



Guiding Musical Creativity in a Test Driven Culture

Dr. Scott Harris

The TEST! In today's educational environment the mere word brings out a number of strong and immediate reactions from teachers, administrations, parents, and students. Whether it's the EXPLORE, K-PREP, PLAN, STAAR, SAT, ACT, GRE, or another acronym not yet discovered, the test seems to drive much of our educational programming, curriculum, and day-to-day teaching.

Creativity is a highly sought after skill in today's society; however, in a test driven culture many wonder if students are actually learning *how* to be creative. Almost all academic environments stress the importance of creative and critical thinking, and many believe music and the arts is where creativity flourishes. In fact, creativity is a required element on music education curricula standards for NAFME, KMEA, and NASM; but does being involved in a school music program actually develop and/or teach individual creativity? Does singing in the tenor section, playing 2nd clarinet, twirling a flag, or playing viola in orchestra for six years bring out a student's creativity?

The traditional approach to music education is built on the large ensemble experience—participation in band, choir, or orchestra. In these organizations, leadership, programming, conducting, and instruction generally all come from one person—the director. The director selects the music, assigns the parts, teaches each member how to perform, and conducts the performance. The director is highly creative and regularly has to make interpretive musical decisions, in addition to finding unique solutions to endless programming, logistical, and personnel issues; but, are the students themselves also demonstrating individual creativity? *I'm not so sure.*

Music curriculums also have their share of tests. While we don't administer written exams in the traditional academic sense, we do have chair placement, all-state auditions, solo and ensemble contests, concerts, and auditions. These are our tests, and I believe that they not only drive our curriculums, but, depending on our approach to them, can suppress our students' creative development.

Having said that, I also believe these activities are

essential ingredients in a successful music program, and I am not arguing against them. I believe we can work within this test-driven culture to ensure our music students are actually developing the individual skills in creative thinking that society believe they already have. Creative thinking can and should be directly incorporated into everything we do in the music/ensemble classroom. Most importantly we, the teachers, must take the lead and value creativity as an essential part of music-making. We must passionately inspire... and *guide*...our students towards creative thinking and ultimately better musicianship.

THREE KEYS TO GUIDING CREATIVITY

1. Provide the tools. Fundamentals, fundamentals, and more fundamentals! An author can't write a novel without first knowing the alphabet. How the instrument works, tone quality, technique, notation, and the basics of musicianship—students must understand the *language* of their craft, before they can communicate their personal creativity.

2. Provide the time. Time is our most important commodity, and our greatest investment. If you truly believe something is important, find the time to cultivate it! As music teachers we require rehearsals, private lessons, and daily practice. In each of these settings we should allow for, or even require, time for creative activities (5–10 minutes is perfect).

Rehearsals - admittedly, developing individual creativity in a large/chamber ensemble setting is difficult. Part of the challenge is sometimes being creative *yourself* as the director in finding new and unique ways to engage your students. Consider these examples:

- *Follow the leader:* Ask a student to the podium and play a game of follow the leader. The leader identifies the first note, then plays whatever they want—a scale, arpeggio, rhythm, melodic phrase, etc. The ensemble then plays it back.
- *Free-Form Creative Music Making:* Ask a small group of students (chamber ensemble) to create spontaneous music within a specific time period. Encourage students to listen to each other and

Continued on p. 12

play off of each other's ideas. Recording, listening to, and discussing the results can be beneficial steps to the process.

- **Musical analysis:** Involve students in musical decisions such as the style and shaping of a phrase or line. Discuss, compare, and share opinions about why one approach might be preferable over another.

Lessons – the best opportunity to truly *guide* our students in creative music making. Engage in call and response activities, active listening (to each other and/or recordings), detailed analysis and critique, and most importantly having fun! Leading and learning by example will always trump textbooks and test scores. Teach your students to *ask questions*. Great teaching isn't giving students the right answers, great teaching is empowering your students to ask the right questions!

Personal practice – as students plan their daily assignments (warm-ups, technique exercises, solos and etudes, ensemble music, and sight-reading) encourage them to include time to *just play*. To explore, be adventurous, and ultimately take off on the instrument without any rules! This might include playing with a favorite recording, reproducing and elaborating on familiar tunes, experimenting with nontraditional sounds and techniques, or improvising. If students only do what is required of them they will never appreciate the awesome power and passion of truly creative music making.

3. Get out of the way! This is perhaps the hardest thing to do—students must discover their own creative insights and abilities. As teachers, we can guide and encourage our students but we must never do it *for* them. They may be wrong (or at least our definition of wrong), but at times being wrong can actually inspire the most imaginative of new ideas! This point cannot be stressed enough—being wrong is sometimes OKAY!

