

November: Rhythm and Organization

This month we will continue exploring the design and implementation Sistema Toronto's new Theory and Musicianship Curriculum, through the lens of our Social Curriculum topic, Organization. If you would like to read about the origins of the curriculum, and missed last month's entry, you can find it [here](#).

Music can be thought of as being organized in any number of ways, from the whole number ratios that structure our perception of tone and harmony, to the repeated rhythmic and melodic patterns, to the different sections of musical form. This very richness can be a challenge in the classroom. Where do we begin in talking about such a fundamental element of the language of music?

MY MUSIC IS ORGANIZED

Student: Angeline
Song: Let It Go from Frozen
Artist: Idina Menzel

How is this song organized? By dynamics, notes, singing and tempo (slowish vs. fast), pacing (slow -> climax -> back down -> larger climax!

Are there verses and a chorus? Verses talked about Elsa's experiences, while the chorus talked about her freedom (verse to chorus to verse) -> together, the verses and chorus told her story and explained her transformation

How many different instruments and singers are there? Female singer, piano, drums, solo violins and other strings

Does the music repeat? Yes! It keeps returning to the chorus

Why does it matter how the music is organized? So it sounds better! So the music sounds "right" and follows a good order of events

"MY Music is ORGANIZED", completed by Angeline, Sistema Toronto 2021

One way into this important musical topic is to focus on how our students perceive musical organization and form. *Song Share - MY Music is ORGANIZED* is one of a series of listening activities that invite students to share, discuss, and analyze their favourite music with their teachers and classmates. In this version, teachers guide the discussion with questions chosen to respond to the particular songs and pieces the students choose and the observations they make about them. In this example, the student chose a song with a verse-chorus structure, and was able to connect that to a larger musical form with two climaxes.

Other Social Curriculum activities this month explore keyboard theory, canons and rounds, and getting organized in a more practical way. For more on these activities, check out last year's Organization blog entry [here](#).

Organization also makes a natural pair with this month's Theory and Musicianship theme, Rhythm. Rhythm is by its nature organized, into beats, bars, metres, and motives, and is often arranged in patterns. The activities this month include reviewing note values and terminology, writing different note types, practicing different rhythms with special annotation for bow division, and composing rhythms.

Reading, writing, and understanding rhythms is a critical skill for young musicians, especially those functioning in an ensemble. A special

Rhythm
Notation and Terminology

Note Terms
Use the Rhythm Single Note Cards to quiz your class about note names (quarter, half, etc)

Note Values
Quiz your class about the relative value of different note types

Note Drawing
Have the class practice drawing different notes, on plain paper, staff paper, or a whiteboard

Note Memory
Use a printed copy of "Rhythm Single Note Cards with Names" to play a game of Memory

Rhythm
Creative Expression

Writing Rhythms
Divide the class into groups or pairs
Have each group write a 2 or 4 bar rhythm in 4/4 and clap or play it for the class

Rhythm Mashup
Use flash cards to assemble rhythms, instead of starting from scratch

Metre Masters
Compose rhythms in 3/4, 6/8, 5/4, or other metres

Rhythm 2
Have each group turn their composed rhythm into a short melody

Sistema Toronto Rhythm Activity Cards 1 and 4, Theory and Musicianship Curriculum, 2021

focus on rhythm activities for the month gives teachers a chance to introduce or review materials, assess their students' comfort with the concepts, and dig deeper into this core musical topic.

Curriculum Design Goals

Implementing our 2017-2018 curriculum had shown us that it was time to explore new approaches to theory teaching, and create new resources for our students and teachers. Our design goals were well defined:

