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TEACHING COMPOSING IN CANADIAN MUSIC CLASSROOMS

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Introduction

In Canadian music classrooms, composing is much less common than performing. For many years, mandated music curricula and teachers' practices emphasized learning to play instruments and sing, with only very limited attention to nurturing young composers. Currently, composing is much better represented in mandated curricula than it has been in the past, but teachers' practices still heavily emphasize the development of performance skills. For example, in a recent survey of music teachers in Ontario (Canada's most populated province), elementary teachers reported spending on average just 11% of class time on composition (compared to 55% of class time on playing and/or singing). Secondary teachers reported spending on average just 6% of class time on composition (compared to 58% of class time on playing and/or singing) (Bolden et al., 2015). In Canada's second most populated province, Quebec, a survey administered by the Quebec Federation of Music Educators' Associations and completed by 330 Quebec music educators identified that half of the teachers spend less than 20% of class time on compositional activities, and that 82% of teachers do not view such activities as a priority (Peters & Pierre-Vaillancourt, 2013).

Mandated curricula

Canada does not have a national curriculum. Instead, curriculum content is mandated by provincial or territorial authorities. As I am most familiar with the Ontario context, I will describe the music curricula mandated by the Ontario Ministry of Education in the province of Ontario.

At the elementary level, using Grade 4 as an example, the mandated music curricula are represented by ten "expectations" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, pp. 104–105). Three of these directly address composing. These expectations provide broad direction to educators that students are indeed to compose, with specific intention, and to notate their compositions using traditional or invented notations. For example, students must

- apply the elements of music when singing and/or playing, composing, and arranging music to create a specific effect;
- create musical compositions for specific purposes and audiences; and

- demonstrate an understanding of musical signs and standard notation on the five-line staff and use devised notation to record the sequence of sounds in a composition of their own.

At the secondary level, using Grade 10 as an example, the mandated music curricula are represented by eight “expectations” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, pp. 110–111). Four of these directly address composing and again provide very broad direction to educators, stipulating that students must make use of creative processes, unspecified compositional techniques, and unspecified technology when composing. The expectations require that students

- apply the creative process when composing and/or arranging music;
- apply the elements of music and related concepts appropriately when composing and/or arranging simple pieces of music;
- apply compositional techniques when composing and/or arranging simple pieces; and
- use current technology when composing, and/or arranging music.

Recommended composing practices

Within the government document, the curriculum expectations are presented with suggested (but not required) composing activities and practices that can enable learners to achieve the expectations. These listed suggestions are helpful in identifying some of the composing practices that are common—or at least recommended—in Ontario schools. The suggested approaches progress in complexity as the grades advance and address aspects such as specific melodic parameters, textural and structural possibilities, notation options, things to represent in the music, purposes for the music, and more. For example, at the Grade 4 level, suggested approaches include composing a pentatonic melody for recorder or voice with a *bordun* accompaniment; using non-traditional notation to compose a melody map with symbols; composing a soundscape to represent the physical landscape of Canada; creating a composition to accompany a dance piece; and using a system of syllables, numbers, or letters to represent simple pitch notation in a composition. At the Grade 10 level, recommended approaches include composing an 8-bar melody with appropriate accompaniment; writing and performing diatonic melodies over an appropriate harmonic progression; creating a simple two-part composition; creating a soundscape using environmental sounds such as forest sounds or sounds in a machine shop, and developing a means of notating the sounds; composing or arranging a selection in binary form for more than one voice or instrument; arranging a selection for percussion using musical forms common in West African drumming; and composing the rhythm section accompaniment for a 12-bar blues progression using software.

However, despite these clear examples of what is *expected* of teachers and students with regard to composing, it is very difficult to know what is actually going on inside music classrooms; there are no formal, systematic processes for determining what students and teachers actually do with regard to music learning in Ontario or indeed anywhere else in Canada. It is virtually impossible to know to what extent mandated curricula and recommended practices that refer to composition are actually experienced by Canadian learners.

An overview of Canadian articles addressing composition pedagogy in schools

In order to provide some sense of what is going on in Canada in terms of the teaching and learning of composing in schools, I carefully sifted through all articles published in the *Canadian Music Educator*—the official journal of the Canadian Music Educators’ Association—between

2010 and 2018. I identified 26 articles that addressed the teaching of composing. The *Canadian Music Educator* is published four times a year and delivered to approximately 2,500 Canadian music educators across the country. Article authors include music education academics and classroom practitioners. While the journal does not by any means comprehensively describe or address all that is going on in music education in Canadian schools, I believe its content constitutes a reasonable representation of what Canadian music educators are doing and thinking about. A synthesis of these articles therefore enables me to provide a broad perspective of current thought concerning composing pedagogy in Canada.

