



# Hitting the Right Note

*At a Boston charter school, instruction in music composition helps students expand their horizons and see their true potential.*

**Linda F. Nathan**

Unlike in so much of the school curriculum, where correct answers and rigid rules prevail, in the arts, judgment—not rules—is what counts. Problems can have more than one solution and questions can have more than one answer (Catterall, 2009; Eisner, 2002). Too much of our contemporary educational emphasis requires students to regurgitate facts. Making art involves discovery, risk taking, and being vulnerable to the unknown.

Although the benefits of arts education are well-known and research-backed (Deasy, 2002; Ingram & Riedel, 2003; Nathan, 2009), the arts are too often curtailed in schools. Since 2008, fewer than half of the students in U.S. urban schools have received any regular arts education classes (Kraehe, Acuff, & Travis, 2016).

American education has become obsessed with ranking and sorting our children and schools—typically based on standardized test scores—and this has caused many school systems to eliminate or reduce arts classes to make room for double doses of English and math classes (Baker, 2012). It should come as no surprise that, in the process, many young people have become disengaged from school.

Of course, in private schools and many of the more well-resourced public schools, arts and enrichment activities remain central to learning. Thus, in the landscape we have created, the most engaging curriculum and significant resources are directed to those young people that already have advantages. That is a recipe for disaster.

That's why I am excited to be involved with Conservatory Lab Charter School, a small preK–8 elementary school of 440 students in Boston where, in addition to a full slate of academic



**Conservatory Lab student Jasmine Campbell, a 6th grader, conducts her composition “Storm at Sea” at the school’s 2018 Spring Concert.**

classes, all children play music every day. Students are admitted to the school through a lottery system, so no prior musical training is expected or necessary. The students are predominantly from minority backgrounds. Nearly half are economically disadvantaged, and more than 60 percent are considered high-needs learners<sup>1</sup> (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.).

Conservatory Lab’s mission is to “empower a diverse range of children as scholars, artists, and leaders through a unique and rigorous academic and music education. We enrich the larger community through performance, service,

and collaboration.” The curriculum is project-based, using EL Education (formerly Expeditionary Learning). The daily music instruction draws inspiration from El Sistema, a Venezuela-based program that aims to effect social change through intensive, ensemble-based music education in underserved

communities. At Conservatory Lab, the academic faculty and resident artists believe that the pursuit of musical excellence—by infusing joy and determined aspiration into their studies—teaches students to strive for excellence in *all* areas of their lives. As one of the school’s resident artists told me, “We are trying to get our students to realize that they have the ability to make change in our society through their art. As young people, they can be agents of change.”

### **Artistic Habits**

In their seminal book, *Studio Thinking*, Hetland, Winner, and their coauthors describe eight attributes or habits that artists (and art teachers) possess—which they dubbed *studio habits of mind*. They are:

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1. *Develop Craft*: They learn tools, materials, and artist's practices.

2. *Engage and Persist*: They learn to pursue topics of personal interest and develop focus and perseverance.

3. *Envision*: They picture and imagine what cannot be observed.

4. *Express*: They create works that convey ideas, meaning, or emotions.

a social-emotional component as they learn how to respect one another and work together in an ensemble. Musical training is an excellent way to teach social-emotional skills, including waiting your turn, perseverance, assuming best intent, prolonged focus, and the willingness to prioritize the good of the greater whole over one's individual desires.

As early as kindergarten, children are given

**“I can be in a bad mood, and I come into music class and I can literally take it out on my viola and make angry sounds or play really hard and then I feel better. I am working on sounding better than yesterday. That’s such a good feeling.”**

5. *Observe*: They learn to view visual, audio, and written resources more critically.

6. *Reflect*: They learn to think and converse about their work and processes of making.

7. *Stretch and Explore*: They learn to stretch beyond perceived limitations, explore freely, and learn from errors or accidents.

8. *Understand Arts in the World*: They learn about art history, artistic practices, and engaging the arts community (Hetland et al., 2007).

