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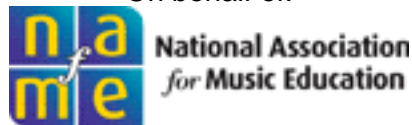
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ASSESSMENT RUBRICS FOR MUSIC COMPOSITION

Rubrics make evaluations concrete and objective, while providing students with detailed feedback and the skills to become sensitive music critics.

BY MAUD HICKEY

Thanks in part to the emphasis that the National Standards for Music Education have placed on comprehensive music instruction, composition is assuming a larger role in music classrooms and teaching situations.¹ Teachers who involve their students in this creative undertaking often find, however, that the challenge to themselves lies in the area of assessment. Though music educators are usually adept at evaluating the quality of musical performance and levels of musical achievement, the task of assessing intrinsically subjective musical compositions poses special problems. While hearing and correcting inaccurate rhythms and notes or improving poor intonation is relatively easy, the prospect of rating a child's musical composition is often daunting to music teachers. What criteria should they use? What makes a musical composition "good" or "bad"? How can a teacher possibly give a formal letter grade to a piece that a student has composed?

One reason why evaluating musical compositions is so difficult is that creating music and responding to it are inherently subjective acts. Beauty can

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be in the ear of the listener, as well as the eye of the beholder. However, recent research has shown that music teachers *can* come to a reasonable agreement as to what is a good composition and what is not.² Given a variety of children's musical compositions to evaluate on a simple five- or seven-point scale, teachers are able to agree consistently as to which compositions are the most creative, most appealing, or most technically solid. However, since this "consensual assessment technique" requires several judges, it is not practical for most

teachers, who are generally the sole arbiters of musical quality in the classroom. Nor does it necessarily reinforce instruction or learning, since it does not provide useful feedback to students.

Guidelines for Composition

Focusing on the challenges of assessment should not obscure an important fact about music composition: Music teachers should not always approach composing as a graded activity. Research clearly supports the notion that the prospect of evaluation or teacher surveillance often squelches children's intrinsic motivation and creativity.³ Composition should be an ongoing activity in the music classroom, providing opportunities for students to experiment freely with musical sound in order to discover how to manipulate and organize it. Students should be encouraged to compose, edit, revise, and "doodle" music as often as possible, keeping their "sketches" as well as final compositions in personal "portfolios" such as those visual artists use to hold their work. Last, and perhaps most important, teachers need not review all of every student's compositions. Instead, they could formally evaluate only a selection—perhaps of the student's own choosing.

In general, whether composition assignments are graded or not, they

should range from very specific tasks with precise requirements to very broadly and loosely defined ones. An assignment asking students to “compose a melody of eight measures in the key of B-flat major, beginning and ending on *do* and using only half and quarter notes” might stand at one end of the spectrum, while at the other end an assignment might invite students to “compose a piece of music that describes your favorite stuffed animal, using whatever sounds and notes you want.” Some students have an easier time composing within well-defined limits, while others prefer the freedom of few specifications. Offering a variety of assignments will give all students a chance for success.



Some students have an easier time composing within well-defined limits, while others prefer the freedom of few specifications.



Teachers can use composition assignments effectively to teach about or solidify musical concepts. Used for this purpose, an assignment not only allows students to exercise their musical creativity but offers the teacher an opportunity to see if students really understand a particular concept, such as 6/8 time or major tonality. The following format can be adapted for a variety of compositional assignments by customizing the information in the parentheses to address specific musical concepts:

■ Compose a melody or rhythm or song that contains (number) uses of (new concept). Be sure that you

can sing (or play) your composition, that it is interesting, and that it is something you like. You should revise it as often as necessary until are satisfied with it.

Teachers might add requirements such as the following, depending on how uniform in structure they want the compositions to be:

■ Your composition should be (number) measures in length.

■ You should use dynamic markings to add variety and expression to your composition.

■ Your composition should be (tempo or style).

■ Your composition should be in the key of (key and modality).

