

Songwriting

A New Direction for Secondary Music Education

Abstract: Songwriting is a form of composition that relates directly to adolescents' personal experience of music. This article provides a rationale for establishing courses in songwriting at the middle school and high school levels. Other topics in the article include curriculum development, instructional procedures, and assessment. The article ends with poignant quotations from students about the power of songwriting in their own lives.

Keywords: adolescent, assessment, composition, curriculum, songwriting

How can songwriting be part of the middle and high school music curriculum? Here are a number of suggestions for incorporating this kind of creativity.

*M*aria resolutely clutched her guitar like a lifeline. No one in the room had expected her to be back so soon, one week after her twenty-three-year-old brother's unexpected death. She began to play haltingly, and her voice quivered. The song she sang was about her brother. The verses chronicled their sibling experience growing from childhood to young adulthood. The choruses described her complex relationship with a god who knew best but allowed such a terrible thing to happen. As the song progressed, her voice became stronger and her fingers more assured. When the last chord of the song rang out, I looked around the semicircle of the audience. Everyone had tears, and some were openly weeping. The next day Maria recorded the song, posted it on YouTube, and sent the link to her grieving parents. It was the only way she knew to tell them how she felt.

Welcome to songwriting class.

The song is humanity's most universal and enduring form of music. In every known

society and in all recorded history, songs have held an important place in human cultures. From the lyric poetry of ancient Greece to the freedom songs of slavery, from the troubadours to Taylor Swift, from concert halls to playgrounds, songs have expressed the depth and breadth of human experience in all its magnificent diversity. Songs are our birthright, reverberating across the ages, and performed with the instrument that we all possess.

Research on the music listening habits of children and adolescents suggests that their musical world is a vast landscape of songs. A 2009 Harris poll of students ages eight to eighteen found that the amount of time they spend listening to music increases with age from about one hour per day for eight- to ten-year-olds to about three hours per day for fifteen- to eighteen-year-olds.¹ Almost all this music is in the form of songs. Over 90 percent of American adolescents have access to portable music listening devices (e.g., cell phones, tablets, MP3 players),² and the

audio storage capacity of these mobile devices is often measured in terms of the number of *songs* they can hold. For many young people, the words *song* and *music* are synonymous. Songs are the soundtrack to their lives.³

There is an asymmetry between the value that young people place on songs in their daily lives and the extent to which songs are utilized in secondary music education. Elementary general music teachers regularly engage students in singing and moving to songs. But in secondary ensembles, the performance of songs gives way to more complex vocal or instrumental works and arrangements, often far removed from the students' out-of-school musical experiences. Tellingly, the one time that songs are heard in the high school auditorium is during talent shows, when students have control of what and how they perform.

Although songwriting has been taught for decades by music therapists,⁴ it has not been widely embraced in the school music curriculum.⁵ The purpose of this article is to describe a rationale and procedures for teaching a new type of music class for high school and middle school, a class devoted to the composition and performance of songs. This article is not intended to disparage the learning that occurs in the large ensemble offerings that currently dominate American secondary music education. Rather, songwriting class can provide a complementary, alternative venue for musical learning for those students who are passionate about music but, for whatever reason, have not been drawn to large ensemble performance.

Why Teach Songwriting?

Regardless of most adolescents' deep, personal engagement with music outside of school, students may avoid school music classes if they perceive those classes to be irrelevant to their needs and interests. In a songwriting class, it is possible to reconnect students' out-of-school musical experience to in-school music instruction, as the following four reasons suggest.

