

Music for Life: Praxis-Based General Music for Lifelong Learning

Kent Knappenberger

Westfield (NY) Academy and Central School

From the founding Editor: This article was invited originally in the expectation that it might be a model for TOPICS articles by or about teachers that illustrate praxis into theory and theory into praxis—the key interests of TOPICS for readers. Time and other demands prevented its earlier appearance. Thus, in addition to articles from scholars, we encourage articles from practitioners whose work exemplifies the premises of theory that guides praxis and praxis that contributes to theory—not just ‘show and tell’ accounts. In all professions, praxis contributes to theory. This article serves both sides of the equation: it builds on the well-known theories of child and adolescent development and educational theory. And it especially exemplifies praxial philosophy—both a view of *music* as praxis—a “doing” that ethically serves people in useful and long-lasting ways; and a view of *teaching* as praxis, not lesson templates “delivered” according to this or that “methodolatry” (Regelski 2002). The comment is sometimes made about praxis-based teaching, that “it looks good on paper but what’s it like in application?” This is one exceptional example, with many of the results in support of advancing praxial theory shown in the video links cited at the end: *readers should not fail to consult them!* This is another kind of empirical evidence of theory into praxis and examples of praxis that can advance theory. And the video evidence serves to reinforce praxial curricular themes offered in the article! Again: We welcome articles by practitioners that, as with this example, will advance the challenge of uniting theory and praxis in behalf of students everywhere.

ABSTRACT

This article gives an account of a praxis-based sequential and spiral *curriculum* as taught in the Westfield (NY) Academy and Central School. The author, based on the same evidence offered in this article (and the supporting videos), was the winner of the 2014 Grammy Foundation and Recording Academy Music Teacher of the Year Award, the first ever, as chosen from over 32,000 entries. It describes general music and choral curriculums for grades 6–12 that exemplify a praxial theory of both

music and music teaching and that demonstrate how such curriculums have a beneficial impact on student ensembles.

Keywords: praxial theory, curriculum, general music, chorus, vernacular music (Celtic/American), handbells, community music

Introduction and Context

The Westfield Academy and Central School music department is home to a K–12 curriculum organized around major precepts of praxial philosophy (Elliott 1995; Elliott and Silverman 2015; Regelski 2016) and action theory (Regelski 2005) that, as a result, places a unique importance on the offering of what is often known as "classroom" or "general" music and its praxial contributions to a wide variety of performing ensembles. In our school, these music classes exist for every grade level from Kindergarten through grade 12, and the curriculums of each provide students with opportunities to engage in musical praxes designed to prepare them for in-life and lifelong use of that learning. The K–5 curriculum places emphasis on developing the singing voice, improvisation, and music reading. However, it is the sequential and spiral curriculum of grades 6–12 that will be discussed here (as taught by the author) and it relies heavily on the theories of developmental psychology, praxialism, and action learning—the latter predicated on “doing” music in school contexts that resemble real life musicking and that focus on promoting lifelong musicking.¹

Background

Westfield is a community of approximately 4,000 residents in the far southwestern corner of New York State. The region is filled with vineyards and was once the worldwide headquarters of Welch foods, the grape juice processor and distributor. The Welch headquarters left the area 40 years ago and since then the school population has been in a steady state of decline. Currently, the district has around 700–750 students in grades K–12. About 40% of the student population is at or

below the poverty level, as indicated by the number of free and reduced-cost lunches. The total student population is a significant decrease in the number of students from the 1980s, which peaked at around 1,300. I began teaching in Westfield in 1989, and since then, the total student number has decreased from 1,150 to the present levels.

The music department is staffed by four certified music teachers. One is responsible for grades pre-K–5. Students receive one general music class in a six-day rotation, and the 4th–5th grade chorus practices once a week. The second position is responsible for 7th and 8th grade general music, 7th and 8th grade choir (both shared with the author), 7th and 8th grade band, and three small group instrumental (band) lessons each day. The third position offers instrumental instruction grades 5–12, a 5th grade band, a 6th grade band, and a 9th–12th grade band. The fourth position, the author's and the curriculum of which this article describes in some detail, covers 6th grade treble choir, 7th–8th grade choir (shared with the middle school specialist), 9th–12th grade choir, and general music in grades 6–12.

The Westfield community has a history of strong support for the arts. Well back into the early 20th century, the Westfield school had a diverse music program that was staffed by enthusiastic, committed educators. Enrollment of the student population in music classes has been very high; a successful opera singer (Janice Schuster Taylor), Broadway composer (Michael John Lachuisa), and singer/songwriter (Natalie Merchant) are former Westfield music students. There is an active folk music scene, a community choir, adult community theater, community sponsored drama instruction, community youth theater, and recently, a new community arts organization has been formed by thirty-plus individuals concerned that arts opportunities continue to be extended in our area. Two members of the organization who have opera and theater backgrounds assisted with a recent school production of *The Mikado*. This community support is due in large measure to the role and contribution of the music faculty over the years; it did not arise from

nothing. Such support depends on the tangible results of school music in our community, and the nurturing of the legacy over time. A praxis-oriented curriculum in general music and ensembles is a decided advocacy advantage in regularly demonstrating to parents (i.e., taxpayers) and school authorities the personal and social value of school music.

The school receives considerable support from the community because of the partnership that exists regarding the arts between the school and various community agencies and resources: local musicians, the historical society, the library, the village government, individuals, and the churches. The school administrators have responded positively in support of the music program due to such community values, the readily noted success of music instruction in school, and the impact it makes on the lives of present and past students (some of whom are now parents in the community).

