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# Good Rhythm and Intonation from Day One in Beginning Instrumental Music

By Colleen Conway

*Before they pick up  
their instruments,  
students can learn  
skills that will  
help them be  
successful  
the first time  
they play a note.*

**T**o many instrumental music teachers, the idea that the majority of students in beginning instrumental ensembles could have “good rhythm and intonation from day one” must sound like something from an imaginary dream world. However, by adjusting their understanding of what happens on day one, teachers may be able to help more students experience early tonal and rhythmic success in instrumental music. This article provides strategies for early lessons in beginning instrumental music so that the first day of actually reading and playing a specific note on an instrument is preceded by activities that build musical readiness.<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that beginning students will not play their instruments in the early weeks of instruction, but that the concept of playing and reading one “right” note with notation will be presented after students have been singing and moving and are musically ready to perform the “right” note.

Before considering how to develop music readiness in the first few instrumental lessons, it is important to think about students’ previous musical environment before they entered the instrumental music program. In an ideal situation, students entering an instrumental music program will have experienced four or



Photo by Mark Regan.

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five years of sequential music instruction in a strong elementary general music program. If the general music program is strong and the general music teacher and the instrumental music teacher communicate regularly, many of the suggestions in this article may be unnecessary. However, in many situations, general music classes meet so infrequently and the requirements to present shows and programs are so time-consuming that sequential musical skill building becomes all but impossible. Consequently, some instrumental teachers cannot assume that children entering the band or orchestra classroom have experienced the musical-readiness activities necessary for success in instrumental music. Instrumental teachers often blame general music teachers for poor preparation of students when they should blame the impossible teaching situation with which the general music teacher must contend.

It is important for instrumental music teachers and general music teachers to work together to advocate for a successful general music program. Administrators, parents, and school boards need to understand that general music teachers should see students consistently. MENC suggests that elementary school programs meet the following standards:

- “Every student receives general music instruction each week for at least ninety minutes, excluding time devoted to elective instrumental or choral instruction.”

- “All music educators are musicians/teachers who are certified to teach music, have extensive specialized knowledge and training, and are fully qualified for their instructional assignments in music.”<sup>2</sup>

The instrumental music teacher must communicate with administrators regarding the importance of these issues in general music.

The instrumental music teacher and the general music teacher also should align their curricula so that children understand that the musical concepts studied in general music can be transferred to learning an instrument. For many students, this transfer will not happen naturally. By using consistent terminology and approach-

es; teachers can ensure that this learning occurs.

*Teach the students to sing  
the songs that they will  
eventually play on their  
instruments.*

### **Readiness for Instrumental Music**

Instrumental music educators need to consider the question, what does it mean to be “ready” to play a musical instrument? As I reflect on my own work with beginning instrumental music students in the fourth grade and try to answer that question, I remember the students who were given their instruments and taught a few basic skills and came back a week or two later able to play several familiar songs. What was it that those students had that allowed them such immediate success? Most of them could already move to a steady beat and sing a familiar song in tune. When hearing less able classmates play, those students were able to hear mistakes in key signature or wrong pitches. They did not learn these skills from me. They could move to a steady beat and sing in tune when they began fourth grade. In order for all beginning instrumental music students to have similar success, these musicianship skills should be taught as part of beginning instrumental music.

### **Executive and Audiation Skills**

It is important to consider the variety of content taught in an instrumental music classroom. Much of this

content falls under what may be called *executive skills*.<sup>3</sup> These are the skills associated with putting an instrument together, holding it properly, having the correct embouchure and hand position, knowing which fingering to play for certain pitches, and having the necessary coordination to move those fingers correctly. Instrumental music teachers spend a great deal of time dealing with these skills because they are absolutely necessary for success in instrumental music. However, strong instrumentalists must also be able to audiate tonally and rhythmically in order to play musically. Grunow, Gordon, and Azzara suggest:

