By Randall Everett Allsup and Marsha Baxter

Listening to music is a daily event for most young people. Many adolescents devote hours to their personal music libraries. Yet when asked to describe the music they listen to and collect, they are hard-pressed to say more than “I like it” or “It’s got a great beat.” For them, musical listening is an intuitive experience, one that reflects moods and memories, fashion and fun.

Some philosophers consider music a mostly “felt experience,” which means that musical thinking does not require verbal thinking. Bennett Reimer, for example, has written that language “need not be and typically is not applied to the sounds we are engaged with in musical experience.” But Reimer also tells us that discussion in the music classroom that helps us to “know why, [is] probably the most neglected aspect of music education.” We need language to pursue this sort of discussion. Equipping students with the skills and language to discuss, describe, and defend music they know and like, as well as music that is new and different, is an essential aspect of music teaching.

The music classroom is the perfect setting for investigative and imaginative inquiry—for teaching students how to talk about music. Because dialogue that is done well is too dynamic (dare we say

When teachers ask thought-provoking questions about music, students can build language and thinking skills to help them talk about the music they encounter throughout their lives.

Randall Everett Allsup is assistant professor of music and music education at Teachers College, Columbia University. He can be reached at allsup@tc.edu. Marsha Baxter is assistant professor of music education at SUNY-Potsdam. She can be reached at baxterml@potsdam.edu.
messy!) to be captured in a one-dimensional model, the ideas and frameworks in this article are merely intended to serve as springboards for eliciting richer discussions in the music classroom. Although we will investigate dialogue and language systematically, we urge readers to keep in mind the improvisatory nature of good music teaching, particularly when we talk with our students about music and musical experience.

**Asking Better Questions**

We can safely say that listening to, thinking about, and describing music (National Standard 6) is common to many cultures. Whether the subject matter is familiar or not, educators from Socrates to Howard Gardner have emphasized the role of dialogue, particularly the asking of questions, to lead students to greater depths of understanding. Standards 7 (evaluating music), 8 (understanding relationships between music, the arts, and the other disciplines), and 9 (understanding music in relation to history and culture) emphasize the interpretation and synthesis of information, factual or otherwise. Benjamin Bloom called these processes “higher order thinking”—staples, and now expectations, of the modern classroom.

In general, there are three types of questions: open, guided, and closed. (See figure 1 for examples of each.) Think of your favorite interviewers, and consider how they ask questions. An effective interviewer, such as NPR’s Terry Gross, often begins with an open question (What did you get out of this project?) and follows up with more targeted questions (How did you interpret the role of Frasier? Where did you find the ingredients for this dessert?). This is also a common practice in ethnographic research. Patricia Shehan Campbell, for example, uses this technique when asking children such questions as “What are you really good at?” followed by “What kind of music do you dance to?” or “How many songs do you know?” We will ask better questions in the music classroom if we follow the lead of skilled radio or TV interviewers or ethnographers like Campbell.

Think of your favorite interviewers, and consider how they ask questions.

The purpose of an initial open question in the context of a listening example or creative activity is to gather musical information. It’s like throwing a wide net. A question such as “What do you hear?” might produce responses that range from “It reminds me of a scary movie” to “I think it’s in 4/4 time.” Answers to open questions tell us where our students are, what they know, and what they can recognize and hear.

The purpose of subsequent guided questions is to elicit more targeted responses from students. Questions such as “How would you describe the texture?” or “How did the dynamics change?” bring into focus a particular aspect of the music that the teacher wishes to examine, one that was probably overlooked during the initial open phase of questioning. While guided questioning remains a student-centered activity, the teacher assumes responsibility for guiding learning, for helping students discover and uncover new information.

Closed questions produce a single answer. They are emphasized in the so-called “hard sciences” where equations and theorems produce a single answer. Closed questions are typically not very exciting. So why do we use them? When do closed questions serve productive purposes? Is it wrong to elicit a simple yes or no? Ideally, teachers ask these questions to draw attention to a particular feature in a listening example that guided questions have failed to uncover. After a period of guided questioning, the teacher might ask, “No one mentioned the time signature. What time is this piece in?” or “What’s the harmonic progression of this particular section? Is it the same as the beginning?” Questions like these do not halt discussions, but they do help to fill in missing pieces and give students a more complete grasp of the musical work they are examining.

