



Interviews with California High School Music Educators Teaching Music Composition

by Dr. Lisa A. Crawford
CMEA Creating and Composition Representative

Part One of Four

In my work as the representative for creating and composition on the state council of California Music Educators Association, music education is considered through the lens of music composition. This article is the first of four parts sharing highlights of interviews with music teachers who have experienced, over time, music composition education they present at the K–12 level. I would like to thank each of the music teachers who spent their valuable time with me in person and on the phone for their deep and honest communication about their composition teaching.

Each teacher in this article was invited to answer the same questions from an interview protocol, developed by the author, about their high school music teaching experiences related to music composition. Part two will share interviews with California music education professors in music teacher education departments who are thinking

about working compositionally with preservice teachers. Part three of this article will compare experiences of middle school music teachers who work compositionally with students grades six through eight. And, part four will look at elementary music teachers who provide K–5 students opportunities to compose.

As part one, this article discusses three interviews conducted with the following California high school music educators:

Anne Fennell is the creative arts department chair at Mission Vista High School in Vista Unified School District and teaches both music composition and steel drum performance ensembles (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8qcIYkxJ-c>). Fennell is also chair of NAFME's Council for IN-Ovations and in 2015, was a Top Ten Finalist for the Grammy Music Education Award 2016.

Mark Vance, is a composer and music teacher who has developed the

Young Composers Project, a community music program in the central part of the state, through Music in the Mountains in Nevada County. Known for presenting professional-level performances, Music in the Mountains has long focused toward music education in the community.

Danielle Collins teaches for the El Monte Union High School District and works with high school students in the areas of ensemble composition, songwriting, sound recording, drum ensembles, and electric string ensemble. (See RHS Panther Sound on YouTube.)

An interview protocol was developed to learn about the teachers themselves, their compositional and teaching experience, unique work they do with students, and the observations they have made about subject matter delivery and students' responses, challenges, and successes. Through the interview protocol, the questions asked of teacher participants are as follows:

Interview Protocol	
Personal Training and Compositional Experience	1. Did you receive training to work compositionally with K-12 students? 2. Are you an active composer? 3. Have you ever been a working songwriter/composer?
Students' Experiences	4. Tell me about your history with young composers. 5. What differences do you find in the ages of students you work with? 6. What are your top two experiences in your work with your current musical groups/ensembles? 7. What prep do you find yourself doing to facilitate opportunities to compose? 8. What types of music have you focused on when working compositionally with K–12 students?
Evaluation, Creativity, and Gender	9. How do you evaluate process and product with students you work with? 10. Do you consider creativity as you observe K-12 students composing? How do you define creativity? 11. Do you find differences in compositional process or product related to gender?
Pearls of Wisdom	12. What advice would you give to teachers new to working compositionally in music classrooms and, can you speak to areas such as choral, instrumental, and general music?

Finally, these teachers were asked if there were any questions they would recommend adding to this interview set.

Teachers' Personal Training and Composing Experience

Music education has long considered the importance of providing opportunities to compose at the K–12 level, however, we are only beginning to find credentialing programs providing active learning in coursework to support this goal (Deemer, 2016; Kaschub & Smith, 2013; Menard & Rosen, 2014; Stringham, 2016). Not one of the music educators in this interview received training in their universities to work compositionally with K–12 students. Discussion of this question considered that, even though composition courses were taken in college, training to work

teachers may be hesitant to work compositionally with students due to lack of preparation. Hickey has also said that children never say “no” to opportunities to compose. These teachers each said the same. While some teachers may wish to use “composers” in their classrooms, it is the opinion of this author that music teachers may wish to “practice” composing in the same way they might their main instrument to develop increased skill.

In responses about their experiences working with young composers in their classrooms, the three music teachers represented here describe limited one-on-one composition lessons but, for the most part, students work in groups.

Collins describes particular composing experiences of her students that have

Vance shared one of his top experiences with students composing in his program, *Music and Science Collide* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NBC9V558Ld0>). The entire class of the Young Composers Project was invited to participate in a science curriculum around water. Students wrote about their experiences and everyone wrote chamber music. Ten students wrote symphonic shorts with footage of the river. Vance says: “We had footage of kids in rafts, kids in labs looking through microscopes... It was cool!”

Evaluation, Creativity, and Gender

Collins discusses challenges with creating deadlines and contracts. Her students create the timelines themselves and identify the number of pieces they will complete as a curriculum map. One challenge

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with K–12 students compositionally simply did not exist. Encouragement may have been given, but curriculum, management, or strategies were not. Fennell cites her extensive experience with the Orff approach as the impetus for the composing focus she now has in her music classroom.

Vance has been and continues to be an active working composer. Yet, while they say they aren’t active composers, Fennell and Collins discuss their classroom activities as inclusive of compositional work. Collins cites “time” as an issue for her for sitting down to write music and says through active listening with her students, she has become a much stronger composer and continues to be a working composer in her high school bands and percussion ensembles. Collins talks about her constant adjustments to technology assignments and lesson plans and says she is learning right alongside her students. Who she looks for? “John Kratus... and old *Music Education Journals*.”

