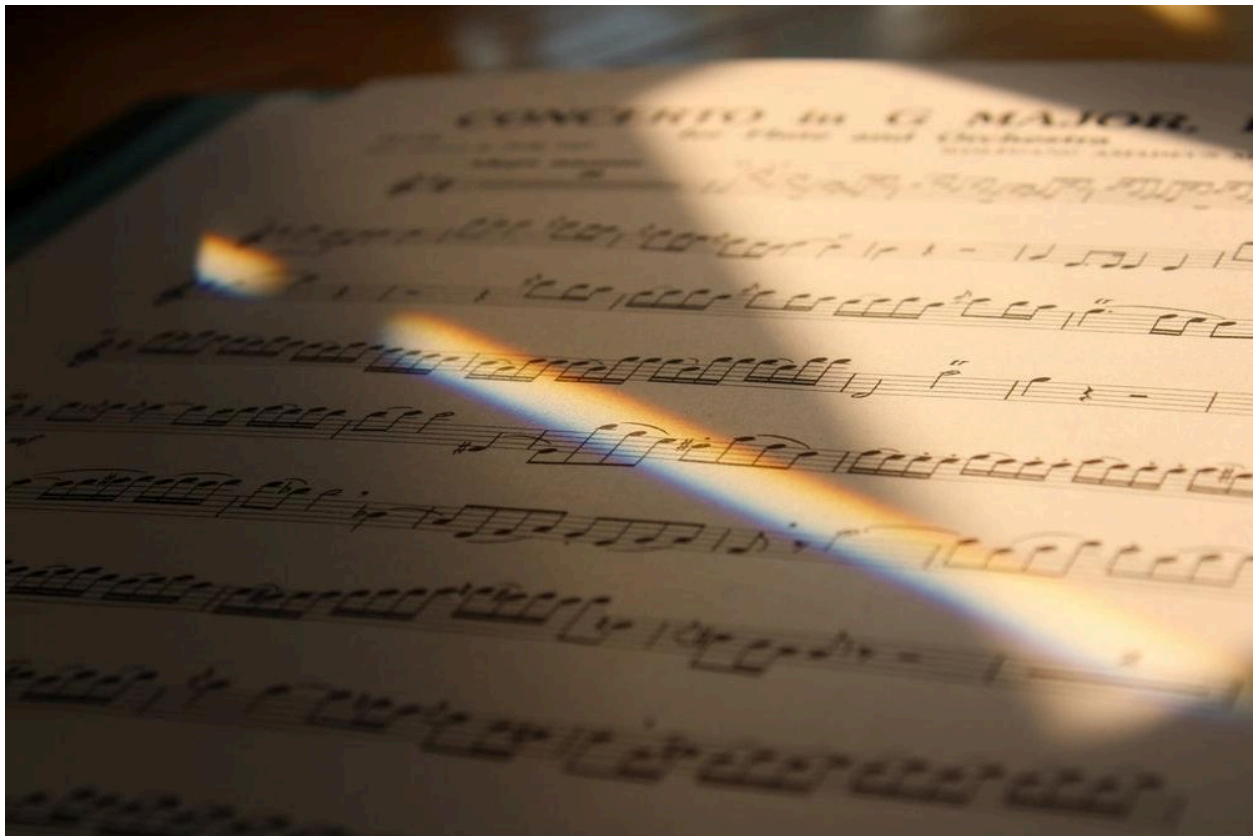


Creative Group Composing in Music Classrooms

Unit Plan



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Teaching students to compose music is a natural and valuable activity that can empower students' creative thinking skills and help them develop tools for lifelong use. However, due to lack of training and limited research into composition pedagogy best practices, many teachers assign closed composition tasks to their students involving little creativity. This unit was developed to empower students to compose creatively regardless of their abilities by justifying musical decision making through the elements of music. It was developed using an inquiry-based learning model, and is informed through review of available research and interviews with experienced composers and teachers.

While there is a lack of research into composition pedagogy within Ontario and even North America, there has been significant work investigating the composing processes of children. By using an empirical composition method applied to a group composition model, this unit was developed to include significant opportunities for review and reflection upon the creative process as outlined in the Ontario curriculum.

The focus of these lesson plans is on the *process* of composition, but students should also be able to develop quality musical *products* using this method. The unit was developed for a grade seven instrumental music class and is intended to require nine 40-minute periods. However, the model can be modified to work for different period durations and for different age groups, provided students can justify their musical decision making regarding their use of the elements of music. Worksheets and sample visual presentations are included in the text of the unit and are also hyperlinked for digital access.

I sincerely hope you find success using this unit to help your students express themselves more creatively and engage them in the art of composing music.

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Lesson Plans



Period 1

Introduction and establishment of norms, development of short musical ideas

Overall goal

- To prepare students for their creative activities.

Specific goals

- Remind students of the musicality norms they have been using, including:
 - Duration
 - Pitch
 - Dynamics and other expressive controls
 - Timbre
 - Texture/Harmony
 - Form
- Have students create a musical idea and modify it according to their norms

Activities

1. Discuss the overall project and the goals for the project
2. Discuss the norms students have been using for performance activities all year
3. Begin visual presentation *Musical Element Norms* (see resources)
4. Ask students to individually create a rhythm and perform it using a pitch of their choice
5. Using that rhythm, play it using several different pitches to make a melody
6. Using that melody, play it using more than one articulation style
7. Using that musical idea, play it using a different timbre
8. Add dynamic changes to that musical idea
9. Create a second musical idea using these musical norms, and arrange them in an order of the students' choosing
10. Share musical ideas with the class (optional)

Resources needed

- Visual Presentation: *Musical Element Norms*

Period 2

Creating and sharing individual musical ideas and considering the composition process

Overall goal

- Students will create, reflect upon, and share a musical idea

Specific goals

- Remind students of the work done last class with manipulating the elements of music to form their musical ideas
- Students will individually create a new musical idea
- Reflect upon the process they used to create that musical idea and, using the *How do we create musical ideas?* worksheet, explain how they decided to create their unique idea
- Share their idea with others to gain depth of insight into how others create
- Encourage the use of music specific language when discussing their ideas

Activities

1. Students are given limited time to create a musical idea.
2. Using the *How do we create musical ideas?* worksheet, students will explain the choices and decisions they made while creating that musical idea
3. Students will share that musical idea and their creative process with a partner
4. Repeat step 3 with additional partners
5. Hand in the worksheet at the end of the period

Resources needed

- Pencils
- Clipboards (as a stable writing surface)
- Worksheet: *How do we create musical ideas?*

Period 3

Organization into groups, development of new hooks and complementary musical ideas

Overall goal

- Begin developing a polyphonic composition involving all members of a group using complementary musical ideas

Specific goals

- Organize students into groups
- Develop musical ideas that fit well together
- Notate, using any form of notation, their ideas for future reproduction

Activities

1. Students will self-organize into groups of 4 or 5, on the condition that they may not work with any students they worked with last class (this is to ensure students diversify their working groups in order to gain a deeper insight into the creative process of others)
2. Students will create a new musical idea, different from the idea they created last class
3. Share those ideas with group members
4. Using one of three approaches discussed on the *Three approaches to polyphonic composition* visual presentation, students will create a polyphonic composition:
 - a. Strategy 1: The Jam Session - Students will play their musical ideas simultaneously, adapting as they listen in order to help their ideas blend with those of their group members
 - b. Strategy 2: The Jigsaw - Students will play their musical ideas, see if any fit well together, make adaptations as necessary, and decide the order in which they'll play their musical ideas.
 - c. Strategy 3: The Construction - Students will play their musical ideas for their group members, and the group votes on their favourite musical idea. The person responsible for that idea (Idea A) plays it repeatedly for two minutes, while the other group members create musical ideas that sound good alongside Idea A. The group votes on

the idea that sound best with Idea A and names it Idea B. Ideas A and B are played repeatedly while the other group members create musical ideas that sound good alongside Ideas A and B, the group votes on their favourite, and so on until all groups members have an Idea that sounds good with all of the other ideas.

5. Throughout the creation of their polyphonic composition, students should reflect on the creative process and may wish to notate their musical ideas, using whatever system they wish, using the *Reflecting on the creative process* worksheet.
6. At the end of the period collect the work of each group into separate envelopes for use in future classes.

Resources needed

- Pencils
- Clipboards (as a stable writing surface)
- Envelopes for storing all resources throughout the unit
- Staff paper
- Lined paper
- Blank paper
- Worksheet: *Reflecting on the creative process*
- Visual presentation: *Three Approaches to Polyphonic Composition*

Period 4

Rehearsing and recording the performance

Overall goal

- To record a performance of the polyphonic compositions created last class

Specific goals

- To rehearse and polish the compositions for performance
- To record the performance

Activities

1. For the first half of the period students will rehearse and refine their composition, preparing it for performance
2. For the second half of the period students will be recorded in their groups using an iPad

Resources needed

- Video recording device
- The envelopes containing the work of each group

Period 5

Analysis of the performance according to established norms, reflection regarding decisions made about the composition, planning for a modified or reworked composition

Overall goal

- To reflect on the performance and develop ways to improve their compositions

Specific goals

- Students will analyze their performance using the musical norms established in lesson 1
- Students will develop a plan for improving their compositions

Activities

1. Each group will be provided with a listening station (iPad or similar playback device) in order to be able to analyze their performance from last class.
2. Students are to analyze their performance according to the performance norms discussed in the first lesson of this project. Using the *Rating Your Musical Decisions and Planning for Revision* worksheet students will defend and rate their musical choices, probing deeper thinking about the ways they used the elements of music and how they could make their compositions more musical.
3. Students will work up a plan detailing what changes they will make to their composition in order to improve the result of their work.

Resources needed

- One device per group that can play back their performance
- Worksheet: *Rating Your Musical Decisions and Planning for Revision*
- Pencils and clipboards
- The envelope for each group

Period 6

Execution of the new plan, rehearsal

Overall goal

- To improve their polyphonic composition through the lens of musical norms

Specific goals

- Students will execute their plan for improving their composition and will rehearse and polish their work

Activities

1. Using the re-development plan drawn up last class, students will work on improving their compositions using the musical norms in order to improve their compositions.
2. When they are satisfied with their product they will rehearse and polish their work in preparation for recording

Resources needed

- Envelopes developed by each group
- Pencils and clipboards

Period 7

Rehearse, polish, and record the final composition

Overall goal

- To record the final composition performance

Specific goals

- Rehearsal, polish, and performance of the revised composition

Activities

1. In the first half of the period students will rehearse and polish their performance of the revised composition
2. In the second half of the period the final performances will be recorded

Resources needed

- Envelopes developed by each group
- Pencils and clipboards
- Video recording device

Period 8

Analysis and assessment of new compositions, planning for the presentation

Overall goal

- To reflect upon their creative process and prepare to discuss it with the class

Specific goals

- Students analyze their final performance, reflecting on the decisions they made throughout the creative process
- Students will prepare to defend the creative decisions they made throughout the process of composing

Activities

1. Each group will be provided with a listening station (iPad or similar playback device) in order to be able to analyze their performance from last class.
2. Students are to analyze their performance according to the performance norms discussed in the first lesson of this project. Using the *Defending your music choices* worksheet and lined paper students will defend and rate their musical choices, probing deeper thinking about the ways they used the elements of music and how they could use the elements of music to improve their work (i.e. use of texture, form, a balance of variety and repetition, etc.)
3. Students will prepare a short presentation defending their compositional and musical choices to be presented next class

Resources needed

- One device per group that can play back their performance
- Worksheet: *Defending your musical choices*
- Lined Paper
- Pencils and clipboards
- The envelope for each group

Period 9

Presentation of the composition, performance, reflection

Overall goal

- To demonstrate the learning achieved throughout the project

Specific goals

- Students will share their performances
- Students will defend their musical decisions

Activities

1. Each group will present their composition, share their decision-making process with the class, and defend their decisions in an open forum.
2. The instructor will assess students using either the *Sample Summative Assessment Rubric* or one they develop.

Resources needed

- Projector and device to play back final performances for the class
- *Sample Summative Assessment Rubrics* detailing defense of musical decisions, use of language, clarity of expression, etc.

Resources



These are hyperlinks to the resources needed for this unit, with examples on the following pages.

