

## KEYBOARD SKILLS

# Creative Skill Building at the Keyboard

Learning technical skills and memorization both require constant repetition to achieve fluidity. While this repetitiveness can be a motivational challenge, it provides an excellent opportunity to encourage creativity in your students. When students are asked to manipulate a musical concept in a creative way, they are not only repeating it many times over, but they are also learning the concept much more deeply and personally because they are making choices during the process. Below are some suggestions that you can use to add creativity to your approach to skill-building in a keyboard lesson.

## Musical Elements

### Introducing Repertoire

Consider all the qualities of a new piece your students will learn--brainstorm all its "ingredients" (e.g., melodic intervals, left hand texture, title, articulation, pedal, dynamics, register, key, form). After this analysis, select elements from the piece that students can manipulate and ask students to compose their own short piece based on that element(s). For example, if you are teaching the students a waltz like *Puppy Waltz*, some ideas might be:

### Puppy Waltz

A. Artobolevskaya

Primo

Secondo

- Have the students write their own waltz based on a modified title using a 3/4 signature. You might ask your students to write a piece called "Monster Waltz" or "Butterfly Waltz, or they may choose their own animal that is waltzing. Have them consider their inspiration and ask: *How will you change the music to reflect the*

*character of your new animal?*

## Monster Waltz



- Ask students to write their own pieces that use the same left hand texture, but with a new melody. Experiment with changing registers and transposing the new piece to a different key.

## Puppy Waltz Variation 1



- Ask students to compose a variation by changing the rhythm of the melody.

## Reading Notation

Composing is a terrific method for students to remember where notes are on a staff. Once your students have learned to read several notes, have them not only compose, but also write down their composition. Even the youngest students can experiment with writing down their compositions. Teach beginner students three notes such as Do, Re, and Mi. Then teach them one of several pieces that use only these three notes (e.g., "Hot Cross Buns," "My Good Friend Pierrot," "Mary Had a Little Lamb," and "Ding Dong.")

### Pierrot (France)



### Hot Cross Buns (England)



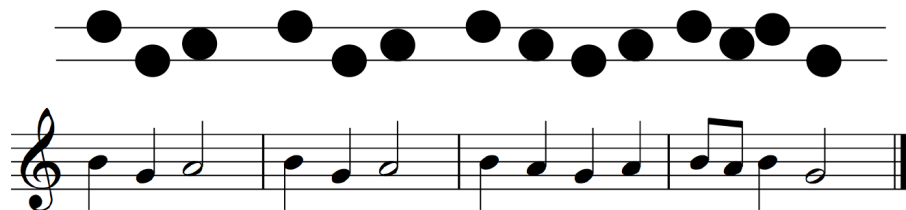
### Ding, Dong (Spain)



### Mary Had a Little Lamb



Next, ask students to mix up these notes to create their own melody, just by listening and using their hands. Depending on the needs of your class, you can ask students to work in pairs to create a melody and then share with the rest of the class. After they have composed and shared their melody, have them write it down first just using two lines and a space (or two spaces and a line) and then on staff paper.



Finally, ask them to switch with another student, read, and play each other's pieces. You can have students compose at the keyboard and then notate their composition but you may also ask them to compose by writing down the notation first and then playing their piece. Connect their process to intention by asking: *Did it come out the way they imagined it would? How could you make a change to make it even better sounding?*

### Scales, Chords, & Arpeggios

Ask your students: *How many different rhythms can we invent to play the same scale?* Start by demonstrating a few different ways of playing a scale with different rhythmic patterns and then ask student volunteers to offer a new version for the class to try. This same playful process can be used for varying articulation patterns.

#### Scale Variation Examples



Follow this experimenting as you teach chords and arpeggios to your students. Encourage your students to compose their own variations based on articulation and rhythm.

### Chord Variation Examples



### Arpeggio Variation Examples



Extend this exploration by looking at strong musical examples that use the concept.



### Learning a Melody

Put students in pairs or small groups with paper and pencil to **write their own lyrics** to a melody you are learning together. Use questioning and reflection to guide their brainstorming and analysis of the piece. For example, if you are working on “Flamingo” by Lynn Freeman Olson, you might follow these steps:

# The Flamingo

Lynn Freeman Olson

Gracefully

The musical score for 'The Flamingo' is written for piano. It consists of six systems of music. Each system contains a treble staff and a bass staff. The melody is primarily in the treble staff, featuring a mix of eighth and quarter notes, often beamed together. The bass staff provides a steady accompaniment with chords and single notes. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The tempo/mood is marked 'Gracefully'. The score includes phrasing slurs and dynamic markings like 'L.H.' and 'R.H.'.

