

We've Got the Whole Tune in Our Hands

By Mary Crum Scholtens

I've come to appreciate an often-under-rated classroom instrument: the harmonica. I include a yearlong harmonica curriculum in the weekly forty-minute music class for my third graders. Now that I teach every third grader in my program how to play the harmonica, I believe it is the best tool for training the ear I've discovered. Perhaps this is because, as I tell my students, "You can't play a tune on the harmonica until it's in your head and in your heart."

When I initially attempted to learn how to play the harmonica, I did not, unfortunately, start from that premise. Instead, I started with the directions that came with my harmonica—and I'm not alone in finding those standard directions frustrating. So, defeated by my inability to learn to play on my own, I put the harmonica and the directions away, awaiting enlightenment at some point in the future.

Years later, I received an Education Improvement Act grant from the state of South Carolina to fund a resident artist for our school. I was most fortunate to find a professional harmonica player from North Carolina, Charlie Story, who visited my school for a week to teach my third-grade students—and me—how to play the harmonica. The first thing Story asked the students

to do was to throw away the directions, because he found them an impediment to learning how to play. He introduced the basic concepts of playing and how to read the traditional harmonica tablature, and we were playing tunes almost immediately.

Introducing the Harmonica to the Beginner

Start by purchasing a diatonic harmonica in the key of C. A harmonica may be purchased for as little as two to five dollars. (Bear in mind that this investment is not a permanent one for the truly avid player. Harmonicas need to be replaced from time to time when one or more of the tone holes no longer play in tune. However, this will not be an issue for your students during the course of a yearlong weekly harmonica class.)

Hold the harmonica in your left hand, primarily by your thumb on the bottom jacket and your index finger on the top jacket, with the tone-hole numbers facing up. You then "nest" your left hand in your right hand. Later on, when the vibrato technique is introduced, all you have to do to produce the vibration is to wave the fingers of your right hand—the "wing" of the bird on the "nest"—while both hands remain in contact with one another. Excellent diagrams and photos of the correct playing position can be found in

Teach your students the harmonica and they will be playing songs almost immediately.

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the books listed in the resource list.

The diatonic harmonica has ten tone holes, or windows, and each hole can produce two notes. You produce one note when you exhale and the other note when you inhale. The articulation technique is much like that of the recorder or natural speech, in that you articulate exhalations by saying “tu,” with the tongue making brief contact with the back of the upper teeth. The pattern for playing a C-major scale is to begin by centering your mouth on tone hole #4 and using the following exhale/inhale sequence:

- #4 exhale (C)
- #4 inhale (D)
- #5 exhale (E)
- #5 inhale (F)
- #6 exhale (G)
- #6 inhale (A)
- #7 inhale (B)
- #7 exhale (C)

If you exhale on tones holes #1, #2, and #3, it will produce a C-major triad. If you inhale on the same tone holes, it will produce a G-major triad.

The best way to understand the physics of sound production on the harmonica is to buy a spare one and use an eyeglass screwdriver to disassemble it. You can then see the “comb” that contains the individual windows as well as the metal reeds of graduated lengths on the harmonica’s upper and lower plates. The upper set of metal reeds vibrates to produce the exhale notes and the lower set of metal reeds vibrates to produce the inhale notes. An added benefit to satisfying your own curiosity about the inner workings of the harmonica is that you can also explain the principles of sound to your students (I show them the separate parts on the overhead projector) and satisfy their curiosity without having them unscrew the component parts of their own instruments.

