GSW Music Hub
Swindon & Wiltshire

classroom composition, improvisation and the pentatonic scale

## *Why is composing and improvising a good strategy for classroom music?*

- When children create and play their own compositions they naturally do this at their own level.
- This makes classroom composition both accessible and challenging.
- It also means it works well in a mixed ability context.

## *What's the difference between composing and improvising?*

- Improvising is a form of composing, but it's more instant than a 'structured' approach.
- In the classroom improvising will often be the first step to developing a structured composition.
- When improvised ideas become 'fixed' they can turn into a more formal composition.
- In a formal composition there can still be an element of improvisation: for example in jazz where melodies are improvised over a fixed set of chords.

How do I start improvising in the classroom?

- Begin with rhythm, for example:
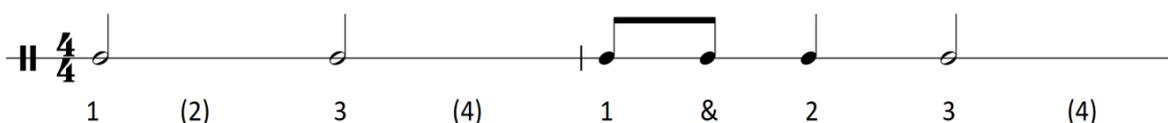
- Start teacher-led (all doing 'copy back') then move to pupil-led, and then to pupils creating different rhythmic responses to the initial rhythm.

Leader's rhythm   Response rhythm
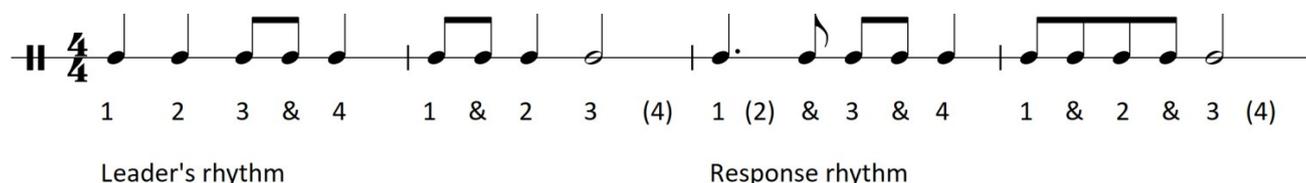
This question & answer / call & response method creates structure and balance.

- Top tip! Set a steady pulse ('the beat') as the foundation of the class rhythm-making. Without this it is harder to create musical order and pattern from the rhythms.

- Count while creating rhythms: this teaches children about metre i.e. beats in the bars and strong / weak beats.

What's the next step?

- Doing rhythms only will eventually become too repetitive, especially for older children (Year 2 and above), so you'll need to introduce other musical elements, especially pitch and texture.

Why is the pentatonic scale a good way to develop pitched music in the classroom?

- The pentatonic (5 note) scale is common in musical cultures around the world.
- You'll probably be most familiar with it though British folk music and blues from the USA (which later evolved into rock /pop music). For example:

- You should find children will quickly learn to sing and play pentatonic melodies.

Why is the pentatonic scale especially useful in the classroom?

- By removing 2 notes from tuned percussion, the 4th and 7th steps of the scale (e.g. F and B, which makes the C major / A minor pentatonic), children can 'see' and understand this simple scale:
  C D E G A

- We hear all the 5 pentatonic notes blending well with each other. In other words it's almost impossible to play a 'wrong' note when improvising and layering with pentatonic scales: they all fit together.

What's the best way to get the class to improvise / compose their own melodies?

- Create a steady pulse for them to play along to.
- Allow them to play quite freely using the pentatonic notes.
- Explain and demonstrate some simple 'rules' of melody making:
a) Use a mixture of steps and jumps
b) Use some repeated notes
c) Use a mixture of long and short notes. For example:

- You can also incorporate some of the rhythmic points (e.g. call and response) mentioned above.

- With younger children (e.g. up to Yr2) you can reduce the number of pitched notes used e.g. only use **C D E**

- With older children (KS2) you could develop some further 'rules' such as mirroring phrase shapes and balancing them by making them the same length:

phrase 1   *phrase 2   (same rhythm as phrase 1)*
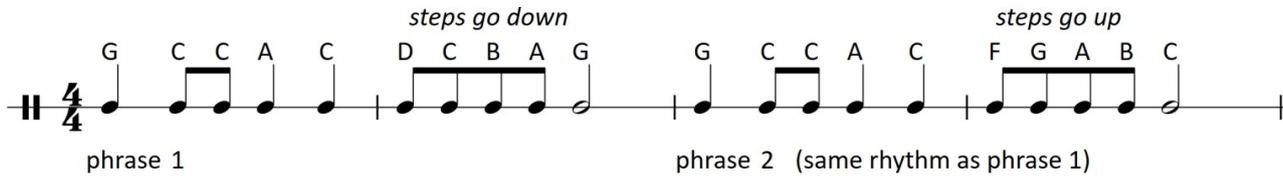
- Above all encourage your children to play freely, experiment and listen. This is more important than any 'rules'!

What other elements can I introduce into classroom composition?

- Dynamics (loud and soft) and texture (layers of sound) are important for making even simple compositions interesting and musical.

- Make dynamic changes clear and obvious e.g. idea /section 1 = **loud**; idea 2 /section 2 = **soft**.

- Some ideas for using texture:
  a) Split the class into three groups and have each group play a different pattern over the others: this is a three-part texture.
  b) Split the class into three. Each group to play a third apart e.g. C E G together. Then move up in steps together: D F A then E G B etc. This creates harmony / chords.
  c) Split the class into two groups. Group 1 to play a repeating (ostinato) pattern on low notes; Group 2 to improvise melodies on higher notes.
  d) One person starts playing, then the others join in one at a time, at a one bar or two bar interval. This increases the texture gradually and will also make the music gradually louder.

Useful vocabulary

Melody: single notes, phrased	**Ostinato:** a short, repeating pattern or 'riff'
Pitch: how high or low a note is	**Duration:** length of notes
Rhythm: note values (duration) & patterns	**Harmony:** two or more note together
Blues /Jazz / Rock: evolving musical styles	**Notation:** written down music
Texture: layers of music	**Dynamics:** volume (loud / soft)
Improvise: make-up on the spot	**Compose:** create original music
Part: each instrument or vocal 'line' is a part	**Structure:** sections of the music

Paul Rowe