

Exchanging Notes

THE PROJECT

Exchanging Notes was an exchange of ideas between teachers and composers designed to strengthen and investigate new strategies for the teaching of composition across the secondary music curriculum. The emphasis of the exchange was to develop practical teaching strategies that could be utilised within any scheme of work, and it took the form of four days of workshops facilitated by Birmingham Contemporary Music Group and Birmingham LEA.

The project team, consisting of three composers, four secondary teachers and two postgraduate students was assembled by Nancy Evans, BCMG's Director of Learning and Participation and Robert Bunting, former Music Adviser for Birmingham LEA, in response to research findings which indicated that music in school is poorly regarded by young people and that teachers lack confidence in teaching composition. The team met over the course of four one-day sessions at the CBSO Centre, Birmingham between March and June 2002. The intention of this publication is to share the ideas that emerged more widely and to inform further professional development with a wider pool of teachers and composers working in education, as well as other interested organisations.

During the four days each member of the team was asked to contribute a lesson or workshop activity which would address and stimulate discussion on four key questions and which would be evaluated afterwards.

THE FOUR KEY QUESTIONS








- How do teachers ensure that pupils use whatever stimulus or inspiration they have as their starting point to create useful and interesting musical ideas?
- What teaching strategies will develop young people's aural imagination?
- What teaching strategies will best help young people:
 - to experiment?
 - to make good decisions?
 - to develop ideas?
 - to evaluate?
- Independent group work is the norm. But what role is there for individual work and for whole-class teacher-led work?



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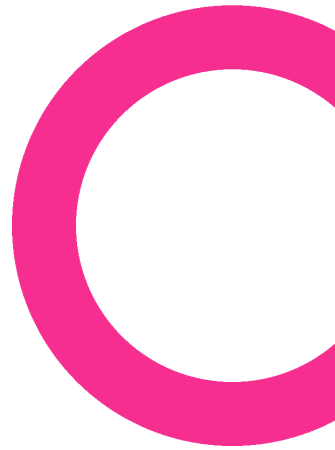
The pack has been organised into eight colour-coded sections each of which addresses a different aspect of the composing process.

-  **Generating**
USING STIMULI TO CREATE INTERESTING MUSICAL IDEAS
-  **Managing**
STEERING THE PROCESS WITH A CLASS
-  **Doodling**
BRAINSTORMING, EXPERIMENTING OR EXPLORING
-  **Choosing**
SELECTING THE BEST IDEAS AND MAKING DECISIONS
-  **Developing**
TAKING IDEAS FURTHER
-  **Reflecting**
AFTER CREATING A PIECE
-  **Imagining**
DEVELOPING THE ABILITY TO INTERNALISE AND HEAR SOUNDS IN THE INNER EAR
-  **Thinking onwards...**
SOME KEY ISSUES TO DEBATE



Generating

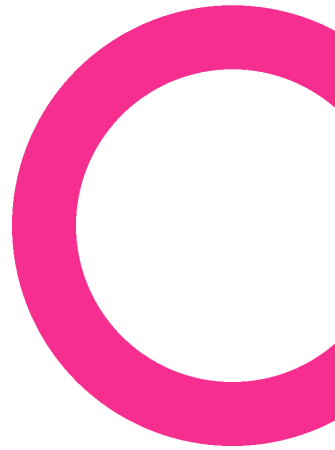
USING STIMULI TO CREATE INTERESTING MUSICAL IDEAS



- ▶ **Research**
Encourage students to do research to find interesting starting points, for example, poetry, paintings, sculptures, natural phenomena, films, animation, musical genres, other people's music, science, life, and social issues. Ask them to keep an inspiration notebook of ideas.
- ▶ **Big picture**
Encourage students to start from the bigger picture. What is determining the structure? Is it a narrative - secret, explicit, or predetermined, for example by a film? Maybe set up a dialectic e.g. water/stone. However for some composers the structure will be generated by the raw musical material.
- ▶ **Blank page**
Composing music does not have to be a linear process starting with writing the first note through to writing the last note. If the students have an overall structure in mind or on paper, they can fill in the bits that they are sure about which will often lead to other ideas being generated. The middle may determine the start, not always the other way round.
- ▶ **Fuzziness**
Students often feel that once they have put a mark on a piece of paper what they have written is set in stone. Composers will often have many different musical ideas on different pieces of manuscript. They see chopping them up and rearranging them as part of the process.
- ▶ **One element**
Limiting starting points can be liberating. Encourage students to focus on exploring one element. This may seem to be a contradiction to some of the other points which suggest gathering lots of material. Both approaches are equally valuable.
- ▶ **Trick yourself**
Under this heading also come the word playfulness and the phrase 'respond to accidents'. This refers to playing around with sounds *without intention* - 'listen out of the corner of your ear'. Through this process interesting ideas/starting points will appear that might not be found if looking for them: hence 'tricking yourself'.

