboard Blues" portrays how I would be in Switzerland, boarding down a mountainside when I would suddenly hear the music coming from the Montreaux festival. I would stop and listen to the rest of the song.

When Miss Schnittgrund told us we were starting a unit on improv, I was ambivalent about it. I mean, I wasn't really excited or freaked out about it, I was just O.K. with it. I thought Miss Schnittgrund's explanations were easy to understand and I wasn't really confused ever. I was a little anxious, though, to get to where we could actually write the melody, instead of waiting on people. I felt great after completing my melody, because I had done it & it sounded good. I am pleased with the finished product, & will keep writing music.

Figure 39. Student Q. "Calypso Vacation"

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a piece titled "Calypso Vacation". The score is written on four staves of music paper, each with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The time signature is 4/4. The first staff begins with a 4/4 time signature and contains a melody with dynamic markings of *p* (piano) and *mf* (mezzo-forte). The second staff continues the melody with *mf* and *f* (forte) markings. The third staff features a more rhythmic melody with *fp* (fortissimo piano) and *f* markings, and includes slurs and accents. The fourth staff concludes the piece with a double bar line.

"Calypso Vacation" portrays the story of a family who has just gotten off a plane in Hawaii. The family members are warmly welcomed to the island as natives adorn them with colorful hibiscus leis. As the family leaves the airport, their first glance of the land overwhelms them, it is so gorgeous. Little do they know that they've barely seen anything of the Hawaiian Islands.

When our class began learning about improvisation, I was both excited and scared, or maybe I was excited about being scared! The first few days were rough for me, as I had never "studied" improvisation, although it comes naturally to me and I use it often. Ms. Schnittgrund's instructions confused me at first, but as we progressed in our study, I understood them. When we did our "improv exercises" with the whole class, I never wanted to jump in for my turn. That was because I couldn't think of a different rhythm when I was already playing quarter notes. After I understood the instructions, I had a much better time. I finished my 12-bar composition in about 15 minutes. The hardest part was following the directions! I wanted to use different notes than the ones allowed! This was an enjoyable experience and I will definitely keep composing and arranging.

Figure 40. Student R. "A Song For Bob"

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a piece titled "A Song For Bob". The score is written on three staves in treble clef, with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The first staff begins with a dynamic marking of *pp* (pianissimo) and ends with *mf* (mezzo-forte). The second staff has a *mf* marking at the end. The third staff also has a *mf* marking at the beginning. The music consists of a single melodic line with various note values, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. There are some handwritten annotations, such as checkmarks and arrows, above the notes. Below the three staves are two empty staves.

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, there were two boys: Fred and Bob. They were best friends, and hung out all the time. One day Fred was having trouble, he was trying to find a present for Bob. He couldn't find the right present, so instead he decided to write a melody.
 Bob liked it so much he decided to publish it.

I was excited to hear that we were going to be doing improvisation but also a bit nervous because I'd never done anything like this before. At first Ms. Schnittgrund's explanations were a little confusing since I'd never experienced anything like this before. Once I listened and learned from others who may have done something similar to this before, it became clearer to me.
 Upon completing my 12-bar melody, I felt happy and proud of myself because I haven't written music on my own before. I was pleased with the finished product, and will continue to write music, as I now enjoy it.

Figure 41. Student S



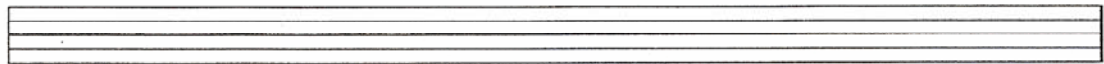
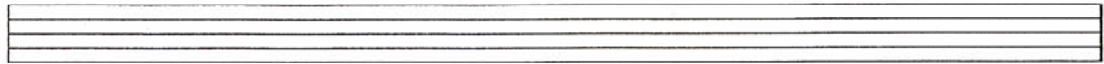
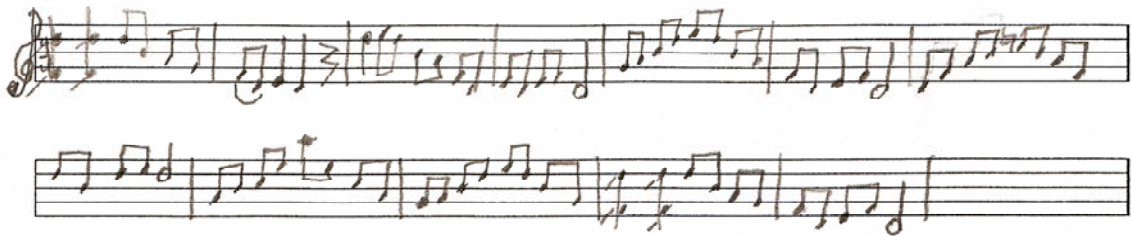
Hi, my name is Toni. My piece is called "hero". What Really inspired me was my Dad. He's my hero. This song pretty much describes what I love (♥) and miss about my dad.

I was very excited but kind of freaked out when we began improvisation. I was excited because we got to make our own music. But I was freaked out by making the song good and I quite didn't know how to make it jazz, bluegrass, or Irish. I got help after class from miss S. And I finally understood it.

This 12 bar melody I wrote makes me feel good inside. I L.O.V.E (♥) it!

I think after this experience I will definitely write more. Thanks miss Schwittgrund - You're the Best!

Figure 42. Student T



This song is about someone who's taking a hike in the woods. They get lost. After a few days, they finally find their way home.

- When we started this activity, I was nervous, but not "freaked out."

- Mrs. Schnittgrund explained every thing very well.

I wasn't confused at all.

- After I completed the 12 bar melody, I was proud of myself.

- I was very pleased with the finished product.

- I will continue to write music, but mostly for guitar.

Figure 43. Student U. "Passing Grade"

Name & Instrument:

The image shows a handwritten musical score on four staves. The first three staves contain musical notation in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The first staff begins with a dynamic marking 'v' and includes various rhythmic patterns. The second staff has the word 'quick' written below it. The third staff has the word 'slower' written below it. The fourth staff is empty, showing only the five-line staff structure.

