

Vertical Teams in Music Theory

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Vertical Teams in music theory involve a unified and coordinated effort to structure a curriculum through multiple grade levels. The Vertical Team in music is responsible for the development and implementation of a planned program that teaches and reinforces skills and concepts from one grade level to the next. This is best achieved through a planning process involving teachers and administrators who construct sequentially based goals and objectives mindful of state and national standards. Such planning will prepare the student for eventual enrollment in an AP Music Theory course.

Many music departments already have informal Vertical Teams in place through their choral and instrumental ensembles. Directors of these groups generally discuss and coordinate student performance repertoire and outcomes from middle schools to high schools. A more broad-based approach to comprehensive music literacy can grow from these existing associations. In fact, some districts in Missouri have already adopted this approach and used College Board–recommended methodologies to articulate a complete K–12 curriculum.

Music Literacy

Development of literacy appropriate to the discipline is a primary goal in the teaching of music theory. Literate students are able to read, write, speak/perform, and hear/understand in ways appropriate to the discipline. In a broader sense, these four aspects of music literacy might be understood as gleaning information, usually presented in written form, away from the actual event (reading); transmitting information to others through symbolic, representative language (writing/notating); expressing ideas to others (speaking/performing); and making sense of external aural stimuli directly associated with music (hearing/understanding).

The Role of the Repertoire

At the heart of music literacy is music literature. Districts are encouraged to develop a repertory list that includes the music studied in their district. It is essential that the curriculum incorporate music familiar to, and already used by, teachers. This is especially important considering the large number of ensemble directors who will be involved in the Vertical Team. These teachers have as their primary responsibility

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the preparation of material for public performance. It is imperative that they be encouraged to incorporate the teaching of literacy concepts into the rehearsal and class environment.

Repertoire should be seen in this instance as a teaching tool. Whether the repertoire is looked at, listened to, performed, or created anew, the objectives attendant to specific grade levels and areas within music can and should form the basis of pedagogical choices. The key is the music—to keep the students involved in a “hands-on” way with the sight of music notation with which to describe, identify, perform, and listen. Musical works, which derive their sense and intelligibility contextually, should be approached as a whole, not only in three-measure snippets.

Getting Started

A Vertical Team initiative in curriculum building might start by the indexing and annotation of materials already available and used within the district music program. Once desired outcomes for the various grade levels and cognate areas are articulated, activities that utilize this repertoire might be developed so as to achieve these outcomes. Assessment mechanisms might also be put in place at this time. The repertoire functions as a unifying text that through a recursive, outcome-based approach to curriculum might be used throughout the student’s formal music education within the district.

Process-oriented skill acquisition is central to development of music literacy. Skills may be acquired in the context of the artistic process. This is the case when the music student has to ascertain, for example, the meaning of a specific symbol found in a piece. Some cast this method of skill acquisition as being on a “need to know” basis; it is an approach commonly used in rehearsal and performance classes. Skill acquisition might also take place outside the context of a directed artistic process. Such learning takes place through exercises, drills, studies, analysis, and so forth, and is often applied in private lessons and classroom music. There is a clear interrelationship between the two methods of skill acquisition described above, allowing for horizontal teaming among teachers delivering music instruction in the various environments.

The following table, adapted from *The AP Vertical Teams® Guide for Music Theory*, illustrates processes and skills necessary to the development of music literacy.

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Listening to Music	Performing Music	Creating Music	Reading and Writing Music	Analyzing Music
Recognizing, describing, understanding, and reproducing musical elements experienced as sound	Reproducing, manipulating, and interpreting musical elements through singing and/or playing	Producing music through manipulating the interaction of musical elements	Becoming fluent in the vocabulary and symbols used to notate musical elements and their interaction	Using visual stimuli to identify and describe musical elements and their interaction
Elements Learned	through	Activities Presented	result in	Skills Acquired
Scales and pitch organization Melody Harmony Duration and rhythm Form Meter Texture Timbre Dynamics Articulation Music terminology and notation Tonality and key centers		Listening exercises Performance exercises Written exercises Creative exercises Analytical exercises Notation exercises Singing exercises		Listening skills Performance skills Reading/writing skills Compositional skills Analytical skills Notation skills Sight-singing skills

The following activity, also adapted from *The AP Vertical Teams® Guide for Music Theory*, illustrates some essentials of a holistic, contextual approach to teaching music literacy. It focuses upon the importance of visual study followed by listening and discussion.

