

Compose yourself!

The indispensable resource for the over-worked music teacher

Paul Harris and Robert Tucker

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© 2003 by Paul Harris and Robert Tucker
First published in 2003 by Faber Music Ltd
Bloomsbury House
74–77 Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3DA
Music processed by David Perkins
Illustrations by Harry Venning
Design by Nick Flower
Printed in England by Caligraving Ltd
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ISBN10: 0-571-51990-3
EAN13: 978-0-571-51990-3

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INTRODUCTION

The act of composition can be as broad and deep as the imagination will allow. That said, learning to compose still requires a considerable degree of technical understanding. This means that the teaching and learning processes require method and a sense of progression, ultimately achieved by revisiting and connecting concepts in different ways. This book is therefore not a prescriptive scheme of work, but a collection of lesson plans which may either be ‘dipped into’, or followed as a course.

As we know, music is highly subjective—musicians have profoundly varying conceptions of what they like and dislike. However, as broad-minded teachers of composition, it may be helpful to bear the following points in mind:

- Anyone can compose.
- Composers feed off both their imaginations and their intellects.
- Fundamentally, it is highly questionable to deem one piece of music, or one style of music *better*, per se, than another; similarly, to assert that one composer is *better* than another.
- Though learning to compose can often seem an intimidating, even frighteningly complex task, it is also an immensely fulfilling one!

Using this book

This book is divided into 50 lesson plans or ‘focuses’, arranged in three sections. Sections 1 and 2 have an associated workbook, covering Focus 1–24 (excluding Focus 3 and 14); this will help structure pupils’ work, build up a useful library of ideas and act as a record of their initial exploration into the world of composition. By Section 3, with the aid of a manuscript book and/or music software, pupils will be thinking and working independently towards their own personal style—be it jazz, pop, ‘classical’, experimental or through the rich diversity of their own musical culture.

One focus may take up a single lesson whilst others may form the basis for longer-term projects. As lessons inevitably develop in all sorts of unexpected directions, we should always be prepared to extend, revisit or change course. Class discussions should flow, with open-ended questions to encourage lateral thinking—avoid searching for one particular answer.

The two-pronged strategy

Improvisation is a very important and essential activity for the young composer. Sitting at the keyboard (even with minimal technique), the young composer will create a library of ideas, or musical ‘vocabulary’, that he or she will

be able to draw upon as compositional skills develop. For the purpose of this book, we call this doodling ‘free improvisation’. Encourage your pupils to improvise as often as possible!

However, free improvisation is essentially a right-brain activity and is only part of the story. By imposing some rules (hence accessing the left brain) we create ‘structured improvisation’, and begin moving from pure improvisation to composition. Perhaps the ideal teaching strategy for young composers is therefore two-pronged:

- Learning the rules of musical composition, eventually equipping them with the means to produce music of real sophistication.
- Exploring musical ideas through both structured and unstructured improvisation.

Intelligent listening

Aspiring composers must listen to a diversity of music, and listen intelligently. Each week we should expect pupils to listen to at least one piece of music and write about or discuss what they heard. Make your pupils aware of basic and more sophisticated compositional devices (as appropriate). Such frequent listening and ‘aural observation’ of how other composers’ compositional processes work is invaluable.

