

Adding Improvisation and Composition to Your Band Rehearsals

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Practical Suggestions

Have you ever met a music teacher (or pre-service music teacher) who worried about having too *much* class time and not enough to do? Music teachers are always racing the concert date or the class syllabus to get everything done in time. Including creative musical activities designed to increase student understanding of the music may actually buy teachers *more* time. When students learn to interact with music through improvisation and composition, they tend to learn music faster, so ensemble teachers can spend less time telling students what to do (“That’s the melody, bring it out!”) because they have developed the ability and awareness to self-correct. Music teachers who learn to improvise and compose develop the skills and confidence to include these activities with their students.

Hopefully, you find these suggestions helpful. It’s really as simple as trying just one thing at a time. Start simple. If it works, keep doing it! Even if you feel uncomfortable or unprepared to include creative musical activities with your (future) students, simply providing them with the opportunity to create and perform original music is a great place to start!

IMPROVISING

- Start each class with one minute of call-and-response rhythm patterns.
- Make up a simple, 4-measure melody in major tonality. You can compose this ahead of time, or make it up on the spot. Sing or play the first 3 measures, then have your students make up the last measure. Here’s an example:



- Pick a simple melody. Teach it to your students by ear – no letter names, scale degrees, or solfège allowed! Once they learn it, they can try embellishing (or “decorating”) it.

COMPOSING

- Encourage students to write down musical ideas they have created themselves. Compare this to writing in language: if a student can write it, they can read it.
- Start simple. Have students dictate the rhythm to a 4-line poem, then add pitches to the rhythm. Or, they can write a eight-measure melody in four-part harmony
- Encourage students to write their own cadenzas in lessons. Even if it isn’t used, the act of writing an original cadenza will help them internalize various elements of the piece of music.



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