



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2021 Volume II: Developing Anti-Racist Curriculum and Pedagogy

Anti-Racist Pedagogy and Counter-Narrative Repertoire for the Middle School Orchestra

Curriculum Unit 21.02.01
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Context

This curriculum unit seeks to broaden the repertoire and pedagogical techniques utilized in directing middle school orchestra. It aims to do this by rethinking dominant pedagogical approaches, and reexamining which narratives are presented in the classroom and for what purpose. If the curriculum is successful, it will firstly help the teacher include counter-narratives in instruction in a seamless manner and provide a framework for restructuring instruction moving forward. In that way, this is not really a curricular unit as much as a way to rethink what, how and why we teach a performance class like orchestra. By introducing counter-narratives, the teacher reaches and motivates a more diverse student body and opens doors to dialog with students about history in a way that would not be possible without the inclusion of counter-narratives. This curriculum also encourages a different approach for teaching basics like rhythm decoding using the South Indian syllabic system called solkattu. When we present culturally diverse solutions to teaching the basics of music performance, we expand our students' awareness of the world and offer them different ways of solving a problem. The curriculum also presents ways to structure orchestral rehearsals in a more collaborative way which not only encourages trust and teamwork between students, but also gives them agency over the final performance of the material. As a culmination of the curriculum, the final unit includes five original arrangements for the middle school orchestra, including a score with all parts and files related to each arrangement. The five pieces include two Civil Rights era anthems, a spiritual from the Bahamas, a South African Zulu folksong, and a popular song of community/fellowship. The teaching of all these pieces will ultimately help to present counter-narratives, open dialog, and develop trust and a sense of personal investment while broadening the repertoire of the orchestra.

Before coming to classroom teaching three years ago, I made my living for over 20 years as a professional double bassist and taught at the college-level. I hold a Master's degree in Jazz Studies and a second Master's degree in Music Education. It is this broad professional experience that has helped me to see the need for diversifying middle school orchestra curriculum with regards to concert preparation, repertoire and general pedagogy. Three years ago, I began teaching orchestra at an urban public middle school in New Haven, CT. Early on, it became apparent to me that I was reaching students much more efficiently by rethinking the program that I had inherited, which was parochial and exclusive with regards to repertoire and presentation of narratives. It is my belief that it is our responsibility as teachers to reflect the very diverse world that we and

our students are living in, to make sure that our students are reflected in the curriculum that we are teaching. This curriculum unit is a timestamp of my journey towards fulfilling that belief.

Curricular Units

Unit One - Using Padlet to Ensure thorough Racial, Ethnic and Gender Equity. This unit will introduce the teacher to an interactive message board that will help to ensure racial, ethnic and gender equity with regards to the music and musicians covered in class

Unit Two - Rethinking Dominant Systems for Decoding Rhythm. This unit will introduce the teacher to the South Indian system for decoding rhythm known as solkattu, to diversify methodology for reading music notation.

Unit Three - Orchestral Performance as Social Praxis. This unit will introduce pedagogy and methodology for removing the emphasis on reading print sheet music and shift focus to more communal approaches to music performance. This unit will additionally provide an alternative to early string pedagogy and repertoire using African American folksongs and spirituals.

Unit Four - Reimagining Middle School-level Orchestral Repertoire. This unit will provide the teacher with original arrangements appropriate for middle school-level string orchestra from diverse genres to help students connect with music making. Genres will include spirituals and pop pieces.

Rationale

By means of our lack of understanding of our own history as a nation, we fail to see how history has placed race at the center of most of the mechanisms of our founding and practices. Many of these mechanisms are still in place and continue to negatively impact the communities whose labors were and are essential in the creation of this rich nation. Since race was invented and fabricated by those who considered themselves to be white to rationalize the enslavement of those who they considered to be Black, little can be addressed or remediated without seeing our society through that lens. How do we rectify inequity within our discipline? If we are to do this, it is through the incorporation of counter-narratives in our field which is so rife with dominant and exclusive narratives. Seeking color**blind** solutions to color**bound** problems will not yield results of even the smallest of consequence and may lead to more problems and further inequity. If we are to create change here, we must see race to ensure equity and forge a plan for the way forward.

This curriculum unit proposes that we reassess and refocus our efforts as music educators so that the benefits of music study and musicianship in general can reach **all** students from **all** backgrounds. Our first step should be welcoming counter-narratives that have been long overlooked by our curriculum and/or excluded from our classrooms. An examination of some of the “business as usual” approach to music education that many teachers fall in line with is a great place to start. When we spend our instructional time on narrowly focused

and short-term goals, like Regional and All-State competitions, I would argue that we not only miss the point, but we are upholding white supremacist elements within our discipline of music performance. By white supremacist, I am not talking about explicit forms of white supremacy like hate groups like the Klu Klux Klan, rather, implicit white supremacy within our discipline. This unit seeks to examine the ways in which music education props up and is tied to this supremacy, albeit unconsciously in the case of most educators. Musicologist Loren Kajikawa points out: “to have access to classical music means having access to other forms of property that were reserved for whites, such as expensive musical instruments, music lessons, and concert subscriptions. This codependency of whiteness and classical music was a main reason why black participation in classical music was restricted by whites and simultaneously sought after by African Americans seeking upward mobility.” (Crenshaw, 164) Contests like All-State thrive on exclusivity and are skewed, by virtue of how they are structured, to benefit students of means and of an increasingly more exclusive and diminishing population. Contests of this sort celebrate the “geniuses” amongst students using a framework and criteria that recognizes a very narrow type of musical proficiency and fluency.

One needn't look further than the 2021 TMEA (Texas Music Educators Association) Convention for proof of why these contests, and the exaggerated role they are allowed to play in education, should be reexamined. In what is now being dubbed “Bassoongate”, Francis Chambers presented a clinic to teachers in attendance entitled: *Building Better Bassoons* ¹. The clinic appears to be a harmless and potentially useful clinic. The problem arises when one reads **how** Chambers claims to be able to help attendees “build better bassoonists”. (The handout from the 2021 TMEA Convention can be found here ².) He claims that this goal is met by being aware of certain “intangible characteristics” in assessing potential bassoon students. I use this as an example because I don't doubt that he might have meant well when he came up with the criteria, but functioning within this pageant framework leads to this sort of thinking becoming the dominant logic in music education. He might very well be an example of someone who has slowly over time bought into the culture of “music as competition” or a way to line his office with trophies. We have truly lost our way when we get begin thinking about choosing students based on economic data in an effort to raise the chances that our school might have a student who made All-State Orchestra to the exclusion of students who could benefit from musical study regardless of whether they “bring home the gold” or not. Chambers' “intangible characteristics” included:

Francis Chambers' List of Intangible Characteristics Workshop

- Self-motivation
 - Find students who don't need constant teacher attention to improve.
- Intelligence
 - Find kids strong in math and reading comprehension
- Socio-economic status
- Pre-packaged musical knowledge
- Stable home environment
 - Do they live in an apartment or house?
 - Are they buying or renting?
 - Do they move/relocate often?
 - Are their parents transferred for work often?
 - Are lessons a possibility, both from a financial perspective and a mobility perspective?
 - Is the home open to home practice?

