

Bank Street School for Children
Curriculum Overview: Middle School Music (6/7s through 9/10s)

Philosophy

Children come to appreciate and truly understand music by experiencing it joyfully. Students in the Middle School at Bank Street have a wide range of musical experiences on a weekly basis: singing, moving, listening, analyzing, playing instruments, reading, writing, improvising, and composing. As a result, children learn new musical concepts organically through experience and discovery. These experiences form the basis of a scaffolded approach to music learning, in which bridges built between familiar and unfamiliar concepts make music literacy (reading and writing music notation, and creating original music) an achievable goal for all students. The curriculum builds upon the musical experiences of the Lower School music curriculum (3s through 5/6s), through which students have developed a strong sense of beat, rhythm, and melody, as well as the ability to sing and play music independently and in a group.

Methods and Materials

The Middle School music curriculum is based on the Kodály music education philosophy. This methodology, developed in the early- to mid-20th century by Hungarian composer and educator Zoltán Kodály, emphasizes experiencing a musical concept – hearing, feeling, singing, moving, and seeing it, as well as understanding its function – before knowing its name. (For example, students will feel long and short rhythmic duration and discover the syllabification of musical text before knowing that the rhythms used in a particular passage are called “quarter notes” and “eighth notes.”) This gives students a context in which to place new information. It is in this context that any new information can be most meaningful.

The Middle School music curriculum incorporates elements of other music education methodologies as well, particularly Orff (which emphasizes the use of instruments and improvisation in music education) and Dalcroze (a movement-based approach).

The song repertoire consists of folk and traditional music from a variety of cultures around the world, including but not limited to those represented by the student population, as well as high quality composed music of various styles.

6/7s Music

Continuity

Music in the 6/7s begins with a continuation of the pre-literacy concepts established in the Lower School music curriculum, through a varied repertoire of new and familiar songs. Children continue to develop an understanding of musical comparatives such as high and low, fast and slow, long and short, and loud and soft. Throughout the fall, students deepen their understanding of the steady beat (the underlying “pulse” of music) and how it relates to the way they hear, experience, and create music.

Rhythm

The concept of rhythm (the patterns sung or played in time with the beat) is a natural outgrowth of the study of beat. In the winter, students encounter their first concrete music literacy concepts. They learn basic rhythms in relation to the organization of syllables in a song’s text. For example, the text of the first line of the chant *Engine Engine* (“engine engine number nine”) would be written as “en-gine en-gine num-ber nine” on the board below symbols representing the song’s pulse.

Students use rhythm names of “ta” and “ti-ti” in place of the musical terms “quarter note” and “eighth note” when these rhythms are first introduced. The term “quar-ter note” consists of three syllables, but the note itself makes only one sound, which can be confusing for 6/7s. With the use of rhythm syllables, however, the syllables students speak match the rhythms they clap. Thus, the first phrase of *Engine Engine* would be spoken as “ti-ti ti-ti ti-ti ta.” Visual symbols (standard rhythmic notation) are used in conjunction with the spoken syllables.

Students sing, chant, play, read, write, and identify these two rhythms in music repertoire, both familiar and unfamiliar. Only after they demonstrate a full understanding of the concepts do they learn the technical musical terms of quarter note and eighth note. Both the technical terms and the rhythm syllables are used from that point forward, but students tend to gravitate toward using the syllables, as those are more concrete and relevant to their musical experience. Near the end of the year, 6/7s explore another crucial element of music: silence. They discover that in music, silence is called a “rest.”

Melody

The process used in teaching the first rhythmic concepts of quarter notes and eighth notes is repeated in the late spring as students discover their first elements of melodic literacy. Having mastered the concept of high and low pitches, as well as the ability to sing in tune with their peers and alone, students are prepared to use their ears to discover the nature of a simple melodic interval (distance between two pitches). Students sing and play songs and melodic patterns that begin to isolate one particular melodic relationship: the descending minor third (in solfège syllables, *so-mi*).

