

Concert Band Turned Composer Band: Create, Perform, and Publish to the World!

By Anthony Beatrice, Pentucket Regional Schools

An elementary general music curriculum typically has compositional and improvisational elements. In addition, music technology electives are popping up in many middle and high schools, and these naturally involve music creation. But in concert band, where trained instrumentalists are ready to perform, we usually leave the creative touch to those students who are in the jazz ensemble. Students who want to dig deeper into music might take a theory class filled with vocabulary and drills. But what if there was a way to marry concert band students' understanding of music and untapped creativity to their well-developed performance abilities? There is! Through composition.

Early Research

My journey into questioning how a successful rehearsal is run began a few years ago. At that time, I was taking on my band's biggest weakness: poor intonation. To help solve this, I read all the books on the market on how to run an effective band rehearsal, and I even posted messages on the Band Director Facebook group to see if there was a consensus around the country. This profound moment in my teaching career helped make our rehearsals more efficient with a solid warm-up routine, including daily singing, breathing exercises, chorales, and guided listening. I was on cloud nine and thought the only thing that could get us to an even better spot would be the addition of a bassoon and oboe to our ensemble.



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But, I was wrong. (It's okay to be wrong sometimes!)

Last year I was part of Pen-tucket's District-Determined Measures task force, aimed at creating an avenue for teachers to show student growth through project-based learning. When questioned about what activities we do in band to provide personal meaning, I gave the typical (and lazy) "Well, we're music. Everything personal meaning." Everyone h agreed with me.

However, after looking at the Bloom's Taxonomy diagram, I realized I was still missing the mark on what brings a higher level of thinking and meaning in music making. I had to admit that my students did not create music in concert band. They were able to connect a note on the music staff with the intended sound on their instruments, but they had no say when it

came to the order in which the notes were placed. It is similar to reading books for years and saying that you understand how language and literature work without ever writing down your own sentences for others to read.

During this reflective time period, I was leisurely reading *Drive: The Surprising Truth of What Motivates Us*, by Daniel H. Pink. Pink brings case studies together to show that students and people in general are more motivated and productive when they have bits of unstructured creation time, or “20% Time,” as Google calls it for its own workers. Pink states that “for artists, scientists, inventors, schoolchildren, and the rest of us, intrinsic motivation—the drive to do something because it is interesting, challenging, and absorbing—is essential for high levels of creativity.” In my opinion the “20% Time” in concert band should be spent composing.

Based off of feedback from my music technology course, it was pretty clear to me that students enjoy making music to animations and so I created the composition unit below.

How to Do It

(Resources can be found at www.composinginband.weebly.com)

The students will:

- Listen to composers talking about their compositions and their creative processes.
- Complete small compositional tasks and then perform their work in front

of the class on their own instruments. (Tasks include the devices of step, skip, leap, melodic motion, repetition, variation, sequence, motive, augmentation, diminution, retrograde, extension, truncation, and harmonizations via I, IV V chords.)

- Analyze a pop song (covering the items covered in step 2).
- In small groups, select a short animation to download from www.archive.org, which has Creative Commons copyright for sharing and adapting.
- Download the animation and delete the soundtrack using software such as GarageBand or MixCraft.
- Create a timeline, noting changes in moods and sound effects along with time markings.
- Compose music for the animation while referencing the timeline. (Students will interview their peers to learn about proper playing ranges for instruments.)
- Rehearse, perform, revise, and then record music to the short animation.
- Sync the performance recording with the animation on Garage Band/Mix-Craft and publish online.
- Reflect!

I have also been impressed with a new online curriculum developed by an ele-

mentary music teacher in New York called “The Young Composers and Improvisers Workshop” (www.yciw.net), and I have purchased subscriptions, which include Noteflight Learn accounts for each of my band students at a price of \$5 per student. This program is well thought out and digs deeper into form and harmonizing. It uses the Canvas learning management system, which includes a gradebook and tutorial videos.

How It Turned Out

We started this project last May and continued up until the last day of school in June, a time when student engagement is typically low. The experience was incredible, and composing is now part of the fabric of our concert band curriculum. We are working on putting together a composer concert and workshops and having students write music for local businesses via YouTube commercials. Students who want to dig even deeper are now receiving private lessons in composition and can take an independent study during the school day to compose music for credit. Next year, we are expanding our offerings to include a film and video game music composition course.

This change in our program has enhanced the musicianship of our students. Addi-

tionally, they are finding ways to incorporate composing music into projects for English and history courses. Students are composing and arranging on Noteflight at home, extending what they have learned in school. (Visit www.composinginband.weebly.com to listen to student examples.) The results of giving my concert band students the opportunity to compose their own music has exceeded any hopes I may have had, and I bet that it will be just as exciting and beneficial for you. •

SOURCES

Pink, Daniel H. *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us*. New York, NY: Riverhead, 2009. Print.

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