

by Rebecca A. Birnie

Composition and Recorders

A Motivating Experience

Abstract: Composition with students on the elementary level sparks imagination and creativity while engaging students in an experience that can demonstrate personal musical growth. Traditionally, music educators have not been taught how to compose music, let alone lead their students in composing experiences. As music educators take the beginning steps of guiding students to a well-modeled, successful composition experience, the process can yield great success for students. By combining elementary recorder instruction and the beginnings of written composition, students experience a new avenue for creativity and personal expression. This article provides a practical way in which music educators can incorporate composition into their classrooms. Students experience composition through independent and cooperative learning, performance, and assessment by both teacher and peers. The result is a positive, motivating experience that strengthens the experience of composition and performance.

Keywords: composing, composition, creativity, general music, motivation, performance

Each year, third-grade students in many elementary schools spend hours of music class time learning to play the recorder—becoming proud, performing musicians by the end of the school year. This elementary school milestone may seem small to many but is enormous to third-grade students. As accomplished musicians, music educators may be quick to teach the unit and move forward to other topics, but taking a slower, more detailed look can reveal the possibilities of combining the performing of recorder with the skill of composition. As music educators approach the last few weeks of a long school year, it is often with much-needed motivation, determination, and discipline, as students often need reminders to stay attentive. Combining skills from previous recorder instruction and the

new task of composing, students may combine their end-of-the-year accomplishments in an engaging, motivating way.

Students of all ages may compose music in different ways and on different levels. The elementary general music classroom is an excellent place to begin. Composing is an activity that involves student participation on a personal, creative level. It can entice attention and spark imagination—inviting students of all musical levels to engage without hesitation. Of great advantage in elementary school, students return to music class week after week, year after year, progressing in musical experiences that build upon ones previously learned. These learned concepts and skills are demonstrated during weekly music classes, often by performing. Combining recorder playing and composition allows

Composing is for all students, and the recorder offers a pathway for young musicians to enjoy the adventure.

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students to demonstrate their musical learning, culminating in a productive end product—keeping students focused and on task.

Teacher Role Modeling

Traditionally, music educators have not been taught how to compose music, let alone lead their students in composing experiences. Evelyn K. Orman, a professor of music education at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, investigated the use of compositional activities in the elementary general music classroom and discovered less instructional time was spent on composing related activities than other types of music instruction.¹ Researchers Charles P. Schmidt, Rhonda Baker, Beth Hayes, and Evan Kwan revealed that general music teachers spent less than 10 percent of their music instructional time on composition and improvisation activities.² By surveying elementary general music teachers, music education researcher Susan J. Byo found that composing and improvisation were identified as more difficult to implement in classrooms than teaching relating to singing, listening, analyzing, and evaluating music.³ Teachers who are uncomfortable teaching composition are likely to spend less time devoted to teaching it in their classroom.

Sandra Stauffer, a professor of music education at Arizona State University, investigated the evidence between student compositions and student life experiences. Stauffer suggested students composed music that was meaningful to them and reflective of their personal life, including experiences with instruments, various media, and other works encountered during prior lessons or ensemble experiences. Musical compositions were partly the result of life experiences, including societal influences, musical traditions, and personal upbringing.⁴

Composing can be learned. “The act of imagining, defining and communicating unique musical ideas awakens in young people a dormant part of their brains, unlocking an awareness of the creative energy packed into every musical experience.”⁵ Jacqueline H. Wiggins,

a professor of music education at Oakland University, investigated the interaction among students and their peers through the use of group composition projects. Students creatively developed ideas that were shared among peers through singing, rhythmic speech, sounds, instruments, and graphic demonstration. Through small-group compositional projects, students worked between whole-group strategies and independent work strategies during the project—culminating in a whole-group effort for rehearsing and finishing purposes, creating solutions to musical problems through composition.⁶ Composition requires creativity—a part of all human beings, although a skill that must be developed. Composition is for everyone from the young student to the adult, but ideal for students who have the basic foundation of musical instruction. For students to begin composing at an early age, they will need to have well-modeled experiences by their music teacher, which will foster their creativity. Adding the element of students performing compositions on an instrument they have recently learned to play (the recorder) adds an exciting dimension to the process.