Beginning Instruction

One of the beginning tenets of learning to play the harmonica, from which the students and I greatly benefited, is that you need not worry about exhaling or inhaling within the confines of one tone hole. We were instructed to play with a wide-open mouth centered on the desired pitch and let the adjacent windows sound as well. Preoccupation with producing a “pure” tone from one window at a

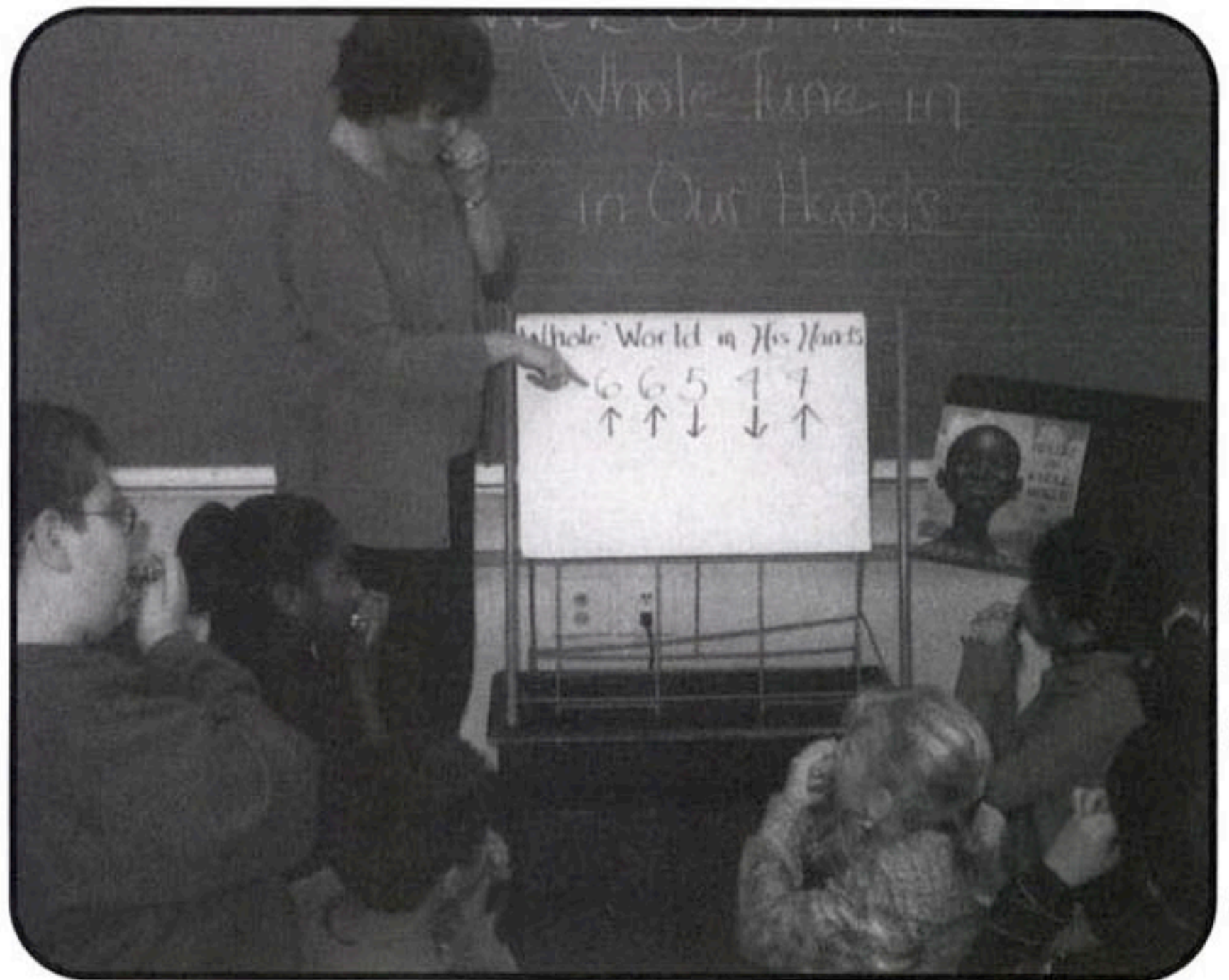


Photo courtesy of Mary Crum Scholtens

After a few basic concepts are introduced, students can play tunes on the harmonica right away.

time—as emphasized in the ubiquitous directions—is a source of frustration for many beginners. Our resident artist emphasized that the word *harmonica* is derived from the word *harmony*, so it does not make sense to emphasize “tone-hole-by-tone-hole” playing. The harmonica is built to play the melody and the harmony simultaneously.