1. Share the title and play the piece for your students. Then ask: *What do you think this piece is about? What about the music makes it sound that way? Why did the composer give it this title?*
2. Take a few minutes to teach the students to hum the melodic line, phrase by phrase, and looking at the score to prepare for the writing activity. Point out two basic and contrasting melodic ideas. Continue to guide their observations through inquiry: *What do you notice about this melody? What do you notice about the ups*

*and downs? How about the rhythm—when does it pull back and when does it move forward? How are these two melodies different? What kind of feelings do they create?*

3. Give the students 3–5 minutes to imagine a short story or scene about the flamingo in this music—based on what they heard in the melodies.
4. Ask the students to use their story as inspiration and collaborate to distill the story about the flamingo into lyrics to match the two melodies. If your students are more advanced, you can have them try to rhyme their lyrics.

Writing lyrics is motivating and works wonders for memorizing a piece. Students can sing their lyrics and play the piece at the same time and they can practice their piece anywhere by singing without a keyboard.

Make this a class activity by having one group sing their new “song” while the rest of the class plays a simple accompaniment or the piece as written on their keyboards.

To simplify this activity for a whole group, gather all the students at the rug and collaboratively create lyrics, gathering and combining ideas from volunteers to be sung by the whole class. For very young children, you can offer a set of lyrics that have you prepared, but with some words omitted and ask the children to fill in the words with their own ideas.

## Composition Exercises

### Keyboard Soundscapes

For young students who are just beginning to learn piano, encourage their exploration of ranges, dynamics, articulations, and tempos by creating a soundscape. Students can brainstorm their own ideas for a soundscape such as a thunder storm, a clear sunny day in a boat at sea, or a surprise birthday party. Use the following steps to facilitate this exercise:

#### Creating a Thunderstorm Soundscape:

1. Allow students to explore different ways of playing the keyboard to imitate the sounds during a thunderstorm. Have students select one sound that they feel best captures a thunderstorm. This might be a loud repetitive cluster in the low registers or a bright and fast glissando.
2. Assemble a class thunderstorm! Once each student has come up with a sound, have students share by layering and building a whole class texture. Explain that one at a time, students will play their sound, repeating their idea until everyone in the class is playing. The class will end at the same time by following your signal to stop.
3. Compose your own simple accompaniment for the class soundscape and share what you will play as your students add their effects.

4. Start the class soundscape by playing your accompaniment and then conduct each student to begin one by one until you have a roaring thunderstorm!
5. Experiment with adding crescendos and diminuendos to evoke the chaos during a thunderstorm.
6. Consider inviting student conductors to the front of the class to lead entrances as well as dynamic choices.
7. Record the soundscape(s) and listen to your composition as a class!

When engaging students in this type of free and exploratory play, keep the following recommendations in mind:

- Students should have free range of the keyboard to try out their ideas. Encourage students to think outside of the box to create the most imaginative and vivid sounds they can!
- Allow time for students to reflect on both the creative process as well as the final performance or recording. Take time to ask them to reflect on their choices, what stood out about the class soundscape, and what new ideas or modifications they might want to try next time.
- Allow students to use both musical and aesthetic terms when discussing their noticings. For example, students may say, “That fast, bangy sound that David made reminded me of a clap of thunder when the storm is right overhead!” in addition to more technical descriptions such as, “The cluster he played was staccato and fortissimo.” You may wish to encourage students to supplement their observations with music-specific language or rephrase students’ comments if they are still developing their musical vocabulary.

## Dynamics, Tempo, and Articulation Exploration

Select passages from their keyboard repertoire and invite students to play it with as many different dynamics, articulations, or tempos as possible—for younger students, it may be helpful to limit their exploration to just one musical element at a time. If appropriate, reinforce or add to your students’ musical vocabulary by incorporating the musical terms for their chosen dynamics, articulations, and tempos.

As always, reflect as a class with questions such as:

- *Which dynamics, tempo, or articulation best suit this passage? Why do you think that is?*
- *What kind of mood did your dynamics, tempo, or articulation create?*
- *How does changing each of these elements also change what the music does for the listener? For example, how does the mood of the music change when we play a passage staccato versus legato?*

This kind of creative work not only allows students to experiment with musical elements, but also provides opportunities for them to practice a passage numerous times and in a variety

ways. Experimenting with various articulations, for example, will achieve greater evenness and fluidity in students' playing.

## Arranging for Multiple Parts

Divide the class into groups of three students each and assign each group to one keyboard. Challenge them to divide the solo piece of music they are working on into a piece for six hands by creating parts for each musician. As a teacher, consider the most beneficial groupings at the given time, partnering similarly-skilled players together to encourage the sharing of musical passages or partnering students of different skill levels to allow for differentiation, modeling, and support. Depending on your students' ability and the aim of this exercise, students could perform their arrangement from memory, notate their divisions in the original solo, or write out new parts to develop music notation skills.