Middle School General Music: Developmental Theory and Praxis

All curriculums and the lessons that spring from them in the middle and secondary level are based on listening, composing, and performing. All expressions of the New York state and national standards are addressed through the actual musical accomplishments of students in these three areas with a wide range of musics, but especially those from the community, in keeping with praxial theory and action learning. This is to say that in any Westfield music classroom, in any level on any given day, students are practicing and normalizing their learning through the authentic praxes of listening, performing, and composing, not going through the motions of endless and unrelated “activities” that supposedly provide experience with abstract concepts but that fail to promote *sequential progress* in musicianship.

Sixth Grade

Due to changes in cognitive, emotional, and physical development of these “tween-agers” (Regelski 2005, 29–51), who are developmentally between childhood and

teenage years, the sixth grade curriculum occupies a unique transitional position. These classes meet five times a week for ten weeks. This particular age level represents a kind of capstone to the musicianship learning, interests, attitudes, and dispositions addressed in the K–5 curriculum. The local area has an active folk music life, and this is modeled in our curriculum in several ways. One way is through a focus on so-called recreational and vernacular instruments, those that can continue to be satisfying long after the school years. In keeping with praxial theory, these social instruments easily become amateur, personal outlets for students outside of school and as adults. They do not require massed numbers² and often easily combine into various chamber size groupings. In effect, each class described below often functions as a chamber group.³

A sixth grade student already has had three years of experience playing the recorder, and possibly even one year of experience on a band instrument. Elementary students begin recorder study in 3rd grade. In the 6th grade general music classroom, however, the focus of study shifts to learning to play the keyboard. This is typically the students' introduction to this instrument and extends the praxis of reading notation begun in earlier classes. The classroom is equipped with eight electronic keyboards (students share, two on a keyboard) and two pianos. Not only does this provide immediate development in the area of music reading (at this stage) of treble clef notation, it also provides the students with a means for performing on an instrument that can be purchased from local department stores, music stores, or online, for home use.

Students learn to read treble clef, beginning with common American folk melodies and progressing to pieces with roots in classical music, to popular music. Sixth grade students also learn the basics of the guitar. They practice playing tonic and dominant 7th chords in the key of G (a key common in popular, folk, and traditional music) and use these to perform many of the same pieces that they are also studying on electronic keyboard. Classes are easily divided after a few weeks so that one half performs a melody on keyboard accompanied by the other half playing

chords on guitar, then switching.

Handbells provide an additional avenue of musical engagement. Our community currently has four churches that either own or borrow handbells (from another church or from the school) on a regular basis. Years ago, the general music teachers agreed that the school could be supporting community musicking if we purchased our own sets of handbells and used class time for students to learn this non-orchestral instrument—and for reasons that expand their musicianship, whatever the eventual use made of the instrument. It is during 6th grade general music study that students first learn to play handbells and normally perform a repertoire based on what they are already playing on keyboard and guitar. From the perspective of teaching praxis, the handbell ensemble and class ensembles provide an exceptional tool for attending to the varying learning needs of a heterogeneous student population. Students with strong music backgrounds and extensive music reading experience (e.g., band, piano lessons) can be challenged, with the needs of students who are beginning (e.g., transfer students) and emerging music readers are both accommodated. This is easily accomplished by arrangements that feature a melody with chordal accompaniment. Students with music reading experience can be challenged to play the melody, while beginning students are challenged by playing chord tones in time.

All of the various recreational and vernacular instruments used in class provide appropriate vehicles for composing. Students learn and refine melodic compositional skills as well as gain valuable experience focused on various areas of music composition. These include (1) melodic contour, (2) contrasting phrases, (3) use of melodic steps, skips, and leaps, (4) use of chord tones, (5) the introduction of non-harmonic tones, (6) AB and ABA forms, (7) theme and variation, and (8) notation for percussion. Non-traditional types of composition are used as well that may include a battery of classroom instruments and other sound sources (e.g., “found sounds”), or that are accessed through technology. Students also use computer sequencing software as a tool for expressive composition.

Class time also includes listening as a vehicle for musical learning. Besides modeling successful performance of pieces studied on performing instruments, listening examples provide further experiences, for example, of different ideas of form (unity and variety), use of tension and release, and formal and expressive use of texture and timbre. In addition, the aural skills of the students are developed using a variety of lessons all aimed at one goal: being able to *play by ear*. Practicing this skill takes various forms, from types of simple dictation (Regelski 2015, 182–185) to reproducing familiar melodies by ear on their instruments.

Seventh & Eighth Grades

In seventh grade, in keeping with theories of the learners' physical, emotional, social, and especially cognitive development, we are increasingly concerned to give them opportunities to connect their growing musical skills with their developing *personhood*.⁴ This concern is a major factor in the ethical component of *teaching as praxis*. This is a time not just to improve musical competence but it is through such growing competence that that students are increasingly engaged in the all-important process of the *construction of self*. When they can look back on their previous musical learning as being interesting, and even personally beneficial, they then can take all the musicianship skills, knowledge, dispositions, and criteria they have been developing over the years and see them in a newly personal way as connected to their growing self-concept and life purpose.

Implications for how to address older middle school students (i.e., eighth grade) are huge. Students, who even one year earlier just "followed us" because we "told them to," now begin to question the validity and usefulness of their learning to their personhood. The theory at stake at this juncture is that this is the time when the focus shifts from developing musical competence as the center of the musical classroom experience—as has been the focus in the preceding years—to instead placing the *student* at the center so that personhood—musical and otherwise—becomes an important variable in teaching praxis with this age group; teaching that

is fully *caring* of the individual, a major ethical criterion of praxis-oriented teaching. It is with this view that music can begin to ultimately fulfill its purpose in the lives of human beings. It is almost as if from this day forward, music becomes more of a tool for *use* by the developing self and less of a for-its-own-sake in developing skills. As adolescents begin to seek understanding of their world, themselves, and their place in it, music plays an increasingly important role.

