

Music Outside the Lines

*Ideas for Composing
in K-12 Music Classrooms*

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Composition at the Core of School Music

Music is, for young children, primarily the discovery of sound.

G. MOORHEAD AND D. POND, *Music for Young Children*

In his book *Love, Justice, and Education: John Dewey and the Utopians*, William Schubert (2009) riffs on a little-known article by John Dewey (2006/1933)¹ that envisions what schools would be like in an imaginary, “Utopian” land. Dewey’s utopian vision holds promise that “the teaching-learning environments that would bring greatest growth are not schools as we know them” (Schubert, 2009, p. 82), and both Schubert, in his contemporary take on Dewey’s article, and Dewey himself imagine schools from this “Utopian” viewpoint—one in which the reader must think beyond the constraints and everyday logistics that seem to burden today’s schools.

It is with the spirit of imagining what music education might be like in a Utopia that I begin this chapter. It is not a variation on Dewey’s particular ideas per se (though I’m certain the idea of a composition-focused curriculum would fit nicely into Dewey’s Utopian school), but my own thoughts on an ideal, utopian, music curriculum, in which composition and improvisation form the core of all music teaching and learning. In this imagined “Music Utopia Elementary School” (MUES), the main repertoire to be learned and performed is created by the children. This repertoire leads to performance, and informs listening and analysis, and naturally connects to music already written (what some might call the *classics*). In MUES, creative music making is at the center from which all other music making and learning radiate.

After describing some learning vignettes in MUES, I offer ideas about organizing a curriculum infused with composition and improvisation activities. I conclude the chapter with some final thoughts about why it is imperative that we focus our music teaching on composition and improvisation, rather than simply view these as add-on activities as they exist now.

Music Utopia Elementary School

Imagine creativity at the core rather than the periphery of music education. The focus on the end, the concert, does not need to suffer, but is likely to flourish, and the process for getting there will be more creative, intrinsically motivating, and richer than one could possibly imagine. The scenarios that follow provide glimpses into classrooms where examples of composition and improvisations are taking place. They are little snapshots in time, but hopefully offer ideas for how a teacher might teach music with creative music making at the center. The ideas for these activities come from a mixture of my experiences either observing exceptional music teachers composing and improvising with children in classrooms, or projects that I have tried myself.

MUES could be anywhere really. The size of the school or the makeup of children in the classrooms does not matter so much as the energy and dedication to creative music teaching embodied by the music teacher. The music teacher at MUES, Mr. Grainger, is in his mid-40s and entering his fifth year of teaching at MUES, with complete confidence in this approach and curriculum. He had experimented with his creative music ideas for years previous to joining the MUES faculty, and had a reputation for doing so. For this reason he was hired at MUES, because the administrators were hoping to infuse more creative activities throughout their school curriculum—and especially in the arts. Creativity matters as much as the so-called basic skills to the teachers and administrators of MUES, and they see that the music and art classes, above all other classes, are the places where students' motivation toward learning and creative thinking can flourish. The administrators at MUES realize that creativity in the arts provides a healthy balance to the sometimes stressful testing in subjects such as math and reading.

Most of Mr. Grainger's music classes begin with 3 minutes of "free play" as children enter the room. They know the routine and the rules (no louder than *mf* on any instrument, and listen first before joining in) as they improvise on a variety of instruments that often morphs into an organized "jam session." Sometimes Mr. Grainger provides a focus for the improvisation session with a word on the board or a visual cue projected on the wall. Once the improvisation comes to a natural end, Mr. Grainger launches into the lesson topic of the day.

The following "musical montages" take you into each grade classroom for a brief glimpse of music lessons at MUES. The lessons come from various points in the conceptual curriculum model introduced earlier in this book.

First Grade: Musical Elements—Texture

Mr. Grainger's room is full of colorful images and patterns. For his first-grade students, he hangs posters of black-and-white M. C. Escher images, colored Mondrian square patterns, cloths of various thickness and intricate patterns, as well as computer-generated tessellations that were created by students in the fifth grade. The students have been learning about patterns and texture in visual art as well as math, and in this particular music lesson Mr.

Grainger hopes to inspire a music composition that will reflect their understanding thus far about patterns in all areas of life.

