

## TEACHING &amp; LEARNING SUPPORTS

# Composition and Collaborative Work

## Introduction

Composition is one of the most immediate and powerful ways for students to develop their own creativity. Its use of critical thinking, direct application of musical concepts, and activation of self-expression impact students' overall musical growth and uniquely stimulate their motivation to learn. Composing can reinforce musical skills and prepare students for listening to Core Works. Moreover, by encouraging students to think like a composer, they gain an insider's perspective into the life and creative work of other composers.

While traditional programs delay opportunities for children to develop their own creativity, Juilliard Creative Classroom is filled with compositional and improvisatory activities for students to create original music and manipulate existing musical material—available to even the youngest of learners. Students' innate musical competence generally far exceeds their functional knowledge and notational ability. Certainly, a formal understanding of notation and compositional structures can help students refine their skills, but the emphasis on technical mastery must not overshadow the fact that students have inborn creative capacities and, when allowed enough freedom, are able to successfully express their own musical ideas.

## Guiding Principles

When leading compositional activities from Juilliard Creative Classroom, please keep the following in mind:

- **Notation:** Maintain a balance between notational objectives and the development of creativity. Allow frequent opportunities for students to compose their own complex rhythms, melodies, or harmonies even if they cannot identify or write them. Students may work from memory, rely on teacher documentation to scribe their ideas, or they may devise their own notation. These practices are authentic to the discipline when considering contemporary compositional practices and diverse cultural traditions. When done well, these experiences will ultimately feed students' desire to learn formal notation.
- **Language:** Consider the power of language, which has the dual potential to inhibit or ignite imaginative impulses. Experiment with words and phrases that engender a sense of play rather

than completing a chore. Consider the freeing implications of prompts like: “Make up a lick that...” or “Find a cool rhythmic pattern that...” or “Put some notes together that...”

- **Ownership:** Even the most dutiful of students can miss out on the pleasures of composing while working on their assignments. Don't settle for their compliance; find ways to motivate students so they push their creativity and personally invest in their own work. Experiment with ways of framing an assignment or adjusting its parameters to increase ownership so students make up musical ideas that they care about, are somehow a reflection of them, and inherently answer the question: *How does this musical idea hold something of me?*

## Strategies for Beginning Composers

Many activities on Juilliard Creative Classroom require students to explore musical ideas by experiencing what it's like to be a composer. For classes that need extra support, here are suggestions and strategies that you can include in your composition lessons as students develop their abilities to generate simple rhythms and melodies. These exercises can be implemented in a variety of sequences and do not require knowledge of standard Western notation.

### Finding Inspiration

Inspiration is the life force of creativity, and composers of all ages generate ideas that stem from a specific catalyst or experience. Surprise and delight your students by introducing them to everyday or unusual items that would grab their interest. Encourage students to bring in their own so that the classroom is infused with stimulating objects and experiences:

Books  
Images  
Photographs  
Toys  
Food  
A movie clip  
Quotes  
News headlines  
Sounds in everyday life  
Video games

A well-defined source of inspiration provides focus for young composers to experiment with new sounds to convey emotions, tell musical stories, or create an atmosphere. It also generates a sense of purpose to keep motivated and avoids the feeling that they are merely completing a technical exercise.

Below is a list of examples of musical inspiration featured in Juilliard Creative Classroom repertoire. Use these pieces, among others, to help your students explore other composers' sources of inspiration.

|                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Stories and Memories                                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stravinsky: <i>The Rite of Spring</i></li> <li>• <i>Ambush from Ten Sides</i></li> <li>• Gershwin: "They Can't Take That Away from Me"</li> </ul>                                                                          |
| Characters and People                                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schumann: <b>Carnaval</b></li> <li>• Ligeti: Bagatelles (V. "Bela Bartok in memoriam")</li> </ul>                                                                                                                          |
| Places or Locations                                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shepherd: <i>Tuolumne</i></li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Technical Challenges:<br>working within a<br>specific compositional<br>structure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ligeti: Bagatelles</li> <li>• Beethoven: <b>Symphony No. 5</b></li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                  |
| A Specific Instrument                                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mendelssohn: <b>Violin Concerto</b></li> <li>• Berio: <b>Sequenza V</b> for solo<br/><b>trombone</b></li> </ul>                                                                                                            |
| Other Art Forms                                                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bach: <b>Cello Suite No. 3</b> (comes from dance forms)</li> <li>• Rose: "<b>Chants du Burgam</b>" (this music is meant to accompany live dance)</li> <li>• Shepherd: <i>Tuolumne</i> (inspired by photography)</li> </ul> |

