

**Critical thinking and creativity in an eighth-grade music
classroom: A comprehensive composition**

by

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Abstract

In my experience, the creative aspect of music has been ignored too often in public school music programs. The multi-part lesson I have designed will incorporate as many aspects of the music process as possible, especially creativity. It can be used with virtually any age, skill level, or primary instrument, depending on need. My focus here is with 8th grade students who have a basic foundation of musical skills. Students will use all their prior musical skills and knowledge to compose a complete melody. They will notate their melody using a music notation program they have easy access to, such as Noteflight, MuseScore, or Quaver. The teacher will have provided prior training on how to use the basic functions of the chosen program. Students will work at their own pace and produce a high-quality product. At this point, some brief training about harmony and accompaniment will be provided by the teacher. Then, a key specific “cheat sheet” that contains common chords, common chord progressions, and simple, repeatable accompaniment patterns will be provided for students to use if they please. Students will write an accompaniment to go with their melody. This accompaniment can be as simple as root position chords placed in sensible locations, or as complex as the student’s ability will allow. The goal is creativity and quality work. The composer will sing or play their melody for the class using any instrument he or she is comfortable with, while the computer plays the student created accompaniment. If nerves are too much of an issue, the computer can play both the melody and accompaniment for the student. The composer will then talk the class through his or her creative process as well as any history behind the song. At this point, other students will have the opportunity to discuss what they noticed and appreciated about the piece. If the composer wishes, the class can provide constructive comments that could make the piece stronger. Composers will then have the opportunity to revise, make additions, alterations, or orchestrate

the piece, with the possibility of a school ensemble performing it for an audience. Alternatively, the composer could choose to simply move on to a completely new project. Throughout the entire process, the teacher, the internet, books and other resources will be available for student composers to use at their convenience.

At this point in my journey through a master's degree, I have noticed several career changing developments in my approach to teaching music. The most surprising and valuable of which is that I have gained a better understanding of what I believe about music education, its place in public schools, and why it is important. The direction of music education is changing, at least in part, to become more student-centered; with individual interest, knowledge, skill, and context growing in importance. I, as a music educator, must continue to learn, adapt, and change over time to make music education relevant and meaningful to ALL students. I have noticed other powerful and complex skills have developed, as well. I have grown in my ability to learn on my own; gather, organize, and present information on a given topic, in a variety of ways. I can effectively find, understand, and use research in my quest to learn and grow. The complex skill of classroom management is something I have been intently focusing on since my research class, in the summer of 2019. I have been observing, reading, writing, contemplating, and practicing this skill. Other salient skills that have expanded include choosing appropriate music, score study and preparation, and the skill and confidence to arrange music for any purpose I may encounter as a music educator.

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Chapter 1 - Teaching Philosophy

Is music education important? If so, is it important enough to be taught in schools? If it is, then why? I will attempt to answer these questions, for myself. I will also address why I teach music and how I think it should be taught.

Before discussing music education, it is important to talk a bit about education in general. The purpose of education is to develop the minds and bodies of young people and to prepare them to lead successful lives. Valuable life skills should be taught that allow students to thrive in and contribute to society. Students should develop a foundation for work life and for pursuing higher education, if they should choose this path. Young people need to learn to think clearly, creatively, and scientifically. They need to gain the skills to solve problems, work collaboratively with others, and to find and use tools and resources. Helping others is important and rewarding. It should be nurtured, as should honesty and ethical behavior. Discovering one's own strengths and interests is vital. Having the opportunity to pursue knowledge in those areas is necessary, as well. Finding out what life has to offer and what the world is like are of great benefit. The educational setting is a great place for students to build meaningful relationships with each other and with their teachers. It should be supported.

The reason I am a teacher is to make a positive difference in students' lives. My purpose is to help students learn and grow in whatever ways I can. When students tell me, "Choir was my favorite class in school," I know I have met my goal. When a parent tells me after a concert that they were so proud of their child, I know I have met my goal. When a former student tells me, "You expected a lot from us, but I'm really glad you did," I know I met my goal. When my school principal at a new job tells me, "That was the best concert we have ever had!" I know I

have met my goal. When a graduating senior tells me, “Thank you for having given me a chance to be in the select choir, that meant a lot to me,” I know I have met my goal.

