
MUSIC NOTES: LEARNING TO LISTEN TO THE MUSIC AROUND US

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Music is a surprisingly difficult word to define. People can make so many different kinds of music, and it infuses our lives whether we engage with it intentionally or incidentally. Music has a power to grab attention and deepen communication. It surrounds our lives. As with other senses, listening is a skill that can be developed through intentionality and practice. Teachers can support their students' development by scaffolding listening activities. Because we often do not register the sounds and music we hear around us, I offer here two possible ways of developing your and your students' abilities to actively recognize the music in your life.

The first suggestion is to dedicate time to listening. Sit quietly, or go for a quiet walk around your room or outside. What sounds can you hear? In this moment, I begin by hearing the sounds of my heating system and an airplane flying overhead. As I continue, my focus shifts to different locations and I can hear more—the beep of someone locking their car, the rustles of a blanket, the sound of a car driving away, the refrigerator suddenly working harder to keep my food cold, the closing of a door, and the click of my keyboard as I type. The longer I sit, the more I can hear. Possibly due to writing this in the wee hours of the morning, I do not hear what most would call music, and yet regularly engaging in this activity primes me for when I do listen to or make music.

Another fun way to develop listening ability is to keep a Music Journal. Every time you hear music, write down or draw where you hear it and how it was used. This might include circle time with students, a young child singing a song to themselves while they wash their hands, humming to soothe a child with a freshly scraped knee, playing recorded music in the background while students draw, or putting on a song to signal it is time to clean up. Outside of school, you might hear music on the car radio (e.g., songs, commercials, jingles between segments), at a store, as someone in your household sings in the shower, or in the background of a movie, tv show, or video game. Through creating a Music Journal, you help bring attention to the music that surrounds each of us, and you help attune your ear to listen.

Both of the activities can work well with young children. It is my hope that you will take a little time to engage in them yourself, too. Can you pause for a minute while you sip morning tea or coffee to listen? Or for three minutes after you finish eating dinner? Can you spend a day keeping a Music Journal? Or an hour when you transition between activities and responsibilities? Sometimes I think of these as opportunities akin to “stop and smell the roses”—“stop and listen to the music.”