

# Putting the E- in E-nsemble

With Alex Shapiro

[www.alexshapiro.org](http://www.alexshapiro.org)

Teaching Plan for Middle School Students

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If you are reading this, your teaching has been completely disrupted by the pandemic. The goal of this unit is to assist you in aiding your students to not only continue to play, but to delve into composition, audio recording/production and inch closer to the actual inclusion of creativity in the large ensemble performance ensemble curriculum.

## Relationship to National Music Standards

The outlined process allows for the incorporation of the 2014 NAfME National Music Standards for both the *Ensembles Strand* and the *Composition/Theory Strand*.

Individual states may have their own standards as well (such as Wisconsin), that can be blended into this sequence of instruction.

Additionally, the *Core Music Standards Enduring Understandings and Essential Questions* may be referenced at various points in the delivery of this unit.

## Anticipated Benefits to Students

(examples of National Standards Enduring Understandings presented)

1. It will motivate students to keep playing their instruments and to remain engaged with each other.
  - a. Enduring Understanding: Performers make interpretive decisions based on their understanding of context and expressive intent.
2. It will connect their love of playing their instrument with a newfound self-confidence of personal expression.
  - a. Enduring Understanding: Musicians connect their personal interests, experiences, ideas, and knowledge to creating, performing, and responding.

3. It will be a lesson in how different choices in linear direction and motivic development have significantly varying impact on otherwise identical source material.
  - a. Enduring Understanding: Through their use of elements and structures of music, creators and performers provide clues to their expressive intent.
  - b. Enduring Understanding: Analyzing creators' context and how they manipulate elements of music provides insight into their intent and informs performance.
4. It will be a lesson in compositional decisions and "flow": some passages will naturally work better next to each other than others, and this will be an object lesson in that phenomenon.
  - a. Enduring Understanding: The creative ideas, concepts, and feelings that influence musicians' work emerge from a variety of sources.
5. It will be a lesson in using technology to create art, and in recording in a professional manner.
  - a. Although the National Standards do not directly address the use of technology, the [WMEA Wisconsin Music Standards](#) have expanded to include technology.
6. It can even be a lesson in copyright: working with co-writers, and, should they choose to publish the resulting piece, learning about registering for performing rights.
7. It will be a lesson in perseverance and attention to detail, as students strive to play well on their recordings, which will often require multiple takes.
  - a. Enduring Understanding: To express their musical ideas, musicians analyze, evaluate, and refine their performance over time through openness to new ideas, persistence, and the application of appropriate criteria.
8. It will offer a journey in self-discovery, as students who had not previously thought that they could compose take pleasure in creating new music!
  - a. Enduring Understanding: Musicians connect their personal interests, experiences, ideas, and knowledge to creating, performing, and responding.

## Project Goals

Students will experience composing music via online collaboration and file transfer. Through this process, they will continue to play their instruments, but will more clearly understand the many elements that go into creating a music composition. At the conclusion of the unit, each student will have progressed from composing a **15-second passage** to producing a **one-minute work** using their own material. As they explore the composition concept of *motivic development*, each student will create an even longer and musically cohesive piece. Of additional and significant value are the skills developed in audio recording and editing, and the ongoing sense of community among peers.

It is essential for all involved to have access to and familiarity with a **web-based central coordination site** (such as Canvas or Google Classroom) and video-conferencing capability (Zoom or Google Hangouts) to use as a portal for downloading and uploading audio files and other class-related information and tools is essential for all involved.

Although audio quality for video conferencing as well as for creating recordings will be greatly enhanced if students are able to use a **USB external microphone** rather than the internal mic found on a phone or laptop, it is not an absolute necessity.

**Headphones or earbuds** will be necessary for recording, as will having a **laptop** or a **smart phone**, and ideally, both. There are many **free music recording and editing software applications** such as Audacity. Links may be found here:

**Audacity:**

[Download](#)

[Audacity for Beginners](#)

[Recording with a Click Track](#)

This course is designed to be synchronous and asynchronous. Students will be sharing screens and computer sound as they demonstrate their work during the classes. Some asynchronous work will also occur as necessary (homework)

It is recommended that class sessions and all interactions be recorded. The recordings will capture the presenter's audio, video and computer screen. Student audio and video will be recorded if they share their computer audio and video during the recorded session. The recordings will only be accessible to students enrolled in the course to review materials. These recordings will not be shared with or accessible to the public, but will be useful to the students, particularly if there is a scheduling conflict causing an asynchronous experience.

