Music Appreciation and General Education in the College Classroom: Four Activities to Create Meaningful Musical Engagement

I bring many goals to my general education courses: arm students with a vocabulary precise enough to let them share with me and others what they hear in and enjoy about music; help students understand the historical and socio-cultural context of particular musical practices and works; foster a love for music that is greater than when they entered my classroom; encourage them to listen to live music; and facilitate their sonic creativity. But too often general education students see themselves as outsiders to the musical process, not capable of engaging with music or musical practices directly.

Since “[to] music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing” ([Small 1998, 9](http://www.upne.com/0819522562.html)), Christopher Small’s concept of “musicking” can facilitate immediate, active, varied, and musically meaningful engagement with the course material in my general education classroom. While “musicking” may at this point be a musicological cliché, I found it useful when planning activities (some taken from Elizabeth Barkley’s helpful book [*Student Engagement Techniques*](https://openlibrary.org/works/OL5852684W/Student_engagement_techniques)) that would be appropriate for general education students. According to David Sousa’s [research](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL3413635M/How_the_brain_learns) on how the brain works, these activities increase retention rates through immediate and active engagement (i.e., practice by doing and immediate use of learning) with the course material. Musicking achieves the goal of deep and lasting engagement by emphasizing the active processual aspect of music, as opposed to the permanent and typically Western classical concept of music as the musical “work.”

The activities I outline below were implemented in a class of 90 general education undergraduate students and build upon Small’s emphasis on listening, dancing, practicing, and composing/improvising (what he calls “providing material for performance”). I share stories from one general education class, *Exploring Music*, which examines the socio-cultural context for classical, popular, and world musics through a variety of themes outlined in Cornelius and Natvig’s [*Music: A Social Experience*](https://openlibrary.org/works/OL16307922W/Music), as well as supplemental materials.

**Listening**

Listening is perhaps the default mode of musical engagement in a general education classroom. This kind of listening is too often relatively passive, with a desire to keep the material at an accessible level for the non-musician (which could result in only providing the musical details required for the test) and large class sizes that make active learning more [challenging](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13562511003620001#.VabqN0uTpq8), including [student resistance](http://josotl.indiana.edu/article/view/1808). Instructors typically begin a course by providing a basic musical vocabulary. Textbooks designed for general education classrooms often open with a terminology chapter that introduces students to the basic musical elements. Familiarity with these elements allows students to more easily digest complex musical sounds and help them differentiate between different musical genres, styles, and specific musical works. But they often struggle to apply concepts and terminology to new examples on their own (as opposed to the textbook or me telling them).

One way that instructors can help students apply their knowledge to unfamiliar works is to arrange students in groups of 4-5 and have them concentrate on a particular musical element during one or two listenings. General education students in particular seem to be overwhelmed when asked to describe what they hear with a shared and precise language. Asking them to concentrate on one element and having them first discuss what they hear in a small group and then with the whole class allows them to focus and build confidence. In the large group, the instructor can ask students for their observations and help them articulate ways in which different musical elements combine. For example, what part of the work is the loudest, densest, or highest in melody? What other musical elements change when the texture changes?

Another activity to help students expand their listening skills uses Elizabeth Barkley’s [“Hearing the Subject](https://openlibrary.org/works/OL5852684W/Student_engagement_techniques).” The instructor can instruct students to listen carefully to a chosen musical work and individually write down what they hear, not yet evaluating or interpreting the music. He or she could then arrange them in small groups (3–4) to share their observations, again refraining from giving any evaluation or interpretation. One could then combine the small groups into bigger groups (6–8) to compare what the small groups had discussed. What are students hearing in the music? What aspects stick out to some students but not to others? After concentrating solely on the musical characteristics for most of this activity, the larger group can now discuss what they perceive to be the music’s meaning, based on their careful listening. Then the entire class can synthesize the larger groups’ discussion of meaning with a short lesson on the music’s socio-cultural context.

These listening exercises help students slowly increase listening competency by targeting a limited number of musical elements and adding more from there. They keep students focused on the sounds rather than immediately jumping to interpretation or evaluation. Students build confidence within each listening exercise and across multiple classes, allowing the instructor to facilitate discussion of an increasing number of musical features to a greater depth.