## Other Music

- Shepherd: *Metamorphoses* (inspired by the music of Anton Webern)

## Composing Rhythms

Rhythm is an incredibly powerful and entrancing element that students respond to physically, emotionally, and mentally. Composing rhythmic gestures and phrases can help generate many creative possibilities for young composers. Rhythm allows anyone, regardless of their knowledge of pitch or ability to play a simple pitched instrument, to create musical ideas that capture their intended inspiration. Without pitch, young students can quickly experiment with complex ideas such as speed, pattern, timbre, and groove.

### Inspiring rhythms

Here are three methods along with prompts that you can use to inspire rhythms in students.

#### A physical action

- *Make a movement with your feet like you are [sneaky and mysterious].*
- *I like how Jessica moved her feet in tiny steps with pauses! Let's make sure we remember this movement and move the same way again.*
- *This time, let's listen carefully to how our feet sound. Let's copy the sound of our feet and make it again by clapping our hands.*



- *Let's practice clapping this new rhythm to make sure we like the way it sounds and feels.*

See Bach, Bourrée: [Exploring Bach's Dance Rhythms](#) for more ideas.

#### An emotion

- *If you were in the middle of a battle, like in Ambush from Ten Sides, what emotions would you feel?*

- If your emotion is “brave,” what tempo would your rhythm be? Slow? Fast? Would the tempo be the same the whole time, or change?
- What rhythm would you clap to go along with your tempo(s)?



See *Ambush from Ten Sides: [Telling a Story through Melodic Themes](#)* for more ideas.

### A verbal phrase

- In this part of the story, what do you think the main character, who is regretful and frustrated, might be thinking? What might the character say? And how could it be spoken to really exaggerate the feelings?

"I wish I had gone to the movies!"

- Let's repeat this phrase and make our voices sound very regretful and frustrated.
- Repeat it one more time, but now we'll add something to our words—let's clap along with every syllable.

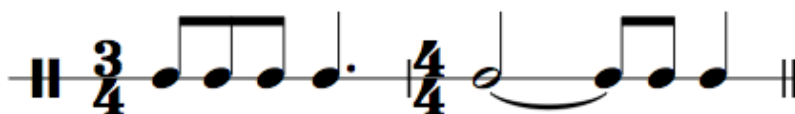


I wish I had gone to the mo-vies!

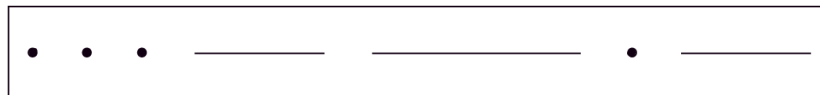
### Documenting Rhythms

Oftentimes, students can clap, speak, or play a complex rhythm, but don't know how it should be notated; in some cases, the rhythm is far more complicated or nuanced to fit into standard Western notation. Below are a few strategies to help students document their rhythmic ideas.

Imagine a student inventing and clapping a rhythm such as this:

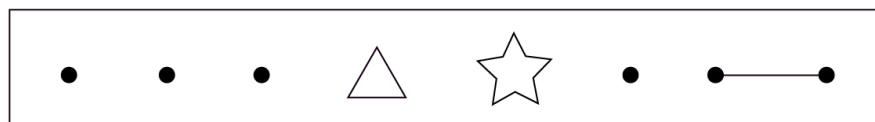


It's an interesting rhythm, but too tricky or time-consuming for young students to read or notate. You (or the student) could write it with lines and dots, perhaps like the below image.



