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Band Director Ron Sikes

Ron Sikes teaches band in the Jefferson R7 School District, just south of St. Louis, Missouri. In this role, he finds himself in three school buildings each week: He teaches fifth graders at the [Telegraph Intermediate School](#), sees sixth through eighth grade students at the Danby-Rush Tower Middle School, and with each passing year he's teaching an additional grade of high school students at the brand-new Jefferson High School.



Ron spoke with MakeMusic's Bob Grifa in January 2010:

"I started using Finale when I was in college. I wrote and arranged and did a great many things with Finale for many years. In 2005 MakeMusic sponsored a workshop in St. Louis, which I attended. At that time I didn't know anything about SmartMusic – I just knew I really loved Finale and was going to show up to learn more about Finale – and I did, but then I also learned about SmartMusic.

What SmartMusic offered at that time was amazing to me. It represented an additional helper to students practicing at home. SmartMusic could say: 'that note is incorrect.' When I saw that I immediately thought of my own fifth grade experience.

I started out on the trumpet. I went to class and I played in band, and I could match the people who were sitting on either side of me. Then my teacher said, okay go home and practice. I went home to practice, but my parents had no musical training whatsoever. As far as they were concerned I was bringing home a foreign language they had never seen before – they couldn't help me. For me that was big source of frustration. The right sounds weren't coming out and I didn't know how to fix it because my ear wasn't developed.

If SmartMusic's immediate feedback could minimize the frustration I experienced, it could make a big difference for a lot of students – and for our retention. I was immediately intrigued."

BG: Can you describe how you began implementing SmartMusic in your schools?

"We started out with a SmartMusic kickoff. We set up a projector in the cafeteria and demonstrated the program for all of my band classes. We also had some parents, administrators, and school board members at the kickoff. Afterward, everyone said we'll absolutely buy into this.

Then I drew up a plan of what I'd need to do this correctly: computers, Internet access, projectors, and the screens. I went to the PTO and asked them if they'd be willing to sponsor this project, and they said: 'Sure.' That's how I got knee-deep into this: with PTO support."

BG: How did the addition of the SmartMusic Gradebook change things for you?

"When the Gradebook was added, wow. It became more integrated. What it offers is immediate accountability for everyone involved. The way I grade and evaluate students has changed so much in ten years it's ridiculous.

Thanks to the Gradebook I feel like the grades kids are getting are very authentic – it's indicative of their performance that quarter AND I have all this documentation to back it up. Early on I used to hear: "You gave me this grade because you don't like me." I don't hear that anymore: all we'd have to do is listen to your sound files. The fact that you can document progress musically in the Gradebook – it was a big step in the right direction – it took out much of the subjectivity of the grading."

BG: Do you have some other favorite SmartMusic features?

"Without question play-by-ear is the most underrated feature in SmartMusic. In my opinion, playing by ear often gets overlooked in the band program. With SmartMusic we can now seamlessly integrate this into the curriculum: There's no longer an excuse why kids can't play by ear.

Also, part of what brought me to SmartMusic in the first place was the fact that I could take any Finale file I'd ever created and turn it into a SmartMusic accompaniment. These two products together have gotten me more excited about teaching, because I feel I'm in charge of my own destiny. I've written my own method book, using Finale, and have also created accompanying SmartMusic files. Today I can send all of those SmartMusic files as assignments to my students, and have them tested. I just love that I have input on every single step of the kids' development."

BG: Can you talk a little bit about the results you've experienced from SmartMusic?

"The big picture? The retention IS better in the younger grades. I don't have as many kids dropping out between fifth and sixth grade and I think SmartMusic is a big part of it. And this continues in the subsequent grades as well. The attrition rate slowed down quite a bit.

As far as their skill development, I have three goals for my students. I want them to be great sight-readers: put something in front of their face and have them "read it down." The next thing is I want them to be able to play by ear – like monsters. No matter what I put on the radio, I want them to be able to pick out the key and pick out some of the riffs. Then, the third component is, whether they're sight-reading or playing by ear, I want everything they're doing to be expressive.