Another important tenet of beginning instruction is to find the starting pitch and then play the rest of a tune by ear. The only mistake you can make is to exhale when you should inhale, or vice versa. I discovered that once you find the first note of a familiar tune, you can learn to play it on the harmonica with just a few false starts and repetitions. (See the sidebar for well-known diatonic tunes in C.) I had never played any instrument by ear before, but playing the harmonica that way proved to be a truly intuitive experience. Given my preconceived notions and previous false starts, this approach to playing by ear was a musical epiphany for me.

While presenting a workshop on teaching the harmonica to elementary general music colleagues, I discovered another tenet of harmonica playing that should be emphasized to more experienced musicians from the outset. Whereas visual learners benefit from the arrow tablature to get started, aural learners need to be told that the exhaled notes are the

Some Well-Known Diatonic Tunes in C Major

Practice these tunes by ear, starting on the tone hole indicated. You can do it!

"Allouette"	Start on #4
"Amazing Grace"	Start on #6
"Clementine"	Start on #7
"Dixie"	Start on #6
"For He's a Jolly Good Fellow"	Start on #7
"Home on the Range"	Start on #6
"I've Been Workin' on the Railroad"	Start on #4
"Joy to the World"	Start on #7
"Michael, Row the Boat Ashore"	Start on #4
"Olympic Theme"	Start on #5
"Oh, Susanna"	Start on #4
"Oh, When the Saints"	Start on #4
"On Top of Old Smoky"	Start on #4
"Reveille"	Start on #3
"She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain"	Start on #6
"Silent Night"	Start on #6
"Swanee River"	Start on #5
"Tom Dooley"	Start on #6
"Yankee Doodle Dandy"	Start on #7

tonic chord notes of the melody and the inhaled notes are the passing tones of the melody. The resource list includes other helpful information about learning to play the harmonica.

Sequence of Instruction

I use the following sequence of instruction to guide the students as they learn to play a song by ear:

1. Sing the tune with the lyrics.
2. Sing the tune on a neutral syllable.
3. Hum the tune.
4. Sing the tune by the tone-hole numbers shown on the overhead.
5. Sing the tune by singing the sequence of exhaled and inhaled notes, substituting the words "blow" and "breathe" respectively.
6. "Rock and roll" the tune. This means to sing the tune using only the words "blow" and "breathe," as they rock forward for exhaled notes and roll backward for inhaled notes while I point to the arrow tablature on the overhead.
7. Play the tune on their harmonicas while I point to the arrow and number tablature on the overhead. After several weeks, I remove all but the first tone-hole number from the tablature displayed on the overhead. Then after several repetitions, I ask the students if they want to close their

eyes and play from memory or by ear. Some students decide to try and others aren't ready, but I don't pressure them.

There are some tunes such as bugle calls, "Reveille" and "Taps," and the tune "There Were Ten in the Bed," among others, that can be played with just exhaled notes. This may seem like a good starting point, but it is best to start with more familiar tunes; for

"Hot Cross Buns" Tablature for Harmonica

Exhale on the up arrows

Inhale on the down arrows

Hot	cross	buns	
5	4	4	
↑	↓	↑	⋈
Hot	cross	buns	
5	4	4	
↑	↓	↑	⋈
One	cent,	two	cents,
4	4	4	4
↑	↑	↓	↓
Hot	cross	buns.	
5	4	4	
↑	↓	↑	⋈

example, "Hot Cross Buns" incorporates the techniques of playing exhaled and inhaled notes and also suspending the breath for rests. (See the sidebar for the arrow tablature for "Hot Cross Buns.") However, bugle calls and tunes using just exhaled notes are a nice addition to the repertoire after learning a few well-known beginning tunes.

