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MUSIC ASSESSMENT CONCEPTS

A discussion of assessment concepts and models for student assessment introduces this special focus issue.

BY EDWARD P. ASMUS

For many teachers, assessment simply means grading. However, assessment is much more comprehensive than that in today's educational world. From a teaching perspective, assessment involves not only objectively measuring acquired knowledge and skill over time in order to assign a fair grade, but also identifying appropriate future learning experiences that the teacher may offer to enhance student learning. Greater precision in assessment will provide better information to both student and teacher, because it can help the teacher evaluate instructional strategies of the past and select appropriate strategies for the future. Educational reform and associated accountability issues have made music educators aware of the need to perform assessments that precisely and substantively document what a student has learned in the music classroom. While this article focuses mainly on student assessment, teachers and entire programs may also be assessed.

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For some music teachers, the very idea of objectifying music is to be shunned. Yet, there are substantive means for accurately evaluating the music learning of students without sacrificing the quality of their musical experiences. If the teacher has a thorough understanding of the musical knowledge to be taught and can accurately present it to students, then the essential building blocks of assessment are already in place. From this foundation, valid assessments of students' musical learning can take place.

It should be understood that assessment is not an add-on to instruction. Rather, it is an integral part of the instructional process, and it can inform both the teacher and the learner. The teacher is provided information for selecting appropriate materials, experiences, and methods. The learner is provided information about what has been learned and what strategies foster learning, as well as the motivation to further improve in the art of music.

Some music educators believe that music teaching and learning are very difficult, if not impossible, to assess. Usually, such beliefs stem from an insufficient level of detail as to exactly what the student is to be able to do or know after music instruction. Well-specified learning targets inform the teacher and the student about what is to be learned and point toward specific means for assessing the learning. For example, educators frequently use the term "musically" when describing how a student is to be able to sing or play. A learning target for the goal of "the student will be able to sing the phrase musically" could be "the phrase will be sung with appropriate use of breath, dynamics, tempo variation, and tension and release." The assessment would cover these specific aspects of performance.

Types of Assessment

Various types of assessment exist for determining the status and needs of many differing aspects of education. Two of these types are student and program assessment. *Student assessment* is the evaluation of students' learning, which provides a basis for planning future instruction. *Program assessment* examines a particular educational program, such as a choral program, a districtwide reading program, or the like, to determine its effectiveness in meeting student, parent, and community needs. (See the Glossary of Assessment Terms sidebar for definitions of terms relating to different types of assessment.) Although music teachers are primarily concerned with student assessment in their daily interactions with students, they probably have more involvement at the programmatic level than teachers in any other curricular area. Music teachers not only assess the learning of students in their charge, but they must also determine the efficacy of a music program's course offerings, ensembles, performance opportunities, and special events (field trips, music festivals, and similar activities).

Authentic assessment is used to determine student progress while the student is involved in real-world activities where learned knowledge and skills can be applied. Music educators have an advantage over educators in other curricular areas in that, when their students perform music, they are involved in a public activity by which they can demonstrate their learning.

Portfolio assessment is a tool for recording process and product—tangible evidence of a student's learning collected over time. Ideally, an individual's portfolio contains items such as musical programs, teachers' written evaluations, recordings, and written self-evaluations. The results of objective, periodic reviews of the portfolios' contents provide feedback to students, teachers, and parents.

Discussions in music education circles about assessment may frequently refer to *standards-based assessment*. Educators using this tool draw on local, district, state, or national standards as criteria for student performance.

Establishing a Model for Student Assessment

Any type of assessment must address the great diversity of instructional settings that exist in music education. Classes range in age level, from preschoolers to senior citizens; in size, from small performance ensembles to full-size orchestras and bands; and in course content, from music instruction and performance to theory, history, and other areas. All of the learners in these settings can benefit from assessment if it is a consistently applied, ongoing process.



Assessment information is invaluable to the teacher, student, parents, school, and community for determining the effectiveness of the music instruction in their schools.



While music learning may be greatly influenced by the context in which instruction occurs and the entering characteristics of the students who are to receive the instruction, three factors are inherent in all music teaching and learning: (1) the music instruction content and process, (2) the ongoing assessment during instruction, and (3) the outcome of instruction.

Music, maybe more than any other school subject matter, operates within extremely long time frames that can last all thirteen years of a student's involvement in the public schools. As they teach, educators incorporate both short-term and long-term learning targets. Within any given instructional sequence—even one meeting of a class—numerous short-term learning targets are the focus of the instruction. These short-term targets influence

what materials a teacher selects and what methodologies he or she applies. Feedback received from assessing how the student interacts with the materials and methods will influence what the teacher does next. When teaching musical performance, educators constantly receive feedback as to how well the students are performing. That is, they are provided with information that indicates how well the students have achieved their short-term learning targets. Not only does the short-term learning target influence instruction, it also influences the assessment that is made. If the short-term learning target is the ability to distinguish the treble from the bass clef, a teacher would probably not ask students to clap their hands to a rhythm.

