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Alexis C. Lamb

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Facilitating Group Composition for Large Ensembles through a Building Blocks Curriculum

BY ALEXIS C. LAMB

When I was a sixth- through twelfth-grade band director in Illinois, I was continually searching for ways to bring composition and improvisation into our classroom. As a composer myself, it was important to incorporate compositional activities into my lessons in addition to engaging with music through performance, getting the students more involved with the music they were studying and rehearsing for concerts. As a result, I developed a composition curriculum for my large ensembles with the goal of going beyond the classroom and performing a collectively-composed work for our community. The curriculum allowed for a fluid and natural expansion from individual composing to small group performance, discussion, and voting, and then to large ensemble performance, discussion, voting, and workshopping. This procedure applied to every musical building block we focused on for the project, including rhythm, harmony, melody, countermelody, form, and orchestration. Students were naturally engaged in discussion about topics such as melodic contour, harmonic development, rhythmic variation, and structure, but they were also asked to consider what it means to be a composer, all while creating a new composition as a collective team. The resulting work was a composition and performance rooted in collaboration, respect, and theoretical understanding of musical structures. This article discusses the curriculum in greater detail, including its relationship to state and national standards, background knowledge and class climate, approaches to each musical building block, and how to differentiate this curriculum to meet the needs and abilities of your ensemble.



Introduction

When I was a sixth- through twelfth-grade band director in Illinois, I was continually searching for ways to bring composition and improvisation into our classroom. As a composer myself, it was important to incorporate compositional activities into my lessons in addition to engaging with music through performance, getting the students more involved with the music they were studying and rehearsing for concerts. As a result, I developed a composition curriculum for my large ensembles with the goal of going beyond the classroom and performing a collectively-composed work for our community. This curriculum was piloted with three middle school concert bands (sixth, seventh, and eighth grades) in Spring 2018 over the course of eight weeks. Each ensemble's resulting composition proved the highlight of their performances at the end of the semester.

The curriculum allowed for a fluid and natural expansion from individual composing to small group performance, discussion, and voting, and then to large ensemble performance, discussion, voting, and workshopping. This procedure applied to every musical building block we focused on for the project, including rhythm, harmony, melody, countermelody, form, and orchestration. Students were naturally engaged in discussion about topics such as melodic contour, harmonic development, rhythmic variation, and structure, but they were also asked to consider what it means to be a composer, all while creating a new composition as a collective team. These elements were adapted for both traditional and non-traditional notation practices to remove limitations on students' imaginations as well as to increase accessibility. After each layer was established, we workshopped the materials as an ensemble and explored dynamics, articulation, and phrasing possibilities. The resulting work was a composition and performance rooted in collaboration, respect, and theoretical understanding of musical structures.

In this article, I discuss this group composition curriculum in greater detail. Part 1 discusses a broad overview of the learning objective “create” within national and state standards and how this applies to my composition curriculum. Part 2 covers the foundational skills and class climate that were established for this project to be successful. Part 3 lays out the process of the curriculum from initial creation to final performance. Part 4 posits alternative means of scaffolding and implementing this curriculum with any large ensemble of any age and/or ability level.

PART 1: “Create” as a Music Education Standard

What does it mean to be a composer? Are all pieces of music considered compositions? Is there a difference between a composition, song, tune, musical creation, piece, or work? According to the most recent (2014) version of the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, a “composer” is defined as “one who creates music compositions,” whereas a “creator” is “one who originates a music composition, arrangement, or improvisation.” A “composition” is defined as an “original piece of music that can be repeated, typically developed over time, and preserved either in notation or in a sound recording.” “Create” is defined as to “conceive and develop new artistic ideas, such as an improvisation, composition, or arrangement, into a work.”¹

¹ “2014 Music Standards,” NAfME, April 1, 2021, <https://nafme.org/my-classroom/standards/core-music-standards/>.

