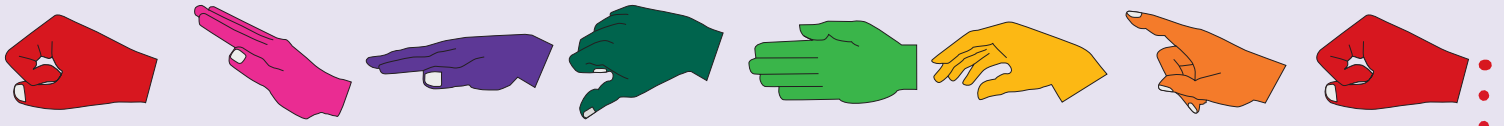


Lost in Translation



Connecting Prior Learning to Smooth the Elementary-to-Middle School Musical Transition

by Kathy Kuddes

Regardless of the focus of your program, I suspect that at some point, you have been involved in a conversation where you either said or heard a comment like one of the following: “I don’t know what they’re doing down at that elementary school, but when they get here those kids can’t read a note. I have to start over completely!” or “Why don’t those middle school directors tap into everything we’ve taught down here? Our kids have a lot of musical knowledge, yet they treat them like they don’t know anything!”

The truth is that each of these impressions is at the same time correct and incorrect. While a quality elementary music curriculum provides students with fundamental musical understanding, the terminology and vocabulary used may be unfamiliar to the middle school director, and thus lead to negative assumptions about prior instruction.

It is clearly in our students’ best interest to smooth this important transition between elementary general music and middle school ensembles. Doing so requires a number of strategic conversations to improve mutual understanding, respect, curriculum design, and instructional delivery on both sides of this programmatic divide.

We’re All Working Hard

Before one can deal with the instructional issues, one must understand more about the daily realities at each level. Through targeted discussions, music educators typically discover a number of important facts that help to inform their understanding of each group of teachers. At the elementary level most schedules allow for only one or two lessons per week, providing elementary students a total of 30–45 hours of instruction *annually*. Most middle school students have 45 minutes of band, choir, or orchestra instruction daily, providing these students with 115–130 hours

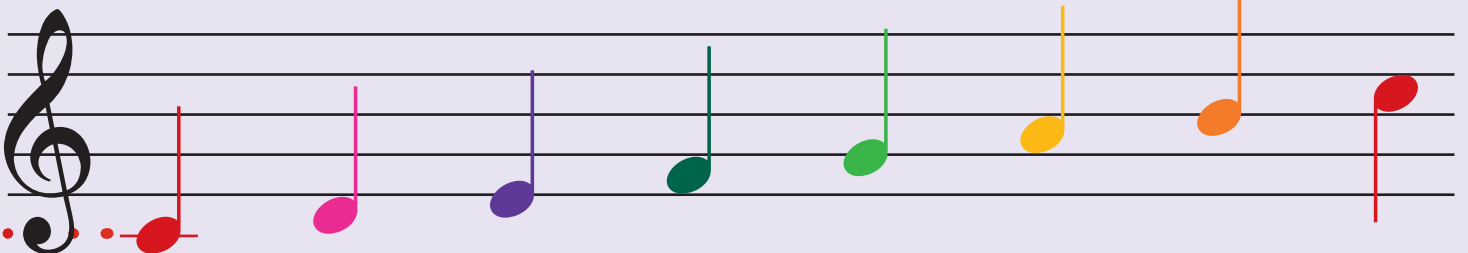
of instruction annually. Given this reality, it seems appropriate that most of the transitional instruction should take place at the middle school level.

Once a level of understanding about the realities of instruction has been established, it will be possible to agree to the fact that *we’re all working hard*. This allows the teacher team to turn their discussions toward larger curricular questions. Two fundamental issues must be understood and negotiated—differences in terminology and instructional modality. While the first may seem to be the most perilous, it is really secondary to the latter in terms of student success. Therefore, the next set of discussions should focus on connecting the more aural approach used by the major elementary music methodologies to the traditional notation-oriented approach of most secondary programs.

Instructional Modalities

All of the active music making approaches (Orff, Kodály, Dalcroze, and Music Learning Theory) advocate a sound-before-symbol approach to early music instruction. Based heavily on a model of language acquisition, initial experiences are presented as aural/oral activities that provide a musical framework for students. Through these rote musical explorations, students acquire a context that gives meaning to the symbol systems of music. Once introduced, these symbolic representations of rhythm and melody are reinforced in a variety of visual and written activities to provide students with opportunities to communicate using this new musical vocabulary.

The traditional symbol-to-sound approach that has been the historic methodology of the western tradition of music education turns this instructional arrangement around and can necessitate a significant paradigm shift for students. Aural skills are often overlooked during early instrumental instruction that is driven



by a strict focus on tone and technique. The adjustment can be difficult and frustrating for students and teachers alike. Students want to make music on their new instruments right away, yet many methods spend extreme amounts of time developing only the solid characteristic sounds of the instrument through long-tone exercises. This focus limits the instructional activities and leads many of the rhythmic and melodic skills developed at the elementary level to atrophy. However, a few moments spent in the middle school class using the voice to read musical examples beyond the students' current technical ability is an easy way to maintain these skills until the technique catches up. Best practices encourage this activity with both rhythmic and melodic reading.