Teaching music is the most effective way for me to help children learn and grow. I believe learning and doing music is inherently valuable and meaningful. It is difficult to explain the value of music using words, as music is a unique form of thought and communication involving pitch, tone, textures in relation to time. It is meant to express something, perhaps emotions or ideas. It must be experienced to truly understand its value. Music develops the mind in distinctive ways. It is a unique skill and form of intelligence. Music is a significant part of life and of the human experience, so it is worth teaching, learning, and doing. Music education helps people to interact with music more fully for the rest of their lives. Learning musical skills gives people additional opportunities in life. They can participate in community music activities, contribute musically to religious services, gain college scholarships, or pursue careers in music or music education.

Music education should be available as a regular subject in schools, so that all children have access to it. Many families cannot afford to pay for private instruction, materials, and instruments, so it must be part of school. Schools and departments of education require music teachers to meet standards of education, character, musicianship, and pedagogy before they can be considered for teaching positions. This ensures, to a certain degree, that in school music, children will receive high-quality music instruction.

Although human brain development is a complex process, I believe that music plays a part in that process. Howard Gardner (2021) considers musicality to be a form of intelligence. Additionally, “Education appears to be the most consistent, robust, and durable method yet to be identified for raising intelligence” (Ritchie & Tucker-Drob, 2017). Thus, we should teach music

in schools. I agree with Zoltan Kodaly's statement: "Teach music and singing at school in such a way that it is not a torture, but a joy for the pupil; instill a thirst for finer music in him, a thirst which will last for a lifetime... This experience cannot be left to chance, it is the duty of the school to provide it" (OAKE, 2020).

I believe the best way to learn music is to actively do music. It may take various forms, like creating, performing, or responding (NAfME, 2020). I strive to make the teaching and learning environment organized, focused, goal and team-oriented, energetic, positive, caring, rewarding, supportive, and safe physically and emotionally. My role is to facilitate learning, be a leader, guide, resource, and role model. Skills and behaviors that I attempt to foster include showing respect for one another, developing a commitment to excellence, a positive attitude, appropriate rehearsal and performance etiquette, teamwork, learning and applying musical concepts, healthy and effective vocal technique, reading and understanding music notation, self-motivation, self-confidence, openness to new styles of music and to new songs. Overall, my goal is to provide students with a rewarding experience where they develop musical skills and self-confidence through active participation. Along the way, they will learn social skills and the value of hard work. In addition, students will have the opportunity to build positive and productive relationships with each other and with me.

James F. Daugherty (1996) wrote an article comparing the views of music philosophers Bennett Reimer and David Elliott. In the article, Daugherty highlights the following ideas, with which I agree:

Reimer describes music as a "basic mode of cognition," a "complex function of the mind." Music should be taught because it systematically develops a form of intelligence that affords "meaningful, cognitive experiences unavailable in any other way." Music

belongs to basic education because musical experiences "are necessary for all people if their essential humanness is to be realized."

Elliott says the practice of music(s) is inherently valuable. It entails unique cognitive challenges and thought processes unavailable in any other way, even through other arts. Moreover, the primary values of music as an end in itself, i.e., self-growth, self-knowledge, and enjoyment, coincide with and overlap values beneficial to individuals and societies.

Education is a way to help students be successful in life. Many things are part of a good education. Music is one of those parts. It is a unique form of thinking, communication, and expression that is intrinsically valuable. I believe all children should have access to high-quality music education in their schools, just as they have access to other subjects. Teaching children through music is my way of helping them learn and grow.

How My Philosophy Informs My Teaching

In my teaching, I am guided by the principles in this philosophy. I recognize that the success of a school music program is an essential component of providing a comprehensive, well-rounded education to all students. I am dedicated to helping students achieve their fullest potential through the practice and study of music. I believe success in the music classroom involves developing the mind in unique ways, building a foundation of musical skill and confidence, having an outlet for emotional expression, and contributing to the school and local community. Music education should be standards-based and challenging, yet enjoyable, engaging, and supportive. While the teacher-centered ensemble model still has value in specific situations, I believe it is important to implement student-centered learning activities where students have input and take responsibility for their own learning. The lesson that follows

demonstrates many of these beliefs. Additionally, it incorporates most, if not all aspects of what music education consists of.

