How can Musicality be Taught?

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How can Musicality be Taught? Often, the concept of ‘musicality’ is reserved for students who have matured in their playing and have a natural ability to create music that moves people. There is a common conception that being ‘musical’ is reserved for those with “innate talent.” I resist this stigma and designed a project that explicitly explores how to tap latent expression in young string players. My T550 project considers this question by reimagining the musical score as a teaching tool to help students understand how musical notation is just a conduit for musical expression. The goal of the project is to activate student imagination in music learning and performance—to humanize music and help transform compositions to reflect the feelings of student interpreters. Through a series of five workshops at a public middle school, I led students through a process that explored different ways of graphic score notation to animate music. This led to a conversation about how storytelling and music are mutually reinforcing. I compiled reflections and notes from the workshops into a notebook that also includes detailed lesson plans that could be used by teachers who are interested in exploring musicality in their own classrooms.

Four workshops used J.S. Bach’s Minuet I as the material for the activities. I chose the piece because it is simple and can easily sound uninspired without adding musical ideas. We played through the piece multiple times, all reading from a large projection of the score. Each version incorporated new annotations—such as phrase markings or dynamics. Our playing was followed by a discussion about the relationship between music and imagery—showing a clip from the original film Fantasia as an example. Students then created live drawings as their peers played their final, most musical version of the piece. Group sharing and reflection followed. In the fifth workshop, I asked a more advanced group of students to explore and annotate their own score. Students worked in groups to extract information from the printed music, but also added their own interpretation.

My overarching goal is to help young musicians reimagine their music learning process. Printed sheet music is not an evocative learning tool for most beginning students. It can seem abstract and conceptual. However, once rhythms and pitches are understood, the music can serve as a jumping off point for interpretation. I wanted students to feel like they have the agency and freedom to bring their own stories and individualism to the music they play—even if they are learning within the context of an orchestra.

The workshops provided a transformative space for learning. At the beginning of each class, when asked to define musicality, students had trouble articulating a definition beyond “music.” By the end of the class, students readily used words like feeling, emotion, and expression to describe musical playing. They were able to draw connections between their artwork or narrative and musical notation and technique. Perhaps most importantly, the collective level of playing improved dramatically as the music began to take shape and became infused with the spirit and ideas of the young musicians.

The experience of designing and teaching the workshops was personally meaningful because it allowed me to explore the part of teaching musicianship that most intrigues me—creating a space for young students to acknowledge their agency in playing and interpreting music. This project strengthened my belief that classroom music learning can be structured in a way that prioritizes both technical improvement and musical interpretation in a process guided by student-driven exploration, inquiry, personalization, and creativity.
(Personal) Lesson Plan I - What is Musicality?

Introductions (3 min.)
Lightning round of names and introductions
Explain overview of the lesson

→ What is musicality? (Have a student record responses on the board)

Minuet I (20 min.)
Play two versions of Minuet I - the first version is a digitally generated recording and the second version is a live performance played by the teacher.

→ What was different between the two? Which version did you like better, why?

Whole group play-through of Minuet I with regular projection of sheet music. Project music and help students understand how to read the score before running through.

Project version 1 with important notes emphasized in red and have students play.

→ What was different about this run through? How do you feel playing from the same music?

Continue to project version 2 and 3, building on the musical notations.

→ How has the music changed? What did it feel like to commit to the dynamics?

Storytelling through music (20 min.)
Show this clip of Fantasia to demonstrate how music can tell a story.

→ How did the images and colors relate to the music? Can you think of other areas in your life when music enhances a story? Think of a scene in a movie.... If Minuet I was the soundtrack to a scene in a movie, what might be going on?

Create a story as a class to accompany Minuet I.

Have 3-4 students volunteer to create a live drawing while the class plays through Minuet I. Then have students share their stories and how they relate to the music.

→ What is musicality?

Set-up: Before the class, set up projector and remove music stands from the the orchestra seating.

