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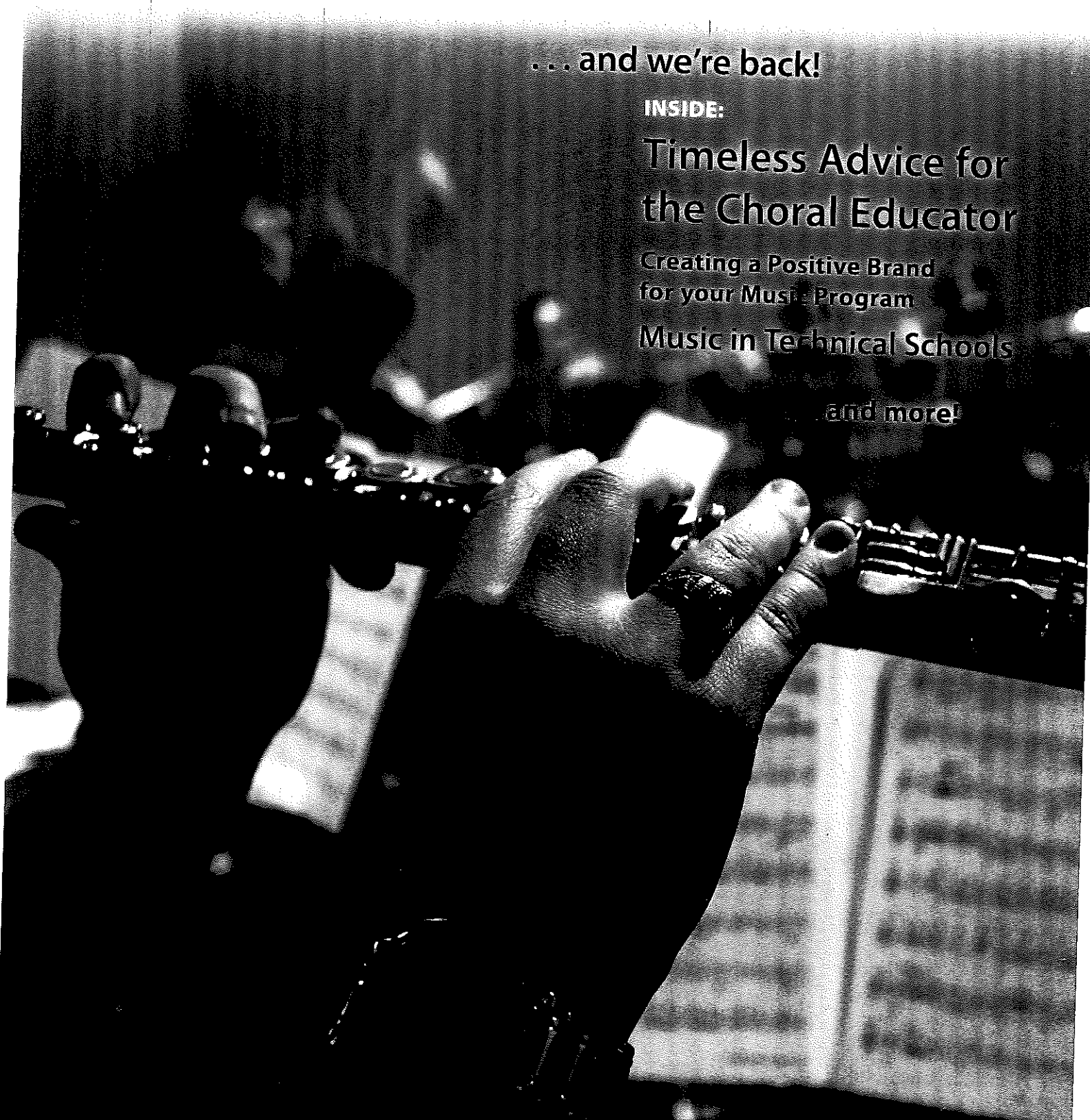
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Using Hip-Hop in the Classroom:

Connecting Your Students to Music Composition

By: *Meaghan O'Connor, Barnstable Public Schools*

During my first few years of teaching music history and music technology, I quickly learned that teaching music history backwards—starting from the present day and moving back in time—was key to engaging students in my curriculum. Upon arriving to class, students would always anticipate their “do now” assignment, or what I referred to as the “Genre of the Day.” They would constantly ask, “When are we going to do hip-hop?” I started thinking about why I had never been presented hip-hop in an academic setting. My former teachers must not have found the content classroom appropriate or of musical merit. Or maybe they simply did not have the materials, expertise, or support to effectively teach hip-hop in the music room. I quickly realized it was the latter.

I started exploring how I could teach hip-hop in the most pedagogically appropriate manner. I made a decision to teach the history of hip-hop, emphasizing themes of social justice often present in the genre, rather than the derogatory and graphic examples one can frequently find on the radio. This provided an opportunity to have highly intellectual conversations with my students about why artists choose to write about certain topics, connecting these topics to contemporary society and current events. My research, mini projects, and class activities have amounted to four major projects. All projects, rubrics, and handouts can be found on the online software platform MusicFirst, under the heading “Hip-Hop Unit.”

The Personal Project

First, students need to learn about the software they are using, including several important techniques. Whether using GarageBand, Logic, Soundation, or Soundtrap, the concept is the same. Students need to learn how to import songs and audio clips/samples into the program.

I first ask students to choose their four favorite songs, regardless of genre, and teach them how to import these into the software. Students love this project because they not only get to listen to their own favorite songs, but also learn about their peers. Importantly, as a critical component of this lesson, students learn how to record audio, in this case usually vocals. A descriptive narrative is assigned, intended to support student reasoning, asking them to explain their song choices. Students are instructed to listen for and identify the musical characteristics (taught in previous lessons) of their songs, and to use these characteristics as a basis for analysis.