1. A primary reason for teaching songwriting is that it connects directly with students' own cultures and personal understandings. Recent analyses of American music education⁶ point to a widening gap between students' in-school and out-of-school musical experience. Songwriting class immerses students in the creation and performance of music in a vernacular style they already know, using instruments with which they are already familiar, and in ways that are meaningful to their own lives.
2. A second reason for teaching songwriting in secondary schools is that songwriting serves the needs of a large population of students who are interested in playing a fretted, keyboard, or electronic instrument but who find few opportunities to perform in standard large ensembles. In 2013, fretted instruments (electric and acoustic guitar, ukulele, bass guitar) outsold all other instrument categories in the United States, with keyboard instruments a strong second.⁷ Sales of all wind instruments combined were less than half that of fretted instruments. These data suggest that the number of budding guitarists and pianists in our middle schools and high schools is a significant, underserved population, ready to benefit from songwriting classes.
3. Songwriting can also address a number of social and psychological needs for adolescents. Researchers have long recognized that adolescence is a time of great change, often leading to emotional and social upheavals in students' lives.⁸ Recent research suggests adolescents spend so much music time listening to songs because music helps them to relieve tension and stress, cope with personal difficulties, and develop their individual and social identities.⁹ In a songwriting class, students have the opportunity to actively engage with these matters, and the class provides them with an expressive outlet, both musically and lyrically. From my fifteen years' experience teaching songwriting, I have seen that the topics students choose to address in their songs are often indicative of their life passages and their growing awareness of social issues. Patricia Riley, an associate professor of music education at the University of Vermont in Burlington, found that the students in her songwriting class credited songwriting with helping them in areas such as emotional stability, self-expression, self-discovery, and overcoming challenges.¹⁰
4. A fourth reason for teaching songwriting is that students leave the class with a musical skill that can be enjoyed for a lifetime. Too often, high school music students' active musical engagement ceases when they leave school because they have not had significant experience in making music on their own. Experience performing in large ensembles does not necessarily prepare students to make music without scores or conductors. Songwriters, on the other hand, are able to create and perform their own music, with minimal resources, by themselves or with a few others.

A New Role for Music Educators

Teaching songwriting requires the music teacher to consider new ways of fostering musical growth in students. In most traditional performance settings, it is the teacher who introduces the music to students, either with notation or by rote. The teacher in this setting has studied the music previously, has developed an internal model for how the music should sound, and knows how to guide students to perform the music in appropriate ways while imparting an understanding of various aspects of the music. Much of this instruction is done with the group as a whole, with some focus on individual parts.

In a songwriting class, all of this is turned upside-down. When a teacher works with a student songwriter, it is to help the student realize and refine his or her own musical ideas, not the teacher's musical ideas. In this way, the teacher acts

less like a director (think of Georg Solti with the Chicago Symphony or Robert Shaw with his Chorale) and more like a producer (e.g., Quincy Jones with Michael Jackson, George Martin with the Beatles).¹¹ When students perform their songs in class, it is the student who introduces the music to the teacher (and the rest of the class), and the teacher is on the receiving end of the music. For an original song, the teacher can have no preconceived ideas for “correctness” because there is no model for a “correct” song. That does not mean that all songs are equally good, but it does require the teacher to respond to each song as a singular musical expression from a unique individual.

The creation of a safe, nurturing environment in the classroom is key to a successful songwriting class. Songs can be personal expressions of deep feelings, like the breakup with a loved one, the illness of a parent, the anger of racial injustice, and the uncertain affections of a new friend. For students to feel comfortable sharing such personal feelings, they need to feel secure and supported by the teacher and perhaps more important, the other students in the class.

There are several ways to establish a safe environment for songwriters. One way is to begin the course with a series of whole-class activities to encourage the sharing of ideas and engender trust. For example, the class can brainstorm to compose new verses to an existing song. The Beatles’s “Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da” tells the homey but slightly off-beat story of Desmond and Molly. What might happen to their family five years later? To write new verses, the students first have to figure out the rhyming scheme and melodic rhythm of the existing verses. Within the parameters of rhyme and rhythm, any student’s suggestion for a lyric should be accepted. Similarly, the whole class can collaborate to compose a song using the words of an existing poem, or a twelve-bar blues progression, or a given harmony. Once students feel comfortable creating songs with the whole class, they will be ready to work in small groups, pairs, and, finally, individually.

The setup of the classroom can also contribute to the learning environment.

The room should ideally provide flexible seating to allow students to work in pairs or small groups and then come together as a class in a semicircle. When students sit in a semicircle, they are connected visually to each other, like the members of a chamber ensemble.

