



Community, Cooperation, and Collaboration through Orff Schulwerk in Middle School Ensembles

by Ellie Johnson

“After almost half a century of involvement with the practice of Orff Schulwerk, I am convinced that the emotional growth that Orff sought as an effect of his approach results from participating in group efforts that are creative at their core.”

—Author and Orff Schulwerk proponent Jane Frazee¹

Community, collaboration, and cooperation are fundamental to adolescent needs and can be integrated into instructional design. Middle school students are kids who desire to talk with one another (constantly), and play, create, and revise as collaborative groups. Music psychology identifies student peers as influential persons—for better or for worse—in adolescent development.² Our middle school ensemble members are existing in a liminal space somewhere between childhood and adulthood, and they often look to their peers for approval as they traverse this space. They exhibit a desire for more autonomy, more responsibility, and move toward specialization as their brains and bodies shift to accommodate and fine-tune increasingly specific skills.³ Music educators can offer a balancing hand as these students navigate adolescence together.

Embracing flexible, Orff Schulwerk-guided music

activity within the ensemble classroom is one way that middle school directors can infuse their rehearsals with opportunities to observe, guide, and appreciate adolescent musical creativity and voice while still providing quality ensemble training. This article will discuss two characteristics of the Orff Schulwerk approach that are suited to middle school ensembles; offer rationale for including cooperation, collaboration, and Schulwerk-inspired play in the ensemble; and share some application ideas to try in your rehearsals.

The Orff Schulwerk Approach

Orff Schulwerk is not a method—it’s a “pedagogical philosophy” that places student creativity as top priority.⁴ It is a whole-body musical experience designed for all learners.⁵ Secondary practitioners, however, can be quick to pass up resources, workshops, and materials labeled “Orff,” as these resources likely feel ready-made for our friends and colleagues in the elementary general music world. Those who have served in middle-level positions that only offer ensemble-based classes sometimes overlook the magic that Orff Schulwerk provides, particularly as it comes to group music-making practices that can help teachers reach large ensembles in unique ways.

Many middle-level ensemble rehearsals already include a great deal of variation, scaffolding, flexibility, movement, and creative enterprise. For some, however, it can be easy to unintentionally develop the expectation that our middle school ensemble members leap straight from elementary general scenarios into formal ensemble rehearsal by offering little variation in rigid rehearsal routines. Orff Schulwerk offers two core ideas toward developing a creative community by relinquishing teacher control and putting musical autonomy and problem-solving into the hands and minds of our very capable students. First: the elemental breakdown of larger works, and second, student-led creation.

Finding Elemental Chunks through Score Study

One of the components at Orff Schulwerk's core is the breakdown of complex musical thoughts and skills into basic elemental structures for sequenced scaffolding and student-led exploration. An Orff Schulwerk lesson must include student input and creativity.⁶ The Schulwerk instructor leads students in the reproduction of these elemental structures *and* in their repurposing and reapplication in student-generated musical activity such as improvising, arranging, and composing. Our ensemble rehearsal planning can mimic this approach. For students to take musical knowledge and skills away from ensemble participation, they need time to experience transferring the knowledge and skills they develop in rehearsal in unique contexts without conducting hands to guide them.⁷ Just as an elementary Orff Schulwerk teacher might break down and sequentially transfer a piece from *Music for Children*⁸ from body percussion to barred instrument, so too can the middle school ensemble director break down repertoire into what I will refer to in this article as “elemental chunks” and facilitate transfer to novel scenarios through creative play.

Dr. Carol Krueger offers an approach to score study that asks directors to break ensemble repertoire down into Orff Schulwerk-esque elemental chunks to better facilitate authentic learning and exploration of the literature.⁹ When many Orff Schulwerk educators open their volumes of *Music for Children*, they are likely looking at the examples for relevant component parts that fit together to construct the greater work. Orff Schul-

werk teachers use score study to break each piece in the volumes down into the most elemental structures necessary for their students to be able to either reproduce a piece successfully—which is what we traditionally do in ensemble spaces—or to generate something new by using the component parts of the piece as constructive materials. In fact, the purpose of the volumes is to serve as a catalyst for creative student work. Krueger asks ensemble instructors to view concert repertoire in much the same way.¹⁰ Seek out repertoire made of materials appropriate for your students' current goals and carefully dissect the repertoire, extracting elemental chunks for use as both training and creative material.¹¹

When studying ensemble repertoire through an Orff Schulwerk lens, it can be easy to feel overwhelmed. Don't despair. Like with any good lesson plan, start with your goals and forget the rest. Don't worry about covering every single component skill and elemental chunk identifiable within a given piece. Address the component skills necessary for students to understand and be immersed in the repertoire just as you usually would—but this time, maintain a special focus on a small set of elemental chunks derived from the score that students can use to generate their own creative material. Allow yourself time to think and plan creatively, and watch how quickly the options for student applications can multiply.

