

# Symphony of Understanding: Engaging Activities for Empathy

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Peace-Building through Music Education

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## Introduction & Background

The ability to show empathy means the ability to listen, to understand, to heal, and to collaborate. It is pivotal in a young person's development to learn this skill because it is not something we just have or lack. Felicity Laurence writes, "music can enable people, somehow, to 'get inside ' each other's minds, feel each other's suffering, and recognize each other's shared humanity" (Laurence, 2015, p. 14). Music has the profound ability to build connections across borders, share stories between different cultures and experiences, convey and invoke emotional responses, and resolve conflict. In a world in which conflict is ongoing, we can do our part to teach young minds to listen, to understand, and to grow through musical experiences.

Olivier Urbain shows the multifaceted uses of music for peace-building in "Music and Conflict Transformation." In chapter 2, Cynthia Cohen states, "“Music is well suited to the work of reconciling adversaries because it can facilitate communication, understanding, and empathy across differences of all kinds” (Cohen, 2015, p. 26). As music teachers, we have the opportunity to facilitate activities, discussions, games, and "musicking" (Small, 1998, p. 14) specifically designed to promote non-violent communication, redress injustices, mourn losses, and "take the world to the world" (WOMAD, 2017), share cultural stories and traditions etc. within our schools and communities. By integrating moments of peace-building in the classroom, students become more engaged, trust each other, break down their barriers, and thereby, “contribute to the creation of a culture of peace” (Lopez Vinader, 2015, p. 147).

In my public-school music program, I am given a curriculum that includes ensemble-based classes that work all year to put on two to three performances, often leaving little to no room for peace-building activities. In order to have an ensemble that is connected to each other,

works as a team, and has a deeper understanding of the music and each other, students must learn to empathize with each other. In Chapter 4, Johan Galtung says, “The step to peace does not come by itself. It has to be thought, felt, and worked out.” (Galtung, 2015, p. 60). As music teachers, we need to intentionally build peace within our classrooms if we expect our students to understand and listen to each other in their ensembles. Performing in an ensemble takes trust, vulnerability, and listening, all qualities that need to be built within the rehearsal setting. Galtung later questions, “Maybe that is where art and peace really find each other and interconnect most deeply: They both address both human faculties” (ibid.). Through musical peace-building activities, we can allow for a space of non-violent communication, understanding, respect, and healing. This space goes even further when the school community is brought in. While reading through mine and my colleagues’ forum posts from chapters 1-8, I noticed that many of us have had meaningful musical moments within authentic, collaborative, and respectful musical activities. For example, Katelyn Levine's "Free Improvisation" class in High school expected students to listen to their peers, Christina Shaw's experience singing "Secret Tunnel" surrounded by Avatar fans at the Live concert engaged the community in that “feeling of oneness” (Stein, 2015, p.18), and Allie Costanza mourning the loss of a friend while listening to a performing ensemble allowed her and her community to heal through music. Meaningful musical moments are imperative to shaping young empathetic students. That is why my peace-building project is "Mini-Games, Warm-ups, and Activities for Peace"; a collection of small to medium games, activities and discussions designed to fit into the ensemble-based curriculum, while fostering empathy, building connections within the school and the community, and enhancing ensemble performances. Whether it's a short body percussion warm-up game, or a discussion about the composer's intent for a piece of repertoire we are learning, this collection gives fun, meaningful,

adaptable ideas for any ensemble-based classroom struggling to find the time for peace-building activities, as well as ways to extend peaceful music into the community.

