

March and April: Teamwork and Listening

This month will mark our final entry on the creation of our Theory and Musicianship curriculum, with a special focus on the role of teamwork and listening. The last blog entry, discussing the role of communication in designing curriculum materials, can be found [here](#), and previous entries can all be found [here](#).

Teamwork and listening are closely related concepts. Both are rich subjects to explore in a musical as well as an organizational context, and both can be seen as key learning skills for students. At Sistema Toronto we faced new challenges to our teamwork and listening skills this spring, as we reopened more of our centres to in-person learning and welcomed new students into the program. At the end of February almost all of our students were still learning online, and we had only been able to start small groups of new students online. By the end of April nearly all had returned to physical classrooms, we had opened a new centre at Lambton Park Community School, and we had introduced more than 100 new students into the program.

For our teachers and admin team, returning to in-person learning involved a great deal of flexibility, creativity, and patience. Each time the pandemic restrictions changed, so too did our class lists and our daily routines. Centres opened in fits and starts, with each change allowing more students to return to the classroom. Teachers and students alike had to readjust to the hustle and bustle of the school environment, and familiarize themselves with the rules and routines we rely on to make the program work.

In this dynamic, shifting context, we relied on our teachers to work together as a team, listen to one another, and to foster these skills in their students. Effective teamwork relies on two-way communication, in which everyone listens attentively *and* feels heard.

Social Curriculum: Teamwork and Listening

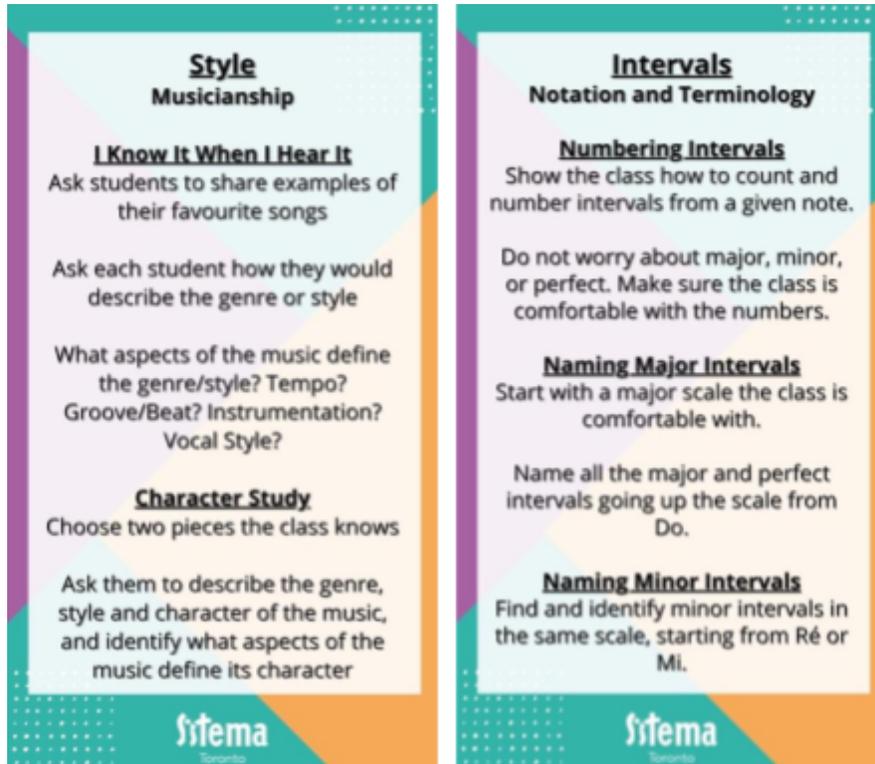
The importance of teamwork to our social curriculum can be seen in the breadth of the activities devoted to it. From “Story Jam”, which challenges the class to write and perform a story as a team with sound effects, to “Team of One”, which invites students to explore how the different parts of their body work together to play an instrument, our teamwork activities for teamwork include theoretical, practical, musical, and social elements. “Setting up for success”, pictured here, turns the daily chore of setting up for class into a game, with the class working together to reach the implicit goal of a perfect 10 setup routine. When the class buys in, the game format frees the teacher from their normal role as the referee, calling balls and strikes, and allows them to take up the supportive role as a coach, offering strategic and moral support. For more on the other Teamwork activities, see [this post](#) from last year’s blog.

Listening plays an even more important role in a music program, and the variety of listening activities in our curriculum bears this out. Last year our “Song Share” series put a special emphasis on music selected by our students for group listening. This year’s activities included “Whole Body Listening”, with a focus on body awareness and focus, “Listening Spinners”, which encouraged students to reflect on different kinds of listening, and “Emo Echo”, which challenged students to perform expressive gestures and challenge their classmates to copy them. The activity pictured below, “Roses and Thorns”, was of particular importance for our new students. Listening to each of their classmates gives the students a daily opportunity to practice patient and empathetic listening, but even more importantly when it is their turn to share, students are given the experience of being listened to intently by the whole class and having their feelings heard and validated.



Theory and Musicianship Curriculum: Style and Intervals

Our Theory and Musicianship activities for March and April are similarly rich. Style includes questions of interpretation, articulation, tradition, and character, as well as genre, form, and personal brand.



