

***Enhancing the Ensemble Experience  
Using Composer Skype Sessions***

Presenters:

Dr. Jenny L. Neff  
Lower Merion School District

Dr. Scott Watson  
Parkland School District



The Midwest Clinic  
International Band & Orchestra Conference  
Wednesday, December 20, 2017  
1:15-2:15pm

## **Clinic Synopsis:**

We live in a time when much of the repertoire available for our ensembles is written by living composers, and when video conferencing technology is ubiquitous and attainable. This happy convergence creates a wonderful opportunity to bring composers, virtually, into our rehearsals. Composer Skype sessions afford students and directors an opportunity to hear composers share about their lives and music, and to receive useful feedback that can lead to a deeper understanding and execution of the composer's music. In this session, co-presenters Watson and Neff will demonstrate what a Composer Skype session looks like (via video and pictures from actual Skype sessions with composers); the many benefits of doing composer Skypes, from the perspective of director, student, composer and administrator; a model composer Skype session lesson plan, aligned with the National Core Arts Standards; and the technical logistics for setting up a composer Skype in your rehearsal space.

## **Clinic Outline:**

### **A. Session Goals**

1. Explain Various Types of Skype Connections with Composers
2. Share Media (video, pictures) from Actual Composer Skype Sessions
3. Present a Sample Skype Session Lesson Plan
4. Connect National Core Music Standards to a Sample Unit Plan
5. List the Benefits of Holding Skype Sessions from Various Perspectives: Student, Director, Administrator, Composer
6. Explain the Process & Technology Logistics for Holding a Skype Session with a Composer

### **B. Types of Composer Skypes**

1. Meet the Composer
  - a. A session that gives the composer the opportunity to share things such as personal and professional background, interesting and helpful information about a work being performed, a window into the compositional process, a virtual tour of their studio, valuable lessons about music and life, and more.
  - b. This allows students and directors to interact with the composer, asking questions about all of the above, especially regarding the composer's music being performed.
2. Skype Rehearsal
  - a. A session that features the ensemble and director performing the composer's music for critical feedback.
  - b. This enhances the ensemble's understanding and execution of the music, helping create musical meaning.

- c. This makes the otherwise impersonal idea of the composer real and personal for students.
3. Hybrid
- a. A session in which time is set aside for rehearsal/feedback and the composer sharing and taking questions.
  - b. A session that might require a longer time period, necessitating special scheduling (beyond an ensemble's normal rehearsal period).

#### C. What It Looks Like

- 1. Various pictures and video from actual composer Skype sessions (Meet the Composer and Skype Rehearsals).
- 2. Composers featured, who routinely Skype with ensembles: Brian Balmages, Chris Bernotas, Steven Bryant, Vince Gassi, Alex Shapiro, Todd Stalter, Michael Story and Scott Watson.

#### D. Connecting to the Content

- 1. Sharing a sample lesson plan used for a Skype session - this can be customized by attendees to use in their programs.
- 2. Connecting a unit plan to the National Core Music Standards
  - a. Identifying the artistic processes used in the unit
  - b. Working through process components used by the ensemble
- 3. Describing steps taken in preparing for the Skype session to create deeper musical meaning
  - a. Introducing the background of piece
  - b. Purposeful listening - engaging students in musical elements
  - c. Rehearsal process - following the Ed Lisk *Director Awareness Scale*
  - d. Connecting the rehearsal to the Skype session
    - i. Formulating questions for the composer using the process components
    - ii. Selecting questions to use during the Skype session
    - iii. Skype expectations for students (e.g., etiquette, rehearsal expectations, assigning questions, note taking, marking music)
- 4. Sharing student work
  - a. Student question samples
  - b. What students learned from the Skype session

#### E. Steps for Creating a Successful Skype Session

- 1. Things to do ahead of the Skype session:
  - a. Reach out to the composer to inquire. What fee, if any, do they charge? (Note: We believe it is important to speak to this issue, but will give