### **Project Description**

Traditional performing ensembles in public schools often follow a similar structure: warm-ups, skill-building, rehearsal of repertoire, and assessment. With goals such as concerts and performances always looming, ensemble teachers often get lost in the concert preparation and put peace-building on the back-burner. The purpose of this project is to enhance the daily schedule of traditional ensemble-based classrooms by incorporating mini-games, activities, and discussions designed to foster peace, empathy, collaboration, and mutual understanding within the school and the community. Music has a way of naturally bringing people together, whether it's through "collective vulnerability" (Jordanger, 2008, p.131) or even synchronized breathing within an ensemble. However, intentionally including peace-building activities for specific conflict transformations fits seamlessly into the traditional ensemble centered classroom. Whether at the elementary or secondary level, small or large ensembles, new students or experienced students, and instrumental or vocal ensembles, students must be connected through music which can only occur in a safe and peaceful setting. Through activities from Musicians Without Borders including songwriting, active listening, drumming and improvisation, and discourse, students in ensemble classes grow to trust in each other more, feel unified across their differences, and further express themselves through the art of music and movement, without sacrificing, and instead enhancing, cumulative performances.

This project is designed to occur over the course of a year based on the time-table of the teacher.

Lesson	Activity	Description	When and Why?
Activity 1 Week 1 (~15 minutes)	DRUM CIRCLE	Students are seated in a circle with percussion (instruments, body percussion, or found sounds). Students and teacher go back and forth creating rhythms, sounds, and playing musical games.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● To establish a fun and safe environment</li> <li>● To engage students in active listening and participation</li> <li>● To allow students to be creative</li> <li>● To increase the trust between participants and leader</li> </ul>
Activity 2 Week 2 (~30 minutes)	“MY LIFE” RAP ACTIVITY	Students work together to write lyrics about their lives and rap it over a “beat” of their choosing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● To foster intercultural communication</li> <li>● To create empathy between students</li> <li>● When students need to connect and resolve conflicts</li> <li>● To promote acceptance within students, their families, and the community</li> </ul>
Activity 3 Week 3 (~20 minutes)	ACTIVE LISTENING AND RESPONDING	Students actively listen to a piece of music (opportunities for different listening examples) and engage in movement or art based on emotions evoked.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● To allow for musical expression</li> <li>● To connect other disciplines of art</li> <li>● To connect visual representations to music</li> <li>● To break down barriers between students</li> <li>● To allow for social activism</li> </ul>
Activity 4 Week 4 (~15 minutes)	HUMAN ORCHESTRA	Students think of a vocal or body percussion sound and organize themselves into sub-groups: short sounds and long sounds and follow the conductor to create an improvisatory performance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● To build connections at the beginning of the school year</li> <li>● When students need a laugh</li> <li>● To establish a safe and fun environment</li> <li>● To break down barriers</li> <li>● To warm-up bodies and voices</li> </ul>
Activity 5 Pre-Concert (~15-30 minutes)	STUDENT LED DISCUSSION	Teacher begins a discussion by showing a video or example of a collaborative performance and start discussion amongst students about how to adapt to their own performances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● To give students a voice</li> <li>● To foster nonviolent communication</li> <li>● Collaboration within all parties of a performance (audience, director)</li> <li>● To dive deeper into meaning of pieces performing</li> <li>● To engage with the music in a new way</li> </ul>

### **Activity 1- Drum Circle**

In Chapter 11 of *Music and Conflict Transformation*, Maria Elena Lopez Vinader says, “We have the rhythm of our hearts and of our brainwaves, as well as the rhythm of other internal organs...which we share with all human beings” which makes rhythm a very helpful tool for growth through music (Vinader, 2008, p. 153). Drum circles have been used as a way to connect through rhythm in many different formats, styles, places, reasons, etc. and can be used in the classroom as a fun and musical way for students to be creative, express themselves, and collaborate.

This activity is meant to be performed in the first week of the peace-building event. At the beginning of the class period, lead students in warming up their bodies by stretching, moving, and exploring. Possible variations could include using this activity as a “cool-down” activity to allow students to leave the classroom feeling successful.

This is an adaptation of Musicians Without Borders activity as described by Dr. Caron Collins:

1. Start with a gentle warm up either sitting or standing.
  - a. Stretch arms, shoulders, neck, encourage movement where needed.
2. Form a circle with drums/percussion in the center. Have students find an instrument and sit.
  - a. Can be handed out for younger students with a song.
  - b. Can also be a found sound activity with no percussion. Use this time to have students find sounds they enjoy and return to the circle.
3. Get to know the instrument.

