

Rehearsing with the Ears of the Composer

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Performance pieces have traditionally been the vehicle used to enhance young musicians' technical facility, phrasing, tone quality and ensemble. These same pieces can also be the textbooks for teaching young musicians how to compose by using rehearsal/analysis. Large ensemble (chorus, orchestra and band) directors have a tremendous opportunity to teach composition every time they pick up the baton.

Composers learn their craft by studying other composers' works. Young music students can develop compositional skills the same way within a performing ensemble context. Students learn to compose by singing themes, chord qualities and chord progressions, and through analysis of the pieces that they perform (you are what you eat).

To illustrate effective rehearsal/analysis procedures, we will use the first half of Frank Erickson's well-crafted composition *Toccata for Band* (Bourne 1957). This article will highlight the concepts and skills that students can learn when analysis is embedded in the rehearsal process.

Teach the theme first

Start by teaching the entire band theme I by ear (meas. 1-8). This develops the students' **melodic aural skills** AND gives everyone a chance to play the theme (including mallet players).

Sing the theme (Figure 1)1 to the students and have them sing it back. Repeat this until they have mastered it with correct style. The three motives marked 1, 2 and 3 will be used in later discussion. You may opt to teach theme II to the students using the same procedure (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Theme I in A Section (meas. 1-4)



Once they can sing it successfully with correct style, allow students time to figure it out by ear on their instruments. I have the students turn their music stands around so that they cannot see the written notation. At first, it may take a while for the students to play by ear, but if done regularly as part of the warm-up process, they become quite adept.

Ask the students, "Does the tonality sound more major or minor?" Most will say minor, and this gives us the chance to introduce the theme's tonality, **D Dorian**

mode (Re to Re or natural minor with a raised 6th). If you wish, play some Dorian scales with the students.

To contrast this with natural minor, have the students play the theme with a Bb instead of B. What a difference a note makes! For a creative exercise, have the students improvise their own tunes in Dorian.

Harmonic progression is next

Teach the **harmonic progression** (root movement) the same way (by singing as an ear tune) and ask the students to identify the root movement using numbers (in this case I-IV-V-I). NOW perform the first eight measures using the notation and the chords will be fleshed out so that the students can hear the **chord qualities** (i – IV – v – I).

Highlight the difference between minor and Dorian (raised 6th) resulting in a major IV chord. Even the students who are not following all of this love that sound and, therefore, find the discussion intriguing. The last chord is major, which gives us the opportunity to introduce **Picardy third**.

While rehearsing the piece, ask students questions about the music (group analysis). For example, after playing measures 9-16 (Figure 2), ask the students if this is the same material or different from what they heard in the beginning. They will quickly hear that it is different, so we label it B and the opening material A (form). If we liken this to a story, the composer has created two characters (A and B).

Figure 2: Theme II in A section (meas. 9-16)



Have the students describe elements that are different between the two eight-bar themes A and B: **texture** is thinner, there is **imitation** in the B section, tonality is now **in the C Mixolydian mode** (Sol to Sol; major scale with flat

7th), the **style** is lyrical, and the **syncopated rhythm** of the chords is gone.

Play some Mixolydian scales and compare with major. Add a B natural and play the section, allowing the students to hear what it would sound like had the composer written it in major.

For a creative exercise, have the students improvise in Mixolydian. An inordinate amount of easy and mid-level music for band is modal and yet most directors warm up on major scales prior to playing in these tonalities. Hmm...

Compare and contrast

NOW ask the students what is the same between the A and the B sections. Sing and play the sections back to back. You may need to make a prompting statement such as, "Compare the rhythmic material."

Students generally recognize that both A and B start the same way rhythmically (motive 1). Introduce the concept of **rhythmic motive** to the students. Have them sing/play measures 1 and 9 to make sure all students understand that both share the same rhythm. In this case, the **contour** (direction and shape of the melody) is the same, too.

Play the A and B themes again and ask the students if there are any melodic similarities. Hopefully a student will recognize that the notes from motive 3 (Theme I) are used in the rhythmic pattern of motive 1 (Theme II). If not, point it out to them and introduce the term **melodic motive**.

