

The Vermont MIDI Project: Fostering Mentorships in Multiple Environments

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Introduction

The Vermont MIDI Project (VMP) is a collaborative community of teachers, students, pre-service educators and professional composers who focus on music composition. As of July 1, 2012, this organization will be known as Music Composition Online Mentoring Program (Music-COMP). Utilizing online communication to connect and share work, the community helps students from the beginning stages of their composition to completion. The online discussion and work samples provide models for teachers as they guide composition activities in their own classrooms. Many of the compositions are designed for live performance and are ultimately performed by the composer, by peers, or by professionals.

The lessons learned and presented in this chapter are derived from discussion, observation, and reflection from experiences of VMP participants over time. Working with an estimated seventy thousand students in grades 3–12 from diverse communities over fifteen years provides depth and breadth of insights into the composition process. Teachers in the project address challenges that are similar to challenges educators encounter today; lack of expertise in the pedagogy of composition; lack of personal composing experience; lack of time for planning and lesson development; lack of access to computers.

Since the beginning, VMP teachers and composer mentors have readily shared what they learn. The hope is that prospective music educators will take the processes and guidelines outlined and build on them to implement composition programs of their own. Composition begins with individual teachers and their students. While it may not be possible to connect with professional composers on an individual school level, using the lessons learned from VMP's connections with eighteen different composers over the last fifteen years includes that perspective into the guidelines in this chapter. VMP teachers and composer mentors firmly believe that music composition belongs in every music class.

John Kratus (2010) praises VMP as one of three worldwide programs that create new opportunities for students and move music education toward a new era. His article decries music education programs focused exclusively on performance. Kratus believes that the current paradigm lacks vision and response to the rapid cultural and social changes in the world.

Another example of sticky music education is the Vermont MIDI Project. The project uses the internet to connect student composers in general music classes with professional composers and with collegiate music education and composition majors. The students in Vermont create MIDI files of their original music, which are sent to music majors and professional composers. The students in Vermont receive detailed appraisals of their music in its first draft and throughout the revision process. Here, younger and older musicians form a virtual community of composers, making use of technology to bring people together and promote the creativity of individuals. (p. 46)

A group of five music educators conceived the project in 1995 in response to their dilemma over how to successfully teach composition in their music classrooms as directed by the new National Standards for Arts Education (1994). Since none had received training in teaching composition during their teacher preparation programs, they sought the advice of a professional composer. During these conversations, the idea of using software and the computer to facilitate student engagement in composition was suggested. From there the next step was to take advantage of emerging technology in online communication to connect the teachers and students in their schools with the professional composer for guidance and support.

Much has been learned about composition and effective mentoring from the work of thousands of students and dozens of teachers in varied school settings since 1995. The project connects small schools with large ones; elementary, middle and high schools; schools from inside Vermont and several outside the state. Although the project began with a base of Vermont schools, the list of participating schools now includes schools in Virginia, Illinois, Indiana, New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. A category of Independent Study students allows participation by students who are homeschooled and students who attend schools that do not participate in the project. Current Independent Study students live in Vermont, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Arkansas. A new initiative will connect students and their teachers from private instrumental instruction studios as they seek to embed composition into student's experiences.

Over the many years of the project, students have discovered they have new musical voices through composition. They tell us they listen differently, play or sing differently, and think about music differently. VMP students have been selected for the Young Composer's Concerts at the Eastern Division for MENC. Students earn honors in the prestigious Morton Gould Young Composers Awards sponsored by the ASCAP Foundation. One VMP young composer was featured on National Public Radio's *From the Top* program featuring outstanding young musicians from

all over the country and an occasional outstanding young composer. Some students who began composing in elementary and middle school enrolled as composition majors at Curtis Institute of Music, Ithaca College, Eastman School of Music, and Harvard University. A number of students in VMP have continued to explore composition as music education majors in college, and graduates now implement composition into their school curriculum.

