

# Creative Musical Activities in Ensemble Rehearsals

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Creative musical activities (CMAs), specifically composition and improvisation, are rarely included in public school music curricula (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). Inclusion of CMAs in music instruction falls short of recommendations outlined in the National Core Arts Standards, written to encourage all students to “conceive and develop new artistic ideas and work” (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2016, p. 13). Researchers indicate that while music teachers – particularly teachers of performing ensembles – generally perceive CMAs to be important to the curriculum (Fairfield, 2010; Koops, 2009; Snell, 2013), few music teachers regularly include CMAs in their instruction (Schopp, 2006; Strand, 2006), “citing lack of time, resources, and physical teaching space as significant challenges” (Fairfield, 2010, pp. v-vi). Researchers and philosophers often call for increased creative opportunities in music education, but more research is needed to explore various practices of teaching CMAs among performing ensemble teachers.

The purpose of this study was to examine creative instructional practices of New York State school music teachers. I distributed an online survey to all New York State School Music Association (NYSSMA) members ( $N = 4,299$ ), then analyzed data from 252 respondents.

Three research questions guided this inquiry:

1. For teachers who include CMAs, what perceived obstacles might exist that inhibit creative musical instruction?
2. What motivates these teachers to include CMAs in the curriculum?
3. What resources may exist that help facilitate the instruction of CMAs despite the presence of perceived obstacles?

Consistent with extant research, teachers identified lack of class time as the most common obstacle to including CMAs. Teachers included CMAs in the curriculum to increase engagement and motivation, deepen knowledge of content, and develop musical independence and autonomy. Teachers were most likely to consult other teachers, and least likely to look to college material if they needed support.

Pearson correlations and multivariate regression analysis revealed significant positive associations between the amount of time teachers spend discussing CMAs and the frequency with which they are integrated into the classroom. A small, but significant, negative correlation existed between small group lesson time and CMAs.

This research suggests that promoting discourse among teachers and increasing pre-service music teacher creative experiences may increase the inclusion of creative musical activities in the classroom.

*Presented at the annual conference of the Pennsylvania Music Educators Association  
Lancaster, PA, April 19-20, 2018.*



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# Practical Suggestions for Teachers

I have never met a music teacher who has complained about having too *much* class time! It seems like I am always racing the concert date to get everything done in time. I have found that including creative musical activities designed to increase student understanding of the music actually buys me *more* time. When students learn to interact with music through improvisation and composition, they tend to learn music faster, and I spend less time telling students what to do – “That’s the melody, bring it out!” – because they have developed the ability and awareness to self-correct.

I hope you find these suggestions helpful. It’s really as simple as trying just one thing at a time. Start simple. If it works, keep doing it! Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions.

## IMPROVISATION

- Pick your favorite warm-up. Have students create their own rhythms.
- Make up a simple, 4-measure melody in major tonality. You can compose this ahead of time, or make it up on the spot. I’m including one I just made up. Sing or play the first 3 measures, then have your students make up the last bit. Try it out – I bet you come up with the same last measure as I was thinking!



- Pick a simple melody. Teach it to your students by ear – no letter names, scale degrees, or solfège allowed! Once they learn it, they can try embellishing (or “decorating”) it.

## COMPOSITION

- I think the best approach is a sound-before-sight approach. Try to encourage students to write down musical ideas they have created themselves. This may require some remedial notation basics, but that’s okay! Think about writing in language: if a student can write it, they can read it.
- Start simple. Have them notate the melody from a piece you performed in the last concert. Have them write the rhythm to a 4-line poem, then add pitches to the rhythm.
- Don’t grade! Well, at least at first. Nothing stifles creativity like the pressure of a bad grade.
- Make a compilation of 4-measure student compositions to send home to parents.

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