

## Spotlight on Social Learning

January 2021: Organization Month

Organization is one of the most important skills we need to succeed in life. Keeping our schedules, homes, workplaces, and possessions organized can feel like an endless chore, but the more organized our environment the easier it is to organize our thoughts. In *The Organized Mind*, Cognitive Psychologist and Neuroscientist Daniel Levitin argues that organizing our thoughts and memories is one of the fundamental challenges of human consciousness. By organizing our thoughts, Levitin points out, we are able to more efficiently manage our attention, which he describes as “the most essential mental resource for any organism”<sup>i</sup>. Musicians face the additional challenge of organizing our bodies, training our muscles as well as our minds to perform the complicated and precise motions we rely on to sing and play our instruments.

Organization is fundamental to our understanding of music. It is hard to talk about music without referring in some way to the ways it is organized. Melody, harmony, rhythm, groove, key, raga, metre, mode, line, and phrase all refer to ideas about how music is or can be organized, let alone verse, chorus, solo, tutti, duet, trio, band, orchestra, song, album, catalogue, section, genre, sonata, symphony, concerto, even concert, recital, or opera.

Listeners rely on organization to make sense of musical sound, and composers rely on it to create expectation, satisfaction, and surprise. Music that is insufficiently organized is hard to enjoy because it is difficult to make sense of. Music that is too organized becomes boring because it is predictable. Every listener has their own set of expectations for how they expect music to be organized, rooted in the musical conventions they are most familiar with, and every composer has their own priorities for what aspects of music they wish to explore most actively.

Ideas about how music can and should be organized take on their own lives in every musical culture, as they become part of an inter-generational dialogue among musicians and audiences. Concepts that begin as metaphors and descriptors become conventions, and then mature into traditions. Western classical musicians, for example, are used to thinking of music as being organized in two dimensions, as it is represented in a written score. Time is represented horizontally, moving from left to right at in approximate proportion to the rhythm, and pitch is represented vertically, with “higher” pitches higher on the page and vice versa.



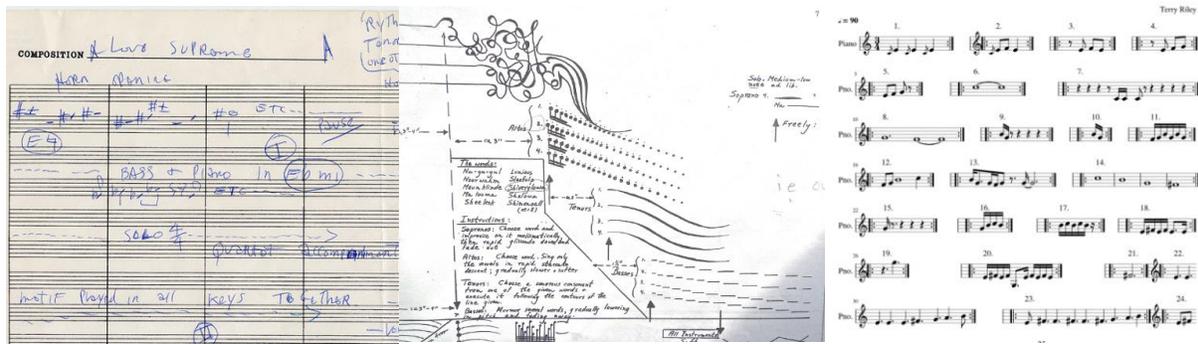
R. Nathaniel Dett, *Barcarolle: Morning*, from *In The Bottoms: Characteristic Piano Suite*

In *The Aesthetics of Music*, philosopher Roger Scruton goes so far as to argue that this spatial representation of music is one of its essential features. For Scruton, music comes to exist in the mind of the listener when they project it into an imaginary space; it is “founded in metaphor, arising when unreal movement is heard in imaginary space.”<sup>iii</sup> For a musician trained in the European classical tradition it can be hard to conceive of music without falling back on the particular spatial metaphors we have become accustomed to, but it is important to remember that these are semiotic conceits intended to *represent* music, and not the music itself.