Passing Grade

is the name of this piece. The piece in the first draft really sucked but after lots of edits (or rehab) it came out better. The title is the inspiration, I just wanted to pass the project.

Though it was a lot more complicated than I thought it was fun to do, but confusing in some part but soon cleared up.

I probably won't write any more music, it's too complicated. Every thing was a struggle to understand particularly the "Chart Sheet."

Figure 44. Student V. "Life's Just Rhythm"

Violin

Handwritten musical score for Violin in G major, 4/4 time. The score consists of three staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. It contains a melody with various dynamics (mp, mf, pp), articulation (accents), and ornaments (trills). The second and third staves continue the melody with similar notation. The piece concludes with a double bar line. Below the three staves are two empty staves.

When Ms. Schnittgrund told our class about this composition project, alarms immediately went off in the back of my mind. I had written one other melody over the summer and the long three months to write just thirty-two bars of something I was proud of, were less than enjoyable. When we started through the process I was nervous but it was so much easier than I expected because we were given a template, explanations of how to write music and notations, and guidelines.

Ms. Schnittgrund gave very detailed and easy to understand instructions. She even gave us ideas on how to overcome writers block. They really helped! I had been struggling to get over writers block then Ms. Schnittgrund suggested taking an hour or two and forgetting about the project then going back, it really worked! As she walked us through the process she gave out sheets with instructions on how to be successful in this project. Every hand out explained every step of the process in an easy to understand way.

We were asked to pick a style between Celtic, Bluegrass, and Jazz. She explained what different rhythms and ornaments are found in the different styles and then played recordings of professional musicians that play the different styles. Then she let us choose one that we thought we would enjoy studying or a style outside of our comfort zone that we thought would be a challenge for us. I chose Jazz because I have grown up around it and love the sound. Though I may not have written a riveting jazz ballad learning blues and jazz rhythms opened up new thoughts and opportunities.

My inspiration for my melody came the day it was due when I was in the car on the way to school listening to my favorite jazz song. I had gotten off to a rocky start and couldn't quite get over my writers block. I've been raised around Jazz and Blues. This melody basically represents the everyday motions of a day in a Jazz musician's life. Waking up suddenly just in time

to run to and from commitments, getting breaks that briefly give relief in a hectic time of year, and the final relaxation as their mind quickly comes to a halt and fades into sleep.

I felt a lot of satisfaction when I completed this melody. I was really amazed at what had come from my mind onto the staff, what I had wrote, and was really pleased with the final product. I would like to continue composing melodies just to see how much I could accomplish with the skills I developed through this project.

Figure 45. Student W

Handwritten musical score for Violin, titled "march - VIOLIN". The score consists of four staves. The first two staves are for the Violin (V) and feature a melody with dynamic markings of *mp* and *mf*. The third and fourth staves are empty, indicating a missing part of the score.

Hey, so ms. S. asked us to write a song and write a story to go with the song. So, this song just about magically appeared in my head, and this is the story. When I was writing this I had just got done with my Social Studies, and we were studying the civil war, and my song reminds me of like a march they would do. I'm very happy with my finished song and I would love to do this again any time.

Figure 46. Student X

Handwritten musical score for three staves. The top staff is a vocal line with lyrics written above it. The middle staff is a piano accompaniment line. The bottom staff is a bass line. The music is written in a simple, hand-drawn style. There are some markings like 'MP' and Roman numerals (I, II, III, IV, V) scattered around the staves.

My song is about the morning of a new day for the wild horses of Wyoming. It's about a young colt that plays all day and soon he runs into danger. And soon the stallion comes to save him and the colt is back home. It's a wonderful sight to see the great views of Wyoming.

When I heard Ms. S say that we were writing a song, I thought she was kidding. I felt a little shakey. But I didn't feel that bad afterwards.

Figure 47. Student Y

name & instrument. *namely clarinet or viola*

The image shows three staves of handwritten musical notation. The first two staves are in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The first staff contains a melody with eighth and quarter notes, some beamed together. The second staff continues the melody with similar note values. The third staff contains two whole notes. The fourth staff is empty.

Three girls arrive in a building. They have never seen each other before. When they finally get out of the building they have become friends

I kinda freaked out at first until Ms Schnitt explained how to do it. I thought Ms. Schnitt's directions were kind of easy to understand.

Figure 48. Student Z

once upon a time there was a little girl and her name was Hailey. Hailey was very poor and she didn't have very many family members. Most of them had died from being ill or not having enough food and water to survive. Hailey lived in New York City with her mom and her younger sister Hailey. Like I said they were very poor so instead of living in a house or even an apartment they had to live in a dusty, stinky, spooky old alley. Their mom couldn't afford for them to go to school and they weren't old enough to work so all they could do was wander around the city day after day. One cold, stormy day while wandering around the city with her little sister, Hailey heard a whisper of music. She couldn't tell where it was coming from. The two girls kept on walking and Hailey could still hear the music. It seemed to be getting louder and pretty soon Hailey could hear it too. At first she couldn't tell what kind of music they were playing, but after a few minutes the girls realized it was bluegrass. "Let's keep going," Hailey said.

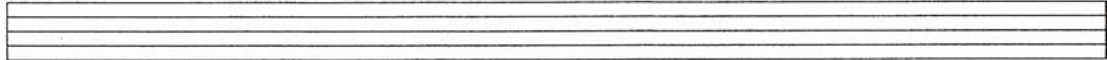
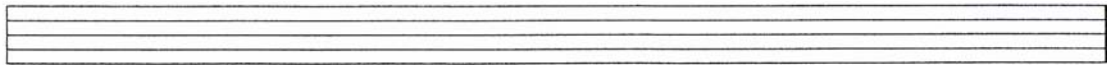
"Maybe we'll be able to tell where it's coming from." Just as Hailey was saying that a big bolt of lightning stretched across the sky and a couple seconds after that there was a big boom and the ground was almost shaking beneath them. With the sight of that Hailey ran back to the alley. Usually Hailey would have ran too but she was too curious about the music to turn back now.