The students are directed in their opening jam session to improvise on Escher's *Woodcut II, Strip 3*, which is hanging in the front of the room. An interesting and overlapping steady rhythmic pattern emerges, established by some children playing hand drums. Children on mallet instruments join the rhythm by improvising in a seemingly random cacophony of sounds. The music slowly fades and ends, and the children sit quietly as Mr. Grainger speaks softly: "Ooooh, I noticed the way your music faded away to a peaceful end." He points to Escher's *Woodcut II, Strip 3*, and asks "So, what do you think of this drawing?" Discussion ensues about the different kinds of birds in the image (some with eyes, some without, some with a pattern behind them). "Those of you with mallet instruments go into the corner and create a pattern that represents the left side of the image, those with hand drums, create a pattern for the middle part of the image, and those with rhythm sticks, create a pattern for the right-hand side of the image."

As the children begin to work, Mr. Grainger walks around, briefly and gently reminding the students that a pattern is a short musical idea that repeats. With 10 minutes left in class, he gathers the children back to the center of the room and asks them to share their patterns. "Now, just as Mr. Escher's print has different patterns but is one picture, how can we put these sound patterns together to make them sound like one music composition?" He skillfully directs the questions and answers from the students. "I notice that your group was playing a fast pattern, and the middle group was quite slow pattern. Who is willing to adjust to make them fit together?" Hands fly in the air, as do suggestions for change. In the end, the children compromise and Mr. Grainger conducts a quick composition made up three sections: one for each section of the drawing. He records it and dismisses the children with the promise that they will hear it again. (Many of the recordings that Mr. Grainger makes in his class get uploaded to his website for parents and students to hear, and some are played over the loudspeaker for hallway movement or to introduce the announcements for the day.) He will likely give this recording to the visual arts and math teachers who are also teaching about patterns. The art teacher may be inspired to create artwork for a CD cover.

For 5 weeks the children will delve into concepts of repeated patterns and concepts of texture in music. As they create interesting patterns on various instruments, they draw notations on index cards to help them remember, and they drop these into a "pattern box" placed at the front of the room. At times they will pull out various patterns and experiment with layering them together, either horizontally or vertically, or both, and experiment with thick and thin textures while also recalling the patterns. The children will also begin to listen for patterns in the beats of rap music, as well as in classical music (two of Mr. Grainger's favorites for these lessons are Gustav Holst's "Mars" movement from *The Planets* and Steve Reich's *Clapping Music*). In the meantime, the art students are learning about pattern (repetition, lines, shapes, colors) and texture (smooth, rough, bright, dull) in their art classes.

After the 5-week unit, all of the first-grade students will perform a concert of their "Pattern Music" while the art students display patterns and textures on the walls for a monthly MUES assembly.

Second Grade: Musical Elements—Melody

"Good morning, good morning! (sol-mi-do, sol-mi-do)" Mr. Grainger sings in a sweet falsetto as the children settle in after their free improvisation time. They respond automatically replicating his melodic "Good morning, good morning!" "Watchya doin' today Molly (do-re-mi-sol-mi-sol)?" After just a tiny hesitation Molly sings back, "Riding my bike after school, yay-a-yay," and the class kindly giggles at her improvisation. Molly continues the game as the children gather into their circle on the music rug, singing to Jack: "Watcha doin' today Jack?" Hands begin to rise, hoping that Jack will sing his response and call on them. Jack sing/raps "Going to the market gonna get me a game yo yo yo yo." And they continue around the circle until everybody has a chance to improvise a little melody. Some sing, some chant, and some rap. The students are deep into their unit on melody, learning that it is what we label any short series of notes that sound like they belong together. The challenge is to improvise a melody with their voice and also to keep track of melodies they improvise—specifically remembering the ones they really like. Mr. Grainger asks them to make notes or notations on the melodies they like in a music composition notebook.

Today the goal is to make up a catchy melody with accompaniment to a selection of silly poems from the book *Fun Limericks for Children* by Debbie Gorton. Mr. Grainger will limit their melody to do-re-mi-sol notes that he has set up on bell sets that are scattered around the room. Students will use the bell sets to aid in the creation of their melodies and will work in pairs to do so. They have been working on using these particular solfège patterns and pitch matching since the beginning of the year, and this exercise will give Mr. Grainger a chance to assess not only their singing skills but their conceptual understanding of melody as well.

