

The Midwest Clinic: International Band and Orchestra Conference  
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### **Enhancing Fluency in Music Literacy**

Dr. Cecilia Kang, Associate Professor of Clarinet, Louisiana State University ( [kang1@lsu.edu](mailto:kang1@lsu.edu) )  
Dr. Simon Holoweiko, Associate Director of Bands, Louisiana State University ( [sholow1@lsu.edu](mailto:sholow1@lsu.edu) )

#### *Co-investigators:*

Dr. Jason Bowers, Instructor of Music Education, Louisiana State University ( [jbowel7@lsu.edu](mailto:jbowel7@lsu.edu) )  
Dr. Shannon McDonald, Instructor of Music, Texas Woman's University ( [smcdonald7@twu.edu](mailto:smcdonald7@twu.edu) )

## I. ABSTRACT

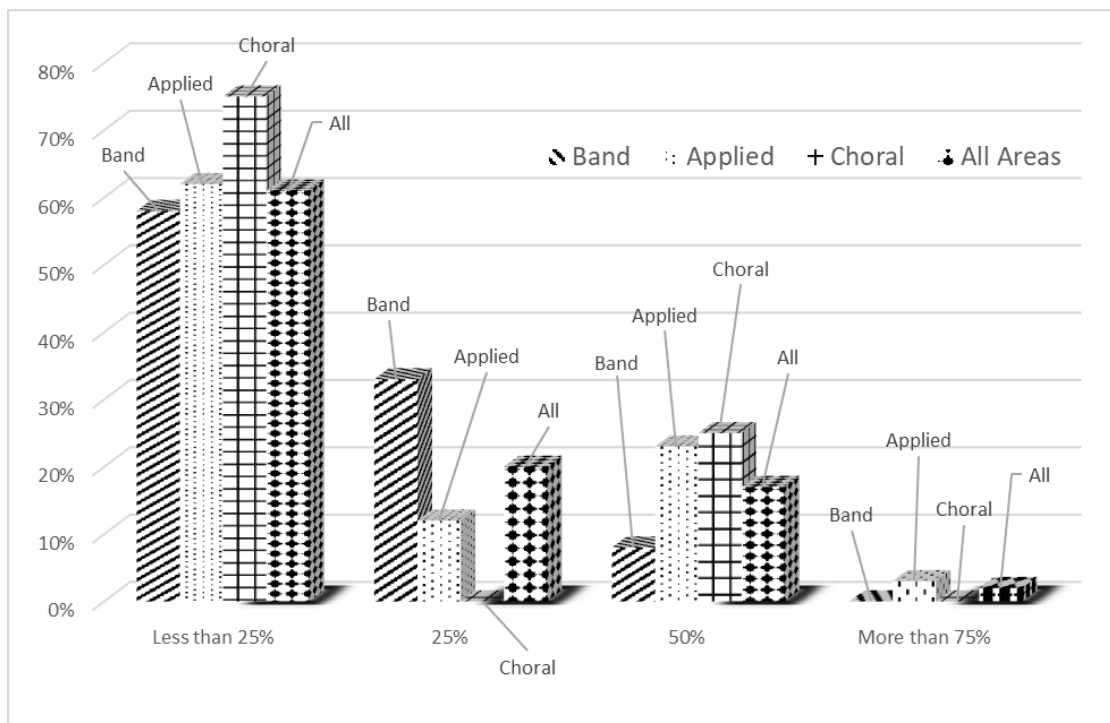
There seems to be a widespread music literacy challenge among collegiate music students. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of applied studio instructors (woodwinds and brass) and ensemble directors (band and choral) with students who have long-term persistent difficulty deciphering western rhythmic notations and/or processing rhythm in higher education. Using the data collected from our survey, “Rhythmic Music Literacy Challenges Among Music Students in American Higher Education: Music Educator Experiences and Pedagogical Accommodations in Applied Studio and Large Ensemble Settings,” our clinic aims to examine common learning habits and challenges faced by collegiate student musicians and recommend practical pedagogical strategies to address rhythmic music literacy issues in applied lesson and ensemble rehearsal settings.

