

BRAINS STORMIN' IN HARMONY: GETTING SMALL GROUPS TO WORK WELL

**Compiled by Michael Levy, K-5 Music Teacher,
Gateway School, Santa Cruz**

This is the final interview in response to Michael's questionnaire:

Before working creatively in small groups, my students must have played (successfully) a composition that models the ideas I want them to use. In particular, they need to be comfortable with the tonality, meter or text I am asking them to use. For example, if I am teaching diatonic modes to sixth or seventh graders, we need to have spent a few classes on the theory, played a piece in one of the modes and analyzed the piece for form and how tonality is established. When I set them up in small groups, it is with specific guidelines: you must choose a mode, and the tonality must be clear to the listener; you must compose more than one section of music, otherwise the form is up to you; there must be melody; use dynamic and rhythmic contrast; you may *not* add unpitched percussion until your piece is in its final stage of preparation; on the first day, get one section of music finished.

I follow up by roaming. It is best to nip errant musical ideas in the bud. For example, if the focus is triple meter and we have spent class after class on a triple meter rhythmic vocabulary, there will be at least one group that has instantly reverted to duple when left to its own devices.

Space is a huge issue. The ideal Orff classroom would have satellite practice rooms to accommodate a galaxy of small groups. When I make my group lists, I consider where I am going to place each one. The school kitchen, the closet, the hallway and the conference room are my possible satellite venues. Not all of these are always available. There is an argument to be made for putting the most responsible group of children someplace outside of the music room, but I sometimes put the most distractible children away from the others. I never send lower primary children out of the room; even fourth/fifth can be iffy.

With older students, I give each group a clipboard to make notes on. I have them put down their names, the instruments they are using, and anything that will help them record their work. Occasionally, the literate students ask for

manuscript paper. As I make my rounds, I try to get their work notated. I keep their papers and mine in my binder for the next class.

Resolving conflicts: This is particular to who the personalities are. I generally stay with them for a while to try to get their attention back on the musical ideas. I reorient them so they are in a circle. I try to get ideas from the students who are not being heard. I tell them it is not okay to veto without proposing another idea. I look for ways to combine conflicting ideas. I take the instruments/mallets out of their hands while we are discussing. I change the instrument of the child who is, say, whacking unremittingly on a gong. I stay until something quantifiable is accomplished. I remind them that part of their job as students is to be able to work with anyone. If it is clearly just two people, I may pull them out for a sidebar.

Difficult students: I make sure that the group is composed so as to function regardless of this student. In truly extreme cases, i.e., when the student is preventing the others from accomplishing anything, I have been known to remove him/her entirely from the process. I share the responsibility over time. It is not fair always to place the student with the most equanimity with this most difficult classmate.

The size of groups is very important. My experience is that seventh and eighth graders work at their very best in pairs. I pair them very carefully, according to intellectual ability, instrumental technique, and personality. I know exactly which students will need guidance coming up with initial ideas, and I can work with them straight off. In pairs, no one can slough off. On some projects, I extend the work by putting two pairs into a foursome to learn each other's pieces and combine the material into a piece of greater formal complexity. Trios are especially good around fifth/sixth grade. In a large class, pairs are not always possible. My standard groups are four or five, in a class of 20-22. The problems here are that it is always possible for someone in the group to do nothing and once you hit five there will be too many cooks. I don't think I ever let students choose their own groups.

Mahala Bundy is the music teacher at Synergy School, an independent K-8 school located in San Francisco's Misson District.