In this style of score study, I might focus on the melody and extract the different three- or four-note combinations the composer or arranger used to build the line.¹² Present these combinations as isolated, meter-less pitch combinations on flashcards and invite students to work in groups to rearrange them (like a magnet poem) to create longer lines. Sing or play one of the patterns and invite students to answer it by improvising a similar pattern back, practicing a loose question-and-answer format in a group jumble that offers safety for students to experiment. Later, invite students to work in pairs to develop a question/answer phrase entirely their own with time to edit and refine.

When viewing repertoire as truly a *composition*—comprising myriad elemental chunks—we identify a wealth of constructive materials with which our students can play, collaborate, and create while still being fully immersed in ensemble preparation. By engaging in collaborative work in this way, students are prepar-

ing themselves to reproduce repertoire in performance, using repertoire-derived materials to generate something new.

Using Elemental Chunks for Student-led Creation

In her cornerstone text, *Elementaria*, Orff Schulwerk matriarch Gunild Keetman offers countless examples of how to carefully shepherd students in the creation of original works.¹³ Keetman insists that a ground-up, incremental approach to music education is essential regardless of student age¹⁴ and asserts that, “It is especially the work in an elemental style that opens the way to *all* kinds of style.”¹⁵ Take a short rhythm or pitch pattern identified from the repertoire and engage in whole-group echo play (an approach Keetman insists is appropriate for any stage of musical learning).¹⁶ Use this small, elemental chunk to work with students to create something new.

Find or have students create simple texts that are free to use and contain meaning. Lead student groups to engage with the text and the short rhythm in speech play to develop independent lines—simple, text-based ostinatos to start. Later, where Keetman might encourage composing specific parts for different Orff instruments,¹⁷ instead have students use material developed in speech and echo play to create vocal lines. To provide even more structure to help students develop logical voice-leading and harmony, start with these basic guidelines for teacher arrangers learned through Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education Level Courses:

- 1) Allow text to guide rhythmic creation. Prosody will help student-created pieces have a natural feel for performers and listeners alike.
- 2) Start with octaves and fifths for accompaniments and bi-tonal/tri-tonal, short-range melodies. Slowly build to pentatonic scale melodies. As students progress and want more challenge, add in “fa” and “ti,” primarily in the melodic voice as a passing or neighbor tone.
- 3) Initially avoid parallel rhythmic and melodic motion—ostinato and polyphony are our friends. Add

paraphony as a first form of homophonic motion later.¹⁸

- 4) Notating student-created works is not always necessary. Develop and preserve pieces through shorthand or use of audio/video recording as student skill grows.

Bite-sized, repetitive phrases can be developed slowly to have a great impact when combined and formed into a greater work through collaboration with other student musicians. Over time, smaller student inventions can come together in a larger form to create an ensemble appropriate piece that was created by and for your students—much in the same way pieces from *Music for Children* or *Elementaria* are structured. In this way, you can incrementally lead your students in exercises that strengthen their ability to reproduce music as an ensemble while simultaneously leading students in the composition, refinement, and performance of their own music, all while building community through Orff Schulwerk-based cooperation and collaboration.

Building Community through Cooperation and Collaboration

Cooperation can be thought of as group work where the teacher appoints tasks or a problem, and each group member works on different portions of the task or problem to arrive at a collective solution.¹⁹ Think of the teacher as head chef designing a menu, and the students as station chefs working together to execute the head chef’s vision.

Collaboration puts more power into student hands.²⁰ The collaborative “meal” is one where students may still be working on distinct tasks, but they’ve conceived of the “menu” and developed materials in collaboration with their team to present something cohesive and unique to their group. There may still be prompts and guidance; some classes may need pseudo cooperative/collaborative activities, or perhaps use cooperative activities to build toward collaboration. Orff Schulwerk provides a proven approach and decades of material that allow for flexible, cooperative, and collaborative lesson design.

As you prepare to initiate a cooperative or collabora-

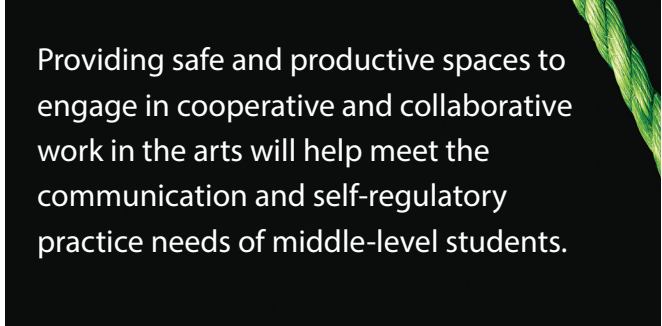
tive lesson in the ensemble space, consider ways to embed the process into the rehearsal routine as a regular occurrence. With thoughtful, proactive planning, the addition of regular student collaboration could help build a classroom culture that not only includes the hard work of repertoire preparation but also the development of original student works through creative play.

