Assessment: Making it a Part of Your Daily Routine
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Assessment has become a major focus in the area of music education in the past decade. With all the concern about public school education and whether teachers and students are meeting expected standards and achievements as dictated by the National Standards movement and the various accreditation agencies, it may seem like one more thing we are expected to do in our classroom. The truth is, that for teachers and students, assessment has many more advantages than disadvantages. When done in a positive manner, assessment can peek the interest of your students and teach them and their parents something about where they are musically. In addition, assessing students helps you understand when to re-teach, reinforce, or change direction. If students are not performing well on specific tasks it may mean that the sequence of instruction or repertoire used was not effective and it is time to consider some new teaching strategies or materials. Assessment also validates music programs with students, parents, and administrators. It confirms that students really do learn something in your orchestra and helps show that music education does have value.

Additional valuable aspects of assessment are that it provides evidence of students' musical growth and progress and evidence of accountability of student learning. For many teachers the word “assessment” conjures up memories of long nights of preparing end-of-semester progress reports prior to a designated deadline. Progress reports are necessary and they represent the cumulative grade earned by students in string class, but grades on progress reports must reflect the growth and progress (or lack thereof) of each student. It is important, therefore, to provide a number of assessment opportunities for your students throughout the semester to enable them to demonstrate their technical and musical skills and their musical knowledge. Ongoing assessments help you determine where a student's level was, where it is currently, and where it should be. How many of you have faced a parent who remarked, "Why did John get a B in orchestra? Everyone should make an A in music!" A reasonable number of varied assessments administered throughout the semester will provide substantiation for grades earned on progress reports and will provide a true indication of student development and achievement.

One of the biggest hurdles associated with music assessment is the amount of time it takes to evaluate individual performances. Listening to and evaluating each student takes time, and the stretch of time it takes to evaluate all students in your string program is considerable! Unlike other subjects where students can be tested in large groups relatively quickly with written exams, music performance and technical skills must be assessed by examining each individual student. Stopping instruction while completing individual assessments may result in an extended period of time where students are not being challenged with new ideas or learning new performance skills. The amount of instructional time lost is unacceptable. Interruption of instruction is the primary reason why assessment does not occur on a regular basis in most performance-based music classes. The amount of time typically allotted for string music instruction is minimal and most teachers are not willing to sacrifice additional time, even if it is for a good cause. So how can assessment activities be completed with a minimal impact on instruction?

Assessing students using well-conceived assessment tools can be done quickly and effectively. Student performances should be evaluated with mechanisms that help the listener discriminate between levels of music performance ability. Carefully prepared rubrics and
checklists are two different tools that can aid an evaluator in discerning levels of skill and content achievement, and the relative mastery of technique associated with string instrument performance. Both rubrics and checklists include carefully constructed descriptions of levels of music performance achievement. Such tools clearly communicate to students what constitutes quality and how it might be accomplished.

A **rubric** identifies specific qualities of music performance at points along a scale. Each subsequent description specifies distinct levels of skill content, and mastery of technique. Numbers are assigned to depictions of increasing performance capability. Five has been found to be the optimum number of criteria to aid a human listener in making consistent evaluations of discrete levels of music performance competence.

A **checklist**, in contrast to a rubric, is a set of written behaviors not arranged in a hierarchical order. It is a written inventory of skills, content, and technique to be checked-off by a teacher as a record of yes-no ratings. Each description is an indication of music behaviors that were present or not present in a music performance.

Using rubrics and checklists are important when assessing students. They provide a framework from which systematic and meaningful judgments can be made. Taking the time from regular classroom instruction is beneficial when useful information is discovered. Intuitive overall judgments, without the use of rubrics and checklists, of liking-disliking a student performance (outstanding, good, average, poor) is not helpful in diagnosing particular performance deficits and formulating plans for future achievement. Use rubrics and checklists to be more diagnostic and to lead toward more specific treatments for improvement.

The following ideas are from many colleagues and friends who have shared how they brought assessment into the classroom or rehearsal hall and inserted it as a part of regular instructional activities. With some minor adjustments many of these assessment strategies can be effective at any grade or ability level. I describe them here with the hope you might consider adopting one or more for your students.