Speaking the Same Language

Once there is some agreement regarding the need to connect to prior learning for future success within the music program, the teacher team should discuss the vocabulary used at each level. This conversation will focus primarily on the variety of *tools* used for rhythmic and melodic reading. Individual teachers often have strong opinions regarding these systems. If the conversation is focused on what is best for the students, however, some give and take can happen and will be to everyone's benefit.

Rhythm

For young children rhythm is heavily tied to text. The first definition often learned is that "rhythm is the way the words go." This implies that most of what is being performed in the

younger grades is moving patterns. A song made up of whole notes isn't very interesting to sing or listen to, so very few are in the repertoire.

The most common rhythm duration syllables used in the elementary school setting are largely non-metric. A particular sound or syllable is attached to a specific note value or subdivision of the beat but does not require students to understand or internalize a particular meter to be successful (e.g., ta & ti-ti, ta-ka-di-mi, or doo-day). The reason for this is largely developmental. The concept of groups of accented and unaccented beats is highly abstract and requires sophisticated listening to comprehend in an aural/oral musical environment. Students with a solid rhythmic background can make the transition to a metric counting system (e.g., 1-ee-and-a or 1-ta-te-ta) with relative ease, so long as the teacher connects the known and unknown systems through a few bridging activities.

Try this reading sequence to continue to transition to a metric counting system:

1. Read the rhythm verbally using the elementary system while conducting the meter.
2. Conduct the meter and label the beats appropriately.
3. Conduct the meter and add the designated subdivision of the beat (e.g., 1-te, 2-te).
4. Read the rhythm again verbally using the metric system while continuing to conduct the meter.

Once the transition is firm, try the following sequence to continue to develop and reinforce rhythmic reading:

1. Read the rhythm verbally using the preferred syllable system.

2. Clap the rhythm while thinking the rhythm syllables.
3. Tongue, buzz, or shadow bow while thinking rhythm syllables.
4. Play or sing the rhythm pattern.

Melody

Absolute pitch is truly necessary only when playing an instrument of fixed pitch while reading from a designated clef. Much of the melodic reading done at the elementary level will most likely be based on the *moveable do* system. This system is designed to reinforce the aural relationships between pitches in a tonality and thus can be *moved* to any location in any clef while the intervallic relationship of each tone to the tonic is preserved. The use of known syllables can assist students in developing the inner ear and establish more “true tuning” within a particular key. This tool also can help prevent too much *well-tempered* playing or singing.

In the elementary music setting, almost 100% of staff reading will be from the treble clef because of the tessitura of the young voice. In addition, all of the usual classroom melodic instruments (including bass xylophones and metalophones) are notated in the treble clef regardless of where they actually sound. Middle school directors may find that using solfège to introduce the tune, without reliance on a clef, may be a useful beginning exercise. Follow this with the reinforcement (or introduction) of absolute pitch names

as students learn the physical position of these notes on the instrument and their visual location in the appropriate clef.

Many elementary specialists will introduce a symbol referred to as the *do clef* which indicates the location of *do* on the staff. This symbol can be used in combination with traditional clefs during early reading. Much of the staff reading in elementary programs will be in C, G, or F and may not include a key signature for tunes that are strictly pentatonic in nature. The transitional use of the *do clef* can assist students in locating the position of *do* in a given exercise and reinforce the connection to the key signatures commonly encountered by their respective instruments.

do clef in G position on the bass clef

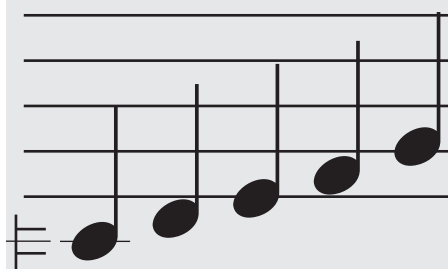


Aural Skills and Singing

Students can typically hear and sing much more complex music than they can read at any level. The greatest skill any musician can possess is a keen ear. Instruction at every level should include more time working in a purely aural/oral


modality to develop these aural skills. Exercises where students must produce correct pitches based on a teacher’s hand signs or “tone ladder” or decode/notate aural patterns don’t have to take a great deal of class time but they will greatly benefit students and their future ensembles.

C pentachord tone ladder on the staff



Teachers should provide techniques and visual aids to support and reinforce the ear, not to train it. When students sing before they play (both in solfège and using absolutes) or audiate before they sing, both the accuracy and the intonation of many first readings will be improved. What students are allowed to write in their score, with relation to note names or solfège syllables, should be limited to situations where special assistance is needed.

Begin the Conversation

As professional educators, we owe it to our students to put their prior knowledge and future success at the top of our priority list. Communicating about instructional situations and teaching modalities and musical vocabulary up and down the vertical team is a critical component of student success. Reach out to your feeder schools. Initiate a conversation about what is working and where students demonstrate instructional gaps. Spend as much time listening to your colleagues as you do talking about your challenges or successes. Build a vertical team of collaborative music education professionals dedicated to smoothing the transition between the elementary and middle school environments and you will minimize the need for a musical translator. 

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