

Focus on
COMPOSITION

Your Band Can Compose, Too



If you want your band students to hone their listening skills, improve their basic notation, make aesthetic decisions, and become more imaginative, creative, and intuitive, perhaps you should introduce them to composition. The use of composition will not only help your students become better musicians, it will also help them meet Music Content Standard 4, which requires students to compose and arrange music within specified guidelines.

Richard Tengowski, a band director for the Kohler School District in Kohler, Wisconsin, has been composing with his bands for about four years.

"Another director and I team-teach a sixth-grade band, a junior high band, and a high school band. Although we initially never did any composition in the classroom, we started to use composition as an assessment tool to see if

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the kids were understanding the elements of the music they were playing. Now each band of fifty to sixty students does some degree of composition."

At first, Tengowski was hesitant to introduce his students to composition. "It was a risk to introduce composition into the band classroom because we had not previously assessed students that way," he said. "The structure was the most difficult—how do you teach all these kids composition at one time and at all different levels?"

Tengowski began by outlining to the students his plan for the year: Each person was required to create a theme and variations. The students composed their pieces outside of class and took them to their individual lessons, where the teachers answered questions and gave suggestions for improvement. Tengowski also introduced his students to the *EZ Vision* (no longer available; has been replaced by *Music Shop*) and *Finale* computer software programs. By the end of the school year, each student had composed a theme and two variations.

"The students must be able to perform all the compositions they create on their own instruments," Tengowski said. "They can make their compositions as easy or as difficult as they want, but we encourage them to use all the elements of music correctly.

"We have not yet performed student compositions in concerts, primarily

because they aren't up to the level of a solo piece quite yet," he continued. "But the sense of pride and ownership the students develop as they create their own compositions makes the music become much more meaningful to them."

SOME BAND DIRECTORS INVITE AN artist-in-residence into their schools to initiate the composition process. Tengowski is one such director.

"Ray Dretske showed the students how to compose on computers, and that motivated a lot of our students to try it. He provided a wonderful experience for everyone involved," Tengowski stated.

Jan Tweed, a band director for twenty-four years in the Waunakee (Wisconsin) School System, and her colleague, Ross Cowing, also used a composer-in-residence to introduce composition into the band classroom. With the help of the Dane County Cultural Arts Commission and the Waunakee music booster organization, her school hired a composer to help the seventh-grade students create a piece of music for the dedication of their new middle school. The composer, Pierre LaPlante, is an educator in the Pecos (Wisconsin) School System.

LaPlante visited the school and explained what the project would entail. After coaching the students in some theme-and-variation exercises, he encouraged those interested to write a variation on "A Way to Wisconsin," the eight-measure folk song he had chosen for the dedication. After the students had worked on their variations for several months, LaPlante chose twelve of them and began weaving them into a piece of music. Later, he had the students write a variation as a group.

"The fascinating part of this project was that these students, with very little, if any, prior composition experience were not afraid to try composition," Tweed said. "The variations they wrote were just amazing, and the finished piece was nearly three hundred measures long."

"It was quite a challenge for these students, now in eighth grade, to play, understand, and interpret the song, but

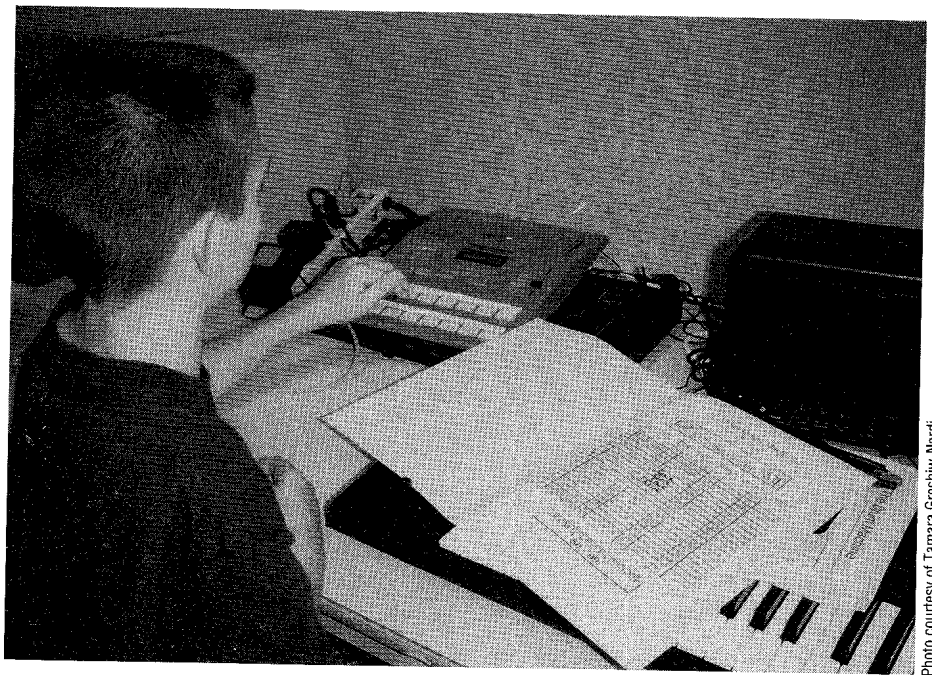


Photo courtesy of Tamara Greshiw-Nard

Composition stimulates thinking skills and creative powers.

they came through beautifully. I have never in my life seen a group of students work as hard. They felt such an ownership of the song and were so proud of what they had done that the experience was one of the highlights of my thirty-year teaching career. Our theme and variations on 'A Way to Wisconsin' is an absolutely gorgeous piece of music."

COMPOSITION CAN ALSO REINFORCE students' grasp of fundamental concepts. When Elaine Schweller-Snyder, the band director at the Lehman Catholic High School in Sidney, Ohio, discovered that her students were having trouble counting, she turned to composition.

"I split the band up into eight groups with eight students in each, placing stronger students with weaker ones so they could help each other out," Schweller-Snyder said. "Each student contributed a rhythm pattern, from which the group created a percussion composition. Then each group performed its composition for the other students."

"This activity was so successful that I may have to find a place for it in my current curriculum," Schweller-Snyder added.

Kirk Kassner, who has been composing with band, choir, orchestra, and general music students from kindergarten

through graduate school for the past twenty years, sings the praises of composition in the band classroom.

"Nothing else kids do in the classroom stimulates the kinds of thinking skills and creative powers composition does," Kassner said. "Even though their finished compositions may not be great, the process they went through to create that music is beneficial to them."

"When students compose, they must think like composers," he continued. "They must decide what to do in terms of dynamics, tonality, and texture. They must decide how they want the audience to feel when they hear a certain section of their piece. When students compose, they achieve a powerful, heady feeling. Nothing else can compare to it."

Kassner encourages band directors to try composition with their bands. "You may think you don't have time to introduce your kids to composition. But since kids perform better when they're encouraged to compose, you don't have time *not* to do it." ■

Ideas contributed by Richard Tengowski, band director, Kohler (Wisconsin) School District; Jan Tweed, retired band director, Waunakee (Wisconsin) Community Schools; Elaine Schweller-Snyder, band director, Lehman Catholic High School, Sidney, Ohio; and Kirk Kassner, CME, general music, chorus, and strings teacher, Cambridge Elementary School, Cocoa, Florida. Compiled by Cheryl Rudaitis, MENC staff.