The children break into pairs—each with a different limerick from the book and a bell set. Mr. Grainger provides the following simple instructions on a check-off sheet:

- Work with your partner to sing the limerick.
- Use do-re-mi-sol pitches.
- Use your bell set to help you.
- Memorize your melody and lyric.
- Write it down to help you remember.

At the end of class, they come back and perform for each other. Mr. Grainger records all of their melodies on his computer and later files them into their digital "process-folios." For students who will stay at the elementary school for the entire 5 years, this provides a record of their growth over time. He also uses the files often at parent visitation days to show parents what the children are composing and how they are progressing.

The following week, children will begin combining limericks and also substituting some of their own words. Some will be in charge of accompaniment parts, using Boom-whackers and hand drums. The ultimate goal is to create a "class song" that will be composed of at least three verses and chorus. Ms. Peterson, a second-grade classroom teacher, is working with rhyming in her classes and will integrate the lessons by working on rhyming with the lyrics during her teaching time. The students will compose the melody as a group and then slowly shape it into a song that describes their class. As they develop their class song, Mr. Grainger skillfully weaves in concepts from lessons on repetition, rhythm, and even harmony. This is a yearlong project, and every year second-grade students look forward to composing their class song. They bring it back (often refined) to perform at their fifth-grade graduation concert.

Third Grade: Form and Timbre

The start of today's class is filled with an amazing variety of sounds as twenty third-grade students are scurrying about the room trying different instruments to find the perfect sound. Today they are beginning the process of organizing sounds for the annual third-grade show they are writing with their classroom teacher, Mrs. Johnson. The story, which they created, is about a small child who gets lost on the way home from school and stumbles into a magical kingdom where children are in charge and adults must listen to them. It is a very funny story, and the children love it.

In art class they will create the colorful scenery and paintings that provide the visual background. In music class on this day, they are beginning to create the sounds to go with the story. "What about this for the door opening, Mr. Grainger?" Sarah asks as she sweeps her hands through a wind chime. "Remember to work this out with your teammates, Sarah. But my honest opinion? I think it's pretty cool," Mr. Grainger responds. Sarah brings her idea over to teammates Josh and Nathan, and they continue working on finding the perfect magical door sound. Their team is in charge of the introduction and beginning scene. Mr. Grainger has arranged teams of three and four students to be in charge of different sections of the story. He is using this opportunity to teach about form and timbre in music. After plotting the sound effects for each scene, students will begin to shape them into a form that makes sense for the particular scene. They will make decisions about, repetition, beginnings and endings, as well as dynamics. They will also have to carefully notate the timing for these musical backgrounds to integrate them with the text of the play.

The sounds coming from the music room are cacophonous and, some might say, noisy. Yet the students are intensely focused in their teams with clear goals as they prepare for the upcoming show. At MUES the teachers do not purchase or reuse a prepackaged musical for their annual production; rather, they work together to create something original and integrate the lessons in all of the classes to teach about the concepts they are learning.

Fourth Grade: Form and Timbre

It is spring of the fourth-grade year, and the children are learning about the food chain and food web in their science units. Mr. Grainger has cleverly thought of a way to integrate

music composition into the science lessons that will help the students understand concepts associated with the food chain. During these weeks, he posts colorful images of plants and animals as well as words like *autotrophs* and *heterotrophs* around the room. Words such as *wooden, metallic, dark, bright, sharp, dull, hollow, thumpy, scratchy, and papery* also hang on the wall in different colors, sizes, and shapes as reminders for the students to consider different timbres when composing. Mr. Grainger uses this unit as a time to teach timbre, theme and variation, and development. Students are prompted often to think about how sounds would or would not match up with the musical ideas they are composing. The students have worked to match timbre types to various plant and animal types and have spent several lessons exploring ways to create the “sound” of a plant or animal. This project also requires the students to write using rich adjectives to describe their musical ideas.

“All right, class,” Mr. Grainger says while clapping to get students’ attention from around the room. “What have you decided? Will it be food chain or food web?” They had been discussing various possibilities for theme, variation, and development, and listening to examples of both. *The Variations on a Theme by Rossini* by Chopin was of particular interest because Chopin used another composer’s theme. This prompted Mr. Grainger to also play Brahms’s *Variations on a Theme by Haydn for Piano*. “Even back then,” Mr. Grainger chuckled, “composers did covers of others’ music. If other composers recreate a theme, then are they moving the music along the food chain?”

