



by Dr. Stuart Chapman Hill

When people ask you what you do for a living, what do you say? I am a choral conductor-teacher and identify as such, but I’ve also found the simple title “music teacher” often feels like it fits me best. That’s partly because I have a lot of musical interests, but also because I want to feel connected to the whole enterprise of music education, not just the choral part of it. One thing I hope unites us all as music educators, is our desire to help students become better musicians. No matter what kind of music we teach – band, choir, orchestra, general music, guitar, piano, music theory, music technology – *all of us teach musicianship.*

Musicianship means different things to different people. The musicianship of the conductor of the North Carolina Symphony will be different from the musicianship of the artists who take the stage at J. Cole’s Dreamville Festival. Musicianship can range from technical proficiency on an instrument, to having a great ear, to deep creative insight and imagination.

I want to focus on one important conception of musicianship, *audiation*, and offer several tips for choral teachers (*music* teachers who specialize in choral music) to help students (and teachers) become better audiators.

Audiation is a term coined by Edwin Gordon in his Music Learning Theory (MLT). Although many teachers use the verb to describe “inner hearing,” the ability to play back musical sounds in one’s mind, audiation goes deeper and broader than that. Another definition is musical thinking that is “foundational to all forms of music making and music learning.” Audiation involves perceiving music with comprehension – especially that of tonal and rhythmic context. To hear “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” is one thing; to play it back in your mind is another. To understand it in the context of its major tonality and triple meter, or recognize the implied harmonic functions of the tune represents audiation in action.

Audiation is a complex concept, whose essential principle is musical thinking that involves giving musical meaning to sounds by understanding their context. Importantly, audiation is *not* imitation or memorization. Many convincing musical performances rely on imitation, memorization, and technical proficiency without dipping into the well of audiation. If we really want our students to grow as musicians, we must go deeper than imitation and memorization, deeper than performances that sound good on the surface, and help them grow as audiators.

Strengthening one’s audiation is a lifelong journey. So is strengthening one’s knowledge *about* audiation and MLT. Here are four ideas to help you think about giving an “audiation boost” to the choral music teaching and learning happening in your classroom. You don’t need to be an MLT expert to try some of these ideas in right away, and I hope you will see a resulting difference in your students’ musicianship and your own.

These activities are focused on building students’ *aural* musicianship, rather than notational literacy or music theory knowledge. Just as you learned to talk before you learned to read, musicians need to build up their musical “speaking vocabulary” before they’re ready for abstractions like notation and music theory. Try these activities to help spur some audiatational growth.

Explore various tonalities and meters. So much of what we sing and hear in choral environments is in major tonality and 4/4 or duple meter. This major-and-duple “rut” can be a real hindrance to strengthening audiation. Think about language literacy for a moment. Part of becoming more literate is encountering language in a variety of contexts, from conversation to written communication, television, and theater. As we encounter varied media, we grow our vocabularies and develop new ways of understanding and using language. That learning wouldn’t be as rich if it were confined to just one medium. Music literacy, or audiation, also thrives on variety: variety of style, instrumentation, tonality and meter.

Students should experience a variety of tonalities and meters through listening, singing, moving, chanting, and more. They should experience songs in all modes – even Locrian! – and in different meters: duple, triple, and uneven (i.e., asymmetric). This may seem a tall order, especially if you don’t remember hearing pieces in Locrian at that last choral reading session you attended. But experiencing multiple tonalities and meters can happen in warm-ups and in classroom activities outside concert repertoire.

Collections like *Experimental Songs and Chants Without Words* contain short songs and chants that can be used as part of your warm-up routines or as standalone activities interspersed throughout rehearsal. Alternatively, just take a familiar song and mix it up! How about singing “Ah, Poor Bird” in Phrygian? How about performing “Dona Nobis Pacem” in asymmetric meter? (See notation for these two ideas in Example 1.)

Fair warning: these activities are likely to challenge *your*

Example 1



musicianship, not just your students’, and they may not go swimmingly at first. Don’t let any hiccups dissuade you from trying. That’s how learning works!