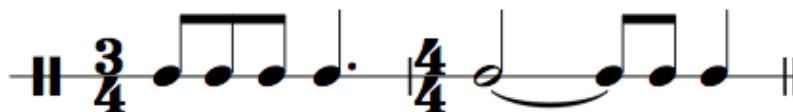
Using geometric shapes is another way your students can represent the rhythm.

| Rhythm Key |       |
|------------|-------|
| Symbol     | Count |
| •          | 1     |
| • — •      | 2     |
| △          | 3     |
| □          | 4     |
| ☆          | 5     |



### Different ways to hear and perceive a clapped rhythm

It's important to understand the way our students' minds work when they are thinking about rhythm. According to Jeanne Bamberger's studies documented in *The Mind Behind the Musical Ear*, students may interpret and represent clapped rhythms in a variety of ways. For example,



could be heard and represented in multiple ways, as seen in the below examples.



The fourth and fifth notes are short, followed by long pauses.



The fourth and fifth notes are long, held notes.

Both rhythm drawings are acceptable and should be honored as we help our students transfer a sound in their head to an idea on paper.

Here are some clarifying questions we can ask students as they invent and clap rhythms.

- *Is your [fourth] clap held for a long time (draw a long line in the air with your hand), or is it another short note with a pause? (You can also verbalize a “ta—” along with your clap to emphasize the difference in durations.)*
- *What kind of feeling do you want your claps to have? Light and short with pauses, or long and dragging?*

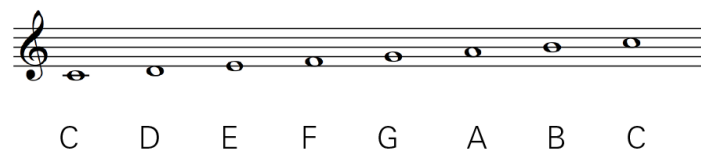
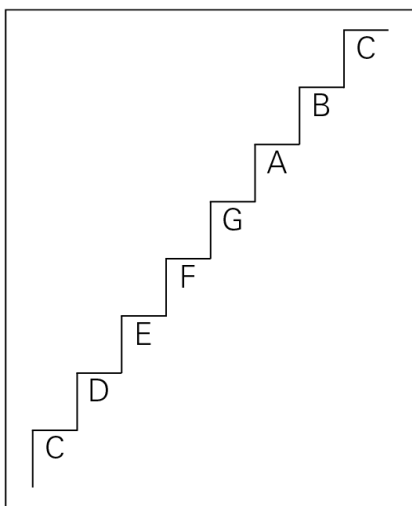
Bamberger encourages this approach to reflection so that students can become more sensitized to nuances even within simple rhythms. As they define what they hear, students become aware of the different options of representation and can more capably express their creative ideas.

## Composing Melodies

There are many ways to compose melodies, and students can benefit from being shown a variety of strategies to enhance their creativity. One approach that enables young composers to create interesting melodies is by composing their rhythm first, and then adding pitches. Why rhythm before pitch? Rhythms are a way to ensure that a musical phrase is distinct and interesting and not just a succession of pitches of equal duration. Maintaining the integrity of the rhythmic idea often defines the character of a melodic shape. Younger students may lose or obscure their interesting rhythmic ideas when they become preoccupied with playing every pitch correctly. This occurs frequently in classrooms where beginning and intermediate instrumentalists perform their own melodies.

### Adding pitches to rhythms

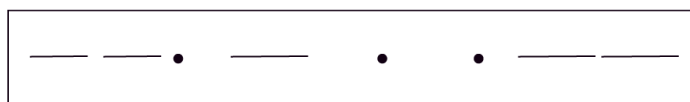
Students can use their rhythmic compositions, as detailed in the above section, Composing Rhythms, as starting points for adding pitches and creating complete melodies. Provide students with visuals like the ones below to assist them in trialing ideas for pitches.



