

Musical Transitions

Keep Elementary Students Learning

by Kristina Caffey and Loren Tarnow

Even when we plan the most effective lessons that help students develop their musical knowledge, if the time in between each lesson isn't effectively utilized, it can lead to distraction and possible behavior problems. This downtime will ultimately affect our ability to deliver lessons effectively and will slow our students' learning. Given the brief amount of time most elementary music teachers spend with their students, it is imperative to make the most of every moment. By making transitions from one activity to the next meaningful and musical, student engagement and learning can continue.

How do you move your students from one activity to the next? Do you just yell "fire!" and watch them run? While that is unlikely, your students' behavior during these transitions might seem like you have! If instead you plan effective and relevant transitions, students can calmly move to the next activity in an organized and safe manner. They can stay engaged and behavior issues can be reduced. The lessons will continue with a musical flow, and students will learn to connect games and other activities to musical elements.

As has been repeatedly proven that if we keep our students focused and involved in music, there will be less talking and more music-making—and this all starts with the teacher. Less talking from the teacher will result in greater student interest and fewer

opportunities for them to be off-task. If we plan transitions that continue to offer musical content, the entire time they are in our classroom will be spent learning.

MAKING TRANSITIONS MEANINGFUL

While it can seem challenging at first to create transitions that are musical and that tie into the lessons you are teaching, once you begin creating them, you will find the benefit greatly outweighs the planning time involved. Some transitions can be used for multiple songs and activities, so including them doesn't mean that you will have to plan for every transition time. Students will

enjoy incorporating something new and this will keep them engaged.

Meaningful transitions can be used between every activity, and the more frequently they are practiced, the more smoothly transition periods will become. Transitions should utilize authentic music and elements that are grade-level appropriate and should include elements currently being used in class (e.g., a rhythmic transition for a rhythmic element). They should

be purposeful and easily understood by students. If students don't appreciate the reason for a transition, they will be less likely to practice them the way you desire. Make sure your instructions are clear and precise.

EFFECTIVE TRANSITIONS:

- utilize authentic and grade-level appropriate music and elements.
- are based on elements currently being used in class.
- are purposeful and easily understood by students.

Rhythm Transition: A meaningful transition can be as simple as having students walk to the beat of a drum or walk while they tap the rhythm of the game song. More advanced students may be able to draw the phrases of the song, sing on rhythm syllables, sing and sign the solfège, or set up instruments as their transition. This transition can bring students back to their seats while preparing them for the next activity.

In the game *Riding in a Buggy*, pairs of students join hands, standing in a circle in promenade position. The students promenade counterclockwise in a circle during the verse “Riding in a buggy Miss Mary Jane . . .” On the refrain “Who mourns for me? . . .” the students keep the beat while playing a form of pat-a-cake (pat, clap, partner, clap). For a musical transition to the next activity, students walk back to their seats while clapping the rhythm for the phrase “Who mourns for me?”

After they return to their seats using this transition, the students are set up to practice reading the rhythm from the board. Students read the phrase written on the board and then individual students can come to the board and draw lines to connect rhythms to a phrase from other known songs (see Fig. 1). You can then have them transition into singing “My Paddle” in canon.

Fig. 1

Melodic Transition: An example of a simple melodic transition is with the game *Bow Wow Wow*. In this game, students start in a single circle. Students face a partner while staying in the circle (make sure everyone has a partner). For the first phrase “Bow wow wow,” students march to the rhythm. On phrase two “Whose dog art thou,” students put arms out like asking a question. Then on phrase three “little Tommy Tucker’s dog,” students hold hands with their partner and trade places. For the last phrase “Bow wow wow,” students stomp the beat again but jump and turn around at the end of the song. Now they have a new partner. You then start the game again, and if played correctly, students should end up with their first partner at the end of the game.

After the students play the game, isolate the third phrase “little Tommy Tucker’s dog” (melody shown in Fig. 2, no. 3) by singing it on a neutral syllable such as *loo*. Have students identify the pitches used in that phrase and sing the phrase on solfège (*ss sl sm d*). Next (as seen in Fig. 2), students can read the pitches from stick, then step, and lastly from staff notation on the board. Additionally, you can erase and replace one pitch at a time to transition the phrase into another known song (nos. 4–5). In this example, no. 3 is the phrase “little Tommy

Fig. 2

Tucker’s dog.” With two changes, students have transitioned to the first phrase of *Little Tommy Tiddlemouse*.