This presents particular challenges in terms of curricular design! It is not always easy to answer the question, "How can I continue to address musical learning, skill development, and still advance students' competence while recognizing their developmental and psychological needs?" Ideally, if the students have been led to recognize and appreciate their own musical skill set, this will be much easier—somewhat like walking is preliminary to running for children. Their own sense of growing competence becomes key in their own ability to move forward musically and be personally engaged in further learning.

In terms of performance in class, the curriculum is designed so that the older middle school student (eighth grade) continues to play keyboard, although not as often as was spent in sixth grade. When students are prepared with a working knowledge of treble clef notation, it makes sense to introduce more complex rhythmic reading challenges and to use music that has greater technical demands. We try to use a mix of repertoire with students that is representative of various styles (since, of course, not all students have the same tastes) that also expands their repertory of musical skills and general musicianship that can be used in various musical settings. Sometimes this means using folk music, sometimes classical, sometimes pop music, and sometimes jazz, or fusion/new age. The ideal choice is an engaging selection that captures the attention of middle schoolers and motivates them to a higher technical level of playing and deeper musical insights.

As to which vernacular instruments are studied, rather than assign each student to play the guitar, students are allowed to decide and to choose between guitar, mandolin, continuing on keyboard in order to learn chords, Celtic harp,

ukulele, hammered dulcimer, and banjo. This choice continues through grades 7–12 with other choices allowed—although most students have a tendency to remain with a single instrument over those years. Students are introduced to reading tablature on the guitar, mandolin, and banjo during this level. Generally, we try to have the students playing in two different key centers by the end of eighth grade: G and D. In each of these keys, they gain basic competence with the tonic through sub-mediant (vi) chords (with the exception of bar chords).⁵

In terms of repertoire studied, we continue to use traditional American or Celtic folk music. These may not be musics enjoyed in the out-of-school lives of the typical middle school student in most countries, but this music ends up being *very* appealing nonetheless and demonstrates the sociality of music very well.⁶ The social context of the songs is addressed. Literally all of this music has a story and most are in a certain dance form. For example, we play “The Rights of Man” which is a reel composed in homage to the book of the same name by Thomas Paine. Many of the pieces have lyrics to frame discussion. We also play quite a few of the songs of the blind early Celtic harpist Turlough O’Carolan, regarded by many Irish as Ireland’s national composer.

The way these pieces use chords and melody patterns often makes performance very accessible to students, and challenges them to the next level of technical skill. Pop music is also used, and the very idea for students that they are now able to play something they already know and love is extremely motivating. Immediately, their musical skills enter a new realm: that of having personal use and relevance to the changing tastes and musical needs of an adolescent.

It is a challenge to find appropriate repertoire that, again, moves students forward in their musicianship but also is engaging to the middle schooler. However, repertoire that can be a huge motivating factor in class *now*, may be obsolete in six months in the changing preferences of the students. The bottom line is, however, that they are using something they *do* know (i.e. their favored choice of music in mind at the time) to bring that interest to something they *don’t* know (i.e., a new

skill level or more advanced musical learning). The earlier musical preference may not endure, but the skills developed in the course of studying a variety of musics will, through continued use with various musics from 6th–12th grade (and on into adult life, which is an important goal of a praxial curriculum).

In terms of song-writing, the use of chords in composition, as a framework for melody writing and the accompanying use of non-harmonic tones, is explored at a beginning level. In this curriculum, the premise of "song-writing," unlike elsewhere in the music education literature, refers to a notated composition (see Regelski 2005, 72–108). Song-writing for the general music student involves using traditional music notation and melody writing and harmony having its roots in the common practice period of music theory. Pop music forms (such as multiple verses with chorus) are studied as vehicles for creating music that not only "sounds good," but also makes use of new learning in the area of phrasing and melodic construction. Learning to set a lyric to melody is also practiced and students are guided as to how to select or write workable lyrics and how to set them musically in a way that respects the natural prosody of the text.

Using a sequencing software program, students can arrange and construct more complex musical compositions. A software program such as Garage Band® has an abundance of pre-existing loops that can be combined in ways that allow to practice manipulating texture, combining various musical voices, using percussion, and experimenting with various arranging techniques. Using such a program can maximize the excitement of composing and creating music, apart from the technical necessities of performing a piece yourself.

Students in eighth grade continue to play as a class handbell ensemble. During this time their increasing skill level can accommodate more rhythmic complexity (and dexterity). The origin or style of the handbell arrangements seems to have less importance in the motivation of the students than literature studied on other recreational instruments. Arranged transcriptions of classics are as interesting to them as anything else. By nature, playing handbells is a very

physically engaging activity and has excellent cross-over appeal to a student who may struggle with small motor coordination in music class (or with sitting still!)

The curriculum for middle level students is based on a few very important theoretical convictions. During this time, adolescents are beginning to exercise their "personality muscle" by testing and identifying themselves with markers. Giving them a chance to include "musician" in the mix of who they *are* is crucial! In order for that to happen, there needs to be a feeling of musical self-competence. They do not want to be doing something so social and so exposed that will be embarrassing or make them, in their minds, look "stupid." Creating an atmosphere where middle level students can feel safe, successful, and able to experiment is key in helping them construct a self-image that marks them as a "musician."

At the same time, the door needs to be opened for music's ability to help them construct who they *are*. In our curriculum, this means the need to try to give students the opportunity to connect their musical skill with the idea of personal taste and the expression of personhood through the arts and music with which they identify. The "I-am-a-musician" connection happens when students become aware of their musical skill level in such a way that it becomes personally important in enjoying, navigating, and interpreting life.