Chambers also presents ableist prejudice by providing a list of “physical characteristics” that include hand size, overall body size and “being athletic”. This kind of mentality harkens back to the turn of the 20th century when scientists were using fields like eugenics to justify the creation of the concept of race, racial hierarchies and in some cases, overt caste systems. American citizens jumped at the chance to prove themselves worthy or better than others by holding Fitter Family and Better Baby Contests where whiteness was used as a norm or ideal against which difference is measured. (Crenshaw, 161) These contests sound silly to us now, but we must make sure that we learned the lesson that a student cannot be assessed through these methods with any reliability or validity. Humans are amazing and adaptive, don’t get in their way. Mr. Chambers’ list troubling for at least two reasons. Firstly, that he thinks this list is an efficient way to assess children and what they are potentially capable of achieving is absurd, at best. Secondly, that TMEA (which is the largest and therefore one of the most influential music educators’ associations in the country) saw no problem with advertising this clinic as is and therefore promoting this method as a valid approach to assessing students is equally concerning. The mentality of “win a trophy at the expense of respecting our very humanity” is disconcerting to say the least, yet here it is in black and white. This mindset has crept into our discipline and it is high time to reexamine our methods and goals. (Listen to episode 52 of *The Score: An Urban Music Education Podcast* ³ for more on Bassoongate and further dialog about music education as social gatekeeping.)

Personally, I would rather have a student who continues to make music throughout her life than have one the boasts at 49 years of age that they made All-State in middle school but hasn’t played a note since. **Music as social praxis should be our goal!** By this I mean, how much of what students learn at their instruments or in your rehearsal affects who they are, how they problem-solve or interact in their lives. Contests like the All-State do not prepare students well for future study, do not help them acquire the skillset acquired through music study and do not yield the type of musicians that we need in our ensembles. These contests play to the dominant narrative of the “young musician as child prodigy” which is not helpful in meeting the goals of the early music educator. These contests might help produce soloists, which is not a role that young musicians should be focusing on so early in their study. Furthermore, teaching students what matters is becoming a soloist with regards to why they should practice or make time for music leads to instruction “making a pragmatic musical difference for only a select (or self-selected) few- those with the ‘talent’ or interest needed to submit to such instruction – and, of these, usually only for their school years.” (Regelski, 72) These contests “promote outright competition between students for ensemble seating solos, and the like – formal competition or the informal kind of ‘comparatition’ that is natural in the identity formation of adolescents – where ‘social’ status is the goal rather than music and musical learning”. (Regelski, 71) If the goal is to impact the student’s epistemology, sense of self and confidence in their ability to learn, this is not the way to go about directing our ensembles. Quite simply, once the contests and concerts stop after graduation, the student will struggle with finding musical motivation to continue study and keep music in their lives as they enter adulthood. Keeping in mind that in teaching students we are trying to make better citizens who know how to navigate their own mental, as well as social spaces, with all of the obligations that come with that is what we should be striving for within our classroom and rehearsal spaces.

If we are to accept this assessment of the current state of our society and our discipline, we will need to apply this assessment to our circle of personal and professional responsibility. If you are reading this, chances are that you are a music educator in some capacity. If you are a music educator, I would argue that we need to reassess how knowledge production within the discipline of music education has helped to promote white supremacy and excluded other narratives and voices in favor of promoting the dominant narratives presented by Western Europe in music performance, practice and history. If you are invested in making change in the way music is taught and how its gifts are passed to and maintained by the next generation, your circle of

personal and professional responsibility should be seen as your classroom and the students working in your ensembles. Writer James Baldwin said it best when he said, “If any particular discipline ... does not become a matter of your personal honor, your private convictions, then it is simply a cloak which you can wear or throw off.” (Baldwin, 42) There is much work to be done but we are up to the task.

Dominant vs Counter-Narratives

Few would argue that two examples of the most dominant narratives in music presented in music classrooms and orchestral performing ensembles over the past few hundred years is that of the child prodigy (e.g., W.A. Mozart) or the brooding and troubled artist (e.g., L.V. Beethoven). Included in these narratives are the ideas and systems established by artists from this milieu including putative music theory concepts and performance/compositional techniques. If one thinks more broadly, they might conclude that these narratives in music actually represent a very narrow experience, which requires and works to uphold the exclusion of other narratives. The praising of these dominant narratives over counter-narratives celebrates dominant narratives as universal when they are actually particulars of a narrow slice of humanity presented as universal. Presenting these dominant traits as universal creates a problem in that it serves the experience and social composition of a world that does not resemble the world that we are currently inhabiting, nor does it validate the experience of the students we are seeking to serve. These narratives need not be erased from history so much as their dominance must be put in check in an effort to make the discipline of music education more relevant and less cynical. Education should remove boundaries between what is taught in classrooms and the world that our students actually live in. To bring the discipline of music study with all its benefits to all of our students, these narratives must reflect a truer and broader truth and counter the “destructive disaggregation that occurs when scholars focus on specific treatises (or narratives) about discrete times and places that ignore larger patterns of social history”. (Crenshaw, 13)

Teaching music today is rife with challenges with regards to dominant narratives, especially if one is looking at a specific area like orchestral performance. Orchestral performance presents challenges on multiple fronts in today’s culture, especially if you are teaching in an urban district. Firstly, no matter who the student is, when trying to acquire a new skill it is of the utmost importance to see examples of people who look like themselves displaying excellence and mastery in that field. If there is no model or template for the student in their desired field, achieving even the most basic competency will be an uphill battle. There are no shortages of examples of this scarcity of narratives for students of color within the arts already. When author Octavia Butler was asked why there are no African-American writers in the genre of science fiction she famously replied, “There aren’t because there aren’t. What we don’t see, we assume we can’t be. What a destructive assumption!” James Baldwin moved to Europe as a young author because “I was trying to become a writer and couldn’t find in my surroundings, in my country, a certain stamina, a certain corroboration that I needed. As far as my father knew (which was much more important) there had never been anything called a Black writer”. (Baldwin/Giovanni, 13)

Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie addresses the problem of scarcity of counter narratives in her lecture *The Danger of the Single-Story* ⁴. Adichie tells her story of growing up in Nigeria where she had access to children’s books mainly from England and the United States. In these books, the characters who were all “foreigners”, played in snow, ate apples, drank ginger beer and had blue eyes. Because of the books she was reading, her young mind assumed that by nature, all books had to be full of foreigners and had to be about

things of which she was unfamiliar and could not identify with. She eventually finds literature that includes African characters but finds them portrayed as a simple people with “no possibility of a connection as human equals.” This is all rooted in who has the power to tell stories or narratives, and which are told. In the Nigerian language of Igbo the term “nkali” means “to be greater than another”. Adichie says that stories are defined by nkali, the possession of which yields the authority to decide:

- Who tells stories?
- Which stories are told?
- How are they told?
- When are they are told?

The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti once wrote “if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with the word secondly”. (Adichie 4) The immediate danger of the single story is that it creates stereotypes which are, by definition, incomplete. The second danger of the single story is that it tamps down the excluded people’s potential, keeping all the gifts for the people with the most power. Some peoples have a surplus of stories creating a broad collection of narratives of greatness, where a great many communities have a scarcity of them with obvious results. By locking these counter-narratives out of the story, we not only harm the excluded community, but we rob everyone of the opportunity to grow and evolve into further greatness through the inclusion of these narratives. Adichie tells us that “when we reject the single story and realize that there is never a single story about a place or a people... we regain a kind of paradise.” (Adichie 4)

How does this dominant narrative or single-story crisis manifest itself in music education? I would argue it is through this scarcity of narrative for communities of color and the ownership of the dominant narrative by white communities within the field of classical music that minority groups are greatly underserved by the discipline. It is not that there aren’t any ethnic minority or Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) musicians, but many of the most high-profile musicians who are repeatedly presented are not from those communities. It is important to expose our students to great music played at a high level through guided listening activities. When doing such listening activities, go the extra step to play a video of the piece played by a person or ensemble of color. Ensembles comprised of Black musicians, like the Chicago-based chamber group D-Composed, should be presented as such examples. The group’s mission inspired the ideas put forth in this curriculum unit. “The mission of D-Composed is to uplift and empower society by providing a platform for the music of Black composers. In order to do this, we aim to increase access and exposure to Black creativity, culture, and life through thoughtful programming, events, and content.” ⁵ The group’s founder and executive director is Kori Coleman. The four founding musicians of the group are violinists Caitlin Edwards and Kyle Dickson, artistic director/violist Yelley Taylor and cellist Tahirah Whittington. Additionally, each of these musicians can be presented individually. For example, cellist Tahirah Whittington began making her mark in the early 2000’s as part of a group of young Black classical musicians who became known as “The Young Eight” ⁶ . Through the presenting of musicians and organizations that are current and diverse, teachers have the power to change the narrative about who does this thing called music. We must shift our focus and efforts from upholding dominant narratives to promoting counter narratives if we are going to have a truly egalitarian artistic community as opposed to one rooted in “putatively parochial and prejudiced particularism.” (Crenshaw, 3)

It is this scarcity of narrative for classical BIPOC musicians that lead Afro-British double bassist Chi Chi Nwanoku to establish the Chineke! Orchestra, which provides career opportunities for Black and ethnically diverse classical musicians in the UK and Europe. The Sphinx Organization is the US equivalent. The Chineke!

Orchestra and Nwanoku are named for the Igbo word “chi” which means “the spirit of creation” or “the god of creation of all good things”. Nwanoku’s emphasizes in her lecture entitled *Music Does Not Discriminate* ⁷ that people learn so much more than how to play an instrument when they study music. Studying music introduces life skills to the student including:

- Discipline
- Tolerance
- Time management
- Breathing
- Mindfulness
- Perseverance
- Listening
- Self-assessment
- Listening
- Community responsibility
- Providing support to others (Nwanoku ⁷)

Through the study of music, I acquired the skills listed above, as well. Those skills serve me in all areas of my life, not just on the bandstand. Nwanoku says, “music is even better when we involve ourselves personally and physically in the creation of it.” **All** communities deserve to reap the benefits that music study yields. Why should any single community have such overwhelming access to it and another so much less? Finding, creating and presenting narratives that encourage students from those communities to get involved is the job that music educators are tasked with. The job is not to present the same tired narratives from a world that was far less diverse than the one that we and our students currently live in. One might make the argument that this is why orchestras across the nation are closing their doors for lack of an audience. The genre is not evolving to meet our diverse and modern communities and include their narratives. Anything that refuses to evolve and thrives on exclusion is destined to wither and disappear, we see it in all areas of our world.

As a middle school music teacher teaching a performing ensemble like orchestra, it is my opinion that our foremost goal is not to create future violin performance majors at a conservatory. Our foremost goal should be to bring the skills and experiences listed by Nwanoku to children through the discipline of music study. It is my belief that we spend too much time prepping competitions and not enough time unlocking skills that serve the student as a human. We live in a society that is all too much concerned with trophies and not actually growing intellectually or spiritually. Acquiring things, piling them up and showing them off appears to be the goal of so much of our current culture. I would argue that this problem is propped up by a white supremacist narrative presented within the discipline of music education. I am certain that few orchestra teachers cover the Negro Philharmonic Society which was comprised of more than 100 musicians in early 1800’s New Orleans, or the rich tradition of Black fiddlers who frequently played music at gatherings for white partygoers when our country was young. The narratives are available: “The slave orchestras that played for parties held in town mansions or on the plantation near New Orleans were generally small ensembles. It was not uncommon to find dance music being provided by a single fiddler. Dance fiddlers were in great demand, and a good one, such as Massa Quamba, could charge as much as three dollars per night for his services.” (Southern, 135) Introducing narratives like this is how we create incremental change in inequity with regards to whom we reach with our message. Again, it is my belief that through changing how and what we teach young musicians (with the **how** being secondary to the **what**) that this goal is reached.

