

# Approaching Beginning Band Students as Musicians

Robert Glynn, 2015 MMEA All State Conference

---

Detailed outlines, videos, documents, and resources are all online:

[mmea2015.basicband.info](http://mmea2015.basicband.info)

---

YOU ARE CREATIVE  
YOU ARE A MUSICIAN  
YOU CAN DO THIS

Music-making is essential for the full development of every human being– not just the “band” kids. By removing music notation from the beginning of our band curriculums, we are better able to teach the music-making process: intentional, aural interactions between humans.

## PHILOSOPHY

**The “traditional” way** of learning a band instrument: using a method book, learning instrumental techniques and fundamentals sequenced by what it looks like through music notation. This may not be the most effective or musical way. The method book’s job is to teach music notation, not music.

**The Problem:** many band educators enter the profession only having the method book to rely on as a curriculum. The country’s beginning band curriculum is being determined by what it looks like, not how it sounds.

I can’t change the fact that my students come to me without the proper readiness of informal and formal music instruction in the first ten years of life.

*“I’m not musical.”*

(this toxic thinking permeates our culture)

**The Solution:** have an evolving, freely-accessible resource for beginning band students, parents, and teachers that shifts focus away from the complexities of music notation and towards the sheer fact that playing instruments and making music is *fun* and *personally satisfying*.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- The word “musician” is not an elitist term. It can and should apply to everyone.
- The purpose of the first year is to make it to the second year.
- Kids are only limited by what you think they can’t do.

**Music and language are learned in the same sequence (Gordon):**

1. Listening
2. Singing & Chanting
3. Improvisation
4. Reading
5. Writing

— *If you can sing it, you can play it!* —

## PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

**What Should We Teach?**

- Listening - How to listen, what to listen for (beyond simply hearing)
- Tonality - sound goes up and down; tonic/dominant relationship, melody, harmony, bass line
- Major/minor Tonal Patterns & Duple/Triple Rhythm Patterns (Gordon)
- Steady Pulse and Physical Movement
- Singing - humming, solfège syllables, letter-names
- Improvising - simple patterns within given parameters
- The Musical Alphabet - reciting it forwards/backwards, using *Alphabet All Stars*
- Fun - making music is inherently fun. Students are choosing to be with you instead of other electives. They should want to be with you.

**Before Students Have Instruments**

- Boomwhackers
- Recite rhythm patterns with physical movement
- “DO-RE-MI” from *The Sound of Music*: learn song aurally, by rote
- Singing in band rehearsals: known songs, work on balance/blend/listening

## With Instruments

- “Repeat after me” exercises - ear training
- Improvisation (not specifically jazz): within given parameters, students play and the band repeats
- Harmonize: most beginning band songs can be harmonized “two notes up” (E-D-C becomes G-F-E)
- Bass lines: most beginning band songs move tonic – dominant, or DO – SO, or 1 – 5.
- “Triplet-ize” beginning songs. Play them in a triple (6/8) feel.

## Band Songs

- We Will Rock You, Charlie Brown, The Hey Song, Louie Louie, Another One Bites the Dust, Smoke on the Water, Iron Man, In the Jungle, Happy Birthday, My Country Tis of Thee, America the Beautiful, This Land is your Land, Bingo, Rock Around the Clock, Flintstones, Take Me Out to the Ballgame, Star Wars, Spongebob Squarepants, Crazy Train.
- Many students are motivated to learn these on their own either aurally or through the notation.

## Game-Based Learning

*"Empirical evidence confirms that the combination of high expectations and low stakes (exactly the conditions of a good video game) matter for learning."*

-Jose Bowen

Kids LOVE stickers. They are quick, easy rewards that will keep students motivated to achieve small, short-term goals.

**Alphabet All Stars** (see website for examples)

- teaches Musical Alphabet forwards/backwards, steady beat

**Rhythm Rock-Stars** (see website for examples)

- continues steady beat, common rhythm combinations
- same reward system as Alphabet All Stars

**Scale Superstars** (see website for examples)

- continues from Musical Alphabet, preps for full scales

## **BasicBand.info | a free, online video resource**

- 8-10 videos for each beginning wind/percussion instrument
- covers first few weeks of curriculum
- made in “kid” language – good for parents too – clear, concise, direct
- 1,000+ subscribers on YouTube – may show an interest in learning before reading
- Students who switch instruments during the year: they show up already knowing the basics.
- Motivated students get weeks ahead easily
- Encourage students to move at their own pace; pause, rewind, etc.
- Wind instrument tone quality *is not* characteristic. There are links to professionals in both classical and jazz settings for each instrument.

## **Basic Band Books**

- freely available on the website
- companion to the videos
- to be used before and alongside any traditional method book
- preparation for Alphabet All Stars, Rhythm Rockstars, Scale Superstars
- motivated students move ahead and learn the chromatic scale

## **RECRUITMENT & RETENTION**

I’ve outlined my personal recruitment process, as well as some ideas about retaining kids from year-to-year, on the website listed above. The *Teaching Music Through Performance* series for Beginning Band and Middle School Band (GIA Publications) includes excellent chapters on the subject as well.

### **The Bottom Line ———**

Kids will mostly stay in the program if they know you care about them, if they are achieving success, and are having fun. We have to create the right environments for all of that to be true everyday.

---

Detailed outlines, videos, documents, and resources are all online:

[mmea2015.basicband.info](http://mmea2015.basicband.info)