



One Note Piece

In this activity the children will compose a short piece using just one note. They will use dynamics, articulations and other techniques to create musical expression.

'Using only one note compose a short piece of music – all I ask is that you don't bore me!'

- Murray Schafer, Composer

Page 1 - Introduction

Limiting choices is an effective way of composing. When starting a composition, there are often too many decisions to be made. This activity limits those decisions and enables the young people to explore rhythm, timbre, pacing and articulation. It works effectively with any level of technical skill, from beginner to professional and allows each child to be individually creative within a clearly structured framework.

Learning Objectives

The children will:

- Develop awareness of how different lengths of notes and silences can be used to make an effective piece of music
- Be able to recognise simple forms and compose music with a simple form
- Understand how different timbres, dynamics and articulations can be used to create expression in music
- Understand how music can be effective and expressive without melody

Resources needed:

- Whiteboard
- Pens/wipes

Success Criteria

A successful composition will:

- Use different lengths of notes and silences effectively
- Use different articulations, dynamics and/or timbres
- Have an effective simple structure

Page 2: Warm Up Ideas

Warm Up One: Circle Sounds



1. Stand with the children in a circle with their instruments. Demonstrate and play together a short, staccato note, explaining the technique of how to do this well.
2. Ask each person to play their short note one at a time around the circle. The only rule is that you cannot play your note until your neighbour has played. Ask the children to send the short note around the circle as quickly as possible! Do this a couple of times, changing the direction the second or third time.
3. Now play the game again but this time using a long note. Each person can decide how long their note is. Again, each person must wait for the preceding note to finish before they can play.
4. Now each person can choose whether to play a short staccato note or a long note. Again, the only rule is that you must play as soon as possible after the preceding note has ended. Encourage the children to choose whether to play a short or long note depending on what has preceded it. Describe the patterns created and the effect of the combinations of short and long notes.

Warm Up Two: Copy Me

Play a simple idea on one pitch on your own instrument and ask the children to copy you, all together, as precisely as possible - on any note they choose. Do not set a fixed pulse. Vary your musical ideas. Make them lively and unpredictable. Incorporate different playing techniques, a wide range of dynamics, articulations and rhythms. Make sure that the children are copying you accurately. Repeat the idea if the children are not accurate at the first attempt.

Ask the children to notice and describe the different musical ideas and ways of playing that you have used. Make a list together, adding any the children miss out. Demonstrate and encourage the children to describe the sounds in their own words.

Page 3 - Composing a One Note Piece (1)

Explain that each person will compose their own piece of music using only one note.

Give everyone one or two minutes to compose a short and simple one note musical idea using just long and short notes and silences. Remind the children that they can use any note. With some children you might want to start with just long and short, notes and silences and then move on to adding different dynamics, playing techniques and articulations. With other children you might want to encourage this from the beginning. Ask them to memorize their idea, and to notice what kinds of sounds or patterns they are using.

The children's ideas will be diverse: some will use rhythmic patterns; some will concentrate more on timbre, dynamics and articulation with more abstract results. Some will have pulse and others not. Both are valid responses. Value each child's idea and encourage this diversity.

Listen to some of the ideas and model describing verbally the different musical elements being used and their effectiveness. Continue with this asking the children to describe the ideas and to suggest ways to improve them. E.g. maybe by adding in a silence, a tremolo/trill, or varying the note lengths more.

Page 4 - Composing a One Note Piece (2)

Now play the children a one note idea and follow this with a simple variation on it (e.g. loud version, add a note on the end). Ask the children to listen and notice what was the same and what had changed? You may need to repeat this to build up a repertoire of variation possibilities for the group to use.

Give the children about 5-10 minutes to create variations of their one note idea. Ask everyone to find a partner to play their variations to. Ask them to listen to each other and notice what has been varied from the original. As you go round listening to the children's ideas, remind them to use articulations, dynamics, etc. Spotlight different children ideas to demonstrate effective use of this.

Now ask them to create completely contrasting idea but still on the same note. The children now have their original idea, two variations and a contrasting idea.

You might at this point ask the children to find a way to draw their ideas e.g. using dots and dashes. They can use this later for structuring their ideas if they would like.

Some examples:

Original idea



Variation one (backwards)





Variation two (jumbled up)



Contrasting idea



Page 5 - Composing a One Note Piece (3)

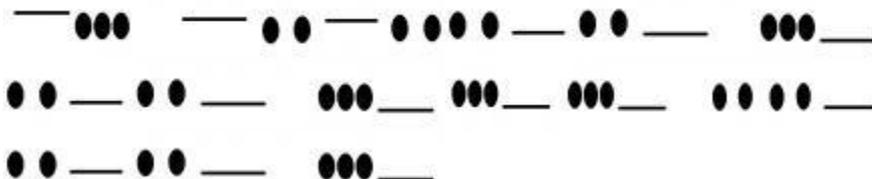
Play the children your original idea, its two variations and your contrasting idea. Model using these to make a short piece. It is important to demonstrate different ways that you could do this effectively. See examples on the right. Ask the children to listen and explain the structure that they hear.

Now ask the children to compose a short piece. It can include their original idea, their two variations and their completely contrasting idea. Explain to the children that: they don't have to use all their ideas, they can repeat ideas as many times as they like, and they can revisit ideas.

Listen to the final pieces and again ask the other children to:

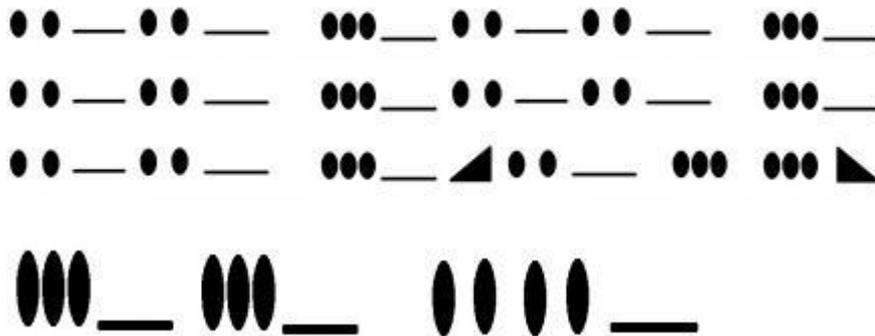
- Work out the structure
- Comment on what they thought worked well in the piece

Original, variation 1, original, variation 2, original





Original x 5, contrasting idea, variation 2 (very loud)



Page 6 - A One Note Piece for the Whole Ensemble

Chose one or two of the children's One Note Pieces to turn into a whole ensemble piece. As a group decide:

- Will everyone play the same one note or different notes?
- Will everybody play the whole piece?
- Could members of the group join in one a time?
- Could different instruments or groups of instruments play different parts of the piece?
- Could different instruments or groups of instruments play different individual notes?

You could also join some of the children's One Note Pieces together to make a longer piece.