

Assessment in Music: A Practitioner Introduction to Assessing Students

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There has been an increased interest in documenting the growth and learning outcomes of students in all subjects in the past 20 years, and music education has not been immune to the accountability movement. Yet, in spite of the increased sociopolitical pressures put on educators, music has remained a difficult discipline to assess, which in turn has created tension between music educators and policymakers. This review of literature examines the basic nature of assessment in music education and discusses possible concepts and methods to improve practitioner understanding of student growth and learning. Topics include (a) What is assessment, (b) Why does assessment matter, (c) How do we assess in music, and (d) What challenges occur in music assessment?

Idealistically, assessment has been presented as a method for gathering information relevant to both teachers and students about teaching and learning, centered on student knowledge and skills (Parkes, Rohwer, & Davidson, 2015). Students have been found to benefit from specific and reliable feedback gained from both formative and summative assessments (Colwell, 1998; Salvador, 2011; Sicherl Kafol, Kordeš, & Holcar Brunauer, 2017; Zerull, 1990). Formative assessments have been defined as assessments conducted during learning, and have been one of the primary aspects of designing and differentiating instruction (Salvador, 2011; Saunders & Holahan, 1997; Sicherl Kafol et al., 2017). Summative assessment, or the end measurement of either learning, growth, or achievement (Sicherl Kafol et al., 2017), can also be thought of as answering the question: How did the student(s) do? (Mastrorilli, Harnett, & Zhu, 2014). In music, individual performances and competitions often serve as summative assessments and have been found to be the source of many student grades and teacher evaluations (Ciorba & Smith, 2010; Latimer, Bergee, & Cohen, 2010).

Teachers and researchers have used general performance, rubrics, content-specific rating scales, checklists, report cards, aptitude testing, observations, and portfolios to assess student learning and growth (McQuarrie & Sherwin, 2013; Parkes et al., 2015; Rohwer, 1997; Russell & Austin, 2010; Salvador, 2011). Performance assessment is one of the most common forms of assessment in music, due to its paramount nature in regards to music making and its power to motivate students (Latimer et al., 2010; Reimer, 2009). While definitively authentic, performance assessment is an inherently subjective endeavor (Bergee & McWhirter, 2005; Latimer et al., 2010; Reimer, 2009; Ryan & Costa-Giomi, 2004).

Several different approaches have been developed and researched to offset the subjective nature of performance assessment. Rubrics, which use descriptors of performance domain criteria (e.g. tone, balance, rhythm, etc.) to provide an isolated domain-specific rating or overall total performance score (Latimer et al., 2010), have been found to provide both higher inter-judge reliability (Norris & Borst, 2007) and a more detailed picture of student achievement (Ciorba & Smith, 2009). Similarly, practitioners have described checklists, which are a tally system to guide instructor focus, as allowing for individual assessment on any number of teacher-determined skills (Chiodo, 2001; Goolsby, 1999). Therefore, checklists may also be used with judges to arrive at an overall rating, and have been found to be reliable (Doan, Davidsen, & Hartman, 1990). Correspondingly, researchers have similarly found rating scales to lead to high inter-judge reliability (Bergee, 2003; Saunders & Holahan, 1997). Finally, portfolios have been implemented with increased frequency over the past 25 years in music

settings (Lehman, 2008; Parkes et al., 2015; Zerull, 1990) and can be defined as collections of artifacts and student work that serve to document growth and learning over a period of time (Asmus, 1999; Hughes & Keith, 2014; Parkes et al., 2015).

From a broad perspective, the lack of agreement on music curricula or the end goals of instruction have created divisions in assessment approaches, which in turn may have erected barriers to assessment (Lehman, 2008; Reimer, 2009). Logistical challenges may also influence assessment decisions and impede improvement in assessment practice (Ferm Almqvist, Vinge, Väkevå, & Zandén, 2007; Harrison et al., 2013; Russell & Austin, 2010; Salvador, 2011). Assessing creativity in music has often proven especially challenging for music educators (Hickey, 2001). Despite the educational value of creativity, the inherent subjectivity may prove problematic for educator assessments (Hickey, 2001; Rohwer, 1997).

Assessment and accountability are inherent in music education. As a profession, we strive for improved teaching and learning, leading towards instilling in our students a lifelong love of music. Consequently, the effectiveness of our assessments matters, as motivation, external value judgements, and student learning all can be linked to assessment.

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