



See an example of how a single essential question can be utilized in a year-long general music class.

Janet Stearns, a middle school Music Educator in the Tippecanoe School Corporation in Indiana, shares how to use a single essential question to guide instruction for an entire year.

Note This Essential Question

General music students are often avid music listeners and music consumers, but not “wanna be” music performers—at least in an ensemble setting. This is typically why a student would enroll into a general music class rather than a choral or instrumental ensemble class. Frequently, the middle school philosophy for general music is one of exploration. Students are allowed to explore various topics within the technical or related arts to determine where their skills and interest might lie. Yet, it is desirable to have some basic music literacy skills that apply across the department at the middle school level in general music, choral ensembles, and instrumental ensembles.

This curriculum alignment would strengthen student success as students may transfer from one music course to another during the middle school exploratory years.

Once this alignment is in place, it would benefit the educator to establish a mindset as well as a professional philosophy that includes the following:

- ♦ Backwards planning of curriculum scope and sequence
- ♦ Growth Mindset
- ♦ Thematic Instruction around a topic weaving and integrating content together
- ♦ Freedom to create instruction from resources besides the adopted textbook
- ♦ Collaborative Inquiry and Discovery Learning
- ♦ Full use of Bloom’s Taxonomy

These six topics are representative of a curriculum where the learner is actively involved in the learning process. The learner must fully understand a variety of concepts to answer and defend the answer to the Essential Question. Instruction is set up for the class to allow the learner to discover, research and understand the topic and how each learning moment is integral to the overall answer to the Essential Question that guides the learning.

With this mindset, an educator may begin to brainstorm, write, and research a list of possible Essential Questions (EQs) to serve as the yearlong guide. Remember, the EQ must be broad enough and inclusive in scope to allow for many topics, a variety of student perspectives as well as various instructional avenues. Student responses will need to be sufficiently defended with relevant evidence or artifacts gleaned from classroom activities, readings, and instruction.



Note This Essential Question (continued)

Here is a sample list of EQs for a music classroom:

- ♦ What inspires a composer to write music?
- ♦ When can you call yourself a music reader?
- ♦ When is it music? When is it noise?
- ♦ How does music affect culture? How does culture affect music?
- ♦ When is it music? When it is written down or when it is heard?
- ♦ What does it mean to be really good at something?
- ♦ What is the difference between “singing along” and “performing?”

(Music Educators may wish to also view the National Standards for Music which incorporate EQs throughout the scope and sequence.)

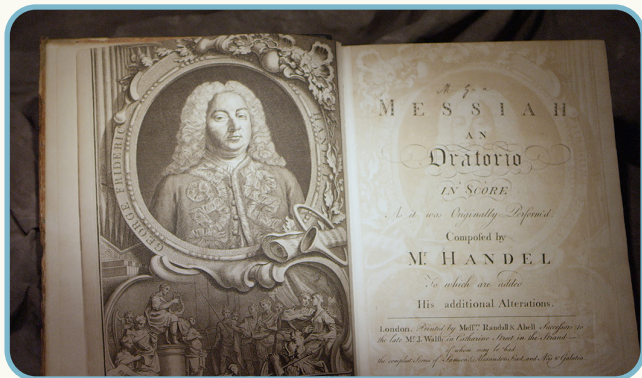
Begin to narrow your list and plug it into the curriculum to see if the question will provide the ‘true North’ you seek and the student outcomes that are needed. Work to see how it can be answered with each curricular topic. If you are wondering about the music literacy components, thematic instruction would encourage this to be integrated throughout the year alongside music history content. As the students progress sequentially through history, the music itself will change and grow in complexity. That being said, the teacher must keep instruction focused primarily on the key basic literacy points and the importance of those literacy concepts. The more a student sees, hears, and identifies the basic points, the more the student will understand the meaning and application. Here are four examples of how music literacy can be incorporated thematically.

Example 1:



Give a collaborative student group three music scores: a Medieval score, a Renaissance score, and a Baroque score. Have the collaborative group try to determine which score belongs to which era. Students must be able to defend their answer based upon specific items in the scores. Stress this is an educated guess. Use evidence located right there in the score to support your conclusion. (Note: The three music scores will be used again and again as you study each era over the course of the year.)

Example 2:



Provide a collaborative student group a music score of the “Hallelujah Chorus” from the Messiah oratorio by G. F. Handel. Have the students locate and identify certain music vocabulary, rhythms, and voicing within the piece.



Note This Essential Question (continued)

Example 3:

Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor

By JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Adagio

Provide each student with three sample phrases from J. S. Bach's "Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor." Have the students listen to one phrase being performed. Then have the student identify which of the three phrases it is. The goal is for students to connect what is heard to how it looks when written in the language of music.

Example 4:



Each student will learn to play the melody of the Westminster Chime on a barred instrument i.e., xylophone, metallophone, or glockenspiel. This chime melody is played from Westminster Abbey in England each hour of every day on Big Ben Clock Tower. This is the same church where G.F. Handel is buried. Mastery by the end of the grading period is the goal.