And what I've found is that with the advent of SmartMusic, the sight-reading and the playing by ear have both improved. Therefore, because both of those things improved, the expressive musicianship came faster. When they can feel expressive at a younger age, it not only increases the likelihood that they'll stay in band next year, but it also increases the likelihood that music will remain an important part of their life beyond school."

BG: Any final comments?

"In the world of music, just like any other subject, all kids learn differently. It's the whole multiple intelligence thing. You have the kids who are visual learners, but don't have good ears. There's the other kids who have good ears, but don't do as well visually. Then you have kids who have the ears and the eyes, but they have something else going on with them right now. There's such differentiated instruction with SmartMusic: I think that's a big component as to why it's so successful. It doesn't cater to any one style of learning. You're reaching all of the kids with this program."



Tips & Tricks

The [SmartMusic Blog](#) is a tremendous resource for all kinds of tips and tricks, with suggestions for everything from [Installation and Activation at Home](#) to [Finding Repertoire](#),

and [Developing Independent Playing with SmartMusic](#).

Additional recent blog posts include:

[Installation and Activation at School](#) by James H. Anderson

[If it ain't Baroque, don't fix it](#) by James H. Anderson

[Catching up on my Reading](#) by Scott Yoho

[The Last Few Days \(Part Two\)](#) by Bob Grifa

[What's New and Less is More](#) by James H. Anderson

[The Last Few Days](#) by Bob Grifa

[Death, Taxes, and Student Holiday Lethargy](#) by James H. Anderson

[Thanksgiving Break](#) by Bob Grifa

We'd love to hear from you. Please provide comments on the blog posts, letting us know what posts you've found helpful or what you'd like to see in the future.

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Author Spotlight: Dean Sorenson

Dean Sorenson is the Director of Jazz Studies at the University of Minnesota and an acclaimed composer, arranger, educator, clinician, author, and Yamaha performing artist. Along with Bruce Pearson, he co-authored Standard of Excellence Jazz Ensemble Method, which has recently been added to SmartMusic.



In early 2010 we caught up with Dean to ask him about the creation of Standard of Excellence Jazz Ensemble Method and its integration with SmartMusic:

"The structure of the book is essentially a combination of my ideas and those of Bruce Pearson. Part of the fun of putting this book together was how Bruce and I would complete each other's sentences as we were bouncing ideas off of each other – so it was really obvious we were both on the same page.

What we both wanted to do was to really break the jazz experience down into the two elements that differentiate it from what the students' concert band experience is – learning to interpret jazz rhythm and jazz phrasing, and, of course, the element of improvisation.

Regarding the rhythms, a lot of people I know use singing and vocalization as a way to learn rhythms, and so we wanted to include that, not only as a means for students to help get a better handle on how these things work, but also to help the director to learn to use as a it tool.

For the improvisation, we wanted to keep things as simple as we could, so we created grooves students could improvise over using a single scale. While this approach has been around a long time, students don't pick up a language by learning the alphabet alone, so that's why we've included licks as well – to begin giving them a little bit of the language that they can listen to and imitate.

Also, this approach mimics the idea of transcribing solos, which is absolutely essential in learning how to play this music. It allows students to begin to experience that on a very, very approachable level – at the level of technique where they are at.

The overarching idea behind all of these exercises is that they relate to a tune – to a chart that they can play in their jazz ensemble. This provides the carrot at the end of the stick – if I do all these practice exercises I can actually apply it directly to a piece of music that I

am playing.

While we as teachers know the applications and benefits of this exercise or that, what happens so often is that the application is not clear for the student – it's not real direct. In contrast, this method has a real direct absolute correlation between the exercises and the chart that follows.

One thing that not a lot of folks recognize is that the charts were written last. The first thing that was written were the rhythm studies. Then the improvisation studies were written, and then we wrote the chart around those studies. So the music was written around the pedagogy – which I think makes the charts even more unique, because the purpose of the music is to teach the concepts."