Out of 113 respondents who fully completed the survey, the participants consisted of **48** band directors, **4** choral directors and **61** applied studio (woodwind and brass) instructors with experience teaching in higher education in the US. 83% of the respondents have completed doctoral degrees in their respective fields. 28% of the participants had over 26 years of teaching experience in higher education and the majority (59.3%) of the participants have taught at public universities.

The survey data was collected between August 20, 2022 to September 25, 2022.

## II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND RESULTS

### 1. How often do band, choir, and applied music educators encounter college students who have difficulty reading Western rhythmic notation and or playing rhythm?



In all three areas, the majority reported that less than 25% of their students exhibit long term persistent rhythmic literacy challenges. It may be meaningful to consider that it may be more difficult for students to “hide their challenges” in applied lesson settings than in big ensemble settings where multiple performers may share the same part.

Over 44% of respondents either somewhat agreed or agreed that they have noticed an increase of music majors who exhibit long-term persistent rhythmic music literacy challenges throughout their career. The next highest category was neutral (over 31%) for both band and applied areas. Choral was the outlier as 50% disagreed.

### 2. How often do band, choir, and applied music educators encounter students with learning differences that can directly affect their ability to read and/or perform Western rhythmic notation?

Only 3.5% of all respondents stated that they have never worked with students who openly disclosed medical diagnoses of learning disabilities or differences.

It’s interesting that band is the highest of this category since it would be expected that band directors would have access to students’ IEP or 405 plan. According to the survey results, band directors encounter more students without diagnosed disabilities or disorders than choral or applied music educators.

The most frequent diagnoses include: Anxiety 80.5%; ADHD 71.7%; ASD 51.3% ; Dyslexia 49.6%

The four diagnoses were the most common among all the groups, but in slightly different orders for each area. At least half of all respondents encountered students with dyslexia, which, as a reading processing disorder may affect their ability to process rhythms.

### **3. What are the most common rhythmic challenges encountered by collegiate music students in band, choir, and applied lessons?**

#### Band:

Most Frequent: Syncopation (10% with 22 responses)

Least Frequent: Multimeasured rests (1.36% with 3 responses)

#### Choir:

Most Frequent: Mixed Meter (21.05% with 4 responses)

Least Frequent: Compound meter, Dotted rhythms, Keeping a steady pulse, multimeasured rests, subdivision in a slow tempo, counting rests, counting long notes (5.26% with 1 response)

#### Applied Lessons:

Most Frequent: Keeping a steady pulse (12.05% with 40 responses)

Least Frequent: Multimeasured rests (1.81% with 6 responses)

#### All areas combined:

Most Frequent: Keeping a steady pulse (10.86% with 62 responses)

Least Frequent: Multimeasured rests (1.75% with 10 responses)

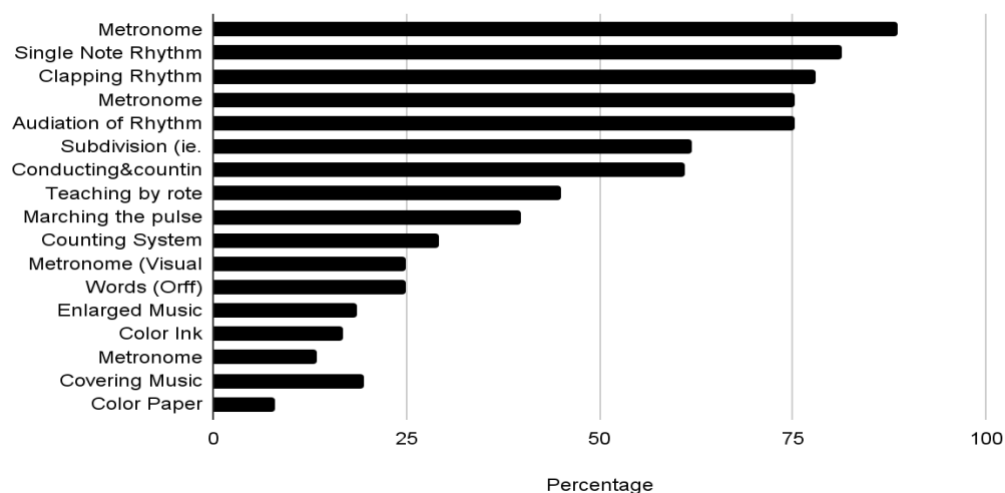
The most common rhythmic issue facing all respondents was reported to be the ability to keep a steady pulse with the least common issue being the ability to navigate multi measure rests.