- a. Give 15-30 seconds to rub, scratch, tap, soft hits, palm hit, finger slaps, etc. as a warm-up.
4. Call and response to get students engaged and listening and to allow students to get used to the instrument.
  - a. Could be a great time to work on tricky rhythms from your repertoire or introduce new concepts like syncopation.
5. Centering rhythm
  - a. Choose a sound that will bring students back to “rest position”.
6. Here are a few examples of different activities to do within the drum circle. You can choose as many or as few to use as would fit in your lesson plan.
  - a. Follow the Code (better for older students)
    - i. Assign a rule to a rhythm, i.e. quarter note moves to the person next to you, 2 eighth notes switches directions, 2 sixteenths and an eight skips the person next to you) Follow the tempo of a metronome. If you play at the wrong time or out of time, sit down/out until there is one winner.
    - ii. “Clapping Game” - Joel Copeland  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddDCwH9QK2U&t=143s>
  - b. Hot Potato
    - i. Show the group a regular pattern like “hot potato (hot po-ta-to) to play and have fun with.
  - c. Forbidden rhythm
    - i. Create a rhythm for the participants to NOT play back during call and response. Place it in between a regular pattern (i.e. 'hot potato").

- d. Guess the Leader
  - i. Invite one person to go outside - the investigator, while one person in the group is chosen to be the drum leader. When the investigator returns, the drum leader will be responsible for changing the pattern subtly for the group and the investigator has to guess who is leading the circle.  
  
Determine how many tries the investigator will have to correctly guess who the drum leader is.
- e. Chain Drumming
  - i. Starting with the facilitator, play a simple solo pattern and demonstrate that the solo chain will pass around the circle. Invite everyone to play a solo.
  - ii. <https://youtu.be/UwlsFuUB5zI>
- f. Create a break-
  - i. Get the groups to create a drum break. Demonstrate by playing a pattern (however long) then vocalizing an equivalent word rhythm (i.e. "I like pizza, I like pie, gimme some, gimme some, gimme some more").  
  
Allocate a time frame. Bring them back to share then teach their breaks to the whole group. Integrate by playing a regular pattern then giving each smaller group the opportunity to play their break in time.

***Putting into performance:***

There are lots of ways to bring this activity into a performance to share with the community. For example:



- Use this drum activity to introduce a piece of repertoire that includes percussion in order to engage the students and audiences in more non-western traditional performances.
- Teach the audience a repeating rhythmic motive and have them perform with the ensemble to make a collaborative experience for both the performers and the audience. Secondary level students may be able to take a leadership role in teaching the rhythmic passages.
- Have the audience keep the beat while students improvise rhythms on percussion instruments.

### **Activity 2- “My Life” Rap Activity**

This activity is based on the video linked below from MWB My Life: Rap Workshop linked here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTXxKXoOIgk>

A very adaptable activity, this is meant for students to compose lyrics for raps on the topic of their choosing. In the MWB video, we see people from all different countries sharing their stories of overcoming the prison system and taking control of their lives. However, this activity is adaptable to any sort of social justice stance, occurring conflict, or any other topic you feel your students would benefit from reflecting on.

This activity is to be performed in the second week of the peace-building event. It is meant for students to become vulnerable and share their stories with their peers, further deepening their trust in one another. This activity can be performed with any age group, though elementary students may need more guidance.

Because this activity is a bit longer, this activity can be used at the end of the class period as a fun cool-down activity. Perhaps after a more formal skill building lesson.