Graphic notation

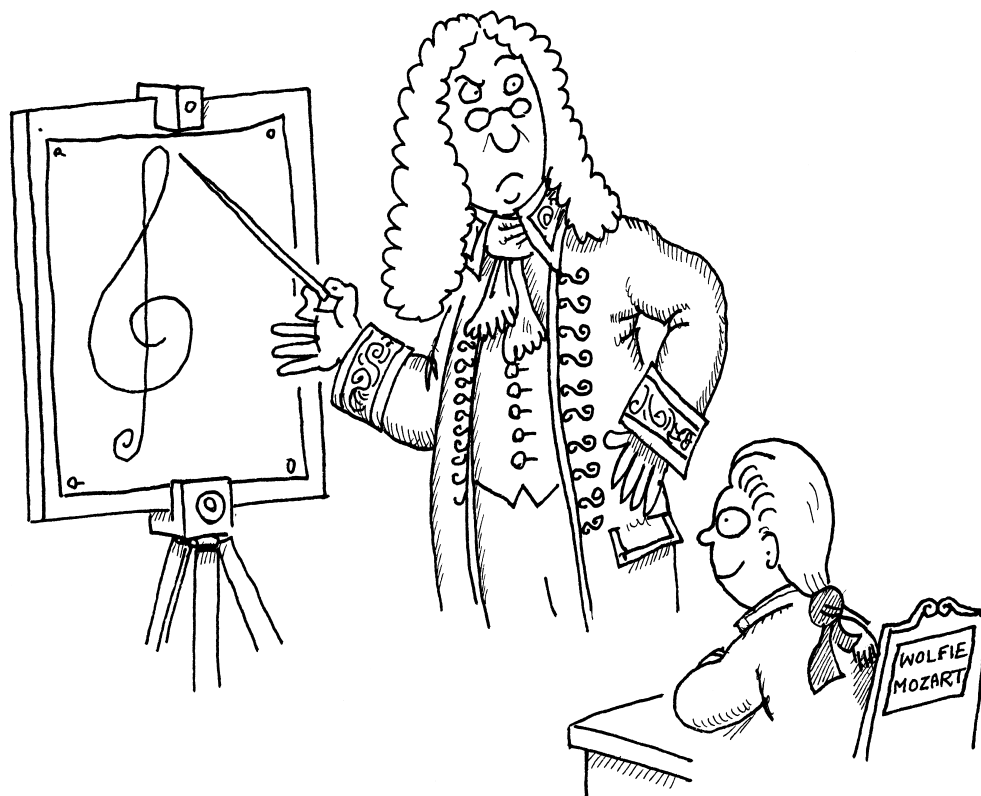
Graphic notation is useful for scoring special musical effects or directions for loosely structured improvisation and aleatory music (often alongside conventional staff notation). However, try to avoid the conception that it is an easier alternative to staff notation—the latter is, after all, just another form of graphic notation.

Music technology

Technology can encourage pupils to become independent learners; through editing, refining and continual aural monitoring of their work they will begin to establish a musical process for composing. Additionally, notating their music in a professional way will both enthuse and stimulate their interest. Encourage pupils to visit relevant websites: fabermusic.com/composeyourself offers invaluable support material and is an interactive learning tool. Additionally, pupils may wish to share their music interactively on the internet and/or have it marked via email.

Only connect ...

Above all, encourage an integrated approach to composing, listening and performing: make the connections and your pupils will begin to develop real musical insight.



SECTION 1 **Laying the foundations**

FOCUS **1**

What is composing?

FREE IMPROVISATION

Ask pupils (individually and in groups) to improvise music that depicts different colours: other pupils then try to guess the colour.

DISCUSSION

How do composers create music? What is music? What does music communicate? Does a piece of music need to be memorable? How does a composer differ from a poet, writer, artist or drama director? Do you need imagination to compose? What is imagination? How did pupils try to depict the different colours?

LISTENING

Introduce 'intelligent listening' (see *Introduction*, page 2): No.1 from *Musica ricercata*, GYÖRGY LIGETI; *Stimmung*, KARLHEINZ STOCKHAUSEN; *Concerto for Orchestra*, BÉLA BARTÓK; any one of *Sequenza I-IX*, LUCIANO BERIO; 'Speak to me' (opening) from *Dark side of the moon*, PINK FLOYD; *Terror and Magnificence*, JOHN HARLE; any track from *Sketches of Spain*, MILES DAVIS and GIL EVANS; any track by TALVIN SINGH or NITIN SAWNHEY; any similar piece.

STRUCTURED IMPROVISATION

Ask pupils to improvise on one note creating as much variety as possible. Discuss the results. Which musical elements supply the means for this variety? Now try to depict a colour again, using only one note! Explore various sound colours using different instruments and, if available, the parameters of multi-timbral keyboards, synthesisers or samplers.

PRACTICAL

- Pupils' workbook page 2
- ① Write a paragraph on 'What do composers do?'
 - ② Intelligent listening (see *Introduction*, page 2).
 - ③ Improvise music with as much variety as possible, using only two notes.
 - ④ Again, improvise freely, trying to depict more colours.

FOCUS 2

Tempo, pulse, metre and rhythm

DISCUSSION What do each of these terms mean? (An Editor/Sequencer may be used to illustrate rhythm visually, together with keyboard rhythm styles.)