VISION AND MISSION

The vision of VMP is to generate multiple opportunities for every student to compose music in all music classes and performance ensembles. The project facilitates an educational environment where students feel as much a composer as they are a performer or listener. Since the inception of VMP, the mission has been to embed composition into the curriculum. One fifth-grader said,

Well now that I'm a composer, I do a lot more with music. I enjoy music now. I actually play French horn now in band because I enjoy composing so much and I play piano. Yeh, I like to compose and I like music. Last year when I started composing it kind of opened up like this new world to me of music. (Umpteen Productions, 2006)

Essential to the mission of VMP is professional development for teachers. Every summer a Music and Multimedia Institute brings together teachers from participating schools and others who are interested the work of VMP. The institute focuses on reflection and critique in a creative learning format while developing implementation strategies for teacher's individual school curricula. During the year, workshops and online sessions are held both to address individual needs and questions and to facilitate group sharing of successes and challenges.

Beginning in 2000, VMP added live performance opportunities to bring the composition and performance community together in a celebration of the extraordinary work of students. Since much of the work is written for acoustic instruments, a logical next step is to hear these pieces with real instruments such as woodwinds, strings, brass, percussion, piano, guitar, and voice. In addition to the twice-yearly project-organized performance events, collaborations with other organized groups such as the Vermont Symphony Orchestra, Vermont Youth Orchestra, Vermont Contemporary Music Ensemble, and others present work by competition or invitation.

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY: INAUGURATION THROUGH DEVELOPMENT

The early years of VMP began when computers were uncommon in the classroom. Electronic communication was at the very early stages and the Internet was something few people used. The growth and opportunities provided by emerging

technology played a crucial role in the Vermont MIDI Project in the early years as well as in the developments in subsequent years. The idea that students could compose and would share their compositions with a professional composer online attracted the attention of a grant committee and provided the initial monies for this collaboration.

As an organization, VMP harnesses technology to facilitate the organization's mission and vision; technology as tools for composition; as tools for communication; as tools for sharing and feedback on student work; to disseminate resources; to highlight the work of the project. As new technology tools are released, members of the project evaluate if they will enhance the learning and community of VMP. In the fall of 2009, members were offered Noteflight Learning Edition® accounts linking cloud computing/server based software and class management tools. Skype® video and audio conferencing became the standard tool for meetings and web conferences for support or to connect with professional composer mentors. The desktop sharing feature has been invaluable in technical support for a variety of purposes.

The first file exchanges of student work were sent between the teachers in the project through e-mail and attachments. Gradually some teachers felt confident enough to share student compositions with the professional composer mentor. This sharing took place via dial-up accounts where the interchange was strictly between adults. In 1996 when the first VMP website for discussion and posting of files was launched, the real value of mentorship became obvious. With a website open to every school in the project, but closed to the public, all teachers could view all the works by all students shared online within this safe community.

The project teachers observe the dialogue and developing work of their own students and all others sharing on the mentoring site. This open organization of the website within the community is significant and caused a major impact on the growth and development of VMP. A professional composer mentor delivered the first professional development for teachers. He shared his one main plan about how to begin and develop work with students. Soon teachers began to design their own assignments for their own classes. The success or limitations of these new lessons were observable as student work was posted to the website. Participating educators could notice that Teacher A was asking students to compose based on ABA form. Teacher B developed a lesson using question and answer techniques while Teacher C started his group with a known tune and asked students to create their own variations on this tune. This same kind of curriculum sharing that propelled the project forward in the initial years continues today.

Many teachers utilize the website with their classes for multiple examples of compositions and for practice and refinement of the techniques of reflection and critique. Teachers observe the development of compositions and follow the feedback provided by the professional mentors to their own students as well as to students in other schools. Teachers who participate regularly in online mentoring show remarkable growth in their ability to teach composition as they assimilate the skills and language demonstrated by the professional composer mentors.

