From Groans to Grins:

A Play-Based Approach to Teaching Music Literacy

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Choral music educators continually seek effective methods to engage students in music literacy, a fundamental component of musical development. Traditional approaches to teaching sight-reading and literacy may elicit resistance from students, yet many believe these skills are essential for well-rounded musicianship.[1] These traditional approaches might look like teachers using methods books to rehearse exercises as if they were repertoire. Instead, researchers and practicing teachers increasingly support the integration of musical play as an alternative approach to teaching music literacy. Musical play comprises structured, interactive activities that foster creativity and collaboration. These activities enhance student engagement while supporting skill acquisition in ways that feel enjoyable and motivating.[2] By reimagining sight-reading and other literacy exercises through the lens of play, educators can create a dynamic learning environment that encourages active participation, reduces performance anxiety, and nurtures a lifelong appreciation for music.

Musical play leverages the natural joy and social interaction that arise from shared music-making experiences, transforming otherwise routine literacy exercises into compelling activities. In a choral classroom, musical play can take many forms, from rhythmic games and call-and-response exercises to improvisational singing and collaborative composition tasks. These activities allow students to explore elements of music literacy—such as rhythm, pitch, dynamics, and phrasing—in a low-stakes, supportive setting.

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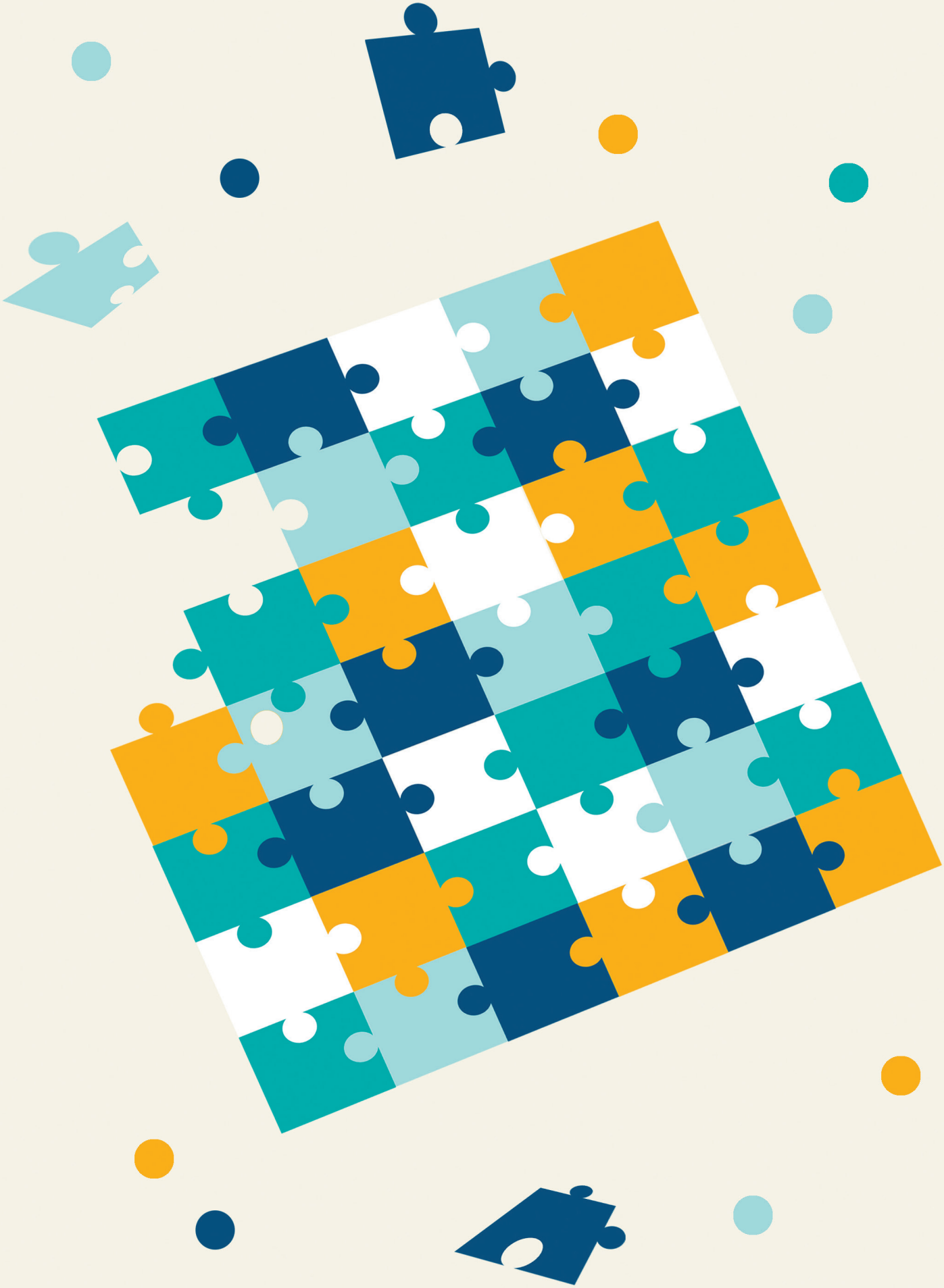