Period 1: Visual Presentation – [Musical Element Norms](#)

Period 2: Worksheet – [How do we Create Musical Ideas?](#)

Period 3: Worksheet – [Reflecting on the Creative Process](#)

Visual Presentation – [Three Approaches to Polyphonic Composition](#)

Period 5: Worksheet – [Rating your Musical Decisions and Planning for Revision](#)

Period 8: Worksheet – [Defending your Musical Decisions](#)

Period 9: [Sample Summative Assessment Rubrics](#)

Visual Presentation - Musical Element Norms

<h3>The Elements of Music</h3> <p>Establishing norms From Creative Group Composing in Music Classrooms</p>	<h3>The Elements of Music</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">DurationPitchDynamics and other expressive controlsTimbreTexture/HarmonyForm <small>Ontario Ministry of Education (2009). The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1-8: The Arts. Toronto, ON.</small>	<h3>Duration</h3> <p>Create a rhythm and perform it on a note of your choice</p>
1	2	3
<h3>Pitch</h3> <p>Using the rhythm you created, perform it using a variety of pitches to create a melody</p>	<h3>Articulation</h3> <p>Using your melody, use different articulation styles to change the way the melody sounds</p> <p><i>Normal Staccato Tenuto Slurred</i> <i>Accented Marcato Accented</i></p>	<h3>Timbre</h3> <p>Using that melody with the new articulations, change your timbre to sound different from before</p> <p><i>Growly Soft Brassy Smooth Edgy Piercing Gentle</i> <i>Narrow Broad</i></p>
4	5	6
<h3>Dynamics</h3> <p>Using your melody with articulations and a timbre change, modify the volume at different points to add interest to your composition</p>	<h3>Form</h3> <p>Now that you have a complex melody (melody A), create another one (melody B) and decide the order in which you wish to play them</p> <p><i>A-B B-A A-B-B-A</i> <i>A-B-A B-B-B-A</i></p>	<h3>Perform!</h3> <p>Now that you've created a complex piece of music, share it with the class.</p>
7	8	9

Worksheet - *How do we create musical ideas?*

Name: _____ Class: _____ Instrument: _____

Composition Process

1.) How did you develop your own musical idea?

What thoughts or ideas came to you while developing your musical idea?

How did you decide what to keep or leave out?

2.) First partner's name: _____

What did you think of your first partner's musical idea? What was unique or interesting about it? Using the elements of music, explain how it was different than your idea:

3.) Second partner's name: _____

What did you think of your second partner's musical idea? What was unique or interesting about it? Using the elements of music, explain how it was different than your idea:

4.) Third partner's name: _____

What did you think of your third partner's musical idea? What was unique or interesting about it? Using the elements of music, explain how it was different than your idea:

Worksheet - *Reflecting on the Creative Process*

Names: _____ **Class:** _____

Using either *The Jam Session*, *The Jigsaw*, or *The Construction* technique to develop your group composition, tell me about how decisions were made along the way. Ensure you discuss the use of pitch, duration, dynamics and other expressive controls, timbre, texture/harmony, and form.

[illegible]

As you work, you may wish to note some ideas, however the use of the lines on this side of the paper is *completely optional*.

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Visual Presentation - Three Approaches to Polyphonic Composition

<p>Three Approaches to Polyphonic Composing</p> <p><i>The Jam Session, The Jigsaw, and The Construction</i></p>	<p>The Process</p> <p>You are going to create a polyphonic composition.</p> <p>A polyphonic composition uses different notes and rhythms simultaneously.</p> <p>Each of you will develop a musical idea using your instrument, and share it with your group.</p> <p>How you combine those ideas is up to you.</p>	<p>Strategy #1 - The Jam Session</p> <p>Students will play their own musical ideas simultaneously with their partners, adapting as they listen in order to help their ideas blend with those of their group members until a piece forms.</p>
1	2	3
<p>Strategy #2 - The Jigsaw</p> <p>Students will play their musical ideas, see if any fit well together, make adaptations as necessary, and decide the order in which they'll play their musical ideas.</p>	<p>Strategy #3 - The Construction</p> <p>Students will play their musical ideas for their group members, and the group votes on their favourite musical idea. The person responsible for that idea (Idea A) plays it repeatedly for two minutes, while the other group members create musical ideas that sound good alongside Idea A. The group votes on the idea that sound best with Idea A and names it Idea B. Ideas A and B are played repeatedly while the other group members create musical ideas that sound good alongside Ideas A and B. The group votes on their favourite, and so on until all group members have an idea that sounds good with all of the other ideas.</p>	<p>Summary</p> <pre>graph TD; A[The Jam Session] --- B[The Jigsaw]; A --- C([The Construction]); B --- C;</pre>
4	5	6

Worksheet - *Rating your Musical Decisions and Planning for Revision*

Listen to the recording of your composition several times and make note of the ways each element of music is used in the piece. Use the questions below to help guide your criticism of the elements of music in the composition and develop a plan to improve your piece.