I read through the 26 relevant articles and analyzed the content thematically. Four themes emerged as prominent: (a) the need for more creative opportunities in music classrooms, (b) recommended composing approaches, (c) applying creativity research to nurturing composing, and (d) encouraging teachers to teach composing even though it is outside their comfort zone. I discuss each of these themes below.

Theme one: the need for more creative opportunities in music classrooms

One theme that emerged as significant among the reviewed articles was the need to provide learners with more creative opportunities. Authors identified that learners generally have little chance to exercise their creativity in Canadian music programs and implored teachers to provide opportunities for student composing as a means to develop creativity (Bolden, 2012, 2014; Cavanagh, 2016; Giddings, 2013; Willingham & Bartel, 2015).

Cavanagh (2016), for example, cited the Quebec survey described above in which 82% of the surveyed music teachers responded that composition activities were not a priority in their programming (Peters & Pierre-Vaillancourt, 2013). Giddings (2013) described his own experiences of school and post-secondary music as completely devoid of creative music opportunities, which he found instead outside of formal music learning, playing in a ska band. Bolden (2012) quoted well-known Canadian music educator Lee Willingham:

We lay claim to creativity as one of the pillars of our musical educative endeavours. Yet music education, so strongly rooted in performance traditions, has resulted in the virtual absence of creative problem solving processes in its teaching and learning practices.
(2002, p. xvii)

In his 2014 article, Bolden expands on this theme, identifying that the considerable emphasis on large ensemble performance preparation within Canadian music classrooms leaves little time and space for learners to compose.

The authors seek to convince teachers of the importance of finding ways to build composing into their programs—to advocate for composing—and make the case that it deserves as much time and attention as performing or listening. Cavanagh (2016) makes the case for composing by pointing out that other artistic domains engage young people in creating the art—dancers create dance pieces, visual artists create artwork—and so musicians should have the opportunity to create music compositions. Giddings (2013) offers as rationale for composing that it is the best way for students to consolidate and apply their musical learning, referencing Bloom's taxonomy and its identification of creativity as the highest level of thinking and personal actualization. He also identifies that composing gives learners ownership over their work, or what Ryan and Deci (2000) refer to as autonomy, one of three factors key to human motivation and happiness.

Bolden (2012) outlines social, cultural, and economic arguments for building students' creative capacity and identifies that, to practice and develop this capacity in a music education

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context, “learners must own the decision making and connection making involved in creating the musical product” (p. 2). Bolden claims composing is therefore the most effective way for students to fully exercise and develop creative capacity in a music education context. In a 2014 article, Bolden promotes composing from a slightly different angle, identifying it as a way to combat growing disinterest among students in school music programs, suggesting composing is a way to increase learner-centeredness and student engagement:

Positioning creative work such as composing at the heart of music education curricula [...] firmly places students at the centre of their own music learning. It allows them to hear and share *their own* voices above the noisy tumult of the education environment. Such a shift transforms music education; it opens it up.... In such an environment learners not only compose music; they compose selves.... Music education in the 21st century must enable young musicians to choose their own musical adventures, sing their own songs, and hear their own voices.

(2014, p. 3)

Theme two: recommended composing approaches

Another theme among the articles reviewed was to provide readers with various recommended approaches to composing. Authors offered ideas that I have categorized as (a) games and exercises, (b) working with sound and soundscapes, (c) graphic scores, and (d) songwriting.

Games and exercises

Music educator Douglas Friesen is prominent in the Canadian creative music making scene. He has authored a number of articles that describe “Creative Traction Ideas” such as “create a piece of music (beginning, middle, ending) with your shoes” (Friesen, 2017, p. 11). “Chain composing” (Friesen, 2012a) is an exercise in which a group of instrumentalists (a) come up with an idea for their piece to be about, (b) figure out a way to start, (c) pick one person to play what they think should happen next, then designate who goes next (until all have played), and finally (d) play all the way through, revise, practice, and perform. Friesen (2013c) also describes a method for whole-class collaborative composing, using riffs as building blocks. He recommends that the class work with instruments in hand, first learning a riff from a pop song together by ear, then organizing the riff into a composition. He suggests structuring strategies such as moving the riff around the ensemble, layering, adding a bassline, adding a counter melody, and finally imagining and then working out a beginning and an ending. His “noisy introductions” (Friesen, 2017) involve an improvised introduction to a rehearsed performance piece. The conductor starts the piece by inviting players to play pitches and durations of their own choice, while shaping the improvisation with gestures to indicate that the musicians play low or high, soft or loud. When the “noisy introduction” is complete, the conductor segues seamlessly into the actual start of the piece.