Much of the tradition of classical music was written when our world was much more segregated, and few

would argue that much of our world remains segregated. By this I mean that much of the genre of traditional classical music was created in the vacuum of white Western Europe. Once we see that, we can also see that it has struggled greatly to keep that stranglehold on the genre and, by proxy, the field of music education. These efforts have succeeded in that the field is still largely dominated by white participants, which is ultimately to its own demise in that this is an unsustainable model. By excluding counter-narratives and the people that those narratives give voice to, the field ceases to evolve and ultimately renders itself obsolete. The task here is to teach this discipline in a way that recognizes this and aims to fix it. History has shown us that as people gained more connectivity and mixing through modes of transportation, and sadly, through institutions like slavery, the disciplines missed the opportunity to incorporate those new voices into itself instead of defending its fortress from “other uncivilized” cultures. Instead, race was invented and therefore a rationale for maintaining ownership was secured. If we as teachers are to stay effective in bringing the wonders of music study to students who live in and are by virtue of their existence, are evidence of a diverse experience and world, we MUST re-envision these things. If we do not, this discipline will live on in museums, its precious gifts frozen in amber and locked away from the modern society that we have become.

Curriculum Overview

I have organized this curricular unit into four discrete units of instruction because I see the problem of re-centering race and removing dominant narratives as a multiple-front effort. As stated earlier in this project, there are many areas of music education in which dominant narratives have a stranglehold on how performance ensembles like orchestra are directed. Maintaining one’s vision and direction is important and easy to lose sight of or become overwhelmed by over the course of a school year. The arc of a student’s tenure in a performing ensemble should be plotted and programmed with direction and intention with a focused beginning, middle and culmination, with a plan for continued study at the next academic level. The best way to do this is to put into place a system to help the teacher stay organized and keep instruction cohesive as opposed to unfocused or discursive. Each of the four units begins with a brief explanation and background for the teacher to ensure thorough understanding and grasp of the content to be presented to the students. Next, a list of guiding questions will be presented to serve as a way to prime the students for the lesson. Following that will be a description of activities. Links to resources and a guide for execution and delivery of the materials can be found in the notes section.

Unit 1 - Using Padlet to ensure thorough racial, ethnic and gender equity

Padlet (www.padlet.com) is a free, interactive website that basically serves as a digital message board. There are many types of message boards that can be picked from the site’s template gallery but the two that I am suggesting for use here are the timeline and map Padlets.

Map Padlet

We will be using the map Padlet to plot important locations in music history such as birthplaces of composers or points of origin with regards to genre. Setting up the Padlet is simple and intuitive. Additionally, you can use the platform for any existing lessons as it's a very flexible resource. The links to two sample Padlets that I have already made (a map Padlet ⁸ and a timeline Padlet ⁹) are found in the notes section. When the map Padlet is initially opened, the viewer sees a world map with all of the details one would expect when accessing a world map. The next step for the teacher is to select a location of interest on the map. Options for detailing this location are made available to the teacher at this point in a pop-up window. Using Afro-British composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (named for the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge) as an example, his birthplace of London, England would be selected as a first step. In the pop-up window the teacher uploads a picture of Coleridge-Taylor, a short biography, hyperlinks to YouTube videos of performances and any other information the teacher considers pertinent. When this pop-up window is closed, all that appears over the location of London, England on the Padlet map is a pink pin. When this pin is clicked, the uploaded picture of Coleridge-Taylor appears and the student can further explore by clicking "expand post" to find the any information the teacher has inputted in the entry. Taking this a step further, the teacher can then choose to select a second location on the map that is connected to Coleridge-Taylor in an effort to open dialog about what it is to be Afro-British. Coleridge-Taylor's mother was a white English woman and father was a doctor from Sierra Leone. Now there are two points on the Padlet map for this one composer. One can continue with this approach by marking other places associated with Coleridge-Taylor. Additionally, a dialog can be opened from this point about Sierra Leone and its role in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade industry. Using the map Padlet can open these discussions organically if the proper care is taken in introducing and navigating the dialog.

I suggest that the teacher use this map template on Padlet as a way to assure that composers and musicians from all over the world, who also have their roots and connections to yet secondary places in the world, are represented. As more composers are added, the map obviously becomes more populated. If this is platform is made part of a weekly class or rehearsal by year's end the map should be densely populated. A secondary function of the visual aspect of this platform is that the teacher and students can observe when an area of the world has fewer or no pins marking any of its specific locations. This can be seen as a special challenge to find composers or genres to fill those gaps. Pairing this map Padlet with a regular listening activity would be ideal and should be visited and added to throughout the year.

Timeline Padlet

The timeline Padlet allows the teacher to arrange entries on a timeline using the same method as described in the map Padlet. When the timeline is opened for the first time, it is a blank screen save for a dotted horizontal line marked with intermittent dots. By clicking the + sign on the site, the teacher is prompted to enter images, text and hyperlinks in the same manner as described in the map Padlet section above. Again, using this platform, many theoretical and abstract points can be made visual, but in a different manner. When teaching middle school-aged children, visual demonstrations are often much more effective than more abstract ones. As Dr. Ayesha Ramachandran said in her lecture entitled "Mapping the Intangible: Faith, Fiction and Feelings", different maps or tools give us different information depending on the focus of the map. In the case of the map Padlet, we visually focused on **where** different important composers and musicians are from in the world. Using the timeline template, we can focus more on **who** these people were, how their faces (when displayed side-by-side) reflect the changing landscape of our world and how including counter-narratives changes what

a line-up of what these important figures looks like. Both templates (map and timeline) serve as maps of sorts, providing different pieces of knowledge about the same figures but with the same aim for shifting the narrative from the dominant white, Eurocentric one that has been upheld by the discipline of music education to the counter-narrative.

A brief example can be given as such: To the left end of the timeline, the teacher might place a Baroque era composer like Vivaldi (who is fair skinned and wearing a powdered wig) whose entry would include a portrait, biographical data and links to examples of his music. To the far right of the timeline, a living composer like living African-American composer Jessie Montgomery might be added with similar details pertaining to her life and music. Now the opposite ends of the timeline span the chronological distance from Vivaldi born in Venice in 1678 to Montgomery born in the United States in 1981. Filling the gulf between these two entries with the ones that came between them (J.S. Bach, Joseph Bologne, Gustav Mahler, Scott Joplin, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Florence Price, George Walker, Margaret Bonds, Adolphus Hailstork, Caroline Shaw etc.) would demonstrate on a visual level what it looks like to include all narratives in the story of humanity's musical developments in chronological order. As the student scrolls to the right, they would see more women and more ethnic diversity in the portraits of these giants as time moves on. To help get the teacher started, consult my timeline Padlet ⁹ .