Style Activity Card 3 and Interval Activity Card 1, Sistema Toronto 2022

Activities like “I Know it When I Hear It” invite students to explore their own tastes and preferences, and apply their analytical skills to music they enjoy for its own sake. “Character Study” turns this lens back onto the music learned in the classroom, challenging the class to differentiate between different genres and styles in the music they encounter there.

Intervals are a much more narrow topic for music theory, which makes it possible to explore in depth in the classroom. Starting with naming conventions, as in the card above, activities for this month encourage students to become intimately familiar with these fundamental units of melody and harmony, exploring them creatively and intellectually, as well as practically on their instruments.

Teamwork, Listening and Curriculum Development

Last month’s blog entry explored how our design process led us to our final format for Theory and Musicianship curriculum activities: simple, concise activities that would be easy for teachers to execute and adapt to the needs of their different classes. For two years online we had been using Google Slides to create social curriculum activities. These longer, more involved activities worked well when our teachers were leading online group classes and were hungry for new activities with engaging visuals and novel formats, but for in-person learning we knew we needed something different. One of the key considerations in developing our final design was thinking who our team was and what they would need in the classroom.

Our team at Sistema Toronto includes thirty-five teachers, each teaching a different combination of classes, operating in six different schools. We pride ourselves on having a diverse staff with different musical and teaching backgrounds, and on encouraging teachers to think independently and explore their own ideas in the classroom. To meet these diverse needs and interests, the activities would need to be:

- 1) Clear and easy for everyone to understand immediately
- 2) Simple enough to easily explain to students and execute in the classroom
- 3) Flexible enough to be easily adapted to different instruments and age groups
- 4) Useful to all of these teachers, filled with useful ideas for how to teach theory concepts in new ways

We also knew they would need to be easy for teachers to access in the course of a busy teaching day. The first draft of the activities were designed to be printed on index cards. Adopting this design constraint helped us develop a disciplined approach to writing the activities, stripping the language and instructions down to their simplest elements. The physicality of the index card was also appealing, having spent two years working with only virtual materials, but it soon became apparent that printing and distributing hundreds of index cards to six locations was not going to be practical.

Our final format brings together the concision of the index card with the convenience of digital distribution. Each activity card is formatted to fit on a phone screen for easy access in or on the way to one of our centres, and contains all the information necessary to plan and execute the activities for the week. Support materials are also formatted for phone screens, so teachers don't have to print anything ahead of time or rely on their centre directors to print something for them. The design is simple enough to read quickly, and contains all the necessary contextual information for how it fits with the curriculum as a whole.



Sistema Toronto Theory and Musicianship Activity Card Template, 2021

A second consideration was related to listening and communication. We already knew we wanted the activities to be simple and clear, so they would be easy for teachers to understand and execute, but we also wanted to provide teachers with terms, explanations, and ideas that would be simple enough to pass on to students. Using fewer, simpler words pushed us to further simplify the activities themselves, and to think carefully about how to design activities that would work with existing classroom activities, resources, and goals. Just as we knew our teachers would be listening to us and responding to the language we embedded in the activities, we knew the students would be listening to their teachers, so the language we used in the activity design was going to have a direct impact on what the students heard in the classroom.

One aspect of this was embedding specific terms and ideas in the activities that we wanted to encourage teachers to use. Kodaly rhythm terms (Ta, Ti-ti, etc.) and Solfège syllables (Do, Ré, Mi, etc.) are both key elements of elementary music education that we wanted to encourage teachers to use more widely, and to teach their students to make use of and integrate into their own musical thinking. They are particular terms that come from a particular place, but they are primarily used as teaching tools that enable students to engage directly with the music itself. Kodaly rhythms are simple enough that students can immediately make use of them to understand rhythm, beat, and musical proportion, and moveable Do solfège is a powerful way to introduce tonality and harmony, as well as understanding scales.

Another was balancing the use of culturally-specific terms with more general, universal terms that could be applied in any musical context. For our students to be able to function in an orchestra, or join in other musical

activities based in western traditions, we want them to be familiar with widely used Italian terms like “Forte” and “A tempo”, as well as functional terms like “quarter note” and “treble clef”. These terms come from the western classical tradition, and so have a particular cultural valence, but they are widely used in musical work, and can be considered an important aspect of musical literacy.

On the other hand, we wanted to treat all musical cultures as equally welcome in our classrooms. A simple example would be using the word “song”, which students will be aware of in a number of other contexts, before the word “piece”, which is more likely specific to instrumental music. A more complex example would be a term like “beat”, which in western classical music refers to the basic unit of a measure or bar, but in popular music often refers to a repeating pattern that can include pitch and rhythm. These are words that can include or exclude different musical ideas from a conversation. Carefully deploying these terms, and acknowledging some of their complexities, would help us embrace more ideas from different musical cultures and practitioners, including those of our students.

Finding ways to handle each of these types of terminology appropriately would help us equip our teachers for their work in the classroom, and create an environment in which our students more easily understand what they are hearing, and feel heard themselves.

Next Month: Respect

This concludes our series on the design and development of our Theory and Musicianship Curriculum. Next month’s entry will focus on our Social Curriculum topic for May: Respect, and our work on Asian Heritage Month.