This interval can be found in many places throughout a child's world outside of the music room, such as when calling out to a friend on the play deck ("I'm taller than you are!") or responding to a parent who beckons ("Coming!"). The interval of a minor third appears in much of the 6/7s song repertoire and is exemplified in the familiar song *Rain Rain Go Away*. Through their experiences with Orff instruments (barred percussion instruments such as xylophones, metallophones and glockenspiels), 6/7s can easily identify the first two pitches of the song as being a skip apart. For example, if the first note of *Rain Rain Go Away* is a G, their ears tell them that the second note cannot be an F, but in fact must be an E. The language of "skip" and "step" helps students transfer their aural knowledge to a visual understanding. The melodic study in the 6/7s ends with the placement of this basic relationship on the five-line musical staff.

Music Literacy

Critical to students' success in the application of these first music literacy concepts is joyful music making. The process of making musical elements conscious is broken down into brief steps. Each step typically uses only about five to seven minutes of a 40-minute lesson. There may be a number of different concepts being taught in any given lesson, and the majority of the period is spent making music. The music literacy instruction happens in the context of songs, games, and other musical activities.

Social/Emotional Development

In conjunction with the musical elements of rhythm, melody and music literacy, making music with others helps 6/7s to develop self-regulation – the ability to control one's own actions. Students learn to monitor their bodies while using instruments so that all students are safe and all

instruments are well cared for. In their core classrooms, students spend a great deal of time taking care of their classroom and its materials. This work happens in the music room, as well.

7/8s Music

Continuity

The music curriculum in the 7/8s follows the same strategies as that of the 6/7s, but at a slightly accelerated pace. While the 6/7s encounter their first concrete music literacy concepts in the middle of the year, the 7/8s begin to learn new concepts as early as October. September is spent reinforcing the concepts mastered in the 6/7s, as well as adding new songs and games to their repertoire.

Rhythm

The rhythmic elements students learned in the 6/7s (quarter note, eighth note, rest) continue to serve as the building blocks for musical experiences in the 7/8s. In addition to these basic rhythms, students begin to explore rhythms of longer (half note) and shorter (sixteenth notes) duration.

Melody

Beginning in the early fall, 7/8s add to their understanding of melody. As an outgrowth of the simple intervals of skips and steps with which they are already quite comfortable, students begin to encounter new tonal relationships. By January, they are familiar with the pentatonic scale – a set of five tones (*do re mi so la* in solfège syllables) that create consonant sounds when combined in the form of a melody or in simultaneous harmony. This scale permeates the song repertoire of the 7/8s, which enables students to independently recognize and identify the melodic intervals that are now familiar.

Improvisation and Composition

The pentatonic scale allows 7/8s students a great deal of freedom when it comes to using classroom instruments. Students begin to create melodic patterns using these five notes, both improvised and premeditated, and are afforded many opportunities to share their creations with one another. The beauty of the simplicity of the scale is that it offers a structure within which students can engage in the early stages of music composition. This is a crucial aspect of music in the 7/8s: beginning to compose music of their own.

Repertoire

Concurrent with the use of the pentatonic scale, however, is an ever-growing repertoire of songs and games with no rhythmic or melodic constraints. All songs have potential pedagogical uses, even if the purpose of one song on one particular day is as simple as learning to enjoy a new musical experience. (“Just for fun” is a perfectly fine pedagogical goal.)

Instruments

Students end their year of music in the 7/8s with an introduction to a new instrument: the soprano recorder. Since many students are still developing the fine motor skills needed to be proficient on the recorder, the entire group learns only a few notes to begin their recorder study. While they will not master the instrument until the 8/9s, students in the 7/8s benefit greatly from the responsibility involved in taking care of and practicing an instrument of their own. The recorder is also used in the 7/8s to reinforce the rhythmic and melodic concepts that students encounter throughout the music curriculum.

Social/Emotional Development

In addition to strengthening individual musical understanding, another key component of the 7/8s curriculum is developing a sense of ensemble, or participating actively in a group. The experience of singing or playing an instrument in an ensemble helps students to think about the needs of others as well as their own. Musical activities such as collaborative singing games and choreographed dances provide an engaging structure in which students can further develop this skill. See the “Chorus” section below for more information about ensemble development in the 7/8s music curriculum.

