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Introducing Creativity in the Ensemble Setting: National Standards Meet Comprehensive Musicianship

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Introducing Creativity in the Ensemble Setting
National Standards Meet Comprehensive Musicianship

Abstract: This article explores realistic ways with which ensemble conductors can facilitate the conceptual acquisition of their students via creative activities. Creativity, as included in the National Standards, is presented through the “eyes” of comprehensive musicianship.

Keywords: composing, comprehensive musicianship, creativity, improvising, performing, standards

For nearly a century, the MENC community has pondered the purposes, content, and means of delivering a comprehensive music curriculum to K–12 students in the United States. Landmark events in American music education, such as the Contemporary Music Project, the Yale Seminar, Tanglewood Symposium, and the Manhattanville Music Curriculum Program, proposed the content and skills that should be the focus of American music education. Two of the major outgrowths of these music education events became known as comprehensive musicianship and the National Voluntary Standards for Music.

A widely accepted definition of comprehensive musicianship has been phrased as “[that which] encourages students to grow in musical knowledge and skill at all levels of instruction by synthesizing the musical materials they are working with and by making conceptual connections through performance, analysis, and composition.” In this approach to music instruction, musical knowledge is defined as understanding of four basic musical elements—pitch, duration, intensity, and timbre (these elements also are commonly extended to include language such as melody, harmony, rhythm, tempo, texture, dynamics, form, articulation, and expression). To attain understanding of the musical elements, students engage in three primary musical behaviors: performing, analyzing, and creating.

The comprehensive musicianship approach to music education conceded that the emphasis of any one musical behavior depended on the nature of the music class in question. Therefore, an ensemble class would have as its primary focus performing behaviors, while music appreciation and theory-related courses might focus more heavily on analytical and creative behaviors. Nonetheless, comprehensive musicianship advocated that the development of musical understanding (of elements) should not be one-dimensional and therefore should incorporate in varying degrees all three aforementioned musical behaviors.

The tenets of comprehensive musicianship eventually gave way to the National Voluntary Standards for Music (National Standards), which in essence shifted the focus of instruction from understanding or knowledge to performance. Here are some ideas that may surprise you.

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of musical elements to musical behaviors or what students might be able to do with music as a result of K–12 instruction. These nine standards are commonly known as the following:

1. Singing, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music
2. Performing on instruments, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music
3. Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments
4. Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines
5. Reading and notating music
6. Listening to, analyzing, and describing music
7. Evaluating music and music performances
8. Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts
9. Understanding music in relation to history and culture

As one might glean from the discussion thus far, the standards essentially extended the three musical behaviors of comprehensive musicianship (performing, analyzing, creating) to a number of more specific musical behaviors or skills (such as singing, performing on instruments, improvising, composing, evaluating, etc.).

With the advent of the National Standards, music educators—ensemble conductors, in particular—have become pressured more than ever before to deliver musical instruction that moves beyond the typical and limited curricula of the “traditional” ensemble course—that is, reading, rehearsing, and performing music at school concerts and festivals—toward a model that somehow engages junior high school and high school ensemble students in other non-performance-oriented musical behaviors, such as improvisation, composition, and arranging.

Integration of nonperforming musical behaviors—improvising, composing, and arranging, in particular—in the ensemble setting can be a daunting task. The specific proficiency levels suggested in the National Standards, such as “improvise original melodies over given chord progressions, each in a consistent style, meter, and tonality” or “compose and arrange music for voices and various electronic instruments, demonstrating knowledge of the ranges and traditional usages of the sound sources” may seem entirely out of reach, given the time constraints and community expectations for ensemble classes’ outcomes. Pressure to prepare for community and competitive performances is prioritized so highly that creative opportunities, such as composition and improvisation, are not provided for music students in middle school and high school ensembles. Other than singing and performing on instruments (Standards 1 and 2), reading and notating music (Standard 5) are the most likely practiced musical behaviors, given that nearly half of all states require middle school and high school ensembles. Other than singing and performing on instruments (Standards 1 and 2), reading and notating music (Standard 5) are the most likely practiced musical behaviors, given that nearly half of all states require

To move beyond what might be considered these “traditional” curricular practices (to reiterate, those that involve reading, rehearsing, and performing), this article will explore a literature- and concept-based approach to integrating basic creative skills into the performance setting. Such an approach can acknowledge the need for student creative activity suggested in the National Standards but provide these skills as additional means to attain understanding of the music elements so central to comprehensive musicianship. Specifically, this article will (1) propose a perspective from which creativity can be integrated into the performance class setting, (2) describe a curricular model that integrates the primary tenets of comprehensive musicianship and National Standards, and (3) share sample lesson plans that introduce and provide the impetus for regular creative activity. Although the ideas presented here are not meant to supplant the highly regarded performance outcomes of twenty-first-century secondary ensemble classes, the ideas are shared to invite ensemble conductors to consider realistic ways in which all students can be introduced to musical creativity.