Hailey got closer and closer until she could see a small, lit up store down the street and by then the music was almost blaring. Hailey walked into the store hoping she wouldn't get in trouble. Instead of people looking at her in disgust they just stood and smiled politely. She could have stayed there forever listening to the same melody but it started to get dark so she knew she had to get home.

On her way back she skipped through the streets merrily humming the same song over and over again. When she arrived back home her mom wondered where she had heard that song before. Late that night when it was time for the girls to go to bed their mom sang them a lullaby and Hailey realized that it went along to the tune she had heard that evening. You make up the ending.

I really liked this project. At first I was scared and nervous but it all worked out fine. I made my song blue grass because I think it goes along better with my personality. I know I will be writing more songs now that I know how. This was a great experience for me.

Figure 49. Student AA



At first I Really didn't want to do this project, but after I started it wasn't that bad. I actually had some fun doing it. Yea I freaked out a little bit when I had to write my melody because I thought it was really bad. I feel a lot better about it now that it is done. Your explanation was where pretty easy to understand I understand it all now.

I was walking my dog last night listening to my i-Pod. AND it started pouring! All a sudden it was raining and I was RUNNING! I got home & was drying off & it inspired me to write my melody. About 15 min. later I found myself with my melody & I'm satisfied.

Figure 50. Student BB

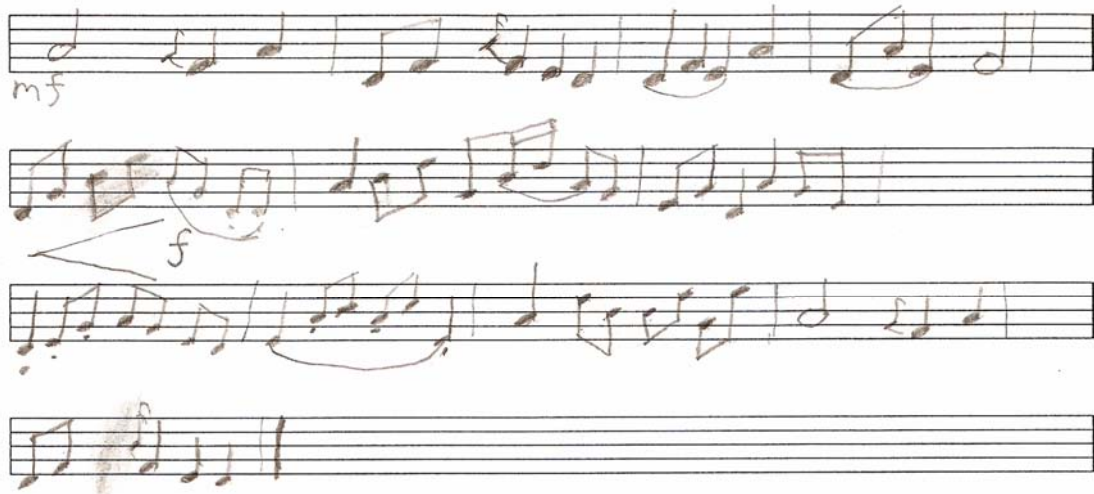
Handwritten musical notation for two staves. The first staff is in bass clef, key of D major (one sharp), and 4/4 time. It contains a melody starting with a half note D4, followed by quarter notes E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, B5, C6, D6. Dynamics include *mf*, *f*, and *p*. The second staff is also in bass clef, key of D major, and 4/4 time. It contains a bass line starting with a half note D3, followed by quarter notes E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5. Dynamics include *f* and *p*. Below the staves are two empty sets of three-line staves.

There was this girl who always looked up to her dad. She wanted to be just like him when she grew up, traveling the world, climbing enormous mountains, daring to do what many people would not. She trained for years just so she could climb Mt. Everest with her dad. When she finally got the opportunity she was ecstatic. She packed up all her equipment and got started right away with her dad. After the long weeks of hard work, they reached the top of Mt. Everest. At that moment, they knew it was worth it. Then the girl said to her dad what they were both thinking, "I'm to be here with you."

When I first heard about the assignment I was kind of excited to make a song, but then I thought about what I had to do and I got pretty nervous. I was confused about what to use for each chord but then Ms. Schnittgrund showed us the scale and that cleared things up a bit. When I actually finish the melody, I thought it sucked but then I revised it and it was okay.

I don't know if I'll write any more music but
if I do I'll give it more time to get it perfect.

Figure 51. Student CC



A country kid goes to the city. He becomes fearful of electricity because of all the lights. Boy goes home. Boy is happy again. The End.

I was excited. Yes the descriptions were thorough. No, I was not confused. Confident. I was very pleased with it. Maybe, Maybe not.

Figure 52. Student DD

Handwritten musical notation on three staves. The first staff has a treble clef, a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#), and a 4/4 time signature. It contains a melodic line starting with a quarter note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, C5, and D5, then a half note E5, and finally quarter notes D5, C5, and B4. A dynamic marking 'p' is written below the first measure. The second staff continues the melody with quarter notes A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4, B3, and A3. A dynamic marking 'sfp' is written below the first measure. The third staff concludes the piece with a quarter note G3, a half note F#3, and a double bar line. The fourth staff is empty.

One night a man named Harold was leaving a graveyard after visiting the grave of a dead relative, a man who escaped from a mental institution was too walking in the cemetery. The man who escaped from the mental institution was a paranoid vampire hunter who sometimes had odd hallucinations. He carried with him a gun with silver bullets so he could kill vampires. The insane man saw Harold and thought he was a vampire he pulled the trigger of his gun but Harold used his fancy Matrix moves to dodge the bullets. Then suddenly before the eyes of the insane man Harold vanished! The mad man had imagined Harold. Or had he? Well he wasn't the smartest vampire hunter because silver bullets kill werewolves.

