

Music (sound) education at a distance:

A case for the offline during this online push

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Intro

As we are adjusting to what our next few months will include, music teachers are wondering what their practice might look like at a distance. How do we run our classes from home? Without having to commute, get instruments fixed, organize our rooms, plan for concerts and other events, we might actually have a bit of time for reflection on our practice.

What does music even look and sound like when we are not together? Each of our students are almost definitely still listening to music and quite possibly also practicing music making.

What kind of music and meaning making do our students already practice in their homes?

What kind of listening (and meaning making through sound) do we each do everyday?

What is the sound that we interact with daily at our homes?

Has our interaction with music changed during self isolation? How?

What are the ways in which music teachers can help their students and their families through these times?

What is important to students now?

What are the ways in which making/listening/interacting/composing/thinking about music can be beneficial to us/our students/their families?

Which of our students have access and support for online learning beyond receiving messages?

<http://behindthenumbers.ca/2020/03/27/schooling-for-equity-during-covid-19/> (article from two tdsb principals that addresses this so clearly)

What can we do that requires minimum access (just email for example)?

“The gap between conventional music curricula in North American schools and the musical practices in which most people engage in everyday life is enormous, and it is growing wider at a breathtaking rate.” Bowman (2004).

The above list might be questions that the institution of music education has been asking since before this strange time but perhaps we teachers may be able to navigate them a little more practically than has been done by more academic thinkers and researchers. Maybe this time could be a chance for us to affirm the music education we believe in.

Despite the number of times you may have heard the word “online” our focus here is to suggest work that can also be done offline in any home. We are all teachers and are planning to try the ideas below with our classes.

Priorities: fun, doable, creative, quickly engaging, possible to do offline, connected

Ideas we might try along with our students

These ideas are for elementary, secondary, and/or for integration into more “core” subjects (not that we believe the arts should not be considered “core”). Feel free to adapt, edit, change, add or come up with your own versions of any of the below.

Found sounds:

1. search for the interesting sound objects (sssssss, bonk, boooooiiiiinnng, rickety-rickety, fluuuurrrbb, etc.)
2. use them to compose an ABA piece (opening section, a new section, and back to the opening),
3. (if you can) record your piece and share it (add effects)
4. (if you can) remix another student’s piece (add effects, edits, layers)

Note: The free program soundtrap allows students to collaborate virtually with each other

Make a **soundtrack to your favourite poem** (try adding short sounds, long sounds, both).

How to Play Your World (Rich Marsella) - <https://issuu.com/cmccanada7/docs/hpyw-excerpt>

Sound museum - collect sounds you want to preserve, record, write descriptive poems about them, remix ([some examples here](#))

Music in our home - share how we already make and interact with music at home.

(if you can) Talk to a family member and ask them to teach you a song.

Ask parents or elders to teach you a clapping game from their childhood.

Make a recording of the game.

Teach it to peers online if you can.

Invent new lyrics.

If the game is in another language, translate it, make up new lyrics.

Invent variations.

What kind of musical artifacts can you find in your home?

Instruments? Lyrics? Songbooks? Records?

Learn, describe, share.

Sound games we can play with our family or friends online

Augusto Boal’s [two by three 1, 2, 3 \(replace with sounds\)](#)

[empty repeating canvas II: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 :||](#)

1-10 circle and square.

Write out #s 1-10, circle three, put a square around another three, the circle is one sound and the square is another....count it in! [R. Murray Schafer](#))

clap, double clap (need three or more) - clap keeps going around circle, a double clap changes the direction, a foot stomp

I hear with my little ear (describe without labelling)

Create **sound treasure hunts** (“find me a sound that goes from higher to lower with a pop at the end..”)

Hum switch - on cue each person hums a note, cue a breath, then come back on another persons note

Make your own drum kit.

You are gonna need a boom (a kick - low/deep sound), a bap (a snare-louder and higher), and tick (hi-hat - even higher but not too loud).

(try one line at a time or combine)

Beat One

boom, bap, boom, bap
tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick

Beat Two

boom bap boom boom bap
tick tick tick tick tick tick tick tick

Make up your own beat!!!

Instrument building is a great idea: a couple of easy ones are (based on the work of Lili Romero):

1. a bottles xylophone: (fill up glass bottles with different quantities of water (tuned if you like) and then play/compose and reflect
2. Balloon skin drums (take two different sized cans, stretch a balloon over the open end. Also you can play the closed end with a stick. You can tie them together with some tape. (this is a good instrument to practice rhythm reading and writing with low and high sounds.
3. Toilet paper kazoo: take a finished toilet paper roll (just the cardboard thing), cut through it, cut a 1 inch square in the middle. Roll it into a 1 inch tube. Cut a 2 inch square from a thin plastic bag put it over the hole and fasten it with two rubber bands. Sing into it.
4. Make a pan pipe with used markers. Cut the markers with a saw (parental/guardian supervision needed) in different lengths, take out the filling and assemble together using tape. You can give students specific lengths if you want a specific scale. Learning how to make sound has a bit of a learning curve but it shouldn't be hard for kids 8 and up.
5. A trumpet using a piece of hose (any kind that is not too wide, garden hose is ideal). Cut a piece of hose (about 15 to 20 inches). Cut a plastic bottle in half. Use the half with the opening and screw or secure it onto one edge of the hose. On the other half you can try blowing into it just like that or use something to make it smoother. You can use another bottle spout as your mouthpiece.