“Half of us are going to compose food web music, and the other half will compose food chain music,” announces Betsy. Her classmates nod in agreement. “Don’t forget to use the food web picture as your musical score,” Mr. Grainger reminds them. They break into groups and begin their work: looking over the “score” and then selecting instruments with timbres that seem to work for them.

Mr. Grainger is anxious to have them perform their music in science class. He will assess their connections to the scores as well as their understanding of development and/or theme and variation that the compositions should show.

Fifth Grade: Big Elements—Interdisciplinary Connections

In the fifth-grade year, the students compose music for, and compile, an entire CD. It is truly interdisciplinary in that it is based on, and inspired by famous artworks as well as their own art, and they write their biographies and liner notes for the CDs. Mrs. Andrews, the language arts teacher, helps them write their biographies and liner notes that describe their music, and Mr. Toma, the art teacher, has been guiding the students to carefully select a portfolio of artworks to inspire their music, as well as to design their CD cover.

Today the students are broken into three groups: some of the students are in the art room finishing up the art for the CD cover; another group is working in the computer lab typing their liner notes; and the third group is in the music room, using the recording equipment to record some of their original compositions.

Keira has been intrigued by the stillness of Mark Rothko’s paintings, and even more so by Morton Feldman’s music compositions that were inspired by Rothko’s artwork (on

Feldman's CD *Rothko's Chapel*). She composed a piece of music she titled "Calm," for five players on Alto Orff instruments. This was inspired by a particular painting by Rothko titled *Orange and Yellow*. Her music, like the painting, is seemingly static as the players move through a progression of very slow moving sustained chords. Mr. Grainger had just been teaching about "tension and release" in music class, and as he was watching her rehearse her classmates, he commented: "Oh Keira, you are showing such patience with this! The tension becomes almost unbearable with the slow chords. Do you want to do anything to release the tension?" Keira thought a bit as she recalled the lesson they completed during the week on ostinato as a tension builder. "No, I don't think so, Mr. Grainger. But I do think I need to add some dynamics to build up and then fade away at the end." She asked her players to mark their scores with some dynamic markings before they commenced with their final run-through before recording.

Fifth grade is also the year that students can elect to join the band or orchestra. Here students will apply their developing composition skills as they compose the songs they will perform on their first concert in December. The band and orchestra teacher, Ms. Carmody, enjoys the enthusiasm that the students bring toward improvising and composing songs when they join one of the ensembles. The first few weeks of band and orchestra are focused on learning the physical techniques of holding and manipulating the instruments as well as developing good tone quality. The students learn by ear, and as they add new notes to their repertoire, they compose simple songs, either individually or as an ensemble. Ms. Carmody will not introduce written repertoire or books until after the fundamental physical techniques and tone qualities are solid.

Imagine

Imagine a year of music moving in the direction of the "Music Utopia Elementary School," as described above: class begins with improvisation, continues with the concept(s) of the day, and then students compose or improvise around the concept to be learned. School concerts include a mixture of compositions composed by the students as well as the usual repertoire performed in elementary school. As students learn to improvise and compose, their understanding of and appreciation for already composed music will only deepen.

Imagine collaborating with the language arts teacher and the visual arts teacher on creating an original "musical story," complete with visual artwork, to be performed for parents in the spring. The approach to the curriculum is organic, with lessons stemming from questions and opportunities based on students' interest and natural evolution in composition. What happens when you bang two pieces of wood together compared to pieces of metal? Which sounds do you prefer, and why? Compose a song of ugly sounds. Compose a song of beautiful sounds. Compose a song of sounds that move from beautiful to ugly. It should have a steady beat as well as be in a triple feel. Work with a partner to create music that contrasts meters and sounds. What happens to the feeling of the music when the time changes? How might you notate it? Are there easier ways? What happens to the development of clean and clear tonal and rhythmic patterns?

