



# Music Performance Ensembles: A Platform for Teaching the 21st Century Learner

## SUMMARY

Performing ensembles give students opportunities to develop critical listening skills, to collaborate with team members, and to put critical thinking into action by making music. This author describes the importance of music education and some of the challenges faced by music educators in test-driven times.

*In a progressive education system,* it is easy to set aside the arts when Common Core dictates the expectations of our students. This past school year alone I lost a large handful of my most valuable instrumentalists when they were switched out of my band class to take a double period of ELA or math. My administrators viewed this decision as the best possible solution to boost our students' grades, a continuing pattern throughout many schools in many districts. Between demanding academic requirements and this addition of double periods in core subjects, music electives are often the first classes on the chopping block since they are not mandated.

However, music performing ensembles help students succeed in ways that are often overlooked while scheduling

students for classes. My fellow NYSUT music teachers and I share similar questions that remain unanswered:

- Why do these students have to be removed from an ensemble when music-making provides ample opportunities for helping students develop individually and as team players?
- What about all of the cross-curricular skills students are learning while participating in band, orchestra, or chorus?
- What about students who have dreams of working in the field of music as a career, or simply need music in their daily lives to empower them in any direction they choose?

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## Audrey Rome, Roosevelt Teachers Association

### **Cadenza: Music-Making Fosters Solo Development**

Performing music ensembles are more than just a school subject or a class period. Music classes provide involved students with a necessary prerequisite to their future livelihoods — their very first jobs. When students are part of band, chorus, orchestra, guitar ensemble or another performing group, they are fulfilling a role as a member of a functioning community where they are not only accepted, but also needed. Music performance ensembles provide students with a sense of responsibility that makes them feel important.

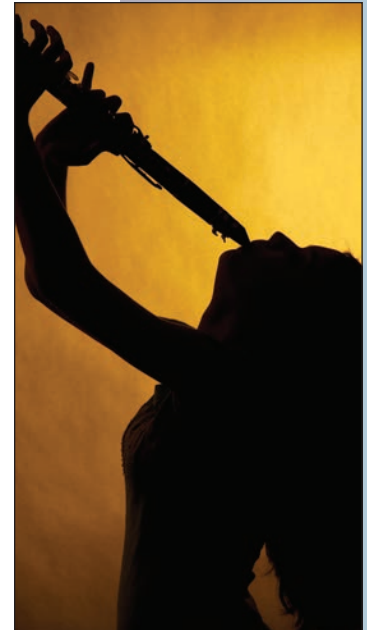
“Cynthia\* doesn’t even bring a pen or notebook to school, but she has that clarinet with her wherever she goes,” one of my core-content colleagues once told me about one of our students. I explained that I knew Cynthia worked best when she was given a unique challenge, which was evident in the amount of pride she demonstrated in working toward performing at the New York State School Music Association (NYSSMA) Solo Festival on clarinet. Together, my colleague and I worked

*\*Student’s name has been changed for privacy purposes.*

with this student to devise a strategy that would help her stay organized and on task. We assigned her a leadership role for that class and duplicated the practice log she was using for her NYSSMA solo as a homework log. Within a week or so, Cynthia was back on track in all of her classes and more motivated than ever.

Young musicians know that if they are absent from band, it doesn’t just mean they have to make up the classwork and homework. An absence from band means other members of their section or ensemble might miss a cue because they rely on hearing another student’s entrance at a particular measure, or another player has difficulty staying in line during a parade because of the hole in the block formation from one member’s absence.

In addition to teaching work ethic, providing students with the job title of “ensemble member” helps foster social emotional development necessary for success in a career. In a typical school environment filled with cliques, bullying, stress, pressure, and high



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expectations from all angles, fulfilling this role as an ensemble community member is crucial to students' self-esteem. If you didn't feel needed by your faculty or family, wouldn't you feel a sense of displacement? One of my alto saxophone players expressed her newfound confidence and sense of belonging in a recent letter to me: "The solos you have given me and how hard you've pushed me has made me such a better musician." The student continues later in the letter, "I am so proud to be a part of this band."

Furthermore, this particular student spent several consecutive days absent from school because of emotional distress from the drama that exists within her circle of friends. Perhaps it was a coincidence, but I would like to accredit the parallel between her solo assignment for our upcoming concert and her newly acquired pride and smile. "You can't be absent because I'll mess up *my* part!" another member of her section said one day during class, reiterating her significant role.

This confidence from rehearsing and performing in a music ensemble is necessary for our students to apply and interview for their first paying jobs and eventually their careers in any field. According to a study cited by the National Association for Music Education (NAfME)

Advocacy Group, C.L. Jenlink conducted an experiment to find out if at-risk students had a raised level of self-esteem after their school put a heavier emphasis on its music program. The group reported Jenlink's findings (2014):

The author concluded that the music program lessened students' feelings of alienation, promoted individual growth, and provided a common bond between the home and the school. Further, participation in the select musical performing group promoted goal attainment, teamwork, leadership, academic achievement, feelings of success, and cultural exposure.