You may wish to display prompts or questions to encourage student work such as:

- *How and where can we divide the music?*
- *How might we decide who will play each part?*
- *Why might we want to double certain passages? When does it sound best to have just one person on a line? What in the music led you to these choices?*

For example, if students were learning the Hungarian Rhapsody Duet, they might turn it into a six hand piece like this:

The image shows a musical score for a six-hand arrangement of the Hungarian Rhapsody Duet. The score is written for four staves, each with two voices (RH and LH). The staves are labeled Primo, Secondo, Terza, and Quarta. The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 2/4. The Primo staff starts with a 15ma (15th measure) marking. The LH part of the Primo staff has a 2 (second) marking. The score includes various musical notations such as eighth notes, quarter notes, and rests, with 'etc.' indicating the continuation of the piece.

By providing this opportunity, students will become familiar with the solo work by thinking of it in a new way. They will explore the full range of the keyboard (or a teacher-specified range) when making choices as arrangers. Carefully formulated reflection time will allow students to use their arranging choices to inform their phrasing, dynamic, articulation, voicing, and



pedaling choices as soloists. Additionally, students will learn to perform together as one ensemble.

## Keyboard Orchestra Compositions

Ask students to reimagine a solo work as a multi-part composition using different instrumental sounds. Working in small groups of two to four students, have the groups divide the music into parts, one part per student. More advanced groups can be challenged to add voices by composing over what is already written. Once parts have been determined, have students consider the quality of each line and the desired mood before selecting the instrument they feel is best suited. As an added challenge, you might allow students to change their instrument within the piece.

Depending on the setup of your keyboard space, it may be useful to rearrange the room for this activity so that all of the musicians can see one another.

Allow groups to share their arrangements with the class, and reflect on how their choices altered the piece.

This activity will help students think like a composer or arranger. As with the other exercises that draw inspiration from a work in their repertoire, students will become more familiar with the piece through repetition and experimentation.

## Book Scoring

Read to younger students a simple narrative such as *My Many Colored Days* by Dr. Seuss or share a picture book with your class. Ask the students to imagine what the piano would sound like for each of the colors that the book mentions. Allow students to go to the keyboards and experiment with improvising a musical idea that evokes their favorite or assigned color. Individually or as a class, allow students to share their musical ideas and express how their choices reflect their assigned color.

End the class by reading *My Many Colored Day* again, incorporating students' musical ideas when their color appears. Record the class composition and listen back before reflecting on the process and final performance. Expand student listening and perception by asking students to compare and contrast musical choices: *How did red sound different from blue?*

This activity allows students to explore the range and musical possibilities of the keyboard, experiment with musical concepts (i.e., dynamics, tempo, mood, etc.), describe what they see and hear in works of art, and connect their visual and musical perceptions.

## Film Scoring

Play a short clip from a movie or a movie trailer for your class, making sure to mute the sound. Break the students into small groups and allow them time to improvise a soundtrack to the short film on keyboards. This project would work especially well if groups had their own silent version of the film from which to work--on an iPad for example. If this is not possible, divide the class period into segments in which students view the video, compose, and rehearse their pieces with the video.

Introduce the idea of a beginning, middle, and end to them and encourage them to organize their music loosely around these moments.

Add any musical concepts that you may have been teaching the students as elements they should incorporate in their soundtrack. For example, if the class recently learned about chromatic scales, encourage students to incorporate at least one into their soundtrack at a place that feels most suitable. As a class, discuss where groups feel the chromatic scale should exist and why they feel this way.

Ask the groups to share their soundtracks! Discuss each group's choices and how their music interacted with the film.

## Improvisation Exercises

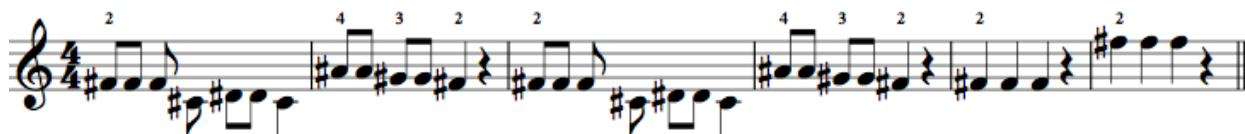
### Games with Patterns

Pattern recognition is an important skill in reading, writing, and listening to music. Exploring patterns through improvisation games is a great way to develop this skill in students.

