

Reviewed by Sarah Joncas

## Experiencing Music Composition in Grades 3-5

Written by Michele Kaschub and Janice Smith  
New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017

**I**n *Experiencing Music Composition in Grades 3-5*, authors Michele Kaschub and Janice Smith detail a variety of composition projects that general music teachers can use to facilitate composition by upper elementary school students. With the increased emphasis on *creating* as an artistic process within the *2014 Music Standards* (National Association for Music Education, 2014), many music teachers are seeking ways to involve their students in creative experiences such as composition. This book offers clearly defined projects and includes resources such as student handouts to help teachers implement the projects.

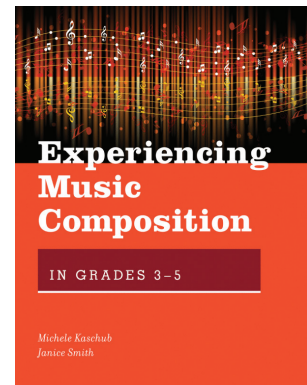
The authors begin by discussing the characteristics of composers in Grades 3-5 and the “compositional capacities”—skills that young composers use in creating music, such as “feelingful intention, musical expressivity, and artistic craftsmanship”—that projects presented later in the book aim to develop. Through the lens of this framework, two additional chapters explain how to use the included “sketchpages” student handouts and suggest processes to promote positive experiences in the sharing of student compositional work. The sketchpages worksheets offer students a balance of direction and freedom, giving them inspiration and guidance for their compositions without being overly restrictive or prescriptive. They focus on

the music-creating process to express students’ musical intentions, allowing them to separate what they wish to express from how to express it.

These preliminary chapters lay a strong foundation for implementation of projects found later in the book and could also serve as a guide for other composition projects. Nevertheless, this section could be enhanced by the provision of a rationale for student composition, or classroom management and procedure strategies for student-driven composition project work, both of which may be barriers for teachers uncertain about or unfamiliar with implementing large-scale composition projects.

Much of the book details 15 specific composition projects for use in music classes in Grades 3 through 5. Five compositional genres—Songwriting & Choral Music, Composition & Visual Media, Instrumental Music, Electronic Music & Digital Media, and Music Theatre—are used to classify the projects. They specify *processes* for how the music will be created, not necessarily what the resulting composition *product* will sound like. There are five projects specified for each grade level, though it appears many of the projects could work well with several grades, depending on prior student composition and musical experience. This flexibility allows teachers to use the projects in ways that suit the needs of their students.

Each project section includes a project overview, a list of materials, the estimated time needed to complete the project, discussion questions connecting to the compositional capacities, a sequence of activities, and sketchpages student handouts. This project format is straightforward and easy for a busy teacher to reference while planning for upcoming lessons. Many of the discussion questions could be used as student daily learning objectives to focus them on the goals of specific parts of the composition process. The integration of technology in some composition projects will be a welcome resource for teachers with access to these materials.



Within the composition project outlines, the time needed to complete the projects seems optimistic in several projects, especially the whole-class group projects suggested for use with students who may not have experience composing. The sequence of activities gives enough information for any music teacher to understand the process involved in facilitating the project as suggested, without seeming scripted or overly prescribed. The amount of independent work time suggested for students is very clearly laid out, though it may not give some students enough time to be fully satisfied with their work before being asked to perform or move to another step. The black and white sketchpages are student-friendly and engaging. Some projects include several of them, which could be overwhelming for some students and teachers to manage. The generic sketchpages notation templates, which can be used with any project, provide a consistent structure and serve as a logical framework to help developing composers record their ideas.

Although not claiming to be a curriculum, the sequence of projects in each grade level suggests it would be ideal to use all of the projects. This could be challenging, however, considering the limited amount of time devoted to music in many public schools. For example, the final project for Grade 5 students suggests six to eight working class periods to complete. For teachers who see students only once a week, this singular project could take up nearly a quarter of the

school year, leaving less time for other important types of music learning experiences. Teachers who see students once or twice a week could adapt projects to take less time, choose to use only certain projects, or use the projects in an enrichment or elective setting that provides more instructional time.

Teachers eager to compose with their students and seeking new ideas for large-scale composition projects will find this book an exciting resource. Projects from the book are engaging and teacher-friendly in both organization and content. The increased emphasis across the curriculum on student creation, rather than consumption, along with the Music National Standards emphasis on composition, make this publication a timely resource for those looking for projects that allow students to compose independently.

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## REFERENCES

National Association for Music Education. (2014). *2014 Music Standards*. Retrieved from <http://www.nafme.org/my-classroom/standards/core-music-standards>

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