This approach aligns with principles of constructivist learning, which suggest that students learn best when they can actively engage in their learning and receive feedback that they can implement immediately.[3] Through musical play, students might internalize music literacy skills more efficiently as they engage in real-time problem solving and expressive collaboration, creating a positive and productive environment that contrasts with a potentially more traditional, static method of literacy instruction. This article introduces a framework for conceptualizing literacy in three domains: rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic. Directors will then explore how to use pedagogical games and play-based learning to practice these domains while applying three specified learning modalities: aural, visual, and synthesized. Although these activities are derived from elementary methods, they are applicable to secondary choral ensemble classrooms, with a particular focus on high school students.

What is Musical Play?

Kathryn Marsh and Susan Young defined musical play as "the activities that children initiate on their own accord and in which they may choose to participate with others voluntarily."[4] These activities balance challenge and ease, empower the players, and spark joy. Marsh and Young also emphasized that a key component of play across all ages is multimodality or blending movement with singing and using objects like props, toys, or instruments.[5] Musical play not only engages children aurally but visually and kinesthetically.[6] Social interactions are also an important part of play. Students can share musical ideas, practice and refine skills, and imitate and create patterns.[7] In 2017, Lisa Koops researched factors leading to student enjoyment, finding that "children's musical enjoyment occurred when there was a balance of structure and freedom, novelty and familiarity, and individual expression within an established community."[8] Researchers have linked musical development and enjoyment to the exploratory practices in musical play,[9] which led to the question: how might the concept of music literacy be reframed using musical games?

Music pedagogues have discussed musical play as an important pedagogical component, which aligns with developmentally appropriate practices for building musicianship. For example, many elementary music teachers refer to methodological practices derived from Orff, Dalcroze, Gordon's Music Learning Theory (MLT), Kodály, and Suzuki. Each of these methodologies recognize play and social interaction as a fundamental aspect of how students learn and construct meaning in music.[10] An Orff or MLT approach might incorporate games, stories, and imagination to build on the learning styles of emerging musicians.[11] Similarly, a Kodály or Suzuki methodology prioritizes a playful approach to develop strong musicianship while fostering a love for music.[12]

What is Music Literacy?

The National Association for Music Education (NAfME) adopts a broad conception of music literacy as a musician's ability to create, perform, and respond to music,[13] yet many teachers define music literacy primarily as one's ability to read Western classical music notation.[14] Choir teachers might align state and national standards for music literacy toward teaching notational literacy, therefore building learning sequences that center decoding notation. However, some teachers have broadened their definitions of music literacy.[15] For example, some scholars define music literacy beyond reading and writing to include the ways in which people use sound and symbols to communicate.[16] According to Edwin Gordon, "Music literacy goes beyond reading and writing music notation … one must be able to listen to music with meaning."[17] Teachers using a more comprehensive approach to teaching literacy may find lesson planning and instructional delivery to be overwhelming. It is, therefore, important to break down music literacy into smaller parts and consider activities to build skills through musical play.