**Critical Listening**

Lenore Pogonowski developed the framework for critical listening

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open</th>
<th>Guided</th>
<th>Closed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What did you hear?</td>
<td>What makes this piece so danceable?</td>
<td>Can you clap the ostinato?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can we describe what we heard?</td>
<td>How would you describe the mood, the atmosphere?</td>
<td>What is the tonality of this piece?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments?</td>
<td>How did the texture change?</td>
<td>How many string instruments did you hear?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you were going to render a title for this particular musical work, what would it be?</td>
<td>How did the composer depict the different stages of his mother’s life?</td>
<td>Did the tempo change? Dynamics? (Guided follow-up: If so, how?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If we were going to compose a new piece based on the musical example we heard today, what might we do?</td>
<td>How might we incorporate some of the rhythms, timbres, etc.?</td>
<td>What instrument(s) will begin?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1. Types of Questions**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analytical</th>
<th>Judicial</th>
<th>Creative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about the melody.</td>
<td>How did Jessie's [the composer] plan work?</td>
<td>What would you do differently a second time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why did that remind you of Jay-Z?</td>
<td>Why did you make that choice? [Asked of a student composer or a listener choosing a favorite piece.]</td>
<td>What elements will you keep?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What happened on beat 2?</td>
<td>What was your favorite section?</td>
<td>What will you change?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the trumpet doing?</td>
<td>What did you like best about the piece?</td>
<td>Where can we go with this?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Categories developed by Lenore Pogonowski. Used by permission.

that is illustrated in figure 2. For Pogonowski, dialogue is an important component in developing critical thinking and metacognition (i.e., awareness of one's own thinking process) in music classrooms. Too often, she noticed, students remain attached to their first impulse. How many times have we heard students pipe out “I liked that” or “I didn't like it” before we've even asked, “What did you hear?” Moving students to think analytically not only will help them to justify or rethink their preferences, but it will also eventually lead them to deepen or broaden their perspectives.

In the Pogonowski framework, there are three domains the teacher needs to address: analytical, judicial, and creative. Without dismissing the initial affective response (“It was good” or “I liked it”), teachers operating within this framework immediately move students into thinking about musical content. Questions in the first phase, analysis, will address the elements of music (pitch, duration, timbre, texture, dynamics), form, and style, as well as expressive devices, associated feelings, visual images, and cultural conventions. The purpose of this stage is to talk about how these structures interact and keep the conversation going.

Consider the following example. In this scenario, the teacher moves quickly to the analysis phase and stays there as long as possible. The teacher uses a combination of open, guided, and closed questions.

The opening phrases of “Mai Nozipo” performed by the Kronos Quartet fill the crowded classroom. The teacher suddenly pauses the recording and asks an open question or two. “What do you think this piece is going to be about? What are you hearing?” Hands go up everywhere. “It sounds like dance music,” responds one student. “I think it's going to be about a celebration,” says another.

The recording is played again from the beginning, and students listen as the chordal sonorities of the string quartet blend with the energetic rhythms of African drums. “Tell me about the beat” is the first guided question after the recording is over. “What about the melody? Is it singable? What is the mood, the character? How is it created?” The teacher records students' observations on the blackboard, now crowded with fragments of musical information elicited from the class: rhythmic repetition, syncopation, country fiddle, conga drums, steady beat, contrasting tempo, ABA form, and so on.

Making clear the interaction between musical elements and structures and whatever feelings and visual images the piece might provoke is key to the analysis phase. A comment like “It makes me want to dance” can be followed by “What is happening in the music to create this dancelike feeling?” and then “What kind of dance would this be? Can you show me?” Like a good interviewer, the teacher looks for opportunities to probe more deeply, inventing related follow-ups before changing directions.

Good discussions inspire both teachers and students.

Importantly, in this method students can learn vocabulary on the spot. If, during the analysis phase, a guided question elicits a comment like “I hear a loud fast section, followed by a slow section, followed by something like the beginning,” we have arrived at a teachable moment—the perfect opportunity to talk about form and how it is related to feelings, melody, the composer's intent, and so on. Vocabulary learned in context is immediate and more likely to make sense to learners. When the same terminology is used in a variety of discussions, the meaning will eventually stick.