Here are the potential steps you can take

1. Students choose their groups (I prefer it this way so students feel more comfortable getting more vulnerable with their lyrics, though you can curate groups of your choosing based on the topic of your lesson).
2. Give them guiding questions such as:
  - a. What is a change you would like to see in \_\_\_?
  - b. What steps do you need to take to \_\_\_?
  - c. How and why will you \_\_\_?
  - d. How did \_\_\_ make you feel?
3. Encourage discourse and collaboration.
4. Have students rap their lyrics for the class and/or share with another group/individual.

***Putting into performance:***

- Students perform their final songs in concert.
- Include links in the performance program to recordings of student work.
- Engage the audience in songwriting by asking for lyrics, suggestions, and feedback.

**Activity 3- Active Listening and Responding**

Listening is the primary way we interact with music. Both inside and outside the classroom, it is important to teach our students how to develop their listening skills through active listening. Active listening happens when students listen to music and perform another task. For example, dancing, drawing, painting, engaging in continuous fluid motion, or even full body relaxation (lying down with eyes closed).

This activity works with students of any age. In the third week of this peace-building event, have students perform this activity at the beginning of class to encourage movement and listening to warm-up their bodies and minds. Here are some ways to adapt this to your own classroom.

1. Dalcroze eurythmics

- a. Play/improvise music on an instrument of your choice.
- b. Encourage movement around the room based on the sounds heard (i.e. long slow movements for legato, quick short movements for staccato, match the emotion of the song to the emotion of the movement).
- c. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0LcXoptEr4>

2. Improvisational Dancing

- a. Play various genres of music (classical, pop, theater, etc.) and have students change their movements based on the emotion the song evokes.

3. Expression through Art

- a. Through the Guided Imagery with Music (GIM) procedure (Vinader, pg. 133), encourage students to find a spot around the room where they can be comfortable. Lead optional breathing exercises for optimal relaxation.
- b. Play a series of pieces of music and have students visualize a story, image, or piece of art in their heads.
- c. After the song is over (or the lesson must continue) have students create their visual with any art medium (drawing, painting, comics, sculpture, etc.) depending on the resources available to you.

4. Total relaxation

- a. Helen Bonny states, “a deep state of relaxation, which gives the possibility of entering into another state of consciousness which allows the person to heal wounds from the past, reach peak experiences and enhance one's creativity”.
- b. Have students find a spot around the room where they can get comfortable.
- c. Play a piece of music of your choice.
- d. Turn off the lights.
- e. Allow for active listening.
- f. Discussion may follow this activity if time permits.

***Putting into performance:***

- Encourage active listening within the audience by having them close their eyes during a concert and visualize a movie scene, piece of art, or dance.
- Encourage the audience to get out of their seats and allow their body to move however they deem fit.
- Play a recording of students performing this activity in class during the concert.

**Activity 4- Human Orchestra**

The Human Orchestra is a great way for students to become creative and silly, while still remaining musical. As a “conductor-lead” activity, the conductor has the ability to accommodate on the spot based on the needs of the students. In the fourth week of the peace-building event, after students' bodies, breath, and voices (if in a choral ensemble) are warmed-up, lead students in this activity with as little talking as possible to reinforce total engagement. The Human Orchestra activity can be enacted with any age group or ensemble type.

This is another Musicians Without Borders activity that functions as described by Dr. Caron Collins:

1. Gather a small group of students, friends, or family members (in this case, your performing ensemble). Each person thinks of a vocal or body percussion sound. The conductor forms two sub-groups: the people with short sounds and the people with long sounds, then gives non-verbal conducting directions such as start, stop, louder, quieter and combines the groups into an improvisatory performance.
2. The conductor can give a specific rhythm to the short sounds group through visual directions. For example, the conductor could motion by pointing one finger at a flattened hand in the rhythm he/she would like them to play. Divide the groups as you like, you could invite solos or duos, etc. by cuing them in/out of the performance.
3. Remember to include everyone! If doing this with younger or high energy participants consider getting everyone started before dividing the groups (entrances/exits) so that everyone is occupied right from the start. Have fun!
4. Invite others to be the conductor - this can open a great conversation about what we need from our leaders and what leaders need for the people we are trying to lead.
5. Discussion post-activity.

