

Musical Conversations: Composing and Performing the Blues

Levi Comstock and Chris Schroeder, El Sistema Resident Artists, Music Teachers

Overview. This module is part of a larger curriculum unit on the Great Migration entitled *Going North: African-American Journeys* featuring the artwork of Jacob Lawrence and the music of the blues. Prior to this module, students were immersed in a three-month study of blues music during which they listened to a variety of blues songs and analyzed the structure of the 12-bar blues. After reading blues poems by Langston Hughes, Eloise Greenfield and others, students composed their own blues poems about issues in their lives using the AAB blues pattern.



In this module, students put their blues poems to music. Students formed four groups based on the themes of their blues poems: The School Blues, the Big World Issues Blues, the Personal Loss Blues and the Down 'n Out Blues. Each group was led by a resident musician and each student played the instrument he or she plays in the school orchestra. After whole group sessions that introduced students to improvisation, call and response, and the blues scale, small groups worked together to compose music on their instruments that expressed the mood and themes of their poems. Each student selected a favorite stanza from his or her blues poem and the group combined and sequenced the stanzas to create a group song. Together, students made choices about dynamics, tone color, rhythm, and other musical elements to illustrate their feelings and ideas. During rehearsals, students were encouraged to experiment and to improvise, both vocally and instrumentally.

The four groups performed their blues songs for family and friends at a celebration of learning, and at House of Blues in Boston where they opened for the Blues SchoolHouse Band!

Time Frame. 10 days, 45 minutes per day

Grade Level. Grade 4 (can be adapted for use in middle school)

Curricular Connections. music, language arts, history

Guiding Questions

- *What makes a song sound like the blues?*
- *How can I make musical choices to illustrate a mood or idea?*

Learning Targets

(Learning targets are objectives that guide instruction. They are written in concrete, student-friendly language, shared with students, and tracked carefully by students and teachers during the learning process.)

- *I can name elements of music (e.g. rhythm, tempo, dynamics, pitch, tone color)*
- *I can make musical choices to illustrate the mood and theme of my blues poem.*
- *I can play the bass line of the 12-bar blues.*
- *I can play and sing the blues scale.*
- *I can sing or speak a blues poem expressively over the 12-bar blues.*
- *I can collaborate with my group to create an expressive blues performance.*

Common Core Standards and Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks

Common Core English Language Arts

- Read grade-level prose and poetry orally with accuracy, appropriate rate, and expression.
- Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners . . . building on other's ideas and expressing their own clearly.
- Pose and respond to specific questions to clarify or follow up on information, and make comments that contribute to the discussion and link to the remarks of others.
- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

Massachusetts Music Frameworks

- Sing expressively with appropriate dynamics, phrasing, and interpretation.
- Create and arrange short songs and instrumental pieces within teacher-specified guidelines.
- Play expressively with appropriate dynamics, phrasing and articulation, and interpretation.
- Echo and perform easy rhythmic, melodic, and chordal patterns accurately and independently on rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic classroom instruments.
- Perform independent instrument parts while other students sing or play contrasting parts.
- Perceive, describe, and respond to basic elements of music, including beat, tempo, rhythm, meter, pitch, melody, texture, dynamics, harmony, and form.
- Listen to and describe aural examples of music of various styles, genres, cultural and historical periods, identifying expressive qualities, instrumentation, and cultural and/or geographic context.
- Describe and demonstrate audience skills of listening attentively and responding appropriately in classroom, rehearsal, and performance settings.

INSTRUCTIONAL PLAN

STEP 1: IMPROVISATION

Students sit in an open circle with their instruments. Ask students to improvise music that expresses how they feel about a topic, such as snow. (We chose snow to parallel the theme of a collage activity students did earlier in the week, using colors and shapes to express a mood.) Ask everyone to play his or her snow improvisations at the same time (cacophony). Then ask individual volunteers to share out. After sharing, ask each volunteer to describe the thinking behind his or her improvisation.

STEP 2: ONE-PITCH IMPROVISATION

Present a new theme—summer—and ask students to improvise with just one pitch. Start with the whole group playing their one-pitch improvisations together, followed by volunteers sharing out. Volunteers describe the thinking behind their improvisations. Students discuss whether the musicians effectively communicated their ideas to the audience.

STEP 3: NAME MUSICAL ELEMENTS

Name, define, and discuss the elements of music that go into a musical composition: articulation, dynamics, tone color, register, contour, rhythm, space v. density, etc. Create a visual aid to help students recall the elements. Play examples of each element.