Again, these tools would ideally be used as part of a regular listening activity where the composer of the piece introduced to students is entered on both the map and timeline Padlets. Each Padlet will make the same and different points using similar information but both with the aim of broadening the narrative. Using these sites, the students can see where the composer is from, what they looked like and where they fit in the continuum of composers. An added benefit to this platform is that students can access them whenever they like. As long as they have the link, they can go to either Padlet and access the biographical information and the links to the recordings of the music they were introduced to in class. This encourages students to revisit the information outside of class, perhaps having a private listen to the music of William Grant Still. Both of these Padlets should grow over the course of the year as new music is introduced to the students. The links to two sample Padlets: map Padlet ⁸ and timeline Padlet ⁹ are found in the notes section.

Unit 2 - Rethinking Dominant Systems for Decoding Rhythm

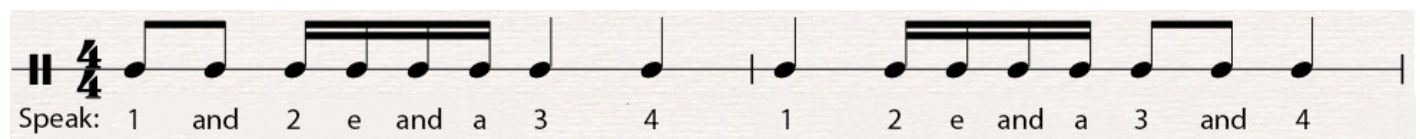
One of the best and most important parts of the job of being a middle school ensemble director is the chance to give students a good solid footing for the basics of music performance from the start of their studies. As someone who has taught at the high school and college level, I can recount more stories than I care to about students at those levels who arrive in my classroom or studio with poor fundamental skills. The most immediate and easily observed deficiencies are usually physical ones centered around technique or posture. These can be difficult to remedy but also easy enough to rectify if the student is committed to working towards a solution. Where one finds greater challenges is in the area of reading sheet music, especially when it comes to sight-reading. Which components of music notation does the student need fluency with in order to successfully sight-read? If one thinks about it, there are really just two immediate components involved: pitch and rhythm. Surely beyond those two basic components, the student must learn to navigate other more specific aspects of notation such as dynamics, bowings and navigation markers like codas or 1st and 2nd endings. I would argue those are easier to implement and are not usually a barrier to getting sound off the

printed page. Furthermore, I would posit that rhythm is usually the obstacle that prevents students from translating symbols into sound. Once the student is familiar with the 5 lines and 4 spaces of their clef, there is little more for the beginning musician to know with regards to reading pitch. Most students can identify the pitch names of a page of whole notes early in their music education. The problem arises when these same pitches are assigned different rhythmic values. Nothing changed about whether notes are on a line or a space and which pitch letter is assigned to that line or space, but the beginning music student is usually suddenly confused by the addition of this new information, even if the student can identify the different note values (whole, quarter, eighth etc).

I would argue that this is another area in which the widely accepted dominant system is rooted in a white, Euro-centric approach and could benefit from the addition of a counter-narrative or secondary approach. In the rhythmic system that we have inherited from this parochial view of rhythmic decoding from Western European music theory, we teach our children to decode rhythm using a combination of numbers and words. As if that weren't complicated enough, we also employ isolated vowel sounds like "e" and "a" into the daunting task of reading music. It's no wonder so many children struggle with decoding rhythm and therefore arrive at high school or college saying and believing things like "I'm a terrible reader!" or "I wish my sight-reading was as strong as my playing is!" This also prevents further obstacles for children with learning disabilities or for whom English is a second language. Assigning the word "four" to a quarter note value which receives one beat is fine so long as the word "four" is one syllable long, as it is in English. If you use this system in Spanish, for instance, the word for four is cuatro, which is obviously two syllables. Now you must truncate the word cuatro (or teach the system in English to a Spanish-speaking student) so that it is a monosyllabic word forcing it to correlate to a quarter note value which is another cognitive step (or obstacle) in translating notational symbols into musical sound.

Here's an example of how much language is required to decode rhythm under the dominant system:

Illustration 1: Using the dominant method for decoding rhythm



The illustration shows two measures of music in 4/4 time. The first measure contains a quarter note, an eighth note followed by a sixteenth note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. The second measure contains a quarter note, an eighth note followed by a sixteenth note, a quarter note, and a quarter note. Below the notes, a speaking guide reads: "Speak: 1 and 2 e and a 3 4 | 1 2 e and a 3 and 4".

As you can see, in these two measures of music we employ numbers, words **and** isolated vowel sounds to unravel this rhythmic passage that employs the use of just three simple rhythmic values (quarter, eighth and sixteenth notes). The student is required to call upon many different pieces of knowledge in one cognitive request. This is how students end up with a damaged epistemology with regards to decoding rhythm.

The solution I am putting forth is to teach a comparatively less complicated system for decoding rhythm, especially in the beginning of a student's music studies. The South Indian system for decoding rhythm known as solkattu does exactly that. The system employs no numbers or words but rather syllabic sounds that correspond to note values. In this way, the teacher is allowed to focus on what really matters when teaching the early lessons on reading rhythm which is the concept of beat. Without a firm understanding of beat (or pulse) the student is adrift in an ocean of numbers, words and vowel sounds when it comes to decoding rhythm an act which requires cutting the larger beat into smaller, specific durations.

In solkattu, a single beat (or quarter note) is called "ta" regardless of where it occurs in the measure. Therefore, a single quarter note, regardless of where it falls within the measure will be called "ta" and not 1,

2, 3 or 4 in common time. This works so well because it allows the student to focus on the first and most aspect which is “at what tempo (or speed) will I attempt this passage?” So often students confuse being counted into a passage with a countdown. When the director says “1, 2, 3, 4” it is not a countdown into a shapeless space of time, it is an indication of the tempo or beat. Imagine how much clearer the indication of the tempo would be if teachers counted their ensembles in with “ta, ta, ta, ta” at a specific tempo rather than the traditional “1, 2, 3, 4”. So many students hear the traditional count-off as a countdown “1, 2, 3, 4... blastoff!” They do not extrapolate the necessary information from what the teacher has said, which is an indication of the tempo. Furthermore, when “ta” is split in half (eighth notes) we use the syllables “ta ka”. When the beat is split into three parts (eighth note triplet) we use “ta ki da” and into four parts (sixteenth notes) we use the syllables “ta ka di mi”. It must be stressed to the student that the most important step when attempting to sight read a piece is first picking a feasible tempo at which to make an initial attempt.