### **4. What resources do band, choir, and applied music educators use with students who have difficulty reading and/or performing Western rhythmic notation?**

Supplemental Books and Methods used to address rhythmic training by participants	Percentage of usage among participants of the survey
Other (Please see below)	38.9%
Music Theory Software or Apps	23.9%
All-State Sight Reading Books	21.2%
Robert Starer: Rhythmic Training	15 %
Ed Gordon: Music Learning Theory	11.5%
P. Bona: Complete Method for Rhythmical Articulation	10.6%
The Dalcroze Method	9.7%
Garwood Whaley: Basics in Rhythm	9.7%
The Kodály Method	9.7%

The Orff Approach	8.8%
Raymond Fussell: Exercises for Ensemble Drill	7.1%
The Georges Longy Rhythm System	6.2%
The Ploger Method	6.2%
David Hickman: Music Speed Reaching	5.3%
Royal Conservatory of Music Aural Training Curriculum	5.3%
Grover Yaus: 101 Rhythmic Rests	4.4%
John Victor: Symphonic Band Technique	1.8%
Jay Althouse: Ready to Read Music	0.9%

Other: Paul Harris (ABRSM): Improving Your Sight-Reading, Bellson-Breines: Modern Reading Text in 4/4 and Odd Time Reading, Joe Allard: Advanced Rhythms, Gary Karpinski: Manual for Ear Training and Sight-Singing, Ed Sueta: Band Method Books, Gabriel Pares: Scale Method Books, Robert Shaw Counting Techniques, and Edward Ayola: Winning Rhythms.



## 5. What attitudes do music educators exhibit towards students with long-term persistent rhythmic music literacy challenges?

It's interesting to note that more participants thought these students were more likely to succeed as a performer than as ensemble directors. Majority (42%) of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement, "music students who have long-term persistent rhythmic music literacy challenges can be successful performers," whereas the majority (35%) of respondents somewhat agreed to the statement, "music students who have long-term persistent rhythmic music literacy challenges can be successful as ensemble directors."

There were numerous comments regarding the attitude, perseverance, and the dedication or willingness of students to work on issues surrounding rhythm. There were multiple comments regarding the need to

acknowledge the psychological aspect of successfully convincing students to embrace such weakness as they themselves often perceive this as a harsh critique or a personal attack.

Particularly from band directors, there were a number of comments regarding the **need** to train students to sight read more often and help students understand the written notations and encourage audiation to rely less on teaching by rote.

### III. TESTIMONIALS

Below are selected responses from participants regarding personal experiences teaching rhythm in higher education:

“The majority of my students arrive as freshmen with rhythmic music literacy issues. I offer all of them an array of strategies and the ones who choose to engage with at least some of the strategies often see improvement, but only when they actually utilize the strategies. Increasingly, students see the offering of strategies as a personal attack, but they also see rote instruction as a personal attack, so I'm left without any options.”

“I have had a few students who have severe issues with keeping a steady pulse. They cannot successfully play along with a metronome by themselves; however, they can play within large ensembles because they follow the rest of the section. These students have still managed to complete required recitals with a pianist with a LOT of work, but I don't know how successful they would be in teaching others. None have desired a music education path, but rather have followed a Music Industry/Arts Admin career path.”

### IV. CONCLUSION

- Based on our survey, 86% of the participants (somewhat) agreed that music majors who struggle with rhythmic literacy may be embarrassed to seek help.  
=>There is a need to “normalize” this issue in music education..
- Ensemble directors and applied studio directors should find creative strategies to address rhythmic challenges in various learning modalities.
- Open communication between applied instructors and ensemble directors or academic colleagues (aural skills/music education/group piano classes) may encourage students to connect the dots between classes and instill the importance of strengthening their music literary skills.

### V. Q&A

Thank you for attending our clinic!