

Best Music Schools: Getting Started

National Standards: 7-8, 10-11

Beginning the search for a college music program can feel like a Herculean task (because, well... it is). Figuring out where to start is sometimes the hardest part. Taking a page out of Journalism 101, it is often productive to determine the *who, what, when, where, and why*, and of your college search. Once these questions are answered, and a process of researching options is students will begin feeling more comfortable during this time of life. Thankfully, we exist in the year 2023, when all of the information needed is only as far away as a well-directed Google search.

Prepare

Create a unit on higher music education. Whether or not they are music college bound, have your students imagine a college music future and write out their own *who, what, when, where, and why* analysis. Encourage them to think deeply about who they are as a student and musician, and how that information might help them develop a list of qualities they look for in a music school. Similarly, make sure they narrow down their focus to a very specific program of study. ‘Composition’ is a good starting point, but ‘Electronic Music Composition for Video Games and Film’ will quickly narrow down your search. And don’t forget to include personal preferences about weather, geographic region, urban vs rural, size of campus, and any other details they might not have considered. Even if students use this purely as a hypothetical exercise, it will still come in handy if and when they start their college search in earnest.

Key points in the article:

- Despite the title of the piece, there is no such thing as a “best music school.” Every student has a unique set of skills, preferences, and circumstances, and no one program can cater perfectly to everyone. Having a strong sense of self, clear goals, and a detailed list of desired qualities for an educational institution will help you find the right program for you.
- Preferences that might seem insignificant or finicky at first may come to play an important role in finding your desired school. Something as simple as a distaste for cold weather might immediately rule out a school in northern Michigan, and feeling uncomfortable in large crowds might cross all major universities off your list of prospects in one fell swoop.
- While we live in the golden age of information, it is important to consider where the information is coming from. You can learn a lot about a school from its website, but keep in mind that their web presence is highly manicured and designed to present the school in the best possible light. Any issues with the institution will certainly be absent from their online presence. Gathering information from data aggregators can provide a different

perspective. The best course of action is still making a campus visit, as well as talking to faculty and alumni of the institution.

Begin

Review vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Impart:** to make (information) known; communicate
- **Discipline:** a branch of knowledge, typically one studied in higher education
- **Consultancy:** a professional practice that gives expert advice within a particular field
- **Superlative:** expressing the highest or a very high degree of a quality
- **Provisional:** arranged or existing for the present, possibly to be changed later

Discuss

Conduct a class discussion about methods for researching colleges. Have any students in your class started their search? How did they narrow down their schools of interest? What online resources did they find helpful, if any? Did social media or traditional marketing campaigns influence which schools they considered? Were there any resources not listed in the article that they think should be mentioned? Have students who have started their college search write a *how* guide for students who haven't. Have students who have not started their search write a step-by-step plan for how they will begin.

Q&A

1. Why is it a good idea to add adjectives like “best” to your Google searches for colleges?
2. What were the three first conservatories in the US?
3. What is the general acceptance rate of Eastman School of Music?
4. How many students attend the prestigious Curtis Institute?
5. What are three pieces of information about schools you can find on data aggregators like College Factual?

Answers

1. The internet deals in superlatives, and it will likely yield more results
2. Oberlin, Boston, and Juilliard
3. Roughly 25%
4. Less than 200
5. Rankings, Admissions/Acceptance, Faculty, Retention, Graduation Rates, Diversity, Cost, Student Debt, Average Earnings, Location, Majors, Online learning, Related Sch

Expand

Using the written answers from the *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why* exercise, have students implement the research methods. Have them rate their satisfaction with the results. Then, assign each student a partner and instruct them to trade *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why* answer sheets. Have the students research programs that fit their partner's criteria and then compare the results. Did both partners land on the same schools? Did they discover programs their partner had not?

How to Play “Drive By” by Train

National Standards: 1-9

Incorporating new stylistic elements is one way for established artists to keep their sound fresh. American pop rock band Train has maintained a steady presence on the Billboard charts since their 1998 debut, and a new ska influence helped propel their 2012 single “Drive By” into the Top 10. The song was recorded in the key of E at a tempo of 122 BPM.

Prepare

When it was released, Train’s “Drive By” broke new stylistic ground for the band. Have students listen to previous hit singles from the band, like “Drops of Jupiter” and “Hey, Soul Sister.” What are some key differences in the sound of each song? Which elements of their sound remained consistent?

Key points in the article:

- Ska is a highly influential genre of music that gave birth to other popular Caribbean styles, such as reggae and dancehall. Developed in Jamaica in the late 1950’s, ska became an important touchstone for British and American artists in the 1970’s. You can hear its influence in a wide array of musical styles, including pop, rock, and punk.
- Rhythm guitar is rarely the most prominent part of modern pop a song’s arrangement, but the off-beat acoustic strums in the verses and choruses of “Drive By” propel the whole tune forward. To anchor the syncopation of the guitar, the other instruments in the arrangement play simple parts focused mainly on the downbeats.
- The only way to make sure you keep a consistent tempo while playing ska’s signature off-beat pattern is to practice with a metronome (or another mechanical timekeeper, like a drum machine). Although the metronome often feels rigid and inflexible to new musicians, it provides the most accurate feedback about your sense of time. Where a human drummer might speed up or slow down to match your pace, the metronome stays perfectly consistent.