With this thematic approach, Music Literacy is woven into the topic areas throughout the year. Students will use and reuse the vocabulary and literacy components to only strengthen their historical understanding of how music evolved and changed. For the student, music learning progresses through history, so should the learners vocabulary and understanding of the score.

Thematic learning helps the student to connect and see the relevance of the study—rather than wondering “how will this ever be used?” Think of music literacy for general music classes being more “big picture” and conceptual rather than “student as the performer” oriented. The goal is for the student to understand the concepts of the written language. The learner can synthesize and connect hearing the music with seeing it written. This may be a good time to remember that the definition of “read” is to make meaning of the written language. (EQ: When can you call yourself a music reader?)



Note This Essential Question (continued)

These are some examples of a single Essential Question for General Music 6, General Music 7, and General Music 8.

Samples for General Music 6

EQ: What inspires a composer to write music?

Theme Song: “I Write the Songs” performed by Barry Manilow

- ♦ **EQ:** What inspired Hildegard von Bingen to write music? (Medieval Era Sample)
Answers and Discussion Points: chant, Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison (ABA form), Catholic Mass, sacred music, The Knights and battle, monophony
- ♦ **EQ:** What inspired Thomas Morley to write music? (Renaissance Era Sample)
Answers and Discussion Points: Secular music, harmony, polyphony, a cappella singing, troubadours
- ♦ **EQ:** What inspired J. S. Bach to write music? (Baroque Era Sample)
Answers and Discussion Points: the pipe organ, fugue and toccata form, sacred music
- ♦ **EQ:** What inspired Rodgers and Hammerstein to write music? (20th Century Sample)
Answers and Discussion Points: the human voice, political and social causes, Broadway, stories



Samples for General Music 7

EQ: When is it music? When is it noise? (Use one or more of the five elements to defend your response and answer: Rhythm, Harmony, Melody, Timbre, and Form)

Theme Song: Listen to the Music performed by the Doobie Brothers

- ♦ **EQ:** Is STOMP (the performance) music or noise?
Answers and Discussion Points: rhythm, form, timbre, found sounds, how might this be written down, create your own instrument
- ♦ **EQ:** Did the evolution of the keyboard create music? Or did the evolution of the keyboard create noise?
Answers and Discussion Points: How did the functionality of instrument allow for use of rhythm, harmony, melody, timbre, note range i.e., virginal, clavichord, harpsichord, spinet, pianoforte
- ♦ **EQ:** Is Mozart’s Magic Flute opera music or noise? What elements did Mozart use to write?
Answers and Discussion Points: Opera as a form (Recitative, Aria, Ensembles, Chorus), vocal classifications (Coloratura Soprano, Mezzo Soprano, Alto, Contralto, Countertenor, Tenor, Baritone, Bass)
- ♦ **EQ:** Were Joseph “Papa” Haydn’s Symphonic Works music? Or were Haydn’s Symphonic Works noise?
Answers and Discussion Points: Symphony form, tempo and mood, dynamics, rhythm, repetition of melody, string family, influence of royalty on music

Samples for General Music 8

EQ: How does music affect culture? How does culture affect music?

Theme Song: “Man in the Mirror” performed by Michael Jackson



Note This Essential Question (continued)

- ♦ **EQ:** How did Arnold Schoenberg's music affect culture? How did culture affect Arnold Schoenberg's music?
Answers and Discussion Points: Schoenberg created a 12 tone system of music. Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust were so unpleasant and horrific that only 12 tone sounds and Sprechstimme could be used to express these cultural moments.
- ♦ **EQ:** How did Duke Ellington's music affect culture? How did culture affect Duke Ellington's music?
Answers and Discussion Points: Ellington was an educated composer who made jazz music more legitimate when it was performed in concert halls as well as clubs and movies. The stereotypes of the day led Ellington to create the Cotton Club in Harlem (a region of New York City) as a way to financially and artistically support himself and other black performers of the day. Ellington composed "Take the A Train" as an advertisement to encourage non-black visitors to frequent the club.
- ♦ **EQ:** How did the Eastern European music festivals affect culture? How did culture affect Eastern European music festivals?
Answers and Discussion Points: The Singing Revolution of Estonia occurred as a part of the region's popular music festivals. These annual events featured singing choirs from around the country with the choirs preparing for weeks and weeks. The groups traditionally sang the folk songs of their country. Typically, these events would include moments where the thousands and thousands of singers and audience members would sing together in harmony. Communist leaders attempted to stop this free speech and national pride by making it illegal to sing the patriotic songs of the pre-communist controlled era. However, the will and song of the people simply could not be stopped at these events. Eventually, these events were an influencing part to the fall of the USSR and communist control of Eastern Europe.

Building a yearlong course around a single Essential Question is an evolutionary experience. It takes time and careful preparation. It requires the educator and the learner to view the sequence of learning in a new way, and, yet the EQ keeps the academic focus and learning outcome so clear. The EQ is the "true North" where repeated use maintains curriculum focus, purpose, and intention. Over and over again, the class is asked to answer the single EQ with each topic and learning moment. Students learn not only how to answer, but also how to defend the answer with evidence based responses from the music score, music history, music concept learning, and the music classroom experience.