

Spice Up Your Strings - Rehearsal & Lesson Ideas for Tomorrow & Beyond

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Clinic Synopsis: Our students thrive when they identify with the music being taught. We will look at ways to teach multiple skills, build "ears", and develop critical thinking and expression. We will also share "out of the box" teaching ideas with different genres! Come learn about improvisation and stylistic approaches that are easy to embed in day-to-day teaching, with music selections that sequence good technique. We will explore resources and fun activities through pedagogies such as Suzuki and Bornoff.

I. Introduction

a. This session explores

- wider cultural experience/authenticity
- pedagogy including Suzuki and Bornoff, Kodaly and Orff, and more
- critical thinking with exploration/improvisation = independence = long-term musical participation
- engaging, scaffolded repertoire that gets "out of the box" while building technique

b. Our background = deep roots with eclectic string experiences

- certification/trainings/experience: Suzuki, Bornoff, Mark O'Connor, El Sistema, California Bluegrass Association, Kids on Bluegrass, Stockton Soul Orchestra, jazz
- public school k-8, high school, and higher education (multiple states: Texas, California, Florida, New York)
- teaching strings public schools
- composing for strings, conducting honor orchestras, adjudication
- pre-service and professional development

c. Session: organized chronologically

1. beginners - "beyond the method book"
2. 2nd year through middle school and into high school - sample sequence of ensemble pieces building technique with **left hand** (pitch: keys, pitches, intonation) and **right hand** (bowing, articulation, styles)

3. Examples to tap into critical thinking, creativity, and improvisation: increase engagement, "buy-in", independence

II. Beginners into 2nd Year Players- "Beyond the Method Book"

a. Intro to beginning methods: what do many teachers/method books do?

- 1) Start pizzicato? How long til bow enters?
- 2) How much music theory first? Rhythm? Notes? Staff or iconic notation?
- 3) Lots of terrific books out there... and we may use ideas/materials from other pedagogues, such as Suzuki, Bornoff, O'Connor, etc. - what is used in your area?

b. Overview of pedagogies: Bornoff and Suzuki approaches

- 1) brief histories, degree of sequencing versus Gestalt approach, spiral curriculum
- 2) similarities and differences in terms (ex: finger patterns and hand shapes), settings, and goals; advantages with group & ensemble teaching (children, pre-teens, older)
- 4) **Demonstration:** how and when Bornoff approach introduces certain techniques (different strings, finger patterns, bowings)

c. Teaching Example Demonstration: New Sonic Experiences with Pitch & Bowings

- 1) the hook: approaching Halloween with minor mode and special effects for familiar first melodies
- 2) minor mode (low 2) for "Hot Cross Buns", etc.
- 2) bowings (tremolo) and pitch patterns (slides, harmonics), etc.
- 3) it won't be perfect, but inspires engagement; gives a reason to work on
 - * beautiful bow hold
 - * posture and instrument position
 - * high versus low fingering (different hand shapes/finger patterns)
- 4) using games and critical thinking activities as assessment for pitch discernment

d. Teaching example Demonstration: Developing beginnings of swing versus straight rhythms

- 1) the hook: "Doo's" and "Doobie's" with "Old MacDonald", "Baa Baa Black Sheep"
- 2) aural approach, iconic notation, regular notation
- 3) questioning strategies with listening examples to differentiate swing and straight eighth-notes, exposure to different genres

e. Teaching example Demonstration: Developing improvisation with beginners (Banana Boat Song)

- 1) the hook: The Muppets, Kermit the Frog, Harry Belafonte video
- 2) Call & Response with culturally authentic approach:
 - * critical thinking: discern same/different calls and responses
 - * paired or group activities

- 3) Choice: who calls/responds, which response, then developing new responses
- 4) Outcomes: learning form, courage to attempt solo, independence, ability to improvise more fluidly in the moment

III. Ensembles: Middle School - High School Literature

a. Eclectic Styles and Approaches? Current research (Savage & Harvey, *String Research Journal*, 2024) - recent survey results regarding for fiddle club, mariachi, composition/arranging for middle school and high school curriculum

b. Bowings - Introducing Swing (the Quest to Write an "Easy" Grade .5 Piece that swings)