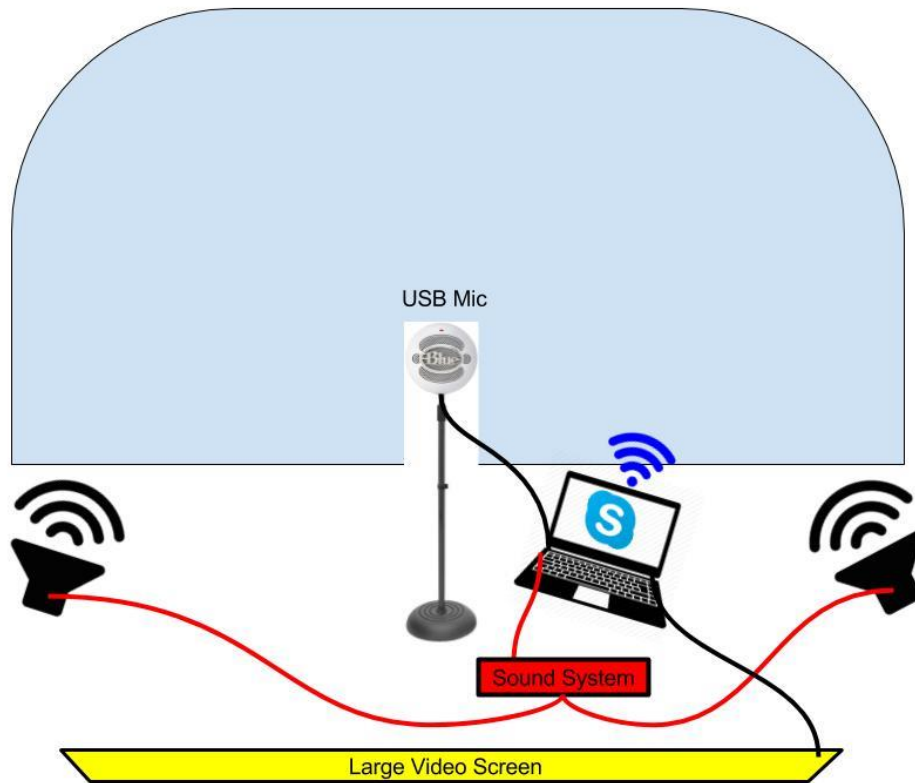
examples of various fees and gratis offers in general, without mentioning specific composer names.) Can a session be scheduled?

- b. Enlist your building's/district's tech paraprofessional to assist.
  - c. If possible, schedule a brief time to test the Skype connection with the composer. You don't want to waste time at the start of the actual Skype session fiddling with tech settings!
  - d. Have students submit their questions for the composer (on 3x5 cards) to you so you can read through and select some good questions that are representative. Many students will ask similar questions; a few will ask really unique and interesting ones!
  - e. Do all you can to be sure everyone attends the Skype session (publicize date well in advance, clear time slot with administrators so there are no conflicts with other classes or school activities).
2. Things to consider during the actual session:
- a. REHEARSAL: For longer pieces, work section-by-section, having the composer offer feedback. Students should have pencils ready to take notes, make corrections, etc.
  - b. QUESTIONS: Students asking questions should come to the front of the ensemble to introduce themselves (first name) and speak into the microphone. If students stay seated in the ensemble, they can stand to speak and director can relay their name and question.
  - c. PUBLIC RELATIONS: Have a photographer and/or videographer (school/district PR employee, student with newspaper, etc.) take pictures of the event to use for advocacy.
  - d. TECHNOLOGY: Remember that the mic placement will affect how the composer hears your ensemble.
  - e. ADVOCACY: Consider inviting an administrator to view the session.

#### F. Setting Up the Technology

1. ACCOUNT: Get a free [Skype](#) account. Choose a Skype "handle" you don't mind sharing with colleagues/students!
2. TEST: Try the Skype connection with composer either in the weeks/days ahead of your scheduled session (preferred) or, at the very least, in the 30 minutes prior to your scheduled time.
  - a. Internet Firewall? Be sure Skype is not blocked by your school's network
  - b. Have a "Plan B" - Use the fastest connection available (hardwired ethernet cable or wireless network) but have a backup (mobile phone "personal hotspot," Facetime, or even just phone call).
  - c. In Skype, look for mic and video icons and make sure they are "on."
3. SIGHT: Connect the VGA out of your computer, laptop or tablet to a projector/screen, interactive whiteboard (IWB), or very large screen TV.

4. SOUND IN: Use a good quality USB Mic (i.e. [Blue Snowball](#) for \$70 works well) placed at the CENTER/FRONT of the room. We suggest mounting it on a conventional mic stand, with a [long \(16-25 ft.\) USB cable](#).
5. SOUND OUT: Room speakers on far sides of room, angled (to avoid feedback).
6. COMPOSER: Will probably use headphones/earbuds.



#### G. Various Perspectives

1. What have those who've engaged in this mode of sharing learned? What advice do they have for us? Let's hear from some composers, directors, students, and administrators (with our sincerest thanks for sharing!):
2. DIRECTORS: Meredith Allen, Tiffany Hitz, Chris Bernotas, Scott Cullen, David Kehler, Jenny Neff, Jeffrey deSeriere, Teren Shafer.
3. COMPOSERS: Brian Balmages, Steven Bryant, Chris Bernotas, Vince Gassi, Kevin Mixon, Alex Shapiro, Scott Watson and Travis Weller
4. STUDENTS: Various quotes.
5. ADMINISTRATORS: Various quotes.