While these definitions are subjective, my pedagogical experience has revealed that students often feel uncomfortable adopting the word “composer” to describe themselves as creators of music. One of the goals with this curriculum was to begin with open discussions in class about the language we use to describe creating and music-making to empower students as well as legitimize their work and to confirm the value of their work as equal to any other music that we study or play in class. Through this introductory process, the students were able to offer their own definitions, which happened to expand on the definitions provided by the National Coalition of Core Arts Standards, and also reflect on their own creative processes in our class and beyond.

“Create” is also one of the pillars of music standards within the National Association for Music Education, along with “Perform” and “Respond.”² However, many examples of creation projects within an ensemble setting I have experienced have been limited to short-term projects that only work at the individual or small group level, such as writing a short model composition (or even just a melody) or collaborating with others on rhythmic improvisation games.³ My school district was also an advocate for the Danielson Framework for Teaching, with particular emphasis on the rubric titled, “Engaging Students in Learning.” The Danielson approach requires students to take initiative with their own teaching through collaboration with other students, self-advocacy, and self-reflection.⁴ This building blocks composition curriculum attempted to fill a void by creating a project for students to engage in the materials on an individual, small group, and full ensemble level, as well as give the students the opportunity to lead their learning and expand their creative work into a quarter-long process that resulted in a performance for our community.

2 “Connect” is still a listed pillar in the National Coalition of Core Arts Standards (NCCAS), but it has been embedded into the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) standards, even though NAfME is a part of NCCAS. At the time that this curriculum was piloted, “Connect” was still a separated pillar in the NAfME standards.

3 My students also engaged in similar creative projects that only lasted 1-3 lessons, and I believe these shorter projects significantly contributed to the positive and open class climate we developed for this longer-term project to be as successful as it was. Grant (2022) also offers a variety of lessons that engage on a creative front and lead to a longer-term final project for a theory class.

4 “3C: Engaging Students in Learning,” Danielson Group, August 9, 2022, <https://danielsongroup.org/the-framework-for-teaching/>.

PART 2: The Foundation for Successful Building Blocks

Rhythm

All of my pedagogical work begins with rhythm as the core foundation of musical knowledge and communication. Perhaps this is due to my bias as a percussionist, but I found that, when given something with a steady pulse (listening to a song, playing along to a groove in a digital audio workstation (DAW), working with a metronome, etc.), students intuitively know how to align with that pulse, either through movement, body percussion, or their voice. Because my students were fairly new to exploring pitch on their instruments (and in the case of my sixth graders, it was only their second semester ever playing their band instruments), we could always return to rhythm. Rhythm also served as our constant when other variables, such as learning new notes on our instruments, were less consistent—even if they were still working on pitch accuracy with new notes, they were confident in the rhythms and could keep up with the material. When vocalizing our rhythms, we spoke with either basic “solkattu” vocalizations (ta, ta-ka, ta-ki-ta, ta-ka-di-mi) or with a standard, “1e+a” system to work on our notation literacy.⁵

While there are many approaches to engaging with rhythm in large ensembles, such as rhythmic call and response activities, two of my core activities included improvising a rhythmic idea over an ostinato pattern and sight reading rhythms notated on a staff. For the improvisation activity, students would work in either small groups or full ensemble. One student would create an ostinato pattern that everyone would replicate, and then individuals would each take a solo over the top of the ongoing ostinato. Not only did this activity aid in rhythmic fluency and groove, but we began developing a trusting class climate where students felt free to explore their musical creativity without judgment. As we developed the other foundations for our building blocks composition, we began to discuss this activity in a similar hierarchical relationship of balancing melody, countermelody, and harmony. For the sight reading activities, I used a combination of the online programs Sight Reading Factory and

⁵ Solkattu is a South Indian rhythmic language comprised of phonemes often used with Karnataka music. As a percussionist, my collegiate pedagogy focused primarily on solkattu as a means of rhythmic subdivision that is idiomatic for the voice. I found that the use of solkattu syllables in this composition unit allowed more rhythmic freedom for the students in our improvisations because they were less focused on how the rhythms aligned to our meter. Because of that, students were playing more naturally with syncopations and advanced rhythmic material that they otherwise would not see in their pedagogical repertoire and method books.