High School General Music: Praxial Steps toward Adult Musicking

Ninth Grade

General music study at the high school level is an elective in our school. As evidence of the interests developed in the elementary and middle school typically one-third to one-half of our high school students elect to study music in ninth grade (!), and generally, a quarter of a typical graduating class has completed at least three upper level credits in general music. In the State of New York, students complete a "major" sequence of their choice in their high school programs. A formal credit is typically 180 days of instruction for 40 minutes a day. Approximately, a quarter of our

graduates each year earn a New York State Regents major sequence in music! This entails a minimum of three credits, with one credit being from an upper level course—other than band, choir, or the ninth grade elective “Music in Our Lives.”

This elective is taken for a full high school credit toward graduation. In this class, students develop their musicianship via three different groups of recreational instruments: folk instruments, handbells, and steel pans. Generally, students are involved in performing folk instruments (similar to those begun in the middle level) for 40% of class time. Besides continuing with a repertoire of American/Celtic folksongs and fiddle tunes, contemporary folk and pop music are also performed. In this course, music is studied in the keys of C, G, D and A along with first steps in advanced tablature reading and bar chords. Keyboard players are expected to play chords and melody together using chord and treble clef notation. Handbells are played approximately 10% of class time and the notational and rhythmic focus of the handbell praxis incorporates what is studied on the other recreational instruments—not religious musics. The school owns a set of steel pans and around 10% of class time is spent playing them. Besides being a non-Eurocentric music praxis (in origin), a variety of rhythmic challenges and patterns are dealt with in the typical repertoire included for this part of class.

It is at this level that we place increased emphasis on being able to *play in a small ensemble*. We offer students many experiences using recreational instruments where they learn various roles in a small ensemble and practice the ability to rehearse, perform, and generally function effectively in such groups. It is our theory that successful experience in small ensembles *while in school* is an important *model* for promoting musicking *outside* of school and after graduation.

Students in this course continue notated song-writing and make use of the more complex rhythms that they are learning on their different instruments from the literature performed in class. Finer points of melodic writing, lyric setting, use of chords as a basis for melody, and non-harmonic tones are studied further. Moreover, students’ understanding of harmony is promoted by creating three-part

arrangements of familiar melodies.

We continue to use the Garage Band® software for creating soundscapes that employ other, often non-traditional, musical elements and compositional techniques. We study the “book,” music, and social implications, and performance history of the musical *Sweeney Todd* (minus 30 seconds of sexual references). Then students use Garage Band® to create compositions that they musically reflect characters in the musical, and they develop new themes for them in the process.

We spend a fair amount of time discussing how music wraps around our definition of self. We create compositions, using Garage Band® and mix MP3 files that are “expressive of” each student’s own personality. This is always an exciting part of class and has provided a vehicle for students to think about music as it relates to them and their own self-perception. We also give a portion of the class over to a seminar-like setting where students take over as teacher during part of the year and devise listening lessons (see Regelski 2005, 133–187) and teach them to the class. They are guided through a step by step process of selecting the music, determining what’s musically important to them and noteworthy about their selection, and then formulating questions and directions (etc.) that both guide the listeners in discovering interesting musical features in the pieces, and constructing their own personal meaning.

Our year ends with an independent project. This is determined by the student’s choice and may expand on one of the compositions, arrangements, performances, or listening lessons studied by the class earlier in the year. We watch (and study) the film *Amadeus*, a re-telling of Mozart’s musical life, as a point of departure for the independent project. The film, although not historically accurate (as noted in class), is *very* motivating to students, and they are presented with options for their independent project that have some correlation with Mozart, although that is not their only option.

Tenth Grade

The tenth grade general music elective is called "Musician's Studio." At this point in their studies, the typical student who elects this class has developed a significant attachment to music-making and is well into developing a very functional personal skill set. The curriculum addresses five different areas: improvisation, recreational instruments, handbells, and steel pans; and the balance of class time is spent in listening, song-writing, music theory rudiments, and composition.

The improvisation portion of the class focuses on use of the G pentatonic and E Dorian scales. Both are useful in limiting choices. The theoretical premise is similar to learning a foreign language. We try to develop the ability to "converse" using the limited musical scales students are also studying in class. Having their choices focused, students can avoid the stigma of embarrassing, clunky sounding notes. These limitations on pitches also allow students to focus on contour, rhythm, and phrasing.

Students can either use their classroom instrument, or another instrument (sometimes from band) on which they have proficiency. They learn the scale and have a group of pre-written "riffs" that become a source of ideas for their improvisations. As the class progresses, they compose riffs and use the G pentatonic scale in other song-writing projects in class. Again, the idea is to develop a "conversational vocabulary" in G pentatonic. They learn "vocabulary" (pitch relations), phrases (riffs), learn to compose, and practice dialogue (in-class small group improvisation praxis) all with the goal of being "conversant" in G pentatonic improvisations.

The same procedure is repeated using E Dorian for the second half of the year.

In regard to recreational instruments, we use Celtic/American repertoire (airs, fiddle tunes, jigs,) to advance students in their playing technique, style specific performance interpretations, and musical independence. All music that is learned and performed as a class is also practiced and performed in small ensembles which,

following praxial and action learning theory, model realistic in-life use of these types of instruments and musics. At this level, competence on their chosen recreational instrument moves to a place of increased importance and is used as a tool for other musical experiences (improvisation, composition, ear training, etc.). During the second half of class, the vocabulary of chords is expanded to include key centers that make greater use of bar chords and chords that use flats, which are not as easily played on recreational instruments like guitar and mandolin. At this level, handbells and steel pan music emphasize greater rhythmic complexity and scales not previously encountered. Students are asked to read rhythms and follow scores at a new level of independence, musicianly insight, and competence.