Because many students today lack the readiness to begin instruction on an instrument and because others need to apply their musicianship to the instrument, it is necessary for the teacher to teach all students to audiate a sense of tonality and a sense of meter while at the same time teaching instrumental technique. Stated another way, a student will simultaneously be learning two instruments—the audiation instrument (in her head) and the executive skill instrument (the instrument in her hands). Audiation is to music what thought is to language. It is through audiation that children learn a sense of tonality and meter.<sup>4</sup>

Instrumental music teachers must consider the importance of *audiation skills* in the first instrumental music lessons. In the early lessons, audiation skills and executive skills should be considered separately. Otherwise, for many children, the coordination of executive skills may take over, and they will never be able to sing and move. As they advance in instrumental music, these students may increase their executive skills, but they may never be able to perform with good rhythm and intonation.

### **Where Does Notation Fit in?**

The idea of singing and moving as part of instrumental music instruction is certainly not new. Many others have suggested that teaching students to

move and sing will enhance instrumental music achievement.<sup>5</sup> However, the difficulty comes for most music teachers when young instrumentalists need to learn many skills at once. It is hard to know where to start. Beginning instrumental students need to know everything. What should come first? Many instrumental music teachers seem to be in a hurry to introduce notation to students. In some programs, students learn notation and music theory before they are even given their instruments. Students learn to decode notation with no real understanding of the musical meaning of that notation. Of course, music reading is an important concept in beginning instrumental music. However, students cannot learn to read what they have not moved to, responded to, sung to, improvised to, and audiated.<sup>6</sup> The music teacher should consider holding off on teaching notation until students can make a good tone and play a variety of songs by rote. The first few concerts could easily feature ensembles using no notation. Then, once students can perform repertoire by ear and audiate a variety of tonal and rhythm patterns, they can begin to put notation to what they have already learned.

The remainder of this article offers some suggestions for helping beginning instrumental students develop rhythmic and tonal audiation skills. These activities do not need to be the only activities presented in instrumental music class. Teachers can provide information regarding instrument setup and care, hand position, embouchure, tone production, and so forth in conjunction with the audiation activities suggested here. All of these activities are based on the music learning theory of Edwin E. Gordon. (See the Gordon's Music Learning Theory sidebar for more information.)

## Rhythmic Readiness

It is common for many beginning instrumental music teachers to ask students to tap their feet to the beat. However, what happens to students who aren't able to perform this task? Students who cannot keep a steady beat need some general movement instruction as a precursor to steady-beat activities. By moving freely to

Edwin Gordon's music learning theory is a systematic study of how we learn music. It is based on the concept of audiation. "To audiate is to 'hear' and to comprehend music for which the sound may or may not be present. Audiation is to music what thought is to language" (*Jump Right In*, p.17). Gordon's theory explains what a student needs to know in order to be ready to audiate, and it provides techniques for teaching audiation. The theory can help teachers to plan music instruction in a logical, sequential way.

## For More Information

Consult the following sources to learn more about Gordon's music learning theory:

Azzara, Christopher A. "Audiation-Based Improvisation Techniques and Elementary Instrumental Students' Music Achievement." *Journal of Research in Music Education* 41, no. 4 (1993): 348–42.

Conway, Colleen M. "Why Wait to Start Beginning Band?" *Teaching Music* 5, no. 1 (1997): 36–45.

Dalby, Bruce. "Teaching Audiation in Instrumental Classes." *Music Educators Journal* 85, no. 6 (1999): 22–25, 46.

Gordon, Edwin E. "All about Audiation and Aptitude." *Music Educators Journal* 86, no. 2 (1999): 41–44.

Gordon, Edwin E. *Learning Sequences in Music*. 7th ed. Chicago: GIA Publications, 1997.

Grunow, Richard F., Edwin E. Gordon, and Christopher A. Azzara. *Jump Right In: The Instrumental Series Teacher's Guide*. 2nd ed. Chicago: GIA Publications, 2001.

Taggart, Cynthia, and Maria Runfolla, eds. *Readings in Music Learning Theory*. 2nd ed. Chicago: GIA Publications, in press.

