

**LINDA LANIER-KEOSAIAAN
316 Prospect Avenue #5A
Hackensack, New Jersey 07601
lanierkeosaian@optonline.net**

**“I Can’t WAIT to Take This Class”:
Teaching Music Appreciation Through World Drumming**

When I was told to teach a new course in Music Appreciation to my seventh and eighth graders (twelve and thirteen-year-olds), I considered taking up sky-diving as an alternative. The traditional version of a Music Appreciation curriculum would be mind-numbing for my rambunctious adolescents. So I discovered a solution that was so successful it surprised even me.

I took a course in World Drumming, taught by Will Schmidt and others whom he had trained and gathered together as a staff. We used Will Schmidt’s book, World Music Drumming, a Cross-Cultural Curriculum, 1998. In the book are rhythm ensembles from Africa and the Caribbean which have been translated into Western music notation, but which we learned playful ways of teaching. The book offers useful tips for teaching new learners, with enough variety in content to keep even a higher grade level interested. There is also a student book that may be used for photocopied hand-outs, such as the map of Africa and information about Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America. Given the basic training offered in this approach, I found that new ideas occurred to me that helped me create this course to fit the needs of my students.

My students learn how to create and maintain a steady beat, how to play existing rhythms in ensemble, how to play West African instruments, and how to create their own rhythmic patterns, all in real time, not on paper. For the final project, each student composes for an ensemble of five or six instruments, then teaches the composition to a group of students of his or her choosing. Through activities and performance, my students learn the names of the countries of Africa, and the musical connections between West Africa, the Caribbean, and this country.

The result is that a group of students, most of whom have never studied music, learn to listen deeply, and with great concentration: the true goal of any music appreciation class.

The administration is happy with the result, and the students are delighted with the class, prompting one of my seventh graders to run in one afternoon declaring, "I can't WAIT to take this class!"

I am given about six weeks, or one third of a semester, to teach this class which meets every day for forty minutes. My primary goal is to get the students to watch and to *listen*, which very few had learned to do up to this point. In the first class they produce and maintain a steady beat by watching my hands, but each day we must work hard at this until finally some of them are able to do it, independent of me. Then, and only then, can we begin putting together the ensembles.

Their little faces positively glowed with happy anticipation of the fun they had heard they were going to have with me in Drumming Class, also known as Music App., short for Music Appreciation. These were my new seventh grade students about to take Music Appreciation Through World Drumming.

After the usual paper work, an information form telling me about them and their background, if any, in music, we had our first lesson in teamwork. They were shown how to set up the room in a semi-circle of chairs, the exact number for today, plus one for me.

The second lesson was in keeping a steady beat. We sat, slapping our hands on our thighs. I told them to watch each other to help them stay together. When the beat began to speed up, I stopped to ask them what was happening. They knew! They had listened and heard the speeding up of the beat. Then I told them to watch me and lay down their hands exactly as I did. The effect was dramatic. The slaps were absolutely together and in perfect synchrony. They listened, and they watched, and they applied it to their activity, taking note of the difference.

(Journal, October 26, 2007, the first day of class, p. 1)

This is probably the most magical moment of the course for me. When they realize they are rushing the beat, they consent to trust me and watch. As they do so, and the beat becomes steady and synchronized, these egocentric, over-stimulated young people are transported from

an acute sense of self into a transcendent state of suspended animation. It is as if we are all hovering, watching ourselves, experiencing this unity within our circle, but without effort on anyone's part. When we achieve this, I feel I can begin teaching. They are "hooked."

As we kept time on our laps I began to chant "what's your name" and answered with my own name, with question and answer each in 2 beats. We went around the circle with everyone chanting the question, and each student answering with their name. The first time around, they merely spoke it, with no apparent rhythm, just speech. I took several names and cast them in a 2-beat rhythm, until they caught on, then all used rhythms for their own names. Then I talked about the tonal nature of the African languages that allowed for "speaking" on the drums. We talked about the high and low pitch of our own names. On our laps, close to the knee was called "low", while higher on the leg was called "high." We then went around again, casting our names in 2-beat rhythms, using the highs and lows and accents of the names.

