Teaching Music History & Theory Through Composition

William Rank, CMP Committee Member

Last June at the CMP Workshop in Eau Claire, I had the honor of working with a colleague who teaches a music technology course that mirrored my own. We were able to exchange many ideas about how to incorporate CMP teaching into our music technology curricula. Despite music technology being a non-performance-oriented class, working through a unit project with this teacher reinforced my belief that the CMP approach lends itself to every aspect of teaching and I've grown to think more like a general music teacher.

At conference after conference, presenters showcase the newest technology, trying to persuade teachers to buy the latest and greatest app that's going to change the teaching world forever. But let's face the facts – teachers are more important than apps. Without strong outcomes for why we would use the aforementioned piece of technology, that gadget becomes just a cool toy, not a strategy to reach your instructional outcomes. We forget that the most important questions are not always the who, what, when, and where; but *why* and *how*. Our goal should be to inspire students to be creative and understand how the development of music (historically and theoretically) impacts their lives today. It's no secret that the new National Core Arts Standards reflect the actual processes in which musicians engage (creating, performing and responding).

A greater understanding of the compositional processes of music should be taught in our curricular ensembles and in general music classes. Technology is always evolving and teachers must evolve with our students. The *why* might stay the same, but the *how* changes constantly as technology evolves. Students interact and manipulate variables in music, therefore they leave with a deeper appreciation and understanding of the music and how music evolves. Teaching students to improvise and compose allows for easy assessment of conceptual learning.

Composing Simple Melodies

A simple melody can be very difficult to compose. Structuring the project by focusing on a limited number of notes or a specific rhythmic pattern will guarantee a more successful outcome. Analyzing some simple melodies with a class can become the basis for an entire composition unit. Noteflight Classroom allows the teacher to create a template for students to compose in small groups. Perhaps a simple accompaniment as part of the template, provides a harmonic structure for students

to improvise as part of the compositional process. Then have the class decide how to notate the melody. Simple melodies make wonderful recorder pieces for a general music class or can be used as an alternative to assess key signatures and scales in instrumental classes.

Student Example on Lightly Row

Polyphony (Late-Medieval)

Leonin and Perotin are credited with the discovery of polyphony, utilizing previously composed Gregorian chants as a vox principalis and composing more intricate melodies over these chants. An example of this is Leonin's *Organum Duplum* and Perotin's *Alleluia Navitas* (pictured). After listening and analyzing how this composition differs from the Gregorian chants that we explored previously, students compose in two parts (three for some of the more advanced musicians). Without Leonin and Perotin would we really have bass lines today?
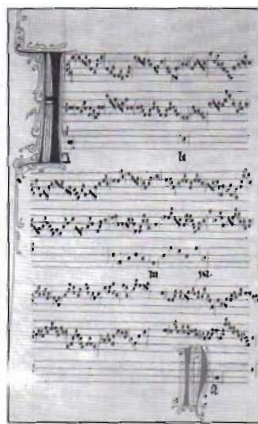
Imitative Polyphony (Renaissance)

Josquin des Prez led music out of the Medieval and into the Renaissance, and his contributions to music are vast. Our literature selection focuses on Missa Panga lingua, and with a quick analysis of the first few measures of the Kyrie, we recognize four voice imitative polyphony. A simple form of imitative polyphony for students to understand and be able to compose is a Canon.

Student Example of Organum Duplum

Other Notation Project Ideas

- **Theme and Variations (Baroque)** – Explore the genius of Pachelbel's *Canon in D* as a series of continuously developing variations. Students compose their own set of variations on Pachelbel's canon. Through their variation compositions, the students will discover rhythmic variation, melodic variation, sequence and inversion.

- **Vocal Warm-Ups** – Students compose sequences that can easily be transposed to extend range. These don't have to be very challenging, but each student could compose a new warm-up to sight-sing each day!

Music Sequencing

Over the past 20 years, sequencing programs have gained in popularity because of their visual layout and ease of use. Developing skill in these programs is important for students considering a career in commercial music. GarageBand is a very powerful entry level sequencing program that is built in on the Macintosh platform.

Rondo Form (Classical)

One focus of the classical period was on balance and structure. We see this when we examine the art and architecture of the day. The music of the classical period lends itself well to teaching about form, and as a prime example of this, Mozart's *Horn Concerto No. 2 - Rondo* (available via IMSLP.org). Using a simple framework, we can build projects around the idea of Rondo form.

Classical Makeover

What would the music of Mozart or Beethoven sound like today? How did the technology available at the time change their compositional style? The piano was cutting edge technology in the time of Mozart. Using the newest technology (instruments) these composers created many sounds that weren't available 50 years before. Starting with some general MIDI files from the Classical Archives, students explore a piece of music, and then re-create it in a modern interpretation, exploring various timbres and textures.
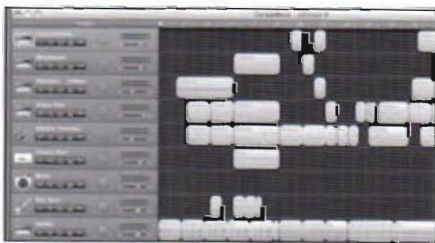
More Sequencing Project Ideas

- **Ringtones** – These 30-second theme songs are created using vocal recordings. Students divide words syllabically to create rhythmic repetition. The "leitmotifs" are then placed in ternary form (Schumann "Folk Songs").

- **Pop Makeovers** – Similar to the Classical Makeover but utilizing popular music from CoolMidi, students recreate thematic materials from the work in a remix interpretation.

- **Using MIDI Controllers** – Students improvise and record bass lines using Oxygen 8 MIDI Controllers - creating their own forms and dub-step beats.

- **Remix Project** – Take sequencing to the next level. Challenge students that have developed skill in composing, editing, form, and sequencing, to try a "Remix" project. Through ILMEA, a popular piece is selected and stems (tracks) are made available to students.

Students download these stems into a DAW and chop them up, add in their own bass lines, develop form and re-master their work. Students then vote on which projects are submitted for our state remix contest!

Cross-Program Projects

- **Car Commercials** – Compose exciting music to create an advertisement using iMovie and GarageBand.

- **Movies and Music** – Explore the emotional impact of music on movies.

Interactive Composition

- Use Ableton Live to perform live remixes – Classical Makeover & Pop Makeover 2.0

A comprehensive approach to music technology means unlimited possibilities to explore music selection, analysis and strategies. I challenge those who teach music technology (or those who have access to technology in their classes) to consider not just using technology as a cool gadget, but as a vehicle to a deeper understanding of *how* and *why*. Teach with intention, perform with understanding!

If you would like more project examples and tutorials, please visit my website: http://band.d92.org

Web Resources

- classicalarchives.com
- FreeMidi.org
- IMSLP.org
- MusicTheory.net

Books

- Ammons, M. (1995). Music History A.D. 450-1995 - *Mark Twain Publishers* (reproducible close-reading text)

- Kuhn, Will. (2015). Interactive Composition: Strategies Using Ableton and Max for Live. *Oxford University Press.*

Notation Software

- Noteflight Classroom ($195/year) – Finale meets Facebook. Web-based (no software to install), 250 users, unlimited scores, no limitations! Also works with Chromebooks!

- Finale 2014

- Sibelius

Sequencing Software

- GarageBand – Free sequencing software for Mac and a wonderful introduction to Apple's Logic Pro.

- Magix Music Maker – PC $49/per computer

- Soundation 4 Education – web-based sequencing software that works with Chromebooks!

- *Hint: Work closely with your technology team to make sure that you are within bandwidth limitations when working with anything that deals closely with real time audio files.*

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