Proposing a Perspective

While most music educators might value creative activity in the education of their students, research suggests that music educators devote little if any time to composition, arranging, and improvising. Although the National Standards are meant to serve as guidelines for music curricula, it is probable that most ensemble conductors are beleaguered by the sophisticated levels at which students might be expected to demonstrate creativity. This sense of frustration may be exacerbated by teachers’ self-perceived lack of accomplishment in the creative realm. This assertion is very logical, considering that today’s music educators were and still are trained under a predominantly performance-based model of secondary music education. Uncertainty about both their own creative skills and values related to student creativity coupled with the pressures of performance preparation leaves music educators faced with unanswered challenges of how to engage or begin to engage their students in creative activity. In the end, overwhelmed ensemble conductors more than likely will exclude creative activity from their music instruction.

In an attempt to alleviate the above concerns, music educators might wish to consider inclusion of Standards 3 and 4 (improvising, composing and arranging) from the perspective of comprehensive musicianship that has as its primary focus musical elements rather than music behaviors. As stated earlier, under the philosophical tenets of comprehensive musicianship, understanding of musical elements—pitch, duration, intensity, and timbre—is developed through behaviors, such as performing, creating, and analyzing. In performance-based classrooms, understanding of the musical elements certainly (and primarily) should be developed through performance activities, but not at the expense and exclusion of creative activities. If one recognizes creative activity in the ensemble setting as a secondary but essential means to developing student understanding of musical elements, then the inclusion of improvisation, composing, and/or arranging might be perceived as more feasible. Acknowledgement of a perspective as described requires an examination of how creativity might become a recurring part of an ensemble’s curriculum.

Describing a Curricular Model

A music curriculum that introduces and facilitates musical creativity may be
with the change in volume) and then perceive the same dynamic changes as icons (series of pictures that gradually increase or decrease in size). The same students would eventually demonstrate understanding by responding with standard music symbols such as p, mp, mf, and f. Another cognitive approach might find students developing perception of a new pitch or rhythm pattern by first singing or chanting on a neutral syllable, then associating the pattern with a verbal mechanism (solfège, numbers, counting syllables) and eventually demonstrating understanding with standard notation. The approach a conductor chooses is not as important as consistently using a system that introduces and fosters continuing growth of aural and written musical vocabulary.

The third part of this curricular model includes the musical behaviors, those outlined in the National Standards, through which students will enhance their understanding of the musical elements so central to comprehensive musicianship. Singing, playing instruments, and note reading must be extended to include improvising, composing, and arranging. The students who are exploring dynamics may not only play or sing written dynamics but also arrange variations of the written dynamics of the pieces they are learning. The students who have begun to aurally perceive new pitch or rhythm patterns as described in the preceding paragraph not only may begin to improvise or compose short sequences of the new patterns but also do so in the context of previously acquired pitch or rhythmic vocabulary. The more readily students perceive a musical element, the more likely they will be able to represent and continue to develop their understanding of the element through not only playing, singing, and reading but also improvising, composing, and arranging.

The final and fourth part of curriculum connects the elements, cognitive approaches, and musical behaviors to repertoire. Perhaps the biggest weakness of curriculum and instruction is the failure to contextualize understanding of musical elements in the music the students are studying. How often do we choose repertoire that is based not on what understanding of the elements the students may gain but on a prescribed state list or the whims of our own individual tastes? Aside from singing and playing music, a large number of state festivals do require ensembles to sight-read at varying levels, and instructors are then compelled to prepare students to undertake the reading tasks, but how often is repertoire used to develop the understanding required of the varying sight-reading requirements? Moreover, how often do instructors use behaviors other than singing, playing, or reading notation to develop the understanding that fosters musical independence to undertake such sight-reading? Selection of repertoire that mirrors a curriculum’s sequential presentation of the musical elements is crucial to student musical understanding.

