

Composing for a More Experienced Musician

In this activity the children will compose a short piece for a more experienced musician to play (you, another teacher, an older young musician, a visiting musician). If there is more than one experienced musician, you could divide the children and assign them different musicians to compose for. The children's music will use a simplified version of sonata form with a theme A and theme B and explore how they can use different notations to communicate their ideas. This activity can be done in small groups, or as individuals.

Page 1 - Introduction

The activity allows the young people to imagine and compose music without having to consider, or be limited by, their own instrumental ability. This allows them to fully use their imagination! It also supports them imagining music internally by separating out the role of composer from that of performer. They will have the opportunity to get know the sonic possibilities of another instrument in detail i.e. the sounds it can make, it's range, what it does well and it's unique qualities. It allows the children to sculpt their ideas in real time through negotiation with the musician.

Learning Objectives

The children will:

- Develop their listening skills
- Understand the sonic possibilities of a particular instrument
- Develop their musical imagination and 'inner ear'
- Learn how musical ideas can be developed and extended in different ways
- Be able to communicate their musical ideas through notation.

Success Criteria

A successful composition will:

- Be idiomatic for the instrument maybe including different playing techniques
- Have a clear musical idea which is developed and/or extended
- Have a clear and satisfying structure
- Be clearly communicated through some kind of notation (written, graphic, traditional).

Page 2 - Introducing the Instrument: Drawing Musical Gestures

On your musical instrument play an expressive musical gesture (no pulse is necessary) that is idiomatic to your instrument. Play it again, repeating it four times with a space in between. After you have played it ask the children to describe what they heard:

- Did it rise/fall in pitch?
- What happened with the dynamics?
- Did it use any strange or different techniques?
- Did the gesture jump a lot (have big intervals) or move in step?
- Was it smooth, spikey, accented, staccato....?

Ask the children how the musical gestures/ideas could be drawn and give them paper or wipe boards on which to experiment. Look at and discuss different versions the children have made. Draw attention to the different strategies individual children have used to show pitch, duration, dynamics etc. You may need to model this. Encourage connections between high/low sounds and shapes, loud/quiet and heavy/light marks, long/short sounds and lines.

Either collect the most effective examples to use as a group or encourage the children to make their own collection. Repeat the process with 3 or 4 more contrasting gestures.

Page 3 - Drawing musical gestures: creating musical ideas

Ask the children to spend one minute imagining/composing their own short and distinctive musical gesture for you to perform using graphical notation indicating what they would like you to do.

Try the children's ideas out. Ask them whether you have correctly interpreted their idea. If not, how would they like you to change it? Does the 'score' need to be clearer? Can they vocalise how they would like it to be if they can't tell you in words or through their images? Ask the group how they think the score could be made clearer e.g. they could also add words. Involve the whole class in this important process of modification and refinement. This discussion between you and the children is an essential part of the process. If there is time ask the children to compose a different idea and repeat the process.

If there are more 'experienced' musicians this could be a more informal process with the musicians moving around their smaller group trying out lots of different ideas.

At this point you could make a collection on the board of everyone's ideas or let the children make their own collection.

Page 4 - Developing ideas

In pairs or on their own, ask the children to choose two ideally contrasting ideas. This could be one of your ideas and one of their own, both of their own or two of yours. Explain that

one will be A and the other will be B. You might at this point want to give a very simple explanation of sonata form. Starting with A ask the children to create 2 or 3 versions of their idea visually which either develops, varies or extends the idea. Model this process first or play one of your gestures and collectively ask the children how they might develop, vary or add to it and how they could represent this visually.

They could:

- Change the dynamics, speed, durations, articulation, timbre,
- Add something at the beginning, in the middle or at the end
- Create a backwards or upside down version or both!
- Stretch it or insert rests/silences into it

Circulate around the children trying out their ideas, continuing to help them refine, modify and clarify their ideas and how they are visually communicating them. You might need to suggest different options.

Page 5 - Developing ideas continued:

Now ask the children to choose from their different variations of A and put them into a musically satisfying order. They could use all the ideas or just some of them. They might even repeat some of them and can also include the original gesture. It may help to have the different ideas on pieces of paper – this way the children can easily shuffle around the order for you to try out.

Again try playing the children's ideas, always checking that you have interpreted it correctly. Encourage them to think about how loud/quiet, fast/slow, high/low they would like it played and with what articulation. They may want to repeat some ideas and/or revisit others. Remember that this is only the A section of their piece and shouldn't be too long.

For some groups of children you may want to stop at this point and move to page 7.

Ask the children to do the same with B and repeat the process. Encourage the children to make their B section a contrast to their A section.

Page 6 - Composing a sonata for solo instrument

Explain to the children that they are going to use a simple structure called a sonata to organise their musical ideas. You could use words like scaffold or make links architecture to help them understand.

The children have already created an A section and a B section known as the *exposition*. This is followed by a middle section called the *development* which mixes up bits of A and B. Ask the children to create a middle section which uses bits of their A ideas and bits of their B ideas. They can continue to vary or extend their original A and B ideas in this section as well as mix them up.

The children need to think about how they are going to visually communicate this section. They might need to add words and instructions too. Continue to circulate around the children playing through ideas, making suggestions, checking you understand whether your interpretation is correct and helping the children clarify their ideas.

Give the children time to think about and plan the ending of their music. In a traditional sonata this is called the *recapitulation* and A and B are played once more. The children could return to both or one or other.

Discuss the different ways their music could end. It could:

- Fade away
- Build to a dramatic climax
- Get faster and faster or louder and louder
- Have a final new idea to finish – a coda

Play the children's ideas through. Check that you understand whether your interpretation is correct and help the children clarify their ideas. If things are not clear, they could also demonstrate their suggestions by using their voices, demonstrating on their own instrument or moving.

Ask the other children to comment on the individual pieces based on the criteria you discussed before. Give the children time to refine their ideas based on the evaluations and discussion.

Page 7 - Creating an accompaniment (optional)

The children could add accompaniments to their solo pieces for some or all of the group. Below are some ideas to explore with them. You could explore one or more of the ideas with them. Different parts of their piece could use different accompaniments.

Call and response:

Chosen gestures/phrases are repeated by all or some of the group either exactly the same or with changes of dynamic, speed or articulation.

Answering phrases:

Similar to above but this time the group responds with an answering phrase/gesture instead of repeating what the soloist has played.

Interruptions:

The child creates a new gesture or gestures for all or part of the group which interrupts the solo.

Ostinatos - melodic/rhythmic/drones:

The child invents a repeating or melodic pattern(s) to be played by all or part of the group throughout the solo or at certain times during the solo.

Accenting and decorating:

The child chooses moments when the group or part of the group join in with the soloist either reinforcing what the soloist is doing or decorating it e.g. on a long note the group creates a group trill or a whoosh.