Help students develop awareness of macro and micro beat.

This suggestion seems simple, but it is crucial students develop an awareness of macro beat and micro beat. By “macro beat,” I mean the main steady pulse, and by “micro beat” I mean the divisions of that pulse.

Awareness of different levels of beat is foundational for rhythmic audiation. Students need frequent opportunities to chant and move to the macro and micro beats in a variety of musical contexts. As students enter the classroom, you might play a recording of a school-appropriate popular song and lead students in movement on the macro and micro beats.

You might play Kelly Clarkson’s “Breakaway” (a great example of triple meter) and have students sway left and right to the macro beat and then tap their shoulders on the micro beat. You could progress to trying macro and micro simultaneously, or you could divide the class in two groups, half micro and half macro, then switch the groups. You also could have students chant the macro and micro beats on a neutral syllable (like “bah”) or using your rhythm syllable system of choice. (I prefer to use the takadimi system, so for Kelly Clarkson’s “Breakaway,” half the class would chant macro beats on “ta” while the other chanted micro beats on “ta-ki-da.”)

In addition to using recorded music for these macro and micro beat activities, bring them into your warm-ups and repertoire rehearsal as well. While rehearsing with one voice part, have the sections who aren’t singing be your “class metronome” and chant macro and/or micro beats. Or, while the whole ensemble sings a passage, have them all march or tap the macro or micro beat. Consistent use of these activities will boost your students’ rhythmic audiation—and likely have the added benefit of helping ensembles learn to avoid common rhythm problems like rushing.

Help students develop harmonic awareness by singing chord roots. Students can develop an awareness and understanding of harmonic function – in an experiential way, not a theoretical one – by singing chord root melodies. The chord root melody is a simple melody that outlines the basic implied harmonic functions of the song. For example, here’s the first phrase of “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” with chord roots notated underneath (Example 2):

Example 2



You can teach the chord roots to the class on a neutral syllable, on solfege, or on numbers representing the chord functions (i.e., “one” for I, “four” for IV, “five” for V). Once students are familiar enough with both the original tune and the chord roots, you can divide the class in two parts, half on the melody and half on the chord roots. Then you can invite students to switch.

This same approach works well with choral warm-ups, since so many of them are simple melodies with simple harmonic underpinnings. Example 3 is a familiar warmup, “Zingamama,” with chord roots notated underneath. (Note that I’ve had a bit of fun by making “Zingamama” minor instead of major – because it’s important to mix it up!)

Example 3



When students hear and sing chord roots, they start to develop an awareness of the harmonic underpinnings of music, and in time, this harmonic awareness helps with things like tuning, and prepares students with the context they need to understand concepts like key signatures and chord progressions. Why not sing your choral warm-ups in two parts, with one part singing the melody and the other singing chord roots? It’s a simple addition that could pay big audiation benefits.

These ideas are just the beginning, but I hope they’re an easy way to get started! If you are interested in learning more about MLT and audiation, check out resources like Eric Bluestine’s book, *The Ways Children Learn Music*, or the new book *Q&A for MLT: Choral Music Perspectives on Music Learning Theory*, by Jill Reese, Krystal McCoy, and me. You might also want to keep an eye on the Gordon Institute for Music Learning website (giml.org) for workshops, including a summer professional development course focused on applying MLT to choral music.

In the meantime, I encourage you to just be brave and give this stuff a try! In time, I hope you’ll find that you and your students are thinking about music and musicianship in new ways. Go ahead and give yourselves an audiation boost!

References

¹ Jill Reese, Krystal McCoy, and Stuart Chapman Hill, *Q&A for MLT: Choral Music Perspectives on Music Learning Theory* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2023), 18.

² Here, “triple meter” just means that each beat (or macro beat) of “Row Row...” is divided into three divisions (or micro beats). This terminology may be different from what you learned in music theory. For example, you may imagine this tune notated in 6/8 and therefore call it “compound duple.”

³ Edwin E. Gordon, Beth M. Bolton, Wendy K. Hicks, and Cynthia C. Taggart, *Experimental Songs and Chants without Words: Book 1* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1993).