At the beginning of this project I was a bit nervous but excited that I would learn how to

actually write music. Ms. Schnittgrunds explanations were very easy to understand + I didn't get confused at all. After finishing my melody (which I redid several times) I felt like my brain chose a bad time to decide it didn't like me. I liked my finished product more than I thought I would but wasn't in love with it. I will continue writing music if there are no due dates + no one has to hear the horrible things I write. I think my story is kind of ridiculous, but I couldn't think of anything else.

Figure 53. Student EE

Name & Instrument:

The musical score is written on four staves. The first staff has a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It contains a melody with several trills (tr) and a grace note. The second and third staves contain accompaniment with slurs and dynamic markings like 'p'. The fourth staff is empty.

This story is about a little girl who runs away from her mom. As she packs some clothes, she thinks about if she really wants to do this (trills going back and forth). She decides to go. As she walks across town, she starts to get homesick. She misses her parents so much, she goes back home after a day on the streets. Her parents see her and are mad and glad at the same time.

I was excited and afraid because I love songwriting but was afraid people would laugh. It was easier than I thought. I will keep playing music/writing music.

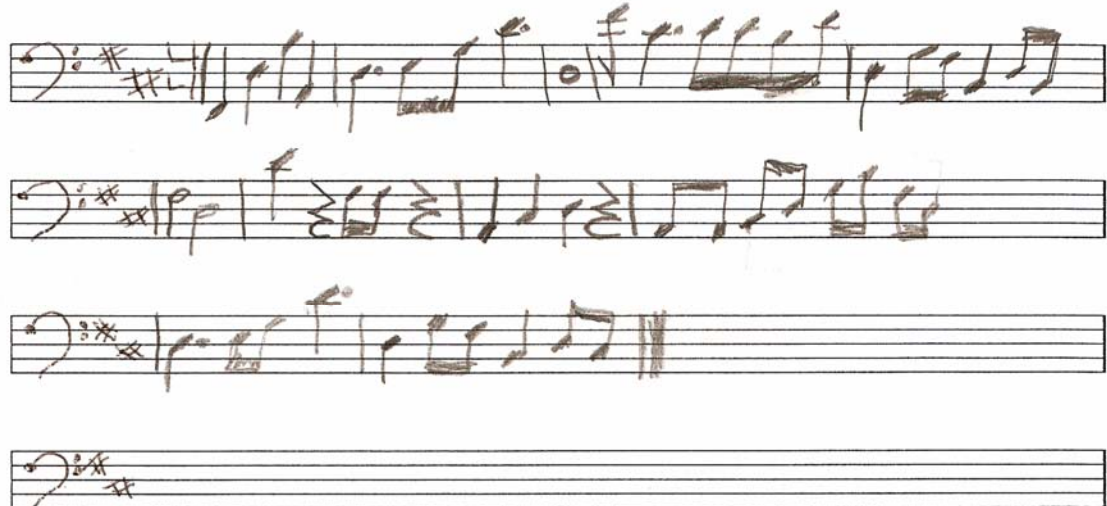
Figure 54. Student FF

I dedicate this song to my grandma who past a way two years ago. She was 100% Irish so thats why my songs Irish. She always got me stuff and cared about me. Every time I would go over, she would have something new for me. So I wrote this for her.

when we started it, I was a little freaked out about it. when she explained the stuff, it was easy to understand. With every thing she said, I was not confused. Then when I finished it, I felt a lot better. Then I was pleased with the finished product. I dont think I will be ~~fighting~~ writing any more songs

Figure 55. Student GG

NAME & INSTRUMENT:



When I play this I think of a lepracaun sitting by a river playing his flute to this song on a moonlit night.

Yes, I was nervous when I started this but I got over it,
yes
No, I wasn't confused
successful
yes
probably not

Figure 56. Student HH



Writing this melody was extremely difficult. At first I couldn't come up with a story that fit my song. After playing it a few times I realised the song reminded me of my cat, Mia. The happy melody was just the perfect mood for my loving cat.

Figure 57. Student II

Name & Instrument:

Handwritten musical score for a piece in 4/4 time, key of D major. The score consists of four staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#), and a 4/4 time signature. The music is marked with dynamics such as *mf*, *f*, and *ff*, and includes various musical notations like slurs, accents, and fermatas. The piece concludes with a double bar line and a final chord.

My song's story is about a family reunion. Everybody is sitting together enjoying each other's jokes and tales. Suddenly, the "trouble-maker" of the family starts a riot and makes the place wild at the very end of their time together. Everyone has a ton of fun.

"What I thought"



At first, I was really nervous, but as we went on, I felt a lot better. The first day I did "freak out". Miss Schnittgrund's explanations were great and easy to understand. After I completed my melody, I was relieved. I had to make a few changes, then my melody was ok. It is nothing amazing at all, but it isn't horrible. I don't think I will ever write music again. It isn't one of my top priorities.

Figure 58. Student JJ



My melody was inspired by bluegrass songs like Devil's Dream Hoedown, Orange Blossom Special, and Millionaires Hoedown. When I first started writing, the style was more sweet and smooth. I didn't think that it really fit with my bluegrass idea so I took some of the same notes and played them faster. I think the end result is pretty fun and fast paced and it definitely fits with the bluegrass theme!

At the beginning of this project, I was confused and skeptical. I didn't know what we were doing and the thought of another 'end of the year project' scared me. As we moved on, the project seemed to get even more complicated and confusing. Then, with a little help, it all clicked. I started to understand the project and the instructions made complete sense. I finished my melody with some relief, but mostly a sense of achievement!

Figure 59. Student KK

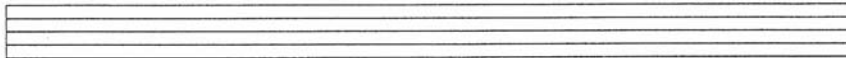


Once I was drinking Mountain Dew. Then I got the hiccups. After that I ran into a wall. So I went outside and saw a little elf riding a llama named Wilber. I went over to say hi and get my three wishes when I slipped on some discarded Jello. When I woke up both Wilber with the little elf and my hiccups were gone.

