

## Getting a Good Groove On Using Fundamental Blues Elements in General Music Class

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January and February are my favorite months for teaching music. The winter holiday show prep, with its single-minded focus on a handful of songs to be showcased in a one-time performance – the music teacher equivalent of teaching to the test – is behind me. Culmination and other end-of-year activities are months off, and now I can get back to my primary teaching objective – instilling an appreciation in my students for their own musicality, and showing them how music is an essential part of their lives and the life of their community.

Most music teachers I know incorporate some blues into their instruction this time of year, particularly in February during African-American History Month, but the blues are worth delving into year-round. It is said that jazz is one of America's premier art forms, but blues is the forerunner of jazz, as well as the foundation of rock and roll, country, and R & B. It is part of our shared cultural heritage, and, therefore, presents many cross-curricular teaching opportunities. It is also a highly accessible platform from which to teach improvisation, which has been a significant part of the National Music Education Standards since the mid-1990s.<sup>1</sup>

When I first began to teach blues in my classroom, I focused on form because the blues form is so easy to understand and replicate. For example, the I-IV-I-V-IV-I chord progression of the 12-bar blues shuffle pattern can be played quite soulfully on a variety of elementary school instruments from ukuleles to Orff xylophones (see Figure 1). Blues lyrics, with their emphasis on distress expressed with a touch of humor, are easy for kids to imitate. (In writing their own blues lyrics I tell students to think – “It’s not bad, it’s

worse” – as in “pizza costs two dollars, but I only have two cents to my name.”) I teach these and other aspects of blues form every year, and the lessons are always a hit. Increasingly though, I have begun to focus instruction on even more elemental blues components with the objective of producing a more visceral understanding of what the blues is all about.

### The Groove

What is it about swing that makes it so much fun to move to? Could it be a sense of relief about not having to attack a piece of music on the first beat, or perhaps a feeling of naughtiness associated with moving those body parts that seem especially well-suited to swing? Whatever it is,

kids love it. Even familiar material becomes more exciting to them when set to back beats. Try reciting the alphabet with a ride cymbal playing swing eighths, and you will see what I mean.

One of the most direct ways to teach young kids swing is to use body percussion patterns where the clap is on the 2nd beat or on 2 and 4. A pattern I use frequently is to pat the legs on 1, clap on 2, snap on 3, and clap again on 4, 3 creating an “X” shape. This basic pattern can be made more challenging by moving the claps to a partner’s hands, patty-cake style. As long as the accents are on the back beats, the sense of swing will prevail.

Hopefully, however, there is something

**Figure 1**

**Components for 12 Bar Blues in A**

**Uke Chords**

A      D      E

A7      D7      E7

Don't forget to add some swing eighths on your ride cymbal!

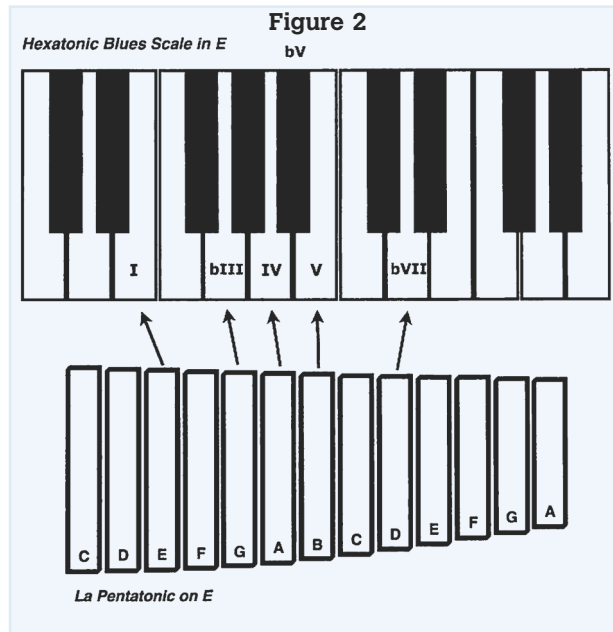
going on that transcends counting, and that is the experience of *being in the groove, or in the pocket*. What is the difference between playing back beats and being in a groove? In a recent article in *Music Educators Journal*, Marsha Baxter and Christopher Santanasio described the groove as something existing in the moment and requiring not just a sense of time notation-wise, but also an instinctive interaction of those participating in the experience including members of the audience.<sup>2</sup> Grooves are intuitive, organic things, relying on the nuances of individual musicians working together. Grooves also contain an overwhelming sense of propulsion, which may explain why we can't sit still when a good groove gets going.

