ETM: The Podcast
Episode 8: Inside ETM's Inaugural High School Composition Contest
TRANSCRIPT

Timothy: Sometimes it's just not going to come right to you. It's going to take some time and thinking. Maybe you have to go through another piece of work. Listen to some music to get some inspiration as to what you want to do with your music.

Eve: Try and make music that sounds powerful to you, and you don't always have to listen to what other people think sounds good, but just go with your own ear. Music that you're proud of, instead, it will make you proud of your own music and your peers will learn to love the music you make as well. It doesn't always have to be based on what they like.

Mamadou: I was about that curiosity, I'm like a curious person. I was like want to learn more about something if I don't know much about it. I want to learn more about something if I don't know much about it.

Speaker 4: I want to learn more about it. Maybe they they don't know that they, you know they're good at music, but if they have a music class, then they might figure out like I'm good at this, so then they might continue doing it. So I just think it's really good for young people to do music

Noah: You are listening to Education Through Music, the podcast. As always, I'm your host, Noah, and I'm particularly excited to bring you this episode, which will combine the voices and experiences of students, teacher and support staff at Education Through Music to tell the story of a pretty unique musical undertaking. Over the past month, high school students at ETM partner schools have been working on original compositions to submit as entries in a competition. The requirements for these entries and the person scoring them made this a truly one-of-a-kind experience. To tell us about the origins of this competition, here is ETM Director of Programs, Stephanie Nantell.

Stephanie Nantell: Well, it first got started when I was talking to one of our instructional supervisors, Dr. Adam Beard, about a unit that he made called Trap Beats for Change.

Noah: And here's Dr. Beard, who you might recognize from episode two of the show.

Dr. Beard: So Trap Beats for Change is a repertoire unit. When we made these, we chose specific pieces of music that we used to pull musical concepts out of and to dictate the projects that students would do. The repertoire for this unit is Lil Baby's the Bigger Picture, which is a song characterized by the elements synonymous with the trap subgenre of hip-hop. This is a song that was written in response to the George Floyd killings. That was written in response to the George Floyd killings and has a social justice message related to the Black Lives Matter movement. So the project that I wanted students to do was to make their own trap song and utilize audio samples that promote a positive message for a social justice topic of their choosing.

Stephanie Nantell: When I saw his unit I thought it was really interesting and unique and I was really moved by it. And I said, well, who's going to do this? How do we know that people are going to do this? And he said, well, I don't know. We send it out to the teachers and we encourage and we talk to them. So I said, well, let's make sure that everyone does this unit. And thus, when an opportunity came up to think about doing a songwriting competition, I thought, well, what about, instead of writing songs, what if we used Adams Trap Beat for Change Unit to do a composition competition? We decided to do it in our three high schools because we wanted to have a manageable group of kids. You know, we serve about 20,000 students in New York City, so 20,000 entries would not be something that we could so easily manage to pick a winner. So the requirements for the competition was basically to complete the project.

Noah: The project had two basic requirements. One was that it would be composed of a trap beat, and the other that it incorporated sampled material on a social justice issue.

Dr. Beard: The main element of trap music is the way that the drum beat is constructed, so a trap drum beat has a halftime feel. Also, the hi-hat patterns are known for having triplets within them and then usually the kicks are replaced with 808 bass notes. So these are also the musical concepts that students interact with and engage with throughout the unit, primarily learning about triplets, but also how to actually make a beat based with triplets within the digital audio workstation, which is a little bit more involved than what they would do if they were just making a duple-based beat. So I just wanted students to pick a social justice topic that resonated with them. I provided a list of possible topics to sort of guide their choice, as well as within each of those topics I found some sources of things like speeches or protests or marches, and the idea is that, regardless of whether students choose to use those things or they find their own sources, the students were tasked with actually collecting the audio samples on their own and putting it within the music that they create,

Stephanie Nantell: And then the teachers were to use a rubric that had been created with the project to assess their own students, and then they were able to send their top choices onto our programs team.

Noah: After being narrowed down by the programs team, three finalists were sent along to Chris Atlas, who you might remember from Notables episode two. Chris is an executive with decades of experience in the music industry and he was kind enough to agree to judge the competition for us. But before any of that could happen, someone had to teach the students. This is Lee Dynes. He's one of the three ETM high school music teachers tasked with teaching the Trap Beats for Change unit to his students.

Mr. Dynes: I'm Mr Dynes. I'm the music tech and instrumental music instructor at Hudson High School of Learning Technologies.

Noah: I'm going to talk to some of your students shortly, and so I'll hear it from them too, but how did your students respond to this project when you first presented it to them?