8/9s Music

Continuity

The 8/9s spend the first few months of the year reviewing the pentatonic scale that they used in the 7/8s, as well as extending and varying its uses. Having mastered the skill of reading simple ostinato (repeated) patterns and playing these patterns on Orff instruments, students use their knowledge of rhythmic and melodic concepts to create and write their own musical patterns.

Rhythm

As the year unfolds, more melodic and rhythmic elements are added to their musical toolbox. In particular, students spend much of the fall and winter learning the mathematical breakdowns of some of the more complex components of rhythmic notation. These rhythms include combinations of eighth notes and sixteenth notes (as in the word “nobody” in the song “Hey Ho Nobody Home”), and syncopated, or uneven, rhythms (i.e. in the opening phrase of a much beloved song called “Dip, Dip and Swing,” in which the syllabification is: “my PAD-dle’s keen and bright,” with the second syllable of the phrase being longer in duration than the first).

Melody

As stated above, the 8/9s song material allows students to continue to explore the pentatonic scale. This five-tone scale (*do re mi so la* with a skip – larger interval – between *mi* and *so*) expands to include a wider range: *so, la, do re mi so la do’* (with a comma representing a lower note and an apostrophe denoting a higher note). In the spring, students continue to develop their musical ears with the introduction of half steps – smaller intervals than those between *do* and *re* or *re* and *mi*. In this unit of study, 8/9s discover that *fa* exists between *mi* and *so* but that it is closer to *mi* than it is to *so*. The difference between the sizes of the intervals creates opportunities for students to begin to explore the concept of major and minor tonalities.

Instruments

Students in the 8/9s continue to use the recorder, but the instrument takes on a new function this year. In the 7/8s the recorder was an exciting and new instrument, and much time

was devoted to learning and practicing notes within the context of simple songs written or arranged specifically for this instrument. In the 8/9s, the purpose is much the same at the very beginning of the year. As the fall progresses, however, students begin to spend less time focusing on the skill of recorder playing. Instead, the recorder simply becomes one of many tools that students use to accompany familiar songs and share original compositions, in addition to the xylophones, metallophones and glockenspiels that comprise the instrumental experiences of Lower and early Middle School students.

Improvisation and Composition

Both composition and improvisation and composition are key components of the 8/9s music curriculum. Students begin the year by improvising, or creating music on the spot, within a specific framework. For instance, they may be asked to use only a small group of pitches (those that sound consonant with the song they are singing) and a specific rhythmic pattern in an improvised accompaniment. Alternately, they may be given a series of melodic pitches to use and asked to make up a rhythm on the spot. From here, students begin to examine the rhythmic and melodic choices they are making and start to compose new patterns in less structured contexts. This lays the groundwork for extensive composition work in the 9/10s.

Social/Emotional Development

In the 8/9s, students continue to strengthen their ability to work in an ensemble and consider the needs of the whole group in addition to their own. This occurs through their participation in Chorus and in more complex singing games and dances that require teamwork and synchronization. The 8/9s spend a great deal of time in their core classrooms focusing on interpersonal problem-solving with their classmates. This skill is reinforced in the music room as students work frequently with partners to compose short musical ideas and share instruments.

9/10s Music

Continuity

Students in the 9/10s begin the year with a vast array of tools for decoding and analyzing music. As the year begins, a wide range of songs and singing games help students to synthesize the numerous rhythmic and melodic elements they have learned over the past few years.

Musical Form

In the early fall, they use their knowledge of these musical elements to discover the compositional structure of familiar songs, and from there move into formal analysis of new song material. Concurrent with the study of form and structure (the organization of a piece of music) is a continuation of the compositional work students embarked on in the 8/9s. This year, however, students begin to think about the overall structure and style of their creative work, particularly in relation to their study of the formal elements of the composed music they encounter.

Throughout the fall, students will spend time listening to and analyzing the form of music from a wide range of genres and styles: jazz, Western classical, popular, musical theater, and world music, both instrumental and vocal. They also listen to multiple versions of the same song and create their own arrangements using the same basic melodic and harmonic structure.

