

Music by Kids for Kids™ Composer Janika Vandervelde on ACF's new educational curriculum for young composers

Editor's intro: *In keeping with its mission of supporting new music, the Forum actively works to support composition and new music in the K-12 classroom. While music classrooms skillfully teach performing and listening, many lack the tools to teach students how to create music. ACF asked composer/educator **Janika Vandervelde** to produce a curriculum that would incorporate composition lessons in the 7th-through 12th-grade classrooms. Vandervelde responded by writing **Music by Kids for Kids**, a five-unit curriculum with Finale® templates that ease students into composing and provide assessment documents for teachers. ACF National Program Manager **Carey Nadeau** interviewed Vandervelde on the process of writing this curriculum – and how she became a composer herself.*

Describe your journey in becoming a composer.

I was quite passionate about composing in high school. I might even say that I've never been as passionate about writing music as I was in high school. But where I came from, there were no teachers for guidance, no classes full of other students to compare yourself to, no role models for inspiration, and especially, no music software or computers to provide instant feedback. I was left completely on my own. When I got to college I was told that music students didn't study composition until graduate school. When I got to graduate school I discovered that the study of composition was about 90 percent music theory. "Check your voice at the door, please." One of my first reviews (while still a graduate student) said I was "skilled at imitating other composers' styles." Oh dear!

Then something amazing happened: I rediscovered the voice I had left behind in high school. Not on my own. A teacher noticed it had gotten tucked away, buried beneath bits of Bartók, Berio, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and all those other guys one was supposed to emulate in those days. At that point everything began to change for the better. Once that little light was rekindled, it was hard to suppress.

Why write a composition curriculum?

With the advent of music software like Finale, the mechanism is in place for anyone to be a composer. It really doesn't require special skills. The curriculum is designed to take people who have very little knowledge of music notation and get them composing whole pieces in one or two hours. It incorporates a tiny bit of music theory into the mix, but the goal is to get the student to generate whole compositions quickly, out of a small amount of material. The focus is on what one does with the material, its development and design, rather than on the material itself.

For teacher and student alike, the curriculum is a springboard of ideas. The various strategies presented can be thought of as blueprints for creativity that make use of the functionality of music notation software.

Describe how you were motivated to write "Music by Kids for Kids." What were your inspirations for this curriculum?

I think everyone should learn to read, write, and play music. I wanted to invent something that could be used by anyone to generate a series of successful, short pieces. There's absolutely no reason why schools

shouldn't cultivate a musical culture of their own, based on the students' interests. This is the driving force behind the curriculum. Students should be writing pieces for each other—chamber music as well as music for band, choir, and orchestra—and making their own, locale-specific music. The only reason why this isn't happening more widely is that most teachers aren't prepared to facilitate this sort of activity. I'm trying to make it easy for them.



Janika Vandervelde

How did you come up with the three layers in each unit (Vision, Voice, and Virtuosity)?

The 'Three V's', as I call them, embody my entire philosophy of creativity. 'Voice' is innate. It includes things that are biologically encoded in one's DNA. As these things are manifested outwardly, they take a particular shape, like one's handwriting, displaying the unique qualities that I associate with Voice. A good teacher knows how to facilitate its development.

'Vision' is what the world brings to the table. It's the sum total of all one's experiences to date. These experiences act as a filter for the Voice, influencing the direction it takes in its outward manifestation.

'Virtuosity' is about effectiveness of communication. It's the craft and skill. Music theory plays a role here, to be sure, but it's important not to view theory as an end in itself, not to treat it as a substitute for Voice. Unfortunately, many composition programs offer courses focused only on Virtuosity, at the expense of the other two essential ingredients. Most students I see at the high school level are about 80 percent Voice, 10 percent Vision, and 10 percent Virtuosity, while at the graduate level it's common to see the opposite (80 percent Virtuosity).

In the curriculum, I try to balance these three elements, starting with Vision. The student is first taken through a blueprint, step by step, which generates a complete piece and at the same time introduces certain concepts. Then it's the student's turn to write his or her own piece using the blueprint as a guide (Voice). Students that finish ahead of the class can then move on to the Virtuosity section, which is a little addendum to the lesson. Here, additional forms or concepts related to the lesson are introduced.

Why include the assessment documents in the curriculum?

Teachers always ask, "How do you put a grade on a composition?" The assessment worksheets help the student (and teacher) focus on what's important in a given lesson. There's no right or wrong when it comes to an act of creativity, but if a lesson has goals, it helps direct one's learning along a particular path. Lesson One, for instance, is about working with multiple melodies (counterpoint). The student is told up front that the goal of this lesson is to produce lines that are independent of one another. Each must have its own identity. The guidelines in the blueprint contain built-in strategies for accomplishing this goal. When pieces are finished, I always ask students to play them aloud in class. Each 'performance' is then followed by class discussion focused on the assessment criteria as stated on the worksheet. We use the peer-review process, meaning that two or three other students evaluate the work of each composer. This gives everyone a voice in the process.

