

Music is Story Telling

Each of my teaching assignments has informed the next, resulting organically over the years in a very cross-curricular teaching philosophy. Music lends itself incredibly well to cross-curricular connections: Breathing exercises teach anatomy; counting beats is number sense; determining note values is working with fractions; moving to music is dance; the history of music is the history of a culture. Music is patterns. Music is language. Music is current events. Music is poetry. Give me a subject and I'll show you how it connects to music.

Which leads me to the activity I designed for my second- and third-graders at the British international school where I teach in Cologne, Germany: Telling stories with music.

Pupils had been learning to play a variety of percussion instruments in their weekly lessons. Now, it was time for them to work together to create something all their own. I wanted to step back and let them explore.

Of course, they needed a framework for this creativity, so I decided to incorporate an element of the literacy curriculum: storytelling. (Add that to the list — music is storytelling!)

For this project, I invited them, in small groups, to write a three-sentence story accompanied by music. They wrote the stories, chose the instruments and incorporated the musical elements they had learned.



I selected six Picture Prompts for the children to pick from: [Icebergs](#), [Inspiration From an Illustration](#), [Weddings](#), [Gymnastics on Horseback](#), [Kindergarten in a Stadium](#) and [Household Chores](#).

The images I selected were colourful and open-ended enough to inspire creativity. I also chose images that I thought would resonate with 7- to 9-year-olds — pictures that would spark excitement, wonder, laughter or an otherwise heartfelt reaction. For example, I included the Weddings photo because it included an element of cross-cultural love and acceptance; it gave us the chance to briefly discuss Hinduism and Judaism and hear from pupils who practice those religions. Household Chores provided a personal connection for the children, who undoubtedly have their own experience with, and opinions about, chores. Of course, there were dozens more that would have worked.

I explained that the children would be writing a short story today ... a *very* short story. So short, in fact, that it would have only three sentences: one for the beginning, one for the middle and one for the end. They were amazed at the thought!

We started by looking at the six Picture Prompts together and chatting about what we saw. I explained that these images would inspire their stories. Some children had questions about what was happening in the pictures — isn't it dangerous to do gymnastics on a horse? Is there really a kindergarten inside the F.C. St. Pauli soccer club's stadium? — which all served to plant seeds of ideas for stories.

Next, I gave them the [work sheet](#) I had designed to guide them through the activity and we talked through the steps. The work sheet included a space to write their three sentences, along with spaces for notating who would do what at each point of the story.

I didn't prescribe how they should notate their plan. Some chose to write brief descriptions; others used rhythmic notation or other symbols they had invented. The work sheet included a list of our classroom instruments, which are mostly Orff instruments like small drums, xylophones, tambourines and triangles.

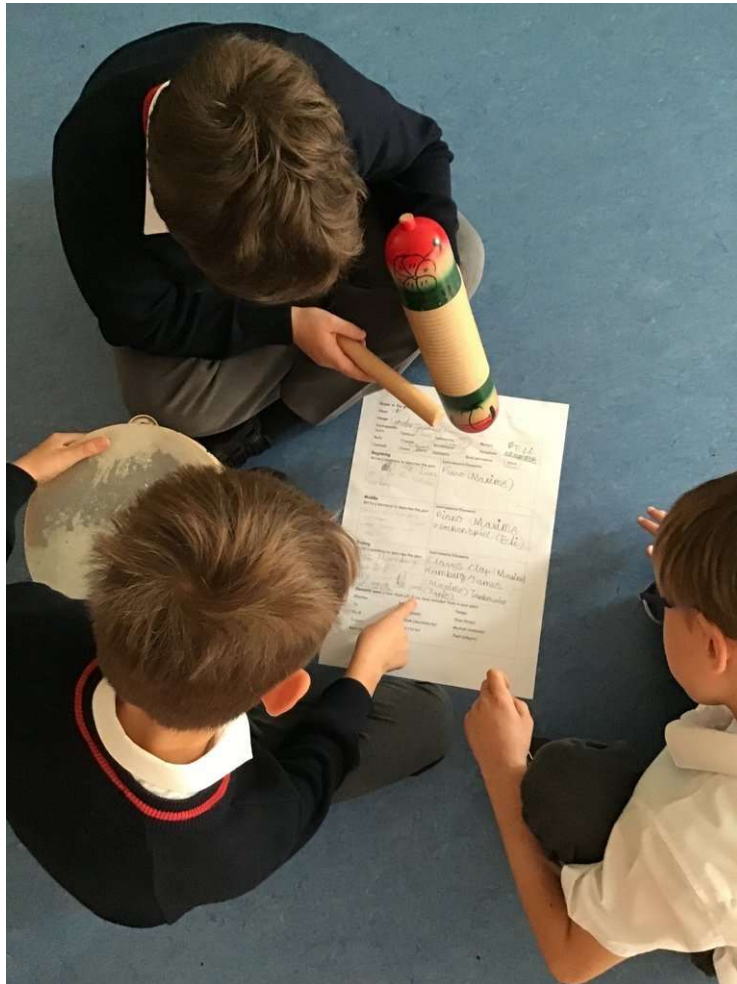
I also included a list of musical elements — tempo, dynamics and rhythmic notes. They could choose to incorporate these if they were stuck for ideas, or if they wanted to enrich their music. My goal with the work sheet was to remind the students of all the materials and prior knowledge at their disposal, so they could create the best musical stories possible.