SmartMusic Integration

"While we include several CDs with our books, SmartMusic offers many additional opportunities. SmartMusic lets you loop sections, slow them down, speed them up, and record yourself. Recording yourself, listening to yourself, and analyzing your own improvisation is crucial and SmartMusic makes it easy. SmartMusic can also assess the accuracy of what you're playing on either the rhythm studies or the improvisation studies, and all studies can be assignments that go into the Gradebook, greatly simplifying the process of assigning meaningful, documentable work.

Plus, on a more abstract level, directors and bands are always scrambling for funding, and correspondingly, one of the things that administrators look at is where is the accountability. This partnership offers the ability to have some accountability in the jazz ensemble.

All performing ensembles are difficult to assess. I always struggle with how to give grades in jazz ensemble. This partnership with SmartMusic provides concrete curriculum for the students and for the director to follow, which is documented so the director can show the administrators and the parents. It's just a nice measurement tool for everyone – even those without a music background."

If you're interested in learning more, you can find *Standard of Excellence Jazz Ensemble Method* in SmartMusic under "Band and String Method Books." Note that the volume of method books continues to grow may have to scroll down to see all the available titles.

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Just Released

The SmartMusic library continues to grow with everything from "Easy Rock Solos" to the *Standard of Excellence Jazz Ensemble Method* and advanced level Concert Band titles, including Holst's "Second Suite in F," Hindemith's "Symphony in Bb," and more.

[Search](#) for new band and orchestra titles.



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Announcements

Have you updated to SmartMusic 2010? - SmartMusic 2010 is required to use the latest repertoire and is a [free update](#) to current subscribers.

Become a SmartMusic Advocate - Do you love SmartMusic? Are you using SmartMusic and the Gradebook with your students? Join our advocate program and help us spread the

word to other music educators. Read what educators in your area are saying about SmartMusic and sign up using the link below the map. [Join Now](#).

SmartMusic for your Entire School or District

Volume pricing is available for a minimum of 100 subscriptions. [More](#).

Upcoming Events

Come see SmartMusic at the Texas MEA Convention, Minnesota Midwinter In-service Clinic, ASTA 2010 National Conference, California MEA Convention, and [more](#).

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Meet the Team

To some people, having broad musical tastes means enjoying both country AND western (or classical and baroque). Patrick O'Melia's musical interests are truly broad, spanning geography, time, and technology. Patrick plays acoustic fingerstyle guitar with folk, Celtic, and African influences. He also teaches private piano lessons and performs solo piano for weddings, parties, and other events. Patrick has played both guitar and keyboard in a wide variety of groups, including several Caribbean bands AND is very interested in synthesizer history, collecting older analog synthesizers, and home recording.



When asked who his favorite composer is, Patrick doesn't hesitate: "François Luambo Makiadi (aka Franco) is one of my all time favorites. I love his guitar playing and the way he integrated the rumba into Congolese music." Talk about diverse!

Similarly, Patrick has proven himself adept at a wide variety of tasks at MakeMusic since first joining the team in January of 1994. Well-versed in both Finale and SmartMusic, he worked in both our technical support and quality assurance departments prior to joining the SmartMusic repertoire development team, where he is currently a Senior Music Production Engineer. In this role he uses SmartMusic daily, developing new repertoire for our ever-growing library. When asked what he likes best about his work, it's no surprise that he cites the diversity of his tasks:

"I like the wide variety of content we support (Exercises, Methods, Solos, Jazz, and Ensembles), because it often means that each project is a little different from the last. There's a lot of detail and problem-solving involved and that, too, keeps things interesting. I'm also fascinated with the integration of music notation, assessment, and intelligent accompaniment. SmartMusic has come a long way since its early Vivace days, and it's exciting to think of where it will be ten – or even five years from now.

I am very appreciative of how MakeMusic allows me to work with other musicians and music enthusiasts. It's a fun and stimulating work environment where we all speak the same language."

Patrick was first introduced to Finale as a student at the University of Minnesota where he earned his Bachelor of Arts in Music Composition and Theory. "In addition to using Finale to create SmartMusic content at work, I also continue to use Finale at home for composing and creating lead sheets. Not being directly involved in the Finale development, I am always surprised and impressed at how much easier and efficient things get with each upgrade."

Patrick also admits to being a fan of experimenting with FinaleScript – just for something different to do.

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