After the analysis phase has been exhausted (a complete analysis is never possible, nor would an attempt be
The composer writes, “my aim was to portray the life of my mother who passed away in 1989. I wrote this piece in three parts. The first portrays my life with my mother on earth. It was all very loving and full of caring and happiness. The second part is sad, portraying her death. The third movement is happy again, portraying that my mother is well, cares for and looks after me and all her children still on earth, as she now lives her new life in the world of spirits or in heaven. We shall all meet her when we die.”

**Grade Level:** Upper elementary or secondary

**Listening Objectives**
- Listen to, analyze, and describe “Mai Nozipo.”
- Analyze and describe the personal and cultural narrative on which the piece is based.
- Examine and describe how the composer’s narrative is captured and communicated.

**Performance Objectives**
- Explore traditional West African percussion instruments (drum, gangoku, hoshito, etc.) and how they are played.
- Improvise in the appropriate style to the recorded example.
- Compose a musical piece based on the musical structure and style of the recorded example.
- Compose a musical gesture (a rhythmic and/or melodic idea) inspired by the composer’s narrative.

**Materials**
- CD player, tape recorder, microphone, and cassette tape player

**Procedure**

1. Students write down all they hear and feel as they listen to the recording of “Mai Nozipo.”

2. Using open, guided, and closed questions, students generate a list of musical information—rhythmic repetition, folk-like character of melody, contrasting tempi, moods, ABA form, etc.

3. Students lightly experiment/improvise on instruments as the recorded example is played again.

4. Students improvise on percussion instruments and also sing along with the recording.

5. As students improvise and sing along with the recording, the recording is turned off; the improvisation continues without the recording.

6. Students divide into groups to compose a piece based on the structural and stylistic features of “Mai Nozipo.”

7. Group compositions are performed and tape recorded for further analysis.

8. Students listen to, analyze, and describe their compositions. The teacher encourages metacognitive thinking using the analytical-judicial-creative framework. Possible questions might include:
   - How did the [student] composers organize their musical material?
   - What was most successful?
   - What were you thinking as you put your piece together?
   - What did you like most about your composition? Why?
   - If you were to write a new piece, what would you do differently?

9. Students listen again to “Mai Nozipo” and share new ideas and new impressions.

10. The composer’s description of his work is read. Students analyze how the musical material communicates the composer’s experience of his mother’s death and her life in the spirit world.
11. Students compose a musical gesture that captures the feeling or character of one of the sections, such as sadness, longing, celebration, etc.
12. Students perform and tape record their gestures.
13. Students listen to, analyze, and describe their gestures.


The Role of Dialogue

Let’s think of the creative classroom as a photo shoot. Like a camera, our questions can focus on details up close or look at the big picture from afar. The musical “images” we develop and collect invite examination and explanation. Discussion can illuminate, like a flash bulb going off. Good discussions inspire both teachers and students.

Teaching students to articulate what they like is an invaluable tool. Dialogue helps students disclose information. Learning by discovery can create flashes of insight and illumination. An analysis that integrates what students like and why helps them make more discriminating decisions. With regard to creative projects, discussion includes the kind of critical-thinking skills that invite students to defend or redo their work.

The Socratic method (teaching by asking questions) is one of the most difficult methods of instruction. It is much easier to give directions than to interview and investigate. Dialogue requires us to genuinely listen to our students. This is a democratic process where we acknowledge and respect our students’ talents and intellects. It is important to stress that judicial comments are more powerful when they are supported by an analytical rationale. By equipping students with not only the vocabulary to defend their preferences, but also the thinking and listening skills to make aural distinctions between an array of musical styles and genres, we are providing a service that can benefit students long after they leave our classrooms.

Notes

2. Ibid., 163.

MENC Resources

- Dimensions of Musical Learning and Thinking: A Different Kind of Classroom (Item #1082) and Dimensions of Musical Thinking (Item #1081), edited by Eunice Boardman, provide ideas and guidelines for helping students to think musically.
- “Would Better Questions Enhance Music Learning?” by Kirk Kassner (*Music Educators Journal* 84, no. 4) offers ideas for making class discussions more stimulating through effective questioning.