Illustration 2: The four basic rhythmic subdivisions using solkattu

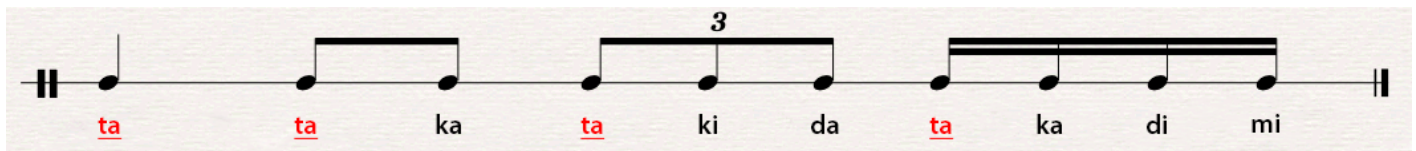


Illustration 3: The rhythmic excerpt from Illustration 1 decoded using solkattu



Consult rhythm expert David Alderdice’s 2016 TED Talk ¹⁰ .

Activity

1. To introduce this system of rhythmic decoding, first use the website The Rhythm Randomizer (<https://www.rhythmrandomizer.com/>). This website generates two measure rhythmic phrases based on parameters set by the instructor. Project the website on a SmartBoard and have the students speak the rhythms with you as a group and eventually on their own. Set the parameters to generate only quarter notes and eighth notes with no rests and speak the rhythms to assure relatively simple examples. The teacher should point out patterns such as the fact that all downbeats are marked with the syllable “ta” regardless of what happens in that beat following the initial downbeat. This should be done initially without instruments.
2. After students demonstrate some mastery over this exercise add an additional step: have the student play the rhythm on a single note of their choosing after they can first speak the rhythm successfully.
3. As a challenge, a third step would be to have the student improvise their own melody using the rhythm generated by the website.
4. As a group activity, the students can say the rhythms of a piece of music they are preparing using the solkattu syllables.

In closing, adopting this system for decoding rhythm gives the student more than one way to decode rhythm which ultimately serves them much better as they continue their studies. Additionally, solkattu is also a much more flexible system for reading more advanced musical notations especially, when mixed or odd meter is encountered.

Unit 3 - Orchestral Performance as Social Praxis

This unit provides the teacher with ways to create a sense of community within the orchestra. What this unit tries to counter is the “bank transaction” approach to education where the teacher has the information, and the student is merely a silent receptacle for that information. So often orchestra directors hand out a piece of music and drill sections of it with the end goal being a performance of the piece as it exists on the page. Of course, this is part of being in any performing group, but we must make time to develop all ways of learning and interacting socially. Thomas Regelski tells us in his article *Reclaiming ‘Music’ as Social Praxis*¹¹ the “failure of music education as *praxis* to make a pragmatic difference for individuals and society that is *noticeable* and *notable* thus creates a legitimization crisis.” (Regelski, 70) By this Regelski means that if what we are teaching in our classrooms does not serve or enhance our students as members of their communities, support from those communities will wain and they will begin to wonder why their children should study music at all. He calls this a “legitimation crisis” and it is happening across the country with regards to support for arts in our public schools. Luckily, music remains in the Common Core State Standards but one gets the feeling that if it were not for that, there might be a much bigger crisis with regards to support especially when one considers the emphasis placed on math and reading skills today over the benefits of arts study.

When we shift our focus from the rat race that is imposed upon us through the audition cycle of the school year through concerts and All-State type festivals, we can focus on teaching the skills that separate music from other disciplines offered in our building. When we rely on competitions to motivate our students and engage communities, we run the risk of losing their trust if the student does not “bring home the gold”. Some of the most valuable skills obtained through music study do not involve trophies. As with the rhythm skills being developed in the previous unit, the idea is that we set the student up by giving them skills that grow with them as they grow. Teaching them how to listen better, blend and support one another is something they can hone and gain more fluency with as they step up through their years as a student.

This activity includes rote teaching which, is employed to counter students’ reliance on printed sheet music and encourages them to trust their own ability to listen and interact socially with one another. I also use this opportunity to introduce traditional music that is normally outside the repertoire of the middle school orchestra and presents counter-narratives. Beginning orchestra repertoire is rife with Japanese folksongs (Suzuki method) or melodies from the Western European musical lexicon (“Ode to Joy”, “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” etc). Traditional folk music from most cultures will lend itself well to the beginning instrumentalist, so this unit presents an opportunity to introduce African folk music to the orchestral repertoire. As with other aspects of this curriculum unit, employing music from Africa provides opportunities for dialog with students about African history and culture so that the narrative of African culture does not simply begin with the era of chattel slavery.

This unit works with any folksong of the teacher’s choosing but for the purposes of this unit I have selected and arranged the South African Zulu folksong “Nampaya Omame” for the middle school-level musician.

“Nampaya Omame” is a traditional song the Zulu children sing as their mothers returned to their villages from gathering goods. It is a catchy simple song comprised of two sections. The English translation of the lyrics are as follows:

Section 1

We saw sweets, we saw cookies!

We saw rice, we saw meat!

Section 2

Ncinci bo! Ncinci bo! (an expression of joy)

There are our mothers!

There are many performances of vocal versions of the folksong to be found on YouTube ¹¹ . In an effort to make the song more feasible for the young musician, the rhythms have been slightly altered/simplified.

Activity

1. The parts to the piece should be taught to one member of each section. For example, teach (by rote) the viola part to one violist from the section.
2. That student then teaches the part to another student in the viola section. Continue this until all members of the viola section know the part. Repeat this with each section of the string orchestra.
3. Have the students experiment with different pairings of parts. For example: “Let’s hear the viola part and the cello part.”
4. Experiment with having one instrument play in support of the other, thus forming impromptu duets. For example: “Let’s play those two parts together and have the cello support the viola.” Experiment with switching the instruments roles.
5. Have the students compose their own arrangement of the song. Access the Google drive in the notes section for an example of a possible arrangement ¹² .
6. Include the new original arrangement as a song of thanksgiving on a concert or performance.