For our 21st century students, these qualities are particularly important to prevent students from feeling lost and burdened by a variety of stressors, including school, home life, friendships, relationships, and cyberbullying, to name a few. When students are used to interacting with other members of an ensemble, they learn how to treat one another and coexist in a professional way. For example, students in band and orchestra learn manners that become second nature, such as setting up for their stand partner or someone else in their section who may be running late. Students in an ensemble look out for one another and make selfless

decisions in the best interest of the entire group. This innate habit of helping one another is an extremely valuable asset for our 21st century learners in a world with an increasing number of self-checkout registers and single-player computer games.

### **Tutti: Music-Making Develops Interpersonal Skills and Teamwork Etiquette**

Engaging in teamwork is a side effect of the individual growth that comes from being in a music ensemble. The ability to work well with others is a requirement for success whether students are in the classroom, participating in athletics, or becoming acquainted with fellow workers at a new job or volunteer position. Although students in music ensembles are often using and responding to non-verbal communication, they are still interacting with one another harmoniously. This is one of the most pressing reasons for students to stay involved in ensembles now more than ever. In our modern society where people of all ages are buried in cellphones and social media, music performance ensembles force students to interact and don't allow time for students to check their text messages or Facebook pages.

Whether I am buying sheet music or writing my own arrangements, I



strategically choose repertoire that keep each of my students actively engaged at all times. For me, this means giving my students music with copious percussion parts, since that tends to be my largest section. If students have more than eight consecutive measures of rest, I've openly invited them to check their cellphones and regress into an isolated state far away from my band. My percussionists know that missing even the smallest triangle entrance would mean messing it up for their entire team (and in my classroom, those teammates will let each other know what they think about that).

In addition, young musicians become accustomed to taking instruction and constructive criticism from section

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leaders, drum majors, and conductors — this is a necessary prerequisite to working for a boss or manager.

Students in performing ensembles regularly react to directives, making them less likely to be fazed by feedback or various perspectives from authority in any environment. *The Washington Post* considered this one of the “Top 10 Skills Children Learn from the Arts” in a recent article: “Children learn that feedback is part of learning and it is not something to be offended by or to be taken personally. It is something helpful...” (Strauss 2013). This statement is evident in each class period since rehearsals are built around the evolution of music-making through constructive criticism.

Students in my band and any performing ensemble know that the phrase, “Let’s fix those wrong notes at measure 32,” is not an insult, but a mandatory classwork assignment without a tangible submission. Students also know not to get offended if another band member tells them that they are playing flat or marching out of line since music-performing ensembles comprise symbiotic relationships. Not only do students accept each other’s critique, they thrive on this to shape them as musicians.

## **Accompagnato: Music-Making Reinforces Cross-Curricular Learning**

While music performance ensembles prepare our students socially and emotionally for their successful journeys ahead, can they compare to the content taught in other areas? At the risk of speaking *con bravura*, I propose a resounding, “YES!”

Music performing ensembles are the perfect supplement and accompaniment to every content area. Students who sing or play an instrument develop practice habits that advance their individual learning styles. Through differentiated instruction in our classrooms and monitoring students’ home progress with tools such as practice logs, music teachers can help students obtain habits to increase their productivity in all classes.

NYSSMA President David A. Gaines agreed in his latest contribution to *School Music News*: “Music education exemplifies most of the skills the education establishment is trying to teach children in math and English language arts. Earlier this year, I worked with my staff to review the ELA Anchor Standards. It was interesting to see how many standards we address as an outgrowth of simply teaching music to children” (Gaines 2014).

When students sight-read sheet music, they are reading left to right and top to bottom while comprehending and communicating in the same manner that they would in ELA. “Practice in reading music notation makes the reading of linguistic notation an easier task,” Ron Butzlaff (2000) explained in *Journal of Aesthetic Education*. Butzlaff continues, “Skill in reading requires a sensitivity to phonological distinctions, and skill in music listening requires a sensitivity to tonal distinctions. Perhaps experience in listening to music trains a general kind of auditory sensitivity that is useful in listening to music as it is in perceiving phonological distinction” (2000, p. 167).

Math skills are also sharpened in ensembles since students are gaining experience with rhythms, counting, mixed meter and *hemiola*. Using rhythm to teach math is a tradition that stems from ancient times. “Western culture has recognized the connection between music and mathematics since the time of the ancient Greeks. The Pythagoreans (of the famous theorem regarding the square of the hypotenuse of a right triangle) used harmony and rhythm as a basis for their mathematical ideas,” explains the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory in its “Teaching Math with Music” issue of *Classroom Compass* (1998, p. 1).