Generating

USING STIMULI TO CREATE INTERESTING MUSICAL IDEAS



- ▶ **Rework ideas** Ask students to 'translate' the musical gesture/motif, e.g. from voice to percussion, then to keyboards or own instruments - from warm to cold, firm to light, bright to dark etc. - from sound, to graphics, to movement. Each change of medium will force changes to the original idea, triggering new possibilities to be explored.
- ▶ **Be economic** Encourage students to make as much music as possible out of a single motif. Change timbre, dynamic, accent - use augmentation, diminution, retrograde, inversion, and distortion. Can they generate enough material to make a whole piece?
- ▶ **Raw sound** Encourage deep contemplation of a single sound. Sounds are not mere neutral counters to be shuffled into sequences. Value the spirit or essence of each sound. Ask students to put the sound under a magnifying glass and view all the intricacies contained in that one sound. It's not just the sounds produced by musical instruments - natural and found sounds are equally fascinating. Enhance sensitivity to sound.
- ▶ **Secret** Ask students to use their telephone number, the letters of their name, the rhythm of their address or their name in Morse code, as a secret generating device which does not need to be made explicit to the listener, just to themselves.
- ▶ **Break boundaries or conform to model?** Be clear about whether you are asking the students to conform to a pre-determined structure or to develop their own unique structure.
- ▶ **Other pupils' work** At the outset of a project listen to previous students' compositions related to the theme and use them as an aid to defining criteria for successful compositions. Over time, build up a bank of exemplar compositions, not necessarily just the best ones which illustrate key points. Within this, present work at different levels of achievement.

Managing

STEERING THE PROCESS WITH A CLASS



- ▶ **Windows** Create a whole class composition with windows in which you could ask small groups to create a section of the whole piece.
- ▶ **Model** This refers to the teacher composing or improvising in front of the class. Model the process of how you would experiment with musical material. Ask the pupils to contribute and discuss the process. A powerful strategy here would be to do something deliberately 'wrong' and then ask for improvements.
- ▶ **Double-decker** Start with specialist groups e.g. tuned percussion, untuned percussion, voices etc. working on specific parts of the piece. Then take one member from each specialist group to form a mixed group to put the piece together. This gives ownership of the piece to each member of the group avoiding the group being dominated by one student or a passive student not contributing. This could also be referred to as a jigsaw approach where each individual contributes a different element of the overall group piece.
- ▶ **Research** Research has an important role in enriching the composing process. For instance, finding out what a particular instrument can do - discovering style features of music relevant to the theme of the piece - exploring how other composers have approached similar challenges. This could be a valuable homework activity, especially for older and more experienced students.
- ▶ **Cooking pot & snowball** Each individual student develops one general idea as part of the overall concept, then works with a partner to develop a joint statement. Pairs merge into fours and all ideas go into a metaphorical cooking pot to create a complete piece. This approach requires a higher level of negotiation skills from the pupils than the above.