Differentiation of Instruction

Not all students will progress at the same rate, of course. Initially, I was concerned about the potential for serious cacophony with a classroom full

The Train Sound Effects on the Harmonica

How to make the sounds

There are three parts to the train sound: the "whistle," the "train track," and the "steam."

- *Whistle sound.* Make two quick inhalations on 1, 2, 3, and 4 windows while you roll—don't slide—the harmonica toward your right cheek. Repeat. On the second time, place a fermata on the second inhalation.
- *Train-track sound.* Bite the upper and lower ridges of the harmonica (demonstrate with your fingernails of your right hand first—thumb on bottom of comb and fingers on top of ridge) and inhale on windows 1, 2, 3, and 4 while whispering "tuck-a-tuck-a-tuck-a-tuck-a." Repeat three times. Have a class competition; with the students standing as long as they can make that sound without a harmonica, see who can remain standing the longest.
- *Steam sound.* Give one long exhalation on windows 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Books that include a train-sound refrain

- Crews, Donald. *Freight Train*, a Caldecott Honor Book. New York: Puffin Books, 2003.
- Crews, Donald. *Shortcut*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1992.
- Fleischman, Paul, illustrated by Claire Ewart. *Time Train*. New York: HarperCollins, 1991.

of harmonica players, not all playing the tune with the same level of accuracy. However, I was surprised to discover that the sound of a classroom of beginning harmonica students is not at all unpleasant. The instrument is very forgiving for beginning instruction. Students who are not quite as proficient as some of their peers can easily hide in the group sound until they're more proficient.

I discovered a method to help bring the less-proficient students up to the playing level of the rest of their peers without singling out any individuals. At the beginning of each class, I teach a short refrain from a familiar song. For example, the phrase "Perhaps she'll die" from the well-known tune

"I Know an Old Woman Who Swallowed a Fly" can be used to teach and reinforce a *sol-la-ti-do* pattern on the harmonica. I then disguise the repetition of this short refrain by showing the class a book based on the folk song and asking the class to play the phrase as a page-turning signal. (See the sidebar for other examples of refrains and books to accompany teaching them.)

Another way to disguise repetition of material and give students an opportunity to rest—since you can expect them to become winded—is to conduct low-key classroom competitions. I alter the team configurations so that every student is on a winning team at some point. Teams can consist

of male versus female, blue versus brown eyes, or other combinations. Reading books that contain a harmonica theme can also provide opportunities for the necessary intermittent rest periods during class instruction. (See the sidebar with examples of the harmonica in children's literature.)

Listening Examples of Harmonica Playing

Another way to create an opportunity to rest while continuing to learn about the harmonica is to share examples of professional harmonica playing with your students from the music series you use. As I became primed to listen for harmonica solos in music, I discovered that examples abound.

Refrains and Their Accompanying Books

Exhale on the up arrows; inhale on the down arrows.

"Down by the Bay"

Refrain: "Down by the bay"

5-5-4-4
↑ ↑ ↓ ↑

Raffi Songs to Read: Down by the Bay, by Nadine Bernard Westcott. New York: Crown Publishers, 1987.

"Fiddle-I-Fee"

Refrain: "Fiddle-i-fee"

5-5-4-4
↑ ↑ ↓ ↑

Cat Goes Fiddle-I-Fee, by Paul Galdone. New York: Clarion Books, 1999.

"He's Got the Whole World in His Hands"

Refrain: "He's got the whole world in his hands"

6-6-5-6-6-5-4-4
↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↑

He's Got the Whole World in His Hands, by Kadir Nelson. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 2005.