### Turning a characteristic rhythm into a melody with similar qualities

Rather than asking students to choose rhythms for metric or other technical reasons, using a character or emotional quality for their inspiration can produce much more interesting

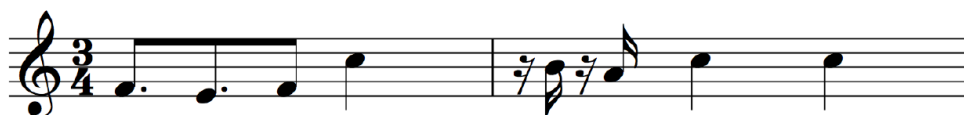
melodies. For example, students might compose a “festive” rhythm to begin their melody work. This festive rhythm could be written as line and dots:



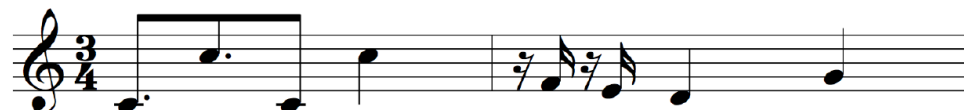
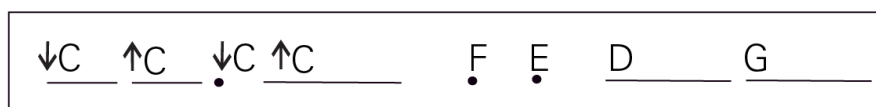
To turn this into a festive melody, stimulate students' creativity by asking questions. Encourage the students to try out multiple possibilities and make revisions accordingly. For example,

- *If we are creating a festive melody, do you want to start with a high pitch or low pitch? Or is it somewhere in between?*
- *Do you want your melody to jump around, or move smoothly and step-wise?*

The original festive rhythm could then be notated by adding letters.



OR



Below is a detailed example of another step-by-step process you can use to generate rhythmic material and add pitches as a basis for melodic composition.

### PDF Composing a Melody

#### Melodic contour shapes

While building melodies from rhythmic phrases can be a great way to initiate composition with students who have limited experience identifying pitches, here are some other ways you can



guide your students to compose compelling phrases based on melodic contour. See Beethoven: [Exploring Contour in Music](#) to approach this concept.

### Playing melodies students draw

Students can discover new melodies within a shape they have drawn. Start by having them draw their own contour shapes. Stimulate the students' thinking by asking: *If you were going to draw a shape for your [emotion or characteristic] music, would it be smooth, or jagged? Curvy, or sharp?*

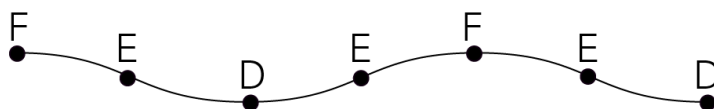
#### "Exhausted"



On a pitched instrument, play possible notes that complement the drawing to help students decide on their favorites. Ask the class to compare 2-3 options and choose which they think best matches their intention. For example, you could ask which of these two interpretations sounds more exhausted to them:



OR



### Drawing what students sing

Once young students have a good understanding of contour, they can begin to translate their own musical ideas by drawing visual representations. Rather than beginning their compositional work by looking at a staff or bar lines, encourage your students to work from their musical ear using these steps:

- Ask the students to imagine a melody and sound it out by ear with their voice or on an instrument.
- When each student has settled on a melody they like, have them sing it out loud and trace the contour with their finger in the air as they sing.

- Have them draw the contour shape on paper.

For example, a student might imagine and sing a melody that sounds like the one below.

After tracing it in the air, it could be drawn with lots of different contour shapes. Here is one possibility:



In addition to contour shapes, there are many other methods we can use to guide students to visually map their melodic ideas. Here are examples of two other approaches to graphically notating a melody.

