

P.S. 11 Composition Class Report

Teaching at P.S. 11 for one semester has been exciting, challenging, and extremely rewarding. My students are imaginative and open to learning about music that they have had little exposure to. On the first day of class, I asked everyone to name a few composers. The responses I got were “Britney Spears, Jay-Z, Jennifer Lopez, 50 Cent, and Mozart.” There was a lot of concern among the students that the music we were learning about would be written by “old dead guys” and would sound “old-fashioned.” After the first month of lessons the students are able to identify the music of Stravinsky, Tchaikovsky, Gershwin, Duke Ellington, Mozart, Vivaldi, and Wynton Marsalis. I have incorporated art, dance, and demonstrations into my lessons to make the children excited about classical music. I have structured composition classes to accomplish three goals:

1. To expose students to a vast repertoire of music and foster an understanding and appreciation of concert music.
2. To guide students through the basic principles of composition so that they may express themselves through music.
3. To present a concert at the end of the school year that showcases the students’ work.

The first compositions we wrote as a class were inspired names. I taught everyone the musical alphabet and had them write their names using only those seven letters.

A B C D E F G H I J K ...
A B C D E F G A B C D ...

I translated the musical spelling of their names into notes and then we played everyone’s name on the piano. It was interesting to see the confidence that every student developed when they realized that music could be personalized. There were a few in the class that were hesitant to compose, but this opening exercise taught them that musical material can come from anywhere.

Once the students had a musical theme that they wanted to write, I taught them about all of the ways that composers can vary those ideas. We learned about major, minor, diminished, and augmented sonorities. I had the children draw impression of each of the different chords. The class decided that major is sunny and happy, minor is lonely, diminished is sad, and augmented is scary.



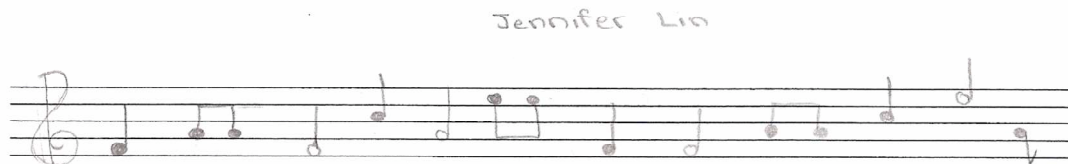
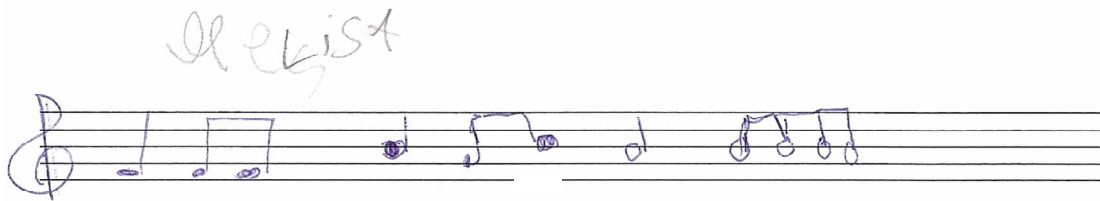
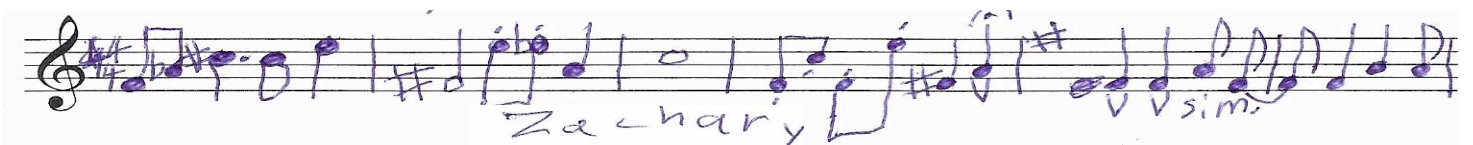
It makes me feel sad, happy

It make me feel like a vampir



In addition to varying themes by using different qualities, I demonstrated how themes can be changed using rhythm. I taught them the divisions of a whole note, the difference between simple and complex meters, and how to conduct in 2/4, 3/4, 4/4, and 5/4. As a class exercise, the students made up their own rhythms and everyone clapped them. The composer of the rhythm conducted the whole group. A percussionist from Brazil, Meia Noite, came into class the following week to demonstrate traditional Brazilian rhythms on the pandeiro, hand drum, and the triangle. Everyone played the instruments and learned the Brazilian rhythms. Having Meia Noite in class was a wonderful way for the class to see how written music is translated into sound. For students who have never written music before, rhythm is easier to notate than pitch. Everyone had fun writing out the different note lengths because they thought of it almost like an art project.

In the first semester one of my goals is to have everybody read music. I'm starting by dividing up the space notes and the line notes. Last month, everyone was assigned to compose a piece using only space notes. We then performed the pieces on piano and keyboards. Here are a few examples of their works:

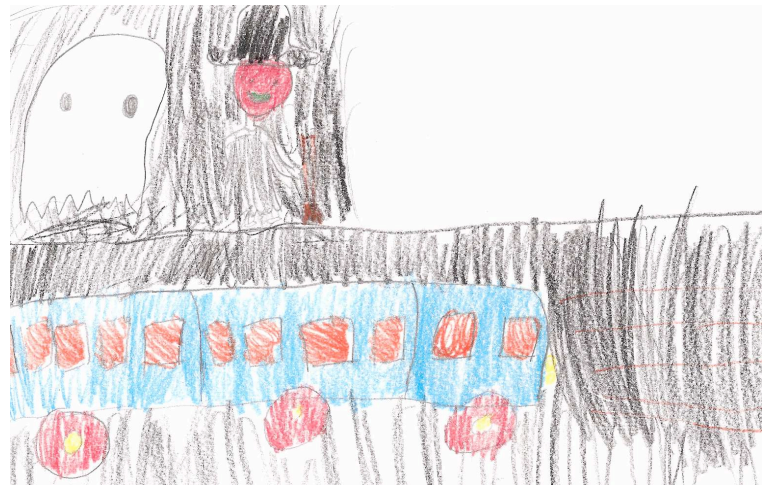


It is important that the class connects with the music that I play for them. We studied Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* one week and I played the corresponding section of *Fantasia* for them the next week. As they were listening to the music, I had the class draw their impressions of the sound. We then compared everyone's drawings to the artist's interpretation in *Fantasia*. In our discussions of the similarities and differences, we found that the class thought the music was more abstract, while the Disney artist saw a definite shape in the music. *The Rite of Spring* provided a wonderful opportunity for me to explain instrumental timbre. We looked at the wind, brass, string, and percussion as a whole in this piece. We had previously studied *At the Octoroon Ball*, a string quartet by Wynton Marsalis and *Rhapsody in Blue* so listening to Stravinsky's work tied the different instrumental families together.

The class is currently deciding what instruments we want to use for the final concert. Some children want to write music for strings while others want to compose themes for flute and clarinet. Everyone is going to make an individual contribution in shaping the piece. I am looking forward to working on the final project.



Impressions of The Rite of Spring



At The Octoroon Ball, Wynton Marsalis