Chapter 2 - Lesson Plan

2014 Music Standards Addressed (NAfME 2014)

1. Creating
 - a. Imagine
 - b. Evaluate and refine
 - c. Present
2. Performing
 - a. Select – The selections are all student choices.
 - b. Analyze – Thinking about their own work, discussing the works of others
 - c. Interpret – The intent is there because the composer is playing the piece; the others are hearing the piece; and the intent is discussed between composer, classmates, and teacher.
 - d. Rehearse, Evaluate, and Refine – Students must learn to play their own work and to make it sound the way they want it to. Then they must make it work with their accompaniment
 - e. Present – Students perform their own work for the class, and then discuss their work.
3. Responding
 - a. Select – The composer has made choices based on their specific interests, experiences, and for the context of the school classroom. These choices are demonstrated and described to the class. Then there is a discussion of how and why these choices were made.

- b. Analyze – Individuals, their classmates, and the teacher are demonstrating, describing, and explaining aspects of the music.
 - c. Interpret – Hearing and discussing aspects of each composer’s work
 - d. Evaluate – Judging the quality of one’s own work as well as the quality of the work of others.
4. Connecting – Students are using their own experiences, skills, and knowledge to make music; and discussing this with the class.

Prior Knowledge/Skills - Students will:

- 1. be at the 8th grade level in public school.
- 2. have been in general music classes in elementary school.
- 3. have had at least 2 years of playing an instrument or singing in a school ensemble.
- 4. be able to read music on at least one clef.
- 5. possess age-appropriate computer skills.
- 6. have had previous experience or training using a music notation program.
- 7. possess at least a basic understanding of major and minor scales, and key signatures.
- 8. be able to discuss note names.

Lesson Objectives - Students Will:

- 1. gain a better understanding of pitch relationships, rhythms, note values, key signatures, major and minor keys.
- 2. create a tangible piece of written music.
- 3. use many of the individual building blocks of music to create a cohesive whole work.
- 4. compose melody, harmony and blend the two together.

5. create a practice accompaniment.
6. demonstrate skill in using notation software.
7. make their musical ideas tangible and share them with others.
8. perform music for others.
9. give and receive positive and constructive feedback.
10. demonstrate critical listening and evaluation skills.
11. find and use available resources to make their ideas become tangible.
12. take responsibility for their own learning.
13. be encouraged by their success.
14. notice similarities and differences in songs they hear.
15. express their ideas through music composition, performance, and discussion.

Assessment of the Lesson

1. Repetitive self-assessment throughout the process of composition, revision, performance, description and discussion
2. Peer assessment – comments and discussion
3. Teacher assessment
 - a. Did the student complete the melody, harmony, performance, description, and discussion?
 - b. Is the student's written notation reasonably correct? Could another musician understand it, read it, and play it?
 - c. Does the student now have a usable, tangible, written piece of music that he or she crafted?

Instructional Resources, Materials and Technologies

1. Laptop computers
2. Headphones/earbuds
3. Internet access
4. Classroom speakers
5. SMART Board
6. Needed handouts or access to these documents through their computer
7. A music notation program such as MuseScore
8. Students' main instruments

Lesson Sequence

1. Introduction
 - a. Introduce the activity by showing MuseScore playing a short melody that was written by the teacher. Then show MuseScore playing the same melody with harmony added. Ask the students to describe what they just heard and saw.
Teacher discusses his creative process with students.
 - b. Give an overview of the project – Write a melody on MuseScore. Add harmony to your melody. Play or sing your song using your main instrument, for the class, while MuseScore plays your accompaniment. Discuss your creative process with the class.
2. Students write a melody
 - a. Students pick a key signature that is comfortable for them to read and play their main instrument in.

- b. Give students a handout specific to the key signature they chose. It will contain the major scale, the natural minor scale, the harmonic minor scale, and the triads built on each scale degree. (Handout 1)
 - c. Using MuseScore, students set up a blank score specific to their main instrument.
 - d. Students write a melody that is at least eight measures long that they can play on their main instrument. They can create and save various melodic ideas, then pick the one they like best to finish. Students try playing their melody on their main instrument to test if it is indeed playable. Revise and add material if desired.
3. Harmonize it
- a. Students can use Handout 1 to help them find fitting chords. They can simply type the chord symbols above their melody line, click playback, and listen to the sound. The chords can be fully written out at a later time if desired.
 - b. Recommend that the students make their harmony very simple at first. Mention that I, i, IV, iv, and V, v chords are generally good beginning choices. Then when the basic chords are in place, they can make it more and more interesting, perhaps adding a grand staff to notate a piano accompaniment.
 - c. Two additional handouts will be available as resources.
 - i. Handout 2 - Common Chord Progressions
 - ii. Handout 3 - Common Accompaniment Patterns
 - d. Students can spend time making their accompaniments more interesting in the future. They can investigate other pieces of music and read about making melodies, harmonies, and accompaniment if they choose.
4. Play it on real instrument