The students answer questions such as: Does the song have a soaring, expressive melody? Does it have a rebellious, loud beat? How do these musical elements or characteristics influence one’s memory of the song? How do they make you feel? Why did you pick this song? Additionally, students learn basic sound editing techniques, including cut and paste and adjusting dynamic levels, as well as how to both import and record audio. All of these skills are key to making a successful

hip-hop track, and all are learned within the context of this first project. The final student product is a multitrack song compilation, combining the student self-written narrative and the four selected songs.

The Sample Project

Have any of your students ever heard a familiar melody, beat, or lyric in a song they have never heard before? Students constantly ask me, “Where do Jay-Z and Kanye get all their instrumental backing tracks?” Sampling is a music composition technique that is used feverishly in today’s music, especially hip-hop and rap. The art of sampling takes a small clip or lyrical line from an existing song and incorporates it into a new and unique composition. This presents an opportunity for your students to compose with some of their favorite artists!

Students are encouraged to use a short sample of their choice (school appropriate of course), of 5 seconds or less, to create an original instrumental track. This is done while promoting creativity and discouraging a mashup or cover. One of my favorite websites for this exercise is www.whosampled.com, a reference which provides a list of “samples” used in almost any song imaginable in an easy to use format. This allows students to explore how hip-hop artists use “sampling” in their songs. Prompting questions for students might be: “Why do you think the artist chose the sample(s) they did?” and/or “How did the artist specifically manipulate the sample(s) in order to make it different or unique?” Have students think about the results. Ask students to consider how they could manipulate a sample in order to fit their needs as an artist. The final student product is an original instrumental composition, combining a sample of their choice with sequenced and/or recorded tracks.

The Hip-Hop Project

At this point, students are ready to head to the studio and finally make some awesome original, self-composed tracks! Students learn about form and are encouraged to move beyond the use of just samples to create original tracks. This project takes students through the essentials of composing a standard hip-hop song, with a focus on the instrumental tracks. From “old school” hip-hop to current radio hits, students explore differences and constants throughout the history of the genre, comparing and contrasting different works from different eras. To understand the overall picture, I created a slideshow that guides students through the historical background, cultural significance, and musical aspects of hip-hop. Students are also provided with a list of instrumentals and clean rap lyrics to look at form. While looking at these examples, students will discover the basics of form, typical hip-hop concepts, and common instrumentations, including the process of composing a “hook” (i.e. melody), harmonic accompaniment, bass line, and beat. The final student product is an original instrumental composition, written, sequenced, and recorded without loops or pre-recorded samples.

The Social Justice Project

This project provides an opportunity to have a conversation with students about the concept of social justice. This concept can best be defined as the fair and equitable treatment of all groups of people across society, and includes issues relating to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, the freedom of speech, and/or gender and sexual identity. Here, the term “social” is defined as a person, or group of people, along with their defining characteristics. The term “justice” is defined as fairness and/or equality, depending on the exact context. Social justice issues often relate to matters of government and policy, as well as cultural attitudes, and are more substantial than a single individual struggling with an individual challenge.

Students select songs to analyze from a provided list and following prompts such as: 1) what decisions the artist made in order to convey the overall message and feeling of the song; 2) what they think was the intended result of these decisions; 3) what they think the overall effect of the song is; and 4) what “social justice” issues the artist is attempting to bring attention to. Students also are prompted to discuss musical characteristics such as instrumentation, lyrical topics, groove, beat, tempo, and dynamics in their evaluations of each song.

Next, students are provided a worksheet to guide their research of a topic of their choice, to be approved by the teacher. In this way, students organically produce topics of study that are important to them, which may vary based on the location, interest, and background of students. Topics my students have chosen in the past include: Bullying, Immigration Rights, Global Access to Education, LGTBQA (Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Bisexual, Questioning, Asexual/All) Rights, World Peace, World Hunger, and Poverty. It’s important that students are aware that artists gain knowledge on their topics by educating themselves on issues that are affecting their audiences, communities, and/or themselves. This awareness is often termed “street cred,” short for “street credit.” Students need to understand that these lyrics and beliefs actually originate somewhere, and that it is essential to do the necessary research if one wants to be a successful, and believable, artist. It’s also important to understand that artists make distinct musical decisions in order to produce an overall message. Students should recognize that many artists use music as their platform to speak out against or for social, political, and/or economic rights. The research aspect of this project can be easily modified into a cross curricular project with a specific Social Studies teacher or across the Social Studies department.

Next, students are instructed to create lyrics based on their research. The lyrics will provide awareness for both the student

and the class as a whole in a positive, progressive manner. The whole idea of the project is for students to create awareness of the selected topic. Lyrics can also be related to poetry, and can be easily modified into a cross curricular project with the English department. While writing lyrics, it is also crucial for students to consider rhyming. A rhyming scheme can provide guidance and structure for the students in their efforts to write the lyrics for a compelling story.

Once their lyrics are completed, students are ready to apply their knowledge of sampling, composing, sequencing, and recording to their Social Justice Project. Students are instructed to create an instrumental within a specific form, with the correlation of their lyrics and their instrumentation as their primary goal. Voila, a social justice hip-hop song! Students can take their song home, share it with their friends and family, learn about the process of songwriting, using various music technology platforms and resources, and explore issues of significance in contemporary society within a genre they have a genuine interest in.

Relating to students is not always easy. As music educators, we can and should utilize our content area to connect with students on a powerful level. Using different genres as a tool to teach universal musical concepts is key to being relevant to our students and their learning experience. •



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