The initial VMP community communicated online as they embedded composition into the curriculum. This exchange was an early example of a professional learning network (PLN). Students sharing work online for feedback by professional composers and others demonstrated the power of Web 2.0 possibilities before most educators were thinking about or identifying this current phenomenon.

Notation software has been utilized within the Vermont MIDI Project much more frequently than other types of music software for several reasons. Teachers are committed to providing opportunities for students to use and master music literacy and notational fluency. Since much of the work has been for instruments (not a computer performance), students need a way to clearly communicate their ideas. The use of standard notation allows students who want mentoring from professionals to find a common language that relates directly to their work-in-progress. When students print and display their completed compositions, they feel like they have truly become composers. Since notation software is visual, guidance from teachers is required to tune students into the aural aspects of the work. The successful students seem to be guided more by their ears than their eyes.

Fostering a Community for Mentoring

Lessons learned from the mentoring experiences of VMP can guide novice educators to develop language and attitudes to use with students when discussing student compositions. A professional composer is not the necessary ingredient in a fruitful feedback loop. The essential component is respectful and insightful conversation that guides young composers to explore possibilities and make their own decisions. This dialogue may be between teacher and student or between peers.

The term, "mentoring" often denotes one expert providing guidance for one novice. Within the Vermont MIDI Project, feedback is provided in multiple ways and by multiple groups of individuals. These include professional composer mentors, in-service educators, pre-service music education majors, and some of the young student composers. While the level of expertise is different with each group of mentors, the opportunity to review the work-in-progress and provide suggestions for the students to reach their intent or goal is key to the process.

One notion of mentoring is a one-to-one interaction between one expert or experienced individual and one student or younger person. VMP employs a cadre of up to ten professional composers at any one time, each with varied backgrounds, experiences, and interests. Student composers often receive feedback from multiple mentors rather than discussing their work with just one expert. Receiving timely feedback on student work-in-progress is also a value in VMP.

While mentoring sometimes involves others beyond the professional composers, the most influential online mentoring comes from the composer mentor cadre. The professionals have experience composing music, listening to and studying the works of other composers. All draw upon a wide range of musical influences including the

popular styles many students enjoy. They capitalize on this with suggestions for listening when addressing questions that come up. Each has expertise in the elements of music and with various instruments or voice. The use of stories and metaphors enhance the feedback. Each of our professionals has experienced the struggles of getting from the initial idea to completion and may relate personal stories as well.

While the professional composer mentors take the leading role on the website, the process for most students begins in the classroom with peers listening to work by peers providing suggestions for changes or improvements. Teachers provide feedback at the classroom level and sometimes post suggestions online for their own students or others. Several collegiate music education programs mentor as part of a methods or seminar class. A few experienced middle and high school students in the program provide feedback on the website. Some are assigned the task by their teachers; others choose to give back to the project by commenting on the work of younger students. Several alumni continue to stay involved by providing mentoring as time allows.

The process of reflection and critique is the foundation of the Vermont MIDI Project. Making critique a part of the culture of the classroom enriches the creative experience for everyone. Critique should be planned, guided, and practiced. It should begin early in the composition while in development. As students critique the work of others, they develop musical vocabulary, communication skills, and a higher level of understanding of the composition process. In the classroom and online, young composers are asked to describe their piece or tell the inspiration behind the work. They learn to ask for feedback on a section of their composition about which they feel unsure. They might ask what they could do next in a piece. They have specific questions on the range or playability of instruments. Some students describe in detail all the events they plan such as the form, the role of each instrument, the tonality, or other ideas. Others provide the basic story behind their original idea.

There are students who seem to have no pre-determined plan or inspiration when they sit down at the blank sheet of the notation on the computer screen. This group is often the hardest to mentor, as one purpose of feedback is to help students reach their intention or goal. One VMP teacher remarked that asking students to describe their intent before sitting down at the computer produced a remarkable change in the results and in student engagement in the composition process. One student's intent was to develop a story about sailors finally spotting land and going ashore while another student's intent was simply to create something light and airy. A third student chose the specific form, key, and instruments before beginning. Intentions, whether specific in terms of a storyline, or general in terms of an emotion, style, or form, work well for students who previously may have simply put rhythms and pitches down before knowing the direction they wanted to take with their composition (C. Pingel, personal communication, April 28, 2011).