Role modeling the steps of composition is an important beginning point for young composers in the music classroom, as aspects of written composition may be new to many of them. Demonstrating the process that students are expected to follow is a music teacher's first step. Donald Freund, a professor of music composition at Indiana University Bloomington, organizes the composition process into three stages: (1) defining the materials and limits, (2) exploring the possibilities, and (3) making choices and communicating the resulting music through some sort of notation.⁷ The first step focuses the assignment by setting limits to the beginning tasks. Exploring the possibilities allows students to discover the creative process—capture an idea, examine it, and begin to develop it, all by predetermined, established criteria. The last step includes determining the final version of the work and how to best portray the results to an audience.⁸

Students experience these three stages of composition as they explore their own inspirations, add or subtract ideas, and complete a final copy. “A young mind's potential for creative thought can be developed by application in any of the arts and sciences, but I believe it can be argued that since creativity as exercised in the art of music composition involves the highest level of freedom from implied comparisons with representational realism; it is the ideal medium for a young person to discover the delights of making something that is new and meaningful in its own terms.”⁹

Project Composition

As a culminating project at the end of the school year, third-grade students in my general music classes complete a composition project incorporating their newly acquired skill of recorder playing. The project is introduced by having students listen to a reading of the children's book *My Friend the Piano* by Catherine Cowan. In the story, a young girl is enthralled with the act of composing as she repeatedly creates and performs her own, unique versions of songs and symphonies on the family piano. Her mother is horrified as she listens to the unrecognizable sounds of an instrument she played so well. She watches her daughter in the act of composing, day after day, while the young girl completely enjoys the miraculous sounds she creates, much to everyone's chagrin. The story continues with an adventure, as the young girl desperately attempts to save the piano from being given away after her parents deem it unplayable. After a valiant attempt, the young girl releases the piano and it is never played again. The act of composing and performing and the pure enjoyment one can receive from doing so (regardless of the feedback one may receive from others) is captured through a beautifully illustrated children's book. After reading this story to my students, I prompt a discussion among them concerning their interpretation of the sounds of the young girl's compositions. Students share thoughts and comments of what

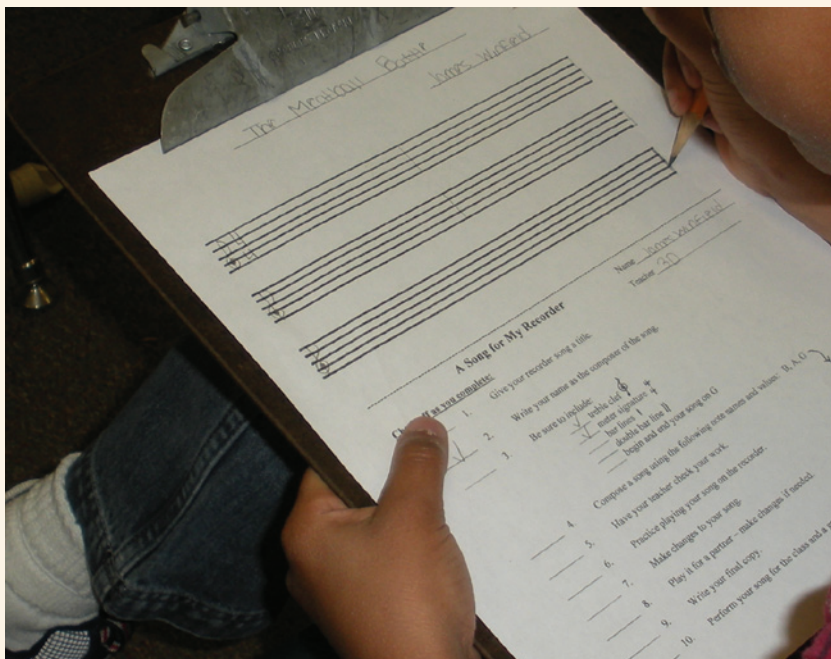
they believe she composed and performed as a few share personal experiences of creating their own songs at home. A discussion of the terms *compose* and *composing* follows with a connection to how the young girl from the story discovered her creative spirit for composing through playing the piano.

During the introduction of the project, connections are also made to contemporary, popular songs from the media that are of interest to students, leading to dialogue among classmates concerning the musicians whose job it was to compose them. What decisions must a composer make in writing a song? Who can be a composer? My students begin to grasp an understanding of how they can also be a composer, each time they create new music—whether singing new verses to a song, playing an original melody on an instrument, or writing their own song.