When we started this assignment I thought I would never be good at it. It actually wasn't all that bad. I had to rewrite it though because I thought it stunk. I'm happy with this one though. Ms. Schnittgrund was totally easy to understand. I hope we never do this again

Figure 60. Student LL

Name & Instrument:



This song was inspired to me by life. It came to me because you start out as a baby, nothing's really hard to do, then the years until later life come on. They sometimes can be vicious (as my songs), then in the end, sometimes it gets more peaceful after you cross all the hard obstacles you encountered earlier. That is what inspired my song.

When we began our song and stuff, I was pretty much dreading it. I didn't really want to have more stuff to do, than I already had. Then, it started and it was really hard until Ms. Schnittgrund taught us a whole bunch of tricks and things to help us. She explained the directions to us in a way I could understand. I never got confused, I just couldn't focus because I wanted to go outside. I felt very relieved when I finished my song. I was actually impressed that I actually wrote a short song. I never thought I would ever write a song. I probably will continue to write music, but not for now because I have a lot more to learn.

- Alyssa M. -

Figure 61. Student MM

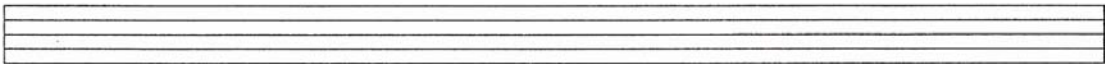
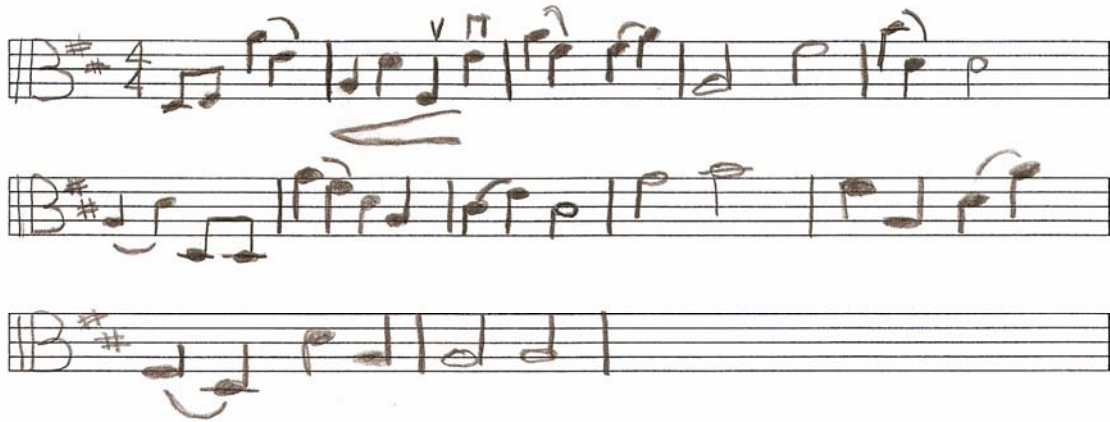
Handwritten musical score for three staves in D major, 4/4 time. The first staff has dynamics p, f, f, mp. The second staff has dynamics mp, mf, f, f, f, p, p, ff. The third staff has dynamics ff and pp. There are also empty staves below.

What inspired me to write this was probably my love for country music and because my attempt at bluegrass was like I was a real country star. "Oh my gosh, this is boring!" Shannon exclaimed. "Why do we have to do this again?" "Duh! For orchestra, you are so spacey! Did you like how I started it?" I asked. "I guess but my reason is because well I listened to different songs and I used Ms. Schnitt's rhythms which was awesome of her. She encouraged me a lot."

I was 10% excited + 90% nervous but then you told us how to do it and explained it very fluently. I was a little concerned but I took awesome notes! I felt awesome after doing that. I felt like a famous composer! I was pleased with it but it sounded a little weird to me. I'm kinda freaking out about performing but I think I'll do good. You were awesome Ms. Schnittgrund and it was fun to do this but I don't think I'll be a composer.

Thanks,
♥Kayla McCraw♥

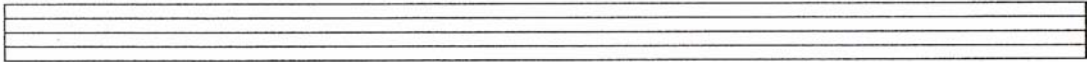
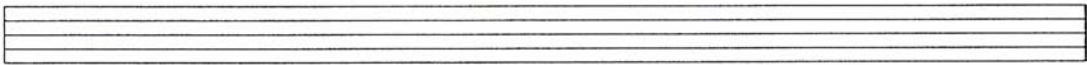
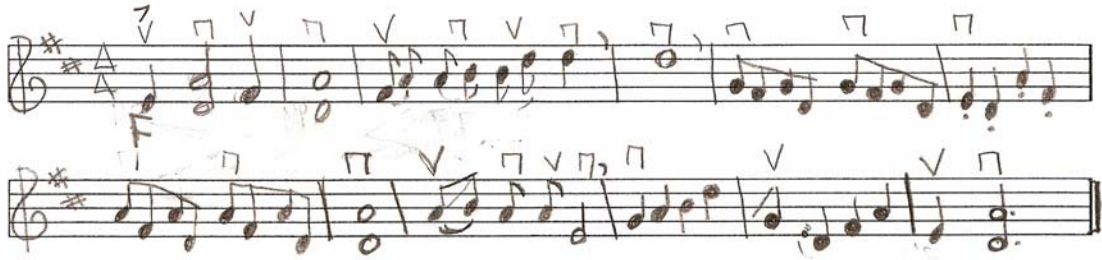
Figure 62. Student NN



My inspiration was my favorite artist Ciara and her music video "Like a Boy" at the beginning you hear strings then she sings.