Managing

STEERING THE PROCESS WITH A CLASS

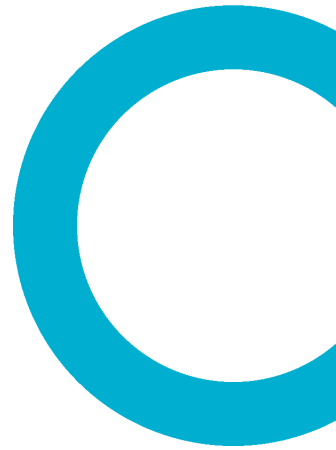


- ▶ **Directing** Invite individuals from the group to lead the whole class or groups in composing tasks. Ask the class to reflect on the process, the decisions that were made, the ramifications of those decisions and what alternatives could have been used. Give time for individuals to plan this e.g. as homework or in class time.
- ▶ **Band leadership** See yourself, the teacher, as a band leader with the class being the band. Invite individual music ideas and ask the other members of the group to respond musically in different ways. E.g. shadow, harmonise, solo on top, contradict, add a different line, distort etc. These ideas can often be ostinatos and can be used to generate ideas, build a complete piece, aid discussion and explore different roles within a texture.
- ▶ **Accept failure** It is essential to create an environment where to fail is ok. Failing is part of the creative process and a piece that 'fails' may contain some of your students' best work. Encourage students to accept failing as part of the journey and if they concentrate on what has been learnt the concept of 'failure' becomes redundant.
- ▶ **Homework** Teach the pupils to internalise sounds and develop the aural memory. Then, as homework, they will be able to plan or revise a composition, make notes and bring their ideas to the next lesson.



Doodling

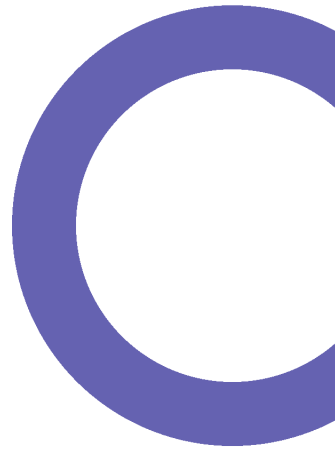
BRAINSTORMING, EXPLORING OR EXPERIMENTING



- ▶ **Bite-size chunks** Before tackling the big task of a whole piece break the process down into exploratory 'bite size chunks'. This will help students to experiment and doodle around the idea without them being overwhelmed by the enormity of the task.
- ▶ **Three-way thinking** Ask students to find three different ways of approaching the task and see which one opens up the most possibilities rather than getting bogged down by sticking to their first idea.
- ▶ **Composing diary** Just as writers have notebooks and diaries in which they record observations of life for possible future use in their work, encourage students to keep composing diaries. These could contain musical fragments or words and ideas, and could act as a reservoir of ideas to draw from whether in an inspiration drought or not.
- ▶ **Complement & contrast** Often, in composing, students are asked to find contrasting material. Encourage them also to find material that complements what is already there.
- ▶ **One instrument many sounds** We would turn to a woodblock for a cut-off sound, a cymbal for an echoing fading sound, or a shaker for a sustained one. Ask students if they can find all three types of sound on a single instrument? Can they get both high and low pitches? How many different ways of playing the one instrument can they invent - enough for a whole piece?
- ▶ **Perform & compose** Where pupils are having instrumental lessons it is essential that they are encouraged to doodle and experiment on their own instruments as part of the composition process.

Choosing

SELECTING THE BEST IDEAS AND MAKING DECISIONS



- ▶ **Interrogate brief** How many different ways can it be interpreted? Can students find a subtle way - a profound way - a subversive way?
- ▶ **Simple or subtle?** Ask students to provide two solutions to the challenge - one simple (obvious), the other subtle (devious) .
- ▶ **Funnel best ideas** Ask students to imagine the process of selecting ideas as a funnel - lots of ideas to start with moving down into a single concentrated stream.
- ▶ **Throw away** Encourage students to have confidence to throw away ideas. Not every idea a composer has is a good one. As an aid to focussing their ideas, play the 'balloon game' - which of their ideas would they throw out of the hot air balloon first and why? Students may find they are all essential. It is the thinking process that is important.
- ▶ **Title or character** In situations where a fair amount of material has been generated but it doesn't seem to be coming together - may be a bit bland - assigning a descriptive title or an overall character to the piece helps to focus thoughts and get rid of unwanted material. As a decision making tool, ask students to check their material against the title/character they started with. What fits? What doesn't? What could be changed to fit? Or do they need to change the title?
- ▶ **Tree diagrams** Ask students to set out all the different ways their piece could develop as a tree diagram with branches going in different directions. This gives a variety of pathway options but also gives them a fuller understanding of the implications of their chosen pathway.
- ▶ **What decisions?** Encourage students to stand back from their material and think about what are the key decisions that need to be made i.e. how long, structure, contrasts, narrative etc.
- ▶ **Interrogate** While discussing a student's piece interrogate their key decisions and ask them to explain and justify them and ask why any alternatives were discarded.
- ▶ **What next?** Listen to an extract from a composer's music or another student's. Then ask 'what do you think happens next, what could happen next and why?'