Groove Pizza. Sight Reading Factory offers randomized rhythmic and pitch sight reading excerpts that can be customized to meet ability level and other pedagogical interests, such as meter, length of excerpt, difficulty of rhythm, and range of pitch.⁶ Groove Pizza is another fun resource that can create and manipulate rhythmic, metronome-style patterns using a grid-based, DAW foundation.⁷ The combination of improvised and notated rhythmic exercises set the tone for our future work on creating our own through-composed ostinati for the ensemble composition.

Pitch

When working with a large ensemble of any kind, it is useful to develop universal methods of talking about pitched material, especially when the ensemble involves a variety of transposing instruments, various clefs, etc., as a concert band does. As someone who was also eager to incorporate theoretical knowledge into my middle school band classes, I opted to teach our diatonic material with scale degrees rather than note names. Even though each transposing family of instruments (C, B \flat , E \flat , and F, in this case) would be asked to verify their note names for their own knowledge and understanding, we were able to improvise as well as build melodies, harmonies, and countermelodies as a collective unit by speaking in scale degrees.

Scale degree fluency became a regular component of our daily classroom activities. One activity we used as a tuning warm-up involved splitting the band into three or four groups and asking each group to play the same scale in ascending and descending order (not repeating the octave), where each pitch would be played as a long tone before moving on to the next. Students would be told their group could enter on scale degree 1 as another group played another odd-numbered scale degree, and then each following group could begin on scale degree 1 in the same way. The resulting pattern would be consecutive thirds, building triads and seventh chords. Later, this warm-up became a catalyst for teaching the students how to build diatonic triads.

Students learned that to build any diatonic triad, they could play any scale degree, skip the next, play the following scale degree, skip again, and play the final scale degree. For example, the diatonic triad beginning on scale degree 1 would result in playing scale degrees 1, 3, and 5. This “play-skip-play-skip-play” approach also allowed for fluency of performing diatonic harmonies in any scale without confusion of the function of the same pitch in different scales (such as B \flat in a B \flat -major scale

6 Sight Reading Factory, accessed August 14, 2022, <https://www.sightreadingfactory.com/>.

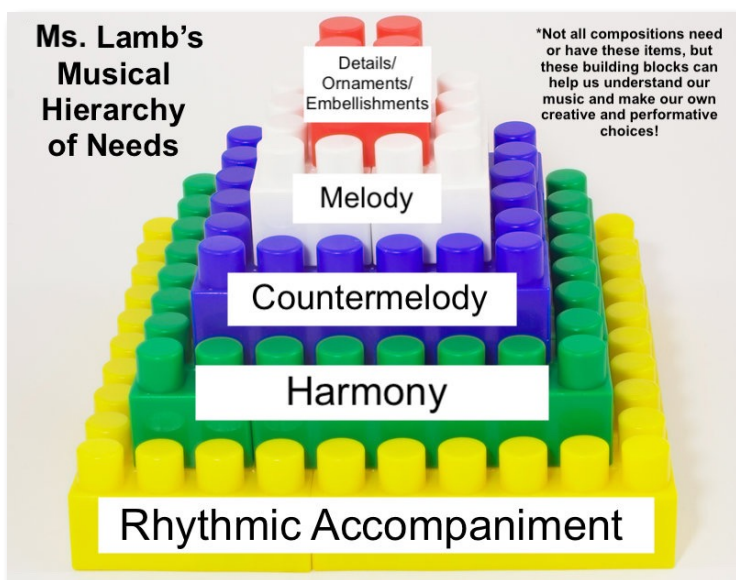
7 Groove Pizza, accessed August 14, 2022, <https://apps.musedlab.org/groovepizza/?museid=LhPu9gbTo&>.

versus in an E_b -major scale), and it relieved any reason to speak note names to the ensemble, which avoided complications with transposing instruments.

One final pitch activity involved a student leading the ensemble with an improvised order of scale degrees that they would show to the ensemble by holding up the number of fingers that matched the scale degree. While this initially began as a quick way to get students directing the ensemble, we were able to have conversations about how the pitches could connect to each other to make a melody, even if the students could choose any order of scale degrees they wanted. All three of these activities naturally connected to our compositional process exploring the other pitch-based building blocks of melody, countermelody, and harmony.