Classroom compositional and listening projects at this level include use of a theme as a compositional construct. This is done in a variety of ways through melody writing that ranges, for example, from using theme and variation, to film scoring using Garage Band®, to using a theme as a sound bite or *leitmotif* for electronic composition. In regard to listening, a variety of audio and video performances are studied that model successful performances on steel pans, handbells, and recreational instruments as well as improvisation, local artists, and compositional tools and constructs.

We also study a contemporary musical theater work: we typically study the “book” as a piece of literature, note and discuss use of themes, sometimes use the score as a basis for further composition, and observe any social and cultural commentary and relevant performance history. This study culminates in ‘informed’ student performances in class of scenes and musical selections from the work. This depth of engagement is much more beneficial than just listening.

Eleventh Grade

At the eleventh grade level, students add *college level* music theory to their classroom music experiences. The class, entitled "Music Theory I" has many common elements with earlier general music classes at our school, such as

improvisation, which now uses the A Mixolydian scale and the D minor blues. The A Mixolydian mode uses a melodic language that corresponds well with the chords and key centers that we focus on in other areas of the class, as does the D minor blues scale. And the latter has a strong correlation (for me at least) with the G pentatonic scale. Students continue to use recreational instruments in class to play American/Celtic literature, which is highly technical its demands, as well as jazz standards—all, in keeping with praxial theory, with attention to their musical and cultural contexts. Students have further opportunity to play handbells and steel pans which at this level can develop a very high level of proficiency and musical independence. As well, we typically closely study—analyze and discuss (as mentioned for earlier levels)—many aspects of two works of musical theater, an operetta and *Sunday in the Park with George* (Stephen Sondheim). These are both used as a starting point for small ensemble performance in class and further composition.

The remainder of the class, which allows students to receive three college Advanced Placement (AP) credits at a local community college, offers an introduction to rudiments of music theory. This curriculum typically covers all major and minor scales, intervals, two-part writing, all types of chord notation, and chord inversions, ear training, and the like.

Twelfth Grade

The final level of general music praxis at our school is a class called "Music Theory II" and presents students with several options. They gain further college credit by completing requirements for the (AP) college level "Aural Skills I," which is a combination of sight-singing and dictation. Students practice aural skills using the computer software program *Practica Musica*®. As to recreational instrument playing, due to scheduling needs this class often meets at the same time as Music Theory I, and the advanced students are asked to learn a second recreational instrument and participate with the Music Theory I students. They also continue to

perform on handbells and steel pans.

The core of the class is spent in a variety of independent projects designed to move the student to a higher level of musicianship in an area of personal interest. These include projects in the areas of sound recording, composition, film scoring, performance, comparative listening (e.g., comparing the improvisations of Stevie Ray Vaughan versus Bela Fleck, and performances of the same literature by different artists), small ensemble performance, preparation of auditions for scholarships or college entrance, and opportunities in arranging for ensembles in our high school are open to the unique interests of the individual. Students in the class are required to complete a successful major project every five weeks, and many of these involve class presentations.

Equipment and Resources

All recreational instruments for classroom study in the 6–12 general music program are owned by the school and available for student use free of charge. All expenses regarding the instruments are part of the music budget, much as textbooks and science equipment are provided for students. Saving money is abetted by using my arrangements (copyright free) the savings for the budget going to the purchase and replacement of instruments, a practice that has been an ongoing process in our district for 35 years. Currently, on a budget of \$1200, that includes choral music purchases, and the acquisition (over time, and counting) of 21 guitars, 13 keyboards, ten mandolins, six ukuleles, two Irish low whistles, six penny whistles,⁷ four Celtic harps, two hammered dulcimers, one string bass, two electric guitars and two electric basses are available for student use.

We own a complete five octave set of quality Malmark handbells and a three octave set (still growing). This took over 20 years to purchase and began with the purchase of a two octave set of *hand chimes*. These are no longer currently used due to being out of tune and showing the signs of use that handbells don't suffer. Good handbells are expensive but a better purchase for their long life. The fact that we

have a duplicate set of bells enables us to accommodate large classes and to pair students on the same part. Our steel pans were purchased over a seven-year period and we have a set of three lead pans, two sets of double seconds, a set of guitar pans, a set of cello pans and one set of bass pans. We can normally accommodate 14 students on this size set, and the balance of the class rotates in and out and performs as the rhythm section on percussion instruments.

Choral Music: Vocal Praxis—with special focus on encouraging the male voice

Our choral music program begins in fourth and fifth grade with a choir that meets during the school day where all students participate (usually around 95 students). They rehearse one time a week for 30 minutes. At the middle school level, students in grades 6-8 can elect to continue in the middle school chorus. The sixth grade students practice and perform as a treble choir, while seventh and eighth grade students are combined to form an SAT or SATB choir, depending on the usual issues of boy's and girl's changing voices.

Students in grades 7-8 are often divided by sex in order to attend to what research theory and personal experience has shown to be the unique needs of adolescent voices during the ongoing developmental process of puberty. In particular, the psycho-social issues of the changing voice and the adolescent male are often dealt with in such single sex ensembles. It is no secret to choir directors that many boys are reluctant to join choirs. Our theory is that a major reason for small enrollments of males in choral ensembles is that *young boys were not given opportunity to develop a sense of self-competence and self-confidence* when it comes to using their singing voices. In fact, single sex choirs at this age can give students—especially boys—a "safe" place to learn, practice and conquer challenges of singing during the time of vocal change without the social distraction and pressure of the opposite sex who are not experiencing the same challenges. Moreover, aspects of girl's vocal development get deserved focus in ways not limited by the vocal needs of the boys. One result of this special concern with boy's voices is that in the sixth

grade choir (in 2015) there were 28 boys and 25 girls. In the joint 7th-8th grade choir, the ratio is almost exactly 50/50. Going forward, the 9th–12th grade choir (at present) has 42 boys and 55 girls. In “Music in Our Lives” (ninth grade) there are nine girls and 21 boys! Overall, there are more boys in the music program than in extra-curricular sports!

