

An Introduction to Gordon's Music Learning Theory

Wisconsin School Music Association

Summer Professional Development Workshop - Waunakee, WI - June 29, 2018

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Music Learning Theory is a theory that attempts to explain how we learn when we learn music. Based on an extensive body of research and practical field testing by Edwin E. Gordon and others, Music Learning Theory is a comprehensive approach to teaching audiation, Gordon's term for the ability to think music in the mind with understanding. MLT principles guide music teachers of all stripes—early childhood, elementary general, instrumental, vocal, the private studio—in establishing sequential curricular goals in accord with their own teaching styles and beliefs. The primary objective is the development of students' tonal and rhythmic audiation. Through audiation students are able to draw greater meaning from music they listen to, perform, improvise, and compose.

Audiation. To hear and comprehend music in the mind; audiation is the foundation of musicianship. Music Learning Theory is a guide to help develop students' tonal and rhythm audiation.

Music Aptitude. Music learning is enhanced when teachers know students' potential to achieve in music and teach systematically to individual differences.

Skill Learning Sequence Activities. The "parts" part of the Whole/Part/Whole curriculum, learning sequence activities help students learn to audiate the tonal and rhythm patterns that make up music.

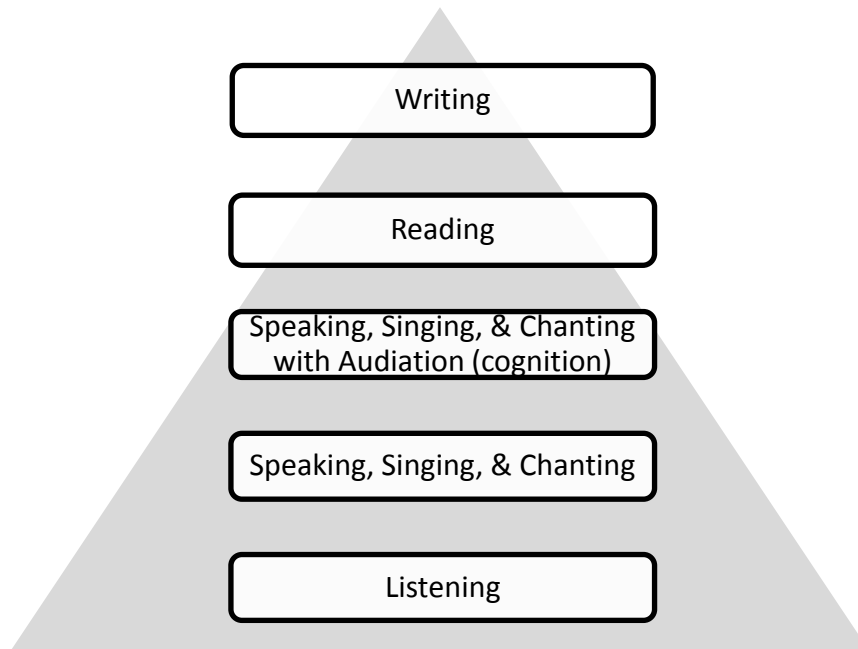
Classroom Activities. Carefully thought out guidelines help the teacher best coordinate learning sequence activities with classroom activities.

MLT Themes:

- ✓ Whole/Part/Whole
- ✓ We seem to learn music in a process similar to that of learning language
- ✓ EXPERIENCE before notation or theory
- ✓ Differentiated instruction
- ✓ Diverse tonalities and meters
- ✓ Talking *about* music is not *making* music
- ✓ Audiation is to music what thought is to language

Developing Vocabularies: Language and Music

Children learn music and language in a similar manner. Both are aural arts, learned initially through listening. Early listening experience in music and language forms the foundation for learning. It is what we have heard that creates in each of us the listening vocabulary to eventually explore speaking, singing, and chanting; to speak, sing, and chant purposefully with audiation; to read; and to write.



Music is learned through active participation:

SINGING CHANTING MOVING DANCING PERFORMING CREATING IMPROVISING
PLAYING INSTRUMENTS PLAYING GAMES READING MUSIC WRITING MUSIC

Gordon's *Learning sequences in music: A contemporary music learning theory*. (Chicago: GIA, 2012)

The Gordon Institute for Music Learning (www.giml.org) is dedicated to advancing the research in music education pioneered by Edwin E. Gordon. The purpose of the Gordon Institute for Music Learning is to advance music understanding through audiation. We believe in the music potential of each individual, and we support an interactive learning community with opportunities for musical and professional development. GIML sponsors *Professional Development Levels Courses* in specific MLT curricula as well as broad introductory courses and special topics.

Early Childhood Level 1

General Music Level 1

Instrumental Level 1

Piano Level 1

Early Childhood Level 2

General Music Level 2

Instrumental Level 2

Starting Early

When it comes to music aptitude, an early and appropriate music environment is key. The sooner children are immersed in a rich music environment, the more music aptitude they retain.