For homework, they were to teach someone in their family what they had learned.

(Journal, October 26, 2007, the first day of class, p. 1)

Not only have they learned something about the tonal nature of the Ewe and Ashanti languages, but they have learned to find rhythm in their own names and to use the high and low pitches that we use in them. This is a lesson in rhythm which taps into their natural adolescent narcissism. They also begin to listen to the rhythms seeking to translate what they hear into words, or names. They are able to translate correctly the names that I drum on my lap.

Here is the second day of class, when we do our first drum solo:

....We reviewed the set-up and the teamwork needed for it. We reviewed the steady slapping of our thighs, their watching me and listening. And we went through the chanting of names and the question, "What's your name?" This helped two students who had been absent and all of the rest who needed a review. Then we got the drums. What excitement!

I showed them the low and high strokes and the "open" sound. We played echo-drumming, with my giving two-beat patterns that they had to repeat exactly. Then we did our question and names on the drums. Some needed prompting to create a stroke for every syllable, but all eventually caught on. Once they had it, we went around again, not speaking, the names now being a two-beat drum solo.

Homework: What's for lunch?

(Journal, October 29, 2007, the second day of class, p. 1)

For the next few days we create two-beat questions based on “What’s for Lunch, ...Dinner, ...Dessert?” This activity right away creates an atmosphere of play, not school work. They are encouraged to think of their favorite food, then to create a rhythm out of it, using the high and low sounds of the words. Once this has been established, they do drum solos. Instead of speaking the question and answer in rhythm along with their drumming, the drumming is wordless. The communication occurs through the drumming itself. Each student is given two beats for a solo based on their answer.

...As the students became more comfortable with the Question-and-Answer drumming (What’s your name? What’s for lunch? Hamburger French fries, etc., What’s for dinner? Roast beef and gravy) their personalities began to emerge. Danny had a tight slapping routine which was unique to this class. Thomas always finished with a side-swiping slap. Meant for attention. Matthew’s patterns were very sophisticated, though he was not a drummer from the band. The girls were usually very careful. When we did Question and Echo Answer, the group echoed exactly what the drummer before answered, including the side-swipes! (Journal, November 1st and 2nd, 2007, p. 2)

The Echo/Answer activity requires intense concentration. We all drum the question, one student answers, we all drum the question, then we all drum *that* student’s answer. To understand this activity, a diagram might be helpful: Q A Q EA / Q A Q EA. This translates to Question-Answer-Question-Echo-Answer, each of these done in two beats, with everyone drumming the Question and the first Answer done by an individual student. After the class repeats the Question, the Echo-Answer is drummed by the entire class without a break. We keep repeating this until we complete the circle. When it works well the excitement is palpable.

When it does not go so well, someone honestly says, “We weren’t very good.” Their own evaluation arises from their desire to do it really well.

After I have given them their maps of Africa and they have done homework on it, matching the number on a blank map with the name of the country, they choose the name of a country in Africa. The question becomes “What’s your country?” and the answer is whatever you have chosen. Of course, someone always wants to try “Democratic Republic of the Congo,” in *two beats*! Here is where they not only have fun drumming the musical names of African countries, but they also learn how to pronounce them! This activity reinforces the concepts of the two-beat question and answer, and complementary rhythms. And.....they must *listen*! When they have difficulty with any of these, I go back to their names.

....This was an amazingly successful day, with everyone on task and really listening and focusing on the music and the beat. We did echo and echo-answer drumming. In the latter we drummed the question together (What’s your country?, What’s your name?) then after each student drummed the answer, we all drummed the question again and then the whole class drummed the last answer given. They really have to concentrate. It is intense! I began the questions by going back to their names, which they are most familiar with, and had them drum first and last name. This was to reinforce the one-stroke-per-syllable we would be using. It cleared up the group drumming considerably. (Journal, November 1, 2007, p. 2)

Part of this experience is that of improvisation, but I do not use that term with them in the beginning. It would be too scary. Instead, we do a question to which the answer may be anything they like. No one has to say what it is. It is un-spoken. It is a drum solo answer to a question drummed by the group. Each student is thinking of words with a particular rhythm, but what gets communicated is the pattern. Some groups become very adept at this and love being given the chance to create patterns of their own. Some students remain reticent, but will at least imitate what another does, and participate in that way.