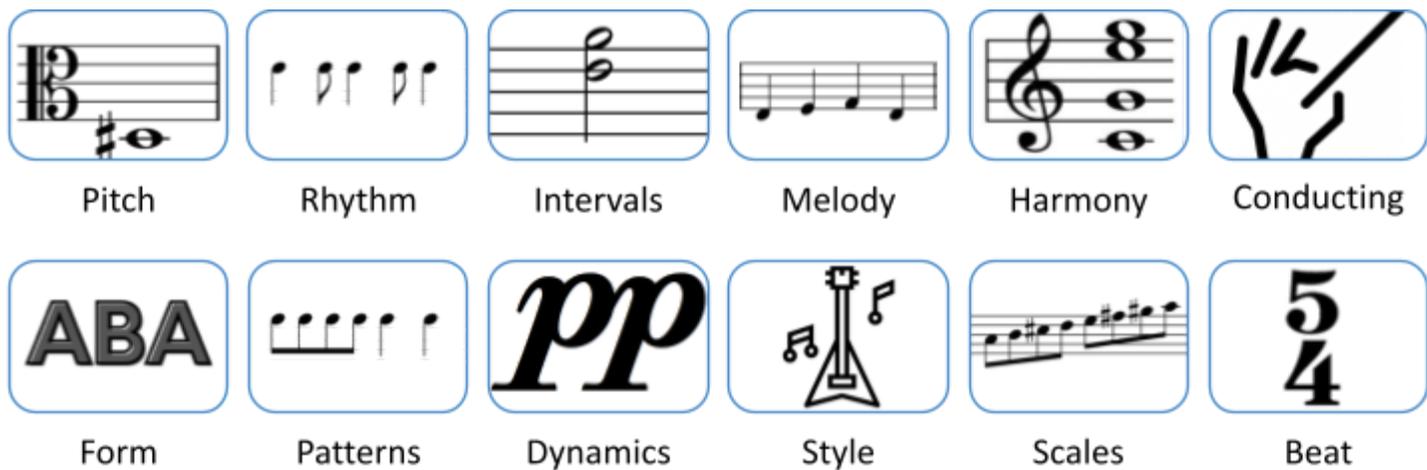
Wide Range	broaden scope of theory topics and concepts, integrate materials from different musical styles and cultures, encourage teachers to explore new topics and ideas
Deep Exploration	inquiry-based activities to encourage deep student engagement, alignment with other curriculum topics and evaluation rubric
Inclusivity	encouraging differentiated instruction, supporting diverse learning styles, and accounting for different levels of student knowledge and experience
Accessibility	materials that are easy for teachers to use, activities that are easy to understand, fun game formats that increase student engagement
Flexibility	repeatable, adaptable activities that encourage variation and iteration, easy to replicate resources
Student-Centered	activities centre student voice and creative decisions, focus on students' knowledge, taste and preferences
Inquiry-Based	activities double as assessments for teachers, encourage reflective practice, empowering students to drive their own learning

Sistema Toronto, Theory and Musicianship Curriculum Design Goals, 2021

From brainstorming to organizing

The first step of the design process was to brainstorm potential topics and themes. The existing theory curriculum was organized by year to reflect students experience through time. Theory and musicianship topics were shared by the music and movement, strings, choir, and percussion curriculum, and provided a key bridge between these different areas. We knew we wanted to expand the topics covered, to cover a **wider range** of topics, so we brainstormed dozens of possible topics for the new curriculum. We also knew we wanted to keep the key themes already present in the existing curriculum and find ways to encourage **deep exploration** of the language of music.

The key moment came when we asked ourselves how to organize this list of possible topics. We had a small list of themes from the existing curriculum, a large list of new ideas, and we needed a way to fit them together. We experimented with different ways of grouping themes and ended up with twelve: Pitch, Rhythm, Intervals, Melody, Harmony, Conducting, Form, Patterns, Dynamics, Style, Scales, and Beat. These themes were broad enough to cover a variety of topics, and rich enough to include a large number of sub-topics that could be grouped within them.