In grades 9–12, students may elect to continue as part of a large non-select mixed choir that often reaches 130 voices (out of 250 total High School students—half the high school!), that sings SATB and rehearses every other day for 40 minutes. Members of that group also often elect to participate in one or more small ensembles. These include a group of about 40 high school women (sopranos and altos), the “Firecrackers” (the name coming from an off-Broadway play by Beth Henley), singing SSA and SSAA music, rehearsing 40 minutes a week; the “Ape Men” (a name chosen years ago to resemble an alternative rock band of the 90s), a group for men (tenors, cambiatas, and basses), also meeting once a week for 40 minutes; a select SATB chamber choir, and a changing variety of other small vocal ensembles. The SATB chamber choir—the “Westwinds”—is the only ensemble in our school that may be termed “select.” However, the opportunity to participate in an extra-curricular vocal group is open to all students, with the instructor having the final say as to where a student is placed vocally. And Westwinds students usually participate in the other small ensembles.⁸

For example, during the course of a year, many young men need to switch parts according to the usual changes of vocal development in boys. For girls, we prefer to have them sing a different part in the women’s choir than they do in the SATB chorus. This prevents potential sopranos (hardly a final diagnosis!) from becoming “stuck” musically as altos (and vice versa) and helps them to have use for and develop their upper (or lower) ranges. And it also gives girls accustomed to singing soprano (often the tune) a chance to work on their music reading. Voice class can be elected, where students prepare solos, sing in small ensembles, and study sight reading and vocal technique. The benefits of this deliberate, praxial

theory-based emphasis on choice, diversity, and skill-development adjusted to individual vocal needs and small groups are typically very evident—to students, their parents, administrators, and the taxpayers! School music, here, is an aspect of, and contribution to *community musicking*.

The SATB chamber choir, Westwinds, performs a musical theater work annually in the fall, and it tours every other year to competitions, festivals, for performances at other schools, and with other choirs (music is, after all, a social event). Students in this group are very keen and proud to demonstrate their achievement beyond the local community, and the community is proud of their achievements (e.g., winning awards, though that's not the purpose). The SATB curricular mixed choir performs three concerts a year: one with an eclectic mix of choral styles; the second always involves a theme and may be a program of musical theater, music of alumni composers, independent artists, singer-song-writers, or other examples of contemporary vocal performance (e.g., Morten Lauridsen, Ola Gyello, and Michael McGlynn, all notable contemporary choral composers). The final concert of the year is typically a major choral work and has included everything from works by Mozart and Vivaldi to Orff, Gorecki, and Lauridsen.

As evidence of the contributory effects of the general/choral music program described here, for example, the chamber choir has been awarded many performances over the years at our New York State School Music Association All-State conferences, as have handbell ensembles, the McClurg (Celtic/American) Street String Band (of which, more below), and our men's ensemble. Moreover, the extra-curricular McClurg Street String Band—named after a historical museum on a street in the village where the group often performs *outside of the school day*—was awarded a performance at the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) 2014 All-Eastern Music Conference in Hartford Connecticut. The chamber choir was awarded “Best Performance by a Chamber Choir” at the *2012 Cavalcade of Music* festival in Colorado Springs. And more ensembles from our program have been awarded performances at the all-state conferences than any other under the same

director in state history. For all, they were selected by a blind audition process using three recorded selections.

These awards are not mentioned here to brag, but as evidence of *the benefits and success of a praxial general music curriculum* in a very small school system that features a musicianship emphasis on “doing” music for life. And the carryover to life outside of the school day is evident in the above-mentioned McClurg Street String Band. This group is a direct outcome of the praxial general music programs described above.⁹ The string band, depending on our invitations and the particulars of the gig, has a floating membership of maybe 30+, usually from several different grade levels, all committed to after-school and out-of-school performances in various venues. Each performance has a different cast, according who is available for the situation. When a gig is requested, usually all students who are free choose to participate—because they enjoy the opportunity to make music together.

The musical menu—mainly learned over the years in general music classes—is Celtic/American or contemporary folk musics, often featuring vocal soloists and small groups, and, most importantly, often involving some adult, usually retired members from the community. Some of the vocal pieces in the repertoire have been arranged by student members (see videos). Participants are prepared for all kinds of gigs, including being co-featured with professional groups in concert—an experience that is all the more likely to result in recognizing a student’s self as a “real musician.” This all adds a new meaning to the musical benefits, dispositions, and pleasures that a music-for-life oriented music education program, especially via praxially focused general music classes, can add for individuals and for the community.

Contributions of Praxial General Music to Curriculum Theory and Pedagogy

The general music curriculum at Westfield School is not modeled on this or that template for delivering recipe-like lesson. It has its roots in the philosophical and social premises of praxialism (Elliott 1995; Elliott & Silverman 2015; and the

curriculum model of “action learning,” Regelski 2005; Regelski 2016) where music from life outside of school is brought into the school with the intent of it benefitting lifelong musicking out of school and in life. It might be easily compared to a science classroom: a praxis-oriented general music class functions as a ‘musicianship laboratory’! Over centuries, scientists have specialized, responded to personal and cultural needs, innovated, discovered and helped others change the way they view the world. However, effectively learning science in most classrooms does not center on a study “about” the history of scientists of the past and present as individuals in order to learn what they did, how many children they had, and what the hallmarks of their contributions were. Science is best taught as a dynamic process of “doing”—praxis—where its true purpose, and the implementation of the scientific process, put the constructive praxis of the student at its center, as a lens to making sense of the natural world.