Use a “musical events grid”:

| Events Key                                                                          |                   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Symbol                                                                              | Event             |
|   | Going up          |
|  | Going down        |
|  | Shaky sounds      |
|  | Swirling notes    |
|  | Quiet, soft notes |

|                                                                                     |                                                                                      |                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|   |   |   |
|  |  |  |

Use colors to represent pitches:

| Color Key                                                                           |      |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| Color                                                                               | Note |
|  | C    |
|  | D    |
|  | E    |
|  | F    |
|  | G    |

|                                                                                     |                                                                                     |                                                                                     |                                                                                      |                                                                                       |                                                                                       |                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

## Graphic Notation

As students add multiple musical lines, create larger sections, and compose ideas that have more freedom than simple melodies or rhythms, they may use or invent methods of graphic notation to release their imagination and document their ideas. One activity on Juilliard Creative Classroom that demonstrates further examples of graphic notation is Shepherd: [Inspiring Musical Ingredients](#).

Graphic scores are also used by professional composers. Provide opportunities for your students to explore the scores of composers such as Cage, Stockhausen, and Xenakis. There are also other codified systems, like guitar tablature, that students can investigate. For a hands-on discovery of Chinese pipa notation see *Ambush from Ten Sides*: [Inventing Notation](#).

## Developing, Revising, and Documenting Student Work

Juilliard Creative Classroom is full of activities that allow students to experience the ways composers develop motives and melodies. Here is a list of activities to develop a small musical idea into a larger piece of music.

|                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Motivic Development                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beethoven: <b>Motives: Planting a Musical Seed</b></li> <li>• Beethoven: <b>Four Famous Notes: Developing Beethoven's Motive</b></li> <li>• Mendelssohn: <b>Transforming Dotted Rhythms</b></li> <li>• Shepherd: <b>Composing and Developing a Three-Note Motive</b></li> </ul>                                        |
| Developing and Embellishing a Melody | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gershwin: <b>Making a Song Your Own</b></li> <li>• Monk: <b>Blue Contours</b></li> <li>• Monk: <b>Developing a Melody for a 12-Bar Blues</b></li> <li>• Stravinsky: <b>Developing a Melodic Fragment</b></li> <li>• Stravinsky: <b>Creating a Melodic Character by Using Grace Notes, Turns, and Trills</b></li> </ul> |
| Accompaniments                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |

|                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beethoven: <b>Building toward a Climax</b></li> <li>• Stravinsky: <b>Accompanying a Melody</b></li> </ul>                                                                                                              |
| Multiple Voices and Interplay | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ligeti: <b>Dialogues in Chamber Music</b></li> <li>• Mendelssohn: <b>One Versus Many</b></li> <li>• Mozart: <b>Creating a Bird-like Dialogue</b></li> <li>• Rose: <b>Celebrating with Call and Response</b></li> </ul> |

## Composer Tools

Keep a list of “Composer Tools” as students experiment with the compositional approaches they experience in music class. Display this list in a visible area so you may continue to add to it, revisiting the ideas and building on them when exploring new strategies. Use the list to ask questions when students need a spark of creativity:

- *Which tool could you use to enhance the sound world you’re trying to create?*
- *What’s a tool you haven’t tried in a while?*
- *Which one would be a fun or unusual experiment?*
- *Which would create contrast to your original idea?*
- *Which tool would make a big change? Which would be slight?*

### Composer Tools

- Change the rhythm
- Change the pitches
- Change the tempo
- Make the melody longer by adding new notes
- Scramble the order of the notes in the melody
- Play the melody backwards
- Repeat the melody
- Compose a new and contrasting theme
- Add or change the accompaniment

- Vary the dynamics
- Change the articulation
- Orchestration (change or add instruments)
- Fragmentation (use bits and pieces)
- Diminution (play it faster and condensed)
- Augmentation (stretch it out)

## Remembering Ideas

### Repetition

Once students feel they have found the most satisfying way of playing their phrase, guide them to take further ownership of the idea by repeating it several times.