- a. Students will practice and play their completed melodies on their instrument alone and then with the computer playing their accompaniment. Practice as much as necessary to be able to play it well.
 - b. If they have not done so already, this would be a good time for students to add any markings to their score, such as tempo, dynamics, articulations, etc.
5. Perform
- a. Each student will perform his or her melody for the class while the computer plays the accompaniment through the classroom speakers. If desired, the piece could be displayed on the SMART Board as well.
 - b. If nerves are too much of a problem for an individual, the computer could play the melody and harmony for the student. Alternatively, the student have a volunteer play the composer's melody for the class. If necessary, the composer could alter their piece of music to fit the needs of the performer.
 - c. The "audience" will practice respectful listening.
 - d. Discussion – The composer will describe his or her creative process and what he or she wanted to communicate through the song. Others can describe what they heard and provide positive feedback. The composer will have the option to ask the class and/or the teacher for constructive suggestions on how to make the song better.
6. Discussion of where to go from here – Possibilities include moving on to a new piece, revising the piece, fully writing out the accompaniment (if it has not been done yet), orchestrating the piece, making it longer or more complex, possible performance opportunities, etc.

7. Things for the teacher to keep in mind – Be flexible and go with each student’s abilities.

You may have to provide additional resources and training for advanced students who want to do more advanced things like using modes or extended chords like 9th chords. Be willing to adjust the assignment for multi-note instruments like strings or piano. Vocalists may benefit from using poetry to write their songs. The assignment may need to be simplified for some students. Create the right conditions for each student to achieve success.

Figure 1 – Handout 1: Major and Minor

Major

Bb C D Eb F G A Bb

Major

Bb Cm Dm Eb F Gm Adim Bb

I ii iii IV V vi vii° I

Minor (Natural)

G A Bb C D Eb F G

Minor (Natural)

Gm Adim Bb Cm Dm Eb F G

i ii° III iv v VI VII i

Minor (Harmonic)

G A Bb C D Eb F# G

Minor (Harmonic)

Gm Adim Bb+ Cm D Eb F#dim Gm

i ii° III+ iv V VI vii° i

Figure 2 – Handout 2: Common Chord Progressions

Common Chord Progressions

Feel free to use these if you find them helpful, or do whatever sounds right to you.

Generally, chords built on the 1st, 4th, and 5th scale degrees of any major or minor scale are strong choices and a great place to start.

Common Chord progressions in Major

I – IV – V
I – V – vi – IV
ii – V – I
I – V – vi – iii – IV – I – IV – V
I – vi – IV – V
I – IV – V – IV
vi – IV – I – V
I – IV – ii – V
I – IV – I – V
I – ii – iii – IV – V
I – III – IV – iv
i – V – i – iv
vi – V – IV – III

Common chord progressions in minor

i – iv – v
i – iv – V – i
i – ii° – V
i – ii° – V – i
i – VI – III – VII
i – VII – VI
i – VII – VI – V
ii – V – i
i – iv – VII – III – i

Figure 3 – Handout 3: Accompaniment Ideas

Accompaniment Ideas

The image displays eight musical staves, each illustrating a different accompaniment idea in the bass clef. The staves are as follows:

- Staff 1:** 4/4 time signature. A simple quarter-note melody: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4.
- Staff 2:** 4/4 time signature. A sixteenth-note melody: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4.
- Staff 3:** 4/4 time signature. A chordal accompaniment pattern: G2, B2, D3 (quarter note), G2, B2, D3 (quarter note), G2, B2, D3 (quarter note), G2, B2, D3 (quarter note), G2, B2, D3 (quarter note), G2, B2, D3 (quarter note).
- Staff 4:** 4/4 time signature. A chordal accompaniment pattern: G2, B2, D3 (quarter note), G2, B2, D3 (quarter note), G2, B2, D3 (quarter note), G2, B2, D3 (quarter note), G2, B2, D3 (quarter note), G2, B2, D3 (quarter note).
- Staff 5:** 3/4 time signature. A simple quarter-note melody: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4.
- Staff 6:** 3/4 time signature. A sixteenth-note melody: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4.
- Staff 7:** 6/8 time signature. A sixteenth-note melody: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4.
- Staff 8:** 6/8 time signature. A dotted quarter-note accompaniment pattern: G2, B2, D3 (dotted quarter), G2, B2, D3 (dotted quarter), G2, B2, D3 (dotted quarter), G2, B2, D3 (dotted quarter), G2, B2, D3 (dotted quarter).