Nevertheless, when teachers come at last to the task of evaluating a composition assignment in this or any other format, they will confront the basic question: What makes some compositions successful and others not? Teachers need concrete criteria to aid them—and their students—in recognizing what is good or not so good about the compositions produced. One way for teachers to direct students in approaching a composition assignment, as well as to provide them with detailed feedback, is through the use of helpful devices known as rubrics, which can serve both as guidelines for students and as assessment tools for teachers.

Guidelines for Rubrics

An assessment rubric is simply a scoring tool that teachers use to list the parts of an assignment that they intend to evaluate in the process of arriving at an overall grade for the student's work. For each component part that teachers list, they should specify the criteria or “descriptors” according to which they intend to rate the student's performance. The descriptors for a particular component should represent a *range of quality*—a spectrum of performance that goes from “excellent” to “mediocre” to “poor,” although teachers may prefer to use other labels. Each descriptor should consist of one or more sentences defining a particular level of performance. Taken together, the descriptors will make a kind of yardstick that the teacher can lay against each student's

work to evaluate his or her performance in a particular area.

Ideally, the components of an assignment and their corresponding descriptors should be so closely tied to the specific task as to be unique to that assignment and context. This correlation between an assignment and its assessment rubric will not only help students to understand the teacher's expectations but will also enable teachers to ascertain students' progress and understanding with considerable precision. Rather than giving a single (and often seemingly subjective and mysterious) grade after students complete a composition assignment, teachers can distribute the assessment rubrics along with the assignment, so that both teachers and students are aware throughout the process of the requirements and expectations that are in place for a successful composition.



Rubrics not only help teachers to understand and measure students' achievements but also help students to become sensitive and informed critics of their own work.



Teachers can follow a series of simple steps for setting up composition assignments and corresponding assessment rubrics.

■ Determine which component parts of the final product are critical to the objectives of the assignment. Spell out a number of these—probably somewhere between three and five—in the assessment rubric. More than five components may overwhelm students; fewer than five may not give them sufficient guidance in the

process or adequate feedback after its completion.

■ Imagine extremes of quality in students' work on each component. Write out, being as explicit as possible, a description of the attributes that the component would exhibit if a student handled it extremely well in his or her work. Detail as many characteristics as you can think of that the component might possess in this superb form. Turning to the opposite end of the spectrum, write out a description of the attributes that the component would exhibit if a student neglected it or addressed it inadequately or inaccurately in his or her work. Detail as many characteristics as you can think of that the component might possess in this extremely weak or diminished state. Try to make each description a short paragraph consisting of three to five sentences.

■ Arrange these two descriptions at opposite ends of a "quality line."

■ Write descriptions of performances that would fall between these end points and position them on the quality line.

■ Repeat this process of creating a quality line for each of the components to be assessed.

Labels for performances at the weak end of the "quality line" should carry constructive rather than negative connotations. Rubrics should not include terms such as "poor" or "worst." Designating very weak and very strong performances as "rookie" and "pro" or "apprentice" and "expert" can be quite effective, because "rookie" and "apprentice" accord to students whose performance is weak the respect that is due to beginners. These terms allow students to maintain their self-esteem and give them confidence that they can improve, thus encouraging them to make the effort necessary to become "pros" or "experts." Teachers should also use numbers or percentages wherever possible, in order to give concrete examples of what is expected at each point on the quality line.

There are many component parts of a specific composition, as well as other criteria for compositions in general, that teachers can consider in evaluating students' work. Teachers can examine particular musical elements,

such as rhythm, meter, and dynamics, to evaluate their appropriateness or effectiveness. Teachers can look at the completeness of a student's work or, in instrumental classes, its suitability for the particular instrument for which he or she was writing the piece.



*When students work
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Teachers can also include other, less well-defined and more abstract components of composition, such as creativity, craftsmanship, and aesthetic appeal, along with concrete components that are specific to a particular assignment. Such broad, general considerations are important to include, in order to show students that these criteria are also valued and have a place in assessment, as well as to encourage students to think holistically about music composition.

Using General Criteria

The rubric for composition assessment in figure 1 offers examples of descriptors for three general components: aesthetic appeal, creativity, and craftsmanship. These descriptors are based on data from a consensual assessment reliability study conducted by the author.⁴ Composers and teachers described what they thought about when they assessed these three areas of pieces of music. Analysis of their responses yielded the wording for the descriptors shown in the rubric. Each of these components could be used or adapted for any specific or general composition assignment. In addition, teachers could make these appropriate

for younger students by changing the language slightly.

Other Examples of Rubrics

The following examples present a variety of composition assignments. Accompanying figures show assessment rubrics with possible criteria and descriptors for evaluating each assignment.

■ *A composition using dotted-eighth notes and sixteenth notes.* Compose a melody or rhythm (for your instrument) that includes at least four examples of a dotted-eighth note and sixteenth note rhythm. Be sure that you can sing (or play) your melody and that it is interesting and something that you like. You should revise it until you are satisfied with it. In addition, your composition should (1) be at least eight measures long and (2) include dynamic markings to add variety and expression. Figure 2 shows a rubric for assessing the assignment.

■ *A composition in rondo form.* Compose a melody (for your instrument) that is in rondo form. Your "A" theme should be at least two measures long. Employ at least three other themes. Be sure that you can sing (or play) your melody and that it is interesting and something that you like. You should revise it until you are satisfied with it. Your completed composition should be at least sixteen measures long. Figure 3 shows a rubric for assessing the assignment.

The following two assignments ask students to compose melodies. The first assignment sets clear, precise parameters, and the second one leaves the field more open, allowing students more freedom of expression. The accompanying assessment rubrics are also very different. The rubric for the first assignment is designed to evaluate simply whether students completed the tasks and produced compositions appropriate to their instruments (if applicable). The rubric for the second assignment adds other criteria to these kinds of task-oriented components, including one that addresses overall aesthetic appeal.

■ *A melody.* (Teachers need to provide students with a harmonic template.) Write a melody in the key of A-flat that begins on *do* and ends on *ti*-

Figure 1. Rubric for assessing general criteria in a composition assignment

| Components | Quality Line | | | |
|-------------------------|---|---|---|--|
| | Needs Work | | | Terrific! |
| Aesthetic Appeal | Does not present an effective general impression. Musical ideas do not hold the listener's interest. | Includes at least one interesting musical idea. Yet, the overall impression is not effective. | Includes some interesting musical ideas. The general impression is pleasant and moderately effective. | Strong aesthetic appeal and general impression. Would be enjoyed by many listeners. Keeps the listener interested. |
| Creativity | Musical idea is familiar or a cliché. No variety or exploration of musical elements (range, timbre, dynamics, tempo, rhythm, melody). | Musical idea is neither familiar nor a cliché. However, there is no development, variety, or exploration of musical elements. | Involves some original aspect(s) or manipulation(s) of musical idea(s). Explores and varies at least one musical element. | Includes very original, unusual, or imaginative musical ideas. Explores and varies at least two musical elements. |
| Craftsmanship | Gives no sense of a completed musical idea. Exhibits no clear beginning, middle, or end section. Form appears random rather than organized. Musical elements (range, dynamics, timbre, tempo, texture, rhythm, melody) do not connect well or are not used to organize musical ideas or the form. | Presents one complete musical idea. However, composition lacks overall completeness. Fails to use musical elements to organize musical ideas or form. | Ending feels final. Uses at least one musical element to organize the musical ideas and overall form. | Presents at least one complete musical idea. Has a coherent and organized form with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Uses musical elements to organize musical ideas or the form. |

Figure 2. Assessment rubric for composition using dotted-eighth and sixteenth notes

| Components | Quality Line | | | |
|--|--|---|--|---|
| | Needs Work | | | Terrific! |
| Includes at least four dotted-eighth and sixteenth note rhythms | Contains no dotted-eighth and sixteenth note rhythms. | Contains one or two dotted-eighth and sixteenth note rhythms. | Contains three dotted-eighth and sixteenth note rhythms. | Contains four or more dotted-eighth and sixteenth note rhythms. |
| Includes dynamic markings and is eight measures long | Contains no dynamic markings and is less than eight measures long. | Is at least eight measures long or uses dynamic markings. | Is at least eight measures long and uses dynamic markings. | Is at least eight measures long and uses dynamic markings effectively for expression. |
| Melody | Does not feel complete or coherent. | Seems complete and coherent but lacks imagination. | Seems complete and coherent and contains some imaginative aspects. | Is convincingly complete, coherent, and imaginative. |

do. Referring to the harmonic template, use only notes from the chord tones shown below each measure. Be sure that you can sing (or play) your melody and that it is interesting and something that you like. You should revise it until you are satisfied with it. Figure 4 shows a rubric for assessing the assignment.

■ *A song.* Write a song (for your instrument). Your song should include at least two complete musical ideas that complement each other. Be sure that you can sing (or play) your song and that it is interesting and something that you like. You should revise it until you are satisfied with it. Figure 5 shows a rubric for assessing the assignment.

Other Ideas

Giving a rubric to students along with a composition assignment not only guides their steps but also enables



*Teachers and students
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composition assignments.*



them to evaluate their progress as they go. By engaging students in this kind of directed self-evaluation, teachers are assisting them to develop general self-assessment skills that they can apply to their future efforts. Thus, rubrics not only help teachers to understand and measure students' achievements and serve as guidelines to students but also help students to become sensitive and informed critics of their own work.

Teachers and students can also work together to develop rubrics for composition assignments. Once students and teachers have the quality line completely laid out and fully described, teachers may choose to attach a letter grade to each level of achievement that it describes. Doing so will assist them ultimately in giving a letter grade to the composition as a whole. Seeing how the teacher intends to grade their work gives students important information that they can

Figure 3. Assessment rubric for a composition in rondo form

| Components | Quality Line | | | |
|---|--|--|--|---|
| | Needs Work | | | Terrific! |
| Rondo form | Has no formal structure. | Has a clear two-measure theme and one other theme but is not in rondo form. | Is in rondo form but with only two other themes—ABACA. | Is clearly in rondo form, with three other themes—ABACADA. |
| Suits the instrument (if applicable) | Is outside the practical range of the instrument and is beyond the technical grasp of players of this level. | Is within the practical range of the instrument but has too many difficult passages for players of this level. | Is within the practical range of the instrument and has only one or two passages that are technically awkward for players of this level. | Falls within the proper range of the instrument and is playable by performers at this level of proficiency. |
| Melody | Does not feel complete or coherent. | Seems complete but lacks imagination. | Feels musically complete and contains some imaginative aspects. | Feels complete and coherent and makes musical sense. It is imaginative and aesthetically effective. |
| Rhythm | Is erratic. It does not make musical sense for the piece overall. | Is stable but does not have any variety or does not make musical sense for the piece as a whole. | Makes musical sense for the overall form of the composition. | Is coherent and makes musical sense. It adds to the aesthetic effectiveness of the composition. |

Figure 4. Assessment rubric for a melody with well-defined parameters

| Components | Quality Line | | | |
|---|--|---|--|---|
| | Needs Work | | | Terrific! |
| Begins on <i>do</i> and ends on <i>ti-do</i> | Does not begin or end with the correct notes (<i>do</i> , <i>ti-do</i>). | Begins or ends with the correct notes but does not do both. | Begins and ends with <i>do</i> but does not include <i>ti</i> . | Begins and ends with the correct notes as specified by the assignment. |
| Uses only notes from chord tones on template | Less than 50% of the remaining notes match the corresponding chord tones. | Between 50% and 75% of the remaining notes match the corresponding chord tones. | Between 75% and 90% of the remaining notes match the corresponding chord tones. | All other notes match the corresponding chord tones. |
| Suits the instrument (if applicable) | Is outside the practical range of the instrument and is beyond the technical grasp of players of this level. | Is within the practical range of the instrument but includes too many difficult passages for players of this level. | Is within the practical range of the instrument and has only one or two passages that are technically awkward for players of this level. | The composition falls within the proper range of the instrument and is playable by performers at this level of proficiency. |

use before they begin, while they work, and after they get the assignment back from the teacher. Teachers must always be clear about their goals for the end product and the activities in which students must engage to achieve the objectives. Assessment should be used to educate, not to punish.