The act of repetitive listening solidifies the life of the musical phrase and allows a composer to reflect, analyze, and consider the future of the idea. Here are some questions student composers can ask of themselves as they listen to their ideas multiple times:

- *What are the qualities of my phrase? What do I like about it?*
- *Could this be the central theme of my composition?*
- *Will I use this in some parts of my piece, but move on and focus on some other ideas?*
- *Does my theme have the potential to change and grow into something else?*

### Make an audio recording

Once students have played or listened to their musical idea multiple times, they can bypass the notational step and document their final product by recording it. This also provides you, as facilitator, with a method to track the development of a student's ideas. Over a long-term composition project, you can replay a student's recording for them as they revisit and expand their music.

### Helping students when they're feeling stuck

There will be moments when a student has started an idea but is not sure how to finish it. Since composing is a form of authentic communication, we want our students' voices to ring true. It is important that we not complete their thoughts for them but instead, guide students by asking questions that lead them to discover their own creative options. A common example of a teacher imposing their own idea on the composer can be captured in this exchange:

- Student: I want my melody to start from happy, but end sad.
- Teacher: You want it to be sad? That's easy—you can write minor chords in the end.

In this moment, the teacher has prescribed a quick-fix solution to the question, but the student has lost his/her opportunity for experimentation, divergent thinking, and self-discovery. While there are other appropriate moments in class for a teacher to highlight the difference between

major and minor chords, the above scenario deserves a series of questions to lead young composers to unearth their creative sensibilities, empowering them to go with their instincts.

## The Improvising Classroom

### Improvising Essentials

Great improvisers possess essential skills that allow them to simultaneously honor and break from tradition, defy expectations, and entice audiences with beauty, excitement, and humor. Students alike must be:

- **Listening Responsively:** Respond to and interact with others
- **Developing Ideas:** Embellish rhythms and melodies, create variations, and alter motives
- **Contextualizing:** Understand the style and structure of the song
- **Taking Risks:** Try new and unconventional ideas
- **Embracing Spontaneity:** Play the first thing that comes to mind

These skills can be achieved by students of all abilities, if practiced regularly. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that the basic act of **improvising is a natural gift that all humans possess**. Common barriers for many students are their fear of error and lack of confidence. There are activities on Juilliard Creative Classroom that provide opportunities to overcome these barriers in inviting and playful ways. Students are engaged in improvisation not only musically, but also through movement and speech. These exercises help build confidence as students refine their abilities to express themselves in the moment.

To help revive and preserve a sense of fearlessness in your students, here are some tips you can incorporate into your ongoing lessons. The goal is to highlight improvisation as intuitive, impermanent, and fun!

- **Make improvisation part of your students' daily or weekly routine.** Rather than waiting for "special" times to improvise, students should be surrounded with many opportunities to make spontaneity a habit and familiar skill. This will depressurize the environment and make improvisation more accessible. Start with simple tasks and gradually increase their complexity as students become more comfortable.
- **Create opportunities for each student's voice to be heard and validated.** If students feel that your classroom environment is a safe space for them to share their inner self, take risks, and explore, then more ideas will flow from them. According to Juilliard alum and faculty member, Wynton Marsalis: Taking risks and making mistakes are very important, because **if you're not making mistakes, you're not trying**. It's an art of negotiation, of communication.
- **Remind students to trust their instincts, and not to overthink!** Rather than being preoccupied with what's good, bad, right, or wrong, the practice of reacting intuitively brings out a musician's true personality. As students continue to respond to improvisational challenges, they can begin to identify and take pride in their own style.
- **Give students a framework to motivate their improvisation.** This can be presented as a musical challenge or game through aesthetic prompts (e.g., musical opposites, variations, evoking specific emotions). When students feel a sense of purpose, they will have a jump-

start as they tap into their pre-existing creative capacities. Imposing constructive limitations also helps focus students who might be overwhelmed by the daunting task of creating something from a blank slate.

- **Listen to improvisatory music across several styles and traditions.** Improvisation is a timeless art that knows no cultural boundaries! If students are able to transfer concepts from one improvisational approach from one style to another, they will be better equipped to overcome any bias or preconception they have about a particular musical tradition or aesthetic.