Orchestration and Form

Most of our class discussions around orchestration and form were based on the other repertoire we were working on in class. One of the goals I wanted for each student was to go beyond learning the notes on the page and instead become aware of how their individual part fit into the entire piece. To do so, we began talking about the music in terms of its melodies, countermelodies, and harmonic and rhythmic accompaniment. From these discussions came the use of what I called “Ms. Lamb’s Musical Hierarchy of Needs,” shown in Example 1.



Example 1.

Ms. Lamb's Musical Hierarchy of Needs.

The intention of Example 1 was to create clarity of vertical elements in the music that could be happening at the same time. This directly influenced our expressive performance choices of balance and phrasing as well as gave students an opportunity to explore how various instruments could be paired together through the examples of music we were already playing. In this way, students were analyzing the music in real time throughout our rehearsals, which would later serve as insight into their own performance of that work and our composition project.

It was important for me to include LEGO building blocks in the above visual, because we also used LEGOs as an analogy for discussing form, only on the horizontal plane instead of vertical. For example, in a ternary form piece, we could demonstrate it visually by color and number of connectors on the LEGO, as shown in Example 2.



Example 2.
A Model of Ternary Form using Legos

The students began to independently recognize patterns within their music, such as when they repeated a melody or when the music contrasted with what we had performed so far. Through these approaches to orchestration and form, students learned about how they could organize their own compositional material both vertically and horizontally.

Class Climate/Democratic Approaches in Full Ensemble Setting

The intention with this curriculum was not only to allow students to explore their creative potential in writing and designing each building block of the composition, but there was an attempt to make it as limitless as possible while still keeping the final composition at an appropriate difficulty level. This work began with the aforementioned, shorter-term activities leading up to the main composition project. As we built our background skills and knowledge, students knew they were valued and their ideas would be heard without judgment. Throughout these activities, students had experience working individually, in small groups, and as a full ensemble. There was a mutual understanding that all collaborations, feedback, and critiques would come from a place of compassion and respect. Students also knew that they were

welcome to offer ideas on how we interpreted our music in class, and my job was to serve as a guide in their creative, democratic process. All these contributions to our class climate were essential in completing the building blocks curriculum and made it a rewarding experience for all.

PART 3: Building our Ensemble Composition, One Block at a Time

Rhythm Building Block

We began our compositional process for the large ensemble work with our rhythm building block, parallel to the foundation shown in Example 1. Since my students were at a more rudimentary ability level, this element served as both an introduction to writing a through-composed idea without pitch as well as a source for different rhythmic ostinato patterns that we could implement with our harmonic material later in the compositional process. Students were encouraged to begin with one to two motivic phrases that they could expand into the complete composition. Students were also tasked with a few requirements in their rhythm compositions, such as including at least one use of a whole, half, quarter, eighth, and sixteenth note in 16 measures of music. An example of our rhythm workshopping can be seen in Example 3.

This was also the first opportunity in the ensemble composition project for students to share their individual creative work with another student in class and receive feedback. After all students finished their own 16-bar rhythm compositions, they exchanged compositions with a partner in class, who then had to perform their work. Not only did this begin to alleviate any anxieties around sharing one's own creative ideas, but this also helped mitigate issues of writing something beyond the ability level of our class because the students were directly involved with workshopping their composed materials. In the first iteration of performance, students would clap and speak the rhythm compositions. But in the second iteration, they performed them on a single pitch on their instruments. By offering this second run-through of the rhythm compositions on the students' instruments, they were able to workshop any concerns regarding articulating shorter rhythms for extended periods of time (for example, if a student wrote constant sixteenth notes for multiple measures at a time). Students also had a chance to hear their music performed by their peers with their instruments, which again seemed to offer legitimacy to their writing skills. At the end of the partner activity, students selected their favorite measure from their own compositions that could work as the rhythmic ostinato for our harmonic building block.

