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## Lift the Hood and Get Dirty! : A Closer Look at Informances

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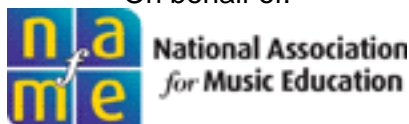
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# Lift the Hood and Get Dirty!

## A Closer Look at Informances

**M**y father and grandfather offered to change the oil in my car. When my father lifted the hood, my grandfather was shocked. Even though my grandfather was familiar with cars, things under the hood had changed since he was young. Similarly, parents may be familiar with music education from their own experiences, but curricula and teaching processes have changed since their youth. Lift the hood of your music program's "car" and introduce parents to informances, presentations "designed to highlight the [music] teaching and learning process."<sup>1</sup>

Demonstrate to your community how your program's "oil" is changed by showing them how you work with students. Invite parents to get their hands dirty and encourage them to participate with the students. In this article, I describe the three components of successful informances: introduction, demonstration, and participation. Each affected parents in my school by adding depth to their understanding and by changing their appreciation for what is under the hood.

### A New Venue

Informances are relatively new to music educators. They have been described in detail by Jill K. Anderson in the January 1992 *Music Educators Journal* (see "Suggested Informance Resources" sidebar).<sup>2</sup> Informances are informal opportunities for music educators to describe the curriculum; demonstrate classroom activities, rehearsal procedures, and

assessment techniques; and encourage the "audience" to participate in the music making. Through informances, parents experience the teaching and learning process, not just the product. Suzanne Burton recommended using informances to advocate for music programs.<sup>3</sup> Compared with performances, however, informances are unknown to many parents.

Introducing parents to informances—lifting the hood—is the first component. The unfamiliar format of informances causes parents to look closely at the working parts beneath the shiny exterior. I was unsure how parents of my elementary students would react to informances. I tested the water by having informances in addition to our traditional grade-level performances. Parent reaction was positive. "The fact that you had [an informance] surprised me, because it was the first time I'd heard of this." "I thought that was a really great way for parents to know just how good their child's music class is." The novelty causes parents' perspective to shift—to take a second look at what they thought they knew.

Just as engines continue to evolve as engineers contribute to our understanding of fuel efficiency, so music curriculum and teaching approaches continue to evolve as researchers contribute to our understanding of music learning. I was intrigued by parents' comments comparing music classes from their youth to their children's music classes. "In elementary school, we didn't learn the things that you showed us you are teaching the kids now." During informances, parents remember

*Let your community know what is happening in your music program through hands-on presentations that involve both parents and students.*

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**TABLE 1**  
**Responses from Adults about Memories of Elementary General Music**

<i>What do you recall about your elementary general music class?</i>	
<b>Teaching process</b>	Nothing. Rhythm sticks. I remember music book. It was <i>about</i> music and I knew how to read music, so I know it wasn't <i>written</i> music. It was a book <i>about</i> music.
<b>Depth of curriculum</b>	It was primarily singing. And I must say I did enjoy it and I remember the words to the songs. There was some effort to teach us basic music, but very little.
<b>Comparing music classes: parent vs. child</b>	It was mostly singing songs, just the funny songs. I remember doing some concerts and the general rhythm stuff with tambourines or whatnot. It seems like it was more geared toward that performance than towards learning.
	It's interesting—when I walk into this room, I immediately see the contrast. We had a room with a piano and that was it. We would watch film strips sometimes: <i>Dance Macabre</i> , I remember every Halloween, and <i>The Nutcracker</i> . It was just singing with the piano.

**TABLE 2**  
**Parent Responses after Attending an Informance**

<i>What did parents learn from attending the informance?</i>	
<b>Teaching process</b>	You use the whole child. They think, they sing, they move with their bodies. You'll have them do something in their heads. I just love that. And they're all so good at it. It's elegant, just a beautiful thing to see.
<b>Depth of curriculum</b>	I was surprised how much she knew as far as the vocabulary. I had never heard of a lot of the words. I was surprised at how much detail they get in the music classes—the depth of what gets discussed and the amount of material.
<b>Comparing music classes: parent vs. child</b>	It's much more advanced than I would have thought. They are learning so much more than I would have imagined. It's incredible that you're teaching that kind of stuff.
	I was surprised at the depth. The kids were totally getting it. It was interesting to remember what I had and see what they're getting now.
<b>Real learning</b>	I can remember sitting [at the informance], thinking, "This is amazing! I never knew all of this."
	What I know is that they are on their way to knowing a lot more about music than I ever learned.
	I was blown away. I called my parents, I called my in-laws. What you were teaching them was not your basic "Mary Had a Little Lamb." This is <i>really</i> music education.
<b>Classroom environment</b>	It doesn't seem simple, thrown together—where the kids get to romp around and shake musical instruments. It seems like there's a lot of <i>actual learning</i> going on. They're learning a lot of skills—not just musical skills—in the way they interact with each other.
	The way you run your class, every single child is safe. They all seem equally happy to participate. You call on them all, so they are expected to participate. And yet, if they don't, it's fine. They're so involved. They are learning all the time, on every level.

their elementary music classes and revisit their childhood musicianship. What do parents recall from their music classes? Parents identified with singing, playing instruments, and listening to music; they also recalled watching films and rehearsing for concerts (see Table 1).