Developing

TAKING IDEAS FURTHER



- ▶ **Ideas under the microscope**
Ask students to put one of their ideas under the microscope, so that they focus on its small corners (e.g. just 2 or 3 notes in an extended melodic passage or rhythmic idea). Which of these corners catch their interest? Can they be taken out and given a life of their own?
- ▶ **Revisit ideas**
It is very important to revisit and revise and polish, even (or especially) with the simplest exercises. Pieces need refining, statements need clarifying, hinted at tendencies might need to be encouraged to fruition.
- ▶ **History of a note**
When reviewing work in progress: encourage students to choose any particular note, and go through the piece noticing what role it has played so far. This may seem arbitrary, but it will trigger ideas as to where the piece may go next - e.g. can they find a new role for the note, or for other notes?
- ▶ **If you've only got eggs, you can't make roast beef**
Encourage students to let the material dictate the direction of their piece. If their initial musical material is quite simple and similar the resulting piece may be quite short whereas if they have more complex and contrasting material this inevitably will need more development and is likely to be a larger scale composition.
- ▶ **Form is not a jelly mould**
Encourage students not to decide in advance what form your piece will take, so that they force their music into a chosen mould. Let the form evolve organically from the nature of the materials. Set up a process (e.g. steady growth - cycling through a group of ideas in different versions each time - putting opposites side by side). The piece will develop its own unique form as the process works itself out. Pay special attention to the 'branching points' where they feel change is needed. This may seem to contradict 'Blank page'; however both approaches are valuable.
- ▶ **Is it finished, Miss?**
Has the energy created through repetition or development of the musical gesture or idea come back to rest? Have the musical ideas been explored fully without being repetitive? How much material can be cut without losing the essence of the meaning of the piece? Working the material enough but not too much.



Developing

TAKING IDEAS FURTHER



- ▶ **Create problems**

Set a routine composition task of creating some dance music but give it a twist by saying that it needs to be a dance for an alien being. This shocks the student out of usual trains of thought. Or, the student presents a piece which has come to a full stop or is a little short or bland. Here you can pose a problem which sets the student on a different train of thought by asking 'now create something completely opposite, or make it three times longer'.
- ▶ **Distilling**

Develop a piece by making it shorter! Distil the idea to its most powerful form.
- ▶ **Assemble & collage**

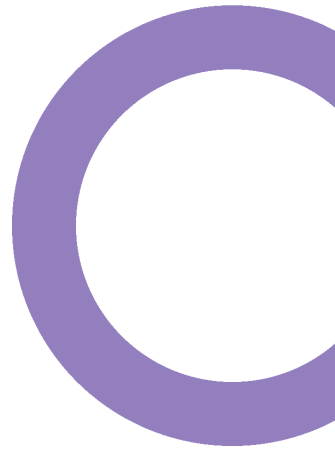
Students are traditionally told to 'develop' ideas and the National Curriculum requires that students do this. This is only one strategy for clustering musical ideas. Students could instead assemble material as in a collage or a mobile which turns around. Some composers intentionally chop up their musical ideas and rearrange them.
- ▶ **See the wood for the trees**

It's always important to be able to see the wood for the trees. Encourage students to compose with materials that are essentially manageable - like just one note! - so that the key issues of composition (that apply to all music), can immediately be revealed, experienced and discussed - how do you begin - what is the nature of contrast, what makes a 'whole' piece, how do you ensure a piece has 'character'?
- ▶ **Critical change**

This refers to the moment when the musical material needs to change or develop. The places in which this happens will be in proportion to the length of a piece and therefore establish pillars/landmarks for the listener as markers for the pace of overall development and scale of a piece. Large numbers of repetitions of a single idea signal that a piece is likely to be on a large scale whereas short numbers of repetitions signal a shorter piece. In large numbers of repetitions, the energy will need to be sustained for much longer. The intuitive decisions the composer makes will tell them how long a piece is going to be. Playing around with when this is expected to happen can be another expressive device to be used.