## Short and Simple Improvisation Activities

These improvisation exercises are meant to be short, allowing students to generate ideas quickly and respond to the musical atmosphere the classroom has created. When facilitating, give each improviser repeated opportunities and encouragement so they become more comfortable creating new sounds in the moment.

### Rhythmic call and response

- Have volunteers come to the front of the classroom to improvise clapping short rhythms.
- Have the rest of the class copy the leader's rhythm.

### Create an improvised "melody chain"

- Arrange your students in a circle, each with an instrument or using their voice.
- Going around the circle, have each student sing or play one note and hold it (or repeat it) until the next student responds with a new note.
- You can expand upon this melody chain idea by guiding students to explore articulation, note duration, dynamics, or longer phrases.

### Building chords

- Have two students create chords: student A chooses and holds the first note and student B chooses and layers the second, creating a harmony. Students can listen to the texture this chord creates, and then move on to try new harmonies. (This can also work with 3-4 students.)
- Vary the creative challenge with imaginative prompts to inspire students' chords (e.g., soothing, open, heavy, tight, crunchy, piercing, purple, sour)

### Talking instruments

- Have students imitate human speech patterns on their instruments. This can be achieved by approximating the rhythm and syllables of a verbal phrase, and improvising a general contour to complement vocal inflection.
- Students can create their own monologues, or have instrumental conversations in pairs.

## Improvisation Activities on Juilliard Creative Classroom

These Juilliard Creative Classroom activities strongly feature improvisation. As you plan to teach them, find ways to connect and incorporate the improvising essentials (**Listening**

## Responsively, Developing Ideas, Contextualizing, Taking Risks, Embracing Spontaneity).

|                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                   |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Ligeti: Dialogues in Chamber Music</b>                             | Students begin the activity by improvising physical copycat and mirroring games. They later transfer these elements into a musical improvisation. |
| <b>Mendelssohn: Transforming Dotted Rhythms</b>                       | Students experiment with altering a musical phrase to correspond with a character or mood.                                                        |
| <b>Monk: Improvisation Building Blocks</b>                            | Students create rhythmic improvisations using 1-2 notes.                                                                                          |
| <b>Monk: Improvisational Modes of Expression</b>                      | Students brainstorm and respond to creative prompts to inspire improvisation.                                                                     |
| <b>Monk: Repetitions and Resolutions</b>                              | The Advanced Student option asks students to use the A-A'-B form as inspiration for their own improvisatory solos.                                |
| <b>Rose: Celebrating with Call and Response</b>                       |                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Mozart: Name Game: Making Conversations One Syllable at a Time</b> | Partners improvise conversations using one syllable.                                                                                              |



## Tuolumne: The Water's Journey

Students create movements responding to different pictures of water.

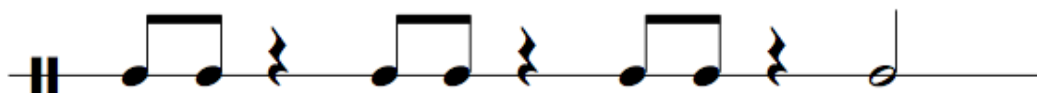
## Facilitating Collaborative Composition

Group composing projects can support a culture of experimentation, respect for multiple points of view, and an ability to compromise. While there are many possible variations of this work, the strategies below are meant to encourage three main benefits.

- Collaborative creative work allows students to learn from and be inspired by one another.
- Group composition instills a sense of community and pride, uniting students when they feel they are part of a creative team.
- Composing within a large group empowers young students by giving them the opportunity to have their contributions be publicly validated—even a small musical decision like changing one note or slightly altering an articulation, can be an important contribution to the whole.

### Incorporating one student's idea into a whole class piece

Imagine your class is collectively composing a musical narrative. At one point, you are working with one student's rhythm to capture the sentiment: "Running out of breath, and suddenly... SURPRISE!" Then the student claps the below rhythm.