Then, I sorted the students into groups, and they got to work.

First, they had to brainstorm ideas. They asked each other: Who is in the picture? What are they doing? What happened before or after this photo was taken? What would our five senses be experiencing if we were there? What exciting event can be the climax of our story?

Once they had the premise for their story, they had to write one sentence in each box on the work sheet. As I roamed around the room, listening in on conversations, I reminded them that their first sentence should tell us the character's name, and that something exciting should happen in the middle or ending sentence. When you've got only three sentences to work with, your writing has to be focused.

Once their sentences were written and I had given them the go-ahead, they reached their favourite part: choosing instruments to accompany the story. I rarely let them independently dig through our instrument trolley and try out the various instruments, which is why they loved this so much! The rule was, they had to make sure the sounds were purposeful and would add to the story. In one group, the tambour drum was the sound of the soccer fans applauding; for another group, the triangle was the sound of the mysterious iceberg floating toward the town. (Spoiler alert: The iceberg had aliens hiding inside it!)



Students rehearse their plan before their performance.

If the children were stuck for ideas or had finished early, I encouraged them to add some elements of music to their plan, to make their performance even better. Several groups chose points at which they would play loudly or softly. The soccer kindergarten group chose to speed up the beat as the child in their story ran down the field with the ball.

An important aspect of the project was writing down their musical plan in the space beside each sentence. The goal was not to simply improvise, but to create something and rehearse it. Who would read each sentence? Who would play which instrument and when? In the final five minutes of rehearsal, I gave them my usual reminder: Know how you begin and how you end. Even if a performance falls apart in the middle, having a clear ending in mind helps the performers be successful and helps the audience know when to applaud.

Any teacher, in any subject, needs to monitor groups as they work; this is all the more important in a lesson like this, where the sounds of rehearsing can quickly grow into an unbearable cacophony. To avoid the whole class getting a headache, I requested that they not practice at full volume, and to make sure that the sounds they made on their instruments were intentional and purposeful.

Quietly wandering through the classroom was also important during the planning phase. Some groups encountered difficulty compromising as they wrote their story; others didn't know how to begin in the first place. A couple of effective guiding questions got them back on track and using their time productively.

Performances were the highlight of the entire experience. I taught this lesson to six classes in second and third grade, and from six Picture Prompts burst forth about 25 distinct and entertaining musical stories. Aliens invaded a small seaside town; a toddler scored the winning goal; a magical broom did all the chores; a nervous equestrian gymnast won the gold medal. Most importantly, over 100 children had fun exploring and creating music that told a story.

This activity ticked a lot of boxes for me and for the children. The children liked it because it let them explore the instruments on their own terms. I liked it because it allowed me to step back and watch them work and learn, integrating and applying concepts from music and literacy. Developing their collaboration and self-assessment skills as they prepared to present, the children were actively engaged with their learning.

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