STEP 4: MUSICAL CONVERSATIONS: CALL AND RESPONSE

With another music teacher, model a musical conversation with your instruments. After the conversation, share your thinking. *What was your musical conversation about? What were you saying to one another? What mood or ideas did you want to express?* Ask students to turn to a partner and have a musical conversation with their instruments. Partners then tell what their musical conversation was about. Invite a pair to perform their musical conversation before the group and/or invite a student to have a musical conversation with you. Ask the musicians to put their musical conversation into words.



STEP 5: FOUR BARS AT A TIME

With background accompaniment, students go around the circle playing four-bar phrases on their instruments. You can limit the phrases to one or two notes or the blues scale. Emphasize that students must be ready for their turn. When one set of four measures is over, the next person in the circle plays another four-bar phrase. End with everyone playing four bars together.

STEP 6: WARM UP

Warm up for a new whole-group session with students sitting in a circle playing a free improvisation with their instruments. Partners play a musical conversation with two notes. They then play four bars at a time.

STEP 7: INTRODUCE 12-BAR BLUES CHORD PROGRESSION (“COMPING”)

Write the roots of the chords on chart paper. Have students play with matching articulation and style. Add other chord tones in different colors and break the class into harmonies.

STEP 8: INTRODUCE AND PRACTICE BLUES SCALE

Teach students the blues scale using call and response, repeating patterns within the blues scale. Go around the circle and have students play four bars at a time, encouraging them to use blues scales. Depending on students’ confidence with the chords, they may choose to softly “comp” when they are not soloing.

STEP 9: SINGING CALL AND RESPONSE BLUES SCALES

Begin another whole group session with students doing a few short exercises to review improvisation, “comping,” and the blues scale. Warm up with call and response by having students sing blues scale patterns or scat syllables.

STEP 10: ANALYZE AND SPEAK BLUES LYRICS

Present the lyrics of a student’s blues poem or of a classic blues song that students are familiar with, such as “Cross Road Blues” by Robert Johnson. Read the lyrics aloud, looking for structure and key words and phrases. Students then speak the lyrics dramatically and semi-rhythmically, with emphasis on key words. Next, add the music. Demonstrate listening for the chord changes so you know which part of the stanza you are in. Students recite the lyrics in unison, speaking dramatically. Then ask for volunteers to speak the lyrics, encouraging them to vary their pace, tone, pitch, and rhythm to give the lyrics a new interpretation that draws out a different mood.

STEP 11: SINGING THE BLUES

Demonstrate two distinctly different ways of singing a blues song. Discuss the different moods each version conveyed. *How did the musical choices you made create the different moods? What elements of music contributed to the mood of each version?* Play the music and have students sing on their own at the same time. Then ask for volunteers to share out their interpretations.



STEP 12: COMPOSING THE BLUES—ARRANGING THE LYRICS

Organize students into small groups based on the themes of their blues poems. For example, group students who have written poems about school into one group and students who have written about world issues into another group. Students from each group select one stanza from their blues poems, then arrange the stanzas into a sequence of verses that creates a flow of emotions, topics, or energy. Each student sings his or her verse as a solo, while the rest of the students in the group accompany on their instruments. Students create an introductory and/or concluding verse that ties the song together—these verses might include lyrics that are either sung or spoken.

STEP 13: COMPOSING THE BLUES—ADDING THE MUSIC

In small groups, review the musical concepts from steps 1 – 11 and work with students to integrate them into original compositions that express the mood and theme of their lyrics. In developing the form of their composition, students also decide where instrumental solos will take place and whether there will be any transitions between verses. While one student is singing a solo, another student performs an instrumental solo in response. Students decide where the instrumentals solos go and who plays them. There is a lot of interaction between the singer and instrumental soloists during this process. Groups also create an instrumental “head” and “tail” to introduce and conclude the piece.

STEP 14. REHEARSE

Each group practices the delivery of their solos and the interaction between instruments and vocals. The instrumentalists work to support the vocalist by imitating the mood and style of the voice. In some songs the mood stays consistent, in others the mood changes over the course of the song. Students determine the common elements that hold the whole piece together and which elements introduce variety.

STEP 15: PERFORM

Students perform their blues songs for family and friends during a celebration of learning. At the celebration, students make connections between the blues and the historical period of the Great Migration and showcase the collage art and writing they did during the unit. The opportunity to perform for an outside audience at the House of Blues motivated students to raise the quality of their performance.



