

SYMPHONY PLASTIQUE: The Exploration of Pre Instruments in the Elementary Classroom

by Derrick Crow

The Symphony Plastique is a exploration of the new beginner instruments available. The Pbuzz, Dood, and Toot are a few of the new pre instrument instruments available. Plastic instruments have been thought of as lesser or novelty quality, in many ways the material and technology has produced inferior instruments, but in recent years, the material and technology has produced increasingly functional instruments. We will explore why pre instruments are a better alternative for elementary classrooms, why recorders are currently used, and how the Pbuzz, Dood, and Toot are the better choice. Before we can establish the value of pre-instrument instruments a clear and concise definition must be understood.



Before continuing, the operational definition pre-instruments must be clearly established. First, pre-instrument processes basic characteristics of western classical instruments, and use these characteristics to prepare young players to advance to the more technically advanced instruments. Second, pre-instruments share specific pedagogical skills with their classical counterparts. Finally, the instrument should play chromatically. For the purposes of this discussion the Dood, Toot, and Pbuzz are the specific instruments used to represent pre instruments. The Dood is a simple clarinet type instrument that uses a reed and recorder fingerings, the Toot is a flute stand-in that can either use a flute head joint or a simplified head joint and uses recorder fingerings, and the Pbuzz uses a brass mouthpiece and a simple slide to change pitches. Recorders do fit many of these criteria, and this is what has facilitated their inclusion in the elementary curriculum.

While recorders do match some of the criteria of the operational definition, the embouchure and the breath support do not have a direct relationship with any woodwind or brass instrument. This presents the question, why was recorders brought into the elementary classroom. We have included recorder for three main reasons. First, to improve musical literacy, second, build inner hearing, and third, teaches the fine motor skills needed for performing music.

While singing allows the student to merely follow the melodic line, playing an instrument force the musician to read the music. Playing a recorder requires knowing which fingering to use and eliminated the forgiveness of sliding into the pitch. The repetition of practicing fingerings forces the memorization of note names and their position in the staff. The movement from following to reading is a major milestone on the path music literacy. The next major concept of reading is being able to develop of inner ear.

Once you are able to read you have to be able to discern pitch, and be able to distinguish the relative distance between notes. Recorder forces the player to listen. If a performer blows to hard or to soft, the pitch will bend away from center. The pitch can be bent by not covering the finger holes properly. These two skills help young musicians develop their inner ear. These previous reasons are cognitive based reasons, but the final reason to include recorder in the elementary classroom is the development of gross motor and fine motor skills associated with musical performance.

Playing recorder develops fundamental physical abilities to play a musical instrument. You must maintain an embouchure, move fingers independently and together, and proper body posture. Each of these can be taught through recorder, and it is a path to future musicianship, but there are difficulties in transferring skills from recorder to woodwind and brass instruments.

While recorders do offer many ways to introduce fundamental skills for beginning musicians, it is not without problems. There are two glaring foundational skills that share neither a direct relationship nor are skills upon which the student may scaffolded upon as they develop as musicians.

Correct embouchure is essential for good tone production. A proper recorder mouth shape is slightly similar to a woodwind embouchure, but a sound can be produced on a recorder with out correct or consistent placement of mouthpiece, tone hole, instrument position, or even a tight seal on the mouthpiece. These variables negate any ability to transfer embouchure technique and limit the benefits of recorder as way of developing an inner ear. To develop inner hearing a replicated action must create similar results, and if making changes in embouchure, body posture, and instrument carriage do not change the sound or pitch, then the connection between the inner ear and finite muscle control of the embouchure. The connection between auditory understanding and musculature adaptation is a foundational skill in tone production of all western classical instruments.

Anyone who has the pleasure to enter a classroom while recorders are being taught will understand the effects of using normal breath support. The instruments are loud, squeaky, and shrill. The proper breath support for a recorder is highly restrained and a great of control, but a good tone can be accomplished with improper breathing. The recorder uses less air than all woodwind and brass instruments. While it could be argued the oboe uses a similar amount of air, there is no comparison between the back pressure created by playing. These factors could cause students to develop bad habits, such as clavicular breathing, which could delay their future growth by making them unlearn the bad habit and relearn the skill properly.

It becomes clear that teaching recorder could slow children's musical growth. That alone is a sufficient enough reason to explore and introduce new methodological practices for introducing foundational skills of western instrumentation.

The Pbuzz, Dood, and Toot offer solutions for the issues presented by recorder, and in multiple ways offer a more direct link for the beginning musician. The main benefits are the instruments are uniformed, the embouchure for these pre-instruments present a closer relationship with western classical instruments, and breath support is more representative of how brass and woodwind instruments react, and finally there is a greater consistency between instruments.