Possible Variations of this activity:

- Instrumental ensembles can create sounds using their instruments.
- Incorporate elements of repertoire in the human orchestra such as rhythms, melodies, dynamics, and lyrics.

- Use visuals to lead the orchestra such as a video of a roller-coaster moving up and down to show dynamics, a video of different animals to show a change in articulation, different colors and textures, etc.
- Use this activity to teach a song by rote, and transition into repertoire learning of said piece.
- Change up the “conductor” to allow students to take on a leadership role and experiment with the sounds of the ensemble.

***Putting into performance:***

- Perform the ensemble-created piece of music at the concert.
  - To further engage the audience, give direction to the listeners to perform movements (i.e. put your hands up when you hear A and put your hands on your shoulders when you hear B).
- Engage the audience in improvisation along with students.
- Split the audience into two groups (short and long sounds) and switch to make a more collaborative performance.

**Activity 5- Student-Led Discussion**

This activity is based on the collaborative compositions of chapter 15 author, June Boyce-Tillman. This activity is best geared for High School and Middle School students. This activity is meant to be enacted closer to the concert in preparation for performance. When students have a good understanding of the piece of repertoire, allow for further discussion and deeper understanding of the music, intentions of the composer, and impact on the audience.

1. Begin by showing students a video of an impactful collaborative performance. Here are a few examples:
  - a. “A Million Dreams” 2023 NYSSMA Winter Conference  
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1P0HUp9gK1Zqz3Qz4WjXAJ7qz1j9UCoTt/view?usp=sharing>
  - b. “Weather” TCNJ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0P41Sev78A>
  - c. Jacob Collier “The Audience Choir”  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3KsF309XpJo>
2. Open the floor for discussion.
  - a. What did you like about that performance? What made it impactful? What did you not like? What would we change if we were doing that performance? Etc.
3. Try to allow discussion to be student-centered. Encourage respectful “calling out” and reinforce the “no wrong answers” ideal.
4. Lead students to discuss one of your current repertoire pieces.
  - a. What message are we trying to convey with this song? How can we use visuals to achieve that? How can we include the audience? Is there room to go “off-script” from the music?
5. Discuss different ideas and come to a decision (whether by vote, or teacher’s choice) about what you will incorporate into your next performance.

***Putting into performance:***

- Students speak at the concert about their experience before the performance.
- Include links to student responses from the discussion for the audience to read during the performance.

## **Helpful Hints**

This section is intended to be helpful for any teacher intending to implement any of these activities into your classrooms, schools, and communities. To make your activities successful, remember the 5 principles of Musicians Without Borders which is to provide:

### **1. Safe-spaces for participants**

- a. Remind students to always be respectful of others' voices, lyrics, responses, and remind them that there are no wrong answers when it comes from your heart.

### **2. Experiences of inclusion**

- a. Ensure all members of the choir have an active role in music making.

### **3. Opportunities for creativity**

- a. Remind students to be open minded, try new things, and step out of their comfort zones. This is a safe-space and creativity is encouraged.

### **4. Equal treatment of all group members**

- a. Ensure every student's voice is heard.

### **5. High quality music making**

- a. Provide helpful feedback to the students and have them engage in self-reflection throughout every activity.

## **Conclusion**

These activities fosters empathy, awareness, unity, diversity, mutual respect, build connections, and promote dialogue within my music classroom. By incorporating peace-building activities into the daily flow of the class, students become more engaged, have more fun making



and experiencing music, and build connections across various boundaries. The music room is a safe-space, and often the home, of many music students. Continuing to include peace-building activities in my classroom not only encourages students to be creative, build connections, and resolve conflict, I also hear a difference in my performing ensembles. When students trust each other enough to fully express themselves in ensemble pieces, they connect on a deeper level than just hitting the right notes and rhythms. I encourage you to keep discussions open and honest, reinforce creativity and acceptance, and have fun!

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