- 1) the hook: Can strings really swing? If not, why not?
(to be fair, do 7th grade middle school bands always "swing hard" either? Maybe it IS a spiral curriculum!)
- 2) Ensemble repertoire: what swing patterns introduced, when, and how? (Grade 1 - 3)
- 3) Pieces can be sequenced to introduce students to harmony, style, while gradually adding in technique challenges
- 4) Examples (slides with score + sound) feature compositional approaches such as
 - aa. pizz only
 - bb. degree of challenge (players and accompaniment)
 - cc. straight 8ths in blues (gives harmonic element of jazz/rock/contemporary genre)
 - dd. gradual increase in string crossings and pitch movement
 - ee. "as it comes" bowings first (not rushing, enough bow on "up's")
 - ff. more advanced bowings (re-takes, hooked, slurred bowings, ghosting notes) to accentuate elements of the style = more authentic, sophisticated sound
- 5) Examples include **blues, swing, jazz, and rock**, from rep such as the following (may be updated with most recent publications):
 - aa. Frost/Elledge, "Ready Set Swing" Grade .5, Kjos;
 - bb. Brittin, "Rize & Shine" 1, Wingert-Jones
 - cc. Peter Martin, UK, self-published, 1.5 (syncopation)
 - cc. Newbold, "Rhythm and Blues" 1 (-1.5?), FJH
 - dd. Monday, "Shortnin' Bread Blues 1 (-2?), Wingert-Jones
 - ee. Dudley, "No Bow Blues" 1.5, Wingert-Jones
 - ff. Wood, "String Thang" 2 with advanced Grade 3 part, Alfred
 - gg. Sciaino, "Hipster Hootenanny" Grade 5, Kendor
 - hh. On-line websites/Youtubes featuring tutorials on ghosting, sophisticated slurred patterns, chopping. For developing and advanced players exploring techniques, styles, and improvisation. Summer camps available that dive into different genres.
- 6) Composition to pedagogy connection: **understanding the compositional elements used gives clues to sequencing** for technique and stylistic development

b. Left hand pitch development - Example of a sequence within one composer's works:

(may be updated to include different other compositions)

- 1) the hook: interview with composer Susan Day, regarding pedagogy embedded within her catalogue of compositions
- 2) Introducing new keys, new notes with creative use of modes, low fingerings (such as F natural = low 2)
- 3) examples: pieces such as "King's Court", "Open Seas", "A Gypsy's Life"/"A Wanderer's Life", other 1.5's (Alfred)
- 4) Shows small-step sequencing within a given grade level, especially helpful to "non-string natives"

IV. Extensions to Critical Thinking, Creativity, Spontaneity

a. Taking time for More Questions

- 1) Encourage students to discern: ask who, what, where, when, why, why not?
- 2) Teacher-to-group, and student to student (and not always stand partners) and student-to-teacher
- 3) Asking students to ask parents and peers questions broadens your program... imagine a parent's surprise when their child asks them what they were listening to as a teen!
- 3) Oral, written, or charades (movement always gets a laugh.... a great ice-breaker, attention-getter!!)

b. Allow for more student choice/student voice

- 1) Repertoire
- 2) Breaks (does not have to be "dead time")
- 3) Rewards/Motivators

c. Add in games

- 1) can build trust if stakes not too high
- 2) variety = "Spice of life"
- 3) To invent:
 - aa. Anything that can be perceived as same/different = "Rhythm Poison" or "Funny Position"-type game (pitch, rhythm style, etc.)
 - bb. Recall/performance = speed game or accuracy game (students against the teacher, against the clock, or own previous performance level).
 - cc. To reduce anxiety, the game can be "your ability to focus today", rather than good/bad performance.
 - dd. Caution pitting students against each other. The most fun games are low-stakes, high-giggles.
- 4) Let students come up with games/challenges for specific targets -- trifecta of student choice, creativity, and assessment! Use pairs/crews to build comradery.

IV. Implications and Conclusion/Questions

- a. We desire structure and variety for engagement and progress
- b. Hearing how others sequence their repertoire can be helpful
- c. Aural, visual, kinesthetic stimuli are important
- d. Critical thinking and a playful approach = high engagement assessment
- e. End-goal: independence and life-long learning
- f. Questions? (now or following session)

Ruth Brittin Bio

Ruth Brittin is Professor and Program Director of Music Education at University of the Pacific in Stockton, California. Dr. Brittin conducts, adjudicates, and clinics orchestras and bands in Northern California, such as the 2025 California Orchestra Directors Association High School String Orchestra, CMEA regional and country honor orchestras, and Cazadero Music Camp Junior High Orchestra. Ruth also is a leader in music education research with International Society for Music Education, NAFME, and CMEA, having served as journal editor, as ISME Research Committee Commissioner for USA, and on the SRME executive committee. She holds Pacific's prestigious Eberhardt Teacher-Scholar and Outstanding Faculty Mentor awards, and CMEA's Higher Education award. She performs on horn in orchestras, wind ensembles, and chamber music.