Students who do not wish to be recorded should:

- Change their screen name to hide any personal identifying information.
- Avoid sharing their computer audio or video during sessions, and instead, upload the files for individual access by others during the online class.

## **Project Overview**

An existing ensemble will initially be divided into small groups of 3 to 5 students. Each “Sound-Team” will be instructed and supervised by an ensemble director. At the discretion of the instructor of record, an advanced student may serve as a resource for specific sound-teams. The instructor will help facilitate the process, answer questions, and discuss basic composition and technology concepts. The creative process and resulting product, however, should be driven by the shared vision of the students within each Sound-Team.

For the initial use of this unit the instructor should consider building teams of mostly homogenous instruments: flutes and oboes together, low brass together, etc. before they become part of a team. The reasoning for this is that the students will feel more at ease with each other online. The human connection and camaraderie are notably positive aspects of music making. As students progress through the unit, it will be musically more interesting to vary the instrumentation within the Sound-Teams.

### **Learning Experience 1 – Synchronous course delivery preferred**

1. Introduction of unit to students –
  - a. This may occur through the recorded introduction by Alex Shapiro or may come from the instructor. In any case, BE CREATIVE!
  - b. Explain use of technology
    - i. Demonstrate how to access folders
    - ii. Demonstrate how to access the drone (pitch) recorded file
    - iii. Demonstrate how to record an audio file
      - Include instruction on –
        - Placement of recording device
        - How to check quality of recording
        - How to adjust volume of recording

- iv. Demonstrate how to record an audio file while listening to the drone pitch
- v. Demonstrate how to upload recording
- vi. Demonstrate how to access recordings in the folder
- vii. Announce the creation of Sound-teams (to be posted)

## **Learning Experience 2 (asynchronous homework)**

**2014 Music Standards (Composition/Theory)**, CREATING – Imagine - EQ: How do musicians generate creative ideas?

1. Each student will be able to access an .mp3 file of a 15-second, undulating B-flat drone, via the school-approved platform.
2. Each student will listen to the drone and then create and explore original improvisations/compositions “over” the drone on their instrument. In the case of percussionists, students may use a drum, bell kit, practice pad or any other “percussive sounding” device.
3. While listening to the drone through headphones, each student will record their 10-15 second musical creation.
  - a. It is suggested the drone can be played through a laptop style computer and the recording occur using a cellphone.
4. Students will upload their recording to their specified Team folder in the class folder on the school-approved online platform.
5. Notation is not required.

## **Learning Experience 3 – Synchronous course delivery preferred**

1. Instructor shall ask the class “What makes music interesting/memorable”? “How does music evoke feelings?”
  - a. Answers are to be collected by the instructor and posted on a shared document.
2. A rubric incorporating aspects of the National Music Standards, state standards, curriculum guidelines and/or class generated criteria will be created to be used for formal assessment at the conclusion of the unit.

- a. Be certain to include the students when creating the rubric. The discussion can be enlightening for all involved!
3. Instructor will demonstrate how to access the specified music recording/editing software platform.
  - a. Have students access the platform on their home computer.
4. Instructor will demonstrate how to download audio files from a specified folder.
  - a. Have students download their specific Sound-Team audio files.
5. Instructor will demonstrate how to import and manipulate audio files.
  - a. Have students experiment with importing and manipulating audio files.
6. Instructor will explain the next assignment.
  - a. Each Sound-Team will have strict parameters—some of which, like instrumentation, duration, delivery format and date, mirror the parameters of professional composing commissions. Oftentimes, composers find inspiration and creativity from greater restriction, and for first-time composers, a framework of rules and limitations is helpful in preventing the assignment from feeling overwhelming. Subsequent experiences will allow for increasing amounts of creative freedom.

#### **Learning Experience 4 (asynchronous homework)**

**2014 Music Standards (Composition/Theory)**, RESPONDING – Evaluate - EQ: How do we judge the quality of musical work(s) and performance(s).