MENTORING GUIDELINES

Within VMP, guidelines ensure a productive and respectful interchange. There are separate guidelines for mentors, for teachers, and for students establishing the responsibilities for each group (<http://www.vtmidi.org/mentorguidelines.htm>). These guidelines are presented to collegiate mentors before they begin working with students in schools in the online environment. They are applicable to all who embark on mentoring young composers.

1. Think like a detective.
 - a. What can I tell about the skill level of the student composer?
 - b. What is their intention or goal for this composition?
2. Think like a teacher.
 - a. How can I help the student achieve their goal?
 - b. How can I make them feel successful?
 - c. How much information can I give them at one time?
 - d. How specific should I be with my comments?
3. Prepare comments like a short order cook.

Respond with a scrumptious sandwich. The term "critique sandwich" was coined by some 5th grade students and has provided a vivid metaphor for structuring feedback.

 - a. Begin with a comment or two supporting the student effort. Point out something that worked well. This gets the student's attention and makes them feel supported.
 - b. Provide a rich filling to the sandwich with substantive and clear comments. Be specific. Don't overstuff or the sandwich will be hard to swallow.
 - c. Add the top layer of bread for the sandwich with a word of encouragement to the student and their work.
4. Think like a composer.
 - a. What changes might make this composition stronger?
 - b. Point out possibilities, don't give directives.
 - c. Answer questions the student might have posed.
5. Additional protocols from VMP for mentoring.
 - a. Always use respectful language. Humor is acceptable, sarcasm is not. Words like "might," or "could" and phrases such as "Have you considered . . ." provide the students with the opportunity to explore possibilities.

Example—Professional mentor to a 5th grader: "As you continue to revise your piece, you may want to change the flute part a little. Right now the flute plays the same thing 7 times in a row, which may be a little too much. What would happen if it played some different notes, but kept a similar rhythm? Maybe it could go up instead of

down at the end of the phrase? Try some new ideas for the flute part, and see if you like them.” (Retrieved April 15, 2011, <http://vtmidi.greenriver.org/work> [password protected].)

Another example—Professional mentor to a 7th grader: “One thing for you to consider as you continue, is that right now as the piece goes on, it seems to be losing some of the interesting chromatic language you were using in the beginning . . . Can you find ways of using some of the interesting chromatic language that you started the piece with in these later sections?” (Retrieved on April 15, 2011, <http://vtmidi.greenriver.org/work> [password protected].)

- b. Use language for suggestions and an occasional score demonstration when text is too cumbersome. Do not take a student score and “fix” it for them.
- c. Provide timely responses.
- d. Keep the age and experience level of the student in mind.
- e. Ask questions of the student when necessary for clarification.

Example—Professional mentor to 5th grader: “You wrote that you ‘think we have some wrong sounding notes.’ I’m curious what you mean by this. Which notes sound wrong to you? I didn’t hear anything that jumped out at me as ‘wrong’ sounding, but would like to know which parts you’re not happy with. (Retrieved on April 15, 2011, <http://vtmidi.greenriver.org/work> [password protected].)

Another example—Professional mentor to high school student: “I’m not clear on exactly what your question is when you say. ‘What I need help and advice on is how to *get* to that point. As a listener, what do you feel would be the most fulfilling to listen to (in terms of fast, slow, loud, etc. for the next section?)” (Retrieved April 15, 2011, <http://vtmidi.greenriver.org/work> [password protected].)

- f. “Let go” of the piece when students indicate they are finished or close to the end. You may recognize many more suggestions you could make, but you need to phrase any further suggestions carefully.

Example—9th grader to professional mentors: “Thanks to all who provided me with feedback and encouragement. I have added dynamics, more bowings (but not all) and new material to my piece. This is my final posting and hope to continue composing.” (Retrieved April 15, 2011, <http://vtmidi.greenriver.org/work> [password protected].)

- g. Be sincere. Students see through exaggerated praise.
- h. If a piece is accepted for live performance, score preparation details may be more direct.

Professional mentor to 8th grader—“Redundant dynamic marking—clarinet m. 19—delete the MF. Extra metronome marking at the top of pg. 4—delete.”

Expressive, or “mood” markings like “aggressively” or “relaxed” are often helpful to performers at the beginnings of sections.” (Retrieved April 15, 2011, <http://vtmidi.greenriver.org/work> [password protected].)

LESSONS LEARNED WITHIN VMP OVER TIME

While technology enables all students to create compositions regardless of their skill level in music, care must be taken not to let the technology or software determine the outcome. VMP students, teachers, and composer mentors have been exploring the use of software for composition for many years and have developed some strategies and solutions to address issues they observe with students. Often students feel like they are not composing unless seated at the computer working on a score. While everyone works differently, teachers can support activities that lead to more successful composition projects.

1. Encourage sketching.

Student artists and professional artists maintain a sketch pad. In music, students sometimes have the notion that composing only occurs when working at the computer. Students should be encouraged to use the idea of sketching both at the computer and away from it.

Teachers may create ways for young composers to practice exploring concepts and techniques prior to a more open-ended composition project. Consider this a warm-up or compositional etude. (Kaschub & Smith, 2009.)

2. Listening is practicing.

Students and teachers alike bring their notions of how to practice for instrumental performance to the task of composing. While it is essential to spend the majority of instrumental or vocal practice time actually playing or singing, composing is different. Listening to a wide variety of musical examples from classical to pop to jazz to world music brings new sounds to each individual’s listening library. Listening as practice needs to be more active than passive.

3. Provide tools to work beyond the classroom.

Technology software programs come in a wide range of prices and capabilities. When students have a composition program at school, but no software to use at home or outside the music classroom, the amount of composition most accomplish is minimal. To some students (and teachers) this is frustrating. Students need time to create, to reflect, to share it with others for feedback, and to revisit for revision.

Today’s web-based technology tools with low-cost or free programs available on the Internet are viable solutions. Encourage students to take advantage of these or provide these tools through school-wide subscriptions where student work is stored on the Web with files accessible anywhere and at anytime.

4. Embed composition activities at all grade levels and in all music classes, including performance ensembles.

One key observation is the importance of starting in elementary years and continuing to offer composition experiences as an integrated whole in the curriculum. Involvement in composition allows students to uncover self-expression and engages them in finding unique ways to solve compositional tasks. The opportunity to compose often does not occur until a student is a junior or senior in high school, which is when traditionalists feel students have enough theory background to compose. However, students at all levels can compose when guided by skillful teachers. Students in VMP tell us they learn so much about music by composing music.

One VMP high school senior confessed,

I'm a tuba player and . . . sometimes it's a bit on the boring side, when you're playing six whole notes tied together or something like that. I guess one thing I used to do, I'd be apt to maybe fancy up the tuba part a little bit during band and play whatever I'd feel like playing, using my ear to make it sound good. I guess now that I've composed, you feel like you owe it to the composer to do what they told you to do. You realize how intentional every note is and every staccato, every tenuto, every dynamic marking. It wasn't an accident. They put it in there for a reason. (SBO Magazine, 2009)

The idea that composition activities enhance an instrumental curriculum was supported in a research study (Riley, 2006). This study provided composition experiences for an experimental group and the regular band rehearsal-based curriculum for a control group. The results support composition activities for performance ensembles for those educators worried that students will not perform as well on their instrument or in the performance ensemble.

Given that [students] who engaged in music composition activities and students who did not engage in music composition activities both experienced gains in individual music achievement and gains in individual instrumental music performance, it seems that an approach to teaching middle school band classes that includes music performance, listening and composition is effective. In this study, students who performed, listened to and composed spent approximately one-half as much time on music performance activities as students who performed and listened to music, yet these students experienced the same improvement in individual student instrumental music performance. (Riley, 2006)

Web 2.0 tools with available software for composition provide a solution to instrumental and vocal performance ensembles where class time for group interaction and practice is important for success. Although

there is research to support the benefits of taking time within the regular rehearsal schedule, another option is to utilize available Web 2.0 tools to provide students with a composition tool and occasional homework assignments to complete outside the regular rehearsal. It is important that teachers provide feedback and opportunities for sharing. Again, much of this can be done with a Web 2.0 environment. Another consideration is to use an online composition curriculum designed for flexible use such as independent study, homework, or in class exploration.

5. Teachers should compose.

It is important that teachers experience new tasks in a similar way to what they expect of their students. When teachers compose and submit their work for critique, many discover they guide students more successfully through a process that can be intimidating. One elementary band director composed a piece at the summer institute to present at the first concert for his beginning ensemble. The teacher reported that almost every rehearsal began with more than one individual asking, "Can we practice the piece you wrote for us?" The students presented a stellar performance and there was an enormous appreciation from the audience of parents, colleagues and the administrators (C. Olzenak, personal communication, November 10, 2004).

Below are excerpts from an online request from one teacher to his middle school band members who were concurrently in general music and composing within the class. The piece was completed and eventually performed by those same middle school band members.

Here's a piece I have started and is far from finished. Working on it here will give me an opportunity to emphasize some key points that I have been talking about in this class. Look at how simple the rhythms are, how much stepwise motion there is, how melodies repeat and give the ear something to hold on to, how the main theme starts and ends on "Do," how we are in the key of A, how the various notes come together to produce chords in the key of A.

This is also an opportunity for you to help me. Gwen asked me to try the tempo faster and it made a big difference. Yes, "I like it" is nice and "You're the best composer in the world" would make me feel special, but there's more to giving feedback than that. I want to know about technical elements of the piece and how changing them would make my presentation more effective. I want sentences that begin with "In measure . . .". I want comments based on the elements we have been learning about and other thoughtful, practical and non-judgmental ideas. Think of what you might like to hear and give me help getting there. (Retrieved April 15, 2011, https://vtmidi.myhaikuclass.com/danseiden/putneyexploratorymiddleschool/cms_βpage/view).

IMPLEMENTING MENTORING IN MULTIPLE ENVIRONMENTS

Mentoring is a powerful process for student composers. It begins with the individual student reflecting on their own work so they can ask for suggestions and sort through the suggestions they receive. Within VMP, classes who practice this classroom-level mentoring to provide and receive feedback develop a sense of camaraderie around the process of composition. It is common to hear questions such as "Chris, can the trumpet play this?" or "Sylvia, can you help me figure out which chord sounds better here?" Or "Who has an idea for a better title?" Communication of this sort reflects 21st-century learning skills and fosters a sense of collaboration and problem-solving.

The benefits of establishing a composition community can create opportunities for student works to be performed in different community locations. Gaining momentum for a composition program at the school level requires awareness and support by both school level administrative and the community. Since the majority of adults have never composed before, there seems to be a mystique about composition. Demonstrating that students have the ability to create amazing works by showcasing a wide variety of original compositions can do much to ensure composition becomes embedded into the curriculum.

Mentoring programs can be as straightforward as peer-to-peer or older students with younger students. As mentioned before, this requires modeling and repeated practice. Mentoring can begin at the local level. Cloud computing software such as Noteflight with a comment feature can be enabled by young composers to solicit and accept feedback. The comment feature, once selected as an option, is viewed by any user in the community so it is important to develop a respectful and supportive class culture for critique. Noteflight Learning Edition® and others can set up groups that provide for individual school or district level communities.