Begin

Have students listen to “Drive By” and assign them different instruments: vocals, guitar, bass, drums, and keyboards. For larger classes, there are also auxiliary percussion elements in the song, like tambourine and hand claps, that can be doubled by other percussion elements (shakers, etc). After listening to the song and memorizing their parts, allow students to decide whether to modify their parts or play them exactly like the record. When playing as a group, note how each modification affects the overall feel of the song. Which parts can change without disrupting the rhythmic feel of the song? Which parts need to stay exactly like the record?

Review vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Rhythmic Subdivision:** the concept of shorter notes equally spaced between longer notes
- **Metronome:** a device that produces an audible click or other sound at a regular interval that can be set by the user, typically in beats per minute.
- **Side stick:** A technique in which the drummer lays their stick across the snare and hits the stick upon the rim of the snare, creating a “clock” sound, similar to a wood block.
- **Arpeggio:** The notes of a chord played one at a time in series
- **Contrapuntal:** a section of music with multiple independent melody lines that sound harmonious when played together
- **Melodic Resolution:** the move of a note or chord from dissonance (an unstable sound) to a consonance (a more final or stable sounding one)

Discuss

Listen to early ska breakout hits, such as Millie Small’s “My Boy Lollipop” and Jimmy Cliff’s “The Harder They Come.” Then, in addition to “Drive By” listen to ska-inspired songs from the 1970’s, like The Police’s “Walking on the Moon” and The Specials’ “You’re Wondering Now.” Do these songs sound similar at all? What identifiable elements of Ska can be heard in each of these songs? How does each song take its ska influence in a unique direction?

Q&A

1. Which popular styles of Caribbean music evolved directly from ska?
2. Train’s 2001 single “Drops of Jupiter” won a GRAMMY in which category?
3. Before it developed its signature straight-eighth note feel, which time signature was most common for ska songs?
4. Which is the only section of “Drive By” that does not feature a syncopated rhythm guitar?
5. Train was formed in which major American city?

Answers

1. Reggae and Dancehall
2. Best Rock Song
3. 12/8
4. The bridge
5. San Francisco

Expand

Have students choose a different song by Train and challenge them to create a ska-inspired cover of it. Discuss whether the off-beat rhythm guitar works well with the tempo and rhythmic feel of the song. If not, why? Another unique element of “Drive By” is the fact that it ends without

resolving the chord progression. See if students can name another song that ends without resolution. Discuss why the artist might have chosen to do so.

Molly Tuttle Comes Home to Bluegrass

National Standards: 7-8, 10-11

After starting guitar lessons with her father at age eight, Molly Tuttle quickly rose to prominence as a bluegrass guitarist prodigy. Her professional recording career began at age 13, and she never looked back. Tuttle made history in 2017, becoming the first woman to win the International Bluegrass Music Association's Guitar Player of the Year award. However, even with such an impressive bluegrass pedigree, she never felt truly at home in the genre, until now. With the kind of confidence and insight that only comes with life experience, Tuttle has emerged with her first true bluegrass album.

Prepare

Have students watch performances from Tuttle's teenage years (search "Tuttle Kids" on YouTube to see her performing with her family band), from 2017 (the year she won Bluegrass Music Association's Guitar Player of the Year award), and from her most recent album. How have her abilities evolved as a guitarist? As a vocalist?

Key points in the article:

- Although she grew up playing it, bluegrass wasn't an immediate love for her, calling it an "acquired taste" that she developed over the course of her childhood. It wasn't until she became enamored with the storytelling of Hazel Dickens and Ralph Stanley that she really felt a deep connection to the genre. That lyric-first mentality would go on to become a feature of her songwriting and her approach to guitar, even leading her to feeling slightly out of place in traditional bluegrass settings.
- Tuttle has taken musical influence from each of the three places she has lived. Her upbringing in Palo Alto, California immersed her in the world of traditional bluegrass and formed the foundation of her musical abilities. Her time at Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts was a time of rapid development for her as a songwriter and gave her the confidence to lead her own band. Her current home of Nashville, Tennessee has surrounded her with a thriving community of contemporary roots musicians that pushes her musically while making her feel right at home.
- During the first years of the Covid-19 pandemic, Tuttle felt the same alienation that many professional artists, and most people felt. This led her to expand her musical horizons with two EPs of eclectic covers. This feeling of disconnection from her roots, however, did not last past lockdown. As the world reopened and musicians began performing and touring again, Tuttle felt emboldened to embrace her past and create a bluegrass album that felt authentic to her, regardless of whether it aligned with tradition.