Researchers have compared music literacy to the process of learning a language.[18] Language acquisition scholars break down communication into smaller domains such as vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, which operate both verbally and in writing, and generally occur through immersion. Teachers can approach music literacy in a similar way by disaggregating literacy into an aural pedagogy and a visual one. Many agree that a *sound before sight* approach to literacy is an effective

strategy when beginning to teach music literacy.[19] According to a Kodály model, a "prepare, present, practice" approach[20] allows teachers to expose students to specific musical elements, then define them, and finally practice them until fluent. In their book *Music Play,* Wendy Valerio et al. unfold a similar informal early childhood sequence where teachers *acculturate* students to a variety of sounds, then those students *imitate* those sounds and practice them until they are *assimilated* into the students' musical vocabulary.[21] Understanding this iterative process of music learning is important in developing sequences for building students' music literacy across their lifespan of musical learning.

Breaking Down Music Literacy

Gordon disaggregated music literacy into three experiences: aural, oral, and visual.[22] The aural experience describes listening to and discerning musical elements. Oral experiences describe one's ability to verbally produce musical elements. The visual experience of music literacy describes processes of recognizing and decoding musical symbols at sight. Sight singing is one way to coalesce these three experiences into one difficult cognitive task. Reducing cognitive load by developing these composite skills independently can help students gain proficiency with sight singing. Gordon's framework provides a strong starting point to conceptualize how some activities span multiple literacies.[23] In this article, we will retain his definitions of *aural* and *visual* experiences, while reframing the oral experience to a *synthesized* experience. In my experience teaching, some students were able to learn music by rote, thereby developing their aural literacy. These students could also write their solfège next to note heads in a variety of keys, demonstrating their visual literacy. However, synthesizing the two experiences was difficult. For example, they could not accurately sing the solfège at sight. Synthesized literacy, therefore, is the ability to demonstrate aural and visual literacies simultaneously. Breaking music literacy into distinct components—such as aural, visual, and synthesized literacy—enables more targeted instruction and assessment by allowing educators to isolate specific skill areas, identify gaps in student understanding, and tailor learning experiences to support focused cognitive development in each domain.

Three Domains of Music

Teachers might focus on three domains of music to teach music literacy: rhythm, melody, and harmony.

1) Rhythm: Students can show proficiency in the rhythmic domain by demonstrating an accurate sense of pulse, meter, and tempo.

2) Melody: Proficient students might recognize and produce intervals, scales, and tunes.

3) Harmony: Students fluent with the harmonic domain can situate music they encounter within a tonality and identify the function of various harmony and progressions.

Teachers can work within these specific domains to target the individual areas of sight singing through play and create a fun environment that encourages students' success in building musical skills.

Playing in the Rhythmic Domain

Aural Literacy: Poison Rhythm

Teaching rhythm in ensemble spaces lends itself to musical play because rhythms are catchy, and rhythmic games are inherently social activities, like dancing or clapping. When I was a student teacher in Houston, students loved the game "Poison Rhythm," which my cooperative teacher used to develop students' rhythm vocabularies. This game involves the whole class in a version of "Simon Says," where there is a four-beat rhythm notated on the board. This rhythm should include the elements the teacher intends to practice, such as the dotted-quarter-eighth-note pair, or combinations of sixteenth notes. The rhythm on the board is the poison rhythm, and anyone who begins to perform that rhythm is "out."

To level the playing field, the teacher should practice the rhythm with the group a few times, thereby aurally reinforcing the teacher's rhythmic pedagogical goal. The teacher can perform these rhythmic patterns on a neutral syllable or using a rhythmic solfège system, depending on their goals for the students. After this,

the teacher will cycle through several rhythmic patterns that build the desired rhythmic skill. Eventually the teacher should perform (clap, tap, sing) the poison rhythm. Any student who begins to repeat the pattern is out.

In a more advanced version of the game, the teacher can clap or chant the rhythm on a neutral syllable, and the students can repeat back the rhythms using their rhythmic solfège. When a student gets out, their job is to help identify other students who might get out. Similarly, all the students could be in competition with the teacher. If any student does the poison rhythm, the teacher gets a point. However, if the teacher does not "catch" anyone, the students get a point. This game exposes students to rhythmic patterns relevant to the teacher's pedagogical goals.

Visual Literacy: Rhythm Relay

Students often express difficulty when demonstrating their ability to decode written notation using a standard rhythmic counting system (i.e., 1& 2& 3& 4e&a). They may easily repeat rhythms by rote, but they struggle identifying those same rhythms in notation, let alone chanting the counts in rhythmic solfège. Similarly, it can be easier for students to sing popular music or rap music by ear rather than transcribing the music or learning from notation. It is important to create experiences for students to practice decoding rhythmic notation. "Rhythm Relay" makes use of the multitude of rhythm worksheets designed to help students read and write rhythms. I used the game to practice writing in rhythmic solfège; however, teachers could also use this game to practice composing specific rhythmic patterns.