"Hokey-Pokey"

Refrain: "That's what it's all about"

4-4-4-4-5-5
↑ ↑ ↑ ↓ ↑ ↓

The Hokey-Pokey, illustrated by Linda Dockey Graves. Lincolnwood, IL: Publications International, 1993.

"I Know an Old Woman"

Refrain: "Perhaps she'll die"

6-6-7-7
↑ ↓ ↓ ↑

I Know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Pie, by Alison Jackson, illustrated by Judith Byron Schachner. New York: Dutton Children's Books, 1997.

There Was a Cold Lady Who Swallowed Some Snow, by Lucille Colandro, illustrated by Jared Lee. New York: Scholastic, 2003.

There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Trout, by Teri Sloat, illustrated by Reynold Ruffins. New York: Henry Holt, 1998.

"Old Black Fly"

Refrain: "Shoo fly, shoo fly, shoo"

8-8-7-7-6
↑ ↓ ↑ ↓ ↓

Old Black Fly, by Jim Aylesworth, illustrated by Stephen Gammell. New York: Henry Holt, 1992.

"Old MacDonald"

Refrain: "E-I-E-I-O"

5-5-4-4-3
↑ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↑

Old MacDonald Had a Farm, illustrated by Carol Jones.

Boston: Houghton Mifflin/Walter Lorraine Books, 1998.

Old MacDonald in the City, by Suzanne Williams, illustrated by Thor Wickstrom. New York: Golden Books, 2002.

"Ten in the Bed"

Refrain: "Roll over, roll over"

6-5-4-6-5-4
↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑

Ten in the Bed, by Penny Dale. London: Walker Books, 1998.

Ten Monsters in a Bed, by Rozanne Lanczak Williams, illustrated by Kathleen Dunne. Huntington Beach, CA: Creative Teaching Press, 1995.

"Today Is Monday"

Refrain: "Wish the same to you"

5-5-4-4-3
↑ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↑

Today Is Monday, by Eric Carle. New York: Philomel Books, 1993.

"Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star"

Refrain: "Up above the world so high / Like a diamond in the sky"

6-6-5-5-5-5-4
↑ ↑ ↓ ↓ ↑ ↑ ↓

"Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" books are readily available.

The Harmonica in Children's Literature

Chapter Books

Cleary, Beverly, illustrated by Louis Darling. *Beezus and Ramona*. New York: Morrow Junior Books, 2000.

Fenner, Carol. *Yolanda's Genius*, a Newbery Honor Book. New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 1998.

Picture Books

Bottner, Barbara, illustrated by Paul Yalowitz. *Hurricane Music*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995.

England, Linda. *The Old Cotton Blues*. New York: Margaret K. McElderry Books, 1998.

Keats, Ezra Jack. *Apt. 3*. New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 1999.

McCloskey, Robert. *Lentil*. New York: Puffin Books, 1978.

Steiner, Barbara. *Whale Brother*. New York: Walker and Co., 1988.

Some Resources for Learning and Teaching the Harmonica

Books

Bay, William. *Children's Harmonica Method*. Pacific, MO: Mel Bay, 1985.

Habif, Marcos. *How to Play the Harmonica Instantly*. Hermosa Beach, CA: Harmonica Music Publishing, 1985.

Harp, David. *Blues and Rock Harmonica Made Easy*, Second Revised Edition. Middlesex, VT: Musical I. Press, 1993.

Oliver, Dave. *Playing the Harmonica*. New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2002.

Tomlins, Tina. *Happenin' Harmonica*. Boston: Santorella Publications, 1997.

Multimedia Resources

Harmonica Primer, by Tom Wolf. Instruction book with audio CD or instruction DVD available in the Watch & Learn Video Primer series. Atlanta:

Cassette and Video Learning Systems, 1998. www.cvl.com.

Musicians

For professional harmonica players who might visit your school, look at the list of approved visiting artists for your state.

Purchasing Harmonicas

Look for any inexpensive (\$2 to \$5) harmonica that is a diatonic model in C, made by Marine Band, Hohner, Chicago Blues, or similar brands. Purchase just one first, and play it to check for the tone and intonation.