Attainment of a series of short-term learning targets should contribute to the acquisition of defined long-term learning targets. One outcome of a music instruction sequence is increased student motivation, which can enhance knowledge and skills. Another important outcome of many music instruction sequences is a musical performance. The music performance is one of the most authentic assessment opportunities available in schools. The pre-performance anxiety and the stress of performing music publicly place students in a setting comparable to that faced by professional musicians. A music performance is informative to the teacher, the students, the community, the parents, and the school.

Sources of Learning Targets

Good learning targets provide the basis for effective assessment. District music curricula, state curriculum standards, and the National Standards for Music Education can all provide teachers with learning targets for music instruction. Three MENC publications that provide a basis for determining long- and short-term learning targets are *The School Music Program: A New Vision; Opportunity-to-Learn Standards for Music Instruction: Grades PreK–12*; and *Performance Standards for Music: Strategies and Benchmarks for Assessing Progress toward the National Standards, Grades PreK–12*. Publications that provide more course-specific

Glossary of Assessment Terms

Alternative Assessment: Any assessment technique other than traditional paper-and-pencil tests that uses strategies for collecting and analyzing information.

Assessment: The collection, analysis, interpretation, and application of information about student performance or program effectiveness in order to make educational decisions.

Authentic Assessment: Assessment techniques that gather information about students' ability to perform tasks that are found in real-world situations.

Benchmark: A description that provides information for measuring the student's progress toward an established standard.

Criterion-Referenced: Determining the value of a student's performance by referring to a requirement that was specified prior to the student's performance of a task.

Criterion: A description of the standard of performance for a particular task.

Evaluation: The collection and use of information to make informed educational decisions.

Formative Assessment: Ongoing assessment within an educational program for the purpose of improving the program as it progresses.

Measurement: The use of systematic methodology to observe musical behaviors in order to represent the magnitude of performance capability, task completion, and concept attainment.

Norm: The midpoint in a set of scores taken from a large number of representative individuals where 50 percent of the scores are above the point and 50 percent are below.

Norm-Referenced: The value of a student's performance determined by referring to a norm established from a large number of representative individuals; this value indicates how a student performed in relation to other individuals' previous performances.

Performance Assessment: An assessment that determines a student's ability to perform assigned tasks rather than his or her ability to answer questions.

Performance Task: A student demonstration that shows ability to handle complex material in real-world situations.

Portfolio Assessment: An analysis of a collection of student work used to demonstrate student achievement in a content area; student progress is determined by reviewing the collected works in light of previously established criteria.

Program Assessment: The determination of an educational program's strengths and weaknesses through a well-conceived and well-implemented plan of data collection and analysis.

Reliability: The consistency of an assessment instrument to obtain similar scores across time.

Rubric: A set of scoring criteria used to determine the value of a student's performance on assigned tasks; the criteria are written so students are able to learn what must be done to improve their performances in the future.

Self-Assessment: Analysis of one's own performance or abilities.

Standard: The content, level, or type of performance expected of students at a particular point in time or stage of development.

Standards-Based Assessment: Assessment established from school, district, state, or national standards of content and performance in a subject.

Student Assessment: The determination of one or more students' capabilities in a subject, made from information gathered on meaningful performance tasks that are referenced to well-defined, educationally sound performance criteria.

Summative Assessment: Assessment performed to determine the overall effectiveness of an educational program.

Validity: The effectiveness of an assessment instrument in measuring what it is supposed to measure; also relates to the appropriate use of assessment information and results.

learning targets are available in MENC's thirteen-volume *Strategies for Teaching* series. This series covers prekindergarten music, K-4 general music, middle-level general music, high school general music, beginning and intermediate band, high school band, elementary and middle-level chorus, high school chorus, strings and orchestra, middle-level and high school guitar, middle-level and high school keyboard, specialized ensembles, and music methods classes.

If the specifics of what will be taught are known, it is a relatively simple matter to determine the most appropriate methods for assessing the learning. The assessment must be congruent with the actual learning targets. If band students are taught how to play the B-flat concert scale, they should not be assessed on their ability to notate the B-flat concert scale, because they were taught to play, not notate. As most music teachers are well aware, moving from playing to notating is a giant conceptual leap for numerous music students, and that transfer of learning is not as easy as many would believe.

Practical Suggestions

Assessment must necessarily involve recording observations made about the teaching and learning process. Tangible information about the musical knowledge and skills a student possesses must be gathered accurately and objectively. Whether it is a collection of materials in a student's portfolio or marks in a teacher's grade book, impartial observation addresses whether or not the student meets learning targets, and this observation allows the teacher to make measurements. "Measurement" can be defined as the assignment of a numeric value that characterizes a particular attribute of interest. Observation is made more consistent when a set of rules is used to define how the attribute is characterized.