A project like this one is valuable for many reasons. Firstly, the students are introduced to music from a culture whose narrative is told through a very narrow lens. By incorporating songs from a country like South Africa, the students’ minds are expanded by incorporating this music into their knowledge base. Incorporating repertoire like this into a string orchestra’s repertoire greatly expands the breadth of what moods, styles and melodic/rhythmic approaches that students might expect to be exposed to in such an ensemble. It is a chance to reimagine what the middle school orchestra includes in its bag of tricks, so to speak.

Additionally, the students get the opportunity to explore different types of “musicking” and learning. By learning the piece by rote from one another in Step 2, they experience a sense of sharing and community that they would not have had if they learned the piece from a printed piece of sheet music distributed by the director. It is a chance to develop aural skills without administering dry dictation exercises and quizzes.

Step 3 allows for the students to experiment with instrumentation by means of singling out two voices from the orchestration and hearing what sounds result from such experimentation.

Step 4 of the activity allows for the students to experiment with accompanying and lead voices by giving them the chance to sit in either position of that pairing. Violists are commonly playing accompanying roles but violinists do not. Take the opportunity to have the violinists play a supportive part while another instrument plays a more prominent or melodic role.

Steps 5 and 6 are very exciting for students as it allows a space for them to play the role of composer and also to operate within a democratic group in which each individual voice matters. This can be structured in any number of ways, but it should be done so that all student voices are heard and their ideas incorporated in some part of the final arrangement. This is a type of exercise rarely done in orchestras and by its omission, does an injustice to orchestral students. Modern musicians should be able to think creatively about music and its composition, and to value their own opinions on such matters. Through the study of music composition, students learn about making decisions with sound, communicating those ideas, trying them out in real time and then assessing the results. This is normally an activity one might associate with a music composition course or a performing group like jazz band. There is no reason why orchestral string students should not be exposed to these rewarding challenges and group activities. It is not only an important creative exercise but it also creates a sense of community and a feeling of ownership over the repertoire put forth by the ensemble at performances.

Unit Four - Reimagining Middle School Orchestral Repertoire

I have ordered this unit to be the final unit in this project because it should be seen as a culmination of the work put forth in the previous three units. The purpose of the unit is to help the teacher rethink choices they make in a very broad sense throughout the school year. The unit works best when efforts are made to refocus “what” we teach and not as much “how” we teach. Simply adding a piece or two to a concert program that represents diversity is nice, but broadening the curriculum, giving voice to counter-narratives and amplifying under-represented communities should be seen as the ultimate goal of our pedagogy if we are truly seeking an egalitarian society in which all are equal stakeholders in all successes and failures within that society.

These are original arrangements that I composed for the middle school-level string musician. In my years of teaching this age bracket I have found it difficult to find arrangements that allowed me to teach my students in a manner that met their ability level where they are at this point in their development. Repertoire should be seen firstly as a vehicle for developing musicianship. All too often we see students attempting pieces that are too far above their musical ability too early in their studies. Sure, parents want to hear Beethoven’s 5th Symphony in c minor or Mozart’s 40th Symphony in g minor. This is done all too often at the expense of the music as it was written for master level performers. As a solution, some educators opt for a watered-down arrangement of these great works that compromised the integrity of the exercise of learning the masterwork in the first. When our students take the stage, it is time to put on display the fruits of the labor that one acquires through the study of music. It should sound beautiful and, at times, not so beautiful as they are beginners. I wrote these arrangements with this goal in mind. Because of the parameters I used in composing

these arrangements, students should gain command over the content with steady progress and positive reinforcing experiences in pursuit of mastering them. Furthermore, the students should be given background on each piece and the stories behind them. This will ensure that the music will connect with the students' lives outside of the rehearsal room, as they might tell these stories to family members (music as social praxis). This will also provide an opportunity to dialog about history, race, and counter-narratives within our society.

Remember: Search. Program. Perform. Repeat...

Activity

A link to the resources for all five of the following pieces (including a complete score, parts, Sibelius files, XML/MIDI files and sample recordings) are included in the notes section for the teacher's use ¹³ .

1. The South African Zulu folksong "Nampaya Omame" was introduced in Unit 3 and is just as effective as a concert piece as it is for rote teaching and student-led learning. This piece of thanksgiving and familial love is upbeat and provides an opportunity to dialog with students about African culture and open discussions about their own relationships within their families and other areas of their social lives.
2. "We Shall Overcome" is a Civil Rights Era anthem. Its origins date back to Charles Albert Tindely's 1901 composition "I'll Overcome Someday". This song may already be familiar to students and will provide an obvious opportunity to talk about the Civil Rights Era with students. It works very well as a part of a celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday or a school-wide Black History Month assembly.
3. "People Get Ready" by Curtis Mayfield is another Civil Rights Era anthem that is more widely known, particularly to the general pop music community. There are many versions of this song. This arrangement is based largely on Mayfield's original recording with The Impressions ¹⁴ .
4. "I Look o'er Yander" is an African American spiritual that has its origin in the Bahamas. It is a song of loss and death that is framed in a harmonically bright setting but maintains deep emotive content. This is another song that hopefully allows for dialog with students about history and other communities involved in the era of chattel slavery in the West Indies. Additionally, it allows for a space for the teacher to engage students in dialog about death, loss and resilience. The lyrics are as follows:

I look o'er yander, what did I see?

Somebody's dying everyday

See bright angel standing there

Somebody's dying everyday

Everyday, passing away

Everyday, passing away

Everyday, passing away

Somebody's dying everyday

I would encourage the teacher to find other melodies like "I Look o'er Yander" that lend themselves well to the beginner musician. I found "I Look o'er Yander" in a collection of African American spirituals entitled *Afro-American Folksongs: A Study in Racial and National Music*¹⁵ by Henry Howard Krehbiel published in 1914.

5. Bill Withers' "Lean on Me" is the possibly best known of the five pieces presented here. I include it because of its obvious message of comradery and community but for opportunity to examine and tell Withers' life story ¹⁶. As mentioned at the start of this project, a Padlet timeline should be used throughout the school year to ensure the telling of all narratives from all communities. Along with concert hall-type composers like Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson, I suggest that composers like Withers from outside of the classical canon be included.

The goal of any performance ensemble should be to create better informed citizens not just better students. Included in being better informed, the students should be acquiring a broad sense of knowledge about many areas and genres of music. This includes artists from all parts of the world, from many different communities and also from varied genres. In this way, they learn to tell the narrative of a modern society, which includes many stories and experiences that have been ignored or underappreciated for far too long. This curricular unit provides a start in helping students realize there are many narratives within the musical world. Being made aware of counter-narratives they might better relate to will hopefully create the type of citizens and thinkers so badly needed in the world today.

