

## **My Middle School General Music Program** by Greg Livingston

I am often asked about my general music program, so I decided to write it down to make it easier to share with other teachers. Please feel free to use this information any way you can, if you find any of it useful to your situation.

My Background- classical double bass (Boston Conservatory of Music, 1974); M.Ed (Curriculum & Instruction, Boston College 1993).

My whole teaching career was in the Newton public schools in Newton, MA, a suburb of Boston, from which I retired in 2018 after 40 happy years. The district has 15 elementary schools, four middle schools, and two high schools. I taught at all three levels in many of the buildings, and spent the last 25 years of my career at Bigelow Middle School. I still go back to volunteer, and I enjoy bringing my trumpet to sit in with the sixth grand band.

The kids were motivated and the parents were supportive. I enjoyed complete freedom to do whatever I wanted to in my classroom. At Bigelow, my duties were 6th grade band, 7/8 band, 6/7/8 strings, 6/7/8 jazz band, 6th general, 7th general, and bus duty every afternoon, which was a lot of fun since I saw the kids outside the classroom, and because of bus duty I didn't have to pull cafeteria duty.

**My goals:** to establish a baseline of music literacy for all students; to have them read music well enough to play simple tunes on the piano; to overcome kids' tendency to think that they don't have talent or ability and therefore "can't do music"; to break down the wall between the music they learn in school and the music they all listen to at home; to get all kids to enjoy singing, outside the chorus experience.

I wanted to make everything as hands-on as possible; eliminate all busy work; hold quizzes to a minimum and make them relevant to the material; and give them tools to explore an unfamiliar art form so they'd become lifelong participants.

I avoided worksheets, such as labeling notes, which (at least in my district) could have reinforced negative experiences from elementary school.

Here is what I taught at my school.

**Sixth Grade General Music-** basic music theory, one hand piano tunes, recorder (alto and soprano), Song Day, Video Friday, guitar (open string chords to accompany singing), music composition performed in class

**Seventh Grade General Music-** continuing basic music theory, one hand piano tunes, Irish tin whistle tunes, Song Day, Video Friday, continuing guitar, music composition performed in class

(another teacher taught 8th grade general; lots of singing and the class formed jazz bands after learning the basics of the drum set and open strings on the double bass, plus the 6th and 7th grade piano and guitar. Each band had 4 or 5 kids with someone on drums, someone on bass, someone on piano or guitar, and everyone singing a 12 bar blues composition that they all composed in class.)

**Song Day-** (all grades) I put together a book of lyrics to many styles of songs; Disney, Beatles, Motown, folk songs, novelty songs, patriotic songs, sea chanteys, show tunes, whatever interesting songs I could find that were singable. Every Tuesday, we'd spend the entire period singing songs from that book. There were over 60 pages and 125 or so songs, and I'd make

them on the school copy machine and run transparent duct tape down the edge to preserve them. At the end of the term, they'd be really beat up so I let the kids keep them and by that time I was ready for a new edition. I was continually adding new songs.

We all know that kids don't like to sing in public, with the exception of the chorus program. I challenged that. I told the kids that you don't have to sing; I will; but you may not disrupt. "Sing on the inside", I'd say. It never took long before the whole class would join in. I let them choose the next song to sing and it was a lot of fun.

I chose songs that had something to teach. One was Wonderful World (the one that starts "don't know much about history"). One line is "don't know what a slide rule is for" and I bought a slide rule on ebay and would pass it around, and tell the kids that the Suez Canal, Empire State Building, and Eiffel Tower were all built using a slide rule. For fun, I'd tell them that the Titanic was built using one also. :)

We sang a medley of patriotic songs, and I had a photo of a flag with 48 stars. I'd ask them what was the 48th state? No one ever knew (I had to look it up...Arizona, 1912). That led to discussions about history.

Star Spangled Banner led to a detailed timeline of Key's poem written on the British ship.

Over The Rainbow led to a discussion of the first color movie, and for fun I told them that Dorothy's daughter married the Tin Man's son in later years.

The kids always asked for "Ghost Chickens In The Sky", and it would hurt my voice to do the chicken but the kids always laughed at that.

All this time, I'm playing guitar chords and singing strongly to lead them on. If the pace slowed, I'd cut to "This Land Is Your Land" or "My Favorite Things" which always got them going. You get the idea.

**Video Friday-** (all grades) Every Friday was Video Friday. I showed You Tube videos on my laptop onto an Elmo projector. I wanted the kids to see music of all genres in live performance. When I first got the idea, I made a list of performers from the 20th century who were well-known to the general public and who represented many genres (for example: Willie Nelson, Louis Armstrong, Vladimir Horowitz, Ella Fitzgerald, Eddie Van Halen, etc) and looked for their videos on You Tube.

I had over a dozen playlists and kept track of which playlist I showed to which class on which day. Each playlist had about 25 minutes of music so we could talk about them in between. They were not expected to take notes or be tested, but to see adults performing all kinds of music. I did not show any MTV-type videos because I knew they could see those at home. Also, I avoided rap and most hip-hop, since I couldn't play anything with obscenities, and if I played a version with a word beeped out, the kids knew all those and would shout those words anyway.

This describes what I taught, grade by grade.

**6th Grade General Music** (which became my favorite class). I had three or four classes each quarter, for about 30 class meetings in all. I got a whole new batch of kids four times a year.