Chapter 3 - Reflections

After two years of study, thought, and practice, I am starting to view a Master's Degree in Music Education not as evidence of having mastered anything, but more as providing a fresh start in music education. I have a newly found, stronger belief in the value of teaching music. I had always liked music and teaching, but I didn't really know if what I was doing was truly valuable or even necessary. I must say that I believe music education is not more important than any other school subject, but it is as important as any other subject if the goal is to provide a well-rounded education; and I do think that is the goal of most public school education programs. Honestly, if only two subjects were allowed to be taught in schools, and I was told to pick which ones they would be, I would have to choose Reading and Math. But that is not the reality or the purpose of public school education. It truly is to teach a well-rounded curriculum to develop children's minds and bodies, preparing them to lead successful, productive and meaningful lives. With that new knowledge, I feel more confident and grounded that what I am doing is important and inherently valuable. Music education is one of the building blocks of education in general.

I have noticed growth in a number of my music teaching skills. I have learned how to, much more thoroughly, prepare a score for rehearsal. Marking up the score with specific colors that signify various important aspects in the written music is helpful when studying the score and when teaching and conducting from it. Learning about the history of the piece and its composer helps me to perform it as was intended. Sight singing and music reading are skills I can teach to students in ways I had not imagined before. Rehearsing actual choral pieces using solfege is something that will strengthen students' ability to read music accurately and efficiently, as well as enhance their musical understanding. I have discovered that the 2014 National Standards

(NAfME, 2014) are a helpful tool and guide for helping students learn music. They inform my curriculum and assessment planning, and add strength to my teaching practices. Classroom management is something that I have been intently studying since my first semester in the Master's program. I have been reading research, books, and articles on the subject. I have been watching and studying other teachers who demonstrate great skill in managing their classrooms and their students' behavior. I have also been practicing this skill and learning by doing with real students. I still have much to learn and improve upon, but I do have the understanding that without good classroom management, very little learning will take place. I have gained skill in choosing appropriate music for choirs and individual students, based on maturity, skill level, and voice type. Arranging music for specific needs I may have is something I feel much more confident doing now than before I began the Master's program. I must say that the Arranging Choral Music class, which I took in the Summer of 2020, was a particular high point in my studies at Kansas State University. Not only did I learn the skills and understandings that the course was intended to teach, but the process of actively arranging choral music refreshed the joy of doing music for me, in a big way. Although difficult and time consuming, it was a whole lot of fun!

In aligning my emerging philosophy of music teaching to the 2014 National Standards for music (NAfME, 2014), one of the most significant changes my teaching practice will undergo is greater incorporation and integration of the creative aspect of music. In large part, this was missing from my experience as a young music student. It was also lacking in my previous teaching experiences. Now, with the support and confirmation of the Standards, I am happily planning on including many student-centered opportunities for creating new music into my teaching practices.

As I enter into my final Summer in the Master of Music program, I find myself very much looking forward to learning about developing curriculum and learning assessments for my music classes. These are things I have little experience with, yet I believe understanding and applying these tools to my teaching has the potential to lead to greater student growth and engagement in music classes. I would also allow me to show evidence of student learning to parents, school administrators, school boards, and the community. Luckily, I have the opportunity to participate in a course on these very topics, this summer.

I will start a new job teaching kindergarten-sixth grade elementary music this August. It will be a split-time position between two schools in the same district. The two schools serve very different populations. One school serves many low socioeconomic status (SES) students. Behavioral, emotional, and academic problems are very prominent learning obstacles for many students at this school. The second school is the polar opposite of the first. Most students are considered high SES students with few behavior problems. Many are high achieving and highly motivated students with supportive families. It will definitely be an interesting new challenge for me. It will be an opportunity to put all my previous experience, as well as my newer skills gained through participation in the Master of Music program at Kansas State University, to use in a quest to help all students learn in whatever ways I can. A new Master's degree and a new music teaching job...it will be a fresh start for me in music education!

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