I kind've freak out jus' a lil' bit but not a whole lot except when I played and then I freaked out and didn't want to play until I figured out to play quietly until the crescendo, and the *f* the at the end I winged it + jus' a lil' bit. your explanations were easy to understand sometimes but not all the times so I hardly understood the I put the melody together. Not a whole lot but I just winged it and put the melody together like it sucked and I wanted to rip it up.

Figure 63. Student OO



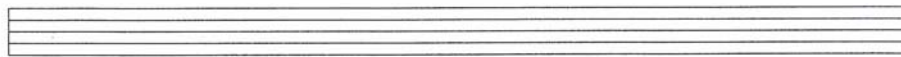
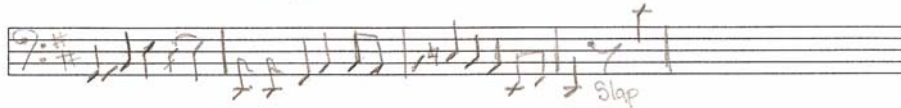
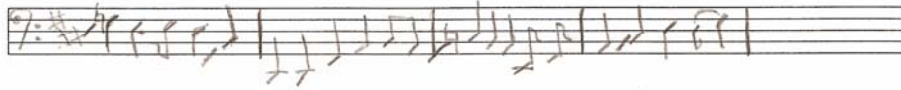
I was pretty happy and started to dance.
I love bluegrass so I started to make rhythms.
It went further and further with the rhythms.
In the end I repeated myself and ended up with
a good piece of music. End of story!

I was pretty happy when we started
improvisation because we had never done it before.
I'm glad Ms. Schnittgrund explained it well,
otherwise I'd be lost. I was really excited when
I finished, because I thought I would never have to
do it again, but I needed to revise it. I was pleased
with my finished copy, but I don't think I'll
continue writing music. (I chose Bluegrass)

Figure 64. Student PP

Name & instrument:

Pizz



My song was inspired by my dad because he loves to sing and dance. Even though he gets on my nerves a lot with his funny dancing to Ray Charles I love him.

I really enjoyed this project, but I did "freak-out" just a lot but I think you should do this in future years.

Figure 65. Student QQ



~~It kind a makes me think about~~
~~birds~~

A bird

Q

Figure 66. Student RR

pizz-

The image shows three staves of handwritten musical notation. The first staff is a bass clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 4/4 time signature. The melody starts with a quarter note G2, followed by quarter notes A2, B2, and C3, then a half note D3. The second staff continues with quarter notes E3, F3, G3, and A3, then a half note B3. The third staff continues with quarter notes C4, D4, E4, and F4, then a half note G4. The fourth staff is empty.

Before I begin to tell all about how my little tune came to be, I must first point out that it may not be as good as some of the other students may have done, but I for one, am proud of what I came up with, and am also a little stressed out.

And now to my story. I originally started out with a blank sheet of paper, a bass guitar in my lap (because I couldn't fit the actual bass in my room), and absolutely no idea what the heck I was going to write. To make a long story short, I came up with a song that would have sounded a lot better on a guitar with an amp at a gig, but unfortunately, it wasn't jazz, bluegrass, celtic, or any thing like it was supposed to be, and the only rhythms I had were triplets. So I started over (a little frustrated), and eventually came out with this. It is a little jazzy, but just a little quicker. But for most part I was thinking of rhythms of the music I like to listen to. Oh well. At least I got it done. 😊

Figure 67. Student SS

Handwritten musical notation on three staves. The first staff has a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. It contains a melodic line with dynamics 'mf' and accents '>'. The second staff has a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp, and contains a bass line with dynamics '< f'. The third staff has a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp, and contains a bass line with dynamics '> p'. Below the staves are two empty staves.

As the town hustles by, a young guy smoothly moves down the street. Suddenly, a whole new world swings into his mind. His shoes become the drums, keeping time. His finger snaps become a cello with the harmony. His hum becomes a violin with the melody. In his mind, he's making his own orchestra and band. To him the music he makes is the best! in the world.

At first, I was nervous and confused with the unit on improvisation. Soon, I started to follow Ms. Schnittgrunds easy to understand explanations of the things I was doing. Once I started to follow a certain style, things got a lot easier. My melody is jazz-styled, because jazz, to me, rocks! I am pleased with my new melody, and I think I will continue writing music. I would just have to get practice thinking the melody in my head more.

Figure 68. Student TT

Name & Instrument:

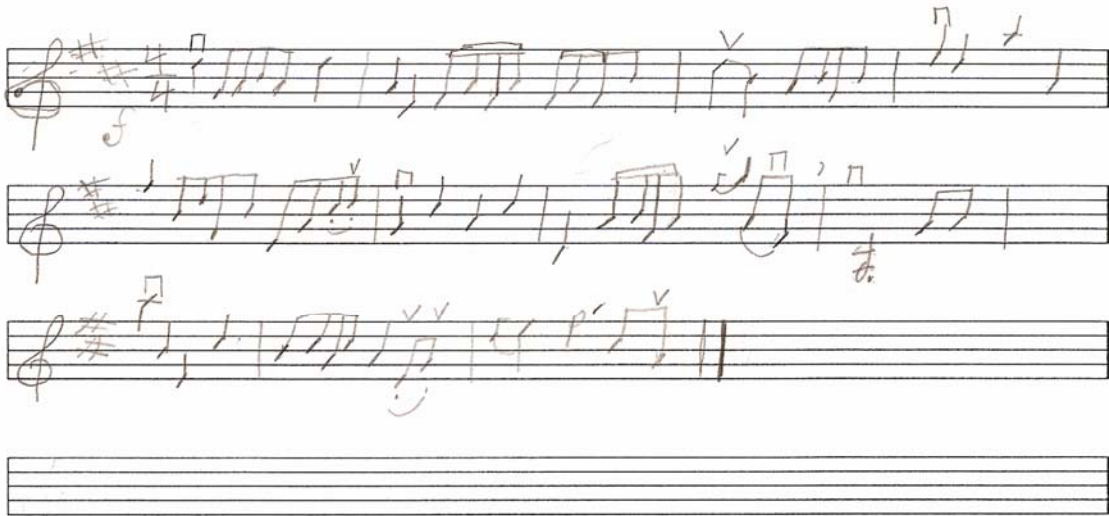
The image shows four staves of handwritten musical notation. The first staff is a single melodic line in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The second and third staves contain complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth notes. The fourth staff shows a continuation of the melody.

