

# *Making Our Own Music: Games To Get Started!*



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## Introduction

Children are naturally creative. They TELL stories, WRITE stories and MAKE ART.

Often though, they do not feel free to make their own music. Our premise is that children can feel free to compose even when they are just beginning the study of a string instrument.

Our project is to provide teachers with some musical games that can help encourage this natural creativity. We are researching approaches used by Alice Kayne Kanack and others in order to give our students a fun way to feel more ease with the idea of “making something up!”



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## The Three Rules of Composition\*



- 1) **There's No Such Thing as a Mistake**
- 2) **Listen respectfully in Silence and then Applaud**
- 3) **Never Criticize a Friend**

Every choice is valid and meaningful as a child explores composition. Therefore there are no mistakes!

It is important for the teacher, fellow students and parents to listen, to really listen, to the student(s) performing the composition and to then support this effort with applause.

No need for criticism as that implies that there are mistakes. Beginners (and all of us) need positive reinforcement and often criticism is negatively given or negatively perceived. There are ways to help illuminate different paths but saying “No! That is wrong — This is a better way!” is not one of them. Appreciate what has been accomplished and more accomplishments will follow.

\*Adapted from Alice Kayne Kanack — Creative Ability Development

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**Some Simple Games to Get Started Composing For Students who do not yet read music**  
**It can be intimidating to a student to be asked to compose music.**  
**Playing composition games is an easy way to get started.**

**In the Beginning there are Open Strings to explore**

**It is possible to get started when the student has shown the ability to either pluck or bow the open strings. The student can figure out a pattern of open strings to play.. Then some rhythm choices can be made. The teacher can play some harmonies or can improvise a melody to go with the student's choices. Another possibility is to use a rhythm track that uses percussion instruments and that can be almost any style. The teacher can add harmony if desired.**

## **Finger Fun!!!**

**Write on the Student's music or on a board:**

**"G (or any other string) 0 - 1 - 2 - 3"**

**Ask the student to use those fingerings and to make a pattern consisting of 8 - 10 notes. If a group class, ask each student to pick one number. These will be the notes of the composition. Play through whatever was chosen.**

**For Example: Play 2-3-0-1-1-3-2-1-3-0**

**Add rhythm Notes:**

**Quarter OR Eight notes**

**Again, the student(s) pick the notes if using eighth notes play the particular fingering twice.**



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## **Note Fun!**

**This game is played the same way but the note names are written on the student's music or on the board. It is a good idea to start with one string in the beginning (For example: G string: G, A , B and C).**

## **Staff Fun!**

**The game is the same but now the music staff is used. Again it is probably best to start with the notes on one string first and adding a string at a time as the student becomes more dexterous.**

## **Playing Cards To Compose Music**

**Make your own music deck of cards using finger numbers, note names, notes on the staff —whatever fits your students' level. Make another deck of rhythm cards. Make multiples of the rhythm notes.**

**Choose something fun for the back of the cards. In some cases it may be possible to involve the student(s) in making the cards.**

## Spin that dial!!!

Make your own board game of notes. We include an example of notes/fingerings and we include a rhythm example that are both in color. It is also fun to assign a color to a note and let the student choose a color. The student(s) can be the one(s) assigning the color to a note. A note can be a blue B on the A string or 1st finger on A. Or it could be a blue quarter note. It's best to choose colors for the notes or the rhythm but not both at the same time!



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**At the beginning the rhythms can be set by the teacher and then later chosen by the student/class. Or the melody can be used for a rhyme that the student/students have composed or chosen.**

**For example:**

**Fuzzy Wuzzy was a Bear, Fuzzy Wuzzy had no hair, Fuzzy Wuzzy  
wasn't very Fuzzy, was he?**

**OR**

**Eenie Meenie Minie Mo, Catch a Tiger by the Toe, If he hollers Let  
him Go, Ernie Meenie Minie Mo!**

**Familiar rhymes are fun to use to get started with this game.  
Charles Givens has some excellent examples. Students can make up  
rhymes or they can make up sentences and find the inherent rhythms  
in their own words.**



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**Rhythm Games are essential and a fun way to get students composing. Find the rhythm in any sentence, in names, etc. and get started. Help the student write out the rhythm in quarter notes, eighth notes and sixteenth notes. Add a melody that the student(s) can write using the above techniques.**

**One string class always learns the refrain of We Will Rock You and before they can actually play the notes they love to hear the melody and stamp or clap or knock the basic beat on the backs of their instruments.**

**Notice the rhythm in everyday activities such as walking to a class, going up and down the stairs, running on the playground and put it in the music.**

**Going down a slide or a rollercoaster!**

**Listening to the subway train slow down and speed up. The sound of peaceful rain drops turning into a downpour banging on the roof and then back again to quiet drops.**

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# Games Made Musical

## Hangman

The student composes a short piece of perhaps five to ten notes, and writes it down, without the teacher seeing it.