NAME: _____

16-BAR RHYTHM SONG

RHYTHM KEY:

whole note (4 beats) quarter note (1 beat) sixteenth notes (1/4 beat)

half note (2 beats) eighth notes (1/2 beat)

Please compose your own 16-bar rhythm song in the measures below. Then, write in the counts of each measure (remember, we are in a 4/4 time signature). You must use each of the rhythms in the key AT LEAST once. When you are finished, please trade your composition with a partner in class and have them clap and speak your composition! We will perform our compositions at the end of class.

1

5

9

13

Example 3.
Rhythm Building Block Sample Activity

Once their rhythm compositions were complete, the small group work began. Students offered their selected ostinato measure to a group of five to six peers. Each student would teach their ostinato pattern to the group, and then the group would collectively repeat the pattern on their own instruments for about eight measures. The group would then discuss the patterns and vote on their preferred ostinato option after hearing everyone's contributions. Again, it was crucial to establish a positive classroom environment prior to this curriculum in order for our process to be successful. Students knew from the beginning of this curriculum that they would have to vote on their favorite choices from their small group work for each of the building blocks, but it was never a popularity contest. Collaboration, respect, and value of each person's creative work was prioritized.

A similar workshopping and voting process took place with the entire ensemble. Small groups would collectively share their chosen ostinato pattern, the ensemble would play and repeat the pattern for about eight measures, and then we would discuss it. The discussion component to this curriculum after each new presentation was also critical because I wanted the students to analyze the music and ask questions as it was being created: "What stood out about this particular option?" "Would this choice offer any curious possibilities with other building blocks as we get further along in the compositional process?" As a result of this group analysis, for example, my 8th grade band selected an ostinato pattern with syncopated rhythms, so the harmonic accompaniment created a welcome break from the downbeat-driven melodies and countermelodies they later wrote.

Harmony Building Block

Because of our work with building triads using the aforementioned "play-skip-play-skip-play" method, all ensembles went into the composition project knowing how to create diatonic triads in any key. In the case of testing the success of this curriculum in its pilot stage and meeting the abilities of my students, our compositions for all three ensembles were in the tried-and-true band key of B \flat major. The first part of our harmony building block included developing a "chord bank" of all diatonic triad possibilities as well as a general overview of common harmonic progressions. I wanted students to feel as free to explore their own harmonic patterns as possible. However, we did use our warmups and other repertoire to demonstrate the importance and function of certain triads, particularly I, IV, and V.

Since this composition is built with looped patterns, similarly to working in a DAW, students were asked to create a repeatable harmonic progression in the key of B \flat major that included between four and eight chords in the progression. Because our

school had the technological resources for each student to use a Chromebook in our class, students were able to work in the cloud-based notation software, Noteflight, to input their harmonic progressions and listen back via MIDI as they were constructed.⁸ However, students were also asked to write their harmonic progressions out in scale degrees so the chords could be played by their peers, regardless of instrument.

Once students created their individual harmonic progressions, they moved back into small groups and offered their work to everyone for discussion and voting.⁹ At this stage, the students interacted with each other's work in two different ways. They were first able to listen to the MIDI playback to get a general idea of the progression. Then, students were asked to play through the harmonic progressions with their groups by playing one horizontal line of scale degrees through the progression. For example, if an individual's harmonic progression was vi-ii-V-I, students would determine a horizontal path that aligns with the vertical harmonies through the scale degrees, such as 1-2-2-3, 3-4-5-5, or 6-6-7-1. This approach also paid dividends with students' theoretical knowledge of the construction of each chord as well as served as an introduction to voice leading.