Students' Composing Experiences

Hickey (2013) has discussed what preservice teachers can learn from composition research and suggests that music

evolved over time:

“I have had students my entire career in this high school who write music. I have developed programs throughout my time here that come from requests students make. One of my students wanted to write music and have it performed. In lieu of our marching band show that year, we did the Silent Film Show. Students performed to black and white silent films with music I or they selected and some students composed. Now, this same student has twelve to fifteen students on his staff who compose, orchestrate, and perform the music alongside the movies. Sometimes, students are included by invitation; others by their composing style.

“As well, we have a community service program at our school with a requirement of meeting ten hours. A student asked me if he could perform in the community for the ten-hour requirement but wanted to know where he might find the music. I told him it was up to him. Now, my students do this every year. But, that first student is now a full-time composer and finishing a degree in composition. And working.”

is students’ understanding of what peers can and can’t play and she teaches them to talk with each other to learn that information. This past year, with one piece of music, there wasn’t enough time to learn it so it was tabled until spring term. Other problematic situations include older students not apprenticing younger students well enough. However, she says, student composer’s theory placement jumped two or three tiers after their involvement with composition. Collins defines creativity as a moment when someone brings something from their own experiences to paper, computer or not. Collins attends conferences, songwriting seminars, and popular music convenings. She describes talking with other colleagues about what worked this week. What didn’t?

Fennell discusses age differences as developmental, compound, and complex at the high school level. She finds melodic development in this age group with a greater understanding of vertical thinking, less so with younger students. Collins discusses different learner types, and that students may be more mature instrumentalists but cannot follow structure well.

She cites differences between music tech and rock band ensembles as in a completely different realm from the learning needs in traditional ensembles. Non-traditional course students get off-task faster and are less intrinsically motivated, yet after a year become more independent. And, every student is different emotionally. She talks about students in her technology class with ADHD, less formal training, and who may also be English Language Learners (ELL). Vance discusses video production and premiering orchestral works of his students.

Clearly, each of these teachers is responsible for a great deal of preparation time, and have accepted this challenge. Collins remembers changing the name of their Community Service Ensemble to a performance called Parent Appreciation Concert. Students performed and conducted their compositions and she says: "they had the room." She notes campus recruiting, repertoire students have arranged or written, and rehearsal and conducting processes. Collins knows she is not big on competition and says her students grade themselves. She says: "My top things are not about winning competitions."

Fennell reports an experience of returning to class from the office halfway through the period and observing students in rehearsal with self-leadership and full ownership of the work at hand. "Here is what we did today," they say with notes on her desk. Fennell recommends beginning with arranging and helping students to be open to the musical creativity of their peers. If students have an octavo in choir, ask: "How can we open this up? Is there a section you can repeat where you can take solos? Is there a section you might want to do an improv?"

Another suggestion she makes is exploring soundscapes: "Develop willingness to use voice or instruments to explore soundscapes with words and ideas. I think too often we get stuck in the way we were taught but this limits students from becoming creative musicians. I do believe that what students receive in an ensemble is different than becoming a whole musician, becoming who they are, not just as a performer, but how we encourage that in performance ensembles, becoming a whole musician."

In Vance's program, his teaching is intended to support the necessity of hearing your composition performed. He worries about the amount of time students have for preparation and would like more time for understanding instruments students are writing with. Vance has found limited understanding for some students with masterworks, also finds gaps in students' abilities, and mediocre performing and sight-reading skills with some students.

For Fennell, she doesn't identify for students what genres to work with and says that projects depend on them. Students select the type of music they most appreciate. Sometimes her students, interested in heavy rock, find themselves composing classical music. Sometimes she requests, in Composition Levels 1 and 2, that students work on a 12-bar blues as a beginning project. She describes that they discuss modulation (how are you going to get there?) and that she has spent a lot of time with minimalism. She calls it a beginning technique and uses a piece of art.

Each of the teachers interviewed discuss differences in emotional maturity between gender in their classrooms but none could describe finding difference in compositional process or product related to gender. All of these teachers have more male students than female in their composition classes or nontraditional offerings. Fennell finds this peculiar, and also fascinating as she notices that male students create a more "epic" kind of sound than females. "I don't know what it is," says Fennell.

"My students listen to rotations of each others' compositions and each gives notes about what they heard," she says. They are always close to what I might have said, to grades I might have given. But they know."

Pearls of Wisdom

Collins, Vance, and Fennell use a project-based learning system throughout their teaching. Collins uses a rubric to aid in student listening to their compositions. She also asks students to defend their compositions. The questions she provides include: "Why did you choose this instrument? Are you using an ascending or descending line? Have a reason for what you did." She says she doesn't have to agree with it, that students need to know their reasons.

Fennell believes there should be music for all students through high school. She describes that her job is to help students find what they already have. Fennell says: "Whether mariachi, composition, being a music critic, instead of getting caught up in AP music theory, understand what are we all doing? *What* are we doing?"

Through these interviews, the importance of preparation to teach was clear. This author will continue to develop materials that can be used in credentialing processes to assist preservice teachers with gaining comfort and experience with composing.

The examples found in these discussions shine a very bright light on what we are currently doing, and share possibilities. And, this is the point of the subject matter here. Initiative to compose by yourself, to develop beginnings for composing with others, and present increasingly more challenging opportunities to work compositionally with student ensembles, and again initiative, to muddle through until experience gains a greater footing and then, there are no boundaries to the creativity you find through providing opportunities to compose with your students.

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