INSTRUMENT SETUP TRANSITIONS

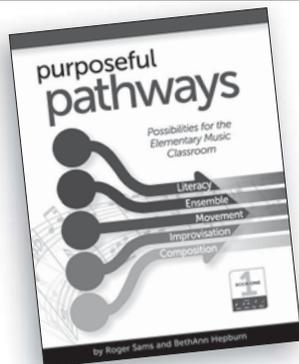
Setting up instruments can take time, and we rarely have adequate time in between classes to prepare for the next. If instead you spend time at the beginning of the year teaching students about the instruments and how to take care of them, they can handle setting them up.

Using melodic transitions is very helpful for setting up instruments. For example, if you want students to play a pentatonic scale, have them sing the scale (*drm sl*) while assembling the xylophones in the correct key. Then they can play the scale and match their pitches. If they begin singing off-key, you can use this as a learning tool and ask them if the pentatonic scale they played was higher or lower than what they were singing.

LISTENING EXERCISES

Transitions into listening exercises can also be simple. In the game *Great Big House*, students start in a single circle. Number students as ones and twos until each has an assigned number. On the first verse students hold hands and walk clockwise while

NEW FROM MIE PUBLICATIONS



Purposeful Pathways: Possibilities for the Music Classroom

By Roger Sams and Beth Ann Hepburn

An extensive collection of 30 developmentally sequenced lessons for learning about music by making music. This collection incorporates strategies from **Dalcroze Eurhythmics**, **Kodály** and **Orff Schulwerk**. Flexible design makes this resource helpful to all teachers, first-year to seasoned educators!

BR1 Purposeful Pathways, Book 1 \$79.95

BR1-CD Purposeful Pathways, Book 1, CD-ROM Companion \$20.00

PURPOSEFUL PATHWAYS PROVIDES THE MUSIC SPECIALIST WITH VALUABLE TOOLS to integrate singing, playing of instruments, and creative and purposeful movement. While these lessons can be used across many elementary grade levels, Roger and BethAnn have created movement ideas for young children to imitate animals or characters and explore rhythmic pathways, and movement for later grades that coordinate specific durations or rhythmic ostinato patterns with the text and music.

R. J. David Frego, Ph.D., Chair of the Department of Music, The University of Texas at San Antonio.



800-888-7502 | www.MusicElementary.com



Fig. 3

singing. On the verse two phrase “went down to the old mill stream,” ones step forward and hold hands. All twos step in between the ones (they stay in the same place they were when in the single circle). On the phrase “to fetch a pail of water,” they pretend to get water from the well and hold hands with the twos. While singing “put one arm around my wife and the other ’round my daughter,” twos put their arms around the ones (while ones hold hands) and then the ones do the same (now their arms are woven together). Lastly, students walk clockwise (while woven together in a step together motion) on verse three.

After students play the game for *Great Big House*, isolate the rhythm of the first phrase and instruct the students to tap that phrase while walking back to their seats. Students can then read that rhythmic pattern on the board as part of the stick notation for Haydn’s *Symphony No. 94, Movement 2* (Fig. 3). Then they play the melody on an instrument while students continue to tap the rhythm. You can immediately follow this by playing a recording of the music. Students can even discover the rhythmic changes in the piece. More advanced students or afterschool choirs can even sightread the pattern on solfège and sing along with the recording every time the pattern repeats.

Musical transitions can be beneficial and practical to use between all activities, they can be incorporated at any grade and skill level, and they can be simple to create. Incorporate musical transitions and enjoy improved behavior, musicality, and interest level during your lessons. Be brave, creative, and have fun—everyone will benefit!

RESOURCES

- Erdei, Péter, and Katalin Komlós. *150 American Folk Songs to Sing, Read and Play*. New York, NY: Boosey & Hawkes, 1974. Print.
- Locke, Eleanor G. *Sail Away: 155 American Folk Songs to Sing, Read and Play*. [S.l.]: Boosey & Hawkes, 2004. Print.
- Little Tommy Tiddlemouse-Traditional English Rhyme (Public Domain)
- “My Paddles” (or “The Canoe Song”) Johnston, Richard. *Folk Songs North America Sings: A Source Book for All Teachers*. Toronto: E.C.Kerby, 1984. Print.

Kristina Caffey is a Music Specialist at Teravista Elementary (Round Rock ISD). Loren Tarnow is a Music Specialist at Hart Elementary and Brentwood Elementary (Austin ISD).

YAMAHA
SELMER PARIS
YANAGISAWA
SELMER
LA SAX
JUPITER
BLESSING

Trade-ins accepted!

FREE monthly giveaways—

GEMEINHARDT
CONN
BLESSING
BACH
KING
VENTO
AND MUCH, MUCH MORE!

Call us NOW! You'll be GLAD you did!

MUSIC & FACTORY DIRECT
Why pay more???

MusicFactoryDirect.com 1-888-368-7770