OK, so its like this...

My first attempt at making my melody started with jazz. I thought to myself, "This will be fun. It is a challenge so I think I will like it." Little did I know that jazz is practically impossible to write with my experience. I got two measures + they were pathetic. I then went down a different route, Irish. I knew I could do this because I have alot of Irish music I could get some rhythms + ideas.

I thought this project was fairly easy because I've tried to write music on my own, but now this will give me a much better understanding. I understand how notes + cords go together much better now!

Figure 69. Student UU



My Sister inspired this song because of their different times in life and attitudes

Sarah and the giant strawberry

Sarah is a 5 year old who loves to play outside. One day she is outside and she sees Strawberry Short-Cake. (She absolutely adores Strawberry Short-Cake.) She goes and plays with strawberry short cake. They are having so much fun that she forgets to check the time and she's late getting home. (She didn't get in trouble but she always remembered to wear a watch after that.)

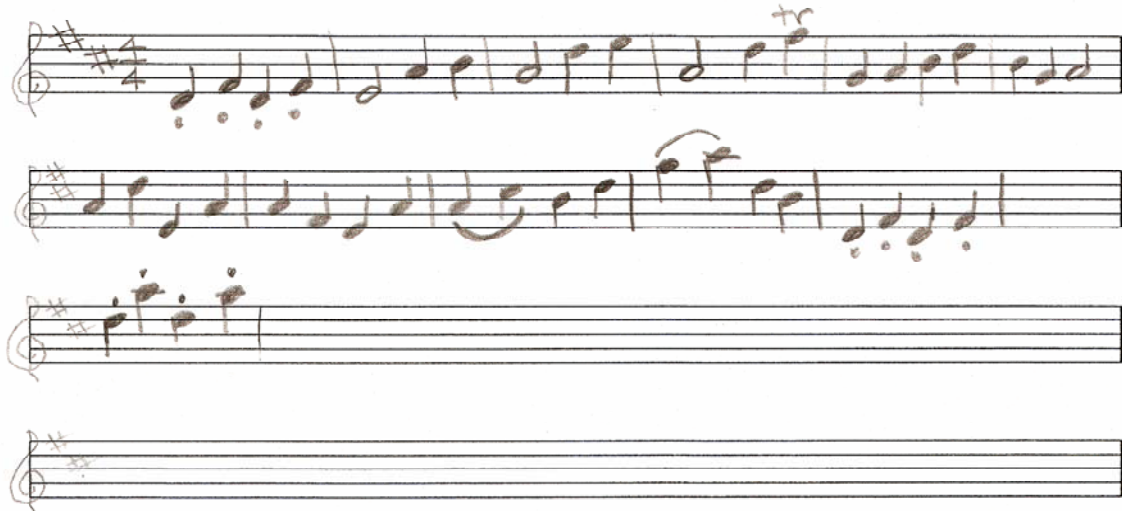
The next day she's playing with strawberry and they find this really big strawberry. The strawberry is so big and heavy that they both had to carry it to Sarah's house. When they finally got to Sarah's house they were tired so they lied down and took a nap. When they woke up they took the strawberry and cut it into pieces and ate it with whipped cream.

The End.

This is my paragraph about this improvisation method.

When I started this unit I was really excited because I like making up different types of music and stuff like that. I took lessons for three years with my brother and we used to make up songs or find rhythms to songs that we already knew and find the notes that went with them. I freaked out a little bit when she said we could only use 4 notes but I got the hang of it. Ms. Schnittgrunds explanations were very easy to understand and she took time to explain it well. There were some things I was confused about but I made sure I asked so I understood. I felt really pleased with myself that I had just completed twelve measures with embellishments. I was very pleased with the outcome and I think it sounds really good. I think that I will continue writing music when I am in the mood, but I will definitely have to be in the mood.

Figure 70. Student VV



When I heard we were writing a melody I was really scared. I thought that it would be the hardest thing in the world! I had no idea how to even start. I was relieved when I found out it was only a twelve bar melody. I had no idea what I was going to do but once I started it, it was so easy! I did a blue-grass song because I had different speeds of bowing. In the end I really loved this project! It would be fun to do it next year!

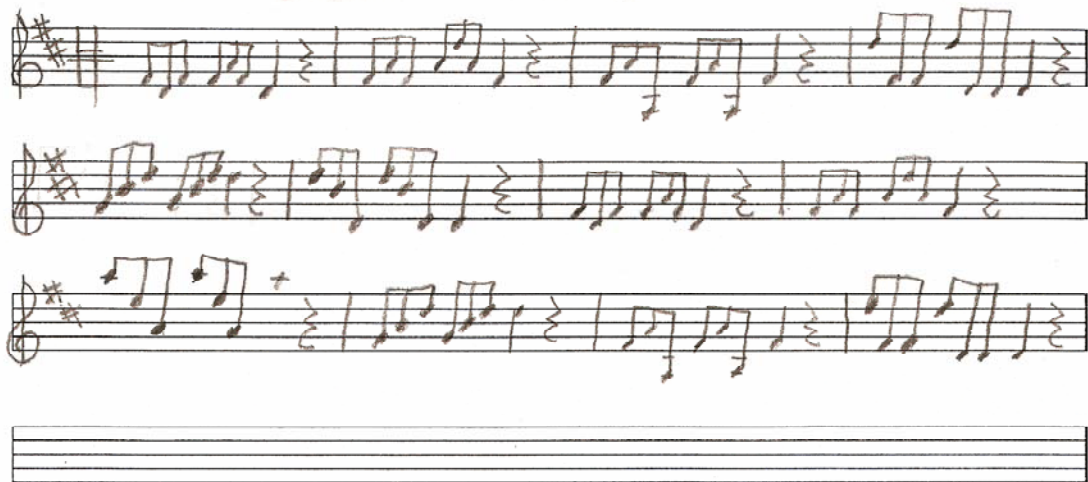
When I wrote this I just picked a few notes and mixed them up. Then I would just pick my favorite. I didn't want a harder melody with a whole bunch of wierd bowing and rhythms.