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TED. (2016, January 14). *Music Does Not Discriminate* | Chi Chi Nwanoku | TEDxEuston [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZPioq5dEHs>

Resources

This is a list of resources, musicians and organizations that promote diversity and inclusion through various means. They should be accessed to help the teacher find ways to diversify and include counter-narratives in their instruction.

Musicians and Ensembles

Protestra <https://www.protestra.org/>

D-Composed <https://www.dcomposed.com/>

The Sphinx Organization <https://www.sphinxmusic.org/>

The Chineke! Orchestra <https://www.chineke.org/>

The Harlem Quartet <http://harlemquartet.com/>

Buskaid Orchestra <https://www.buskaid.org.za/>

Divisi Strings <https://divisistrings.com/about/>

Attacca Quartet <http://www.attaccaquartet.com/>

The String Queens <https://thestringqueens.com/>

Harlem Chamber Players <https://www.harlemchamberplayers.org/>

Castle of Our Skins <https://www.castleskins.org/>

Scott Trixier - violinist <https://music.unt.edu/faculty-and-staff/scott-tixier>

Regina Carter - violinist <http://reginacarter.com/>

Jay Julio - violist <https://jayjulio.com/>

Drew Alexander Forde - violist <http://thatviolakid.com/>

Tahirah Whittington - cellist <https://video.link/w/Lj7fc>

Kevin Olusola - cellisthttps://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kevin_Olusola

Abel Selaocoe - cellist<https://www.abelselaocoe.com/>

Xavier Foley - double bassist/composer<https://xavierfoley.com/>

Victor Wooten - Electric bassist - Music as a Language<https://video.link/w/SQYib>

Joseph Conyers - double bassist<http://www.josephconyers.com/>

Podcasts

The Score - An Urban Music Education Podcast<https://www.revivalmusicproject.org/podthescore>

Classically Black Podcast<https://www.classicallyblackpodcast.com/>

Teaching Hard History<https://www.learningforjustice.org/podcasts/teaching-hard-history>

School Colors<https://www.schoolcolorspodcast.com/>

Nice White Parents<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/nice-white-parents/id1524080195>

1619 Project: The Birth of American

Music<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/06/podcasts/1619-black-american-music-appropriation.html>

What's Her Name - Women's History Podcast<https://www.whatshernamepodcast.com/>

-Florence Price Episode<https://www.whatshernamepodcast.com/florence-price/>

-Alma Mahler Episode<https://www.whatshernamepodcast.com/alma-mahler/>

-Mary Lou Williams Episode<https://www.whatshernamepodcast.com/mary-lou-williams/>

Colorado Public Radio - Contemporary Black Composers You Should

Knowhttps://www.cpr.org/2021/01/27/refresh-your-sonic-palette-contemporary-black-composers-you-should-know/?fbclid=IwAR1YOuA3jIS9_ymXuUIFtDcwQmKzrOm_7NnmuQLjaEsjVdBXbrpaQgcNXgY

Reference

Google Doc of Music Theory Examples by BIPOC Composers (with links to composer bios)<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1CMnSjvraO1Ho68XUrPpmegBhVmD0pSaQkj17T7MPA6w/edit#gid=0>

Analytical Notes for Scores by Composers of

Colorhttps://docs.google.com/document/d/1ShK8zKPaf83W_XPxyn4gh-3qfgu-fQewY6iL14N2-04/edit

Music Theory Examples by Women<https://musictheoryexamplesbywomen.com/>

Composers of Color Resource Project<https://www.composerdiversity.com/>

Women and Gender Diverse People in Composition - Facebook<https://www.composerdiversity.com/>

Teaching Social Justice Resource Exchange – Facebook <https://www.composerdiversity.com/>

Music by Black Composers <https://www.composerdiversity.com/>

Institute for Composer Diversity <https://www.composerdiversity.com/>

The Black Music History Library <http://chevalierdesaintgeorges.homestead.com/index.html>

African Heritage in Classical Music <http://chevalierdesaintgeorges.homestead.com/index.html>

Black Classical Composers –

Spotify <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5eVR5m1HCO1s8rk9AE95P?si=mWZ-xhkCQY-Z5i9twMZBSg&nd=1>

SixtyEight2OhFive – Author Hanif Abdurraqib’s playlist <https://www.68to05.com/>

The Ongoing History of Protest Music (includes some explicit language, preview before using in class) <https://www.ongoinghistoryofprotestsongs.com/>

Small Axe Project <http://smallaxe.net/>

Musical Passage: A Musical Voyage to 1688

Jamaica <http://archipelagosjournal.org/issue01/musical-passage.html>

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

MU:Cr1.1.E.11a Compose and improvise ideas for arrangements, sections, and short compositions for specific purposes that reflect characteristic(s) of music from a variety of cultures studied in rehearsal.

MU:Cr2.1.E.8b Preserve draft compositions and improvisations through standard notation and audio recording.

MU:Cr3.2.E.1a Share personally developed melodies, rhythmic passages, and arrangements – individually or as an ensemble – that address identified purposes.

MU:Pr4.1.E.8a Select a varied repertoire to study based on music reading skills (where appropriate), an understanding of formal design in the music, context, and the technical skill of the individual and ensemble.

MU:Pr4.2.E.5a Demonstrate, using music reading skills where appropriate, how the setting and formal characteristics of musical works contribute to understanding the context of the music in prepared or improvised performances

MU:Pr4.3.E.8a Demonstrate understanding and application of expressive qualities in a varied repertoire of music through prepared and improvised performances.

MU:Pr5.3.E.8a Develop strategies to address technical challenges in a varied repertoire of music and evaluate their success using feedback from ensemble peers and other sources to refine performances.

MU:Pr6.1.E.8a Demonstrate attention to technical accuracy and expressive qualities in prepared and

improvised performances of a varied repertoire of music representing diverse cultures and styles.

MU:Re7.1.E.1a Apply criteria to select music for specified purposes, supporting choices by citing characteristics found in the music and connections to interest, purpose, and context.

MU:Re7.2.E.8a Describe how understanding context and the way the elements of music are manipulated inform the response to music.

MU:Re9.1.E.1a Evaluate works and performances based on personally- or collaboratively-developed criteria, including analysis of the structure and context.

Notes

1. <https://teachingbassoon.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Build-Better-Bassoon-Expanded-Handout.pdf>
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<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

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