So, how can we incorporate creativity into the test preparation we already do? The following are some examples of activities and exercises I use to encourage creative thinking. While I am a percussionist, and these exercises were all developed within a percussion context, I believe they can be applied to any studio/ensemble environment with just a little imaginative creativity!

FUNDAMENTALS

Most young students find practicing fundamentals (scales, arpeggios, rudiments, and other technical exercises) to be a tedious, uninteresting process with little short-term musical gratification; however, with a

little imagination you can make fundamental practice less tedious and much more productive...maybe even fun! For any given exercise ask students to figure out *on their own* how they can alter, add, vary and/or change the following:

- Dynamics – including crescendos and diminuendos
- Range – use the full range of the instrument as appropriate and possible
- Accents/articulations – on different notes/beats or sections/note groupings of the exercise
- Points of tension and release within a phrase
- Metronome/beat – set the click on the beat (as usual); on the up-beat; or on the second or fourth 16th note. You are physically playing the exact same exercise but you are hearing and *feeling* the musical passage differently.
- Metronome/beat II – set the click on the beat, but execute the exercise using different rhythmic groupings (as heard against the click). For instance, instead of 8th notes over the beat play the exercise with triplet groupings or in groups of five. Again, your hands are physically playing the exact same exercise but you are feeling it, and ultimately *understanding* it, at a different and much higher level.
- Personnel – play with other people! And different instruments! Combine some of the above alterations asking some people to play one way and others another. This type of group practice can then lead directly into chamber free-form music making.

The possibilities are endless! What's important is that teachers give students the spark to try new things and be creative *on their own*!

ALL-STATE/SOLO MUSIC

Solo study in the fall tends to be dominated by practicing the current all-state music. There are many ways to continue working on the etudes while still cultivating creative thinking. Here are a few simple examples:

- Learn the etudes with other students—work together on technique, interpretation, and musical expression; play for each other and critique each other's work.
- Have other students/instruments play your etudes—for instance, a flute player's interpretation of a mallet or vocal work, while different, will greatly expand the students' palette of expressive ideas.
- Turn the etude into a duet or trio (with like or

Continued on p. 14

unlike instruments)—add different ranges, tone colors, rhythmic percussion, a bass line, and/or harmony. In addition, two (or more) students playing the same etude can turn it into a chamber work—trading phrases, expressive ideas and working together to present the piece in a fresh performance. This may take some dedicated time and effort, but the results can be incredibly interesting and can greatly enhance the students' individual understanding of the etude and the music.

Other creative activities to engage student musicians:

- Weekly Musical Motive: post a short rhythm or melodic phrase each week in your rehearsal room and instruct your students to use it as a starting point for creating music (on paper, live improvisation, and/or with other people).
- Role Playing: study how professionals, teachers, and/or other students play the instrument or specific etude/solo. Then try to imitate how *they* play. The internet offers great video and audio resources for assignments in studying how other people perform.
- Jump-Start Improvisation: with a small ensemble, and using simple tunes or pieces of music, take turns improvising. Folk tunes, Christmas carols, patriotic songs, and elementary aged music works great! Much of this music uses simple harmonies and chord progressions, strong tonic/dominant relationships, and chord symbols (like in jazz or on a lead sheet). In addition to developing improvisation skills you can discuss practical applications of music theory and aural skills.

JUST PLAY!

At the heart of any musician is the enjoyment of playing, not necessarily performing or practicing but *playing*. Try this: take 15 minutes out of each day and just play—no music, no tune, no exercises, no directions—just *play*. Explore your instrument and discover what it can do. While this isn't improvisation in the academic sense, there is certainly creative value in simply trying new things, having fun, and expanding the individual understanding of your instrument, as well as your personal voice in creative music making!

The possibilities for musical creativity are endless. The more creative you are as the instructor, the more memorable the event/exercise is, and the more influential the experience becomes in the development of your students. Teaching to the test is only part of the equation—a small part of a much larger learning process. As music teachers we have the unique opportunity to engage students long-term in instrument specific, innovative, intelligent, and creative activities that will prepare them for a broad and diverse musical future.

Dr. Scott Harris, scott.harris@wku.edu, serves as head of the department of music at Western Kentucky University. Prior to his appointment to WKU he taught percussion, music education, and served in administration, at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, TX. He holds degrees from the University of Massachusetts, East Carolina University, and the University of Oklahoma. He is the Associate Editor of Education for Percussive Notes magazine and has given clinics and performances throughout the Southeastern United States.



Photo by David Greenlee

Russell County High School took third place class 3A at the 2013 KMEA Marching Band Championships.