Creating a Lesson

The following activity provides insight into this approach to understanding music. In addition, it is a useful template for creating musical explorations and activities that are enjoyable, informative, and skill enhancing.

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For the activity, choose a song for which you have a score and a recording. A good example is “Nature’s Way” by Charles Ives, as illustrated in *The AP Vertical Teams Guide for Music Theory*, but most any song can be used as long as the arrangement on the recording is the same as that represented by the score.

The student is introduced to the piece through the notation and encouraged to take note of important musical content often left unexamined. Seemingly simple inquiries, such as the way the music looks, can sensitize the mind and ear to the listening experience.

Dynamics, articulations, slurs, phrasing marks, and the like are often treated in the curriculum as musical adjuncts. Music teachers often criticize students who are not playing correct dynamic markings or noticing written articulations. Therefore, if it is desirable that students recognize the importance of elements other than pitch and rhythm, lesson plans must reflect this.

After making the initial observations, students are encouraged to relate what they see to what they will hear. They are made to synthesize their observations into an “aural hypothesis.” Then, when listening to the work, students do so with a real interest in how what they hear relates to what they saw and what they thought it might represent in sound. The implications for enhancing analytical, critical, interpretive, dictation, and sight-singing skills are clear.

Exercises such as this are useful for students at all levels. This particular exercise was piloted in a variety of circumstances, including seventh-grade general music, ninth-grade band class, and an AP Music Theory class. Each group found the lesson enjoyable and interesting. Regardless of level, all students submitted comments relevant to essentially important aspects of the musical structure.

The fact that these elements are important in all music allows for easy transfer of this approach. The teacher shouldn’t feel at all limited by the template. What is presented allows both instructor and student alike to experience the music at a “user-friendly” access point. After examining the music using this technique, ideas appropriate to student level and situation might well occur to the teacher.

In the score, consider the following:

1. Each staff line individually
2. Markings on the page other than notes
3. How busy the score may seem and why
4. How it might sound
5. Things that look the same and different
6. The words—meaning and rhyme
7. High and low

In class, pass out the song and direct the students (possibly in groups) to examine the score and comment on each item. Do not direct or guide the conversation. List all comments and observe into which categories they may fall.

After this activity, guide the discussion to include or speculate about the following:

1. Do the student observations reflect the entire song or just a small portion of the score?
2. Can generalizations about the work be drawn from the observations, for example, the general shapes of melody or bass lines throughout the song?
3. How do the things observed interact with each other, for example, why might there be more notes in some parts than in others? If a section has no words, does the music look as busy?
4. Ask the students to predict how the piece will sound and what will be most important or prominent in the piece when they hear it.

When this discussion has been completed, play the recording. Ask the students or groups to discuss how the sound of the piece related to the sight of the piece. Did their predictions match their observations?

Some Points in Summary

1. The Vertical Team approach provides the opportunity to form a coherent yet flexible curriculum that articulates the concepts of music literacy in a sequential way. Setting AP Music Theory as the capstone event “trickles down” to raise standards at all levels. This is important to districts who are charged with delivering quality music education to all students, even to those who complete their formal musical education in grades 6 or 7.

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2. The curriculum is both vertical and horizontal—vertical because it includes both middle and high school levels (and potentially K–12) and horizontal because it potentially includes the diverse activities of band, choral, orchestral, and general music classes.
3. Vertical Teams present the opportunity for music theory and general music teachers to work cooperatively with ensemble directors who might incorporate music theory concepts, exercises, and activities into repertoire performed during the course of the year.
4. Repertoire used in the district should be made an integral part of a process-driven and outcome/skills-oriented curriculum. When students are more aware of the music with which they are involved, perception might take place at more profound levels. This approach leads to the development of musically literate students and a learning environment in which the students might better experience the aesthetic and affective aspects of the art.
5. Inclusion of activities of ear training, analysis, and music reading will provide students with a better understanding of the music studied and develop in these students critical thinking and listening skills that are transferable. Ultimately this leads to the development of literate, well-rounded student musicians.
6. An AP-based Vertical Team curriculum will facilitate the meeting of both state and national standards by providing an enriched music curriculum—not only one that focuses on musical performance, but also one in which the student is actively engaged in the music experience through analyzing, listening, reflecting, and discussing critically.