An active composer, she writes for secondary, collegiate, and community ensembles (published by Excelcia and Wingert-Jones). Her pieces "Danza La Habana", "Golden Vistas", and "Beyond Words" have been featured at CMEA, such as with the All-State Jr. High Symphonic Band, and other regional and collegiate performances. Her string orchestra piece "As You Fly", exploring improvisation, has been featured at conferences for American String Teachers Association and the California Orchestra Directors Association at CASMEC. As a composer and conductor, Ruth taps into her experience as a "Suzuki mom" for over 20 years and in her roles in instrumental music education. She enjoys supporting string players through their exploration of different genres.

Teaching and Education

Professor, University of the Pacific, 1997-present

Associate Professor, Syracuse University, 1989-1997

Graduate Assistant, Florida State University, 1985-1989

Assistant Band Director, Plano, Texas (Carpenter MS and Plano East HS), 1983-1985

PhD, Music Education, Florida State University 1989

MME, Music Education, Texas Tech University, 1985

BME, Music Education, Texas Tech University, 1983

Darcy Ford Bio

Darcy Ford is a classically trained violinist and seasoned music educator with 25 years of teaching strings and orchestra in California and Texas public schools, serving students of all ages. She graduated from the University of the Pacific in 1997 and later earned a Master's Degree in Cross-Cultural Education from National University. Darcy is certified in Suzuki Method violin books 1-3. She currently teaches Elementary Strings and Middle School Orchestra in the Lincoln Unified School District in Stockton, California.

In addition to her innovative work in public schools, Darcy is an active leader outside the classroom. In 2021, she founded the non-profit Soul Orchestra Stockton Soul, which aims to educate, empower, and inspire audiences through the performance of Black Music. Stockton Soul has spread its message to dozens of community schools and has presented at Universities, workshops, and conferences nation-wide.

In 2023, Darcy was selected as an inaugural fellow in the Black Banjo Fiddle Fellowship, a project of the Oakland Public Conservatory of Music. The paid fellowship focuses on spreading knowledge about the Black Roots of the banjo, fiddle, and Old-Time Music.

An active participant in the California Bluegrass Association, Darcy was chosen as a panelist in the "Roots Revival:" Black String Band Symposium at the International Bluegrass Music Association Festival in September of 2024.

Darcy serves on the Board of the Foundation for the Advancement of String Education, a charitable organization that promotes the philosophy and pedagogy of Dr. George Bornoff by providing financial support for the development of string education and teacher training. She is passionate about making quality string education accessible to all students regardless of their economic status or cultural background.

Our backgrounds - deep roots with eclectic string traditions

Ruth - teaching = mostly band, with lots of general music teaching and strings; perspective of being a "Suzuki mom" with children over two decades = a lot of direct observation of lessons AND groupwork); composer and conductor for string orchestra; music education research into eclectic styles string pedagogy

Darcy - string specialist in Texas and CA, founder and director of "Stockton Soul" non-profit bringing diverse music to community and schools, particularly Black American music; Bornoff fellow and active in bluegrass scene with specialization on diverse cultural contributions

Overview of Session: Ways to diversify one's teaching strategies and repertoire chronologically (beginners through early high school)

- a) building greater technique
 - 1. left hand = the notes we play
 - 2. right hand = the way we play them (articulation = style development)
- b) incorporating more
 - 1. critical thinking
 - 2. improvisation
 - 3. independence through varied teaching models (large group, small group, independent)
- c) scaffolded repertoire (elementary through early high school) - various composers and publishers
- d) Resources from different pedagogies and traditions, particularly
 - 1. Suzuki
 - 2. Bornoff
 - 3. Traditional cultures (fiddling, jazz, mariachi)
 - 3. Contemporary materials through online resources (alternate/eclectic string styles)

The presentation's flow (demonstration, slides & audio, discussion)

I. Working with 1st-2nd year players - Darcy's lesson: "The Banana Boat Song" (*Strictly Strings* - still used in many schools) - introduced in one session, developed further in additional classes, put on concert

a. emphasis on "sound before sight" and the "hook" of a movie = video of Harry Belafonte on Sesame Street singing this song

b. Discovering "call & response" through questioning students: "What's the same?", "What's different", etc.

c. Introducing graphic notation using colors to show call, response, and when the call or response starts to vary

d. Letting students have choice/agency in developing their own calls and responses.

e. Scaffolded by gradually removing visual prompts and adding more "in the moment" improvisation.

f. Emphasize the critical thinking process on the concert by

1. having students lead

2. showing the steps taken over lessons (don't just assume parents see how we got from here to here and what that means)

3. celebrating improvisational growth.

II. More room for choice/creativity with young players (beginners) - fighting the tendency to stay in one key and tonality (DM anyone?) for months (or years!)

a. Bornoff and - brief history

b. finger patterns and their parallels to Suzuki handshapes

c. Changing up "Mary Had a Little Lamb" to minor version (excitement of a minor song just before Halloween!)

d. Graphic notation used to simplify teaching process

1. Technique: Right hand and left hand

2 Repertoire: