

# Note Knacks: Inspiring Young Composers

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In the last few years, education has been the hot topic for politicians and talking heads alike. Considering all of the dialogue, it is surprising how little the public understands about a child's learning process. Children are not products to be placed on a school's conveyor belt where each year they receive new parts until graduation when the school system spits them out. At that point, they are expected to sink or swim. Children are living, thinking beings that come to us, even at the preschool age, with a great deal of ability and knowledge. Our job as educators is to encourage their natural curiosity and build their self-reliance. Only then will students feel they are part of the process and will want to learn.

When I became a music educator 15 plus years ago, like every other first year teacher, I was bright eyed and bushy tailed! I thought I would get in the classroom, find the kids eager to learn, my lesson plans would be bullet-proof and everything would be perfect.....not so much. Teaching is tough. You have to grab their attention and sustain it for the duration of the class. This is even more difficult for music teachers because we see a larger number of students which makes it harder to develop close relationships with individual children. To add insult to injury, we also have a set of standards that the children need to learn by the end of the year, regardless of their prior knowledge. What's a girl to do?

In the regular education world, manipulatives are a part of everyday life. In music, the only "manipulatives" that have been available were those that made sound. This is not helpful when you have a classroom filled with behaviorally challenged youngsters! Instruments are perfect for teaching a great deal of concepts, but notation is not one of them. In solving this dilemma, I re-examined manipulatives from regular education to see if the same concepts could be applied to music manipulatives. After much tinkering and toiling, I created Note Knacks.

Note Knacks are music block manipulatives used in combination with existing methodologies mixed with my own philosophy and self-developed practices. Reggio Emilia, Maria Montessori and George Bornoff have all served me well and provided inspiration. The Reggio Emilia approach enables children to use pictures and art as a means of communication prior to written language. Montessori is intriguing because it uses fascinating tools made of natural materials that are designed to be self-correcting. It is a tactile learning experience in that if used incorrectly, it will not work. Finally, George Bornoff created a string program that allows learners to understand their instruments through a simple set of patterns thus condensing large amounts of information into a concise format. Because his method teaches everything at once, children get a sense of the whole picture while learning the relationships of their components.

The Note Knacks method teaches music literacy through color, touch and pattern, making it accessible to many types of learners. Note Knacks manipulatives have a note on one side and the corresponding rest on the back. They are color coded so that if you say the color, you say the rhythm. We see our students once a week for 45 minutes, at most. The simplicity of Note Knacks is crucial in that it allows kids to figure them out easily and promotes retention from week to week.

The Note Knacks method allows children to write music in a manner that makes sense to them. It is a compilation of three phases of learning. PHASE 1: *Working with Estimated Rhythms and Representative Notation* introduces the idea of representing sound on paper. For the first time, children get a chance to see and touch notes, utilizing their tactile sense. They can be put into small groups, even as young as 4, to work together to compare and contrast lengths of sounds. This is an opportunity for questions and discussion amongst explorers so that they get a firm sense of how to mix long and short sounds to create a rhythm. Their work is recorded by their drawings on long strips of paper which become their very first compositions.

PHASE 2: *Working with True Rhythms* incorporates color to understand rhythm. This is when the Time Signature Frames are introduced and music parameters are taught via 5 different colors. Notation is condensed so children learn rhythms easily and in a capacity that they can retain. When their compositions are created, they can recall what they wrote and they can share it with their classmates. This becomes a vehicle to build a classroom community of fellow composers. The composition can be taken to the next level when all of the pieces are put together to create a class piece. The young composers can then add musical elements for effect. Whether pitch, tempo, dynamics or all three are added, children are a part of the creation process and are working together to explore how a difference in these elements can create a completely different effect. Such is the power of music!

PHASE 3: *Working with Conventional Notation* makes the jump to universal notation. All three Phases are sequential; thus making the information memorable because learners do the work to get there. Conventional Notation is discovered, much like a cryptologist tries to figure out a code. When the code is finally broken, a whole new level of understanding emerges and the learner becomes a part of the literate community. Music is no longer made up of random sounds and symbols; it requires order and deliberate choice. It allows the children to see music as it ought to be seen, as a highly sophisticated, yet accessible language to communicate the human condition.

Note Knacks' mission is to create a music literate society. We as educators have the good fortune of seeing students from an early age. This offers us an opportunity to present them with a perspective not seen at home or in their regular classrooms. We know that music helps expand the mind and enrich the soul. Greater knowledge of music will help students and people in general recognize the importance music has in education and to society as a whole. Let's seize this potential!