Community development is never more vital or tricky than at the adolescent stage. The school environment facilitates near constant comparison to peers.²¹ Drastic physical and mental changes and a transition from constant support in elementary schooling to a more independent middle school approach can leave many students feeling a loss of personal control.²² Despite having a reputation as social creatures, adolescent students often need guidance navigating this complex and shifting social landscape. As cognitive and physical changes lead students toward specialization,²³ students develop distinct preferences and world views. Students often struggle to appropriately express their emotions²⁴ and need guidance learning how to communicate effectively and appropriately.

Parents and teachers of adolescents have long lamented feeling confused or surprised by the choices or reactions students sometimes make while trying to communicate a need, an emotion, or an opinion. Our middle school students are in desperate need for chances to practice expressing themselves to their peers and communities in safe and effective ways. Increasingly, the role of schools is to prepare students to educate *themselves* and to practice the self-regulatory habits necessary to adapt and keep up with new information after traditional schooling ends.²⁵ Providing safe and productive spaces to engage in cooperative and collaborative work in the arts will help meet the communication and self-regulatory practice needs of middle-level students. Orff Schulwerk music making is a group endeavor that can build powerful and meaningful community among students.

In *Adolescents on Music*, Elizabeth Cassidy Parker calls for us to “consciously use a descriptive rather than prescriptive mindset” when working with adolescent students.²⁶ Rather than working to reform adolescents to fit the musical molds we set for them, we must relinquish a little control and remain open and curious

about the many ways adolescents are already interacting with and valuing music in their daily lives. Embracing flexible, Orff Schulwerk-guided, cooperative, and collaborative music activity within the ensemble classroom is one way that middle school directors can infuse their rehearsals with opportunities to observe, guide, and appreciate adolescent musical creativity and voice while still providing quality ensemble training.



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Parker again: “Through musicking, adolescents seek to explore and affirm relationships between themselves and peers to draw greater connection to the world they share.”²⁷ Unsurprisingly to all who have known and loved an adolescent student—or simply vividly remember being one themselves—interactions, feedback, and relationships play key roles in the development of musical identity.²⁸ Embracing group work in more ways than the full ensemble with the director at the helm will allow choral directors to create safe environments for middle school students to further foster their musical identities and allow peers and educators to benefit from student experiences and creative works.

Planning for Success

As with everything in middle school land, classroom management will be a consideration. It will be crucial to establish routines and take care in the scaffolding of group approaches, adjusting to your learners as needed, not only for the cohesion and safety of the classroom environment, but for student success and growth. For students to have the opportunity to truly collaborate, teachers need to set collaborative activities up in such a way that they may *get out of the students’ way!* Musical collaboration can help our ensemble students to devel-

op respectful social norms such as ensuring full group inclusion and valuing compromise²⁹ without pausing musical activity to make time for a non-musical team builder.

Sharing critical feedback in neutral and receptive ways will be key in establishing group work norms. A solid approach comes from Frazee, who asks that students and educators target the *material* and not the *student* when verbalizing constructive comments.³⁰ By helping students learn to address the content of a performance, composition, idea, etc., we reinforce two key analytical and reflective skills in addition to keeping things civil in the classroom:

1) Students learn to listen/watch *content* rather than *person*.

In a social media-driven world, the word “content” has, in many ways, come to mean watching, judging, and assessing a “content creator” rather than assessing their creation. The challenge will be clear and overcoming it will be vital. Work immediately to help your students practice watching and listening to the musical and creative items contained within the *activity* being addressed and word feedback appropriately, rather than ascribing value words to the *person*. Even as you establish positive and productive routines where students learn to consistently target critiques at content rather than creator, students will need to be reassured that it is *not* personal, and that they are all vital contributors to the collaborative process.

2) Students can then be directed to think more neutrally and productively about their own work utilizing the same approach: focus critiques on the *content*, not the *creator*.