During subsequent lessons, the project unfolds as I carefully model an example of how to begin notating a beginning melody on a piece of manuscript paper, through the use of a document camera/visualizer and projector (an overhead projector could also be used). I explain to my students that they will combine what they have learned about reading the musical staff and playing the recorder with composing a song. Students become excited as they realize they will make decisions for their song, including a creative title. Each step of the written composing process is demonstrated for students through a class example on the document camera/visualizer and projector. Students are reminded about their choice of pitches (B, A, G), choice of note and rest values (quarter notes, eighth notes, half notes, dotted half notes, whole notes and accompanying rests), meter signature (4/4), and basic elements of the staff, including treble clef, measures, bar lines, double bar lines, and the correct placement of title and composer name. Students watch as the steps of the process are completed and checked off below the manuscript, completing a simple six- to ten-measure song, including an original title. Each step is

FIGURE 1

A Student Works to Complete a First-Draft Copy of a Composition



(Photo courtesy of the author)

modeled through the example, as a simple check-off list of steps is explained to students. When the last step on the criteria is completed, the class listens as I play the final outcome on a recorder. As I demonstrate and complete the steps of project, students learn that the entire project will take several music classes, as each class will have a specific part of the project to complete.

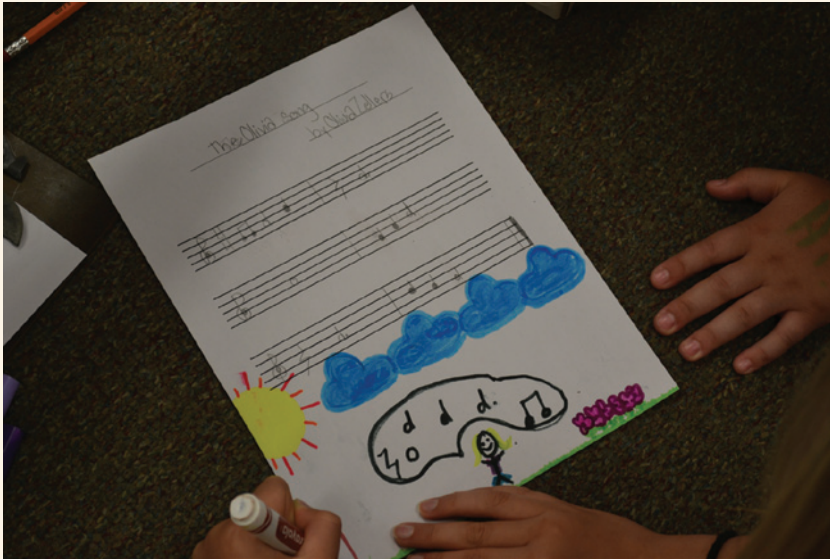
The following music classes are filled with specific assignments each week, which lead the students to their goal of an accomplished, original recorder composition. Students are first given a rough-draft paper containing an empty staff and a check-off list in which elements must be completed as the lessons progress, for example, (1) song title; (2) composer name; (3) drawing a treble clef, meter signature, bar lines, and double bar line; and (4) choosing from specified pitches (as pertinent to level of recorder playing) B, A, G, or additional pitches, such as low E, D, and low C (Figure 1). After students

have completed a rough draft of their song and I have checked their work for required components, students continue with the next steps of the process—playing their newly composed song on their recorder independently. Through experience, I discovered that it is best for students to complete a rough draft of their composition before playing it on their recorder, as they are focused on completing one task at a time. As students play their composed song on their recorder, they are then encouraged to make changes as they desire. Many students make changes upon hearing their compositions for the first time, as the aural experience gives them a new perception of their task. Because their compositions already have a solid structure in place, students can then make changes in pitch or rhythm, while fine-tuning their choices.

Students then share their song with a partner for peer feedback. Students are encouraged to alter their song after listening to a peer make suggestions or if

FIGURE 2

A Student Adds Artistic Details to a Composition



(Photo courtesy of the author)

they are not satisfied with portions of it, such as by making changes to pitches and note values or by adding dynamics. Students are often intrigued and interested in what their peers tell them concerning their work and often are anxious to share with me how they made changes or how they did not feel comments were valid. Finally, after students have decided on a final version and revisions are completed, students receive a clean manuscript page for their “final copy” as they neatly and carefully rewrite their compositions (Figure 2). As students finish their final copies, they add colorful artwork below their creations to reflect their title, melody, or feelings about their song. The final copies are completed and mounted onto colored paper for a “framed” appearance (Figure 3). The compositions are then laminated by the teacher and are ready for the next aspect of the project—performing and assessing.

Perform, Share, Celebrate, Assess

Students were excited as they prepared to share their final, colorful compositions

on the last day of the project (as the project often concludes during the last week of school). Students were reminded of the culminating activity for the day’s lesson—performing, sharing, celebrating, and assessing. The music classroom became a miniature stage as the chairs were arranged to mimic a concert hall and a music stand was placed at the front. Students were asked to share their composition by coming to the front and playing their song on their recorder for their classmates. Students took turns performing and sharing, applauding, and treating each other respectfully, as concert etiquette was reviewed and respectful behavior was modeled. It was truly a wonderful day and the excitement was contagious. Students were proud of their new accomplishment as they played their compositions and experienced performance among peers. They were secure their endeavors would be rewarded as many chose to step out of their usual, comfortable world and enjoy a new experience as a young musician and composer.