Scoring by means of rubrics has become popular in education within the past few years as interest in standards-based education and authentic, performance-based assessment has mounted. Harvard Project Zero collaborated with the Educational Testing Service and the Pittsburgh Public Schools to create a guide for implementing authentic assessment in the arts. Two resulting handbooks outline ideas for authentic assessment of

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Assessment should be used to educate, not to punish.

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music performance, portfolios, and other creative work and include an “Encyclopedia of Assessment Dimensions” with ideas for developing assessment rubrics for children’s compositions.⁵

Why devise assessment rubrics? To paraphrase one group of authors, a rubric for music composition fills the “need for assessment tools that can enhance teachers’ understandings of [composition] and inform instruction.”⁶ Rubrics engage students in the learning and evaluation process. When students work with and are assessed according to rubrics, grades do not take them by surprise, puzzle them, or leave them without feedback, as is often the case with apparently arbitrary letter grades. In music composi-

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tion, assessment rubrics probably offer the most authentic and honest way of measuring the "quality" of children's creative work in an area that is inherently very subjective.

Notes

1. Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, *National Standards for Arts Education* (Reston, VA: Music Educators National Conference, 1994).

2. See Randy L. Bangs, "An Application of Amabile's Model of Creativity to Music Instruction: A Comparison of Motivational Strategies" (Ph.D. diss., University of Nebraska, 1994); Maud Hickey, "Qualitative and Quantitative Relationships between Children's Creative Musical Thinking Processes and Products" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1995); Maud Hickey, "Consensual Assessment of Children's Musical Compositions" (Research poster presentation, New York State School Music Association Convention, Kiamesha Lake, New York, 1996).

3. Alfie Kohn, *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993).

4. Hickey, "Consensual Assessment."

5. Ellen Winner, Lyle Davidson, and Larry Scripp, eds., *Arts PROPEL: A Handbook for Music* (Princeton: Educational Testing Service, 1992); Ellen Winner (ed.), *Arts PROPEL: An Introductory Handbook* (Princeton: Educational Testing Service, 1991).

6. John R. Novak, Joan L. Herman, and Maryl Gearhart, "Establishing Validity for Performance-Based Assessments: An Illustration for Collections of Student Writing," *Journal of Educational Research* 89 (1996): 221. ■



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Figure 5. Assessment rubric for a melody with two musical ideas

| Components | Quality Line | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Needs Work | | | Terrific! |
| Has at least two complete musical ideas that complement each other | Has no apparent complete musical ideas. | Has only one complete musical idea or at least two musical ideas, but they do not work together to create a sense of completeness in the song as a whole. The transitions between musical ideas are not smooth. | Has at least two complete musical ideas that complement each other within the structure of the song. However, the transitions between musical ideas are not smooth. | Has at least two complete musical ideas that complement each other, creating a feeling of completeness in the song. The transitions between the musical ideas are smooth. |
| Suits the instrument (if applicable) | Is outside the practical range of the instrument and is beyond the technical grasp of players of this level player. | Is within the practical range of the instrument but has too many difficult passages for players of this level. | Is within the practical range of the instrument and has only one or two passages that are technically awkward for players of this level. | Falls within the proper range of the instrument and is playable by performers of this level of proficiency. |
| Melody | Does not feel complete or coherent. | Seems complete but lacks imagination. | Feels musically complete and contains some imaginative aspects. | Feels complete and coherent and makes musical sense. It is imaginative and aesthetically effective. |
| Rhythm | Is erratic. Does not make musical sense for the piece overall. | Is stable but does not have any variety or does not make musical sense for the piece as a whole. | Makes musical sense for the overall form of the composition. | Is coherent and makes musical sense. It adds to the aesthetic effectiveness of the composition. |
| Aesthetic Appeal | Does not present an effective general impression. Musical ideas do not hold the listener's interest. | Includes at least one interesting musical idea. Yet, the overall impression is not aesthetically effective. | Includes some interesting musical ideas. The general impression is pleasant and moderately effective. | Makes strong general impression and has great appeal. Would be enjoyed by many listeners. Keeps the listener interested. |