**Music Theory-** I taught the grand staff; not just treble or bass, but I felt that you really need to see the entire staff to really know what is going on. At first I drew a horizontal line with a large

dot on it, then a dot above it, then a dot below it, and told the kids this represents three pitches. To go higher or lower, you'd need another line or two, and I'd draw them. After a while, I had 11 lines on the board. I told them that it's too hard to tell which line is which, so I erased the one in the middle and now we have two groups of ten. I told them that middle line that I erased is really still there but we only need to write it in for one note (middle C). I do not believe in the EGBDF stuff; I feel that it's an extra mental step. I taught them to count treble clef notes up and down from G (the reason for the G clef on the G line) and bass clef up and down from F for the same reason. We'd go from low G on the bass clef to high G on the treble.

I had a large chart with rhythmic values and did not expect the kids to memorize them or quiz them. Quizzes like that, in my opinion, are a waste of time, and they reinforce the idea many kids have that these are nit-picky obstacles to enjoying music. This is not the band or orchestra.

**Piano-** I had a large chart of a piano keyboard; each key was several inches wide so all could see. Using a drumstick, I pointed to each note starting on C and going up chromatically one octave, singing the note names as we went. I used sharp names going up and flat names going down. Then I'd get a volunteer to play those notes on the classroom piano, slowly, while we all sang them together. I had several pianos and several keyboards in the room, and I'd shoo the kids off to try that scale, singing each note as they played it and helping each other.

**First Piano Quiz-** play all 12 notes of a chromatic scale, from memory, very slowly, singing the note names as you play, sharps going up and flats coming down. This could be done in class or privately outside of class but if you made a mistake you had to try again.

**One Hand Piano Songs-** I made oversize staff paper with lines about 1/2 inch apart, and drew the melodies to simple tunes with the names of the notes inside each note head. Star Wars, This Land Is Your Land, Yesterday, etc; not the whole tune, just enough to suggest the tune. I put folders on stands with the tune sheets inside so the kids could choose the ones they wanted to play. They were paired up on my pianos and keyboards, and every five minutes I'd ring a bell so they had to switch to another piano.

**Recorder-** I brought this back to my school. The kids in my district all learn recorder in 3rd grade but few really liked it and fewer remembered anything. To them, recorder was a plastic toy. I wanted classroom melody instruments and over time, I got over 90 soprano recorders and ordered a dozen alto recorders, as well as one tenor and one bass recorder. I used the Essential Elements Recorder Book, plus a song book of my own that I made up.

To correct the negative image the kids had of the recorder, I typed up a page-long statement that I had the kids read aloud. On that sheet, the kids learned that the recorder was one of the most important instruments of the Renaissance and Baroque eras, and its name comes from an old word that meant "to sing like a bird". They learned about recorder consorts, posture, and tonguing, even before I passed them out.

I had enough sopranos for each class and I kept them in Home Depot buckets. I washed each one with soap and water after class. One bucket had clean recorders, and another was filled with hot soapy water. If you used a recorder, even for a moment, you had to put it in the Dirty bucket, not the Clean one. For the first few classes, we only used sopranos but once a student could play a major scale in half notes with correct tonguing, they could try an alto.

For the assessment, a student had to play a tune from either Essential Elements or my own song book, not from memory, but with correct rhythm and articulation (no huffing). I never had any behavior problems, once I explained all the reasons for all the rules.

I used band folders to hold the books plus any handout sheets, and the kids sat in pairs with a music stand. In that first lesson, they learned about the music stands- not to use them as a table or an elbow rest, not to write on them, and how to stack them after class. It was easy for me to collect all the folders at the end of class, as the kids put the recorders in the Dirty bucket.

**Guitar-** my first instrument. I was in the 7th grade when I saw the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show, and my Dad brought home a guitar the next day, and somehow I learned how to play it before joining my school chorus to learn how to read music. I told that story often.

I didn't bother with notation nor trying to play any melodies; that would come much later. My goal was to get the kids strumming along to accompany singing, as fast as possible. I won a grant to buy a classroom set of guitars, and bought Yamaha classical guitars. I taught them how to hold them correctly and how to strum the strings. They learned D and A7 on the first lesson, so we could all sing and play "Yellow Submarine". I made up a guitar song book with as many I-V tunes as I could find, then when we learned the G chord, I had lots of I-IV-V tunes ready. We didn't do any bar chords.

Assessment- play the accompaniment to a song of your choice. Sing it yourself, or have a classmate sing it, or I'd sing it.

**Music Composition-** this was the final activity of the class. Students were expected to create a composition for any instrument and play it either in class or for me privately. They could compose a song, but they'd have to sing it for me.

**Irish Tin Whistle-** A retiring colleague who played a lot of Irish sessions gave me a class set of tin whistles. I washed them after each 7th grade class, just like the recorders. I taught them the Kesh Jig and Breeches Full Of Stitches, two session tunes. I made up a short booklet (on green paper!) using letter names only, not notation, so all would be successful from the first moment (remember, this is not the school band or orchestra). I gave out a guitar accompaniment (simple chords) so the kids could play the tunes in small groups. I have a keyless Irish flute and I played it often in class.

I hope you have found this information helpful. Please let me know if you have any questions or comments. I hope you and your students have a successful school year!

Sincerely,  
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