Students may also note that measure 12-13 is an **augmentation** (8th notes instead of 16ths) of motive 2 at a **new pitch level**. Students enjoy tracking motives throughout a piece. Continue doing that as each section is rehearsed – it doesn't take long to do. Tracking motives demonstrates to young composers the importance of committing to a musical idea creating unity within a piece.

Seek out the unique

I like to point out irregular phrase lengths and anything that is somewhat unique. The theme in figure 2 is a five-measure phrase. Beginning composition students tend not to think about **phrase lengths**. As a result, their own compositions are filled with awkward phrasing. Here is an example of an odd-measured phrase that is successful. It may make for an interesting discussion.

The ensuing B section (Figure 3) is now a trumpet fanfare using **triads**. This section is a great teaching moment in these days of cut-and-paste notational software. Yes, it is a restatement of the B section, but NO, it is not identical.

Have the band perform each B section back to back (meas. 9 and meas. 38) and compare the emotional impact of each. Ask what the composer did differently to evoke those feelings. Students may discuss several musical elements: **style, instrumentation** (woodwinds compared to brass), **dynamics, etc.**

Figure 3: Theme II as a trumpet fanfare using triads (meas. 38-42).



The A section of the piece is wrapped up with a short **bridge (section C)** meas. 51-54 in Gb Mixolydian followed by a return of the A, this time in C minor (meas. 55-72). Have the students discuss the contrast of the keys and the change in the **accompaniment**. These changes in **key center** are extremely important for discussion. Many young musicians don't realize that music changes key center unless there is a notated change of key signature.

The second section of the piece (large B) consists of four, four-measure phrases with a two-bar extension at the end. We are now in C major and common time. Teach the students the four-measure theme by ear (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Large B section theme (meas. 73-75)



Teach the students the chord roots and chord qualities using the same procedures presented earlier using numbers (I – iii7 – vi – V). The next phrase shifts to Eb major. Have the students play the tune by ear in the key of Eb. Then have them play the two together as they appear in the music. This should be done before the students play the section with notation. This allows the students to contemplate the themes like a composer would – in the mind before it reaches paper.

Once again, ask the students what is the same and different between the large A and large B section. Use prompting questions, if necessary. They will be intrigued that the large B section starts with the same rhythmic motive that the A section started with. This is a great lesson in **composing organically** (from the original idea or motive).

If we were to continue our study of this piece, we would next find a brief development section using augmentation of Theme II of the A section and a syncopated transition followed by the return of Theme I.

There is further development on the bridge of the A section. Theme I and the bridge themes are placed on top of each other, whirling into an exciting climax using chords at the tritone relationship. The piece ends with the large B section, creating an overall modified sonata form.

An investment of time

Some readers may think that rehearsal/analysis takes too much valuable time. There is actually an opposite effect that takes place. The students have told me numerous times that they learn the pieces faster when they truly understand them and have them organized in their minds.

Start with just one of your concert pieces and ease into rehearsal/analysis. Find out for yourself what works for you and your students. Keep your comments to a minimum and make sure that the students are constantly singing, playing and discussing.

It's okay to mix good, old-fashioned rehearsal techniques in while doing rehearsal/analysis. For example, when teaching themes, insist that the students sing and play them with correct style. Ultimately, time is saved, because students don't develop habits of playing improper styles that need to be fixed later. Conductors can rehearse entrances, releases, balance, ensemble and style while doing rehearsal/analysis. Eventually analysis is part of most rehearsals and the students think nothing of it.

Key Points

- **Composition can be taught to performing groups.**
- **Discussion of theme, harmony, rhythm, etc., can be part of any rehearsal.**
- **Performance quality benefits from compositional understanding.**

Study your scores in a deeper way and share your findings with your students. Each piece is a unique study in itself. If your analysis skills are not up to where you would like them to be, check online or refer to books that may have it already done. Then choose which concepts you are going to highlight for the students.

If rehearsal/analysis becomes part of your rehearsal regimen, your students will be more ready to compose their own pieces. Continue to refer to your pieces of study to help the students compose. If you understand the pieces that you are conducting, then

you can teach composition. This is a way that all music teachers can teach composition and give their students success!

Notes

1. Goza, David, "A Conductor's Outline of Frank Erickson's *Toccata for Band*," 2009, accessed February 8, 2015, <http://www.asboa.org/Resources/Toccata%20for%20Band.pdf>.

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