I believe that these habits are exactly the ones that Conservatory Lab is developing in its young musicians. These students are working through difficult materials and learning the power of collaboration, expression, reflection, critical thinking, and historical context. Significantly, such habits not only help them to grow as musicians, they also encompass many of the skills that young people need to thrive in today's complex world.

Music classes at Conservatory Lab include orchestra (or multi-instrument ensemble) rehearsals and sectionals (instrument-specific instruction). In preschool and kindergarten, the students are immersed in a pre-orchestral, early-childhood program consisting of singing, movement, and percussion, in conjunction with

opportunities to both compose their own music and conduct their peers in ensembles. The students are treated like artists and learn to think like artists, meaning they must constantly experiment, analyze, and make their own aesthetic choices. Training in composition encourages students to articulate and defend these choices to teachers and peers. Further, it helps them develop their creative voice beyond a focus on instrumental craft and technique.

### **Student Voices**

The combination of empowerment and discernment that such training imparts is evident in the way students at Conservatory Lab talk about their work.<sup>2</sup> Elisa, a 4th grade violinist, described the elation she felt when her class orchestra played the piece she had composed called “Space Battle.” “When the planets hit each other, my classmates really understood how to play that—they went really *forte*,” she said. “No *piano* or quiet sounds.”

When I asked her what she would change in the piece if she had a chance, she said that she really liked how the low strings sounded, but that the next time she might put more rests in because the piece was hard for people to play.



Describing how writing music is different from writing for English language arts, Elisa said that in both you have to be creative and figure out how things fit together, “but in my music composition, I really had to think about how others would play my notes and what it would sound like. I had to think about both a story and the sounds.”

Another student, a quiet 3rd grader named Morgan, expressed the sense of accomplishment she felt after making some needed adjustments to a piece she had written. “I had to do some more writing and improvising. My classmates really helped me make it sound right,” she explained. “Sometimes, it just doesn’t work. But in my piece, I made it sound right [by] going from D string to A string and then to G string. The notes stay there until they repeat and then it goes back up. That sounds right. I think.” She looked at me confidently and smiled. “So did the orchestra.” The feeling of “getting it right” in any area can be an enormously powerful emotion; we know that success engenders more success in learning. Musical training—and arts education in general—can generate this feeling again and again.

At the same time, students at Conservatory Lab gain insights into the messiness of the creative process and the power of growth mindset that are rare in contemporary education. By studying Fluxus, an experimental art movement of the 1960s and 1970s, for example, 7th and 8th graders begin to understand the importance of process over product as well as the power of experimentation and risk taking. Since they’ve

often been taught that there is only one right way to answer a question or to play a note, some of the students at first have difficulty accepting that making mistakes can be part of the process of learning and creating. But they catch on quickly to the spirit of Fluxus, as if given a new sense of freedom and possibility. Here’s how one student described what she learned from the Fluxus artists: “You can take your bow and hold it differently and make sounds differently on the strings. It’s just really fun! I can almost turn my musical understanding upside down and actually play with making music. Not just play, but *play!*”

Another student defined her Fluxus studies as a chance to mess up and “that gives me freedom.” Her friend chimed in, “It’s so cool that we get to study this kind of thing in school. None of our friends are as good at music or know so many different kinds of ways to play music.” A third student described the impact of her playing music on her well-being and sense of aspiration: “I can be in a bad mood, and I come into music

**First grade students sit with their basses after an instrument-assignment ceremony at Conservatory Lab’s Lower School.**



PHOTO COURTESY OF PAUL SAYED

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class and I can literally take it out on my viola and make angry sounds or play really hard and then I feel better. I am working on sounding better than yesterday. That's such a good feeling."