Materials: Projector, speakers, art-making supplies, paper.
› I began each class by asking students to define “musicality.” Students clearly had associations with the word but had difficulty articulating how it was deeper than just “music.” In all the sessions, students did not use the words “feeling,” “expression,” or “emotion” until I repeated the question as a reflective prompt after the workshop. Several student responses are transcribed below and they illustrate the transformation in understanding over the course of the classes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is musicality? (before workshop)</th>
<th>What is musicality? (after workshop)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;It’s something about music.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;A way to describe emotion in music.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;You play music.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Dynamics and accents.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Something to do with music.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;You can sometimes put emphasis on one note.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;I think it might be...like...how, you can’t play Minuet like daaa-daaa...in a really boring way.&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Put more feeling into it.&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;If you’re imagining a story, you can put those feelings into how you play.&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;Expressing music and its shape.&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;The way music feels.&quot;</td>
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<td>&quot;How you express or feel music&quot;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>&quot;It has to do with mood.&quot;</td>
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› At the beginning of the class, students were asked to describe the differences between two versions of Minuet I. The first, was a computer-generated recording and the second, was a performance by me. I asked students how they felt about the versions. Here are several student observations:

- “The tone was different, there was no expression in your version.”
- “You put accents on yours, the other was kind of monotone.”
- “I think the recording was more just playing and yours was more enthusiastic.”
- “You had more dynamics and that recording was just flat.”
- “The recording has to add more ‘unflatness.’”

› Although only 3-4 students in each class created live drawings during a run-through, I asked students from the group to offer a description of their musical stories related to Minuet I. Here are a few descriptions:

- “When it was really quiet, it reminded me of the wind and rain. The polka dot thing is when it was really loud and there were different sounds.”
- “A little field mouse dancing through a field.”
- “It could be a dance or a fight in a trench in a loud part of the music.”
- “A horse galloping across an open field.”
- “Someone’s on an adventure...they are climbing something outside.”
- “It could be a jail scene that’s quiet because someone’s about to escape.”
- “When I heard it, I thought of people dancing in a meadow. And there was a bird that was trying to fly, and it is able to in the end.”

These responses demonstrate how students were able to connect an image or a story with an actual event in the music (ex. dynamic level). As we began to share stories, common themes emerged.
“I’ve drawn the sun set and the sun rise. When the song goes higher pitched the sun rises and when it goes lower pitch, the sun goes down. When you flip it over the sun rise changes to a sunset.”

“I drew two people going on an adventure. They are going to find a treasure.”

“It reminded me of a battle scene, the soldiers are holding flags.”
"Two people are dancing - like at a high school prom. There is punch and a chandelier."

"I drew someone at a fancy dance. There would be a string quartet playing music in the corner."

"A person is sailing in the waves and trying to reach land before some pirates get them."
Introductions (2 min.)
Lightning round of names and introductions.
Explain overview of the lesson.

→ What is musicality?

Brandenburg Concerto No. 3, Allegro (10 min.)
Play through excerpt of the movement to warm-up.

→ How can we make our performance more interesting?

Introduce Brandenburg score projection. Ask students to describe the different kinds of information they see in the score. Guide student by having them find where their section plays the main melody. Focus in on this motive:

→ How can we play it conversationally?
→ Where should we add shape and character?
→ How can we pass it off between sections?

Have students start from the top and stand when they have the motive. Repeat, but have students make eye contact with the section that has the motive.

Score Study (15 min.)
Group sections into 3-4 students. Have students annotate their music always marking:

-where they play the melodic line
-who they take it from and pass it to
-character words for eighth notes and melodic passages
-dynamics
-storyline that could accompany the music

Play! (10 min.)
Play through the excerpt that was annotated two times and ask students to comment on their experience. Then begin to work through the next section, encouraging students to be mindful of where melodies are passing. Transition into a general coaching structure until the end of class.