In "Rhythm Relay," students work in teams to complete the rhythmic worksheet. First, assign a team captain and place them at the first position of the relay line. The team captain begins by writing in the counts for the first line on the worksheet. When they are finished, they pass the worksheet to the next student, who completes the next line. When the team completes the sheet, the team captain will check for errors. If there is an error, the captain will help the erroneous teammate understand the concept. The fastest team to submit the correct and completed worksheet to the teacher, WINS! Ask the team captain to start the relay for each team so they can write an exemplar for the next students to consider when they fill out their own rhythm. Teachers can extend this activity to prepare challenging rhythms that might appear in their repertoire. It is important for teachers to allow space for the social interactions and laughter that come in these collaborative and low-stakes competitions.

Synthesized Literacy: Epic Rhythm Battle (full class)

While "Rhythm Relay" is a great activity for writing in counts, it doesn't provide a play-based approach for students to perform those rhythms. Consider "Epic Rhythm Battle" as a solution! In this activity, based on the popular "Epic Rap Battles of History," the teacher divides students into two groups. The teacher will project a rhythmic worksheet on the screen or assign a series of exercises that are the same for both teams. Groups will alternate performing sections of the worksheet while backed by a rap track on YouTube.[24]

In this activity, students who have difficulty performing rhythms are able to participate and learn from their more experienced peers. To lower the stakes of the activity, tell students that the winning team is not the most correct, but the team who has the most compelling performance. This activity is a great way to resurge the energy in the classroom if there is a lull. This example builds upon a synthesized literacy of students' embodied music making. Synthesized literacy not only includes performing rhythms but can also include composing rhythms. In order to demonstrate fluency in a symbol system, like music notation, writing in that system is an important step in learning. Once students have experiences with rhythmic vocabulary and their rhythmic solfège system, they are more able to read in that system, and eventually they can compose rhythms.

Synthesized Literacy: Rhythm Origami (individual/small group)

Composing can be one of the more difficult national standards to incorporate into a lesson. When I developed this activity, students had so much fun, they ended up extending "Rhythm Origami" into more advanced composing by incorporating melody and even harmony.

For this activity, the teacher distributes a blank sheet of paper to every student. Instruct the students to fold the paper into either eight or sixteen squares. An easy way to achieve this is to tell students to fold their pa-

per "hamburger style" then "hotdog style" and then "hamburger style" again for eight squares. Add a final "hotdog style" fold for sixteen squares. Once students have their sixteen-square grid, limit students to choose specific rhythmic elements that equal one beat. For example, students can only choose a quarter note, quarter rest, or paired eighth notes. It is important to be mindful to diversify the meters. This activity can also be used for triple meters using combinations that equal one beat in a compound meter (e.g., quarter-eighth, dotted-quarter, eighth-quarter, eighth-eighth-eighth). The students then write one rhythmic element in each box. To extend this activity, have students perform their compositions for each other in class, then trade papers and perform their friends' rhythms. This is a great way to involve social interaction and movement while allowing students the chance to practice composing and performing rhythms in a low-stakes environment.

Playing in the Melodic Domain

Aural Literacy: Intervals and Audiation

Teachers commonly use interval drills when building literacy skills. When I started teaching, my approach to teaching intervals was by rote. Valerio et al. assert that young musicians develop aural literacy by first acculturating themselves to a variety of sounds.[25] For example, atonal music might be jarring to a newcomer until they spend more time listening to and gaining familiarity with the genre. Luckily, many elementary music teachers skillfully acculturate their students to many sounds. *The Interval Song*[26] can be taught by rote to practice diatonic intervals. Then, teachers might practice audiating different tonal patterns with their students. Gordon coined the term *audiation* to describe a person's ability to comprehend musical elements in their heads without verbalizing or physicalizing those elements.[27] To practice this skill, teachers could show spatially oriented Curwen hand signs to their students and have them repeat the patterns back. Consider limiting the pitches to support specific tonal goals. For instance, if a choir is singing a pentatonic folk song arrangement, the teacher might do some audiation exercises using only pentatonic tonal patterns. Eventually, students can lead these drills and practice with each other.