Once they are able to drum the question, "What's your country?," and answer with a country's name, with reasonable success, they are ready to begin Ensemble #1. This is an actual instrumental ensemble from Ghana, but known in our curriculum as "Ensemble #1." All three of our drum types are used: high, low, and medium. Each drum has its own pattern which is complementary to the others, with the steady beat inherent in all. Coincidentally, the low drum pattern for this ensemble is the same as for "What's your name?"

Ensemble #1 caught on that day, a Friday, but on Monday, it was as if we had lost ground over the weekend, so I took it slower. We took turns playing the patterns for each other, doing a critique of group drumming. They heard the beat speeding up. I introduced the timeline, the cowbell, and showed them the step to help stabilize the beat. Two players face each other, step together, count together, and watch each other intently as they play the cowbells. This is the timeline which all of the other instruments play against. On Friday, we had a duo of Ryan and Michael, both in the band but not drummers, who had a rock-solid beat. On Monday, we struggled to find others who could do the same.

On Tuesday, as we practiced each drum pattern, I told them I would choose a leader of each drum group whom the others would then watch to help them stay with the beat. This swelled the pride of those chosen and it seemed to work. They learn from each other, and the chosen leader takes responsibility for being consistent.

When we do question and answer solos, Danny screws up his face and pooches out his lips, eyes squinted, just as he does his drum solo, as if to say "Just watch me now!" They are so happy with themselves when it works! (Journal, Nov. 2-5-6, 2007)

I wait until students have become confident on each instrument before I introduce another.

...We set up the drums, did an echo session, with challenging rhythms. This delighted them. Then we practiced the patterns for Ensemble one. They still got hung up on the high drum, "keep-the-rhy-thm-go-ing" pattern, so we slowed it down. We tried it together, then walked four positions to a new drum and pattern. We added the timeline. The beat worked briefly but they couldn't sustain it yet, so we went back to our laps to practice. Some got it, others still had work to do, but they were happy.

(Journal, November 12, 2007, p. 3)

....Tuesday I got their homework and we did lots of echo patterns. We once again worked on Ensemble #1. They were improving on the high drum pattern, but only Michael and Ryan were able to sustain the timeline beat. When others tried, it foundered. For a few brief moments it "rocks" and being delighted, I brought out the gankogui which produced shrieks of delight. Time to pack up.

(Journal, November 13, 2007, p. 3)

When we finally have the ensemble put together, I teach the movement and song. Everyone pushes back their drum and stands. I demonstrate the step-close-step-close which we use for the timeline players. Then I have them sit and I sing the song "Nana Kru," about a young man who lives in a country where there are more rivers than roads, and who courts his sweetheart in a canoe. They are shocked to see and hear me singing (This is a DRUMMING class!). Once they can sing the song, we divide the class. Some play instruments, others move and sing, then we rotate, with each student taking his/her place at a different instrument, or in the singing group.

With each new group I have to decide how to pace the instruction. Some groups move more quickly than others, some just need more time to develop.

....Instead of simply moving on before everyone is proficient on the instruments, I decided with this group, to stay on Ensemble #1 until there was more confidence. I was afraid they might be bored, but I haven't seen that at all. They really got into the critique of each other, and it was never cruel, just frank, about what went wrong or right. When everyone had played, I showed them how to do a parade, with some students placing the drums on their shoulders while others played them, and we all paraded around the room singing Nana Kru. (Journal, Nov. 28, 2007, p. 6))

The parade became a favorite request. In fact, they wanted to take it to the school halls.