1. Students will review and reflect on each Sound-Team members' audio submission, referencing the list of musical elements created during LE #3, line 1.
  - a. Reflections will be no more than one paragraph per audio file and submitted to the instructor.
2. Students will review the appropriate (chosen) software application tutorials. Below are links to three very helpful tutorial videos created by University of Washington's Chris Mathakul.
  - a. ***Basic Audacity setup***
  - b. ***Audacity multitrack tutorial***

3. Students will “compose” a work individually by organizing/layering all of their specific Sound-Team’s audio files into one work. This is a time for open creativity! (Stress that all efforts are correct) **2014 Music Standards (Composition/Theory)**, CREATING - Plan and Make - EQ: How do musicians make creative decisions?
  - a. Things to consider when manipulating the sound files to create the composition –
    - i. Texture
    - ii. Unity and Variety
    - iii. Rhythmic interaction
    - iv. Complimentary and contrasting musical lines
    - v. Duration and/or tempo
  - b. NOTATION IS NOT REQUIRED**
    - i. Consider asking students to notate them in one or both manners: graphically, using their imagination and a sense of creative freedom to draw what they hear, and/or traditionally using western notation.
    - c. The sole rule for this particular assignment is that **passages/motives may not be edited or chopped up**, because the lesson revolves around many people manipulating the same material, and the resulting variations. Recordings for this round may not be sped-up, slowed-down, reversed, or mixed in a manner that alters the integrity of the original recording.

### **Learning Experience 5 – Synchronous course delivery preferred**

1. Instructor will comment on reflections submitted, without using names of students.
  - a. Referring to the list of terms from 3a in LE #4, instructor points out specific examples.
2. Instructor brings forward the concept of motive, with four select specific examples (these could be provided to help the instructor, one each from the styles of classical, jazz, country and hip-hop music). A growing list of examples is available on the curriculum page of Ms. Shapiro’s website: [https://www.alexshapiro.org/Shapiro-E-ensemble\\_Syllabus.html](https://www.alexshapiro.org/Shapiro-E-ensemble_Syllabus.html).

- a. Following the playing/demonstrating of an example, the instructor asks “How was the motive manipulated by the composer?”
  - i. A list is of motivic development techniques kept and posted in the class shared folder. As needed, the instructor may reframe/relabel terms or concepts to incorporate musical vocabulary (ex – “All the note values were longer” can be reframed as “Augmentation”, etc.)

### **Learning Experience 6 (asynchronous homework)**

**2014 Music Standards (Ensemble)**, PERFORMING - Analyze - EQ: How does understanding the structure and context of musical works inform performance. Students will identify and list three examples compositions of motives in three different genres of music.

- a. With each example, the student will write a one sentence description of how the composer manipulated the motive.
2. Students will create a motive to place over the drone-pitch.
3. The motive will be recorded as a solo line, bounced to an .mp3 file and uploaded into the assigned Sound-Team’s folder.
  - a. The resulting .mp3 audio snippet (solo; not mixed with the drone track) should be titled with a few descriptive keywords that identify the nature of the passage. For instance, “pulse-based” “aleatoric” “quarter-120” “uneven\_pulse” “melodic” “loose\_improv” “slow” “medium\_tempo” “chaotic-fast,” etc. This will make it easier for the students to then assemble their co-composition, because they’ll be able to discern the sound elements in the file names.
4. Students will schedule a time to “meet” virtually and discuss the various motives. The instructor should be present for all such meetings.

**NOTE BELOW:** Students **may not use pre-recorded samples** of any existing

music. This is for two reasons: #1: copyright! #2: the entire point of this class is to create and play original music.



### **Learning Experience 7 – Synchronous course delivery preferred**

1. Instructor will comment of meetings attended and the motives created.
2. Instructor will guide students through the process manipulating motives with examples via the DAW platform.
3. Instructor will guide students through the process of editing and mixing audio files using the school-approved DAW platform.
  - a. Tutorials on the applications discussed during class will have been uploaded to the online portal. Students are to watch online tutorials they find on YouTube and through Ms. Shapiro’s curriculum web page to become more comfortable with the technology.