Reflecting

AFTER THE PIECE



- ▶ **Defining criteria**

What would a successful piece sound like? Some composition briefs will contain their own criteria – though these may need to be spelt out to students. With more open-ended briefs the thrust of the piece only becomes clear during the composition process, so the students themselves are developing criteria of success while work is in progress. They may need to be guided through this!
- ▶ **Define the audience
Create the audience**

As the teacher, you need to ensure that students can answer the question “Who have we composed this piece for?” Each audience brings its own expectations and previous experiences, which may colour the way the piece is composed. Is our piece intended to satisfy the teacher? - our classmates and peers? - a specific external audience such as a primary school class? - or just ourselves? Can the students (as composers) know their audience? Should composers create what they want to create or music that they think (rightly or wrongly) audiences want to hear?
- ▶ **Fulfilled the brief?**

Checking outcomes against the brief is another valuable aid to reflection
- ▶ **Strong & weak points**

Ask the students to list the strong and weak points of their piece as bullet points. What is to be learnt for future pieces?
- ▶ **Peer evaluation**

This is only useful if handled sensitively and given enough time. The evaluators need to understand the brief and the criteria of success. Rather than each piece being played to the whole class (tends to be a rush), it may be more effective for one pair or group to present its work to another (less exposed, can be more reflective/critical).
- ▶ **Looking back**

Encourage students to evaluate their work in the context of past pieces.

Imagining

DEVELOPING THE ABILITY TO INTERNALISE AND HEAR
SOUNDS IN THE INNER EAR



- ▶ **Play by ear** Keep notation out of the way when generating or exploring ideas. Encourage students to listen to what's in their head, however fuzzy, then work it out in sound. Communicate with others by getting them to play as much as possible by ear. This is especially useful in teacher-led modelling of composing processes.
- ▶ **Sing** Ask students to sing or vocalise every sound in the piece, as a quick check-over or to find new versions of their ideas. Encourage them to feel themselves soaking the music into their inner ears.
- ▶ **Mentally rehearse** When a piece is coming together go through the moves in your mind rather than playing them out loud. Try to remember everyone's part, not just your own. This is especially useful in teacher-led modelling, and also for final rehearsal before presenting finished work.
- ▶ **Describe & notate** When students have fixed the ideas of the piece in their inner ear, ask them to try to describe them in words, graphics or conventional notation, without referring to an instrument.
- ▶ **Teach your piece** One member of each group rotates to the next group (or individual composers pair up). Ask each student to teach another student how to play their piece, using modelling, words, notations. NB (a) this needs to be well prepared for, (b) students must expect their pupils to change the piece a bit to suit themselves!
- ▶ **Rub your stomach, pat your head** Get students to play one rhythm while listening to a second rhythm then pat their heads; move on to playing the second rhythm.



Imagining

DEVELOPING THE ABILITY TO INTERNALISE AND HEAR
SOUNDS IN THE INNER EAR



- ▶ **Give permission** Give students permission to imagine any sound even if they have no idea how to play it or notate it. For instance, a student responds to a film clip by saying that the right sound would be a harp even though it is not available. Or the student just wants a 'bubbling sound'. Here the student imagines the sound first then tries to think how it can be created rather than feeling limited by the resources at hand or the process of notation.
- ▶ **Reconstruct** Reconstruct someone else's piece having heard it only once. The results may be very approximate but this does not matter - it is still useful.
- ▶ **Repetition** Sometimes repeating a finished piece over and over again is useful to internalise it. So we shouldn't be afraid to let students play compositions again. This is particularly relevant in group composition. When a student has composed a piece we should ensure it lives with them for ever more!



Thinking onwards...

SOME KEY ISSUES TO DEBATE

- ▶ Are we providing experiences or creating composers?
- ▶ What happens before, what happens after, that particular composition?
- ▶ To what extent should curriculum planning be based on styles and cultures, techniques and concepts - or creative processes?
- ▶ Should everything be geared towards exams?
- ▶ Should composers work from an external brief, or from closely observing/working with raw materials?
- ▶ Should composing happen in the head or at an instrument?
- ▶ Can we develop new ways of having a dialogue with young people about their compositions?
- ▶ What roles are there for notation?

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IF YOU HAVE ANY COMMENTS ON THE PACK OR WOULD LIKE TO KNOW MORE ABOUT BIRMINGHAM CONTEMPORARY MUSIC GROUP AND ITS LEARNING PROGRAMME PLEASE CONTACT VISIT OUR WEBSITE BCMG.ORG.UK