RULES/NOTATION Discuss and compare time signatures (through conducting or other movement, listening, reference to pieces pupils may have played and so on). Introduce various note values and their rests, and show how they are notated.

IMPROVISATION Individually, or in groups, improvise rhythmic pieces by clapping, using percussion instruments, keyboards/sequencers, percussion pads or voices. Encourage pupils to conduct.

LISTENING *Drumming*, STEVE REICH; First movement from Symphony No.15, DMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH; examples of non-western drumming or any strongly rhythmic music.

PRACTICAL Compose a short piece for a side-drum or other non-tuned percussion instrument, electronic keyboard or voice. It should last between eight and sixteen bars and use rhythms discussed in the lesson. Include rests. Group work might include layering on a computer, sequencer or portable multi-track.
Pupils' workbook page 3

FOCUS 3

Pitch

DISCUSSION Identify naturally occurring pitch sources (for example: bird song, engines, vacuum cleaners). What is the difference between pitched sound and noise? List pitched and non-pitched musical instruments (western and non-western). Does music need pitch? Discuss the quality of high and low sounds. How are low and high sounds produced? Encourage students to demonstrate on their own instruments. Involve instrumental teachers whenever possible.

STRUCTURED IMPROVISATION Create a musical dialogue (with two pupils at one piano, or using a high and low instrument/voice) between, for example: a high- and low-voiced person, a nightingale and a tortoise, etc.

LISTENING *Peter and the wolf* (opening), SERGEY PROKOVIEV; 'Two Jews' from *Pictures at an exhibition*, MODEST MUSSORGSKY orch. MAURICE RAVEL; *Carnival of the Animals*, CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS; or an Indian raga. Discuss the use of pitch in the context of the piece.

PRACTICAL Explore high and low pitches. Use interactive CD ROMs, sampled sounds, unusual instruments and electronic keyboards. Improvise, contrasting high and low sounds. Involve the Physics department if appropriate. Draw up a list of high- and low-pitched instruments.
(no worksheet provided)

FOCUS 4

Simple melody-writing (the four-bar phrase)

DISCUSSION What makes a good melody? (Choose some for discussion). Play/sing *Happy Birthday to you*, the theme from *Eastenders* or any other suitable example. Discuss the use of repetition, shape, balance, melodic direction and silence.

LISTENING Any good tune! For example: *Yesterday*, THE BEATLES; *Clarinet Quintet in A K.581*, WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART; *Danny Boy*, ANON.; *Away in a manger*, WILLIAM KIRKPATRICK; *Misty*, JOHNNY BURKE and ERROLL GARNER.

IMPROVISATION The teacher improvises two-bar phrases (the question) and pupils improvise a two-bar answer. Begin with stepwise movement, exploring other intervals as pupils become more confident. Are certain notes more effective for beginnings and endings? Is there such a thing as 'musical gravity'? Can this influence melodic shape and direction? Improvise question and answer phrases in pairs and groups, creating backing tracks if appropriate.

RULES/NOTATION Notation of the following notes:



Discuss the qualities of a successful four-bar phrase: rise and fall (or fall and rise!), consistency of style and content, etc.

PRACTICAL Compose a number of four-bar melodies in question-and-answer form (perhaps for different instrumentalists/singers in the class), using mostly stepwise movement. Include dynamics and phrase markings. Use the notes introduced in the lesson and begin and end on C. Suggest that each tune be given an imaginative title. You may like to recommend the use of score-writing software to store and edit ideas. For non-music-readers, programme some questions digitally—the answers can be improvised.

Pupils' workbook page 4

FOCUS 5

Developing a musical idea

DISCUSSION Teach the class to sing or play the following melody:



Discuss its characteristics.

STRUCTURED IMPROVISATION Try the bars in a different order. Do particular combinations sound more effective? If so, why? Are there an ideal number of repetitions for each bar? Try transposing bars (perhaps up or down a tone). Reassemble the melody by choosing two bars of the original and two bars of the transposed version. Use ICT to select, copy, cut and paste.

PRACTICAL Compose a four-bar phrase and develop the idea using the techniques discussed in this lesson. The finished composition might be eight or twelve bars in length.

Pupils' workbook page 5