The curriculum as described empowers music educators to offer a wider array of activities with which students can more completely attain musical understanding. The cornerstone of ensemble instruction, then, is the musical elements, introduced in a logical and sequential manner. Understanding of elements is developed through one or more cognitive approaches while engaging students in a variety of musical behaviors (in addition to singing and playing). With repertoire as the overarching context for musical learning, a sound and viable music curriculum addresses the important concerns of comprehensive musicianship (the elements), the tenets of one or more cognitive approaches, and the National Standards (the behaviors with which musical understanding is developed).

Sharing Sample Lesson Plans: Introducing Creativity

In the curricular model as described, students develop, explore, and demonstrate understanding of musical elements through improvisation, composition, and arranging as related to the literature that they study. Because creativity implies action, the ensemble conductor must also ensure that students are familiar and comfortable with the process of creating by enabling student perception of musical elements in selected repertoire, by demonstrating the creative process, and by providing examples of musical creativity that result from clear and specific guidelines. These guidelines should prescribe clearly...
the musical materials with which students will create, such as the specific pitch and rhythm patterns, number of beats or measures, meters, keys, and other elements, such as dynamics, articulation, and phrasing. These guidelines should balance previously mastered understanding of elements with newer elements found in the new repertoire. Two lesson plans are offered as illustrations of how repertoire coupled with introductory creative activities might enhance musical understanding.

The first lesson focuses on the first five pitches and the do–mi relationship in major tonality. The primary theme of an Angolan folksong, "O Desayo," serves as an appropriate context. The principal theme of "O Desayo"—that all voices sing throughout the piece—clearly embodies the aforementioned pitch material (Figure 1) and therefore is readily perceived by the students.

In this lesson, students engage in a variety of musical behaviors from singing patterns and phrases to listening/analyzing/identifying the patterns in the piece to composing with the patterns found in the piece. The primary modes of developing and demonstrating musical understanding are centered on aural perception and oral replication of tonal patterns, associating solfège with tonal patterns, and composing with solfège symbols. Again, the focus of all the musical activity is derived from the repertoire. Table 1 details the progression of student learning.

As demonstrated in the plan, students can manipulate the prominent musical material not only by playing and singing teacher-selected repertoire but also through composing short études or warm-ups with specifically outlined teacher guidelines (in this case, a ten-pitch stepwise sequence using do, re, mi, fa, and/or sol with one skip from mi to do). Students perform these pitch sequences and/or the instructor presents them for warm-up activities in future rehearsals. The teacher might also employ the same creations in error-detection exercises, in which students evaluate the printed composition according to a student performance. There is no limit on the number of creative activities with which a conductor could facilitate deeper understanding of all the musical elements.

The second lesson plan—one that has been successfully implemented by the author on numerous occasions—focuses on the concept of timbre or, more specifically, articulation. Young, inexperienced wind players often struggle with tonguing, slurring, and staccato when these concepts are introduced and first explored. An alternative to endless teacher modeling and student repetition finds students "arranging" the main theme of a band composition (regardless of what individual parts play) with regard to its articulation. Students then not only play variations of the tune as written but also evaluate agreement between a visual representation of the theme and a live or recorded performance. "American Patrol," a commonly used tune in beginning band repertoire and materials (Figure 2), serves as the focus for the second sample lesson.

The lesson as written will likely spread over a two-day period, but its undertaking will save time and energy in preparation for the performance of the selection and in future experiences with different repertoire. Students engaged in the creative process as illustrated more effectively internalize their understandings of basic articulation. In the days immediately following, students can continue in a similar vein with quick board work in which they write these same types of articulations on daily scales and other ensemble warm-up materials. This type of lesson simultaneously provides opportunities for purposeful creative activity that fosters individual musical understanding and develops individual playing skills necessary for technically sound and musical ensemble performances (see Table 2).

In both of these student learning examples, the philosophical premise centers on developing musical understanding (internalization of specified tonal patterns and specified articulations) rather than on "getting ready for the concert." The actual musical behaviors, those of which the National Standards speak, are the means to the understanding of the musical elements, those with which comprehensive musicianship is concerned, and in the long term transform traditional ensemble instruction or "getting ready for the concert" into a series of much more efficient and musically satisfying experiences.