**Teacher as Evaluator**

Prior to the start of a group lesson or ensemble rehearsal select five students that you will make a deliberate point of listening to that day. Then plan a normal string rehearsal with regular drill and practice activities. However, make sure you choose and listen to the five selected individually during the course of the rehearsal/lesson. Briefly stop and ask a selected student to perform 4-8 measures of music. Immediately after the student performs the short excerpt of ensemble music record the level of student performance achievement. Make a record of the student’s performance level you heard with the use of a well-organized scoring rubric or checklist. Each subsequent rehearsal select five new students to hear individually. Over a period of a few weeks you will be able to listen to everyone individually in the ensemble.

Another technique useful for listening to individual students during rehearsal is to quickly instruct students in an ensemble section to perform, one student at a time, two measures each in succession while keeping a steady pulse. Each student performs in sequence a two-measure portion of a complete phrase. Again, this provides an opportunity for you to listen to the students in order to evaluate their individual performances.

Listening to students in small sub-groups is an alternative way to assess individual performance achievement. A clever way to create opportunities to listen to small groups of students is to assign everyone in your large ensemble into a number of string quartets. Label each quartet with a composer’s name, for example the Beethoven Quartet, the Haydn Quartet,
the Mozart Quartet, etc.. Then create a procedure where at the beginning of each rehearsal, immediately following tuning and warm-up exercises, a student string quartet performs an excerpt of the ensemble music in front of the larger ensemble. For each rehearsal a different quartet performs in front of the larger group. During the brief 3-5 minute presentation use scoring criteria to evaluate each student’s level of performance achievement. Create a schedule of quartet performances so that students might be able to organize rehearsals prior to their appearance in front of their peers (another way to get students to practice their ensemble music).

Others have told me that each semester they assign dates for each individual student to perform in front of the entire ensemble. Again, the students are assigned short excerpts no longer than 5 minutes in length so a minimum rehearsal time is used for assessment. Some students, however, may find it hard to perform alone in front of their fellow students and feel more comfortable performing in a quartet.

Yet another means to hear individual student performance is to have students record themselves on audio tapes or compact disk. There are a variety of methods that can be used to have students make recordings and submit them for review. One method is to give an assignment whereon a given date everyone is to turn in a cassette recording of themselves performing an assigned excerpt or exercise. Your job is to then sit and listen to each of the student performances. Again with the use of rubrics and checklists, evaluate the student performances and return the tape with a completed score sheet. Is it permissible for students to re-record themselves until they are satisfied with their recorded performance? Absolutely. The more time spent practicing and perfecting the music will benefit your students and the performance quality of your ensemble!

A variation of this procedure is to have the students one-at-a-time, during the course of a rehearsal, go to a practice room where recording equipment is ready to be used. Each student is to start the tape recorder, announce their name (or number), and then perform the assigned excerpt of music into a microphone. After the student is finished they stop the tape recorder, return to rehearsal and indicate to the next student that it is their turn. This procedure is repeated until each student has made an individual recording.

Student as Evaluator

Students can benefit greatly if they are asked to listen to their own music performances. Having students make well-considered evaluations of their personal performances will help them to identify their strengths and weaknesses and initiate plans on how to improve. Students are more likely to change if they themselves are convinced that change is necessary. Participating in reflective assessment can help students define for themselves what constitutes excellence in music performance achievement and how they personally plan to accomplish it.

If you ask students to record an audio tape/compact disk for your evaluation, why not first have the students listen to their own recorded performance and make a self-assessment? In order for students to know what to listen for and how to evaluate themselves with precision, distribute to the students the same set of rubrics and checklists that you will be using when assessing their recorded performances. Students are asked to submit the personal assessment with the recording. A great follow-up activity, after you have completed your teacher evaluations, is to meet with the students to compare and discuss the teacher evaluation with their own student evaluation. Wonderful discussions can take place when there are discrepancies between the teacher and student evaluations.

Another activity that engages students in assessment is to have them perform for and