Figure 71. Student WW

Handwritten musical notation on three staves. The first staff has a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. It begins with a forte 'f' dynamic marking and contains a melody of eighth and quarter notes. The second staff continues the melody with similar note values. The third staff shows a bass clef with a few notes and a double bar line. Below the staves are two empty five-line musical staves.

Ashoken Farewell inspired me with its slower rhythm. Using rhythms from other songs, I put them together & added different notes.

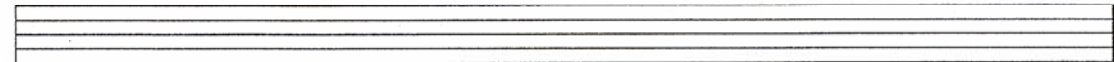
Figure 72. Student XX



A family walks into a restaurant and hears this melody. They start dancing and everyone looks at them. The family then sits down and enjoys their meal while they listen.

I was nervous when I heard we had to write our own melody. I thought that Ms. Schnittgrund were easy to understand. I wasn't confused. I felt great when I finished the 12-bar melody. I was pleased with my music. I don't think I'll continue writing music.

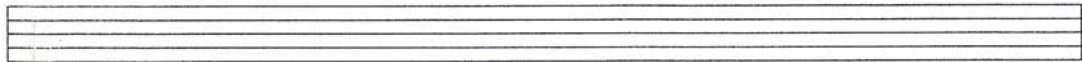
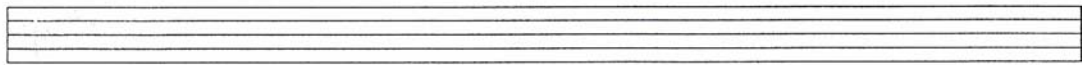
Figure 73. Student YY



Once there was a girl. Her name was Katie. Katie enjoyed frolicking through fields of flowers. Her favorite flowers were white daisies. One day Katie picked a daisy. She sniffed the daisy and soon realized she was allergic to daisies.

When we began this experiment I was kind of nervous I started to freak out a little bit. Ms Schnittgrund's explanations were pretty easy to understand. I did not get confused. When I was done with it I felt kinda relieved that it was over. I was not disappointed with the finished product. I don't know if I will continue to write music

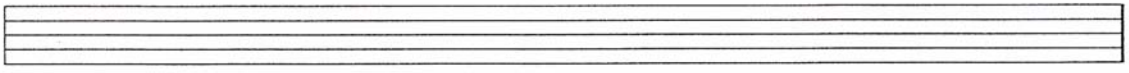
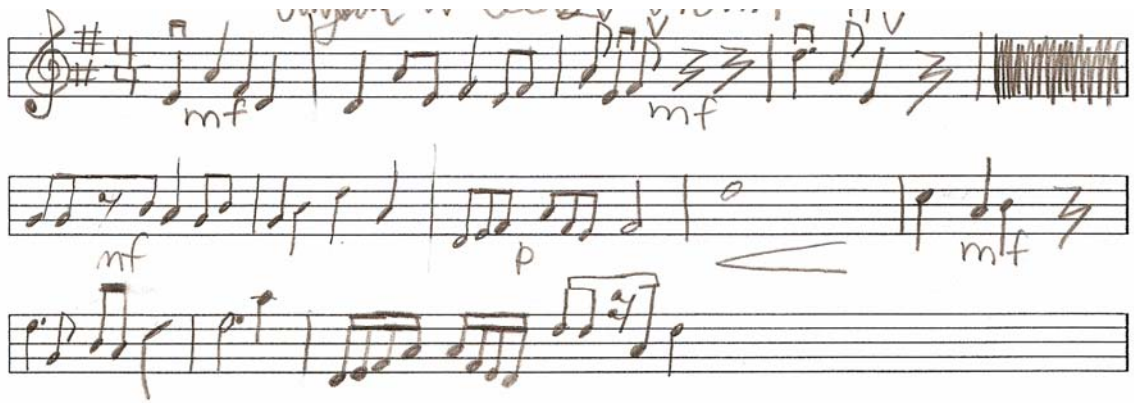
Figure 74. Student ZZ



My Song was inspired by my little Sister. She was in surgery the day we started this project. It kind of reminds me of her because she is very strong. The Song is very Sad when I listen to it. She can't walk right now so that makes me sad. I hope this song helps her to find the strength to get better.

When we first started this project I freaked out. I thought we had to write an entire song then submit it for the class. Ms. Schnittgrunds explanations were easy to understand because she answered my question that I had. After I finished my song I was sooo relieved. My finished project is o.k. I will not continue writing music because I am not very good at it.

Figure 75. Student AAA



At first when Ms. Schnittgrund told us about this I was excited but when we got into it more it got confusing. But I thought the directions were easy. I was sort of confused on the measures. I felt ok about it but I was also nervous. I was fine about the finished peice. I will probably continue.

The end

Thank you
Ms. Schnittgrund

Figure 76. Student BBB

I was nervous + I did freak out a bit. Yes, Ms. Schnittgrunds explanations were easy to understand. NO I wasn't confused too much but otherwise I think I did pretty good. I felt a bit relieved after I finished this. I was really pleased with my finished project but I don't think I will keep writing music.

Inspiration Story

well, this movie was on so I watched it it had some bluegrass music + I kinda liked it. Then I remembered I had this story + 12 bar progression to do + I listened to the music on the movie + I wrote the stuff down + I tweaked it a bit. That is what inspired this 12-bar progression.

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