Performance anxiety’s grip on adolescent musicians extends far beyond the wings of the stage. Sharing with important others (such as peers) can create a sense of importance around performative sharing that may increase anxiety levels.³¹ Working early and diligently to establish productive feedback routines will help with these anxieties. We are often our own worst critic. Help students learn to reflect and revise their personal work

much in the same way that they would address their peers—neutrally and thoughtfully, focusing on the value of the *content* and not the *creator*.³²

More Ideas for Application

As you wade into the world of embracing collaboration and student-led creative work in the ensemble, tune your own internal critic to focus on the value of the *content* delivered and lessons learned rather than expecting yourself to be a perfect collaborative lesson *creator* right away. Give yourself the time and grace to experiment, edit, and grow in the application of these ideas, just as you will for your students.

Allow for messiness and growth on the part of you and your students; grow comfortable with the uncertainty of creativity by working with these activities in small ways on a regular basis. These activities need not always generate longform compositions to carry great creative meaning. We can use Krueger’s approach to careful score study and Orff Schulwerk-inspired play to embed simple and attainable creative student collaboration into the rehearsal space.

1) *Sing*: Enlist student groups to develop and refine pentatonic scale canons to add into the warmup routine. Repeat the activity as student skill develops over the course of the year to add fresh, student developed material and keep warmups engaging and purposeful.

2) *Say*: Enlist student groups to develop and refine word-based rhythmic ostinatos that thematically and musically relate to concert repertoire.

3) *Dance/Move*: Enlist student groups to develop and refine physical gesture that they believe best represents desired musicality in a segment of the repertoire. Identify the most effective gestures with the help of the ensemble and utilize them in your conducting gesture for the piece from then on.

4) *Play*: Transfer the ostinatos from the “say” activity to percussion or instrumentation and add to your performance of the piece as accompaniment or present alongside the piece as a programmatic pairing.

Conclusion

If we are working to uphold teaching philosophies that express a desire to develop the whole child, embrace individuality and creativity, and foster lifelong musicianship, consider the inclusion of Orff Schulwerk-spirited play and collaboration. Especially in ensemble spaces, we tend to always be looking forward to the next *thing*—maybe a performance, competition, auditions, high school, and beyond. Parker reminds us, “One moment of musicking is not solely preparation for another; it is also a legitimate interaction in itself, filled with experiences, individuals, and memories.”³³

Avoid the constant push to the performance by committing to making space for creative exploration of structures in the repertoire. Encourage your teacher-brain to settle into middle school pace by working to observe and participate in the present moment. Facilitate the positive peer interaction that middle-level students so desperately crave and enjoy having more opportunities for musical play as a part of the day-to-day rehearsal flow. **CT**

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NOTES

- ¹ Jane Frazee, *Orff Schulwerk Today* (Schott, 2006), 22.
- ² Robert H. Woody, *Psychology for Musicians* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022), 55.
- ³ Bridget Sweet, *Growing Musicians: Teaching Music in Middle School and Beyond* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 8.
- ⁴ Wolfgang Hartmann, *Looking at the Roots a Guide to Understanding Orff Schulwerk* (San Francisco, CA: Pentatonic Press, 2021), 3.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.
- ⁶ Wolfgang Hartmann, *Looking at the Roots*, 42.
- ⁷ Robert A. Duke, *Intelligent Music Teaching* (Austin, Texas: Learning and Behavior Resources, 2011), 141.
- ⁸ *The Music for Children* volumes are literature materials developed by Carl Orff and Gunild Keetman and translated across language and culture for use in the Orff Schulwerk approach.
- ⁹ Carol Krueger, “Conversations with Carol: Music Literacy—Tonal” (Virtual Workshop, Dudley Foundation for the Arts, May 22, 2020).
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Gunild Keetman, *Elementaria*, trans. Margaret Murray (London: Schott & Co. Ltd., 1974).
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.
- ¹⁸ This suggested progression was learned through Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education Courses and can generally be seen throughout Orff Schulwerk materials and publications.
- ¹⁹ Colleen M. Conway, *Teaching Music in Higher Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 175.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Albert Bandura, *Self-Efficacy* (New York, NY: Freeman, 1997), 174.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 178.
- ²³ Bridget Sweet, *Growing Musicians*, 8.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ²⁵ Albert Bandura, *Self-Efficacy*, 213.
- ²⁶ Elizabeth Cassidy Parker, *Adolescents on Music: Why Music Matters to Young People in Our Lives* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 2.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ²⁹ Jane Frazee, *Orff Schulwerk Today*, 23.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ Andreas C. Lehmann, John A. Sloboda, and Robert H. Woody, *Psychology for Musicians* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 156.
- ³² For additional suggestions for addressing performance anxiety, see Mikayla Feldman, “Performance Anxiety: 5 Strategies that Worked for Choir Students,” *ChorTeach* 14 no 2 (Winter 2022): 19-23.
- ³³ Elizabeth Cassidy Parker, *Adolescents on Music*, 12.