Mr. Dynes: In general, people got really into drawing in the drum beats. You know, in MIDI, you know making a track for hi-hat, one for snare, one for kick drum, one for 808. And there's a really great video I found on YouTube that helped them, that really just kind of laid out the process and like they really got into doing that. You know, chopping up the hi-hats, um, throwing a kick in random parts of the beat and seeing what it sounds like. Like they really got into that. And I think then, of course, there's always the sort of sculpting of the piece, which that's, I think, with most projects. That's when you know once you've done all the detail work and now you're actually just building the form and trying to make it longer, trying to make it like sound professional, like students get kind of obsessive about that, which is always a good thing, because it reminds me of myself when I was learning music. It's like yep, like I see you, you're like, they're like no, no, no. Just give me a second, Mr. Dynes. I'm almost done. It's like I know. Believe me, I get it. Like you're in that place where, like you're getting obsessive about it and that's great to see. So yeah, I would say both those things.

Noah: It's the zone, you, the zone, yeah, and they're in the zone and and flow, while you, you uh managed to like open up a, an access point for the flow state yeah, that's awesome yeah yeah, arrangement you're describing like arrangement and the this sort of obsession with with getting the arrangement right, and I think there are lots of different, potentially exciting and and you know, potentially um sort of obsession affirming points in the creative process. I wonder if that's just that that's yours and so that's theirs.

Mr. Dynes: Now, you know, it could be because I I placed a lot of emphasis on form this year, well, you know, the interesting thing about music tech is that, um it, it gives students really great immediate gratification because you can just click and drag a loop in and start building the sound of a whole band in like 30 seconds and before you know it you have this like block of loops that sounds like a song and that's amazing. But we can't just be clicking and dragging stuff. We have to bring in like some I don't want to say music theory, but some musical concepts. I guess is what I mean, some musical concepts so that they're getting a meta awareness, because a lot of times, like, if you don't talk about form with students and they're doing music tech, they'll their piece will get this kind of like. It's like a meditative, like one one section that just keeps going and it develops. It may be, you know, they'll have one bass drum or what, or I mean one bass part and a drum part and like a keyboard loop in there and it's those stay the same throughout the entire piece and then they'll add more things in and then take them away, which is a perfectly legitimate type of form right um, but especially if you do it on purpose. But if you're, if you don't know that there's, oh, you can literally just like chop everything right there at measure 17 and change it all and have a new section. You know, if you don't, if you don't know to do that, you might not do that, you know. And so, yeah, so was a. That was a big focus for us all year because you know, it's making use of, like the immediate ease of being able to access music with, with logic and garage band and and soundtrack, which is really amazing. But also, like, how do we work in like higher level musical thinking? In that I think it was really great to involve social justice issues, you know, into a school project. Like I've been meaning to find a way to do that this year and that was a really great way to do it. The students it's kind of interesting. They, they really want to talk about that stuff, like even if they

don't act like they do. You know, like if I presenting, I made a little PowerPoint for them and if you know they're like they don't act, like they care about this PowerPoint, which maybe they don't, it's fine, it's a PowerPoint, but like when they start working on it. You know the choices that they were making were like really, really interesting and really thoughtful. And you know they I mean it must be like this generation, because I think they're just really that stuff is on their minds like all the time and they want to talk about it, um, and they want to get to the bottom of some of these things. So that was really huge, I think yeah, it sounds like.

Noah: You know, not everybody comes into a music class wanting to do exactly the you know what you want to teach, but there's always an entry point. Regardless of the subject matter, there's an entry point for everybody in it. Yeah, um, sounds like this is a pretty good entry point.

Mr. Dynes: Yeah, I, I love doing the cross-curricular stuff. I mean, like I always have students when I'm doing it being like the most common thing I hear is like I thought this was music class, mr Dynes, this isn't history class, this isn't whatever, but they love it. I mean, like at the end of the day, like, if you know, when I say OK, no, give this a shot please and they, they do it, and they, they get really into it and they make brilliant results.

Noah: And speaking of brilliant results, let's hear from some of these students and let's hear some of their music.

Eve: My name is Eve Baser and I am a junior at Hudson High School.

Noah: And what was your project about?

Eve: It was about women's rights, equal rights for women. I think it's so important that women are treated the same as men, like paid the same for equal work, equal pay. I think it's such an important topic.

Noah: Could you walk me through the process of how you built your composition?

Eve: Yeah. So I went onto YouTube and I looked up the best women's rights speeches by influential figures and then I took the speeches from that video and implemented it into my composition and then I created a trap mix around those sounds. It started with a hi-hat and then you made something, and then I just went by ear what sounded the best with the kick drum and the snare. After that to create my compositions. Sometimes I wanted the speech to be by itself so you could really get the power that it brought from that speech, but I also wanted the music on top of it so it kind really get the the power that it brought from that speech. But I also wanted the music on top of it so it kind of connected in the composition. So I kind of switched. Sometimes it's by itself and then sometimes it's with music.