For example, students might encounter a few different versions of the George Gershwin piece *Summertime* (the original version from the musical *Porgy and Bess*, a cover recorded by Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald, and a live performance of piano and voice by the music teacher). They would then use those three variations of the same song to help them decide upon their preferred form (the order of verse, chorus, improvised section, etc.) and instrumentation (perhaps only guitar and drums, or maybe a flute solo), and create a musical score to describe their arrangement.

Composition

In the wintertime, students in the 9/10s further develop their compositional skills through the use of motif. A motif is a short musical phrase that repeats fairly frequently throughout a larger work. Often times, a motif represents a certain character or event. (Nearly all students

are, at this point, familiar with the melody of the *Death March* from the Star Wars movies, the playing of which indicates the arrival of the movie's villain, Darth Vader.) Students begin to listen for motifs in the pieces of music they study and create their own motifs to represent various characters or themes. One favorite activity involves creating a motif for Bugs Bunny and a separate motif to represent Elmer Fudd, to be used as a potential soundtrack for an episode of *Looney Tunes*.

Throughout this unit of study, students transfer their composed motifs from pencil and paper to the computer using a music notation software program called Sibelius. This program allows them to publish their original composed work in the same format used by professional composers.

Musical Synthesis: A Composing Project

With a musical toolbox full of composing techniques – including rhythm, melody, form, instrumentation, style, and motif – students in the 9/10s are ready for their final composition project in the spring. The project begins with motif composition, but these particular motifs represent the students themselves. Each student chooses three aspects of his or her own personality that he or she is proud of and would like to convey in the final product. Once the students have chosen their desired personality traits, they compose and notate a separate motif to represent each trait. These motifs are then published using Sibelius software and exported into a different software program called GarageBand, which is available on any Apple computer. GarageBand allows students to create background music into which they insert their own personal motifs. The final product for each individual student is an audio recording of an original song, composed and arranged independently or with a partner.

Social/Emotional Development

The 9/10s music curriculum is structured such that it supports students' increasing independence. Students are encouraged to think about their own personal musicality and musical taste, and to become avid listeners of new music. At the same time, 9/10s are also provided opportunities to strengthen their ability to negotiate and compromise with their classmates, both in the framework of composing music and within the context of singing games that take on a more competitive nature at this stage of development.

Transition to the Upper School Music Curriculum

Through the experience of the composing project, students reinforce all of the melodic, rhythmic, and formal elements they learned throughout their time in the Middle School music program. They also develop a strong sense of their own creative identity and critical thinking skills, and head to the Upper School ready for the challenges that lie ahead, in music and all other subject areas.

Chorus

Structure

All students in the 7/8s, 8/9s and 9/10s participate in the Middle School Chorus program. There are three separate ensembles, each of which meets one time per week. The 7/8s and 8/9s participate in mixed groups: one 7/8s class is paired with one 8/9s class to form one ensemble. This allows the 8/9s to be role models for the 7/8s, who benefit greatly from the wisdom and prior experience of the older children. Two of the three Middle School Choruses are of the 7/8s and 8/9s mixed variety. The third ensemble is the 9/10s Chorus, in which both classes meet together as an age group in one ensemble.

Goals

The Chorus environment is very different from the general music classroom experience. Chorus meets in the Auditorium and has 40-48 children. The physical environment – more children, different space – combined with the concept of “ensemble” necessitates a very different approach to musical development. An ensemble approach involves more whole-group instruction and little to no individualized attention. Students learn to place more importance on the group’s musical development than on their own in this setting, which is an incredibly challenging goal for young students (and even for grown-ups!).

Repertoire

The musical repertoire in Chorus consists of a wide range of genres, including (but not limited to) Western classical, jazz, popular music, and arrangements of folk and traditional music from various world cultures. Students sing in English as well as in countless foreign languages. The weekly rehearsals culminate in school-wide performances that take place each winter and spring. The experiences students have in the general music classroom support the Chorus program. However, the primary goal of Chorus for students in the Middle School is to develop a love of music in a large ensemble setting.