Ensemble #2 requires fewer instruments but has new patterns on several. The medium drum pattern is the same as in Ensemble #1 and forms a connection between the two ensembles. There is a new concept: call-and-response. Along with the ensemble, we learn the call-and-response song, "Take Time in Life." Each of the students takes turns singing the leader's part while the group sings the refrain. Then we divide into instrumental ensemble and singer-dancers,

with rotations between the groups. Once they understand the call-and-response form, I play a recording of Ugandan children singing a song in that form. One of my former drumming students correctly identified a spiritual we were singing in choir as a call-and-response form. I was pleased by this apparent transference of knowledge.

Once they have mastered Ensemble #2 I like to give them a break from the drums and instruments. We do some group improvisation with body percussion.

...On Friday, I decided to take away the instruments and let them do group improvisation with body percussion. We first divide into groups of 3 to make sure that everyone is forced to participate with peers who need each other. I gave them about 5 minutes and then we had show-and-tell. It was amazing! There was a burst of creativity from this group who had had difficulty getting the beat and the patterns in the ensembles. Craig added a beautiful birdcall to his group. Then we broke into groups of 4, then of 6. Each time there was almost a manic excitement to the effort and the project. They were startled when I told them it was time for the bell. John Michael went a little goofy at first, but his first group, all boys, did not one, but 2 great ensembles, one with a very creative introduction.

For this project I specify only that the percussion be on the body and may include mouth sounds. They could not use the chairs to beat on and if they used their feet, it was to be sparingly. One group featured a boy swinging his feet together, but not hitting the floor. The energy in the room was palpable. They loved performing their compositions. For the second and third groups, with 4 and 6 students respectively, I told them to create introductions and endings which involved all of them. Again, the creativity was wonderful. They worked extremely well together and learned more from each other than they could have from me. (Journal, Nov. 30, 2007, p. 6)

We then go on to Ensemble #3, "High Life," from Ghana. This is, by far, the most difficult ensemble. The timeline pattern itself can be frustrating to learn. I use the step-close pattern for the feet as a framework for teaching this syncopated rhythm, with their speaking "dah-DAH-dah-dah-dah. With this particular group, there was such frustration that we decided to go back and work on earlier ensembles. Then, finally:

...I got their consent to spend another day trying Ensemble #3. They automatically began saying the timeline pattern: *Dah-dah-DAH-dah-dah* (Journal, Dec. 12, 2007, p. 8)

...Wednesday, short periods, early dismissal for a winter storm= hyper students.

I got Ryan to demonstrate the timeline pattern by speaking, stepping, and using 2 fingers on his palm. Then we reviewed the shekere pattern. As I saw students doing the pattern correctly and speaking as they played, I handed them an instrument. We then added drums, one of each, and to students paying close attention. Then the gankogui. Finally I could bring out the frame drum and I gave it to John Michael, who was so fascinated that he seemed to concentrate on the beat. Danny was exploding because he didn't have anything. Finally I gave him the talking drum and showed him how to play it. He was delighted. Then the period was over. It had worked and it was fun.

(Journal, Dec. 13, 2007, p. 8)

By now, we only have a few days of class left before they cycle into their next class, art. In order to prepare them for their final project, a composition of their very own that will be written out and then taught to a group of other students, we do a Group Project.

The paper form I created for the Group Project is identical to that for the Final Project (individual student), except that all of the group names appear on the group sheet, and only the one student's name appears on his or her own project. The Group project is done in real time, hammered out through trial-and-error, fed by each student in the group. These are highly individual, depending upon the particular students in each group. That is why I like to keep them moving through various groupings at first. When the group finally settles upon what they consider their best ensemble, each student chooses an instrument (or body percussion) for that pattern, and it is recorded on the sheet. The notation for the patterns should *sound* like the pattern on the instrument. For example, "DOOM-bah-bah-DOOM-bah-bah." After I have evaluated the inventions of each group, I let them get instruments and play for us, then teach it to another group.

