

GEEK OUT! and Be Relevant *Electroacoustic Music and Composition for ALL*

Christine C. Hayes, WMEA State Chair, Standards



Do your students have experience with electronic composition, connecting with gaming, movies and an electroacoustic composer? Have they performed literature of this genre? Read

on for a model with the WMEA Standards at the core!

When I begin each year, I truly do start with the end in mind – outcomes. Like any devoted music education nerd, I love reading through the standards, keeping the mission of the year on our curricular track. This allows me to question if each lesson or project is a valuable engaging experience that furthers the student’s understanding and application, or just an entertaining activity.

This fall I entered the classroom inspired by music on the cutting edge, music that could inspire the students, music that connected with what the students were experiencing and could capture their imagination. This fall the music and soul of composer Alex Shapiro entered my heart and walked through the music classroom door. Alex is the rock star of electroacoustic composition, writing pieces for all genres – chamber groups, large ensembles, solo instruments. Her compositions are mesmerizing. Alex Shapiro’s work was what the fourth and fifth grade music students would discover this year. It would catapult them forward in a

deeper understanding of the music with which they identify. They would create more personalized compositions and perform one of Shapiro’s electroacoustic works. Take some time to explore Alex’s website: <https://www.alexshapiro.org/index.html> and to review the Technology Standards at <https://wmeamusic.org/standards/maps/technology/>.

Create – In the September 2021 *WSM* issue, I discussed the electronic composition project the 4/5 students would individually complete using the free online program Beepbox, <https://www.beepbox.co>. Think Mario music but a whole lot more! Each student created an intriguing 3-part electronic composition, to which they added acoustic improvisation to their electronic B section. Their overall conceptualization and getting their ideas organized were the essence of the artistic process *Create*. This project led to a better grasp of electronic sounds and how to manipulate them. The project is equally effective for middle and high school ensembles.

Respond – Introducing the students to professional electroacoustic music following their composition project was like picking ripe fruit from the vine – their electronic ears and thirst for the next level were in place. It was time to dig into the artistic process of *Respond* where students perceive an artistic work as an audience, not as an assessment activity (that would be found under *Perform*). Students listened to parts of Alex’s recording of “Breathe,” https://soundcloud.com/alex_shapiro, pondering three questions;

“The exploration/
application of music
technology is most
effective when students
are actively involved
and have quality aural
experiences.”

~ WMEA Music
Technology Standards

Why did the composer name it “Breathe”? How does the music make you feel as you listen? What timbres do you hear and how are they created? After a partner “turn and talk” on the three questions, we shared as a class our thoughts about the objective question, timbres. The students immediately discerned the electronic and acoustic timbres, and expressed an affinity towards movie and gaming music. They were hooked! When we discussed the composer, they were excited that Alex Shapiro is a living female composer who wrote such “awesome” music and was inspired by the nature where she lives, an island off the state of Washington.

Perform – Learning the recently published electroacoustic composition “Count to TEN” by Shapiro has been an attainable challenge which the students worked out as a class and in small groups. The artistic process of *Perform*, found the students naturally moving from Select to Rehearse, Analyze, back to Rehearse and Evaluate, with their Performance finally occurring. The piece was composed for the *Murphy Music Press Beginning Band Adaptable*

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wmea music standards

Series, a collection of imaginative pieces in response to the need for adaptable, flexible instrumental music for musicians at the earliest stage of their education. Although listed as a .5 grade level, recorded energized electronic accompaniment tracks come at different tempos and the 3-part acoustic instrumental parts may be played by literally any instrument and are written in numerous keys and ranges. The primary part is the acoustic speaking which incorporates mixed meter from 1/4 to 9/4, many dynamic contrasts and articulations.

Connect – Making a personal connection with Alex Shapiro was the highlight of this project. We had a Zoom session with our questions prepared. It was a thrill discovering that this composer has also written for movies, television, commercials, video games and “pop” music and oversaw music production for *Star Trek* spin offs! She first composed in fifth grade and has a great sense of humor.

“For every outcome you have, articulate how it is based in the standards and has lasting value that deserves the valuable time spent with music students in your classroom.”

This year was a challenge for educators and students alike. It is so valuable for all of our students to invest the time we have in class in meaningful standards-based learning experiences that will be carried on for years to come. This unit was accessible to all of our new ELL and special education students. There are students who want to explore and compose more

and are considering a future in musical composition. The students talked about Alex and her music as entities they now personally know!

It has been an honor to serve on the WMEA Standards Committee. I am grateful for this dynamic and diverse group of active music educators that generously serve all of you. The new WMEA

Standards Committee chair will be Aimee Swanson! Join us at our Summer Workshop, July 27-28, <https://wmeamusic.org/pro-development/workshops/>.

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