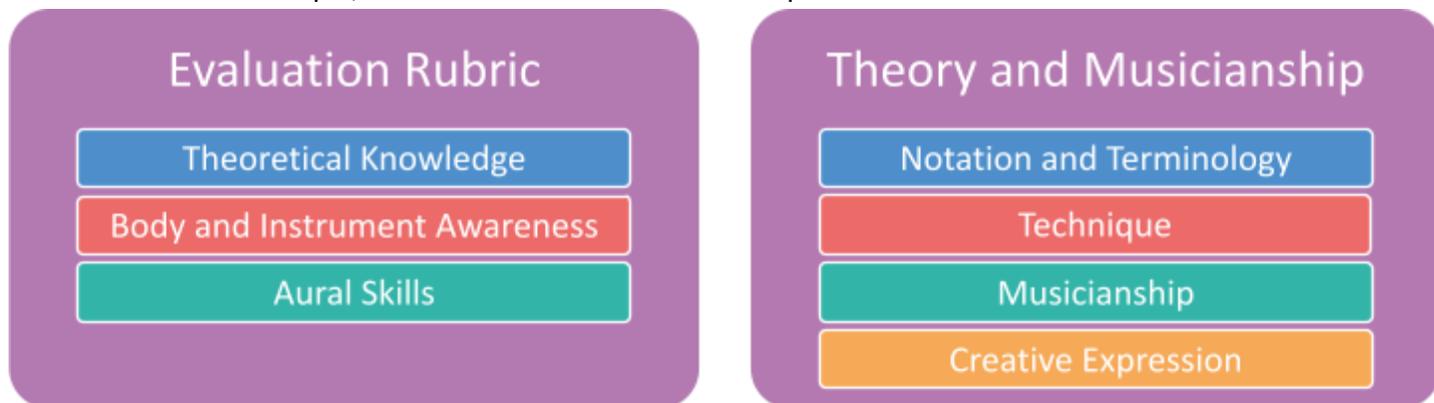


Sistema Toronto, 2021-2022 Theory and Musicianship Curriculum Themes

For each theme, we now drafted a number of possible activities, covering a range of possible subthemes and theory concepts. Once again, we ended up with a huge amount of material. Rhythm activities, for example, included Kodaly rhythms (Ta, TiTi, etc.), subdivision, bow distribution, writing notes, completing bars with missing notes and rests, triplets, counting long rests, keeping a tempo, and rhythmic dictation. Choosing the right themes had helped us include a **wider range** of topics while leaving room for **deep exploration**, but how were we going to meet our other goals of **inclusivity**, **accessibility**, and **flexibility**, while ensuring our activities were **student-focused** and **inquiry-based**? Once again, organization came to the rescue.

This time the key step came from a different curriculum area: our evaluation rubric. Each term we send home student evaluations with three Social areas of learning, Effort, Teamwork and Co-operation, and Empathy and Attitude, and three Musical areas of learning: Theoretical Knowledge, Body and Instrument Awareness, and Aural Skills. The rubric was designed to be **inclusive**, **accessible**, and **flexible**, so it could be used at all levels of the program and by all our teachers, and to describe the different kinds of learning we saw as important in the program. Could it help us with the new curriculum?

Reorganizing our draft activities with this in mind proved we had found our answer. Dividing the activities up into these categories would ensure that we encouraged different kinds of teaching and learning, and balanced the priorities appropriately, and each of the evaluation areas matched up with different aspects of theory and musicianship learning. Theoretical Knowledge fit with Notation and Terminology, Body and Instrument Awareness with Technique, and Aural Skills with Musicianship.



Sistema Toronto, Evaluation and Theory and Musicianship Curriculum Areas, 2021
 To these we added a fourth topic, Creative Expression, that would encapsulate the **inquiry-based**, **student-centered** approach we wanted to foster. Every theme would include activities in each of these learning

areas, ending with student composition and creation, embedding student voice at the centre of the curriculum.

After working through all these ideas, we had a framework that met our design goals, organized our ideas, and showed how it all fit together.

Curriculum Area	Theoretical Knowledge	Instrument and Body Awareness	Aural Skills	Composition/Improv
	Notation and Terminology	Technique	Musicianship	Creative Expression
Pitch				
Rhythm				
Dynamics				
Scales				
Beat				
Style				
Intervals				
Melody				
Harmony				
Form				
Conducting				

Systema Toronto, Theory and Musicianship Curriculum Framework, 2021

Next time: Communication and Dynamics

Finding the right way to organize our curriculum helped us create an effective framework that would meet our design goals, harmonize with existing curriculum, and explore new areas of music learning. Our next blog entry, in January, will focus on how our activity design and distribution plan were shaped by another Social Curriculum Topic: Communication.