The spoken language conventionally used to describe western music, and the written notation we use to represent it, capture some features of the music very precisely and others very approximately. When we listen to music, we experience it *in time*. The left-to-right progression of a musical score captures this very well. On the other hand, the straight, measured lines of a published score are only a poor approximation of how the listener experiences musical time as it unfolds. An hour of banjo music can seem like mere minutes to an aficionado, but to a less sympathetic ear it might seem like an eternity.

Similarly, pitch notation captures the diatonic and chromatic conventions of an equal-tempered piano exactly, but the nuances of tempered tuning very poorly. And of course, the notes we hear are not *literally* higher or lower than one another. Notes that we describe as “high” in pitch could just as well be described as having a short wavelength or a large frequency. For those of us accustomed to reading a score, thinking of pitches as high or low can become such an intuitive descriptor that we lose sight of the metaphor entirely.

Of course a written score is only one form of notation used by composers and performers. Many composers use schematic or graphic representations while they are working on the score, or aleatoric processes that leave some decisions up to the performers.



Scores for John Coltrane, *Love Supreme*, Murray Schafer, *Epitaph for Moonlight*, and Terry Riley, *In C*

Each of these free the performer from certain restrictions, and focus the performer’s attention on different aspects of the music. There are no “wrong notes” in a performance of a graphic score or in an improvisation, but these examples still hew pretty closely to the conventions of traditional western score reading. What would a notation look like that represents timbre and volume the way a score shows time and pitch? What would that music sound like? How would those metaphors develop into conventions and traditions? Maybe we will find out someday.

Organization is rich fodder for exploration in the music classroom, from ideas about musical signifiers and signs to the overlapping sine waves that create musical pitches, tones, intervals, and harmonies. This month’s Social Curriculum activities at Sistema Toronto reflect this, as well as exploring some more practical ideas about organization in our lives and communities.

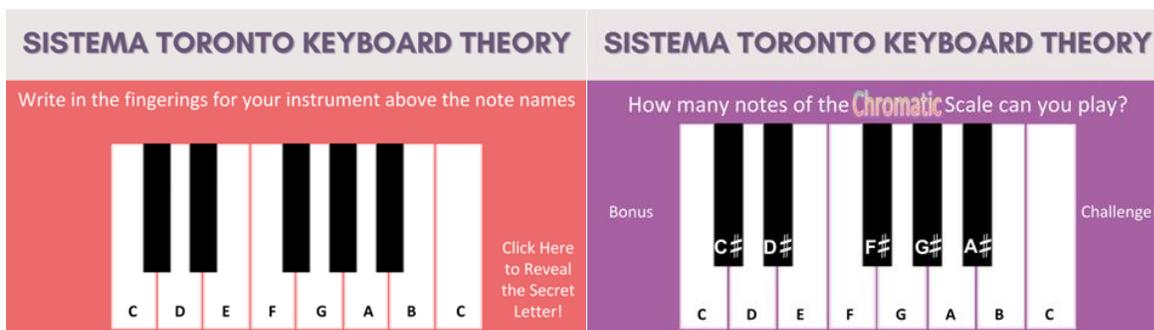
*Are you ready to...* invites our students to reflect on the different ways we need to organize our things, our bodies, and our minds for different activities.



Sistema Toronto, *Are you ready to...* activity, 2021

As performers, musicians are experts at being organized and prepared. Before a concert, everyone needs their instrument, chair, music stand, and notes arranged just so, their body relaxed and in an appropriate posture, their music learned and their minds calm, focused, and ready to play. This activity challenges students to recognize their organizational acumen, and think about how to apply this important skill to other parts of their life, from getting ready to go to school to playing a game of soccer.

*Sistema Toronto Keyboard Theory* uses a virtual keyboard embedded in Google Slides to present music theory knowledge, challenges, and puzzles. Each problem they solve reveals one of the secret letters they can use to unscramble the hidden messages.

