Individualized musical development in the instrumental music ensemble

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Individualized Musical Development in the Instrumental Music Ensemble

By Alden H. Snell II and David A. Stringham

Introduction and Relevance to Research

Preparing instrumental ensembles for a concert is a necessary and important requirement for most music educators. Many instrumental music teachers prepare diligently to provide rich learning experiences for their students. Nevertheless, instrumental music teachers are often unsure of how to incorporate musical behaviors (e.g., singing, improvisation, and composition) called for in the National Standards for Arts Education (Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, 1994) into their lessons, ensemble rehearsals, and performances.

Research supports the inclusion of (a) singing (Bloedel, 1996; Davis, 1981; Schlacks, 1981), (b) improvisation (Azzara, 1993, 2002; McPherson, Bailey, & Sinclair, 1997), and (c) composition (Shewan, 2002; Stoltzfus, 2005) in an instrumental music curriculum to develop students’ musicianship. Improvisation and composition allow students to be creative, while simultaneously providing educators with additional tools to measure and evaluate each student’s understanding of a music vocabulary (Grunow, 2005).

Few resources are available to music educators who wish to teach creativity, improvisation, and composition in an instrumental music setting. Widespread sale and use of Teaching Music Through Performance In Band (e.g., Miles, 1997), and publications such as Teaching-Learning Units (Garofalo, 2000b, 2000e) and Guides to Band (Garofalo, 2000a), indicate that teachers are striving to make the learning process more beneficial for students, and the teaching process more efficient for teachers. While these resources provide practical information for teachers and students, teachers might benefit from additional models of instruction that prioritize individual student musicianship, while also developing requisite executive skills to perform standard wind, brass, and percussion repertoire with comprehension.

We have conducted formal and informal research to implement a model of instruction that prioritizes development of individual musicianship in instrumental music ensembles. Previous presentations of this material to both pre-service and in-service music educators revealed that teachers are inadequately prepared to engage in these activities as either practicing musicians or teachers. These observations are consistent with Abrahams (2000), who states, “Public school teachers are not teaching their charges to compose and improvise because they never learned to do it themselves in their own pre-service teacher training” (p. 219). While Abrahams specifically refers to composition and improvisation, we are also interested in the roles that singing, playing by ear, and aural analysis play in instrumental music instruction.

In both researchers’ classrooms, students were taught using approaches that equipped them to recognize and comprehend all parts that occur simultaneously during the performance of a standard piece of band repertoire. All students learned the melodies, bass lines, and harmonies within a piece by ear before being introduced to notation. Once students comprehend these musical elements, it is possible for them to understand relationships between their
parts and those of other performers. Our experiences suggest that having students learn more than just their individual parts in an instrumental ensemble, while expanding their tonal and rhythm vocabularies, improves each student’s overall musicianship.

To assist teachers in improving individual students’ musical development, we have created resources for teaching instrumental music informed by models presented in Jump Right In: The Instrumental Series (Grunow, Gordon, & Azzara, 2001) and Developing Musicianship through Improvisation (DMTI, Azzara & Grunow, 2006, in press-a, in press-b). Sequential techniques, outlined below, assist instrumental music teachers in using these resources to impart musical content of standard wind, brass, and percussion literature to their students while developing musical independence. Teachers can adapt these techniques to their unique classroom environment.

**Teaching Techniques**

**Part 1: Repertoire**

Teach your students the melody and bass line for repertoire they are learning. First, sing the melody and bass line on a neutral syllable such as “doo.” Next, play the melody and bass line on instruments with appropriate styles of articulation. Personalize the tune using expressive phrasing, dynamics, and tonal and rhythmic variation. To reinforce comprehension, invite students to notate the melody and bass line.

**Part 2: Rhythm, Tonal, and Melodic Patterns**

Chant and play rhythm patterns based on repertoire being studied. Begin with a neutral syllable, then with rhythm syllables, and finally on instruments, playing the patterns on the resting tone of the repertoire. Use styles of articulation appropriate for the repertoire. Next, improvise rhythm patterns. After the teacher performs each pattern, ask students to improvise a different pattern, first with a neutral syllable, then with rhythm syllables, and finally on instruments.

Students should sing and play tonal patterns from the harmonic functions found in the repertoire, singing first with a neutral syllable, then with solfege syllables, and finally playing on instruments. When students are comfortable singing and playing the patterns, teach them the root (e.g. DO, FA, or SO) and name the function (e.g. Tonic, Subdominant, or Dominant). When students are comfortable singing and playing tonal patterns, ask them to improvise rhythm patterns. After the teacher performs each pattern, ask students to respond by singing a consequent phrase different from the original melody (see Figure 1). Continue in a similar manner with the remaining phrases. When students are comfortable improvising consequent phrases, ask them to improvise antecedent phrases.

**Part 4: Learning to Improvise**

To improve improvisation ability, students learn “Seven Skills for Improvisation” recommended by Azzara and Grunow in DMTI (2006, in press-a, in press-b). While these skills focus on improvisation, students can also notate their improvisations, or compose their own music given similar parameters. The seven skills are outlined below:

**Skill 1.** Students have already learned rhythm patterns that resonate with the repertoire you have chosen, and have been invited to improvise their own rhythm patterns. In Skill 1, improvise these rhythm patterns in the context of the harmony, on the chord root of the repertoire you are learning. Ask students to sing their improvisation with the neutral syllable “doo,” and then play it on their instrument.

**Skill 2.** Establish tonality in the same key as the repertoire being learned and ask students to sing appropriate voice leadings based on the harmonic functions of the repertoire. For example, if your repertoire is in Eb DO with Tonic, Subdominant, and Dominant harmonies, ask students to sing “DO, FA, SO, DO” – “DO, DO, TI, DO” – “MI, FA, FA, MI” – and “SO, LA, SO, SO” (see Figure 2). Then ask students to play each part on their instrument.

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**Figure 1**

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**Figure 2**

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Skill 3. Teach students the harmonic rhythm for their repertoire using the pitches from the harmony in Skill 2. Ask students to sing and play every part.

Skill 4. Using a neutral syllable, ask students to improvise rhythm patterns to the harmonic progression using pitches learned in Skill 2. Then, ask students to select a part and improvise rhythm patterns. Repeat with each part. Ask students to try to make their improvised rhythm patterns interact with the melody and other parts. During all parts of Skill 4, ask students to first sing, and then perform on their instruments.

Skill 5. Using macrobeats, ask students to improvise (first singing, then playing) tonal patterns to the harmonic progression of repertoire being learned.

Skill 6. Ask students to improvise tonal patterns and rhythm patterns to the harmonic progression of repertoire being learned.

Skill 7. Improvise melodies by decorating and embellishing the material from Skill 6.

Conclusion

Composing, arranging, and improvising within the context of published ensemble repertoire could be easily added to an instrumental music curriculum. Incorporating these activities, based on musical behaviors, will provide teachers with additional contexts for measuring and evaluating student learning (Azzara, 1993; Frierson-Campbell, 2000; Liperote, 2005; Miceli, 1998; Snell, 2006; Stoltzfus, 2005). The authors would be glad to share lesson plans they have developed for select repertoire or offer suggestions to readers on how to apply this model to repertoire they are currently teaching.

References