Begin

Review vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Converge:** to come together or meet at a point
- **Prowess:** skill or expertise in a particular activity or field
- **Lauded:** highly praised or admired
- **Rendition:** a performance or interpretation, especially of a dramatic role or piece of music
- **Shredding:** slang term for playing a musical instrument with great virtuosity; the ability to quickly perform difficult passages

Discuss

Listen to selected tracks from Tuttle's debut album, 2019's *When You're Ready*, and describe the style and genre. Are there traditional elements of bluegrass in these songs? What elements take it outside the genre of bluegrass? Listen to songs from her two cover albums, 2020's *but I'd rather be with you...* and 2021's *but I'd rather be with you, too...* and discuss the style. How does she adapt her playing style to songs outside of her comfort zone? And finally, compare those with tracks from her most recent album, 2022's *Crooked Tree*. How has her songwriting and playing evolved since her debut?

Q&A

- What instrument did Tuttle's grandfather play?
- What year did Tuttle win the Bluegrass Music Association's Guitarist of the Year award?
- What is the name of Tuttle's backing band?
- How old was Tuttle when she made her recording debut?
- Which college did Tuttle attend?

Answers

- Banjo
- 2017
- Golden Highway
- 13
- Berklee College of Music

Expand

Have students choose one of Tuttle's songs to cover (and tell guitarists not to worry if they can't play it note-for-note; sticking to the chords is just fine). See if they can successfully add other instruments to the songs that aren't on the record. Could they make a synthesizer sound work for a bluegrass song? Alternatively, have students select any song outside the genre of bluegrass and cover it in the style of Molly Tuttle. How would a world-class bluegrass musician approach the tune? Would it be flashy or reserved?

Rhythmic Targeting

National Standards: 1-9

For composers and improvisers alike, creating interesting rhythms that drive a composition forward is essential. So, what do you do when you fall into a rhythmic rut? The solution begins with taking a conscious approach to phrasing and creating exercises that help you vary your rhythmic vocabulary. Rhythmic targeting is an approach that builds musical ideas around a specific beat or division of the beat within a measure, allowing you to create continuity and interesting variations within your phrases. When used in alternating measures, this concept can create a natural call and response feel to a musical selection.

Prepare

Lead a discussion with students about their rhythmic preferences. If they write their own music, what guides their rhythmic choices? Ask students to name songs with interesting rhythms or phrasing, and not just in the percussion! Students could reference a saxophone solo, heavy metal guitar riff, or R&B bassline. After listening to a student's example, analyze which beats the lead instrument or vocal melody is targeting. Compare and contrast the rhythmic approaches between genres. You might notice that funk horn lines tend to emphasize the first downbeat of the measure, or that EDM synthesizer chords primarily target the off beats.

Key points in the article:

- Adopting rhythmic targeting as an exercise can create cohesive, engaging rhythms that propel a piece of music forward. When applied in alternating measures, it can create a sort of call-and-response feel to a melody or accompaniment. The applications are not strictly limited to composing, however. Improvisers and soloists can apply this strategy intermittently to their lead lines, using them as a springboard for their improvisations before cutting loose and getting lost in the moment.
- The selected rhythmic target can be any downbeat or beat subdivision in a measure. The targeted beat can be the start or end of a phrase. If done consistently, both approaches will give a heavier gravitational pull to the selected beat.
- Although selecting just one targeted beat can lead to exciting, expressive solos or compositions, most songs contain multiple rhythmic targets. Alternating between them provides variation and rhythmic excitement for the player and listener alike. Different instruments can also have different rhythmic targets in the same song, creating an engaging interplay that leads to a dynamic arrangement.

Begin

Review vocabulary words and phrases from the article below:

- **Call and Response:** a musical “statement” followed by an answering statement that completes the melodic or rhythmic phrase

- **Sub-Saharan:** from or forming part of the African regions south of the Sahara Desert
- **African Diaspora:** the voluntary and involuntary movement of Africans and their descendants to various parts of the world during the modern and pre-modern periods
- **Samba:** A Brazilian dance of African origin

Discuss

Read through Example 1 as a class. Demonstrate each example melody by singing or playing it on an instrument and have the class sing/play it back. Once students understand the concept, split them into small groups and have them read Example 2 on their own. Assign each group one of the musical examples and see if they can learn it on their own (offering guidance when needed and appropriate for the grade level). Once they have learned it, have each group perform their example for the class. Return students to their small groups and repeat with Example 3. Regroup as a class and discuss any questions students have, gauging their understanding.

Q&A

- The concept of rhythmic targeting originated with the study of music from which region of the world?
- How often does the author suggest repeating a rhythmic target?
- Which beat is commonly targeted in Brazilian samba?
- Which genres commonly target the “and” of beat 4?
- In Rebirth Brass Band’s “Do Whacha Wanna,” which rhythmic target do the horn players use to start many of their phrases?

Answers

- Sub-Saharan Africa (and the ensuing African diaspora)
- Every other measure
- Beat 3
- Jazz, Funk, and more
- The clave pattern

Expand

Have students select another song by Rebirth Brass Band and analyze the rhythmic targets of one section of the song. Once they have analyzed the song rhythmically, have them figure out the key, chords changes, and tempo of the song. Separate students into small groups again. Using what they learned, have students write their own melody inspired by the song. Make sure it is in the same key, at the same tempo, and following the same (or similar) target rhythms as the original. This can be an in-class or take-home project depending on grade level and ability. After the allotted time period, have each small group perform their newly composed melody while other groups play the original chord changes.