

Musical Conversations

In this activity children spontaneously improvise musical conversations in pairs. The activity encourages the children to listen and respond to the musical ideas of a partner through improvisation as well as invent their own. It supports and encourages young musicians to be musically expressive, without worrying about exact pitches or rhythms.

Page 1 - Introduction

Composers often start composing by improvising on simple musical ideas. They try not to worry too much about getting the right notes etc. These musical improvisations then become a source of ideas when they start to compose.

Learning Objectives

The children will:

- Develop their listening skills
- Be able to respond musically to the ideas of a partner
- Understand that music is communicative
- Understand how musical ideas can be developed, varied and extended through taking turns with a partner
- Develop their awareness of how music can create different emotions, character and moods through the use of dynamics, timbre, and speed etc.

Success Criteria

In a successful improvisation the children will:

- Respond to the each others musical ideas
- Express distinct character, mood or emotions which may change or stay the same
- Demonstrate total engagement with their ideas and show freedom and lack of self consciousness

Page 2 - Warm Up One: Call and Response

1. Create a short musical idea and ask the children to copy you, i.e. whenever you play the call, the children should respond in unison. This is called a call and response.
2. Create different ideas and ask the children to respond in unison to you each time.
3. Play the game by moving around the circle and having individual 1-to-1 conversations with different children. Every now and then, play the call to all the group, so that everyone remains involved.
4. Play the game with one of the children as leader.



Page 3 - Warm Up Two: Park Bench (Voices)

Arrange three chairs together at the front of the group. This is the Park Bench.

Select two children. Ask the first to sit on the Park Bench. When the second arrives ask the children to have a conversation in 'gobbledegook' – i.e. a spontaneous made up language. Select a third person to join. When they arrive the first person leaves, and the remaining pair have a conversation. Keep selecting new children until everyone has had a go, or you decide to stop.

The game is very funny and will bring out the theatrical side of the different personalities in your group. It allows the children to perform freely without the constraints of playing their instrument and builds confidence in quieter children. If your group is already very confident you might skip this activity.

The rules are completely open regarding how the two people interact in this activity. You might see some balanced and thoughtful conversations, and others where one person dominates, or others where arguments break out! Allow the children their freedom, even though at times it may seem a bit out of control. You can put yourself on the bench if you need to calm things down.

Warm Up Three: Park Bench (Instruments)

Now play the Park Bench game again, this time with the children using their instruments. The only extra rule is that the children have to choose only two pitches to 'talk' with. This can be any two notes, and each player should choose their own.

As the children play, notice all the different playing styles, techniques and timbres they are using. At the end of the game, comment on these and describe some of the more effective strategies children were using. This 'labelling' helps the children to internalise and become more conscious of their ideas and their effectiveness. It also helps the children to develop a vocabulary with which to talk about their music making. Ask the other children in the group which ideas they found particularly interesting, engaging or effective.

NB If moving around with instruments is difficult, you can play the same game using three hats. Give out one hat, then another. These children start their conversation. Then give a third hat out, and collect the first hat to give to the next child, and so on.



Page 4 - Improvising a Musical Conversation

Ask a child to play you a simple musical idea. Respond to the idea. You could:

- Repeat it
- Repeat it with contrasting dynamics or a contrasting speed
- Add something to the end
- Repeat only part of the idea
- Change the playing technique
- Do something totally different
- Etc.

Ask the child to play the same idea again and this time respond differently using one of the above strategies or one of your own. Repeat this many times each time asking the rest of the children what you did.

Now ask the child to respond to you with an answer, then answer back and so on using the above strategies and develop a demonstration musical conversation between you.

Ultimately the decisions you make shouldn't be conscious but responsive to what you both hear.

Divide the group into pairs. Ask each pair to spend a few minutes improvising their own musical conversation using two pitches each (or more notes if your group is more advanced or have done this before). Remind them of the different things that you did but encourage them to respond freely. Make sure the conversations are musical and based on listening. As you go around the room while the children are working, notice how the different pairs are functioning and encourage expressive and 'playful' playing.

It might not be possible to listen back to every pair. Instead you could: have a list and make a note each session of who has played; pick names out of a hat; ask for volunteers.

Sometimes you might make this active purely improvisatory whereas at other times you might ask the pairs to create a musical conversation composition which is remembered and repeated.

Encourage the use of extended techniques, different articulations and dynamics and taking on different characters.