

U.S. Copyright Law for School Music Teachers

Practical guidelines for sheet music, recordings, streaming, performances, and online sharing

IMPORTANT DISCLAIMER

These guidelines provide a general overview of copyright issues commonly encountered by school music educators. They are intended for informational purposes only and should not be considered legal advice. Copyright law can be complex, and the legality of a particular use may depend on the specific facts, licenses, publisher terms, and circumstances involved. Before copying, sharing, posting, recording, streaming, arranging, or otherwise using copyrighted material in a way that may raise legal concerns, each teacher should review the applicable law, consult the relevant publisher or rights holder, and seek guidance from school administration or qualified legal counsel when necessary.

Understanding Copyright in Music Education

Music educators use copyrighted materials every day, including sheet music, recordings, accompaniment tracks, and instructional resources. While U.S. copyright law recognizes the importance of education, there is no broad exemption that allows schools or teachers to freely copy or distribute copyrighted music. Teachers are expected to respect the rights of composers, arrangers, publishers, performers, and recording companies.

Understanding these rules helps protect your school, your music program, and the creators whose work we rely upon.

Music Is Protected by Copyright

Most music has two separate copyrights:

The Musical Composition	The Sound Recording
Includes: • Melody • Harmony • Lyrics • Written arrangement • Sheet music	Includes: • The actual recorded performance of the music.

These copyrights are often owned by different individuals or organizations, and each may require separate permission for use.

Sheet Music

One of the most common copyright issues in school music programs involves sheet music. In general, purchased sheet music may not be copied simply to avoid purchasing additional copies.

Examples of activities that are generally not permitted include:

- Photocopying music for an entire ensemble.
- Scanning music into PDF files for students.
- Emailing sheet music to students or parents.
- Uploading copyrighted music to Google Drive, Dropbox, OneDrive, Canvas, Schoology, or other cloud storage services where students can access or download it.
- Sharing purchased digital music files with other teachers or schools.

Even if your school purchased one original copy, that does not authorize making additional copies for every student.

Each performer generally needs a legally purchased copy unless the publisher specifically grants additional permissions through a license.

Limited Emergency Copies

Copyright law does recognize a few limited exceptions for emergency situations.

For example, if purchased music is unexpectedly damaged or lost immediately before a performance, a temporary replacement copy may be permissible while a replacement is obtained. These situations are intended to be rare and should not become routine practice.

Digital Distribution

Modern technology has made sharing files easy, but copyright law still applies.

Teachers should not upload copyrighted sheet music to cloud storage or learning management systems unless the publisher has specifically authorized that use.

This includes platforms such as:

- Google Drive
- Microsoft OneDrive
- Dropbox
- Canvas
- Google Classroom
- Schoology
- Email attachments
- Shared network folders

The fact that access is limited to your students does not automatically make sharing legal.

Many publishers now offer digital classroom licenses that specifically allow online distribution within defined limits.

Audio Recordings

Commercial recordings are also protected by copyright.

Teachers should avoid:

- Uploading copyrighted recordings for students to download.
- Sharing MP3 files through cloud storage or email.
- Posting commercial recordings on classroom websites without permission.

Using licensed streaming services for personal listening is legal, but downloading or redistributing those recordings is generally not.

Streaming Music

Services such as Spotify, Apple Music, Amazon Music, and YouTube Music license music for personal listening.

A subscription does not give permission to copy recordings, redistribute recordings, upload recordings for students, or include recordings in online instructional materials unless the necessary permissions have been obtained.

Performance Rights

Schools frequently perform copyrighted music in concerts, festivals, and contests.

Many educational performances are lawful because the school has purchased legal performance materials, and some educational performances may qualify under specific provisions of U.S. copyright law. Public performances outside the educational setting or recordings distributed beyond the classroom may require additional permissions or licenses.

Recording Student Performances

Recording concerts for educational review or archival purposes is common. However, posting performances online may involve additional copyright considerations because the performance includes copyrighted music.

Before posting performances on YouTube, Facebook, or other social media, schools should understand the applicable permissions and platform policies.

Fair Use

Teachers often hear the term fair use, but it is frequently misunderstood.

Fair use is a limited legal doctrine evaluated on a case-by-case basis by considering:

- The purpose of the use.
- The nature of the copyrighted work.
- The amount used.
- The effect on the market for the original.

Fair use is not a blanket permission for classroom copying.

Common misconceptions include:

- "It is for education, so it is automatically legal."
- "I only copied one page."
- "I gave the composer credit."
- "The students are not paying for it."

None of these statements, by themselves, make copying legal.

Common Copyright Myths

Myth: "I bought one copy, so I can make copies for my band."

Fact: Purchasing one copy does not authorize making additional copies for performers.

Myth: "It is okay because we are a school."

Fact: Schools are still required to follow copyright law.

Myth: "It is only on Google Drive for my students."

Fact: Uploading copyrighted sheet music or recordings to cloud storage without permission is generally not permitted unless authorized by the publisher or license agreement.

Myth: "Giving credit makes it legal."

Fact: Credit is good practice but does not replace permission from the copyright owner.

Best Practices for Music Educators

Music teachers can help protect their programs by following a few practical guidelines:

- Purchase enough legal copies for every performer.
- Read the publisher's license terms for printed and digital music.
- Do not photocopy or scan music to avoid purchasing additional copies.
- Do not upload copyrighted sheet music to cloud storage or learning management systems unless the license specifically permits it.
- Use legally licensed recordings and accompaniment tracks.
- When in doubt, contact the publisher or copyright holder for permission.

Recommended Professional Learning

NFHS COPYRIGHT COURSE

It is suggested that school music teachers complete the **free** NFHS course *Understanding Copyright and Compliance* to strengthen their understanding of copyright responsibilities in educational music programs.

[NFHS Learn: Understanding Copyright and Compliance](#)

NAfME COPYRIGHT GUIDE

Teachers are also encouraged to review NAfME's *United States Copyright Law: A Guide for Music Educators*, which provides music-education-specific information about copying, recording, arranging, distribution, performance, and fair use.

[NAfME: United States Copyright Law - A Guide for Music Educators](#)

Conclusion

Respecting copyright is an important part of professional music education. Purchasing legal copies, following publisher licensing terms, and avoiding unauthorized copying or cloud sharing ensure that composers, arrangers, and publishers are fairly compensated for their work. By modeling ethical use of copyrighted materials, music educators teach students not only musicianship, but also professionalism and respect for the creative work of others.