At this point, you can encourage other students to build on this rhythmic idea and offer their opinion to the group. Here are a couple of strategies:

- When looking at a visual aid (e.g., melody staircase, staff, step bells), ask your class: *Do we want the first pitch to start off high, low, or in the middle? Which range of pitches sounds most like "running out of breath?"*
- When deciding the very first pitch, go with the first volunteer's idea. Explain to your class that they are at the earliest stage of the composition and that there will be plenty of time for other students to contribute additional ideas.

Once the decision has been made, provide an opportunity for the whole group to internalize the idea. Using the previous rhythm example and a volunteer's choice of "E" for the first note, have the entire class sing or play the full rhythm on the starting pitch.



The reason for singing the entire rhythm on the starting pitch is to continue to solidify the original rhythmic integrity and supports the students' ability to combine pitch and rhythm.

## Classroom Voting

### Reaching Consensus for Multiple Ideas

Voting is an effective, but tricky strategy to use in a democratic classroom. What needs to be avoided is pitting one student against another or fueling the class to play favorites based on social dynamics. Voting can be done successfully when **one student offers multiple ideas**. Since both options belong to one student, s/he is guaranteed success no matter which rhythms, pitches, dynamics, harmonies, etc. are ultimately chosen by the group. The rest of the students become personally invested in the selected idea since they've advocated for their favorite option.

Another benefit for the single student method of gathering multiple ideas is that the volunteer is challenged to reevaluate his/her initial idea and come up with an alternative. This process of revision models for every student the important compositional practice of searching for and discovering multiple possibilities. For inexperienced and sometimes apprehensive composers, they are challenged not to be complacent with their first idea—when students have the opportunity to choose their favorite between two self-generated options, their confidence is boosted, as well as their own capacity to become invested in their own creative work.

Here is an example for continuing a melodic phrase:

- Ask one volunteer to suggest **two different combinations of pitches** to fill in the next two or three notes of rhythm: *If we're composing music that sounds [like our main character is running out of breath], do we want our melody to go up or down? Do we want to move in small steps, skips, or large leaps? Do we want to repeat any note?*
- After the student has heard their first choice of pitch combinations and is thinking of a second option, remind the student s/he can make small changes (e.g., changing only one note), or big changes (e.g., changing all the notes).
- Play both of the student's musical ideas and have your class vote between the two. (e.g., *Which version sounds more like "running out of breath"? [E F E E], or [E A G F]?*)
- Document the final pitches chosen by the class majority.
- Continue this process with additional volunteers to experiment with options for the remaining notes of the rhythmic phrase.

### Additional structures for group composition

Below are some examples of processes where classrooms are divided into small teams to compose together. Groups of 2-5 increase each student's chances of having their own original material included in the final version of a collaborative composition.

#### Composing in pairs: Swapping rhythms (for beginner composers)

- In pairs, have each student (A and B) compose a rhythm. Next, have the pair swap rhythms so student A is adding pitches to student B's rhythm, and vice versa.
- This exercise encourages openness and reliance between collaborators. Each student's experience giving up control over their initial idea will prepare them for larger and more complex group projects in the future.

### **Patchwork of individual melodies (for intermediate composing groups)**

- Assign each individual member to write a short melodic phrase, and then have groups of 3-5 organize all members' material into a sequence to create a longer piece of music.
- This process lends itself well to writing musical narratives or programmatic music. The teacher can divide a story into several excerpts so each member of the group is tasked with composing a musical gesture to complement their assigned part.

### **The Melody Collective (for groups who collaborate on a high level)**

- In groups of 3-4, have each team collaboratively compose a melody or a sequence of rhythms and phrases.
- Teams can vote together to decide on rhythms and pitches in a manner similar to the one described above in **Classroom Voting**.
- Groups like this can often have assigned roles within the group, e.g., 2 composers who make suggestions, 1 transcriber (who writes down all the ideas discussed), and 1 performer (who trials all the composers' ideas). Rotate the role assignments, as necessary.
- This process can work particularly well with a theme and variations structure, where each group is working with a classroom theme and composing one variation.
- If your class is composing in standard rondo form (A-B-A-C-A-D-A), each group can be responsible for composing each new theme: B, C, D, etc.