Performing a variety of repertoire in an ensemble also helps students understand time periods that they are learning about in other subject areas. When core subject teachers and music teachers collaborate, the result is era-specific sheet music that can further expose students to these significant historical events. Music class can serve to reinforce students’ studies of Harlem Renaissance poetry in ELA or the Civil War in social studies. National Public Radio (NPR) recently interviewed one music teacher who expressed his gratitude to “connect music with what students are learning in their other classes — like a classic spiritual they’re practicing for Black History Month” (McCammon 2014). Band, orchestra, or chorus is often considered a “break” in the day for students; however, these ensembles are yet another opportunity to keep our students immersed in the content we are teaching.

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Singing or performing music might be just the type of differentiated instruction that students need to retain information when they are struggling to process context visually or aurally.

Music can also help students remember facts and information by offering rhythmic repetition and catchy melodies that may have otherwise been forgotten from a one-dimensional textbook or handout. “The Alphabet Song” proves that memorization through music is one of the earliest teaching strategies used in the American education system.

“Psychologists believe laws, stories, and customs were presented as poems, chants and eventually, as songs, in order for them to be memorized and recalled, accurately,” explains Henry L. Roediger III, professor of psychology at the Memory Lab at Washington University in St. Louis (Mitchell 2013). “People with exceptional abilities to recount lists and other data often create song-like structures to help with memorization and recall.” Singing or performing music might be just the type of differentiated instruction that students need to retain information when they are struggling to process context visually or aurally.

Making music accelerates growth for our students in *every* subject area. While learning about diaphragmatic breathing and tuning their instruments, students are learning about their bodies and about the *science* of sound. Students involved in marching band are participating in *physical education* on a regular basis and are required to be as fit as any other athlete. Music students are fluent in terms

and notation markings written in Italian, German, French, and of course, the *language* of music itself. The use of music notation software or the integration of technology such as a midi can help students become computer-savvy, which is a skill employers value now more than ever before.

Students who participate in music are even proven to be in better health than students who do not: “Music increases an antibody that plays an important role in immunity of the mucous system, as well as natural killer cell counts, the cells that attack germs and bacteria invading the body,” Sarah Glynn informed *Medical News Today* in the findings of 400 research papers in the neurochemistry of music (2013). Furthermore, “Listening to and playing music can also lower levels of cortisol (the stress hormone), according to [Dr. Daniel] Levitin and Dr. Mona Lisa Chanda.”

Participating in music provides students with self-assurance that is carried over into their academic success. “It’s conceivable that kids who feel socially connected (say, as members of a school band) develop the confidence and self-esteem that can lead to intellectual curiosity, and better grades,” states veteran journalist Tom Jacobs after assessing results from his recent research linking high grades with involvement in music lessons (2013).

## **Giocosos: Music-Making is Uplifting!**

“Music offers a valued companion [and] helps provide a comfortable level of activation and a positive mood,” researchers from *Frontiers in Psychology* summarized from the results of their recent study (2013). The researchers correctly hypothesized that “arousal and mood regulation” is one of the major benefits people experience from participation in music.

Of course, we can prove this statement true within our own classrooms. Several months ago, one of my students stumbled into my classroom, looking completely distraught. I asked him what was wrong. “I had a really rough night and only came to school today because I’m excited for our band performance tonight, Ms. Rome,” he replied. After thanking him and telling him he could talk to me after class if he wanted, I took a minute to reflect on and truly feel the impact of that heartfelt statement. Some of our students experience stress beyond our knowledge on a daily basis, and music ensemble teachers provide each student with the opportunity to feel successful, safe, and welcomed. More importantly, we provide our students with an outlet of expression that they may not have had otherwise.



After a 40-minute rehearsal, this same student was joking around with his friends and laughing while packing up his instrument. I am privileged to observe those types of transformations on a daily basis; however, music class is not a privilege for our students — it is a requirement for their well-being.

## **Cesura: Stop! Music-Making is Necessary!**

Before pulling a student out of music performing ensemble for extra help or a double period of another subject, take a moment to ask this young musician how being part of a performing ensemble serves as an incentive to excel in other areas. Empathize with your music students by reflecting on the way you may value music in your

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Singing or playing  
an instrument  
can help our  
students succeed  
by teaching them  
the necessary skills  
to develop  
responsibility,  
work well with  
others, retain and  
understand  
information in  
every content area  
and shine as a  
confident and  
capable contributor  
to our society.

life, whether listening or performing. Collaborate as a teaching team to choose repertoire and strategies that will help strengthen this student's skills in each of your subject areas. Your music teachers are here to work with all stakeholders to serve our children the very best we can.

Tom Horne, Arizona's state superintendent of public instruction, places music high on his priority list for K-12 students. "If they're worried about their test scores and want a way to get them higher, they need to give kids more arts, not less," says Horne, a classically trained pianist. "There's lots of evidence that kids immersed in the arts do better on their academic tests" (Smith 2009). Singing or playing an instrument can help our students succeed by teaching them the necessary skills to develop responsibility, work well with others, retain and understand information in every content area and shine as a confident and capable contributor to our society. To fully experience the benefits of music performance ensembles, join one yourself — after all, educators are 21st century learners, too.

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