Will a music educator devote the amount of time implied in the provided plans on a daily basis? This depends on a music educator's personal teaching philosophy and the curriculum and expectations of his or her school district. In most cases, if musical concepts and representative repertoire are chosen purposefully, these creative activities supplement rather than supplant what we consider to be more traditional ensemble instruction—that which culminates in a number of performances in any given school year.

In a Nutshell

The National Standards do set a high bar for creativity. While such expectations are laudable, the current and long-time realities of budget constraints, high school requirements, successful
## TABLE 1

**Lesson 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learners</th>
<th>Nonauditioned seventh-, eighth-, or ninth-grade treble choir</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>“O Desayo,” Elliot Levine, Plymouth Music Company, WWIC-101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectives</td>
<td>Students will demonstrate understanding of the above tonal patterns by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Singing vocal warm-ups based on the given patterns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sight-singing a variety of patterns on a solfège “diagonal,” comprising diatonic steps and tonic triad skips.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Identifying above patterns while listening to “O Desayo.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Singing these patterns from “O Desayo.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Creating solfège warm-ups, using tonal patterns from “O Desayo.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Known</td>
<td>Students have experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• singing the major scale with solfège.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• singing stepwise patterns from a solfège diagonal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• writing solfège syllables when the teacher sings on a neutral syllable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• underlining the aforementioned solfège patterns in their music.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• singing themes from the A and B sections of “O Desayo,” using solfège syllables in place of text in the appropriate places.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggested sequence</td>
<td>Students sing sirens on forward vowels (get a few demonstrations from capable individuals).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students sing oo vowel while teacher sings solfège; after a few repetitions, students change to solfège.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Write on the whiteboard (or blackboard) an ascending do–re–mi–fa–sol (solfège diagonal) on the staff in F major.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students review the warm-up patterns as the teacher points to solfège symbols on the solfège diagonal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students sing section A of “O Desayo” with text; teacher monitors correct rhythm/pitch/tone/etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students identify (review) the five patterns by singing the corresponding solfège in place of text as they sing sections A and B (and other sections A and B); scores are marked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Review where the patterns are written in the first theme of section A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students sing unfamiliar solfège sequences (teacher writes at the board) comprising the aforementioned patterns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Having worked with the teacher’s models, students create their own ten-pitch sequences using these patterns (students use paper and pencil or whiteboards).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher moves around the room, giving guidance as needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student creations are used for warm-up activities in subsequent classes as the piece is prepared for performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To ensure that students are genuinely mentally processing the tonal patterns, students should perform creations, individually or in small groups.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## FIGURE 2

Excerpt from “American Patrol,” Frank Meachem, adapted by Charles E. Norris from an arrangement by John Kinyon, Alfred 906S

**American Patrol Theme**

advocacy, and community expectations and understanding of school music programs limit implementation and achievement as they (Standards 3 and 4) are stated (and described earlier in this article) at the high school–proficient level. For the time being, the author recommends introductory experiences in creating, those that simultaneously address concerns of the National Standards and comprehensive musicianship. To provide more experiences in creativity, perhaps music educators might establish a comprehensive sequence of music concepts (K–12), complete with song and repertoire “banks.” These banks would provide contexts in which children and adolescents could develop a musical
vocabulary necessary for creating music. Over time, teachers can feel increasingly comfortable including periodic creative experiences in not only the elementary general music classroom but also the advanced high school orchestra.

The symbiotic relationship between creating and playing quality music that exemplifies the many patterns that constitute musical sound can ensure that our schools afford a comprehensive and standards-based music education for all students. The possibilities are limitless; perhaps all of the goals outlined in the National Standards—someday—might be attainable.

### NOTES

1. Complete discussions of these and other historical music education events are available in Michael Mark, *Contemporary Music Education* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996).


6. There are many sources for this assertion, for example, Susan Byo, “Classroom Teachers’ and Music Specialists’ Perceived Ability to Implement the National Standards for Music Education,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 47 (2004): 111–23; and Evelyn Orman, “Comparison of the National Standards for Music Education and Elementary Music Specialists’ Use of Class Time,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 50 (2004): 155–64. This conclusion also has been expressed in numerous dissertations in the last ten years.

7. Choksy et al., *Teaching Music*.