A third way to enhance the safety in a songwriting classroom is for the teacher to share self-composed songs with the class and allow students to provide feedback. This can be a frightening experience for a teacher, but the rewards in terms of establishing students’ credibility and trust are well worth the risk.

Starting a Songwriting Class

Songwriting can be taught as a yearlong or one-semester elective class in high school or middle school; as a project or series of projects in a general music class, choral class, or digital music class; as an extension or replacement for guitar class, keyboard class, or ukulele class; and as an after-school workshop. The student learning that occurs in a songwriting class is congruent with the Core Music Standards of creating, performing, and responding. Students learn to *create* original songs and *perform* them for other class members. Students also learn to *respond* to music by critiquing the songs of others in a constructive manner and describing the musical, lyrical, and cultural aspects of existing songs. What follows are suggestions for teaching a songwriting class. The ideas offered here are by no means definitive and are intended to spark teachers’ individual initiatives.

The musical prerequisites for students taking the class are minimal. Preferably, students should be able to sing and simultaneously play an accompaniment on a fretted or keyboard instrument. These prerequisites can be modified, depending on the nature of the class. For example, a songwriting class can be embedded in a guitar class, and students can learn to play the instrument as they learn to compose songs. In a digital music class, in which music is made with computers or mobile devices, students can learn to create backing tracks as they develop their songwriting abilities. Students who want

to compose raps in songwriting class can download from the Internet backing tracks or loops, eliminating the need to perform an accompaniment.

Instructional time in a songwriting class can be divided into three categories: teacher-led directed discussion and guided listening, students’ solo and collaborative songwriting, and song sharing. If students have access to instruments outside of class time, then the amount of class time devoted to songwriting can be minimal. Otherwise, they will need class time to compose individually and with others.

Directed Discussion and Guided Listening

The teacher-led portion of the class can introduce students to various aspects of songwriting and performance. (For examples of these aspects, please see sidebar.) Many of the musical and lyrical aspects can be taught through guided listening activities in which students listen and respond to various songs. For example, students can discuss the use of metaphor in “Hounds of Winter” by Sting or identify the chord changes in Robert Johnson’s twelve-bar blues, “Sweet Home Chicago.” Student-selected songs can also be used for this purpose, after first being screened by the teacher to ensure the song’s appropriateness for a school setting. Students can apply their listening skills as songwriters by critically analyzing existing songs. (See “Songwriter’s Listening Project” for an example of one such activity.)

Solo and Collaborative Songwriting

In this portion of the class, students can work independently or with others to compose songs. It may be easier for beginning songwriters to work in groups of two or three than to work solo. The value of creative collaboration in learning is well documented,¹² and one high school student described her experience this way: “Writing a song is different than a science or

Instructional Content for Songwriting Class

Musical Aspects of Songwriting

- Keys, modes, transposition
- Standard chord progressions
- Form—verse, chorus, bridge, intro, outro
- Musical styles
- Rhythm—meter, syncopation

Lyrical Aspects of Songwriting

- Rhyming, alliteration (consonance and assonance)
- Telling a story
- Expressing a mood
- Describing a person, place, or time
- Metaphor and irony

Performance Aspects of Songwriting

- Vocal techniques
- Instrumental techniques
- Creating backing tracks
- Expressive interpretation
- Arranging

Other Aspects of Songwriting

- Possible topics for songs
- Recording techniques
- Copyrighting music
- Overcoming writer's block
- Overcoming stage fright

Songwriter's Listening Project

Objective: To understand and evaluate an existing song through the critical analysis of lyrics, form, instrumentation, and arrangement.

Procedures

- Select a recording of a song that you admire. The song and artist should be a sufficient interest and depth to warrant your study and deep involvement.
- Do some online research on at least two sites to find some background information on the songwriter's life. Be able to provide a brief bio of the songwriter and the context in which the song was written. For example: When in the songwriter's output was the song written? Does it have any special significance related to the songwriter's life?
- Analyze the lyrics in two ways. First, look at the content or the meaning of the words. What is the song about? Then analyze the *way* the lyrics are written. What is the rhyming scheme, if any? Is there any consonance or assonance? Are there any phrases or words used in an unusual way?
- Analyze the music by first outlining the form. Then describe the instrumentation and arrangement and describe the sound of the singer's voice. In what ways does the music fit (or not fit) the words?
- If you are able to also analyze the harmony and rhythm, go for it!
- Finally, write your personal evaluation of the song. What does the song mean to you? What, specifically, do you admire in the song? If you were to perform it or rearrange it, what would you do differently?
- The project should include your analysis, a copy of the lyrics, and a recording of the song.