....Work on Group Projects. A noisy, rambunctious period, but full of creativity, as each group worked to create an ensemble out of complementary drum patterns. I began with 6 small groups, then gradually increased the size with each new grouping, each one lasting about 10 minutes with a "show-and-tell" at the end of the 10 minutes. I find that starting with small groups gets even the quiet ones involved. So willful were they about "forgetting" their numbers so that they could be with their friends, that on Tuesday I simply assigned the groups. I gave each group a sheet with a format on which to record their ensemble, with their names and the patterns each was doing. They were instructed to use the sound of the pattern to create the notation for it. Again, there was a "show-and-tell." Then, one-by-one, the groups were given instruments which they chose and they then played their composition. One group got to teach another their own patterns.

Each student was then given their own sheet for the Final Project, their own composition for an ensemble of their design. Tomorrow we take turns teaching our projects.

(Journal, Dec. 17 -18, 2007, p. 8)

The Final Project is one on which each student works alone. It is taken home overnight and turned in to me the following day. The paper is the beginning only and the students may make changes if needed. The student may choose the players and the instruments, and then acts as a director/teacher. These projects demonstrate individual creativity, leadership, musicality, and a grasp of the concepts taught in class.

The teaching of the Final Projects is perhaps the most exciting activity of the course. Because there is not usually time for everyone to teach, I try to make sure that the shy, quiet ones get a chance. Also, those who would not be chosen for someone else's ensemble are given a chance to choose their group and to teach. This has been revealing.

....With only 2 days for the Final Projects to be presented and taught, not everyone was able to teach and present their project, but everyone participated in the playing of the ensembles. I took up the papers, then created an order for the teaching. I tried to alternate boys and girls and I always try to give an opportunity to the quiet child who may have taken a back seat to the more vocal overbearing types in the class. Danny was one of the first. He had written clearly the patterns he wanted the instruments to play and he put it all together, showing each of them how it was to go. He wanted to know what his grade would be, I told him it was an

A+, and he seemed surprised. Why, he wondered? It had only taken him 5 minutes, he said. Well, then, he must have really learned well the lessons on complementary rhythms.

True to past examples, there were some ensembles which used body percussion plus instruments. There was one ensemble which was so soft and thoughtful that it resembled an Indonesian gamelan. Those who were unable to teach their projects were miserable! Even John Michael, who had very little on his paper, expressed sadness that he couldn't teach his project. Hooray!

(Journal, Dec. 19-20, 2007, p. 8)

As I said in the beginning of this paper, even *I* was surprised at how well this course went over with the students and how much I was able to teach using the medium of these instruments. Why does this work so well? We as children or adults have a need to drum on something. Given access to a hand drum, all of us feel compelled to play it. Maybe this is to imitate someone we saw playing the drum, or maybe it is our innate sense of *play*. In a large gym full of drummers and other people, I once saw a toddler break loose from parents and, having caught sight of the drums, begin running to the largest drum he saw. He stopped in front of it and reached up on tip-toe to hit the top. My husband, who has never studied drums nor has he aspired to it, can only rarely pass my drum without delivering a few hits. It is just fun. It feels good.

In class, as students are listening to directions from me, even their fingers cannot resist playing the drum heads. While I have a signal which means, "hands off," I realize that what they are doing is exploring the different ways in which a drum may be used. They are also listening to the sounds they are making. Given the other instruments, they are infinitely creative in discovering new sounds. The final projects give them the opportunity to use what they have learned, to create a real composition, to choose the sounds for it, and, finally to communicate to the players what they want. That is to say, they teach what they hear in their heads, which is what music teachers do.

I believe that this course, with its appeal to the sense of play and its use of physical involvement, accomplished far more for these students than a traditional course in music appreciation would have. In order to satisfy the continued longing for drumming on the part of the students who have finished the course, I have started an early morning group called the “All-Star Drummers.” They come to rehearsal at 7:15 in the morning to learn ensembles for use in concerts with the choir. They once had the opportunity to drum with the concert band. It was thrilling for them, particularly since these students are not instrumental students, except for drums, of course.

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