Working with sound and soundscapes

The influence of internationally renowned composer, writer, environmentalist, and legendary music educator R. Murray Schafer continues to figure prominently in Canadian music education, particularly in the realm of creative music making. Rutherford (2014) recently analyzed Schafer’s educational approaches of the late 1960s and 1970s and found their emphases on

learning that is “life-long, collaborative, relational, knowledge-building, self-directed, personalized, inquiry-based, and inclusive” (p. 20) to be highly relevant for contemporary educators. In the late 1960s, Schafer popularized the term “soundscape” to describe the combination of sounds one perceives in a particular place or context. Schafer and others also created soundscape compositions, combining recordings of various sounds into electroacoustic musical pieces, or creating scores for instrumentalists and/or vocalists to imitate a variety of sounds from the environment.

Friesen (2012c, 2013d) describes a number of ways students can work with soundscapes. He suggests, for example, that learners go on a “soundwalk” (Schafer, 1977) to a particular nearby location and catalog the sounds they hear. Learners can then use their voices and bodies to imitate the nearby sonic environment and/or do the same with instruments. Friesen also suggests students could extend the idea by creating a “musical” version of the soundscape, translating the sounds into musical gestures with pitches and rhythms (2012c). Heckel (2017) similarly suggests students could find inspiration for composing by going on sound collecting expeditions, and then manipulating the sounds or musicalized versions of them within GarageBand, Audacity, Loopy HD, or MadPad. In another article, Friesen (2012b), again referencing Schafer, identifies other ways students can work with sounds, such as bringing in a sound from home, and having the other students close their eyes and guess what the object is. Friesen explains students can then combine their sounds into “sound sentences.” Alternatively, students can take turns using hand gestures to lead the class in an improvised found-sound orchestra composition. Friesen also offers a simple composing exercise: “Search for a truly happy sound, a sad one, a surprising sound, an unsure sound, a lonely sound, end again with your happy sound” (2013a, p. 9).

Graphic scores

Schafer was also a practitioner and proponent of graphic notation. Friesen and Bettger (2015) describe engaging students with graphic scores and offer the example of using the view looking out a classroom window as a graphic score that students interpret and perform with voices or instruments. Friesen and Bettger (2015) also suggest students take photos that could work as graphic scores or work with fine art students to produce graphic scores. In a mild critique of composing with graphic scores, Eddington (2017) identifies that while students’ musical processes and products tend to be more creative when composing with graphic rather than traditional Western notation—citing studies by Auh and Walker (1999) and Auh (2000)—it is difficult for composers to specify rhythm and pitch, therefore “graphic scores are better for a certain kind of avant-garde music” (p. 38).

Songwriting

In addition to composing approaches inspired by the ideas of R. Murray Schafer, songwriting figured prominently among the analyzed articles. West Coast music educator Ian Farish authored a series of articles with advice on nurturing student songwriting. Farish offered strategies for helping students with song structure (2010) and melody writing (2011) along with general strategies such as encouraging the popular music learning practices identified by Lucy Green (2004)—e.g., learning and imitating songs by ear—and the importance of providing opportunities for students to showcase and share their songs, e.g., in a lunchtime songwriters’ circle, coffee house performance, or compilation of recordings. Friesen (2013b) also weighed in on songwriting, describing how students can learn to build primary chords and then simply

distribute them among given lyrics, e.g., a nursery rhyme, then make up a melody that fits. He also suggests the exercise of tasking students to create the lyrics and melody for a song chorus inspired by a fairy tale, such as the Three Little Pigs.

Music educator Steve Giddings (2013) describes whole-class songwriting with middle-school students. He starts students off by inviting them to improvise within structures, for example, having each member in a group of five assigned a different pitch within a pentatonic scale to play on their instrument, and then inviting them to come up with a sequence for those pitches (a melody) that sounds good.

Theme three: applying creativity research to nurturing composing

A third theme identified among the articles was identifying and describing how creativity research can be applied to inform approaches and strategies for classroom composing. Bolden (2012) references Lehrer (2012) to make the case that creativity is a universal trait, and that all students therefore have the capacity to be creative and, by extension, to compose. He also passes on Lehrer's recommendations of welcoming mistakes and failure as the only way to achieve success in creative endeavors; developing the ability to suppress the inhibitors that block divergent thinking and expression; and allowing the brain to have the time and space it needs to reach the "eureka" moments of creative insights: for example, by taking a break and going for a walk. Bolden connects this notion to the Einstein quotation, "creativity is the residue of wasted time." Bolden also shares Burnard's (2012) strategies for supporting learners' creative work: modeling a variety of processes of musically creating, and making clear what the processes entail; providing time for long planning sessions; welcoming speculative solutions and answers; welcoming mistakes; inviting risk-taking and flexible thinking; and striving to minimize students' fear of failure.