### The Minor Third

The hexatonic blues scale generally does not contain a second but instead goes from the home note to a minor third in the first scale degree. That the interval of a minor third – three semi tones having a frequency ratio of 6:5 – has a “sad” feeling is a phenomenon that has been observed for thousands of years and is still not well understood... but it is a powerful force. A 2010 Tufts University study showed even spoken words with 6:5 intervallic relationships provoke negative feelings, with sadness being the predominant response to the descending minor third, and anger tending to be the reaction to the ascending minor third.<sup>3</sup> The researchers also noticed that these negative emotional reactions were stronger than positive ones, and speculated that this was because we are hard-wired to pay closer attention when something seems amiss.<sup>4</sup>

The rest of the blues scale consists of the fourth, an augmented fourth, a fifth and a flatted seventh. This means that *la pentatonic scale* – a pentatonic that uses *la* as its home tone – overlays the blues scale quite well (see Figure 2.) It is worth noting that there is an additional minor third in the pentatonic between *so* and *mi*, a bi-tonal pitch pattern associated with sassy, playground taunts (as in “nyah-nyah-na-nyah-nyah.”) However, it is the minor third closest

to the home tone that seems to be most evocative of a blues feeling, and it is there where I focus much of my initial instruction, encouraging students to use it in their improvisa-



tional ideas.

The emotionally provocative nature of the minor third may also explain why the blues has an anti-establishment vibe that appeals to my students (and young English musicians in the 1960s.) The blues, at its heart, is an expression of identity. The notion of people who had been legally considered “property” just a few years before sharing their individual stories in an angry, sassy, aggressive way, was very disturbing to the status quo. On some level it continues to be, just as blues continues to be empowering to people singing and playing it.

### Giving Testimony and Witnessing

One of the most useful instructional aspects of the blues is its reliance on call and response as a way of alternating individual and group music-making and as a vehicle for showcasing improvisation. By telling the kids “echo me” or “when I say..., you say...” I am not only able to introduce material that they can quickly learn to improvise with, I am also, with some back beats and minors thirds thrown in, getting a pretty cool blues groove going right from the start. Here again, however, my hope is not just to teach how the blues is structured, but what the function of that structure is.

In the blues, call and response has

been passed through the filter of the black church, where the preacher’s sermon is the equivalent of the solo call, extemporaneous and improvisatory, and the response is the affirmation of the congregation – shorter, choral, and repetitive. More to the point, the purpose of the sermon is to speak the truth, to give *testimony*, about one’s spiritual journey and have it *witnessed* by the community. As the blues developed, this truth-telling came to focus on secular matters – romantic entanglements, money problems, addiction – but always there remained a sense of speaking authentically and having that truth be seen. Even as the idea of testifying has evolved into extended instrumental soloing, it is authenticity and not virtuosity that is used to determine the testimony’s soulfulness and value.

Authenticity in elementary school music-making can be harder to measure, but its presence in music class is unmistakable. When kids are in the groove, wailing on the minor third, and sharing from the heart, they stay engaged longer, collaborate more effectively, make more inventive choices. The sense of joy is contagious and tends to pull in anybody who happens to be passing by. Again, blues grooves are of-the-moment things and the retention of specific musical skills can be a little spotty, even with a careful debrief. But what never fails to register with my kids is how much fun blues-making is and how much they want an encore. I will take that result every time.

1. 2014. Gruenhagen, L. & Whitcomb, R. “Improvisational Practices in Elementary General Music Classrooms.” *Journal of Research in Music Education*. Vol. 61(4). 379-395.
2. 2012. Baxter, M. & Santanasio, C. “From Bandstand to Classroom; Thinking and Playing Grooves.” *Music Educators Journal*. Vol. 99(1). 73-79.
3. 2010. Curtis, M. & Bharucha, J. “The Minor Third Communicates Sadness in Speech, Mirroring Its Use in Music.” *Emotion*. Vol. 10(3). 335-348.
- 4 Ibid.