*Listening Case Study*

In my *Exploring Music* class, we studied [*Manasu Visaya*](https://play.spotify.com/track/7mzcyYVyVBUqsRDgNqiXa9), an example of South Indian Karnatic music, early in the semester when students weren’t yet confident in their application of musical terminology. Since this example also required students to learn terminology specific to the tradition, I needed to find a way to prevent them being overwhelmed by the content while also hearing significant musical features of this Karnatic musical example. Therefore, in our listening, we focused on melodic contour, rhythm, and timbre. Because we had just learned the names of typical Karnatic instruments, the students could correctly identify the instruments heard in the example and their roles: sruti box for drone; venu and violin for melody; mridangam and ghatam for percussion. Rhythm is often more challenging than timbre for students to describe. We had already practiced the Adi tala before listening to *Manasu Visaya*, so students could hear the rhythmic groupings and tap along with it. The sounds and style of this example seemed so foreign to them, but as we tapped the Adi tala, they embodied the foundational rhythmic patterns and were able to hear how other rhythmic details fit in. With the timbral and rhythmic foundations established, the students learned about melody in this example. Rather than having students get caught up (and lost) in the details of the melody, I asked them to listen for the contour: when did we hear the highest pitches or the lowest pitches? I encouraged them to sketch the contour as they listened. We moved from very basic questions (e.g., Does the piece start relatively high or low? Does the piece end relatively high or low?) to looking at contour in specific sections. We might have had to listen to passages a few times, but they were able to translate the unfamiliar sounds into precise musical characteristics. This initial practice with contour helped them move past overwhelming pitch details in subsequent examples and listen to the bigger picture. Our focused and limited listening meant that students were ready to expand the musical terminology in subsequent classes to include more musical elements, such as texture, as well as talk in more detail about timbre, rhythm, and melody.

**Dancing**

[Movement](https://openlibrary.org/works/OL15596127W/Musical_gestures) can help students perceive important musical features that are enigmatic through aural perception only. Some musical works already come with relatively easy choreography. One idea for instructors to help students experience the music in a more direct way is to add the corresponding dance movements when studying certain Latin American music genres, such as salsa and tango, or to bring in guests who can help students learn some dance moves to Bollywood, Irish jigs, or hopak music.

An instructor could have students create their own choreographies before viewing the Joffrey Ballet’s reconstruction of *The Rite of Spring*’s famous “[Dance of the Adolescent Girls](https://youtu.be/jF1OQkHybEQ?t=2m59s)”or other [choreographies](https://youtu.be/NOTjyCM3Ou4?t=3m44s). Students can discuss their chosen movements and dissect what aspects of the music inspired the movements. This can help an instructor assess what students are perceiving in the music and what aspects might need more guidance. Students (and instructors!) may be hesitant or worried about embarrassing themselves. But a safe learning environment and enthusiastic participation by instructors can help to overcome resistance.

*Dancing Case Study*

When covering the “Music and Dance” chapter of *Music: A Social Experience* in my *Exploring Music* class, we studied a Renaissance social dance entitled “[Branle des Lavandières](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFpyHispD3M).” The original manuscript of the piece includes the choreography, which the authors have clearly explained in the listening guide. I had the students learn the choreography, which, as a social dance, was relatively simple, and most students caught on quickly. Dancing this branle had the benefit of not only reenergizing students by getting them out of their seats and enacting the original purpose of the music, but also embodying many of the musical features they needed to perceive: students danced their understanding of the steady pulse by moving their feet in accordance; musical phrasing corresponded to groupings of movement; and the musical form was expressed by different choreography in each of the three sections. Because the students had embodied key musical features through their physical movement, they were able to recall and clearly explain these musical features on the exam.

**Practicing**

Not only will practicing musical concepts achieve one of the highest levels of retention according to [David Sousa](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL3413635M/How_the_brain_learns), but also it’s a really great excuse to stop talking and get the students inside the music. Physical gestures, alternate modes of sound production, and musical interactions often become clearer for students when they have to actively create these musical elements. I find the concept of “practicing” helpful for music traditions and works whose important traits are elusive upon listening only. For example, most students enjoy Cowell’s *The Banshee* and other works with extended techniques. Because he provides clear instructions for creating the desired timbres, students can gather around the piano and try them out. This practice can inspire a discussion on the performance challenges of extended techniques. Similarly, while students can often hear that *Sprechstimme* isn’t singing or speaking, they can immediately appreciate this vocal technique by practicing it themselves: recite the text in strict rhythm, following the melodic contour while avoiding any pure pitch. Practicing can also help students distinguish between different textures. Non-musicians struggle to perceive simultaneous independent melodies, especially when needing to distinguish between homophonic, heterophonic, and polyphonic textures. Students can begin with a simple canon of a familiar tune, such as “Row, Row, Row your Boat.” The instructor can increase the complexity and independence by dividing the group into three different familiar tunes: “Row, Row, Row your Boat,” “Three Blind Mice,” and “London Bridge is Falling Down.”