Criteria for evaluation: Thoroughness and accuracy of the analysis, depth of evaluation, grammar.

English project because communication and actual teamwork are needed. In a science project, one person can slack off and it'll be fine. In a small musical group like this we all have to help. Oh and writing songs is 10,000 times more fun."

Students likely will be scattered around the music room in various configurations, writing lyrics, or trying out

various chord progressions, or rehearsing. Teachers should consider carefully the extent to which their students may need various parameters to guide their songwriting. Students may, for example, be asked to compose a song that tells a story, a song based on the chord progression C–Am–F–G, or a song in a particular musical style. Or students may be given greater freedom to compose

whatever they wish. Initially, students may benefit from a greater degree of structure and guidance and then progress to more independent songwriting.

Song Sharing

Each student or each student group should have some regularly scheduled time during which they are expected to perform for

the class. It can be once a week, twice a week, or once every two weeks, depending on the class schedule. At that time, students can perform a portion of a work in progress, a finished song, or a revised song. If a student has a partially completed song to perform, he or she might ask the class in advance of the performance to listen for some aspect of the song and provide ideas after the performance.

Song sharing can be an unnerving experience for some students, so the teacher should strive to establish a respectful yet informal environment. This can be accomplished by encouraging the class to listen attentively and applaud afterward. Following the performance, the teacher can guide a brief discussion of the song with the class.

Assessing Students' Songs

Assessment of students' songs can take two forms: written comments from the teacher and verbal comments from the students, guided by the teacher, given immediately after the performance of the song. Perhaps the most challenging part of teaching a songwriting class is guiding the feedback given the student during the song sharing portion of the class. It cannot be stressed enough how vulnerable students are when sharing an original song with others. Any disparaging comment a teacher or student makes can and will have an effect.

The instructor can provide a written assessment of the song's music, lyrics, and performance while the student performs. The comments should be primarily supportive, especially at the beginning of the course. Rather than point out faults in the song, the teacher can suggest ideas for the student to consider. If the sheets are to be used for grades, then only songs designated as "finished" by the student should be graded.

If a rubric is used for this process, the teacher should be mindful that there are no rules for writing a "good" song. Assessment should be flexible enough to allow for students to express themselves individually rather than meet the teacher's expectations. Sample categories for a rubric may include: authenticity (Do the lyrics seem genuine?), expressiveness (Does the song

convey emotion?), and flow (Do the music and lyrics fit together?).

After the song sharing performance, the teacher can lead a discussion of the song among the class members. At the beginning of the course, the teacher will likely be more direct in leading the discussion by asking questions such as "What did you like about the song?" and sharing his or her own thoughts about the song. As the course progresses, the students are likely to take greater control of the feedback process. The type of feedback given to students in the course tends to evolve over time through three distinct phases:

1. **Supportive.** Early in a songwriting course, students are likely to give each other positive but not very specific feedback. "That was good." "That's really cool." "I really liked it." In a songwriting class, the students know that they will have their turn in the front of the room, and they usually treat each other as they hope they will be treated when it is their turn. Supportive feedback is worthwhile at the beginning of a songwriting class because it provides the students with a sense of security and increases their trust in other class members and the instructor. But it does not offer the songwriter much in the way of focused guidance. The teacher's role during this phase in the course is to ask students to tell the songwriter specifically what they liked in the song. Was it the singer's expressive voice? Or was it the way the lyrics described her hometown?
2. **Descriptive.** In the second phase, descriptive feedback, the instructor asks the class questions about the musical and lyrical characteristics of the song just performed. For example, "What unexpected incident happened to the man in the last verse?" or "What melodic hook was used to unify the song?" These are the same kind of questions that the teacher would ask when leading guided listening activities in the teacher-led portion of the class. The purposes of descriptive feedback are (a) to

highlight those unique aspects of the song that other class members might want to employ in their own songs and (b) to provide the songwriter with the knowledge that his or her song is worthy of analysis. In effect, the class is saying, yes, we really did notice that you changed the strumming pattern in the last verse.