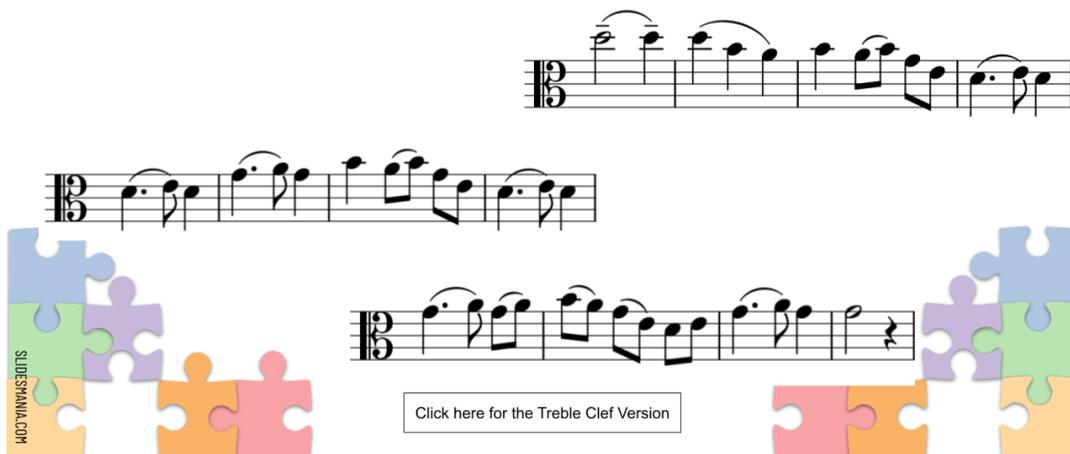


Sistema Toronto, *Sistema Toronto Keyboard Theory*, 2021

The piano keyboard embodies a number of important aspects of musical organization, from diatonic scale and mode patterns, to note-naming conventions and chromatic harmonies. Giving students a chance to explore these ideas through an engaging, problem-solving format makes these ideas accessible and fun to learn.

Another Google Slides activity, *Canon Remix*, invites students to explore one of the most enduring forms of music organization, rounds or canons. A musical canon is organized in such a way that its constituent parts can be used mixed and matched, functioning as melody and harmony in a variety of ways. This activity invites students to remix their own canon melody, and then learn the melody themselves.

Switch to "Edit" mode to make your own version of the melody.  
You can move the parts around, or even copy and paste them if you want to repeat something. When you are done, switch back to "Present Mode" and click on each section to hear your melody.  
Get your instrument out and learn to play the piece when you are done.

The image shows three staves of musical notation in bass clef. The top staff is a single line of music. The middle staff is also a single line of music. The bottom staff is a single line of music. The notation consists of eighth and quarter notes with stems. The bottom staff is partially obscured by a button that says "Click here for the Treble Clef Version". The entire musical notation is surrounded by several colorful puzzle pieces in shades of blue, green, purple, orange, and pink. A vertical watermark "SLIDESMANIA.COM" is visible on the left side of the puzzle pieces.

Sistema Toronto, *Canon Remix*, 2021

Once they do, the canon form offers a rare opportunity for our students to play in a virtual ensemble, as they practice their part along with a midi recording of the piece. Canons make for particularly suitable projects for distanced learning, because the students' understanding of their own part is reinforced by hearing it in each other's voice.

Finally, this month's listening activity, *Song Share: Musical Form Edition* challenges our students and teachers to dig into the different forms of musical organization present in their favourite music. Each week students and teachers are invited to share examples of music they love, and discuss how it is formally organized. Top 40 pop songs almost all use familiar verse/chorus song forms, for example, but many K-Pop and Hip-Hop songs use forms closely related to traditional opera recitative-aria forms. Rock music draws heavily on the 8- and 12-bar blues, which as Alex Ross argues in *The Rest is Noise*<sup>iii</sup>, can be traced in turn can be traced back to the baroque passacaglia and beyond.

Learning to recognize and appreciate these forms of musical organization is one of the most important steps our students will take in their own dialogue with the musical traditions they encounter. As they mature into musicians and music appreciators in their own right, it is our students who will decide what will be passed on to future generations through performance, teaching and listening. The future of



music will be shaped by what metaphors they will revisit, and what terms they will redefine, what concepts they will reinvigorate, and what new ideas, practices, and techniques they will welcome into our evolving tradition. We look forward to hearing what those future musics will sound like.

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<sup>i</sup> Levitin, Daniel. *The Organized Mind*. Allen Lane, 2014, p. 33

<sup>ii</sup> Scruton, Roger. *The Aesthetics of Music*. Clarendon Press, 1997, p. 239

<sup>iii</sup> Ross, Alex. "Chacona, Lamento, Walking Blues." *The Rest is Noise*. Picador, 2008.