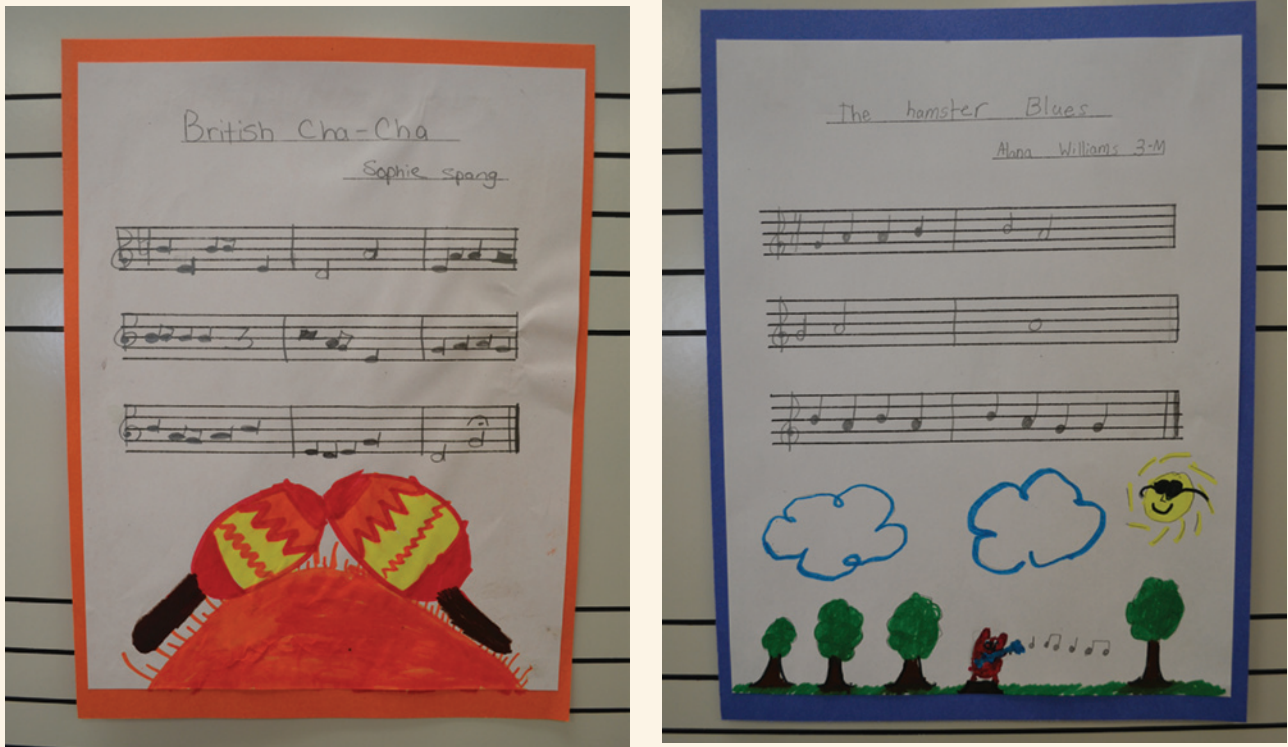
Assessment occurs almost naturally as students progress through the composition project and complete their songs.

I easily monitored student work informally by physically moving around the classroom while students were working on the assigned steps of the composition process for each class. As each class concluded, I could assess the written work completed by reviewing the first draft of manuscript copies. The assessment of the project was twofold, as separate assessment was made for the writing of the composition and the performance of the composition. Rubrics were presented throughout the project as an expectation of student work and a preparation for how students would be assessed (a rubric can be simple or more complex, depending on the needs and levels of specific students). For this example, separate rubrics were given for composition and for performance (Figure 4).

As students performed their compositions, they were also videotaped. Hearing and also seeing a visual presentation of student work is a powerful tool for children in a media-driven world. Students learn much from what the content teachers verbally explain, although learning is heightened through a visual component. Time was allotted at the end of the project for students to watch and learn from classmates through the visual recording. As time permitted, students may be involved in peer feedback and peer grading, as students can be given rubrics or prompts to evaluate their classmates. Students were reminded that their comments beyond the use of the given rubric should be of a positive nature. Students could also complete the project with a language arts component—including reflective writing. Students may answer questions, including “What is the connection between the title of your song and the pitch and note values you chose?” or “What do you feel was the best part of composing your recorder song?” or “With whom will you share your recorder composition when you take it home, and what do you predict will happen?” The possibilities for additional writing prompts may also reflect work of classmates, the compositional process, their personal feelings about their work, or reflections from the recorded performances.