Although the vignettes of music learning at MUES might seem extreme, they were inspired by real music teachers I have seen work this magic in their classrooms. I hope that they spark ideas for lessons that put creative musical thinking and doing at the center of learning in order to engage deeper musical thought from students. Composition, improvisation, and creative exploration activities lead to qualitatively deeper understandings than “re-creating” music. Although the norm is to teach students the “outside-in” version of music (that is, we give them the musical things they are supposed to learn), students who compose experience an “inside-out” view of music. In this organic and creative approach to curriculum, there is less focus on teaching the facts and bits of the (somewhat contrived) elements of melody, rhythm, texture, harmony, with careful sequencing of sol-la before ti-do (for instance), than there is on simply making music in a joyful manner, and teaching about the music after it is composed. It means starting from the whole that is made up and imagined by children, then dissecting and analyzing that organic whole into parts, and then moving out to the whole again.

The Spiral Approach

“A curriculum as it develops should revisit these basic ideas repeatedly, building upon them until the student has grasped the full formal apparatus that goes with them” (Bruner, 1960, p. 13). Jerome Bruner profoundly affected education and curriculum when he introduced the concept that children can learn any subject at any age as long as it is presented in terms that are relevant and meaningful to them. Whereas the previous chapters in this book provide a variety of possible composition and improvisation activities, Bruner’s spiral curriculum model provides a potential structure from which to enact them. A spiral curriculum approach with music creativity included in the core, as diagrammed in figure 8.1, centers around music listening, performing, composing, and improvising. Mr. Grainger, the fictitious teacher at MUES, would use a spiral curriculum in which he touches on concepts each year and “grows” them by revisiting them at a deeper and more complex level as children develop. The means by which these are taught in the creative approach to music are through improvisation and composition. These creative activities form the core of the curriculum and help to form the other concepts we teach in music, such as the context of music, the musical elements, and music history.

Creativity at the Core of School Music

—In composition, to produce is first of all to take pleasure in the production of differences. (Attali, 1985, p. 142)

Children come to school with years of musical experience under their belts. However, sometimes we approach students as if they do not “know” music and it is our job, as teacher,

