

Composing Within a Music Literacy Program

Part 1 – Create a Melody: “Use These Words”

Lesson developed by Betsy Greene based on Conversational Solfege by John Feierabend

Intent

Music composition, like a language arts composition, is the synthesis and organization of a student’s ideas at his or her level. Being musically literate means that you should be able to read and write music with understanding. You are fluent with the “language” of music. You can hear what you read and write what you hear. It, therefore, made sense to me to teach music composition through or integrated into a music literacy program and curriculum. The following approach to music composition uses a compositional technique that does just that.

Students will create an AB music composition using words of a short poem to begin the creative process. The intent is to have students create a melody using tonal and rhythmic patterns or material which they understand or have mastered. This process will incorporate the music literacy learning sequence presented by Dr. John Feierabend in his method Conversational Solfege. The students will use the rhythmic material of a poem “See A Pin” (as presented in Conversational Solfege : p.380 by Dr. John M. Feierabend) and then create the melody using tonal content they have mastered.

Conversational Solfege by Dr. John M. Feierabend uses a twelve step learning sequence for teaching music literacy. It leads the student with understanding through readiness, Conversational Solfege or aural/oral fluency, reading, and writing. Music composition (Writing-Create) is the culminating step (Step 12) of the process in which students use tonal and/or rhythmic patterns that they have previously mastered at the conversational solfege, reading, and writing levels. The significance of this learning sequence is that students are composing with understanding. They have the ability to hear with their eyes what they have written rather than having to play their composition on an instrument or computer. It requires a higher order thinking process in which students must use what they know in new ways (inference thinking).

Example (s) of Student Work: (posted at <http://www.vtmidi.org/AtoC.html>)

See “Jumper,” “King’s Last Dance,” and “Dragon Slayer” for examples. The original work with a single melody line is available along with a revised version which includes additional material as outlined in the extensions section of this document – Lesson 2.

Standards Addressed:

National Standards for Arts Education (1994) all below paraphrased from grade 4 and 8

Standard #1:

1(a) Sing independently on pitch and in rhythm.

Standard #4:

4(a) Compose short pieces within specified guidelines

4(b) Demonstrate how the elements of music are used to achieve unity and variety, tensions and release, and balance

4(c) Use a variety of sound sources when composing – traditional, nontraditional, and electronic

Standard #5:

5(a) Read rhythmic notation

5(b) Use a system for reading pitch notation and read at sight simple melodies

5(d) Use standard notation to record their musical ideas and the music ideas of others

Standard #7:

7(a) Develop criteria for evaluating performances and compositions.

Vermont Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities (2000)


1.16 and 5.23 Reflection and critique

Students critique their own and others' works in progress, both individually and in groups, to improve upon intent.

Prior Experiences and Knowledge:

Students will be required to have completed through Step 11 of Conversational Solfege for the rhythmic and tonal content they are allowed to use. This rhythmic content is quarter, quarter rest, two eighths, and four sixteenths. The tonal content is mi, re, do in F major. Students will also have had experience in completing phrases and composing original eight bar compositions using this content material.


Procedure:


 Students are given a worksheet (CS: 38) which contains the poem written underneath a treble staff:


See a pin, pick it up


All the day you'll have good luck.


They are required to decode the rhythm of the words to use as their melodic rhythm. Using mi, re, and do, they compose the melody and are directed to have their melody sound complete (usually they decide to have the melody end on the resting tone or do).


 Students then share their compositions with each other by singing them.


 Students enter their compositions into notation software on the computer.

 Students add four more empty bars to their composition.

 Students repeat their four bar melody (copy and paste) to extend their first composition to eight bars.

 Students are asked to change the ending of the first four bars to be as a question phrase, leaving the last note on the resting tone to be the answer. This will become their A section of their composition.

 Students add eight more bars to their composition. They are asked to write a contrasting section using the same tonal content. They are allowed to extend the rhythmic content to include four sixteenth notes and quarter rest. This becomes their B section.

 Students share their compositions online or with others in the class to receive feedback. Students work together to develop their feedback questions and to give suggestions. Use critique and reflection. Key points of critique and reflection become the contrast between sections, how to extend the composition, balance and/or phrasing within each short section, and endings.

Assessment:

This is an initial experience and the assessment is a checklist documenting

- sing the initial four measure composition to another student
- task completion of the 16 measure AB composition
- did students fulfill the criteria of the assignment?

ASSESSMENT

Note: Even though the focus is on composition and the standards associated with composition, I find this approach allows opportunities for assessing their rhythmic decoding ability and sight reading/singing ability (Standard 5 and 1). Those rubrics are presented here from CS:

For assessment of student's rhythmic decoding and writing, see Conversational Solfege TM p.333 for rubrics developed by T. Clark Saunders or p. 356.

For assessment of the student's song performance of his/her composition, Conversational Solfege TM p. 325 for rubrics developed by T. Clark Saunders or p.354.

Feierabend, John Conversational Solfege TM - Level I 2001:
G.I.A. Publications, Inc., Chicago.
www.giamusic.com
ISBN: 1-57999-123-8

See additional material for a rubric for this activity – Greene_compositionrubric.pdf

Comments and Extension:

Often through the critique and reflection part of the compositional process, students may decide to extend their pieces in form – ABA and rondo, for example. This piece can also be further developed at a later point in their learning sequence when they have learned tonic and dominant harmony “conversationally.” The students then may add a bass voice and a possibly a second harmony part as well.

(See additional section on tonic and dominant harmony.)