The pre instruments are more consistent between each instrument in quality of production and intonation. A recurring problem many music teachers have is parents will find the most economical instrument they can buy. A cheap instrument can have issues with intonation, blending, tone production, and consistency through the pitch intervals. The Dood, Toot, and Pbuzzes are internally consistent between pitches, are centered on A440, and blend well with themselves and other instruments. This also creates the ability to blend between other elementary musical instruments, and could allow for ensemble playing.

Each of the three instruments' embouchure directly relate to a classical instrument. The Pbuzz use a embouchure similar to all brass instruments. The mouth piece is the same size and depth as a trombone mouthpiece with a tenor shank, but the buzz used to produce a sound is similar in all brass instruments. The size of the aperture changes but the mechanics of buzz production is consistent throughout all brass instruments. The Dood shares an embouchure with all single reed instruments. The process is simplified by using a slotted reed and an affixed ligature, but the mechanics are consistent through out all single reed. The Toot uses the flute head joint and the embouchure hole is the same size as a full-size flute. The similarities in tone production extend to the breath support.

Breath support is representative of how the woodwind and brass react. By using classic embouchure the breath support has consistent and predictable results. Unlike the recorder if these instruments are overblown, they merely get louder or play at a higher octave. Playing an instrument is an interconnecting stream of physical and mental actions. If we do not breath properly it will be difficult to produce characteristic tone. The deep diaphragmatic breathing is a foundational principle of all musicality. The pre-instruments require the same control as classical instruments, and equip the students with transferable

All pedagogies have shortcomings, and instruments like the Dood, Toot, and Pbuzz are no exception. They require a greater amount of instructional time before the students can play. If we are teaching these instruments in a heterogeneous manner, the students must be able to work independently. This could be hard for students limited at the elementary level. One of the largest problems is the initial cost of supplying your classroom. Each of these are valid arguments, but each can be mitigated.

The belief that teachers will spend a greater amount of time working on embouchure, posture, and body carriage is true. This is also true when students start beginning instrument lessons. The use of pre instruments move the instruction of foundations to the start of their journey, and allows students to continuously grow. Our current curricula that rely on recorder forces the students to restart as they move past recorders. Even if students do not retain many aspects, most teacher would rather build upon previous knowledge instead of breaking old habits and teaching new.

Elementary students attention spans are limited, and teaching difficult skills is challenging. Educational philosophers would suggest that we can teach our pupils anything, but it must be presented in a manner appropriate with their knowledge and age. This may mean breaking the topic into smaller chunks, teaching all instruments in a homogeneous setting to build the foundational skills, or even introducing each section as a survey, and slowly build.

With everything being equal, the question becomes why. Why invest in a new set of instruments, why change a curriculum that has existed and succeeded for so many years, and what would this change in the grand scheme of music education.

I would argue the investment in the pre instruments is similar to buying ukulele, guitar, Orff, or any other instrument in the elementary classroom. First, it creates new exploratory opportunities for the students. Music is a experiential classroom meant to allow students to expand student's understanding of the discipline and its place in the world. Second, they create a stronger link between the elementary classroom and the classic ensemble. The direct relationship between Dood to clarinet, Toot to flute, and the Pbuzz to all embouchures allow for an easier transfer to the more traditional instruments of western ensembles. Finally, having a uniform quality of instrumentation. Many times, through my career, I have had students bring recorders from home, which range in quality from different brands with a slight intonation discrepancy to dollar store toys. The latter does not produce the characteristics sound of a recorder and becomes frustrating to students.

Musical instruments are expensive. A student instrument costs between 400 to 1000 dollars. Renting an instrument could cost \$50 or more a month, but many companies require a years commitment and a credit check. These factors would prevent many impoverished or low-income families from exploring instrumental music. The similarities to classical instruments allow children to explore instrumental music. The opportunity to try instrumental music would likely increase the number of students who join the band, and might also decrease retention issues.

This pedagogy does answer questions created by use of a recorder pedagogy and can fit into all existing pedagogies that use recorder, but as previously explained all methodological tools do have shortcomings. Some issues can be mitigated, and others can be solved by other tools in our arsenal. This not a falling cry for the elimination of records, nor is a prescription for success. Success and failure is based wholly on the educator uses their knowledge in conjunction with these pre instruments. In all methodologies the foundation is the teacher.

Biography

Derrick Crow holds a PhD in Education with a concentration in Arts Integration and Curricular Theory. He also holds a Bachelor's of Music Education from Eastern Illinois University, and a Master's of Music from Southern Illinois University Carbondale. His research interests include music medicine, aesthetic education, and arts integration. Through research and pragmatic experiences, he is striving to create educational growth that encourages creative and intellectual exploration. He has had the privilege to work as a music educator at the primary, secondary and collegiate levels, has worked as a student teacher supervisor for the Master's of Arts in Teaching Program, and as an adjunct lecturer at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. He is currently practicing his skills as an educator and musician by teaching young musicians at Danville Municipal School District.