(This can be done either at home between lessons, or on the spot)

A staff is placed on the chalk board or on some paper, with a small line underneath corresponding to each note in the piece.

The teacher guesses the notes by asking if the piece contains an "A on the G string (G1)" or a "C# on the A string (A2)", etc.

If the guess is correct, then wherever this note occurs in the piece, the student writes it above the line where it appears.

If it is incorrect, then the student adds a body part to the scaffold, gibberish, or noose. (A list of incorrect guesses can be added to the side to avoid confusion)

The usual rules apply, that if the piece is too hard to guess, the number of parts being added to the hung person can be increased. (eyes, nose, mouth, fingers, clothes, etc.)

At the end of the game the student plays their composition through several times and the teacher can work on it with them, play it with them, etc.

The student can name the composition if they want and they can create a file of all the pieces written for this game.

The game can be modified for pre-written notation by using A3, D2, etc.

Rhythm is generally left out of the guessing, and can be added afterwards.

(One of my students take this game seriously, and has a collection of dozens of compositions, and sees herself as a composer as well as a violist! We have even harmonized and performed her pieces on recitals. She composes them at home.

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## Red Light — Green Light

In this version of a playground favorite either the teacher or the student closes their eyes and says “Green Light!” at which point the other begins to improvise some music, playing continuously, without stopping. At some point the one with the eyes closed shouts out “Red Light!” while opening their eyes.

The one improvising has to stop before the other sees them. If they are caught still playing, then they lose, and the roles are switched.

The eyes being closed can be accomplished with hands covering the eyes, or even having the person turn to face away from the player, so there is motion to give more time to stop.

Time improvising can be any sound at all coming from the instrument. Notes, or a song or just random sounds. The piece one is working on can also be substituted for the improvising if this is more comfortable, but hopefully it can be done with improvisation eventually.



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# Finish That Song!

The Student takes the first measure or two of a piece that is being worked on, and pretends to be the composer, and writes a different version of the end of the phrase than the one that is written, and eventually, several different endings.

At first it makes sense to use the same number of notes as the original, and simply replace them with other notes. As the exercise continues it is interesting to try different rhythms, replacing quarter notes with eighth notes, adding dotted rhythms, etc.

These are then played and discussed for their musical merits or lack thereof. Perhaps it is better to say the effect of different notes is observed and the attainment of similar or different harmonic and melodic feelings from the original are noted. The reasons for why the composer chose the notes they did can also be discussed.

As part of this exercise, it helps to have a specific note or notes to shoot for from the original version, as the harmonies often depend on those notes. For instance, the last note of the phrase usually ends on the tonic or dominant and sounds strange if it does not do this. This can bring up the discussion of chords and which notes feel finished and which feel unfinished.

This game can be extended to finishing phrases through improvisation. The teacher and student can take one phrase and play it back and forth providing a different ending each time.

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## Three Note Jam

Three notes are written down, and the student improvises using only those notes.

(The number of notes can obviously be increased or decreased as the moment requires)

The same way kids play, you make up different rules for the improvisation. Improvising back and forth as a conversation is always good, and occasionally playing at the same time for some chaos as well.

“OK, this time we use only half notes and play super quiet!”

“This time we play three notes loud, three notes soft, three notes loud and three notes soft!”

“This time we play one of the notes repeated very fast and add other notes once in a while very long!”

“This time we use the rhythm two eighths, a quarter and a half over and over!”

Let the student come up with rules as well, taking turns being creative, or sowing up with ideas together.