Howard Gardner writes, “the density of synapses in the human brain increases sharply in the first months of life, reaches a maximum at the ages of 1 to 2 (roughly 50% *above* the adult mean density), declines between the ages of 2 and 16, and remains relatively constant until the age of 72” (*Frames of Mind*, 1983, pp. 44-45). Gardner adds, “The development process involves the pruning, or atrophying of the excessive connections which do not appear to be necessary.”

What isn't used or nurtured is lost.

Edwin E. Gordon concurs. In *A Music Learning Theory for Newborn and Young Children* (1997, p. 2), he points out

- Researchers believe cognition takes place in the brain's cortex.
- The cortex has neurons that are interconnected by axons and dendrites, which are stimulated by synaptic activity.
- Children's cortexes have an overabundance of cells to make these connections.
- Unless these cells are used to make connections during critical periods of brain development, they're lost forever.
- Unless these cells are used to make connections for each of the senses at appropriate times, the cells will enhance only the senses that do use them.
- The neglected sense will be limited throughout life.

So, **one sense will be strengthened at the expense of the other.** “No amount of compensatory education at a later time will be able to completely offset the handicap,” writes Gordon. “Regardless of the level of music aptitude with which children are born, they must have early formal and informal experiences in music in order to maintain that level of potential,” Gordon says. “Otherwise, the level of music aptitude they may be born with will never be fully realized in achievement.” **Whatever a child's innate music aptitude, it “will diminish, possibly vanishing to almost nothing, without an early stimulating music environment”** (*Music Educators Journal*, September 1999, p. 44).

Early Childhood – Pre-Audiation

Diverse tonalities and meters, movement, stepwise tonal patterns, and 2- and 4-beat rhythm patterns

Gordon's theory of how young children acquire music:

1. Acculturation – primarily absorbs sounds and experiences, begins to make sounds, attempts to participate in music/movement
2. Imitation – more focused/purposeful about imitating music and movement, becoming aware of lack of accuracy
3. Assimilation – working towards more accurate responses while coordinating breath and body to engage in music and movement activities.

Curriculum: Valerio, W., et. al. (2000). *Music Play: The early childhood curriculum*. Chicago: GIA

EFFORT –

reveals a person’s inner attitudes toward the movement;
describes its quality and dynamics.

Excerpts from a Laban/Bartenieff Inst. of Mov’t. Studies handout by Amy Matthews:
An Introduction to Laban Movement Analysis

Points of Initiation

Core – center of gravity

Proximal – hips and shoulders

Midlimb – knees and elbows

Distal – feet and hands

Effort Factors – each like a continuum, rarely observed alone or all four engaged

Flow: “How do I keep going?”

The baseline variation in the quality of bodily tension; underlies all other factors.

Free Flow: allowing energy to flow easily through the joints and out beyond the body; fluent, careless; difficult to stop instantly.

Bound Flow: controlling the flow of energy through the joints; keeping energy within the body’s boundary; restrained, careful, precise; easily stopped.

Weight: “What impact does my movement have? Do I have?”

The sensation of force or pressure exerted in a movement.

Light Weight: decreasing pressure; persistent, delicate, fine touch, rarefied (but not the same as limp).

Strong Weight: increasing pressure; forceful, having an impact (not the same as heavy).

Space: “In what manner do I approach the space?”

The manner in which energy is focused in an action; the quality of attention.

Indirect Space: many points of attention; flexible focus, all-encompassing awareness.

Direct Space: single point of focus; pinpointing, honing in.

Time: “When do I need to complete this action?”

The attitude towards the duration of time available.

Sustained Time: stretching out a moment, indulging in the sensation of time; prolonging, lingering (not the same as slow motion).

Quick Time: accelerating, urgent, abrupt, “pushing” the time (not necessarily the same as fast or staccato movement).

Audiation, hopefully age 5/6 and up

When learners are audiating, we transition to a more formal pattern system & Skill Learning Sequence

Establishing Context when teaching Content

A Paradigm for Sequential, Developmental Learning of Patterns in Music

Discrimination Learning – developing, by rote, imitation, and audiation, a repertoire of patterns, tonalities, and meters, and the ability to tell them apart in musical terms.

1. Aural/Oral: perceiving, imitating, and audiating patterns with neutral syllables.
2. Verbal Association: performing familiar patterns with solfege and syllables and naming tonalities and meters.
3. Partial Synthesis: combining the first two levels, using patterns to audiate tonality, meter, and function of musical ideas.
4. Symbolic Association: reading and writing tonal, rhythm, and melodic patterns.
5. Composite Synthesis: reading, writing, and audiating patterns to determine tonality, meter, and function of musical ideas.

Inference Learning – students use patterns, skills, and experiences to begin teaching themselves familiar and unfamiliar patterns and musical ideas.

1. Generalization: discriminating, labeling, reading, and writing familiar and unfamiliar patterns.
2. Creativity/Improvisation: using familiar and unfamiliar patterns to respond creatively to music, as one would carry on a conversation in language.
3. Theoretical Understanding: revealing the academic theory, labels, and rules behind what has been heard, chanted, sung, read, and written, e.g., interval names, part-writing rules, secondary dominants, etc.

Although “Creativity/Improvisation” appears quite late in the sequence, we are providing readiness and confidence-builders throughout: Exploring – Creating – Improvising – Composing