



Composing in the beginning band classroom: Recipes for success

BY HEATHER WATERS

As teachers we've all seen it many times. In fact it comes around once every year. No it is not the latest zombie video game or the newest cell phone. It is the infamous line # (insert your "favorite" one here) in the band book with only five notes, labeled with a clever or sometimes not so clever title. What if those first five notes could be more than just another line on the page to the beginning band student? What if the pencil that they are required to have on their stand at every rehearsal became a composer's pen? Every child is an artist, every child has a voice, and the best way to teach children to understand music is to have them create it themselves.

Composition is sometimes perceived as difficult, requiring a strong theory background or years of instruction. It is, in fact, possible at the beginning level of playing a musical instrument to be successful at composition. Students can gain skills through a simple shift from following orders to making musical choices. They can attain a deeper understanding of the music, composer's choices, and a greater mastery of the requisite skills to perform it well. Facility of specific techniques may also be enhanced by exploring them in multiple, creative ways. Which leaves us with one question: Are you ready to hand over that pen?

FIRST STEPS: THE INGREDIENTS

The foundation of composition is about the manipulation and organization of each aspect of music. Whether the choice is about harmony, melody, form, timbre, or rhythm, each one is best explored in isolation. You would not give a student a big box of crayons and say now go and draw something when they are only familiar with seven colors. The end product might be a little scary. However, gradually as students develop and become more comfortable manipulating and organizing their choices, more aspects can be explored simultaneously.

What is the key to student's first composition? They have to feel like they are successful. What does that mean to a beginning band student? It must sound similar to what they are used to hearing; a line out of their

method book. They must be successful the first time in order to get them hooked and willing to try more.

So what does a day in the life of a typical beginning band method book line look like?

1. Short in Length (four to eight measures)
2. Rhythmic Simplicity (quarter notes, half notes, and eighth notes)
3. Small Pitch Set (three to seven notes)
4. Repetition (one or more measures repeat)

These four aspects are the genesis for their first composition assignment. Each one is specifically limited and controlled in order to produce a musically rewarding experience.

THE RECIPE

Born out of boredom with the band method book, I decided to try an experiment with both of my beginning 6th grade band classes. At the time they only had a knowledge base of seven notes: Concert B-flat, C, D, E-flat, F, G, and A. From those notes I chose a pentatonic pitch set (concert B-flat, C, D, F, and G). The pitch set avoids the tendency of the fourth scale degree, and any of the five notes can feel like tonic. The length of the composition was to be four measures long in common time and the rhythm was already predetermined using only quarter notes and half notes.

The task of the students was to take the rhythm given and move the notes up and down the staff using the given pitch set in order to create a melody. The only catch was that they must start and end on a concert B-flat. Any other note decisions were left up to the students. I did an example on the board with my students and gave them one night to complete the assignment. Out of all of the assignments turned in, not one student had the same line as another. The project ended up generating nineteen new beginning band method book lines, each with their own set of challenges for the performer.

I took all of the lines, labeled them and plugged them into Finale in full band versions and printed them off. *All* beginning band students were able to play their composition and their classmate's compositions. Not

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only were the students surprised at how well their compositions sounded but they were also able to explain why they liked a composition more than another giving specific musical reasons. By setting up parameters where each student could be successful it eliminated students from negatively discussing each other's work.

A by-product of this assignment was using the student's compositions to discuss the concepts of steps, skips, and leaps. The students were able to identify how many each melody contained and were able to perform them. As a further extension I explored alternate note choices by playing the 'What if' game. What if we were to put a step there instead of a leap? What if we added a skip right before the last note? What if we were to repeat that measure? What would that sound like? It prompted the students to investigate other options and see that there is not just one 'right' answer.

VARIATIONS FROM THE CHEF

The beauty of musical composition is that your options are unlimited. You can go a hundred different directions from one starting point. That is also one of the reasons it can be an overwhelming place to start if you have never done a composition assignment in the classroom before. The most important thing to remember in the beginning is to manipulate only one aspect at a time. Here are a couple of variations of composition ideas that explore other musical aspects.

Dynamics are an important musical concept that help provide interest in any piece of music. In the beginning band classroom I focus on four main varieties of dynamics; piano, forte, crescendo, and decrescendo. One variation of the previously discussed task is to switch the focus from pitches to dynamics by giving the students only these four choices to investigate. Students can take previous compositions and explore different dynamic placements. They could also pick their favorite line out of the method book and add or subtract dynamics to it. For more advance students, they can simultaneously explore both pitch and dynamic elements in a new composition.

What we say is just as important as how we say it, and this holds especially true in music. Articulation is about how we perform all of the notes within a melody. It describes which notes are separated, connected, or emphasized. During the first year of instruction I focus on legato, staccato, slur, and accent. Students can compose eight measure melodies with a predetermined rhythm. They will compose their own melodies with only two rules. The first rule is that they have to start and end on the same pitch. The second rule is that

measures one and two and measures five and six have to be exactly the same rhythm and pitch. Their main goal is to make the first phrase and the second phrase sound completely different by using opposing articulations and not by using different notes. For more advanced students, they can explore different characters in music by also adding a variety of dynamic and rhythmic changes to their preexisting compositions or lines in their band method books.

I usually save rhythmic manipulation until the very end of the year. The pattern of regular and irregular combinations of sounds and silences are difficult for the beginning band students to master independently. The students use a fixed pitch set and are given a starting and ending note. The beginning experiences with rhythmic manipulation are four measure examples that are later extended to eight and twelve measures in length. Students are given 'rhythmic blocks' that encompass two beats in common time. Each block contains different rhythmic combinations of sounds and silences that the student can use. They are to use two blocks per measure and have the option of directly repeating a block or delaying the repetition. This allows the student to manipulate the rhythms without leaving a beat out or having too many in each measure. For more advanced students, exercises in different meters and the elimination of rhythmic blocks can be utilized. Composition exercises that focus on rhythm allow for discussions on the direction of longer and shorter note values and how they have an effect on phrase direction. An extension lesson can involve the analysis of band method book lines that they have already played.

The sequence outlined here offers band directors options for introducing composition into the beginning band classroom. Composition assignments allow the students to be creative, it helps the students make musical decisions, and it also aids in teaching and reinforcing additional musical concepts using student work. Through the organization and manipulation of musical aspects the students are engaged in a very rewarding process that can extend beyond the walls of the classroom.

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