Playlist to help process

Make a Spotify playlist. Make a selection of 10 songs that help you through these times or reflect the way you feel. Write a paragraph about each one and why you added it to your playlist. (you can make one on spotify, apple music or even youtube, you can also do it with LPs, tapes, CDs if you still have those).

Lyric writing

Can you remember the lyrics to your favourite song? Maybe just the chorus. Write them somewhere and add artistic decorations. Can you change a word or a line? Why are these words important to you? Can you sing these lyrics to a new tune? Can you speak them dramatically? What's the best song title you know? Why do you like it? If you were to write an important lyric for a famous band to use, what would it be and what band would you choose?

Could print out/write out lyrics to pre-existing songs then eliminate words/create erasure poetry.

Favourite Home Sounds

What is your favourite sound in your home? Choose something to tap with (eg. a pencil) and search until you find it. Now change your mallet (eg. a wooden spoon). Is your favourite sound still the same or is it new? How about a feather? A quarter? A spatula? Your pinkie? Which sound was the softest/loudest/longest/shortest/most interesting/most tonal? Does it depend on what you're tapping or what you're tapping with?

What sounds can you hear from your window? Make a list and see if they change each day or at different times of the day.

Where is the quietest place in your home? Can you sit in silence and listen to your breath? Can you sit beside some else in your home and make a list of the sounds they make? What about your pet?

Genre Quest

Make a list of your favourite songs to listen to and beside each title, list the genre. What's your favourite genre? Challenge yourself to find a song in a new genre. What genre of music do the other people in your house like best? Maybe they can recommend some listening to you. Why do you think you like some genres and not others? What kind of music did you grow up listening to? When did you discover your favourite genre? Write about that discovery and what the music means to you.

Sounds in stories

Reflect on and add sounds to story books (do this with a parent, guardian, elder, or friend if you can)

1. Pick a story book you like
2. Decide who are the main characters
3. Pick a sound object/instrument to represent each character.
4. Take turns between being the narrator and making the character's sounds.

A variation could be: be the "[foley](#) artist" of the story. Pick the most important sounds, choose objects to reproduce those sounds and then create the sound effects to the story.

There is room there to think about loudness/softness, timbre, long/short, fast/slow, etc...

Recreate fairy tales/stories just using found sounds and your voices

Musical Lives

interview their parents/caretakers about their musical lives. Who did they listen to when they were your age? Why did they like that artist? Did they see them live? What's their favorite record? What do they think of that artist now? Other questions? Write a short paragraph or record yourself speaking about what you learned.

Sound Zines

(a possible way to bring all of these things together/culminating task):

Students could make zines, journals, or time capsules that document the “sounds of quarantine”, their reflections on this huge disruption in routine, playlists, etc. This could take on more trad musical activities and include some sort of practice log for kids that have instrument access - but I like the idea of it more as a way of relating creatively to this situation. Whether they believe it or not right now, they will probably find it really interesting to read about this time, in their own words/through sound reflections & creations, when they're older.

Activities could include many of the things already discussed here and be a good cross-curriculum project with English. Some things that could fit nicely into a zine format:

- Playlist/Playlist journal entry - relationship between mood and playlist choices, rationale for choices etc. Playlist could have a theme to go with daily/weekly news events to tie into Media unit in English?
- Listening notes on Sounds in different areas of the home - soundscape creation tie-in? Recreate a favourite room/spot your apartment?
- Graphic score activity - draw to [the sounds to hear](#), to music, create a drawing that evokes sounds ([Schafer's Snowforms](#))
- Interviews of family members about musical lives/musical preferences (took this idea from whoever wrote it above) - could even be a simple questionnaire i.e: what song makes you nostalgic, what music is best to work to, what song is best to do chores to, etc
- “Meditation”/ear cleaning sound notes - journal/note/reflect on furthest/closest/nicest/worst/loudest/softest sound.

I think some crafty type A kids would love to do this by hand and occupy some time with the actual cutting and pasting element. These could be evaluated through photos. Digital Zines or even more of a “blog” format would suit other kids. The digital option leaves more room for sharing or collaborating with other kids - including links to playlists, uploading recordings from around home/of composition activities.

Zine Links/resources:

-Zine making tutorial

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=ZHK2ZufRb9A>

-A Brief History of Zines

<https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/88911/brief-history-zines>

-The Punk Aesthetic

<https://designobserver.com/feature/the-art-of-punk-and-the-punk-aesthetic/36708>

-Broken Pencil Magazine: “How to Make a Zine” (Toronto based magazine - this is just their list of resources, but the magazine itself is worth checking out!)

<https://brokenpencil.com/gettingstarted/how-to-make-a-zine/>

Coda

We feel that these above ideas cover our ministry curriculum just as much as, if not more than, learning a choir piece or learning to play all twelve major scales on the tuba. These ideas are also all fully possible to evaluate using the assessment categories in our curricula. We are thinking that approaches like this might also actually come closer to what we wish our students to experience and remember from this time and even from public music education as a whole.

Please adapt and change any of the above. Also, if you would like, add your own ideas as comments to this post.