Visual Literacy: "Name That Tune!" and "Who's That _____?"

Many teachers begin with a bell ringer or a simple task for students to do when they enter the classroom. These can be used to refine musical skills or encourage social music making. When less advanced students display difficulty visually tracking melodies in sheet music, use "Name That Tune!" as a bell ringer to gauge their processes for decoding musical notation. For this activity, the teacher displays the notation of a recognizable tune, for example, "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Students must figure out the tune by looking at the notation without help from the teacher or any instruments. Teachers can walk around the room to see what approach students take to solve the riddle. Oftentimes, students intuit the contour of the melody until they recognize the song. Once I realized how my students perceived the function of music notation, I could build upon that knowledge.

If teachers want to isolate specific notational elements, they might use the game "Who's that _____?" Many of my students liked Anime and the show *Pokémon*. Before the commercial breaks in *Pokémon*, the show displayed a silhouette of a Pokémon and had viewers guess "Who's that Pokémon?" For this activity, teachers can use this Pokémon background image (or any popular background image) and replace the silhouette with a musical element for students to identify. For example, a symbol from the International Phonetic Alphabet or a series of notated perfect fourths; ask students "Who's That Vowel?" or "Who's That Interval?" Though students might think the activity is silly, they will appreciate the effort to relate to their interests.

Synthesized Literacy: Musical Spelling Bee (full class)

If composing rhythms is an example of synthesized literacy, then composing tonal patterns develops this literacy as well. But familiarity with notating pitches on a staff is a good skill to practice before composing melodies on sheet music. Teachers can use a collaborative game for students to practice notating music on the grand staff. The game "Musical Spelling Bee" requires teachers to divide students into small groups. I usually grouped students in fours. My classroom had a long whiteboard with staves running along their lengths. I put different clefs (treble, bass, perhaps alto, but my

students never needed to read the alto clef) on each line and assign each team a section of the board. Students made a single-file line in their teams and lined up parallel to each other with the teacher at the front of the lines. Using a list of words that can be spelled with the musical alphabet (e.g., cabbage), the first student in each group is given the same word to spell. Students run to the whiteboard to notate the word on the staff. When they finish, they run back to the next student in their team to give them their marker, like a relay baton.

The next student in the line gets the second word on the list, and so on, until the game is finished. The first team to correctly transcribe all the words, WINS! After this exercise, the students sing the various words on solfège to practice connecting notation to sound, even though these words are rarely idiomatic to sing. One possible adaptation of this activity is singing tonal patterns instead of using words and have the students run to the board and transcribe the patterns. This process of transcribing tonal patterns is better to demonstrate melodic dictation and can allow tonal practice if the teacher has the class sing the patterns. Once students understand some melodic formal structures, they can assemble these tonal patterns into a melody.

Synthesized Literacy: Melodic Conversations (individuals/small groups)

Once students have familiarity with notating pitches on the staff and connecting them to sound in their inner ear, they can more intentionally begin composing music. Introducing this process as a game builds composition from "sound before sight." My undergraduate music education professor used to have my class have "rhythmic conversations" with each other to practice improvising rhythmic patterns. I adapted this activity to melodic patterns. For example, the teacher starts this activity singing a four-measure *musical question* that ends on the fifth scale degree to the whole class. The students all respond at the same time with a *musical answer* that ends on the tonic. This way students can experiment with improvising without feeling any pressure from their peers or the teacher.

Teachers might suggest that a musical answer starts the same as the question but changes at the end to go to the tonic. Students can sing these conversations on solfège or any other tonal system. In language classes, students are frequently taught that they should restate the question to provide an answer in a complete sentence, so this syntactic form is likely familiar to them. Eventually, students will be able to have these conversations in pairs where they can ask questions and answers before finding a new partner. Combining this activity with the notational experiences from "Musical Spelling Bee" can help students toward notating these conversations of the staff to create melodic compositions.

