

## The Vermont MIDI Project: Music & Literacy in Action



*“Do you think my title is good? It is called "The Ant's Adventure." Do you think I should put eighth notes in measures 5 and 6? Thanks for the feedback.”* - David, grade 5 student Vermont MIDI Project

*“Hi David, You've created a well-formed and interesting piece. The A section at the end helps provide unity to your piece. Good work!  
You asked if you should put eighth notes in measure 5 and 6. I think not. The pattern you've created with quarters and a half notes is a good contrast to the first four measures. I wouldn't change them, but listen again and see what you think.”*  
- Sandi McLeod, mentor Vermont MIDI Project

*“I would like help developing the motives. I feel that I am putting down an idea then moving on too quickly.”* - Allan, grade 11 student Vermont MIDI Project

*“Hi Allan, I agree that you're moving very quickly from one ideal/motive set to another. Don't be afraid to repeat things a few times. This will give your listeners a chance to really get familiar with what's being played before you press on...Keep up the good work”* - Timothy Bowlby, mentor Vermont MIDI Project

The above reflections and responses by young composers and their mentors can be found on the website of the Vermont MIDI Project. Such exchanges are a familiar activity for students in several of New England's Elementary, Middle and High School music programs. They are also the main ingredient in a mentorship activity that fosters self expression, literacy and creativity through music composition from grades 5 to 12.

With the help of web technology and Sibelius Notation Software, this astounding student composition program is flourishing in the state of Vermont. The Scorch technology developed by Sibelius allows the viewing and listening of music scores via the Internet. Students post their

work along with their reflections and receive feedback from regional professional composers as their work develops. Over a number of weeks, suggestions are offered and students continue to rework their compositions until they are ready for the stage.

How did this project come about? The year was 1995 and the response was to the release of the US National Standards for music. VMP founder and project coordinator Sandi McLeod embarked upon a mission to provide schools with opportunities to teach music composition. The Vermont MIDI project quickly became established with the help of current technology. The early days began with the use of email exchanges but quickly evolved into a web interface that would allow the viewing and listening of student works. Threads of discussion between the mentors and the students would preface each revision as the music evolved. Now 7000 students are composing music in the schools of Vermont and 450 of them post on the project website for sharing and critique by professional composers.

*"When I began using the MIDI Project and MIDI composition as a tool in the classroom, it opened up a whole new realm of understanding and possibilities to my students. I couldn't believe what kids (even at the elementary level) could grasp with the help of technology and the hands-on nature of our project." - Jennifer Larrabee, teacher*

Although some students are selected to post on the website, all students receive mentoring in the classroom from their peers and teachers. Discussion and sharing of student work in the classroom is a big focus of the project. The VMP website explains the mandate:

*"Teaching composition is certainly more than learning how to use software or simply asking students to 'create' something. Successful strategies have been developed by project teachers and by professional composer mentors. The most important aspect of the composition work is the attention to reflection and critique. Through this process of sharing and exchanging ideas, students develop the use of music vocabulary. They learn to ask for specific feedback from others within their classroom."*

What better way to exercise the integration of music & literacy!

The following key tenets are observed in the project at all levels and they play an integral role in the learning process for all students:

1. Using notation software develops music literacy. (Expectations for developing a musically literate individual include listening, singing or playing, reading musical notation and composing.)
2. Begin composition with structured guidelines. (Students don't "learn" the software but use it to create a piece that supports the learning of concepts from the music class.)
3. Reflect and critique frequently. (This requirement helps students articulate what they are trying to accomplish. They use music vocabulary to accurately communicate with others about their work.)
4. Encourage revision. (It's important to view the possibilities for improvement and revision.)
5. Promote composition for the teachers. (Teachers say they are changed by this experience!)
6. Provide opportunities for live performance of student work. (Technology is the tool but performance is the crowning glory!)
7. Composition is one element of a well rounded curriculum. (The development of music literacy skills is key.)

The students who are selected to post to the password protected website share their work with a number of composers, teachers and other students. This area of the project describes the process as recursive where students get feedback on their work-in-progress and consider which suggestions will help them improve their piece. A visit to the site shows the thread of conversation between student and mentor throughout the process and includes Scorch page postings of the composition as it develops.

Since April 2000, student compositions have been selected for live performance in the Opus series events. VMP determines the instrumentation, hires professional performers and the

musicians rehearse with each student composer before the concert. Performances are captured on video, audio and multimedia CD. CDs and DVDs are available for purchase on the site.

The impact of this program on the students and teachers of Vermont cannot be overstated. Once a composer, they don't listen or perform the same as before. They become appreciative of music outside the popular realm and become audiences for such styles. Together students share ideas using language and musical understanding. Senior students develop sight singing exercises, fugues and beyond connecting their work with their performance studies. The project now gets calls for scores and many students are writing for large ensembles.

The website is well worth a visit. The entire project is outlined in detail, threads of student /mentor exchanges can be read and the OPUS series of concerts is available for listening.

This project began with the assistance of a Federal Technology Challenge Grant called the WEB Project. A US Department of Commerce Technology Opportunities Grant has also been key in its sustainability. VMP also accepts outside schools on a pilot basis. They can join for a few years before striking out on their own. Fees are \$300.00 per school which includes a full time membership and an opportunity to post 16 compositions for professional mentoring.

This project is an example of successful educational innovation and technology integration for the arts. It includes carefully thought out lesson strategies and intelligent use of technology. Of equal importance is its training support for teachers. It is clear that the teaching and learning in this environment has not only fostered young composers but it has developed musicianship and literacy in all of its participants. I am sure that we will be hearing more about music from the State of Vermont in future years.

To see the project in action go to: <http://www.vtmidi.org/>