*Practicing Case Study*

I expanded the “Music and Ethnicity” theme to include Inuit vocal games. When I initially played “Qimmiruluapik” (performed by [Tanya Tagaq](https://openlibrary.org/works/OL15596127W/Musical_gestures)), students were puzzled. They couldn’t quite accept the example was music, and they certainly struggled to describe it or perceive any specific musical features. Students prepared two supplemental readings ([Diamond 2008](https://openlibrary.org/works/OL3083403W/Native_American_Music_in_Eastern_North_America); [Charron 1978](http://www.jstor.org/stable/851489?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents))—the textbook does not discuss Inuit vocal games—and then came to class to “practice” the vocal games. As a partnered tradition, the complex sound results from overlapping call-and-response. Students had encountered call-and-response in a number of other examples so this was a way for them to connect this familiar concept to something new and a bit more complex. To engage students with the more difficult overlapping call-and-response pervasive in Inuit vocal games, I used names of characters from the Avengers (Odin, Loki, Iron Man, Black Widow); Inuit vocal games often use names, so this was a reasonable translation to the culture of our current undergraduate students. I first demonstrated with a teaching assistant: I initiated the statement of names, each repeated an unpredictable numbers of times. The TA had to listen carefully to begin his response before I finished my call. Our demonstration ended in laughter—another link to the original vocal game tradition.

Students organized into pairs and selected a leader who would initiate the call-and-response. They were instructed to work through the names in the same order, but with an undetermined number of repetitions: the students had to listen carefully to keep to a steady pulse and respond to any changes in the name patterns. The students found this activity difficult, and it emphasized for them the intricacy of the Inuit vocal game tradition. They practiced the overlapping call-and-response, and, thus, they could better aurally perceive the overlapping patterns in “Qimmiruluapik.”

The next goal was to have them practice some of the sounds of the style. While not a traditional Inuit vocalist, Tagaq has a [helpful video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KNb2ZDjeiU4) that illustrates some of the basic vocalizations. I had the students place their hands on their throats and try to imitate the sounds: creating sounds as they inhaled and exhaled, that were low and high, and that were voiced and unvoiced. After watching [this video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8IqOegVCNKI) of the Kettler sisters demonstrating one pattern, first in isolation and then in call-and-response, the students tried it; they struggled, but were able to synthesize the basic principles of the tradition. Students demonstrated their engagement with Inuit vocal games through accurate descriptions on the exam and by easily recognizing and discussing re-contextualized uses of the vocal games in other examples.

**Composing/Improvising**

Most general education students will likely balk at the notion that they could “[provide] material for performance” ([Small 1998, 9](http://www.upne.com/0819522562.html)), but an active creation of sound is likely to increase not only their enjoyment but also their understanding of the basic musical elements. As I discussed in the “Listening” section above, we typically break down music into musical elements in our general education classes. But the musical elements can often remain impenetrably abstract. By having students actively create sounds, improvise, and even compose a fixed work, musical elements will be something applied and not simply identified.

I haven’t tried this yet myself, but improvisation and composing can be implemented throughout a course or in a single-session activity. For example, Instructors can bring in instruments specific to that day’s topic to have students try. Or instructors can arrange workshops in smaller groups in a room with a piano plus whatever variety of instruments the instructor can bring in. Students can experiment with the instruments, and the instructor can lead students in a [guided improvisation](http://www.freeimprovisation.com/improvbooksamples/files/Ch%204%20Excerpt.pdf). Read [Erinn Knyt’s](http://flipcamp.org/engagingstudents2/essays/knyt.html) and [Garrett Michaelsen’s essays](http://flipcamp.org/engagingstudents2/essays/michaelsen.html) in *Engaging Students*, vol. 2, for more ideas on improvisation in the classroom.

Short composition exercises in class can help students understand particular styles, such as the blues. Because the blues is a familiar style to many students and the structure is relatively simple, an instructor can ask students to write the lyrics and melody for a simple blues, either individually or in small groups. With the instructor on piano or an online [accompaniment track](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8L2mqkk28sE), students can perform their blues compositions for the class.

An instructor could also provide students the option to compose a piece in their own time: any performing forces in any style. Students would submit a brief description of the piece’s concept and the important musical characteristics, applying terminology from the course. Students would be assessed on the thoughtfulness and precision of their description and how well it matches the music.

Improvisation and composing forces students to make decisions regarding the musical elements, and doing so can increase their understanding of these concepts. Students are invited to be creative and interactive, and, for many, this will be the first time they have ever had an opportunity to try certain instruments (or maybe *any* instrument). Such activities can provide more than academic results: group improvisation can foster a supportive learning environment, and composing can give students confidence about the value of their own creativity.

**Closing Thoughts**

Despite varying topics and sizes, general education music courses seem to have one thing in common: an unpredictable and diverse collection of experiences and motivations in the student body. Some have extensive formal musical training while others only vaguely remember learning recorder in elementary school; some semesters are dominated by freshmen, while others are predominantly seniors; some choose a music class because they are eager to learn more about the subject while others assume a music class will be easy—after all, music is just for fun, right? Too many general education students assume their only musical capability is listening, and they often feel self-conscious about those listening skills. Small’s musicking both affirms their capacity to music—to engage in meaningful ways with music—and outlines a framework for the instructor to design activities that allow them immediate and deep access to the musical material. In *Exploring Music*, I intentionally moved beyond listening to include dancing and practicing; in the future, I will include composing/improvising as well. These activities engage all of my students in intellectually and musically meaningful ways. And the bonus is that we do have a lot of fun!

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