Consider these guidelines for improvising with patterns:

#### Black Keys

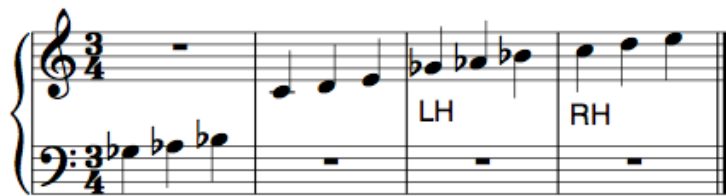
Wearing blindfolds or with eyes closed, have students improvise on black keys only, exploring the pentatonic scale. A black key improvisation inspired by "Old McDonald Had a Farm" might look like this:



Encourage students to continue this exercise by repeating it from other F#s on the keyboard.

#### Whole Tone Scales

Guide students to improvise over a whole tone scale. This can be done with C-D-E-F#-G#-A# which presents a student with an easily recognizable pattern of three white notes and three black notes in a row. For example, if improvising on "Flamingo," use the following whole tone scale as the basis for student improvisations.



#### Chromatic Scales

Encourage students to race along the keyboard using alternating pointer fingers for younger students or traditional fingering for more advanced students in order to improvise over a chromatic scale. For example, if students are studying "Chromatic Kitten Minuet" or "Penguins,"

they might begin by discussing how the use of chromatic gestures evokes the image of kittens or penguins before imagining other animals and using chromatic scales to express them.

## Chromatic Kitten Minuet

S. Papernik



# Penguins

Linda Niamath

Waddling ♩ = 138-152

The musical score for 'Penguins' is written for a single melodic line on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The tempo is marked 'Waddling ♩ = 138-152'. The score is divided into five systems. The first system begins with a *mf* dynamic. The second system includes a *mp* dynamic. The third system includes a *mf* dynamic. The fourth system includes a '5' dynamic. The fifth system includes *rit.*, *mp*, and *p* dynamics. The score features various musical notations including notes, rests, and fingerings.

## Diatonic Scales

Using the same key as the piece students are studying, have students improvise within a diatonic scale. Again, consider qualities within the piece to inspire your students' improvising (e.g., octaves, dotted rhythms, a busy texture, long silences, sudden bursts of energy).

## Boogie Woogie

Familiarize students with a bass line ostinato by challenging students to improvise a melody over a boogie ostinato pattern. Encourage students to experiment with skipping beats at times in order to experience the feeling of the impulse of the rest.

## Boogie Patterns by D. Agay

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## Ornamentations

Allow students to “decorate” main chord tones in a piece by adding ornaments such as grace notes, mordents, trembling trills, or turns. If age- and skill-appropriate, introduce the musical symbols for these elaborations, drawing them on the board or adding them to your Musical Word Wall. This improvisation game fits well into the curriculum if your class is studying a piece like Czerny’s Etude in B Flat Major, Op. 599, No. 83 or another piece from the Baroque repertoire.

# Study in Bb Major Op. 599, No. 83

Carl Czerny

**Allegro**  $\text{♩} = 66-72$

*p*

*simile*

**f**

*cresc.*

**mf**

## 12-Bar Blues

The 12-bar blues provides a great structure over which students can improvise solo or duet improvisations at the keyboard. Explore some of the “Blue Monk” activities on Juilliard Creative Classroom for ideas about how to teach the form and ways to build and challenge student improvisation skills. Below are two additional resources for keyboard development.

### PDF Blues Bass Line in Treble Clef

### PDF Blues Bass Line in Bass Clef

Look for other blues songs that can inspire improvisation and diversify your students’ understanding of the form. “Lady Bug Blues,” below, is one example of a 12-bar blues improvisation that can be played over the 12-bar blues progression. Consider sharing this with your students and encourage them to create their own blues melody improvisations.

# Lady Bug Blues

S. Papernik

The musical score for "Lady Bug Blues" is written for a single melodic line on a treble clef staff in 4/4 time. It consists of three staves of music. The first staff has two measures, the second staff has two measures, and the third staff has four measures. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5 below the notes. Hand positions are labeled "LH" (Left Hand) and "RH" (Right Hand). The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The piece ends with a repeat sign and a final measure.

## Pedal Work

Students are fascinated by the sustain pedal on a keyboard--use this for motivating improvisation and skill building! If your keyboards have a pedal attachment, teach students how to use it early in order to motivate student creativity and exploration. Like a gas pedal on a car, there are different ways it can be pressed to change the type and length of the sustain. (This is true on a piano but might not be on every keyboard model. Experiment with your keyboards to find out what's possible!) Let students play a passage at full pedal, half pedal, three quarter pedal, touches of pedal, etc., and discuss how the various pedal technique makes the keys sound.

Encourage students to consider how the pedal can add color and interest to their playing. As a class, consider a work of visual art such as a piece from the *Water Lilies* series by Claude Monet. Discuss the work as a class--noticing the subject, how it's made, the material used by the artist, the feeling it evokes in the viewers, etc., and then have students improvise short melodic ideas inspired by it. Have students experiment and decide if, and how, the sustain pedal can be used to support their creative ideas.