LINK: <http://bit.ly/2wllLhs>

## **SAMPLE SKYPE LESSON**

by Jenny L. Neff

### **Objectives:**

Students will:

- Develop an understanding of the process components used by composers.
- Formulate questions that align to the process components for the composer.
- Discuss compositional techniques used by the composer via Skype session.
- Develop a new perspective from the viewpoint of the composer.

### **Artistic Processes:** Connecting & Creating

- Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context  
(*Connecting*)
- Conceiving and developing new artistic ideas and work (*Creating*)

### **Anchor Standards:**

1. Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work. (*Create*)
2. Organize and develop artistic ideas and work. (*Create*)
3. Refine and complete artistic work. (*Create*)
11. Relate musical ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding. (*Connect*)

### **Activities:**

- Students will review a chart containing process components for composing. The teacher will draw connections between these and the writing process. The table will describe what each process component is, what it means, and what the composer does. Students will then use their band music from *Der Erbkönig* (by Scott Watson) to formulate questions for the composer. Questions will align with the process components. (Assessment - discussion, completed questions)
- The full ensemble will participate in a Skype session with composer Dr. Scott Watson. Content will focus on discussing the composition process, demonstrating sections of his composition *Der Erbkönig* for concert band, receiving feedback from the composer, and asking questions that relate to the process components for composition. (Assessment - participation in Skype session, complete Skype outline)
- Students will complete two reflection statements:  
Something I learned during today's Skype session was...  
Something I will take to my next practice session from today's Skype session is...  
(Assessment - completed reflection statements)

## **PRE-SKYPE ACTIVITIES/LESSONS**

By Jenny L. Neff

### *Selecting, analyzing, and interpreting musical work for presentation*

1. Sight read the piece
2. Focus areas of key signatures, note names and values, and rhythms
3. Focus areas of articulations and dynamics

### *Developing and refining musical techniques and work for presentation*

4. Isolate details and repeat through logical-sequential analysis
5. Discuss, model, and rehearse various practice strategies
6. Select sections to practice and refine as individuals and as a group
7. Focus on the composition structure and design, as well as transition areas.

### *Conveying meaning through the presentation of musical work*

8. Add expressive qualities to the piece and discuss the meaning to be conveyed to the audience.
9. Work to include all musical elements in a fluid manner, working up to performance tempo.

### *Connecting to literature and music history*

10. Students will read the poem *Erlkönig*, by Goethe. Students will read the English translation and decide which paragraphs represent which characters in the story.
11. Students will read background information on composer Franz Schubert. Students will discuss how the male voice changes timbres to represent various characters in the story. Piano accompaniment figures will also be identified and discussed.
12. Students will watch a five-minute animation of the piece written by Schubert.  
Link to video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JS91p-vmSf0>

## Presenter Bios

**Dr. Jenny L. Neff** teaches instrumental music in the Lower Merion School District (Ardmore, PA). She is also the Interim Director of the Master of Music and Summer Music Studies programs at the University of the Arts, in Philadelphia. She has taught at all levels for over 24 years. She is a frequent presenter, guest conductor, clinician, music advocate, and resource to teachers and administrators. She has presented at conferences in PA, DE, MD, and RI. Her writings have appeared in the PMEA Journal, *PEL* Journal, and on the NafME, Zeswitz Music and J.W. Pepper websites. She currently serves as the Eastern Division Representative for *NAfME's* Council for Band. She is also part of the curriculum writing committee for *NAfME's* Library of Congress project. Dr. Neff can be contacted at: [stognerneff@hotmail.com](mailto:stognerneff@hotmail.com).

**Dr. Scott Watson** teaches instrumental and elective music in the Parkland School District (Allentown, PA) and serves as adjunct professor for Cairn University, Central Connecticut State and University of the Arts. Watson is a frequently commissioned composer with more than 70 published pieces for band and strings at all levels. He is an exclusive composer for Alfred Publications and a contributor to their Sound Innovations Ensemble Development Series. Watson has presented numerous workshops/clinics for music educators, frequently serves as guest conductor for honor band festivals, and is the author of the highly regarded music education text, *Using Technology to Unlock Musical Creativity* (©2011, Oxford University Press). To learn more, visit [www.scottwatsonmusic.com](http://www.scottwatsonmusic.com). Dr. Watson can be contacted at [drscottwatson@gmail.com](mailto:drscottwatson@gmail.com).



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