

Music For Every Classroom: Recycled Music

by Elizabeth M. Peterson

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Everyday objects can be turned into some very interesting music. All you need is a little imagination and the willingness to make a little noise. The end of the year is here. This is the perfect time to constructively channel a little bit of that “summer is here” energy.

Too late to try this out this year? Use some of these ideas for the beginning of next year. Recycled music activities are great ice breakers for a new class and a new school year. You can also keep these ideas in your back pocket for the next Earth Day celebration. Here are some fun ways to turn everyday objects into musical creations.

“Trash Band”

A trash band is a group of musicians who make their instruments out of recycled, everyday materials. They are fun to watch, but it’s even more fun to be a part of one. Bringing the concept of a trash band to your classroom can really liven up your teaching.

To make a trash band, there are a few things you must do:

1. Find your “trash”.

Make it a homework assignment or have students volunteer to bring in all sorts of things from their homes. The list has no end. Have students bring in anything that makes noise. Just make sure they have permission to use the object they bring in.

You may want to send home a list similar to the following:

- Toilet paper rolls
- Empty coffee cans
- Rubber bands
- Kitchen pots that are no longer used
- Empty detergent bottles that have been rinsed out
- Boxes
- Empty water bottles (and maybe some full)
- Chopsticks
- Notebooks or binders that are not being used
- Inkless pens
- Old, but clean drinking cups

2. Construct an instrument

If you would like, have your students develop an instrument from some of the objects that were brought in. (This step can be omitted.) You may want to collaborate with your art teacher with this and have your students make their instruments into visual works of art as well as ear pleasers.

3. Explore the Sounds

Give your students and yourself a chance to explore the sounds of the instruments they have collected or made. You may want to do this in a circle where each student

gets a chance to show off the sounds of their instrument. Taking turns this way is a great opportunity for students to explore the different ways they can play their instrument. Think about some ground rules you may want to review before starting the “circle sweep” such as:

- Explore as many sounds as you can with your instrument in 30 seconds.
- Be wise in how loudly you play.
- Keep your hands off your instrument when it is someone else’s turn.

4. Work in Performing Groups

Once students feel comfortable playing their new instruments allow them the chance to form trash bands with their classmates. Give them time to come up with a short performance. Allowing them to improvise their performance may either catch them off guard and freeze them in stage fright or give them the license to never end. At least for the first time, you should have your students practice ahead of time. You can help them focus their performance by giving them a time frame (45 second performance) or giving them some kind of inspiration (sounds of nature, a day at the beach, out at recess).

5. Perform

Once students have had a chance for form their trash bands and practice together, give them a chance to perform. These performances can be a fun way to spend part of the last day of school. You could even get together with a couple other classes and perform for them, or for each other.

6. Take it a Step Further

Build off the performing experience by writing. Here are a few ideas:

- Make a journal entry. Have students write about their experiences making and playing their recycled instruments.
- Write a procedure. Students can write a procedure that includes an objective, materials list, step by step instructions and the final result for “How to Make a Recycled Instrument”
- Find a setting for a narrative. While students are performing, others may be able to visualize a place. Use this opportunity to have students draw the place they imagine as they listen and use it for a setting of a story.
- Write a poem. Poetry is often just the right venue for students to express the new experiences and sounds they have discovered while playing and listening to others.

Basketball Rhythms:

Have you ever thought of a basketball as a musical instrument? I have, and using them as such can be a lot of fun! So, gather as many basketballs (or playground balls) as you can.

The following activities are great challenges for a group of students. They provide practice in body control, listening and teamwork, as well as in how to keep a steady beat. I’ve used them at basketball practices and music classes alike to help students develop

these skills. For all these activities, you will need a big, open area inside or out: playground, gym, café, or a cleared out space in your classroom.

Dribbling to the Beat:

Clap a steady beat and have your students dribble a basketball to it. Make it fast, slow or speed it up and slow it down. The more basketballs you have going, the more exciting. Change it up by playing excerpts of songs and having your students dribble to that.

Pass Out a Beat:

For this challenge, students pair up and stand about 6 feet apart, facing each other forming two lines. Practice bounce passes to a steady beat so that all the balls passed from one line hit the ground at the same time. Then the other line of students passes it back, again, having the balls hit the ground at the same time.

Do the same thing with chest passes. The first line passes and the other line catches at the same time. It is often helpful for one student to signal when to pass. They can say, “Go,” or make some sort of sound. This signal then also becomes part of the rhythm.

Put it Together:

Here is a short routine you can have some of your students try.

- Starting from different spots around the perimeter of the room, have your students start to dribble their balls to a beat as they form two lines facing each other.
- On a signal, they stop dribbling, grasp their balls and get ready to pass.
- On the next signal, one line bounce passes while the other makes a chest pass. The lines catch the balls at the same time and continue to do the same pass to one another. Continue for a period of time.
- (As an additional challenge, have a student do a dribbling, rhythm solo after the beat of the passing balls has been established.)
- On the final signal make the last pass.
- You can end the routine by having the students dribble in sync to their original spots. Or for some added interest (and attitude) have students make on last dribble, letting the balls go as they walk away. The sound of all the balls sputtering in a decrescendo is a great contrast to the other structured rhythms.

Extend these ideas to other athletic equipment. Have a line of students use a surfboard as a drumming surface or have students bat a tennis ball on the floor with a racket to a steady beat. Don't forget to ask students for ideas too. Once you get them going they may never come up with enough ideas.

Recycling objects for the purpose of musical composition can be a fun experience to share with your class. Or maybe it's just another great way to use some of that extra stuff you keep collecting. Either way, your students are sure to have a blast as you create new opportunities to make music in your classroom!