Set-up: Before the class, set up projector.
Materials: Projector, speakers, copies of score and individual parts, colored pencils.
› Using a Brandenburg Concerto movement for score study worked well because the melody passes between every section. After running part of the movement, we discussed the difference between a boring performance and an engaging performance. We talked about the vast amount of information that is tucked into a score. I encouraged students to think of it as a jumping off place to add their own interpretation. Students grouped by instrument to annotate their scores, focusing on finding rhythm buddies, writing character words, noticing dynamics, and thinking about shaping.

› After students annotated the score, they chose important moments to mark into their own parts. We played through sections of the piece being mindful of the details marked in the music and also to the student-generated expression and character ideas. The orchestra’s sound and attention to detail improved significantly over the course of the workshop. Students were more engaged and began to realize that they do have agency over the process of learning and making music.

› A couple of noteworthy quotes from kids as they were studying their scores:

   "Hey! We’re rhythm buddies with them as well! We’re not antisocial any more!"
   "We’re dynamic buddies here!"
   "There is no rest in this song for us except at the beginning."
Lesson Plan I  
Learning Musicality Through Graphic Score & Imagery

**NaFME National Core Music Standards**

**Creating**
- Anchor Standard 1: generate & conceptualize artistic ideas and work
- Anchor Standard 2: organize & develop artistic ideas and work
- Anchor Standard 3: refine & complete artistic work

**Performing/Presenting/Producing**
- Anchor Standard 4: select, analyze, & interpret artistic work for presentation
- Anchor Standard 5: develop & refine artistic techniques and work for presentation
- Anchor Standard 6: convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work

**Responding**
- Anchor Standard 7: perceive & analyze artistic work
- Anchor Standard 8: interpret intent & meaning in artistic work
- Anchor Standard 9: apply criteria to evaluate artistic work

**Connecting:**
- Anchor Standard 10: synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art
- Anchor Standard 11: relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding

**Knowledge of Students**

Students should have at least one year of instruction to obtain foundational skills such as adequate set-up, comfort navigating first position with accurate pitch, a beautiful tone, comfort with \textit{V V} bows and slurs, and competence producing different dynamics. This lesson is designed to be used with Minuet I by J.S. Bach however, it could be modified with a different selection.

**Learning Objectives**

- Students will be able to perform Minuet I as an ensemble with ringing intonation, accurate bowing, musical phrasing, and dynamics.
- Students will be able to describe what it means to play musically and will begin to understand different ways to approach interpretation.
- Students will be able to imagine storylines to accompany the music and describe the technical means needed to achieve the characters, moods, and colors in their story.

**Resources & Materials**

A whiteboard, projector, speakers, art-making supplies, paper, and a progression of slides with the Minuet I score through its various phases of annotation.

**Instructional Strategy [for 45 minute class]**

- Tune instruments and remove music stands from the orchestra seating area. Make sure that all students will be able to easily see the projections.
- Begin by asking students to define musicality. Ask a student to take notes on the whiteboard.
- Play a computer-generated digital recording of Minuet I followed by a recording or live performance of the same piece. Ask students to describe the difference between the two, focusing on why the second performance was more interesting and engaging.
- Project the score of Minuet I. Review how to read a score so that the students understand how to follow their own part.
- Play through Minuet I as a class to grow confident reading music in this way.
- Project the second version of the score with important notes emphasized in red. Explain how to play an ‘emphasized’ note in a musical way. It should be more tender than an accent. Then play through the piece again.
· Project the third version with scales noted in orange. Ask the students to focus on playing beautiful scales, being aware of a low second finger and ringing intonation. At this point, ask the students what they might add to make the performance more interesting. Students will likely suggest dynamics, which leads to the last projection.

· Have students play the piece again focusing on all three areas in the score. Asking students to reflect on the process and identify things that have changed from the first to the last run-through.

· Transition to a conversation about how imagery can complement music. Show this clip of the film Fantasia to demonstrate how music can tell a story. Then ask students the following questions: How did the images and colors relate to the music? What did you notice when the broom was going up the stairs? Can you think of other areas in your life when music enhances a story? Think of a scene in a movie...if Minuet I was the soundtrack to a scene, what might be going on?