Noah: You're a piano player, right

Eve: Yeah, I play piano and I play guitar as well,

Noah: Cool do you find it's it's one or the other? Do you find you're able to do really cool stuff by mixing the technology with the physical instruments?

Eve: I think it's definitely based off the physical ones, but when you add in the technology instruments, it really makes it that much better.

Mamadou: Hi, my name is Mamadou. I go to Hudson High School of Learning Technologies.

Noah: What was your process for creating your composition?

Mamadou: Mr. Dynes started off by giving us samples. We also watched another video in addition to that, like the kangaroos to make a trap beat. I was not sure how well I put it together because it's the first time I'm doing this, but Mr. Dynes showed us how he would get the tools From there on. It was basically like a back and forth reassessing Like does this fit? How should I put this? What's the time point in the clip, should I put this in? And after I did that, I added the audio. I chose a video from youtube, from like um dw, or it was on the, the dutch oh, deutsche welle.

Noah: Yeah, that's cool. Okay, so you made your beat first, and then you found audio. Audio that would fit with the beat that you had created. Okay. Did you know from the start that you were going to build this around climate change? Or did you build the beat and then decide this is going to fit with this audio, so I guess I'll do this on climate change.

Mamadou: It was like in the middle I already had like some beats I can put on around it. It was like it was a question like like what, what part of the um, the video, like audios, try to use? I found some like um ones that I thought was very impactful, like how, like the rich, the richer countries are like less affected, and like the kind of the cause. Yeah, it's uneven Any of the harm that are caused by climate change come from countries traditionally have been more wealthy.

Timothy: I'm Timothy Lewis, a freshman at Hudson High School my project. I really liked it a lot. It was a really long process.

Noah: Your piece has maybe some plucked strings like a synth plucked string, if I remember correctly. First of all, is that a loop or is it a MIDI instrument Loop? Nice, okay. So what about that loop? Spoke to you.

Timothy: The way it sounded. It sounded just like so clean and like it went with my beat well. So I felt like it would like like it wouldn't just be like one certain sound the whole time. It would like switch up the flow of it.

Noah: Yeah, yeah, and your, your piece is particularly dynamic. It there's a lot of time in which it's like pretty open and and there isn't a whole lot happening, and then there's other times where there's a lot happening, and that sort of dynamic nature to it, I think, keeps listeners glued

in because they're like I know something's coming. It's a little too quiet right now. So what were you, what were you thinking about as you put things together in the timeline?

Timothy: Getting like to that point in the song. I'm not gonna lie, I like songs that have, like they build up that kind of feeling to it. Also feedback from a music teacher and listening to stuff from my dad, because he makes music as well. So I'm not going to lie. That influenced how I wanted to make it a lot out.

Noah: So we've heard a lot of great music over the course of the episode so far and we've gained a lot of valuable insight from these student composers. The next student composer from whom we will hear wrote the piece of music that was chosen as the overall winner of the competition.

Olle Liljelund: My name is Olle Liljelund, I'm 17 years old, I'm from Sweden, I'm born in Sweden and I've lived in New York since 2022. So the thing was I had to pick an issue and I picked the. It was from a video, it was gun violence and also they talked a little bit about racism as well, but it was the video itself was mostly about gun violence. And I picked that because, you know, for me, like coming this was one thing from this year, like not in music, but it was in another class. In Sweden, you know, we don't have like the type of gun laws as here. So it was like three weeks in my school year here and we had a lockdown drill and I was like what is this? And people told me that it's because of school shootings and that kind of shocked me like oh, you really, like you really have to practice how to go about it. So that kind of shocked me. And you hear about it on the news pretty often gun violence. And often also it's so much gun violence so that a lot of it doesn't even make the news because it happens so often. So I just thought it was a good video to pick even make the news because it happens so often. So I just thought it was a good video to pick. So I just downloaded it and I picked out the best, like the most powerful clips so I put them. Firstly I put them in the intro and then Dynes told me that I could put it in the bridge or in between the parts, so I kind of just put it throughout the song. I always liked music that has like clips from it. I like when it's like it flows with the beat so it kind of sometimes comes in like the vocal. So you know, in the beginning I had a vocal. It starts with the vocal, so I kind of listened to it and I wanted it like right before because I should explain it. Her, like her voice it was, it was getting like she was talking and then I noticed like a point where she was like really powerful and really like passionate. So right when she like ended her words that's when I put the hyad and so it's like Fades up with the vocal and then the beat comes in and I kind of put the same in them. So later a guy is talking. So when he's talking he says like no more. So he says no more. So when he says the word more the beat comes in again, so like no more. And then it becomes says the word more the beat comes in again, so like no more, and then the beat comes. So I wanted it to match with the vocals.

Noah: Thanks for sharing your insight and your story.