Playing in the Harmonic Domain

Aural Literacy: Chord Drills

Harmonic activities are inherently collaborative and cooperative because they require multiple pitches simultaneously. Teachers can use chord drills to develop an aural literacy of harmony. Similar to melodic drills, building an aural literacy of harmony benefits from a "sound before sight" approach. Jacob Collier is an excellent model for teachers to lead students through harmonic progressions. He surprised the audience during a concert at the 2023 American Choir Directors Association Conference when he entered the stage and assigned sections of the audience various pitches in a chord.[28] He would point at different sections and cue them to move up or down by semitone, giving the audience the opportunity to experience harmony in real time.

These activities can be effective for tuning chords, unifying vowels, and engaging creativity, especially when students take the lead. Once students gain familiarity with chords, teachers might teach them functional harmonies by rote. For example, teaching them that a I-chord in major is sung as "Do Mi Sol" and a IV-chord is "Fa La Do." This can prep students for connecting aural literacy to visual literacy because they can understand how various solfège constitutes different chords.

Visual Literacy: Among Us

The game "Among Us" became popular with my students during 2020. In the game, players assume the role of either a crew member or an imposter, leading the players through a social deduction scenario where

crew members need to identify the imposters. In this concept, students find an imposter in harmonic notation. To start, display an image that has five chords. Four of them are the same chord (e.g., C Major in various inversions, on different clefs, or a broken chord instead of a stacked chord) while one is something different (e.g., a G major chord). Students must identify which option is the imposter and explain why. Having students explain their choices helps mitigate random guesses. To differentiate the images, consider putting a differently colored border around each image so that students can choose the "Blue" or the "Yellow" image as the imposter. Sequentially numbering each image is a second option that will increase accessibility for students with colorblindness.

Synthesized Literacy: Focused Listening (full class)

Many students listen to popular music but pay little attention to musical components of the music except for melody and lyrics.[29] Therefore, focusing students' listening to other components of familiar music can build harmonic literacy. For example, the teacher can pick a familiar song and ask students to try and vocalize the bass line or the guitar part. As students direct their ears, they can become more aware of different layers of music. The teacher can divide the class into different groups and assign different musical components to listen to. Limit the song to just one verse or chorus; this way, once students have workshopped their individual parts, they can combine them to perform an arrangement of the chosen song.

Synthesized Literacy: Harmonizing melodic compositions (individuals/small groups)

If students have some experiences writing melodies, perhaps from some of the aforementioned activities, they might consider harmonizing those melodies with chord roots or full chords. To facilitate learning this skill, teachers might sing some simple folk songs that can be harmonized with a few chords (e.g., "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" or "Hot Cross Buns") and see if students can harmonize the song by singing chord roots. Consider encouraging students to be "verbal processors" and sing their chord roots out loud to see if they work.

Start by limiting their options to Do, Fa, or Sol (I, IV, V) for major songs. This is a kind of extension of focused listening but involves students harmonizing with chords where they hear a change. After rehearsing what their harmonies might be, the teacher might have students share with the class and have the class agree on one harmonization. The teacher should explain that any time the chord root is Do, it is a I chord, and so on. Students can then practice singing in harmony underneath the folk song. The teacher might hold up 1 finger for a tonic chord, 4 fingers for a sub-dominant chord, and 5 for a dominant chord to help students track the progression. Once students understand how these harmonies fit with melodies, they can extend the practice to melodies that they have composed. For example, ask students to write a musical question that ends on Sol and harmonized by a V chord. Then they can write a musical answer ending the song on Do and harmonized by a I chord. They can sing through their song and fill out harmonies using the same process as with the folk songs.

Conclusion

Music literacy and sight singing are challenging activities. Students often get frustrated and disengage, and teachers rationalize boredom by emphasizing music literacy's importance to being a well-rounded musician. A play-based approach to music literacy builds on students' social motivations. Furthermore, breaking music literacy down into smaller components like aural, visual, and synthesized literacy can help teachers diagnose and address where students need more practice. Applying these literacies to the musical domains of rhythm, melody, and harmony gives teachers an opportunity to scaffold skills in ways that allow more opportunities for student success. Finally, prioritizing play and games reduces the stakes of learning skills and bolsters the ensemble's opportunities to build community.

By weaving play and games into choral rehearsals, educators not only spark joy and creativity but also deepen musical understanding, proving that learning and fun can—and should—go hand in hand. When teachers embrace play as a serious strategy for music literacy, they empower students to take risks, stay engaged, and discover their musicianship in ways that are both meaningful and memorable. CJ

NOTES

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