In much the same way, the guiding principles of our praxial music curriculum do not include focus on composers, historical styles, and other background information as either the starting point or the end-in-view in designing the curriculum. A clever lesson on the life and times of Bach or the Beatles or a rap artist, while providing information on contributions of these artists and personal information, does not engage the student in any kind of constructive benefit in what we refer to as a significant *musical* experience. Our theory is that by using the three praxes of listening, composing and performing, all of which are centered on in-life musical use as the basis for our curriculum and instruction, students are constantly modeling, learning and normalizing musical abilities that have a lasting purpose for their lives and lifelong praxis (see the videos at the end). Such study often leads in many ways to musicking outside of class and school, to dispositions ranging from an expanded range of listening preferences and concert attendance, to on-going musicking in life (e.g., handbells in local churches¹⁰).

In regards to performing, we have made a decision to focus on instruments and musics that have present and potential future use in our students' lives in

school, out of school, and in the community: handbells rather than Zen flute, Celtic and related genres rather than East Indian music. The recreational instruments mentioned in this description of our curriculum may be played alone at home, socially in small groups, in a variety of styles, and in opportunities that exist presently for anyone who wishes to play in the community (e.g., square dance groups). We use the classroom as a *laboratory* that allows the student to acquire musicianship that models in-life use and fosters a high level of musical independence in the service many kinds of musicking and their social and personal benefits.

In classes, we use much traditional folk music, as it provides a perfect entry level experience for young musicians to use musics that actually exist in the world around them, and that is not designed only to be part of a lesson book. Just as folk music comes from a variety of abilities and life experiences, we try to find an appropriate selection of musics that give even the beginner a start in playing "real" music. There is plenty of folk music where the technical requirements for playing are minimal, where chords change slowly, melodies have a limited range, and melodic contours make for ease of playing. And there is also much where the technical demands are logical and can be extended for advanced learners. Thus, we use the common paradigm of music of the "people" to introduce combining chords with melody, improvisation, and harmonic writing and arranging. It has been a predictably successful vehicle for a holistic music learning experience for our students. For example, the carryover to the chorus program is extensive (see videos listed at the end).

For classroom listening lessons, we use a wide variety of recordings as effective models of all kinds of musical compositions, techniques, purposes, and uses of music. Praxially, we intentionally try to avoid taking the view that we are going to listen to a piece of music simply because it is "good" for us, or makes us better musicians. While this can be true, certain selections for listening in our curriculum are chosen with much more specific pedagogical purposes in mind. If we are

listening to *Carmina Burana* by Carl Orff, we might be thinking "This will get students fired up," as it often does. But its curricular purpose is Orff's use of meter, tension and release in setting these medieval student lyrics in a contemporary style;¹¹ other lessons might be focused on the use of folk music melodies, rhythms, and forms in classical music composition. If we listen to the opening movement of Mozart's Symphony #40, we are not listening to it because we think everyone should know Mozart; but we could be listening for his exquisite use of thematic development and transformation as a compositional model. If we are studying improvisation and we would like an exceptional example of the blues, we will listen to Stevie Ray Vaughan's "Texas Flood" album, not just because we should all know Stevie Ray Vaughan but for what is to be learned from his model. If we are playing a handbell transcription of Edvard Grieg's *Wedding Day at Troldhaugen*, we can listen to a piano performance of the composition to give us an aural model of its successful musical performance. If we are composing pieces in folk/pop style we can turn to a former Westfield student and recording artist Natalie Merchant for examples that have their roots in our town and region. Listening is never presented as an end for its own sake or to promote "music appreciation." It is a piece of a larger *musical experience* that joins with performance and composition to create a musically enriched learner for whom "appreciation" is seen in the in-life *use* made of musical learning.

Our use of composition in the classroom truly lends some credence to the philosophical theory that all music, in some way, involves an experience of life as expressed through sound. As an active form of "doing"—of musicking—it engages the essence of life's feelings and brings them into "play" for us as listeners and participants of various kinds. If we consider the huge variety of compositions, even in Western music, we can easily see music's role as a personal and cultural mirror. Just as, over the past thousands of years, music composition has conveyed a sense of life as lived, we present students with opportunity to compose that way and for those ends today.

This may manifest itself in two types of classroom composition: in song-writing, where an actual score is written using traditional music notation, or the “soundscape,” where sound in the broader sense, perhaps using contemporary graphic notation, is the building block of construction.

Song-writing ideally connects the musical experience with real life experience. For example, the use of contour in a melody as an expressive tool for what might happen next; theme and variation, as a way of interpreting places in life where this happens; the fugue, as a place where a theme can be used over time in a way that still makes auditory sense; or the setting of poetry, story, and the film score, and as a way of interpreting character.

The *soundscape* or *sound composition* (Regelski 2015, 109–123; also see R. Murray Schafer’s sound compositions for youth ensembles) can accomplish many of the same goals, but does so without being conditioned by the detailed notation of song-writing, and can focus on the purely auditory and compositional experience. Over the past 25 years of my teaching experience, I have seen this move from the sound compositions of the 90s that used a prepared piano in our classroom, “found sound instruments” from home and the environment, and other non-traditional sound sources, to being now almost exclusively electronic in nature. We have computer applications, such as Garage Band® or the Microsoft Music Kit®, that hold a seemingly unlimited source of sounds and have a deep capacity for sound synthesis and manipulation. These are tremendous resources for being able to focus on the intent or purpose of the composition, without needing to focus on the technical aspects of traditional notation. Both of these types of composition are used with all age groups as a way of continuing to bring students into a more functional and ‘lived’ connection with processes of various musical praxes.