## Authentic Activities

Demonstrating authentic classroom activities—showing parents how the engine works—is the second component. Parents will know more about the curriculum, the students' skills, the teaching approach, the learning process, the teacher–student interactions, and the classroom environment. One parent remarked, “It’s not too often you go to a child’s [music] program and feel like you’ve come away really having learned something.” Another parent expressed similar feelings of growth, as well as a preference for informances: “It was more enjoyable to me than a performance because I wouldn’t have walked away with as much [information] from a performance.” Parent comments demonstrated their surprise with the creative and efficient techniques used by the teacher, the advanced improvisation and reading skills demonstrated by the students, the specific music terminology used in discussion, the depth of the curriculum represented by the activities, and the “real” learning—as opposed to music class as free time. See Table 2 for parent responses.

## Parent Participation

Encouraging parents to participate—getting their hands dirty by exploring the engine—is the last component. Include parent participation in informances to connect parents and students through active music making. Adults can (1) learn a folk dance as the child’s partner, (2) watch children demonstrate an activity and then play a round of the activity, (3) learn to play an easy tune on recorder with the child as teacher, (4) sing the bass line to accompany children’s vocal improvisations, or (5) create with the child a new section for a body percussion rondo. Interactive music making is valuable and

may not otherwise occur between child and parent. It also sets the scene for continued music making at home.

Participation has a bigger effect on parents than I expected. Surprisingly, many parents feel they missed experiential music-making activities in their youth and want to learn about music in the way their children are learning. “The informance was really fun. I don’t know that I knew it was going to be fun.” “I liked that it involved the parents. I would love to see more [informances] and I would love to see it more expanded so that it was even more of a family music night where we all got to play those games.” “I wanted to do what the kids were doing. I wanted you to say, ‘Okay, all the parents, come down and sit cross-legged next to your child and we’re going to do this.’ Because I think I’ve learned more about music from watching the informance than I ever did from all my previous music [classes].” “You want to be able to play like a child, to experience the music in ways you never have had the chance.”

After inviting parents to participate in informances, I began receiving requests for “family music nights.” Parents were

interested in continuing to share music with their children and missed communal music experiences.

## Learning for All

Students learn more than can be represented at traditional performances. I realized that traditional performances provide inaccurate and incomplete views of my students’ capabilities. During performances, I struggled to represent the vast amount of my students’ achievement. During informances, my students rev their engines—demonstrate their ability to sing, chant, play instruments, move and dance, listen critically, create through improvisation and composition, respond individually and as a group, and write and read. Performance is the way much of music education is highlighted. Music programs (especially non-performance-based classes) continue to remain easy targets for budget cuts. An informance may be a more salient way to demonstrate the importance of music education. Although performance is often the end product of the teaching process, parents and administrators need to understand how students achieve success.

Informances go beyond informing. By lifting the hood, learning about the engine, and getting their hands dirty, parents gain an appreciation for the car (the music program) and the mechanics (the students and teachers). Even though the shiny exterior reminds parents of cars they have seen, this is no longer their grandfather’s automobile.

## NOTES

1. *Informance* combines the words *inform* and *performance* and is an informational presentation in a public venue that highlights curriculum and the learning process demonstrated by participating learners. Suzanne L. Burton, “Educate Our Advocates!” *Music Educators Journal* 90, no. 5 (May 2004): 19.
2. Jill K. Anderson, “Marketing School Music: It’s Elementary,” *Music Educators Journal* 78, no. 5 (January 1992): 32–35.
3. Burton, “Educate Our Advocates!” 17–21.

## Suggested Informance Resources

- Abril, Carlos R., and Brent M. Gault. “Perspectives on the Music Program: Opening Doors to the School Community.” *Music Educators Journal* 93, no. 5 (March 2007): 32–37.
- Burton, Suzanne L. “Educate Our Advocates!” *Music Educators Journal* 90, no. 5 (May 2004): 17–21.
- Stauffer, Sandra L. “Beginning Assessment in Elementary General Music.” *Music Educators Journal* 86, no. 2 (September 1999): 25–30.
- Freeman, Robert. “New Perspectives on Audience Development.” *Arts Education Policy Review* 97, no. 5 (May/June 1996): 22–28.
- Anderson, Jill K. “Marketing School Music: It’s Elementary.” *Music Educators Journal* 78, no. 5 (January 1992): 32–35.