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# Musical Story Telling #1

**In this free improvising game one can either come up with a quick story, like “a butterfly and a ladybug went out for a walk, they went through the misty forest, climbed the mountain of doom and encountered the pig with gnashing teeth, which they subdued by singing, they returned over the mountain victorious!”**

**The teacher takes on character and the student takes the other and comes up with a theme for that character. The journey is then played by improvising the different episodes.**

**Either one can stop before each episode and describe it before playing it, or it can be done as one play through, or each episode can be played one at a time, and at the end performed one after the other, etc.**

**Players can change and become different characters as it goes, with a new theme for each one. The student can add episodes to the story as it unfolds.**

**The parameters of the improvisation can be totally open ended or there can be ideas like “the gnashing pig can only be played on the E string, while the butterfly has to be all glissando on the G and D strings.**



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# **From Music to Social !!**

## **Sound Effect (Level 1)**

**In the beginning of the class, have the students listen to “Program/  
Descriptive Music” OR music that has a strong association with an  
image/feeling.**

**For example: Four Seasons, Vivaldi (Weather); The Carnivals of the  
Animals, Saint-Saen’s (sound of the animals); William Tell Overture,  
Rossini (Horse Galloping); Pink Panther; We Will Rock You, etc.**

**The students will have to pick a subject in the classroom and make  
up some sound effect to describe the subject. It can be a picture,  
character, plants, charts, etc.**

**The idea is to use the environment around them to inspire them.**

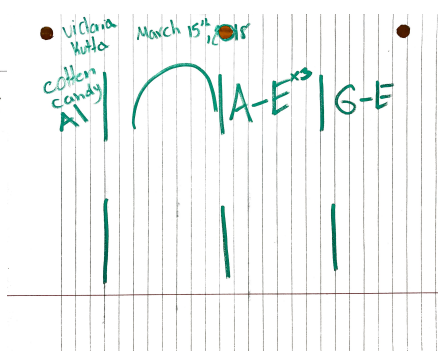
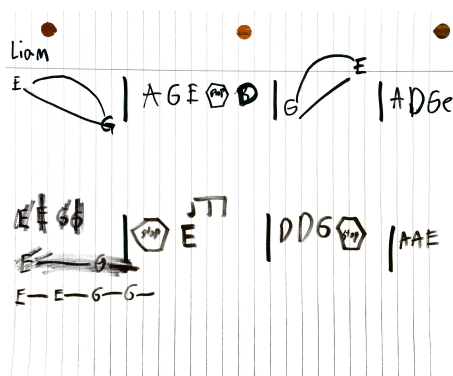
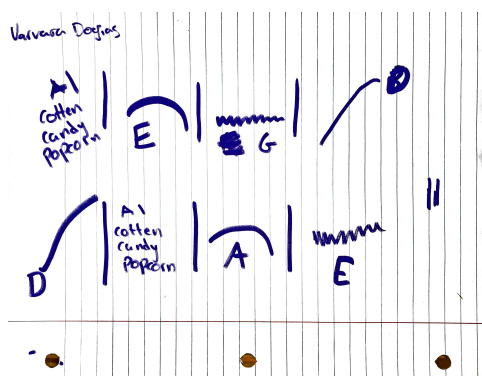
**Goals: As descriptive as possible**

## Making Music (Level 2)

After they have done the exercise couple times, we can make it more personal. Students can pick a favorite subject to repeat the “level 1” exercise, but this time, they can also prepare a phrase or longer elements at home, and refine them in the lessons. For example, their favorite characters, memorable photos, family members, pets, etc.

Since they will have to prepare, that requires some basic notes/ drawings to help them to remember what they have came up.

The following are some examples.



## Goals: It's Personal

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# Making Music TOGETHER (Level 3)

## Musical Story Telling #2

The ultimate goal of the exercise is to help the students to write a piece together and appreciate each others' creative contribution. Mary Cohen's "Mr Misterioso" in Super Duets book 2 is a wonderful place to start as it can be done with each child making up a sound for one of the sentences. Below is an example.

| Player 1                                   | Player 2                                 |
|--|--|
| SAY/Listen: It was a dark and stormy night | Improvise:                               |
| Improvise:                                 | SAY/Listen: Thunder and lightning        |
| SAY/Listen: Opening Squeaky Door           | Improvise:                               |
| Improvise:                                 | SAY/Listen: something pushing the door   |
| SAY/Listen: AHHH!!!! Ghost?                | Improvise:                               |
| Improvise:                                 | SAY/Listen: Wind blowing in from outside |
| SAY/Listen: Turning on the light           | Improvise:                               |
| Improvise:                                 | SAY/Listen: Closing windows              |

**Goal: Making Music Together and Create a positive social skills.**



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## Sources

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Students of Kenneth Mok from Boston Public School *Figures from P.15*, 2018

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**GOOD LUCK  
AND  
HAVE A GREAT ADVENTURE!**