The ultimate goal of our music curriculum has been, is, and will be to give students *structured* opportunities that lead to in-life musical praxis; so we can say after 30+ years of this curriculum that there are ample examples of this happening every day in the lives of former students in our community. Our graduates include a

large number of adults who have gone on to further music study at college and university, and now make their living in the art. But, perhaps more importantly, we have a very large number of graduates who place music centrally in their everyday lifestyles, or at least as a very important form of dedicated musical recreation. They are self-produced singer/song-writers, guitar players, composers, electronic composers, concert goers, church musicians, country singers, band members, members of oratorio societies, active participants in local musical theater, and even enjoy playing at home when they return from work. Our best model has always been and will continue to be the ways that we love and live with music in life. As our curriculum continues to evolve, that will always be the bottom line.



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Video Examples

- The following are selected demonstrations of the 2014 Grammy winning praxial curriculum in action. They offer empirical evidence of the benefits of a general music curriculum based on a praxial philosophy.

<http://www.grammyintheschools.com/features/kent-knappenberger-westfield-ny-selected-first-ever-music-educator-award-recipient>

- And (in this order):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XaPDBRUUJs0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WvOPAmJwmYU>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmQ8k_73HmM

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bvdAyvIscg>

Note: several of these have “up next” continuations that show further details.

- The following sample is of performances of *The McClurg Street String Band* that includes community members. This *extracurricular* ensemble is generated entirely from Middle and High School general music classes (and

some interested adults). Also note the extracurricular small groups from Westwinds performing with the String Band.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0307zoqLCGQ>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnYOQd2Ssbk>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQct_M3qYuY

- SATB non-select choir in concert with steel-pans accompaniment.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HEuxGKM6zs> (with guest solo)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CICM4vPdb8>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzre8Vac2Tg>

- Steel pans.

https://youtu.be/aWfnR1_IWPM

- Westwinds SATB select chamber choir in rehearsal (February 2016) for its spring (2016) concert, in Gaelic.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAjBgRR6G3k>

All accessed March/April 2016

For more details, contact “Kent Knappenberger.” To inquire about his curriculum:

kknappennberger@WACS2.wnyric.org;

or elevation@gmail.com (“Elevation” is his favorite cow!).

¹ Christopher Small coined the term “musicking” as a verb form to stress the active and usually social nature of music over other, usually aesthetic accounts that approach music as a collection of “works.” See Christopher Small (1998). David J. Elliott (1995) earlier and independently had somewhat the same idea in coining the word “musicing.” Small seems to have preferred the spelling from the time in history when “musick” was altogether and everywhere praxial. Elliott’s spelling avoids the “sick” in the middle of the word. In the second edition of *Music Matters* (2015) David J. Elliott and Marissa Silverman extend the explanation of the term and its derivation. Either spelling gets mainly to the idea of music as a social praxis—a “doing,” not a museum of “works.”

² Though that is possible: see the videos listed at the end for the McClurg Street String Band, an extracurricular activity generated entirely by the general music curriculum and the gaining of musicianship that serves a wide variety of musical interests.

³ For example, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmQ8k_73HmM This particular class is an 8th grade class, but the same kinds of chamber playing approach to gaining competence on such instruments is typical for 6–12. In this video the entire class performs on *instruments of their choice a song composed (and notated) by a class member*. Keep in mind that musical praxis is one proper ethnomusicological introduction to the Celtic “culture”; further background information and context, while perhaps useful, is not the major focus of *music* education. We can ask too much of music teachers to accommodate all possible concerns beyond what is reasonable to expect in discussion of school and curricular dynamics.

⁴ See Elliott & Silverman (2015, 153–191) for an extensive discussion of this important topic.

⁵ Sometimes also called “moveable chords” or “barre chords,” a type of chord fingering on a guitar or other stringed instrument played by using one or more fingers like a bar to depress multiple strings across a single fret.

⁶ See, e.g., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bvdAyvIscg> This example is from a high school general music elective, again showing class praxis as a chamber ensemble.

⁷ Penny whistles are introduced according to the needs of the music performed. They bear a close relation to flute, saxophone, and clarinet, and students from band easily accommodate them. This is another value of a praxial curriculum which “crosses over” between general music classes and band. And as an extension for some band students to a new literature that is typically more long-lasting than the band literature, is a decided plus.

⁸ See the example of small vocal groups from Westwinds performing with the McClurg Street String Band listed following the References section. This is a recommended way of getting vocal chamber groups out into the public view in an easy and recreational way.

⁹ The video links at the end (also cited above) give ample evidence of students engaging in musicking outside of school, but predicted on what was learned in the sequence of the praxis-based general music curriculums.

¹⁰ One reviewer worried that including handbells was “Christocentric” (!) but given the community, social theory in general, even the theory of “social equality,” readers can make their own decision as to whether the decision for curriculum in this community to teach handbells to all students rather than, say, Japanese *koto* is warranted. By praxial criteria, the choice is obvious and the complaint or worry is overboard and itself risks being ideological in another direction.

¹¹ Having performed the major choruses of *Carmina Burana*, we have access to the scores, can listen to the student performance in comparison to professional recordings, and really get “into” a lot of features of this appealing work for students. The alleged connections of Orff with Nazism are not considered, just the music, lyrics, and musical effects and affects.

About the Author:

Kent Knappenberger's interest in music was primed, not surprisingly given the account above, by participation in his church hand bell choir. While still in school, he composed and arranged for the group. He also studied piano, played saxophone in band, and sang in the chorus. After graduation, he entered SUNY Fredonia as an animal husbandry major (!), having inherited a herd of cows, with a double major in saxophone. His musical studies and interests led him to change his major to a BM in music education. Upon early completion of the saxophone requirements of that program, he newly took up studying harp. Despite this late start, he was accepted as a harp major at the Eastman School of Music, where he also sang in the choir and played harp in the studio orchestra. Upon completion of his MM degree at Eastman he took a teaching position at Westfield Academy and Central School, where he remains. He also runs a small farm of cows, horses, llamas, and sheep (milking is good for a harpist's fingers).