Finally, the chosen harmonic progression from each small group would be brought to the complete ensemble for the same process of listening, performing, discussing, and voting. While some of the harmonic patterns were unconventional in their function (as shown below), I wanted to respect the students' choices and value their creativity without requiring it to follow any particular guidelines. The three harmonic loop patterns for each ensemble are listed below:

- 6th Grade Band: I - ii - IV - V
- 7th Grade Band: I - IV - V - vi - vi (re-voiced) - IV - ii - I
- 8th Grade Band: I - iii - V - V (re-voiced) - ii - IV - vi - vi (re-voiced)

Melody and Countermelody Building Blocks

Now that we had our harmonic progression and ostinato rhythm in place, we combined those two blocks together to serve as the foundation for our melodies and countermelodies. Students individually returned to their notation software and

⁸ I opted to use Noteflight because our students only had access to Chromebooks as their computer, so we needed to find a cloud-based software rather than an app-based one. However, one can use any other notation software available for your students. Finding a notation software that will allow exported files as .xml will also save time later as the final score comes together.

⁹ I also found it helpful to vary the small group personnel so students were able to interact with most of their peers and their individual, creative ideas.

constructed one melody that fit the length of the harmonic accompaniment. Because of the students' understanding of how each harmony was constructed, that knowledge directly influenced how their melodies were created. After the individual work was done, students once again shared their melodies in small groups to test, discuss, and vote. In this case, however, I asked small groups to choose their two favorite melodies rather than just one.

The full ensemble setting was where a majority of the melody and countermelody work occurred. Since we knew we wanted to create two layers, the performance and discussion quickly turned to a deeper analysis of how one melodic idea may be more of a supporting role, may highlight particular harmonies, or simply may be more interesting as a melody than countermelody. Combinations of melodies were exhausted, and then students voted on their two favorite melodies and two favorite countermelodies. Despite our introductory work discussing characteristics of a good melody, the student creations were certainly unconventional in their construction, with many of them having incomplete leaps, odd places for rests, and some non-chord tones. While the students all had creative freedom to write anything they deemed a "melody," my work in this stage of the curriculum proves that in future iterations of this unit, we will spend more time analyzing examples of idiomatic melodies in hopes of creating something with more standard melodic patterns and characteristics. Examples of the melodies and countermelodies from the sixth grade band are shown in Example 4.

6th Grade Melodies/Countermelodies (All in Concert Key of Bb Major)

Melody 1

Melody 2

Countermelody 1

Countermelody 2

Example 4.
Sixth Grade Band's Selected Melodies and Countermelodies

Form and Orchestration Building Blocks

For the sake of time, students defined their orchestrations only by instrument families, specifically woodwinds, brass, and percussion. While this is a rudimentary approach to orchestration, it was the most straightforward approach given the time constraints. Students were given a worksheet to lead them through creating their own orchestrations and form for all of our building blocks up to this point. I arranged the orchestration choices in such a way that everyone could have an opportunity to play the melody, countermelodies, or harmonic and rhythmic accompaniment. This became a direct application of our work using “Ms. Lamb’s Musical Hierarchy of Needs,” where students had to consider how their individual performance would impact the entire ensemble, so teamwork was necessary to keep all levels of our balance in place.

After creating their own orchestrations, students organized those into a combined form. They were also asked to consider other formal structures, such as intros/outros, repeated sections, points of unison, and changes in density and texture. An example of our form and orchestration worksheet appears in Example 5. The small group work for these building blocks was all based on analysis of each individual’s form and orchestration choices. How many orchestration building blocks did they use in their form? How were they organized? Did they include other form and orchestration considerations?

The performance of these last two building blocks really occurred in the large ensemble step, similarly to the melody and countermelody. Small groups presented their selection, we would perform the form and orchestration in their entirety, and students would get a chance to discuss and offer additional ideas, such as how to end the music. At this point in the creative process, students were openly offering “what if” ideas to the entire ensemble, since they knew these were the final building blocks in our project. Even as we moved into the workshopping phase of rehearsals with a newly-formed composition, students felt welcome to ask questions and contribute new observations about and suggestions for the music. The result was a composition that we continued to adjust, workshop, rehearse, and prepare for our community concert.

NAME: _____

FORM/ORCHESTRATION FOR BAND COMPOSITION

Fill in the blanks for the tables below to create your own orchestrations for the melodies (for example: who will play melody 1? Who will play harmony? Will countermelody 1 or 2 accompany the first melody?)