3. **Prescriptive.** Prescriptive feedback provides the songwriter with suggestions for improvement. At this point, it is possible to have the songwriter try out some of the suggestions in front of the class. When the class reaches the prescriptive level of feedback, it has become a type of master class for songwriters. Unlike most master classes, however, in which the "master" musician makes all the suggestions, the prescriptive form of master class allows for all class members to comment and make suggestions. Essentially, the students in the class become each other's teachers. It is not advisable to move to the prescriptive level too soon. Regardless of how accomplished or experienced a songwriter may be, it is necessary for the student to develop sufficient confidence in his or her own abilities and trust in the teacher and peers. This does not come quickly.

Once the class members get to know each other's musical style, strengths, and weaknesses, something wonderful usually happens. The comments they give to each other are almost uniformly encouraging and specific to that person's musical development. It is not uncommon for the students to refer to a songwriter's previous songs when giving feedback. Or they may comment on how much a performer's guitar playing has improved. It is the students who are the weakest performers technically that often get the greatest degree of support from the rest of the class. At that point, the class has become a self-supporting community of learners.

Words from the Experts

In a songwriting class, our students remind us almost daily of the extraordinary power

of music. Songs can express our humanity in ways that mere language cannot. The opening (and true) vignette of Maria's song for her brother depicts this well. Her song enabled her to give voice to the feelings that she could not articulate to her parents through language alone. Sharing such personal emotions through her song was an act of courage and a gift to her listeners. Perhaps songs are gifts we give to each other—acts of love and expressions of our shared humanity.

Students understand the power of songs, maybe more so than most of us who have spent our adult lifetimes in music education. When students in a high school songwriting class in Illinois were asked "What does songwriting mean to you?" one student wrote,

I want to write songs that inspire and motivate people. I want to be the voice for those who can't be heard and I want to expose the injustices in the world.

Another student wrote,

I am so sick of hearing songs that are about having sex and partying all the time. I've been through a lot of rough stuff in my life and I want to use those things as an inspiration to write songs that will help others. I want people to be able to reach for my songs for comfort when they are in distress.

A third student wrote,

I write songs to help me find out who I am.

A fourth wrote,

Songs can be a way for people to realize that they are not alone in this world.

These profound words by students underscore the power of a songwriting class to nurture students, not only as musicians but as people too. This article concludes with the words of Daniel, a college sophomore enrolled in a one-semester songwriting course. What follows is the last entry in a journal he maintained during the class, and he has

given permission for it to be printed here. His words, outlining his journey to become a songwriter, are more persuasive than anything this author could write about the potential of a songwriting class to empower all the undiscovered Daniels and Danielles in our schools:

I wasn't going to take this class because I felt I didn't have a good voice and I had never been able to write a song before. . . . Taking this class forced me to write songs, and to be able to get in front of strangers and confidently sing my songs to them is like some sort of huge revelation for me. Never in a million years did I think I would ever get up in front of an audience and share a song that I wrote out of my own experiences. Songwriting is also very therapeutic. I feel free when I pick up my guitar now to play anything and most importantly sing anything. If I'm happy or sad, I can write a song about it. Sometimes I think writing a song can keep me a little sane. Now that I'm a songwriter, I am able to listen to others' songs in a bit of a different light. I notice structure, rhyming schemes, word play, composition, and other intangibles that would have otherwise passed through my ears. . . . The only regret I have about songwriting is that I didn't start it earlier in my life. I feel like I've made a world of progress just in a few months. I can't imagine where I would be if I would have started just a few years earlier in high school. I believe that every student in the country should have this opportunity that I was able to seize, whether in college or high school. Because now that I am able to write and compose my own songs, I just can't imagine the rest of my life not possessing this skill.

NOTES

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