Valerio, Wendy H., Alison M. Reynolds, Beth M. Bolton, Cynthia C. Taggart, and Edwin E. Gordon. *Music Play*. Chicago: GIA Publications, 1998.

songs in a variety of meters, all students can experience the movement elements of flow, weight, space, and time in music.<sup>7</sup> Teachers of early childhood music and general movement can suggest many free-movement activities that can eventually lead to better steady-beat achievement.<sup>8</sup>

*Steady-beat movement activities.* Students will often be more willing to move initially if they can bring in favorite recorded music. Although students enjoy moving to recorded music, they should also learn to move without it. It is important for young students to focus just on a beat without other musical "distractions." One strategy would be to alternate between using recorded music and not during steady-beat movement activities. When not using recorded music, you can just

say, "please move to this beat" and give a beat on an instrument or with your voice. Don't provide notation to students at this stage.

Students can begin steady-beat movement activities by finding the big beat—or "macro" beat—somewhere in their bodies. They may tap both arms on a desk or lift their heels from a standing position. If foot-tapping is to be used, have students tap their heels instead of their toes because a heel tap utilizes more body weight, which will lead to better steady-beat achievement. Once they have established a macro beat, ask students to move in duple or triple meter to the smaller beat—the "micro" beat—in addition to the macro beat. My students could usually keep a macro beat in their heels while lightly tapping a

duple or triple micro beat on their laps with their hands.

Directors often plead with their students to try to get them to subdivide. My sense is that if students knew how to subdivide, they would. Young students often tap their feet to the beat but never learn about the micro divisions within that beat. If students are not moving to the micro beat as well as the macro beat, they may never learn to feel that “subdivision.” I don’t believe that just counting the subdivision from notation will work. Young students must move their bodies in order to eventually internalize the subdivision.

*Rhythm-pattern instruction.* Once students can move in both duple and triple to the micro and macro beat, they are ready to begin call-and-response rhythm-pattern activities. It’s difficult to predict when students will be ready for this. The time it takes for them to get to this point will depend on their previous musical experience. Of course, not all children will become ready at the same time. However, it’s safe to proceed to pattern instruction when most of the children can move to the macro and micro beats in duple and triple meter. While the students are moving to the macro and the micro beat, provide a short rhythm pattern on a neutral syllable and ask the students to imitate that pattern. For example, you might perform



using the syllable “bah.” Present these activities without notation. The hope is that students will begin to internalize the rhythms so that when notation is introduced, they can bring musical meaning to that notation.

Continue to teach rhythm patterns in duple and triple meters. Draw the patterns from music that students will later read in notation. Eventually, you may also want to present whatever rhythm-syllable system is to be used in the instrumental program. The rhythm-syllable system developed by Gordon<sup>9</sup> is particularly useful in this type of instruction since it is designed

to be performed before it is read. However, the techniques suggested here could be used with any syllable system. Once students have performed and experienced a variety of rhythm patterns with and without syllables, they will be more ready to bring musical meaning to notation when it is taught.

*Once notation is introduced,  
all students can benefit  
from continuing to sing and  
move in instrumental  
ensembles.*

Once rhythm notation is introduced, it is a good idea to continue using the same sequence of macro- and micro-beat movement and call-and-response activities without notation when introducing any new rhythm to the students. Students who have moved to, chanted, imitated, and improvised with a new rhythm will be better able to understand it in notation.

### **Tonal Readiness**

Most instrumental music teachers would probably agree that in order to play in tune, an instrumentalist must have strong aural skills. However, many of us introduce notation and executive skills at the first instrumental music lessons instead of focusing on the development of strong aural skills. If singing in tune is important to tonal success, then the singing of songs should be an important activity in early instrumental lessons. Stud-

ents with a large vocabulary of songs in a variety of tonalities and meters are more likely to be successful.<sup>10</sup>

Do not ask beginning students to play a specific pitch on their instruments until they can hear the pitch they are supposed to produce. This does not mean that beginning instrumentalists will not play their instruments in the first few lessons. Early playing activities may include (1) brass players buzzing on the mouthpiece and then buzzing on the instrument, (2) flute players producing a sound on the head joint and then producing a sound on the instrument, (3) students producing a sound and holding that sound for as long as they can, and (4) students producing a sound and then trying connected and separated styles of articulation on that sound. None of these activities include notation. In all cases, students are playing whatever pitch comes out without concern for the pitch being right or wrong. When these activities are accompanied by rote singing, resting-tone activities, and tonal-pattern instruction, students will be more likely to eventually produce a tone with good intonation.

*Rote songs.* When I was teaching beginning instrumentalists, I began every lesson and rehearsal with a song. I would sing the song for the students a few times and then teach them to sing it phrase by phrase. We usually sang on a neutral syllable because I was more interested in their learning the melodies than the words. Most beginning method books include piano accompaniments to songs in the teacher’s guide. Teach the students to sing the songs that they will eventually play on their instruments. Good beginning songs that appear in most method books include “Hot Cross Buns,” “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star,” “Go Tell Aunt Rhody,” “Baa Baa Black Sheep,” “Pierrot,” “Down By the Station,” and “America.”

Students should learn to sing rote songs in minor tonalities as well as in both duple and triple meter. Minor and triple songs may be harder to find in traditional method books. If the method book being used does not have minor and triple tunes, try to find some supplemental music so that

students receive the maximum benefit. Students could learn all of the songs mentioned above in minor tonality or triple meter.

In addition to learning the melodies of these songs, students can learn the root melodies, or bass lines. This allows the students to sing in two parts and begin to hear harmonic relationships. When the students eventually begin to play the songs in their method books, teach the root melodies of all of their songs so that they continue to hear harmonic function. This also makes for easy two-part arrangements of any song in the method book. When given the choice at a concert, most of my students wanted to play the root-melody part more than the melody on our two-part songs.

*Resting-tone activities.* As students are learning rote songs, introduce the concept of *resting tone* or *tonic*. Sing the song or part of the song and have the students sing where the song ends—the resting tone. As the students are singing, stop them in the middle of the song and ask them to sing the resting tone. Ask individual students to sing the resting tone so that you can begin to get a sense of who can hear the resting tone and who can't. Try to be sure that most of students can hear resting tone before asking them to play a specific pitch on their instruments. Even once they begin to play, continue teaching rote songs and doing resting-tone activities with more challenging songs.

*Tonal-pattern instruction.* Once students have learned several rote songs and are beginning to understand the concept of resting tone, they are ready for call-and-response tonal-pattern activities. After establishing tonality by performing a tonic and a dominant pattern on the piano, with an instrument, or with the voice, provide a short tonal pattern (two or three notes) on a neutral syllable and ask the students to imitate that pattern. For example, you could perform



using the syllable “bum.” These activities are completed without notation

in the hope that students will begin to internalize the tonality just as they did the rhythm. When notation is introduced, they can bring musical meaning to that notation.

Continue to provide pattern instruction using tonic, dominant, and subdominant patterns in major and minor tonalities. Choose patterns in music that students will eventually read in notation. *Jump Right In: The Instrumental Series Teacher's Guide*<sup>11</sup> provides sequential tonal patterns for presenting to students before they learn notation. However, you may use other patterns. Eventually, you will probably want to present whatever tonal-syllable system is to be used in the instrumental program. Once students have performed and experienced a variety of tonal patterns with and without syllables, they will be more ready to bring musical meaning to notation when it is taught.

*The music teacher should consider holding off on teaching notation until students can make a good tone and play a variety of songs by rote.*

When teaching rhythm and tonal patterns, it's important to ask students to sing alone so that you can accurately assess who is able to perform the tasks. I found with my fourth-grade beginners that solo singing was not a problem if I worked to create a safe atmosphere for them. When a student

performed a pattern incorrectly, I just ignored it and went on to the next so that students would not feel unsuccessful in front of the class. The purpose of this activity is not to teach students how to sing correctly but to determine who needs help with tonal activities. Students who do not perform correctly receive help at another time.

### **First Tone on the Instrument**

Once most students can audiate resting tone and accurately imitate tonal patterns, they are ready to perform a specific, “right” note on their instruments. By this time, they should have had several opportunities to make sounds on their instruments, know how to hold the instrument properly, and have learned the fingering (or executive skills) for the first note they will play. Sing a song in the key of the first note (in most cases, concert B-flat for band and concert D for orchestra, although—depending on grouping of students—flutes, horns, and others may learn some other first tone). Do several resting-tone activities in that key so students are continually singing the note they will play. Once they have sung the note several times, ask them to play that note. If a student plays the wrong note, check executive skills (embouchure, hand position, and fingering). If executive skills are correct and the student is still playing incorrectly, ask the student to sing the desired pitch. If the student can't sing the right pitch, more readiness activities are needed before this student will experience success.

### **Conclusion**

Once students have sung and played many rhythm and tonal patterns without notation and performed many songs learned by ear with root melodies, they will be better prepared to learn notation. The music learning theory developed by Gordon<sup>12</sup> provides a logical sequence for getting students to audiate with notation. However, even students in programs that introduce notation in a more traditional format can benefit from beginning instrumental lessons that focus on singing and moving as a foundation to instrumental musician-

ship. Once notation is introduced, all students can benefit from continuing to sing and move in instrumental ensembles.

The beginning instrumental teacher who takes the time to provide students with the proper readiness for instrumental music can save much time later. When readiness skills are implemented in the instrumental music classroom, good rhythm and intonation can be part of the band and orchestra experience from day one!

## Notes

1. Edwin E. Gordon, *Learning Sequences in Music*, 7th ed. (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1997).

2. Music Educators National Conference, *Opportunity-to-Learn Standards for Music Instruction* (Reston, VA: MENC, 1994), 3.

3. Richard F. Grunow, Edwin E. Gordon, and Christopher A. Azzara, *Jump Right In: The Instrumental Series Teacher's Guide*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2001).

4. Ibid.

5. Mitchell Robinson, "To Sing or Not to Sing in Instrumental Class," *Music Educators Journal* 83, no. 1 (1996): 17-21, 47; Debbie Rohwer, "The Value of Singing in the Instrumental Music Program," *Dialogue in Instrumental Music Education* 19, no. 2 (1995): 73-86.

6. Beth Bolton, "Listen and Move: Preparing Your Students for Instrumental Music Classes," *GIML Audea* 3, no. 2 (1997): 15-17.

7. Rudolf Laban, *The Mastery of Movement* (London: MacDonald and Evans, 1971).

8. Wendy H. Valerio, Alison M. Reynolds, Beth M. Bolton, Cynthia C. Taggart, and Edwin E. Gordon, *Music Play* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1998); Phyliss S. Weikart, *Teaching Movement and Dance* (Ypsilanti, MI: High Scope Press, 1982).

9. Gordon, *Learning Sequences in Music*.

10. Bolton, "Listen and Move."

11. Grunow, Gordon, and Azzara, *Jump Right In*.

12. Ibid. ■

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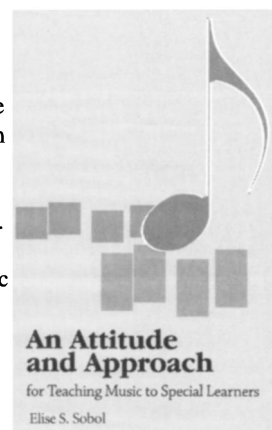
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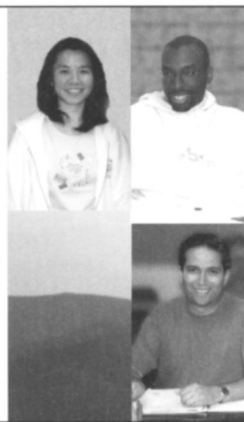
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