WOODWINDS (A1)	Melody 1		
BRASS (A2)		Melody 1	
PERCUSSION (A3)			Melody 1

WOODWINDS (B1)			Melody 2
BRASS (B2)		Melody 2	
PERCUSSION (B3)	Melody 2		

Now that you have your orchestrations, **combine them in any order below to build your form!** Use the structures of our other band pieces that we played as references for how to create your form with the building blocks above. Use the letter-number identifiers in parenthesis (A1, A2, B3, etc.) to write your form.

Example: A1, B2, B3, A3, A2, B1, A1

Other items to consider: do you want an introduction (if so, what would that be?); do you want all instruments to play all the time, or do you want to build the orchestration (for example: start with harmony only, then add countermelody, then melody for a total of three repeats on one section). Do you want repeats? Do you ever want everybody playing in unison (for example: should there be a point where everyone plays the melody at the same time?) How will you end the piece? Write these notes down below or on the back of the page:

Minimum 4 building blocks for form, maximum 8.

Example 5.

Sample Worksheet for Form and Orchestration Building Blocks

Reflecting on the Individual, to Small Group, to Large Ensemble Creative Process

This composition project succeeded because of its structure, a structure that allowed all students to demonstrate their creativity and respectfully collaborate with each other. Every student had an opportunity along the way to express their creative decisions to a small group of their peers, and each student's work was listened to and discussed in small groups and with the full ensemble. When the choices were brought

to the full ensemble for consideration, another discussion would take place after each performance through the material, and adequate rehearsal time was allowed to ensure each students' ideas were given every opportunity to be included in the final product before any voting occurred.

Students were given the freedom to create anything they wanted. However, there was a mutual understanding that what they created individually needed to be playable by our ensemble, and they could “check their work” by playing it on their own instrument and in small groups. This allowed for some of the compositions to break the confines of standard ranges, etc. of ability-appropriate pedagogical repertoire for these students. But I also wanted the students to take pride in their work, and their commitment to this project directly influenced how they practiced and prepared their materials in order to be successful at the final performance. There was absolutely never a “right” or “wrong” compositional choice throughout this project, and the final composition was not “Melody by _____. Harmony by _____.” Instead, the entire class was featured as one cohesive composition collective.

Preparing the Final Score

Because of the traditional and non-traditional notations we used to write this music, the final score was only two pages. The first page included our key signature, time signature, harmony (written in scale degrees), rhythmic ostinato, and form. The second page included all four melodies and countermelodies, at this point written in each student's correct transposition for their instrument (see Example 4 for complete example of page two of the score). The combination of traditional and non-traditional notation practices allowed students to be able to compose, workshop, critique, and develop their own group work in an accessible and efficient manner. They also always had access to the score, so they always had a complete idea of what they were playing. The sixth grade band's first page to their final score is shown in Example 6.

6th Grade Band Original Composition (2018)**KEY SIGNATURE:** Concert Bb Major**TIME SIGNATURE:** 4/4**RHYTHM FOR HARMONIC ACCOMPANIMENT:****HARMONY:**

	I	ii	IV	V
S1	3	2	1	2
S2	1	4	4	5
S3	5	6	6	5
S4	1	2	1	7

FORM:

WW	HAR	CM 2	CM 2	MEL 2	MEL 1	CM 1
BRASS	CM 1	HAR	MEL 2	CM 2	HAR	MEL 1
PERC	MEL 2	MEL 1	HAR	HAR	CM 2	HAR

"STUDIO FADE"

Example 6.

Sixth Grade Band's First Page to Their Final Score

Students were assigned either S1, S2, S3, or S4 during our rehearsals in order to perform one line of scale degrees from their vertical harmonies. The form block then told the students which order they needed to play their melodies, countermelodies, and harmonies. In this case, the sixth grade band collectively decided to begin the piece without an introduction, but they opted for a "studio fade" on the last section of our form, where the entire ensemble faded to silence at the end.

