

Modern Band:

Expanding Access to Culturally Relevant, Student-Centered, and Inclusive Music Education

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Most middle and high school music performance programs fit into one of four categories: concert band, jazz band, orchestra, or chorus. Traditional ensembles provide students great opportunities to learn, perform, and improve as musicians. However, traditional ensembles tend to focus on music chosen by the director and also tend to leave out popular music—the music that many students connect with and experience outside of the music classroom.

The inclusion of popular music in United States public school music education classrooms has become increasingly common in the last twenty years. This expansion is in part due to the growth of Modern Band programs in public schools.

Modern Band is a stream of music education that broadens the repertoire and instrumentation typically found in school-based instrumental programs. The repertoire of Modern Band is what people might

typically think of as popular music (the term “popular” being used to mean “of the people,” or, in this case, “of the students”). The genres can include rock, rap, metal, reggae, EDM, country, and other styles as they emerge. Music classrooms incorporating Modern Band help to bridge the gap between the music that children experience in schools and the music they experience in their communities, allowing students “to see themselves reflected in the curriculum.

By validating and leveraging their cultural capital, (music educators) can forge stronger bonds between traditionally marginalized students and the schools that serve them” (*Modern Band*, 2014).

Another consideration in Modern Band is instrumentation. Just as orchestras and jazz bands have a typical instrumentation, so do Modern Bands: guitar, bass, keyboards, drums, vocals, and technology. Much like orchestras, which allow for the addition and subtraction of certain instruments (e.g., adding an English horn or a harp), Modern Band allows for adding and subtracting instruments such as ukulele, Orff instrumentation, or traditional concert band instruments. Participating in Modern Band programs allows students to gain knowledge of the principal building blocks of music—melody, harmony, rhythm, timbre—by playing songs with which many of them are already familiar with.

Another opportunity offered by Modern Bands is the opportunity for the students to engage in songwriting and improvisation. Music educators all know that composition and improvisation are important aspects of music education, but composition and improvisation seldom happen in concert bands, choirs, and orchestras. Modern Band, on the other hand, embraces student composition and songwriting through the use of common chord progressions and simplified, student-friendly approaches to songwriting and improvisation. Since most popular music uses similar chord progressions, music educators can utilize transposition and approximation to make most songs accessible to students of all skill levels. And unlike other approaches to teaching music that only introduce composition or improvisation once students have a high proficiency on an instrument, “Modern Band integrates composition and improvisation at the beginning of children’s education as a means of ensuring that they experience the confidence-building and self-esteem-raising benefits that come with authorship” (*Modern Band*, 2014).





Modern Band in Higher Education

Modern Band is not just taking off in K–12 classrooms; it is also rapidly expanding in higher education. To date, more than 40 colleges and universities have included Modern Band in a course syllabus. Some of these institutions even offer full Modern Band courses where future music teachers are learning to play popular music instruments while also developing an understanding of the pedagogies involved in teaching popular music.

Lebanon Valley College just started a graduate certificate in Modern Band, and the University of Kentucky offers a summer Modern Band Institute. Ithaca College, Slippery Rock University, and Indiana University of Pennsylvania, among others, have all offered summer Modern Band courses this year. In the past four years, more than 60 colleges and universities have hosted Modern Band workshops, and several institutions of higher education are also intentionally placing their music education student teachers in schools that have Modern Band programs.

Little Kids Rock

The term “Modern Band” was initially coined by Dave Wish, founder and CEO of Little Kids Rock (LKR). LKR is a non-profit organization that

provides instruments, curriculum, and professional development to K–12 and collegiate educators. LKR’s mission is to transform lives by restoring, expanding, and innovating music programs in public schools across the country. LKR partners with in-school music teachers to give them the skills and resources necessary to run Modern Band programs in schools. Since 2002, LKR teachers have brought the transformational gift of music education to more than 650,000 public school children in the United States. At this time, LKR has donated more than 90,000 instruments to public schools and is working with more than 2,500 teachers who are serving more than 400,000 students in 46 states. A number of school districts, including some of the nation’s largest public school systems, have made Modern Band programming an official part of their music programs and are working closely with Little Kids Rock to help make Modern Band available to children throughout their school systems. These school districts include the New York City Department of Education, the Los Angeles Unified School District, the Dallas Independent School District, Chicago Public Schools, and Hartford Public Schools. In Massachusetts, Little Kids Rock has trained teachers to run Modern Band programs in Boston, Springfield, Westford, New Bedford, Lawrence, and Burlington.

Conclusion

Modern Band programs should be seen as an addition to—not a replacement of—traditional ensembles in schools. Our bands, choirs, and orchestras are working well for the students whom they serve. However, current research shows that our traditional bands, choirs, and orchestras are serving, on average, approximately 20% of high school students. What about the other students who are likely passionate about music but don’t want to participate in these ensembles? Modern Band provides an opportunity for music educators to engage students who are traditionally marginalized from or uninterested in our band, choir, and orchestra programs. If the music education community is serious about increasing diversity, increasing access, and promoting inclusion, then it is imperative that we widen the door to participation in school music with more diverse and inclusive ensembles. •

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