STEP 16: REFLECT AND ASSESS

Students reflect on their performance, noting what they think went well and what they could do the next time to make their performance even better. Use the Blues Performance Rubric for assessment, evaluating both strengths and weaknesses. Encourage students to identify elements of their favorite performances and to critique the performance of their own group, as well as other groups.

BLUES PERFORMANCE RUBRIC

Criteria	3	2	1
Engagement	Mind is always focused on performance. Energy and enthusiasm is contagious.	Mind occasionally appears to wander. Shows some energy and enthusiasm.	Mind wanders. Looks distracted and bored.
Presentation Voice/ Articulation	Strong level 3 presentation voice can be heard in all parts of room. Slow, clear speech is easy to understand throughout performance.	Good level 3 presentation voice. Sometimes audience strains to hear words.	Weak level 1 or 2 presentation voice. Voice is too soft and/or too fast. Audience cannot understand words.
Audience Awareness	Eyes move around the room to make direct contact with everyone in audience.	Eyes make direct contact with the audience.	No direct eye contact with audience.
Posture	Excellent posture. Stands tall, proud, and confident. Expressive movements enhance performance.	Good posture. Stands tall with back straight.	Poor posture. Slouches back. Hunches shoulders.
Facial Expression	Face changes expression to reflect changes in the mood and feeling of the song.	Facial expression mostly matches the emotion of the song.	Silly or flat facial expression doesn't match the emotion of the song.
Bass Line/ Comping	Students perform chord changes in tempo when accompanying.	Students perform chord changes with a few mistakes.	Student cannot follow chord changes.
Content: 1, rhyming couplet 2) AAB pattern 3) turn around 4) emotional lines 5) heartbeat rhythm	Verse or song contains all five 12-bar blues concepts.	Verse or song contains 1 to 2 12- bar blues concepts.	Verse or song contains 0 to 1 12-bar blues concepts.

Teacher Reflection: Levi Comstock

The key to getting great compositions and performances from students was to get out of their way as much as possible. Through listening to great blues recordings, students absorbed the feel of the blues like a child learns to emulate the accent and dialect of his or her environment. Our task was to give students just enough of the structure that they felt comfortable creating, but not so much that we were imposing our own aesthetic. In the best performances, the students' personality shown through their lyrics and music.

In rehearsing my small group, I tried to gradually scaffold myself out of the process. At first, I modeled ways to share ideas and give feedback to further the creative process. Students tried several alternative melodies before deciding on



one. In critiquing different options, we referred back to our earlier discussions about how musical choices create a mood, and I encouraged students to be consistent in their choices. When I sensed that we had established an atmosphere where they felt safe to share their ideas, I stepped away and let students run more of the rehearsals.

Every time students saw one another perform, their own performances improved. They could see what was effective and what was confusing to an audience, and they began to adapt their own performances accordingly. We were fortunate to be able to perform three times. At the final performance, which took place at the House of Blues, each student gave a unique and compelling performance.

Learning about the history of the blues in the context the experiences of African Americans during the Great Migration gave the songwriting process a deeper meaning. The creative process enhanced students' literacy, oral language, and communication skills by helping them practice fluency, articulation, and sequencing in an original composition.

Students truly loved composing and performing their own blues. They owned the entire process—from writing lyrics about their personal experiences and feelings to improvising and collaborating in small groups where they made musical choices within a flexible structure. As one student commented, being creative is what the blues are all about!

If your school doesn't have a student orchestra or instrumental instruction, you can adapt this lesson plan by using Orff instruments, which are available in most general music classrooms. You can remove all of the notes from these tone bar instruments except for the ones in the blues scale. That way, students can't hit a wrong note.

About Conservatory Lab

Founded in 1999, Conservatory Lab is a K1–6 music-infused charter school in the heart of Boston. We believe in the power of music to transform the lives of children and adolescents.

We use **Expeditionary Learning** as a framework for our unique interdisciplinary curriculum that integrates music and other creative processes. Our learning expeditions are discovery operations that demand fieldwork and mentoring by experts. We cherish active, hands-on situations where what we are doing matters to us and has consequences. Students strive to create quality work, to collaborate with their classmates, and to contribute to their community.

Conservatory Lab is also the only school in the country to incorporate **El Sistema** program and methods into its core school day. **El Sistema** is a unique program designed to effect social change and nurture promising futures for underserved communities through intensive, ensemble-focused music education.

For more information about Conservatory Lab, visit www.conservatorylab.org.
For information about the curriculum, email lcomstock@conservatorylab.org



The School Blues Group



The Personal Loss Blues Group



The Big World Issues Blues Group



The Down 'n Out Blues Groups