Giddings (2013) makes the case for classroom composing by explaining that it offers students the opportunity to experience what Csikszentmihalyi calls "flow"—"the feeling when things are going well [...] an almost automatic, effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness" (1996, p. 110). Giddings explains that "Creative musicians constantly create flow by improvising and composing" (2013, p. 45). He suggests that—through composing and improvising—students can let go of some of their daily worries and, ultimately, be happier.

Mitchell (2011a, 2011b) synthesizes research specifically related to the assessment and evaluation of students' creative musical work. She identifies that, in order for assessment of creative work to be supportive of students' creativity, teachers must develop supportive and trusting relationships with their students (Simmons & Ren, 2009); recognize that punitive evaluation stifles originality (Yuan & Zhou, 2008) while feedback that is presented as informational supports it (Shalley, 1995), and that therefore teachers should emphasize detailed, descriptive, formative assessment (Mitchell, 2011b). Mitchell (2011a) also recommends that students be supported with qualitative feedback from a variety of sources (e.g., teachers and peers) throughout the development and realization of creative projects and that students engage in detailed and focused reflection (self-assessment) on their own creative products *and* processes. Mitchell provides a list of suggested questions to guide meaningful self-reflection, such as "What were your goals upon starting this project? To what extent do you feel that you accomplished those goals? Why?" and "What were some of the options you considered? Are you satisfied with the choices you made?" (p. 44). Haley (2010) similarly recommends that teachers should support student composers through questioning—e.g., "what are they trying to do with their music?" (p. 41). When these formative assessment strategies take place throughout the creative process, Mitchell points out, they help students develop the ability to engage in creative work autonomously (Wiggins, 1992).

Theme four: encouraging teachers to teach composing even though it is outside their comfort zone

A fourth theme that emerged as prominent within the analyzed articles involved encouraging teachers to teach composing even though it is outside their comfort zone. Willingham and Bartel (2015) describe a large professional development project involving over 30 teachers in Ontario. Collaborative learning communities of four teachers each were established across three school boards to develop ways to engage students in composing or improvising. Government funding enabled release time for teachers to pursue this professional learning through a collaborative action research structure. The teachers reported outcomes of the project including greater confidence in developing their students' creative potential, and a sense of empowerment and confidence to share their knowledge with teaching colleagues.

Secondary school music educator Katherine Fraser (2018) describes her own trepidation in engaging students with creative music activities but took the plunge and found success using GarageBand to create a class soundscape composition with found sounds from around the school. Lesley Dawe (2016), a teacher at the elementary level, described personal risk-taking and experimenting to move beyond the traditional teacher-centered large ensemble approaches she was familiar with. Dawe described shifting her mindset to become a "co-learner" with her students as they engaged in creativity-inviting activities such as composing. Dawe noticed that her students responded with greater willingness for risk-taking of their own, increased engagement, and appreciation that their voices were being honored.

As a means to help teachers overcome a fear of engaging students with composing, Cavanagh (2016) suggests learning about contemporary Canadian composers and inviting them into music classes to demystify the composing process. Along the same lines, Duncan and Andrews (2016) describe a program of commissioning contemporary Canadian composers to come into high school music programs and compose music for them, as a way to help students and teachers understand what composing is all about.

Conclusion

The teaching of composing in Canadian music classrooms is strongly supported by current mandated curricula and professional literature. However, the prominent positioning of composing within mandated curricula is a relatively recent shift from curricula that were previously heavily performance-dominated (i.e., prior to 2000). There is little evidence to indicate how effectively this intended shift toward a greater emphasis on composing has been realized in schools. The limited research that does exist concerning the extent to which music learners are actually provided with opportunities to compose (e.g., Bolden et al., 2015; Peters & Pierre-Vaillancourt, 2013) suggests that composing remains an under-developed aspect of Canadian K–12 music education. Nevertheless, the music education professional literature offers a variety of suggestions for Canadian teachers who are willing to give composing a try.

Reflective questions

- 1 The chapter describes a prominent theme in Canadian music education literature: that composing more effectively supports student creativity than performing. Is this always the case?
- 2 Canadian music education professional literature encourages teachers to teach composing even though it is outside their comfort zone. Are teachers in your context uncomfortable teaching composing? If so, what are the systemic issues that contribute to their discomfort?

- 3 The chapter describes some recommended composing approaches such as games and exercises, working with sound and soundscapes, graphic scores, and songwriting. What other approaches work to engage and support the development of young composers?

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