FIGURE 3

Two Final Composition Projects Ready for Performance



(Photos courtesy of the author)

FIGURE 4

Composition Project Rubrics

Composition Rubric

- 4 - All required elements are included in composition
- 3 - Most required elements are included (1-2 errors)
- 2 - Only half of required elements are included
- 1 - Very few required elements (less than half are included)

Performance Rubric

- 4 - Performed correctly - pitch, rhythm, steady beat, musical elements
- 3 - Most performed correctly - pitch, rhythm, steady beat, musical elements (1-2 errors)
- 2 - Only half performed correctly - pitch, rhythm, steady beat, musical elements
- 1 - Very little performed correctly - pitch, rhythm, steady beat, musical elements (less than half is correct)

Participation, Differentiation, Success

Composition allows for participation and success to be experienced by all students. Differentiation, as researched by Carol Ann Tomlinson, professor of education at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, is planning and providing for the anticipated differences of students in the classroom.¹⁰ During the composition project, students have the opportunity to work independently at varied paces, guided step-by-step with the teacher. For example, a student who brings additional musical experiences to the classroom beyond the average third-grade student would have the opportunity to select additional pitches for the recorder (beyond those learned in music class), or the choice of a different meter signature, added tempo markings, dynamic markings, or repeat signs.

In addition, students with fewer experiences in musical learning or students with required accommodations would have the opportunity for additional assistance with completing the project, the ability to make pitch and note value selection from more limited choices, or options such as playing their composition on an adapted instrument. The encompassing concept is the philosophy that instruction is based upon student needs, which drives the design of instruction. Music teachers must know their students well to make decisions that determine instructional level that best meets the needs of their students and their musical abilities to compose.

Meeting Standards and More

From the composition project, students produce a twofold outcome: a performance experience and a written composition experience. The process is experienced in the classroom but yields a tangible, written end result, which archives their achievement. Students may continue to celebrate their accomplishment as they physically have something in their hands to carry home—to preserve, share with family, or perform over and over again for themselves. From the application of these experiences, depending upon the instructional choices made, music teachers may incorporate many of the National Standards, including composing and arranging music, performing on instruments, reading and notating music, listening and describing music, and evaluating music and music performances. Some of the specific intelligences described by Howard Gardner may also be activated in your students, for example, logical-mathematical intelligence via the learning of pitches and note values, linguistic intelligence by adding lyrics or text to a composition, or kinesthetic intelligence through the addition of movement to the composition. Cross-disciplinary concepts of writing/language arts could also be experienced through the addition of lyrics or personal reflective writing and through visual arts, by visual artistic expression of the compositional process

or a visual representation of the composition through drawing or painting.

Students create a personal connection to their compositions, as they take ownership of their work—making decisions for musical choices, performing, and evaluating. Students may work independently, with partners, or in cooperative groups while sharing their compositions. Students are encouraged to continue peer interaction beyond teacher involvement, as students give and receive feedback from classmates on their work during the process. As opportunity arises and the teacher and student are comfortable, students may perform compositions for other audiences, perhaps on a volunteer basis. Grade-level classes; a partial school assembly; a club or group of students, teachers, and parents; or an addition to an already-scheduled school event are all possible opportunities for students to shine through their performances.

Beyond the Classroom: The Positives

According to a study by Indiana University associate professor of music education Katherine Strand, the most common reason given for the use of composition with students was that children learn more through composing, as teachers used composition activities to teach, learn, and practice skills and for assessment of student learning. Teachers in the study reported students experienced motivation and personal enjoyment from composing, which engaged them in further learning.¹¹ General music teachers of all grade levels can support compositional activities with their students regardless of grade level. Beginning recorder instruction, which is traditionally taught in third grade, can also be experienced by students of upper grades, including grades 4 and 5, and students in middle and high school. Combining recorder instruction and composition can also be incorporated, as teachers design projects that provide enough structure for students to be successful and take ownership in their endeavors and outcomes.

“Teachers who demystify the compositional process by providing sequential instruction in how to compose help students capture the spirit.”¹² Teaching with composition may yield stronger musical skill, which students can internalize and transfer to other aspects, such as performance and creativity. Students begin to understand that all musicians are capable of being composers.

NOTES

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