Pitch

How can we make our musical ideas more memorable?

Are there any notes that don't sound the way we want them to?

How can we change our ideas to make them sound the way we want?

Duration

Do the rhythms of our musical ideas make sense?

Do our rhythms work well when performed with other musical ideas?

How could we play the rhythms more clearly?

Dynamics and other expressive controls

How should we vary the volume or the ways we play the notes to make the composition more interesting? Would staccato, tenuto, accented notes make this piece sound better? Should we use a crescendo, decrescendo, forte-piano, or other volume changes in this piece to make it more interesting?

Timbre

Are there any notes where we dislike the timbre of an instrument? How could we make the composition more interesting by using a different sound quality?

Texture/Harmony

How can we make the notes we play sound better in this piece? Does the music sound too dense or sparse at any point? How could we use texture changes to add variety to the music?

Form

How did we structure the piece? Do we all come in together? Do we stagger our entries/exits? How could we make our composition more interesting by changing the way it is constructed?

What do you like and dislike about your composition?

What do you need to do in order to improve your composition?

Develop a plan to improve your piece:

Worksheet - *Defending Your Musical Decisions*

Throughout this unit you have been tasked with creating a group composition, with your decisions being guided by the **elements of music**, and next class you will defend those decisions.

*“I just like it like that” is **NOT** a good enough answer.*

Think deeply about the ways you’ve used each element of music, listed below, and be able to justify your decisions **on a separate sheet of paper**. Consider questions people might ask ahead of time so you’re prepared with an answer but be flexible in case someone asks a question you haven’t considered.

Pitch:

Why did we decide to use these specific pitches or notes in our composition? Was it a matter of instrument range, scale choice, these are the only notes you could play, the way they sounded together, etc.?

Discuss what options were considered, and why they were included/excluded.

Duration:

Why did you use these rhythms and that tempo in your piece? Did you start by determining a rhythm or did you make the rhythm fit the piece better?

Discuss what options were considered, and why they were included/excluded.

Dynamics and other expressive controls:

What made you use the dynamics you played in the piece? Did you consider other choices? What about the use of articulations, like staccato, tenuto, legato, accents, etc.? Did you try others first?

Discuss what options were considered, and why they were included/excluded.

Timbre:

Did you experiment with using other timbres on your instrument? Were any of your timbre choices inspired along the way or right from the beginning, and why?

Discuss what options were considered, and why they were included/excluded.

Texture/Harmony:

Why did you layer your musical ideas in that way? What other options did you consider, and why did you reject them? How could you have layered them differently? Were you going for a sparser or denser texture here? If your texture is the same throughout or if it varies, what musical goal were you intending? Discuss what options were considered, and why they were included/excluded.

Form:

How did you use repetition in this piece? How much would be too much or too little? How could you have combined the parts differently? What sorts of contrast occur in the piece, and why did you use those contrasts? Discuss what options were considered, and why they were included/excluded.

Creativity:

Lastly, consider whether what you made is creative? Why and/or why not? How could you have made it more creative?

When you've considered the answers to all these questions, try role-playing and asking each other questions so that you are better prepared to defend your decisions next class. Good luck!

Sample Summative Rubrics

Four Level Rubric

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Defense	Students rarely justified their musical choices using the elements of music	Students sometimes justified their musical choices using the elements of music	Students often justified their musical choices using the elements of music	Students consistently justified their musical choices using the elements of music
Language Use	Students rarely used appropriate language to justify their decisions using the elements of music	Students sometimes used appropriate language to justify their decisions using the elements of music	Students often used appropriate language to justify their decisions using the elements of music	Students consistently used appropriate language to justify their decisions using the elements of music
Preparation	Students were poorly prepared to defend their decisions	Students were somewhat prepared to defend their decisions	Students were well prepared to defend their decisions	Students were completely prepared to defend their decisions
Enthusiasm	Students lacked excitement and enthusiasm when discussing their composition	Students showed some excitement and enthusiasm when discussing their composition	Students were enthusiastic when discussing their composition	Students were excited and enthusiastic when discussing their composition

One Point Rubric

	Below Expectations	At Grade Level	Above Expectations
Defence		Students justified their musical choices using the elements of music	
Language Use		Students used appropriate language to justify their decisions using the elements of music	
Preparation		Students were prepared to defend their decisions	
Enthusiasm		Students showed enthusiasm about discussing their composition	