Reaching beyond the school level, two teachers could connect students in different buildings or communities to share a comment of the work of other students. Perhaps a professional composer in the community would be interested in looking at a representative sample of student work and providing feedback. One word of caution, do not overwhelm the professional with twenty sol-me-la compositions by third-graders or she may lose her enthusiasm quickly. Select two or three works from the entire class and ensure students will consider revisions if provided feedback.

PRACTICUM POSSIBILITY FOR COLLEGIATE MENTORS

Several music education collegiate programs engage in mentoring on VMP as part of three different options: during a general music education methods course, as part of an ongoing seminar for music education students, or as an elective Independent Study. These music education majors engage in an additional field experience that can be completed on campus or at home, wherever students have access to the Internet.

The collaboration with the University of Vermont music education program requires collegiate students enrolled in a general music methods course to compose themselves and to engage in VMP online mentoring with students in elementary, middle, and high school. Each collegiate mentor follows two students and responds with online feedback, from the beginning of a composition to completion. These compositions are created at the computer with the intention of having real instruments perform the work. The change in the composition over time affirms how important the feedback and other aspects of the mentoring relationship can be, and how this increases the possibilities for students throughout the grade levels to succeed at composition. (See complete conversations and works at <http://www.vtmidi.org/student.htm>.)

One additional benefit for the pre-service educators is that they are working alongside professional composer mentors in VMP. Learning what to say and how to say it by observing several professionals at work provides great models for future feedback. Reese (2003) describes the continuum of responses to composition from least directive to most directive by highlighting specific language used in his observations of professional composers and experienced teachers. Collegiate mentors reflect on their own and others' choice of words and observe the results in this online dialogue. They develop supporting and respectful language that encourages the student to remain in charge of their own work. Keeping in mind the purpose of developing a student's creative musical voice and helping them reach their intent is evident in the online mentoring program and all who participate at VMP.

Collegiate music education and composition programs can enhance their music training programs through online mentoring while not requiring additional travel or time away from campus. The potential for online sharing with a multiplicity of schools provides unique opportunities not always available in the immediate vicinity of the college program. In the Johnson State College seminar program, music education majors mentor VMP students for three or four semesters as part of the program. This provides the additional experience of observing students over time.

VMP is singled out as "transformative" (Reese, 2004) by observers of the work over the years. Since 1995, the project has maintained the commitment to its mission of embedding composition into the curriculum. As an early innovator in music and technology, the project not only survived, it thrived. Technology changes encourage continued transformation to harness the best new tools and provide more opportunities for students to explore composition as part of a holistic music education program.

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Digital Natives and Composition in the Middle School Band: From Imagination to Music

Bruce Carter

Anyone can make the simple complicated. Creativity is making the complicated simple.

—Charles Mingus

Music educators, like Mingus, understand the complex challenges that lie ahead in any attempt to make the complicated simple. Teaching students to compose music in a manner that fosters creativity is just such a challenge. Teachers must help students explore the world of music and create their own music while guarding against tasks and activities that may overwhelm their newly emerging capacities. Simple exercises and projects can too easily snowball into complicated activities where opportunities to exercise creativity and artistry become secondary to the sheer execution of the task. Yet, with careful thought and planning, composition can present abundant opportunities for an extensive range of musical learning.

Although I am both a composer and a music teacher-educator, I had very little to share about teaching composition either in traditional one-to-one lessons or in groups when practitioners sought my advice. My own experiences teaching composition in classrooms often left me discouraged as I struggled to present instructional practices appropriate for middle school students. However, there is an ever-expanding palette of tools and resources that are both appealing to students and well-suited for educational purposes that music teachers can draw upon to overcome many of the challenges educators have faced. Indeed, we can now make many of composing's complexities simple.

Introducing the Virtual Composer-in-Residence Program

In this chapter I will share the most recent iteration of a composition program designed to support the study of composition by middle school band students. Drawing upon a community of classroom teachers, undergraduate methods students, and professional