Web Sites with Tutorials for Harmonica Instruction

- Coast to Coast Music Instruments & Instruction. Blues, country, and rock diatonic harmonica home page

(<http://coast2coastmusic.com/diatonic/index.shtml>); an explanation of the twelve-bar blues (http://coast2coastmusic.com/diatonic/12_bar_blues.shtml)

- DaveGage.com. Harmonica songs and tablature

(<http://davegage.com/tipsstuf/songs.html>); blues harmonica instruction for basic blues improv (<http://davegage.com/tipsstuf/improv.html>)

- Dave Gage's Harmonica Lessons. Harmonica lessons with 525 pages of online instruction (www.harmonicalessons.com)

- Harmonica Country. Online harmonica lessons (www.harmonicacountry.com)

- Wilbur's Music & Blues Page. Wilbur's beginning harmonica lessons and tips (www.hoerl.com/harmon.html)

Railroad songs are a great resource for harmonica solos, and all professional harmonica players have train sounds in their playing repertoire. Beginning harmonica players can imitate a train sound, too! (See the sidebar on how to execute the train sound effects.)

You can also use the harmonica to teach many musical concepts such as the major scale, vibrato, phrase, rest, refrain, melody, harmony, glissando, tempo, or ritardando. Other ideas are available in the resources for learning and teaching the harmonica listed in the sidebar.

Assessment

Assessment of your students on the harmonica need not cause performance anxiety or consume an inordinate amount of class instructional time. During each class period, it is easy to ascertain when the majority of students are successfully playing the tune by listening for the clarity of the melody. I can also rapidly assess the percentage of students performing the correct sequence of inhalations and exhalations by asking the class to "rock and roll," as described above. I base the students' class grade on participation only.

Also, I have parents assess their own child's progress. Every March, we perform a brief vocal program for third-grade parents, during which we also feature one or two harmonica tunes. On the reverse side of the printed program, I place a letter to the parents announcing that the harmonicas are going home that evening for one week; I also include half a dozen beginning tunes and their tablature on the bottom of the parent letter. I ask the parents to check off tunes their child played for them, sign the letter, and remind their child to return the harmonica and letter at the next week's music class. Some parents write back that they too gave it a try and had success in learning to play!

The best assessment so far came in the form of a letter a student wrote to me after she took her harmonica home for a one-week "sleepover." This third grader wrote, "Every time I pick up the harmonica, my parents gather around me. It's the most attention I have ever had."

Empirical Evidence for the Value of Harmonica Instruction

Each year, an ensemble from the Charleston (South Carolina) Symphony Orchestra visits our school to perform for the children and engage them in a question-and-answer exchange. One of the musicians always poses the question to the young audience, "Do any of you play an instrument?" In the past, just a few hands would be raised by students who study piano privately. However, now that I teach class harmonica, most of the students raise their hands because they identify themselves as

instrumentalists. This interchange provides me with yet another insight into the significant benefits of teaching my students the harmonica.

Another thought-provoking exchange arose when I recently hosted a folk musician at my school to lead a sing-along program. He remarked that he had never performed at a school where the students sang so well in tune. I do not have any scientific data to support the premise that playing the harmonica improves my students' ability to sing with improved intonation. However, the folk artist told me, "Whatever you are doing, keep doing it." And I will. ■

ask the mentors

Every month MENC's online networks for Band, Chorus, Orchestra, Mariachi, and General Music feature mentors to answer your questions!

November Mentors Include:

Band
Ron Meers

General Music
Lenna Harris

Chorus
Terry Annalora

Orchestra
Ann L. Forman

Mariachi
Bill Gradante

To post your questions to any of the above mentors, or if you are a specialist in these fields and would like to share your expertise with other MENC members in future months, go to www.menc.org/mentors.

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