· Ask for three student volunteers to create live drawings while the class plays through Minuet I two times. Encourage artists to work quickly and think not only about the story, but also about the colors they choose to use.

· While students are finishing their drawings, take a minute to generate story ideas as a class.

· Ask each student artist to show their drawing and explain how it relates to different parts in Minuet I.

· Finish by asking students to again, define musicality. Ask a student to record responses on the whiteboard.

Informal Assessment Tools

› Observing the student’s drawings to see how they relate to the music
› Listening to the class performance and how it changes over the course of the class
› Student responses to questions and assessment of individual vocabulary
Lesson Plan II
Learning Musicality Through Score Study

Knowledge of Students
Students should have at least two years of instruction to obtain foundational skills such as adequate set-up, comfort navigating first position with accurate pitch, a beautiful tone, competence producing different dynamics, and an understanding of how to gather information from a musical score. This lesson works with any piece for string orchestra that students have already polished. The piece should have important melodic motives in every section.

Learning Objectives
‣ Students will be able to perform the musical selection as an ensemble with ringing intonation, accurate bowing, musical phrasing, and dynamics.
‣ Students will be able to describe what it means to play musically and will begin to understand different ways to approach interpretation.
‣ Students will be able to imagine storylines to accompany the music and describe the technical means needed to achieve the characters, moods, and colors in their story.

Resources & Materials
A whiteboard, projector, colored pencils, and copy of the score for each group of four students.

Instructional Strategy [for 45 minute class]
● Tune instruments and make sure that all students will be able to easily see the projections.
● Begin by asking students to define musicality. Ask a student to take notes on the whiteboard.
● Play a computer-generated digital recording of the piece followed by a live recording of the same piece. Ask students to describe the difference between the two, focusing on why the second performance was more interesting and engaging.
● Project an excerpt of the score and ask the class to describe the different kinds of information they see in the score (ex. articulation markings, dynamics, rhythm buddies, etc.). Help kids identify places where more than one section share the same rhythm or point out melodic/accompanying line.
● Ask the class to divide into groups of four within each section. Each group should use colored pencils to annotate their copy of the score focusing on the following: where they play the melodic line and who they take it from and pass it to, identifying rhythm buddies, character words for accompanying and melodic passages, dynamics, a storyline that could accompany the music. Encourage students to come up with character words or small drawings to accompany parts of the score.

NafME National Core Music Standards
the following national standards in bold are explored in this lesson plan:

Creating
Anchor Standard 1: generate & conceptualize artistic ideas and work
Anchor Standard 2: organize & develop artistic ideas and work
Anchor Standard 3: refine & complete artistic work

Performing/Presenting/Producing
Anchor Standard 4: select, analyze, & interpret artistic work for presentation
Anchor Standard 5: develop & refine artistic techniques and work for presentation
Anchor Standard 6: convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work

Responding
Anchor Standard 7: perceive & analyze artistic work
Anchor Standard 8: interpret intent & meaning in artistic work
Anchor Standard 9: apply criteria to evaluate artistic work

Connecting:
Anchor Standard 10: synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art
Anchor Standard 11: relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding
Lesson Plan continued...
Learning Musicality Through Score Study

- Reconvene and ask students to choose 3-4 noteworthy spots that they marked in the score to transfer into their individual parts.
- At this point, the class rehearses sections of the piece focusing on the details they identified in the score. Different strategies can be used to encourage the class to play more musically. For example, have sections stand when they have the melody, challenge the class to exaggerate the dynamics, practice looking at the section with the melody, ask the students to share character words and discuss how the group might play sections inspired by those words, etc.
- Continue to rehearse the piece. Be sure to leave the last few minutes for a run-through of a major section of the piece so the students can hear how their detailed work fits into the larger piece.
- Finish by asking students to again, define musicality. Ask a student to record responses on the whiteboard.

Informal Assessment Tools
- Observing the student’s score annotations to gauge their understanding of the music as a whole and how their part fits into it
- Listening to the class performance and how it changes over the course of the class
- Student responses to questions and assessment of individual vocabulary