Indeed, many students at Conservatory Lab describe their experiences playing or writing music in terms suggestive of "flow," which psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) described as a state of concentration or complete absorption that supports deep learning. Cashman, a 6th grader, told me that when he is engaged in traditional academic courses, he can feel his "brain clicking." "But that's not the feeling I have when I learn music and I can play it well. Then, I am not thinking. The music is just coming out of me." Asked about the power of music, another student said, "There is so much bad stuff happening in the world that it's hard to shut out all of that, but when we play music, we are in control and it's beautiful."

These students also experience the thrill and transformative power of performance. Jasmine, another 6th grader, described the pride she felt when her classmates played one of her pieces at an academic conference. "People who didn't even know me were clapping," she said. "And not just for me as the composer-conductor, but for all my classmates who played. That made us all feel really proud. We worked

### Music for Parkland

Watch videos of Conservatory Lab students performing original musical compositions written to honor the victims of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in February 2018. The videos, created in connection with the March for Our Lives events, spread widely on social media, even reaching the families of some of the Parkland victims. [www.conservatorylab.org/music-for-parkland](http://www.conservatorylab.org/music-for-parkland).

on this together, and I [had received] lots of feedback from my other crew members." Conservatory Lab students regularly perform their work in front of live audiences in concerts for families and others. As Jasmine notes, they also give one another feedback as they work on their music. Such "public" interactions can be powerful forms of assessment. This kind of feedback, according to scholars, "raises the bar for learning and creates a high level of intellectual discourse among students and between students and adults that reaches back into the classroom and beyond" (Benitez, Davidson, & Flaxman, 2009, p. 216).

### Beyond Music Lessons

Research in the arts and creativity demonstrates how deep study in the arts can help students develop flexibility, creative expression, and the ability to shift directions (Eisner, 2002; Hetland et al., 2013). There is clear evidence that arts learning is not just an "emotive" discipline, but one that requires deep reflection and intellectual rigor (Hetland et al., 2013).

In my own work (Nathan, 2009), I've argued that we must teach the arts not only so that students will get better at other subjects such as math, but because the arts are necessary for enabling a student to reach their true personal potential. In my experience, as students develop the studio habits of mind, they tend to achieve more success in school and in life outside of school. Students who develop a craft, persist in their practice, and learn to envision and express new possibilities demonstrate more flexible thinking and become more adept at problem solving—especially when the work is challenging.

We see this every day at Conservatory Lab as students experience the pioneering combined curriculum of El Sistema and EL Education. Together, these two approaches help young people use newly developed skills to navigate their world and seek improvements. As José Abreu, the founder of El Sistema, said, "An orchestra means joy, motivation, teamwork, the aspiration to success."

Recently, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, in collaboration with the Arts Education Partnership, published a guide encouraging school leaders to take determined actions to provide more equitable access to arts education for all young people (Arts Education

Partnership, 2018). As the guide states, “Learning in and through the arts helps develop the knowledge, skills, and creative capacities that all students need to succeed in school, work, and life.” School leaders can look to schools like Conservatory Lab for examples of the power of arts in helping students from diverse backgrounds gain rich and empowering educational experiences.

Leaders who embrace creativity and the arts in smart, authentic ways can build schools that provide opportunities for young people to realize their own talent and vision and, through experiences of fulfillment and collaboration, become thoughtful and compassionate citizens, ready to take their places in a democratic society. As leaders, we must encourage our schools to be places where students can recognize their individual and collective dreams, and where we can help make such dreams come true. **EL**

<sup>1</sup>The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education designates a student as high needs if he or she is either economically disadvantaged, an English language learner (or former English language learner), or a student with disabilities.

<sup>2</sup>All student quotes are from informal interviews conducted with Conservatory Lab students in June 2018.

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## GUIDING QUESTIONS

➤ Do you play a musical instrument and compose music, or know someone who does? What life skills do these practices teach? How could they benefit your students?

➤ Nathan says that training in music—and arts education in general—can help students recognize their own talent and vision. How can educators in other subjects leverage and build on this capacity?

➤ In what creative ways could your school or district expand its music education offerings? How might that change school climate?

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