Musical performance is regularly rated, or measured, at solo and ensemble festivals. How it is measured is a point of concern for many music teachers. Measuring can be done in a way that promotes student growth in both musical performance skills and

knowledge of performance practices. Valid, reliable measurements can be obtained by following a few simple rules:

- Clearly define what is to be measured.
- Clearly define the rules, or rubric, for characterizing the attribute to be measured.
- Be as consistent and objective as possible.
- Use a recording system that minimizes disruption to the ongoing classroom activities.



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One simple strategy for evaluating musical performance in the music classroom is to employ a rating scale with categories such as Excellent, Good, Fair, and Poor. These categories could be assigned the numeric values of 4 for Excellent, 3 for Good, 2 for Fair, and 1 for Poor. The meaning of each of these categories would be based on the musical and educational standards of the teacher and his or her school district, many of which use the National Standards for Music Education as a guide. The teacher would then apply the rubric (the rating scale and its defined categories) fairly, focusing on exactly what is being rated. With this approach, any number of performance attributes could be assigned.

Consider, for example, a choral teacher who wishes to assess his or her students' ability to sing their parts for a work that the chorus is preparing for a festival. The teacher determines that posture, breath support, diction,

memorization, pitch, and style are the attributes of singing that should be assessed. These attributes are placed in a grid on a single sheet of paper, as shown in figure 1, Choral Rating Form, and this form is placed on a clipboard. Once the choir has started singing, the teacher can walk among the chorus members and rate them as he or she passes near each student. No extra time inside or outside of class is used, the students are singing within the framework and support structure of the choir, and the situation of a rater evaluating the performance is similar to the one that the students will encounter with the judges at the festival. This procedure also has the benefit of providing the students with an opportunity to enhance their musical independence by occasionally singing without a conductor.

Assessment's Purpose

Assessment in the music classroom has been brought to the forefront by education reform efforts. The need for teachers to document student learning in music has become critical for demonstrating that learning is taking place in America's music classrooms. Assessment information is invaluable to the teacher, student, parents, school, and community for determining the effectiveness of the music instruction in their schools.

While the ultimate purpose of assessment is ensuring the most effective instruction possible to enhance student learning in music, assessment can also be used to determine the effectiveness of the teacher and the instructional program. Clearly identified learning targets and tangible assessment methods demonstrate the teacher's efforts to promote student learning in music.

Assessment is one of the music teacher's professional responsibilities, and the importance of teacher assessment competence has been recognized by a number of professional organizations, including the American Federation of Teachers, the National Council on Measurement in Education, and the National Education Association. The Guidelines for Teacher Competence in Student Assessment sidebar lists characteristic behaviors that have

Internet Assessment Sites

ArtsEdge Curriculum Design Studio

<http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/cs/design/>

Contains links for assessment resources important to the arts and information about assessment in the arts.

Assessment Resource Center

<http://tiger.coe.missouri.edu/~arcwww/>

Offers a wealth of information on assessment, including a special focus on performance assessment.

Center on Learning, Assessment, and School Structure

<http://www.classnj.org/>

Provides information, how-to's, news, an idea exchange, and practical tips for implementing assessment in educational settings.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation

<http://www.ericae.net/>

Features a large selection of how-to articles, numerous links to other assessment sites, and access to ERIC contents related to assessment.

National Assessment of Educational Progress

<http://nces.ed.gov/naep/>

Contains results, policies, reports, and information about the largest school assessment undertakings in the United States.

National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing

<http://crest96.cse.ucla.edu/index.htm>

Provides numerous technical reports that focus on K–12 educational testing; also includes useful guidebooks for setting up various forms of assessment.

Resources for Assessment

Airasian, Peter W. *Classroom Assessment*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997.

Boyle, J. David, and Rudolf E. Radocy. *Measurement and Evaluation of Musical Experiences*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1987.

Chase, Clinton I. *Contemporary Assessment for Educators*. New York: Longman, 1999.

Gallagher, Jo D. *Classroom Assessment for Teachers*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill, 1998.

Gredler, Margaret E. *Classroom Assessment and Learning*. New York: Longman, 1999.

been agreed upon by many of these organizations. The Internet Assessment Sites sidebar also provides information and resources for teachers. Additional reading can be found in the Resources for Assessment sidebar.

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This Special Focus Issue

This issue of *Music Educators Journal* features articles covering a range of assessment-related topics that provide substantive information useful in the music classroom. Sandra Stauffer addresses general music assessment issues in “Beginning Assessment in Elementary General Music,” which covers techniques for assessing the music learning of elementary-level students. “Assessment in Instrumental Music” is the focus of Thomas Goolsby’s article, which offers strategies for assessing the diversity of learning opportunities in instrumental music. In “Assessment and Strategic Planning,” an article that brings two important elements together, Hoyt LeCroy looks at program assessment from the districtwide perspective as a means for implementing districtwide strategic planning. All the writers present practical approaches to foster and enhance assessment in music. ■