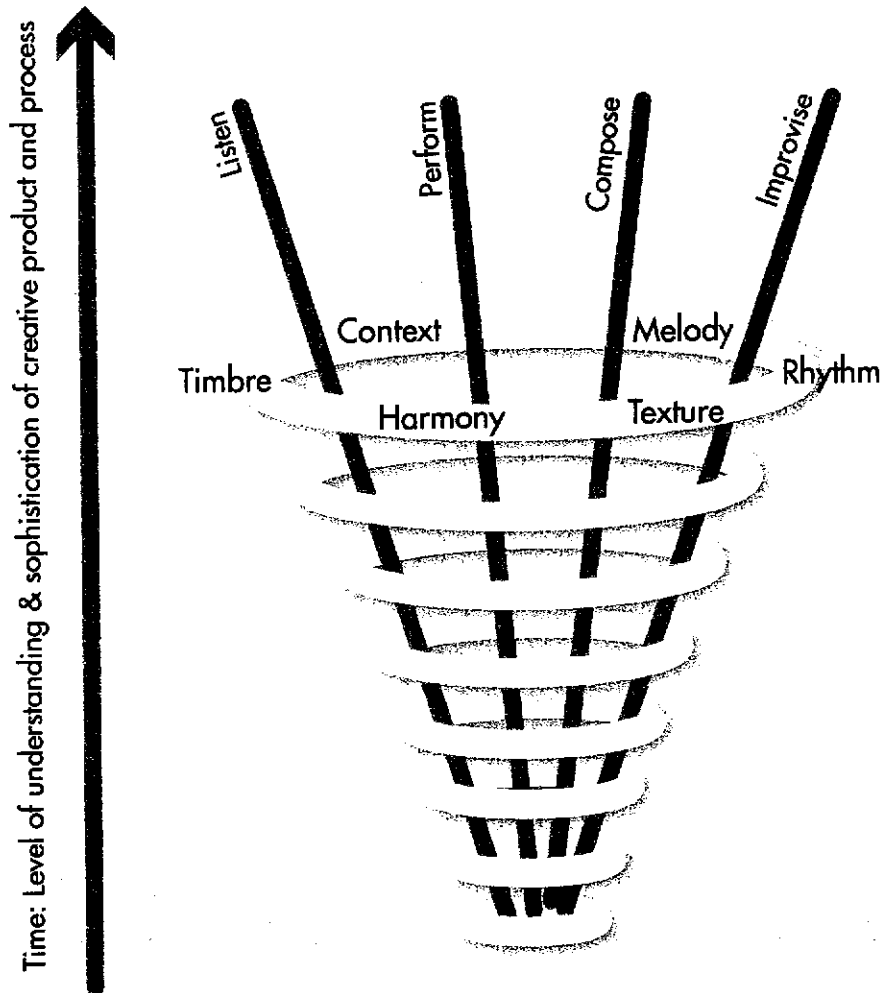


FIGURE 8.1 A Spiral Approach to Creative Teaching and Learning

to teach them music. We forget that their home environments are likely full of rich and complex musical sounds, and have been since they were born. We also forget they have the ability to make their own music, just as they can make up stories and paint pictures. Students come to school full of music: musical ideas, musical rhythms, musical facts, musical love, and musical experiences. And their knowledge of music might be richer now than ever before in history because of the ubiquitous digital music players and other sound sources that provide immediate and constant access to music.

Not only do students come to school with extensive musical backgrounds, but we also know from research that children *can* compose and enjoy doing so.² There does not seem to be a consistent “how-to” formula, and in fact many teachers have learned that a student-centered and emergent approach to the process of teaching composition is the most satisfying. Learning to allow students’ unique voices and identities to emerge seems the most important skill a teacher can possess.

An important part of the equation is the teacher, who must have the disposition to teach in an evolving and organic manner. The ability to improvise in the moment, allowing student ideas to emerge and shape the learning experience, is important for successful composition teaching (Bolden, 2009; Gould, 2006; Ruthmann, 2008). "Just as there is no one right way to compose, there is no one right way to teach or evaluate compositions. Instead, both the teacher and the composer must approach composition as a problem-solving exercise" (Yunker, 2003, p. 237). In order to implement a curriculum with creative musical activities at the core, a teacher must be flexible and skillful. He or she must have the ability to gently "manage" a class while at the same time provide space for musical chaos. It becomes an artful balance between freedom and control. And music teachers must be able to think imaginatively in order to teach from a curriculum in which the "repertoire" comes from the students.

The core of all music teaching should come from the creative essence of music. It begins by organizing the curriculum with the end goals in mind, but must follow a map through the unknown territories that composition and improvisation will bring.

Artistry

Finally, and perhaps most important, we must not forget the importance of artistry in making music. It is easy and fun to create an "anything goes" attitude in creative music making, with final compositions deemed successful simply because they are finished. Although wild experimentation and silly-sounding compositions are appropriate at times, we must keep a thread of our focus on developing aesthetic sensitivity and a sense of artistry in our students. Reimer (1989) presents a set of criteria for making quality judgments about a work of art: craftsmanship, sensitivity, imagination, and authenticity. Craftsmanship involves the ability to put materials of art together in a way that creates expressiveness in the product. Sensitivity becomes manifest through the depth of feeling that is inherent in the music. Imagination reveals a refreshing originality in the artwork. And authenticity relates to the "genuineness of the artist's interaction with his materials" (p. 138). If we keep these in mind as goals when teaching music composition, and share these criteria with our students, then we will develop students who are not only musically creative, but critical, artistic, and sensitive musical thinkers as well. Just as we strive for artistry in performance, we should also strive for developing artistry through music composition. Reaching artistry, just as achieving any goal of merit, takes work, persistence, patience, and much practice. Music composition requires this and more, at the same time it provides an outlet for children that will offer them rewards beyond the norm.

I hope that the activities and ideas outlined in this book help teachers to realize that composing and improvising in the classroom is not nearly as difficult as they might have been led to believe. Composing is simply organizing sound and silence in feelingful ways. Standard notation is not a prerequisite, and sounds do not have to fit neatly into a steady 4-beat pattern. Try out the activities presented in this book, and begin to trust the natural

creative impulses of the students. Build a repertoire of composition and improvisation techniques and activities, and develop them further each year. Once we have opened up our ears to the vast possibilities of what music is and can be, then the options for composition and improvisation in the classroom are infinite. And the musical experiences for the students will be enriched beyond our imagination.