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What makes you most excited about using this curriculum in your classroom?

There are a number of things. The curriculum is very hands-on. Each student moves through the material at his or her own pace. This frees up the teacher to assist students individually as needed. My experience has been that the students are totally engaged, and able to complete viable pieces in just a few hours.

I also like the curriculum's adaptability. Because it's based on 'blueprints for creativity', a creative teacher can use it year after year in all sorts of different ways. For example, last year I used it in two very different situations at the Perpich Center for Arts Education (Golden Valley, Minn.) where I teach. With a class of nine music majors (Perpich seniors), I adapted Lesson Five, turning it into a slightly more sophisticated choral unit. We chose three haiku. Each student set one line of text (in Japanese) using the guidelines from the lesson. We then put them together as a three-movement work. They were beautiful little pieces — each about three minutes in length. Our school choir presented them at our December concert. They proved to be very singable. In an entirely different situation, I used the curriculum for a weeklong interim class of non-majors. They worked on two lessons — counterpoint and rhythm — and then combined them into a single composition. We then set up a sound installation in the lobby, enabling parents to see and hear the results. Students who knew nothing about music produced both scores and recordings of their pieces. I have found that variations on the curriculum are endless, allowing both student and teacher alike to be creative.

How do you envision other educators or teaching artists using this curriculum in the classroom?

The curriculum can be used in the classroom or as an independent study. In the classroom, the teacher should take the class through the

Vision portion of each lesson, helping the students to focus on the primary goals of each blueprint. This usually takes one class period. Then the students are turned loose to create their own pieces based on the blueprint—the Voice portion of the lesson. This might take two or three class periods. Those students that finish quickly (and there are always a few speedsters) are encouraged to move on to the Virtuosity portion of the lesson. When all students have completed the Voice portion of the lesson, the pieces should be played aloud (i.e., as MIDI files) and evaluated using the peer-review process. This complete cycle takes about a week. The next step for many teachers might be the transition to live performance. This works best when two or more students collaborate with each other to create a new piece that all of them can play.

What tips would you share with other educators about incorporating composition into the classroom?

I think there are various stages of evolution with this curriculum: 1) fanciful experimentation using the computer as performer; 2) live performance; and 3) a combination of the two. The more fanciful electronic pieces can be played at the concerts too, but often, as students exercise their creativity, they produce amazing pieces that are too difficult to play. Sometimes the electronic pieces can incorporate a live element, like text or choreography. Eventually, students will invent their own ways to combine the live with the electronic.

What is your goal for this curriculum? What do you hope will result from it?

I hope the curriculum will spark a renaissance of compositional activity at the middle school and high school levels, with students writing pieces for each other. The true 'voice' is in the music itself, so let's cultivate the authentic voices of the students, rather than always asking them to reproduce adult voices that they may or may not be able to relate to.

What do you see as the trend in composition curriculum? Where do we go from here?

The current trend is toward student-produced work, created for small, mixed ensembles. These smaller ensembles can include the singer-songwriter, folk instruments, and standard rock bands, whose styles of working lend themselves to improvisation. There will still be large conducted ensembles at the core of most music programs, but I see music educators increasingly letting go of the reins, putting down the baton, and doing much more to facilitate the creative process, with or without notation. In this way, music programs will be more hospitable to a wider range of musics.

— Composer **Janika Vandervelde** has written music for groups at all levels, from professionals to children. Her works have been performed on four continents. A native of Wisconsin, Vandervelde has written more than 90 works for orchestras, choirs, chamber ensembles, soloists, and the stage. Her scores have been commissioned and performed by Chanticleer, the Dale Warland Singers, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, the Melbourne (Australia) Chamber Choir, Kitka (San Francisco), the Minnesota Orchestra, and numerous church, school, community, and festival choirs. She holds a Ph.D. in composition from the University of Minnesota, where her teachers included Eric Stokes and Dominick Argento. She currently serves on the music faculty of the Perpich Center for Arts Education (Golden Valley, Minn.), and teaches orchestration at the University of Minnesota. Her music is published by earthsongs, Boosey & Hawkes, and Hothouse Press. For more information, see her profile in the New Grove Dictionary of Music (2nd ed.), or visit her website: www.janikavandervelde.com ♦

More on Music by Kids for Kids™

Music by Kids for Kids is a new composition curriculum especially designed for computer labs equipped with MIDI keyboards. ACF invited composer and educator Janika Vandervelde to create the curriculum and accompanying templates.



Music by Kids for Kids intends to fill the gap in the music classroom between performing and composing music. In English class, students are encouraged to write their own prose and poetry. In art class, students are invited to pick up a brush and paint their own pictures. The purpose of *Music by Kids for Kids* is to provide tools for 7th through 12th grade music educators to allow students to make their own music by incorporating composition and notation software into their classrooms.

The base price of the curriculum is \$79.95 and can be ordered online via the ACF website. For more information, and an excerpt from Unit 1 of the curriculum, visit www.composersforum.org/musicbykidsforkids