PART 4: Meeting the Needs and Abilities of Your Ensemble Through This Composition Curriculum

These specific examples of the curriculum’s process and final product are based on the abilities and pedagogical needs of my students when this project was piloted in 2018. However, I truly believe this composition model is flexible enough in its structure to work for any age, ability, and style of large ensemble, from elementary band, to high school choir, to university orchestra. Each building block can also be structured as rudimentary or as advanced as you want, depending on what is pedagogically necessary for your students. Below are some additional suggestions for each building block to cater this curriculum to your ensemble. Hopefully these additional hypothetical questions conjure ideas for how this curriculum could meet the needs of your students.

Rhythm

Would your ensemble benefit from another short-term rhythm composition project to build on the positive class climate before diving into the small group/large ensemble voting process? Could the rhythm building block include more advanced material, such as triplets, accent patterns, and syncopations? How many different ostinato patterns might your ensemble want to use for their harmonic material? Perhaps there could be one rhythmic pattern for each section of the form. What if the students created a different rhythmic pattern for each family of instruments that plays the harmony? In the case of my seventh-grade band who piloted this curriculum, I had a particularly advanced percussion section. The percussionists decided not only to write their own parts for the percussion section (separating snare drum, bass drum, and keyboard orchestration on their own), but they also wrote their own eight-measure rhythm pattern for their “Harmony” orchestration in order to add variety to the large ensemble’s ostinato.

Another component to the rhythm building block could include exploring changes in time signature. Could meters change for each part of the form? Could we assign one group of melodies and countermelodies to be in a triple-based meter and the other set in a duple-based meter? What if students composed the entire piece in a complex meter, such as 5/8 or 7/8?

Pitch

Could your students benefit from including key changes within the form, such as writing different sections in parallel major and minor key signatures, for example?

Are they studying seventh chords and other advanced harmonies or modes that could be included as they build their harmonic progressions? To what extent do you want students to consider voice leading? What are the elements of a melody that you want your students to include in their creative process? Can the students use pitch material as both color and function? How could the pitch material be influenced by the addition of dynamics and articulation?

Form and Orchestration

The next time I implement this curriculum, I plan to dedicate more time to developing the form and orchestration. In the case of form, consider what other examples have students performed in their ensemble repertoire. What if students created their own form based on popular music styles that included verses, choruses, and a bridge? How could this curriculum develop if we started the project as a theme-and-variations form, where each small group contributed one of the variations to the ensemble-selected theme?

One way to play with orchestration is for our ensemble to survey all our other repertoire being prepared for the same concert and look for patterns with how the instruments are organized. What common combinations could be implemented in our own writing? In the case of writing for a concert band, what if the orchestration options were by common chamber ensembles instead, such as woodwind trio, brass quartet, reed quintet, percussion ensemble, etc.? Is there space in the form for a solo, and if so, is the solo something new that differs from the other pitched material we have heard thus far? Could the orchestration be organized by range instead of by instrument family?

While this may seem like an endless series of questions about how to cater the building blocks to your ensemble, my sincere hope is that this group composition project serves the students and their creative and pedagogical needs. Even though this curriculum may contain the same set of considerations, each composition product will be unique in style and reflective of your students.

Conclusion

Each student comes to the classroom with a diverse background of experiences and perspectives. This building blocks composition curriculum was developed to empower students and cultivate spaces for them to engage holistically with the creative process. This project also directly influenced how students engaged in our rehearsals for other repertoire beyond our group composition because they were able to analyze from

both the composer and performer perspectives. Students also not only learned about the theory behind their music, but this curriculum allowed direct application of their theoretical knowledge. Most importantly, my students felt heard, valued, and proud of their collaborative composition. Their performance for the community was well-received, and their excitement for music increased.

Any apprehension around calling themselves composers was in the past. Composition was redefined in the students' eyes as any musical creative output, and many of them continued to write music beyond this project. In fact, students began sharing additional composition projects with me that they were working on outside of our class, including music for DAWs, music for their rock bands, singer-songwriter songs, solos on their own instruments, and chamber pieces for their friends.

I hope this curriculum enables students to explore new possibilities through the creative process at the individual, small group, and full ensemble levels. For more information about this curriculum and how to implement it with your large ensemble, please visit my website at www.alexislamb.com.

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