### **Learning Experience 8 (asynchronous homework)**

1. A longer (one-minute) undulating B-flat drone that includes a few instances of F, will have been uploaded by the instructor to the class folder. Each student will implement their motive and “develop” it in at least two ways, resourcing the information gained in LE #7.
2. Each student will record their one-minute composition over the drone, demonstrating at least two types of motivic development.
3. Students will bounce their recording to the .mp3 format and upload it into their designated Sound-Team folder.
4. Students will write a one-paragraph description of the processes implemented in their composition.
5. Students will schedule a time to “meet” virtually.
  - a. Each student will “present” their composition and describe the process used for manipulating their motive
  - b. The instructor should be present for all such meetings.

### **Learning Experience 9 – Synchronous delivery preferred**

1. The instructor will review the process thus far.
2. The instructor will posit questions to guide the discussion of the process and products
  - a. Consider ways in which the sounds were brought together.

- b. What roles do the recordings serve in respect to the greater composition?
  - c. How do these “roles” vary from one version to the next?
  - d. What were some challenges of using the prescribed instrument groupings?
  - e. What were some benefits?
  - f. Discuss challenges of the technical process (recording/sound quality/ etc).
  - g. Discuss the challenges of the creative process mixing the recordings into something meaningful, etc.
  - h. What makes some pieces more compelling than others?
  - i. What did anyone do that was unexpected?
  - j. How can we learn from one another?
3. The instructor will explain and demonstrate the next LE – combining tracks

### **Learning Experience 10 (asynchronous homework)**

1. Each student will download all of their respective teams’ audio files.
2. Each student will layer 3-4 tracks into one cohesive composition.
  - a. Portions of tracks may be manipulated in any way available to the student, including the use of silences.
    - i. Refer to LE #7 as needed.
  - b. Compositions will be bounced to .mp3 files and uploaded into the specified Sound-Team folder.
3. Students will write a one-paragraph description of the processes implanted in their composition.
4. Students will schedule a time to “meet” virtually.
  - a. Each student will “present” their composition and describe the process used for manipulating their motive.

- b. Students will discuss the topics/questions brought forward in LE #9.
- c. The instructor should be present for all such meetings.

### **Learning Experience 11 – Synchronous delivery preferred**

**2014 Music Standards (Composition/Theory)**, PERFORMING - Present - EQ: When is a performance judged ready to present?

1. All students will present their compositions to the ensemble.
  - a. This could occur during 2 class sessions or over several class sessions.
2. Using the criteria established in LE –
  - a. The Instructor will assess each composition.
  - b. Students will be assigned specific Sound-Team folders to assess. Students will be assigned to Sound-Teams of which they were not a member.

### **Additional Ideas**

1. Schedule Zoom master class sessions with non-performing and performing professional composers working in different genres, to give the students insight into the compositional process.
2. Schedule larger Zoom sessions in which the various Sound-Teams can meet and share ideas and experiences. This could be a good preparation for Class Five and the assignment to use any of the music from any of the Sound-Teams.
3. Encourage Sound-Team members to check in with each other between classes and discuss their processes.
4. Consider adding additional rules, like “compose and record one major-sounding motive, and one minor-sound motive, and one percussive motive”, etc.
5. Consider having students notate some or all of the resulting recordings, for future live electroacoustic performance.

## Suggested Additional Techniques

Consider beginning the course with some limitations that will offer a framework and make the concept of “composing” less intimidating: assign a strict pitch group of 6 notes— including chromatic ones that release team members from a distinct key center— from which the students must create their first motive. Each of the Sound-Teams could be given the same 6 notes, or different Sound-Teams may be assigned different pitch groups.

Consider assigning a tempo, and/or a meter, in which case a click track will need to be created (this is not difficult). Tempi and meter do not necessarily need to be the same for each Sound-Team.

## Available Consultants

***Composer Alex Shapiro is available as a consultant, and/or as a guest lecturer for one or more Zoom sessions with students. She is also available to help customize this course to match the needs of any school. She can be reached at [alex@alexshapiro.org](mailto:alex@alexshapiro.org).***

***Composer Brian Balmages is available as a consultant, and/or as a guest lecturer for one or more Zoom sessions with students. He can be reached at [brian@brianbalmages.com](mailto:brian@brianbalmages.com).***

***Glenn C. Hayes, Director of Bands and Professor of Music Education at the University of Wisconsin - Whitewater, is available as a consultant or guest conductor. He may be reached at [hayesg@uww.edu](mailto:hayesg@uww.edu).***