Preparing students for composing coursework

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Introduction

Composition is often the trickiest part of the music GCSE – not just for the student, but also for the teacher. It can seem like a mysterious beast, which can cause real grief for otherwise musically accomplished students. Others sail through it and produce wonderful compositions in five minutes flat.

How can we actually teach our students to compose? What can we do to prepare them for doing their GCSE coursework, and how can we structure support to give them what they need without 'helping too much'?

This resource examines some strategies for compositional groundwork, and offers tips for avoiding some of the most common pitfalls, as well as some ideas for getting students started.
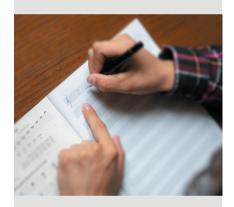
Composition coursework: the problems

Let's start by being absolutely upfront about the challenges posed by tackling composition coursework with a GCSE class:

▶ The **mixed abilities** of your class will be intensified by composition, and not necessarily in ways you might anticipate. Students who are terrific performers and have a sound understanding of theory may well struggle, while less advanced students might have a natural creative flair.

▶ Not all students will want to **work in the same way**. Some may be notation-based musicians, who want to work on manuscript paper or using a score-writing program such as Sibelius or Musescore. Others will flourish using sequencers such as Logic or Soundtrap. Others will want to work 'live' on their own instrument. Teachers will want to accommodate these preferences, even though it may make lessons look and sound 'messy'.

▶ You need to ensure that students' compositions meet the **requirements of the exam board**. However, you will want to avoid all the compositions sounding the same. A 'composition by numbers', step-by-step approach might stifle creativity and result in cloned compositions. Yet you will need to provide adequate support for students who find composing difficult.

▶ **Each method for composing presents its own problems**. Using a notation program has a tendency to result in C major, 4/4, 120 bpm streams of extruded crotchets, or pages so black with notes that the music is both unmusical and unplayable. The visual nature of a sequencing program often results in painfully slow build-ups of texture without any discernible development (or, even any melody in some cases), as students become absorbed in how it looks ('Wait for the pink bit, Miss!'). Those working on their instruments can become distracted by playing pieces they already know, or waste time noodling fruitlessly. All methods for composing can result in pieces that are directionless, shapeless streams of dribbling notes.

▶ **Students' own perceptions** of their composing abilities may be a limiting factor that's difficult to overcome. A lack of self-efficacy about composing may come out of nowhere, and a belief that 'I'm just not creative' can seriously hamper your efforts to support the compositional process. High-achieving students may be extremely fearful about making mistakes, and need a lot of persuasion that getting some ideas down is an extremely important step, because afterwards they can be honed, perfected, edited and added to. The messiness of the creative process is terrifying to students who are used to producing perfect work.

Solution no. 1: setting up the required musical skills

It's unlikely that your students will be ready to start their composition coursework on day one of the course. Even if your KS3 programme is rock solid, you are still likely to need to do some preparation work before students embark on composing their own individual pieces.

There are some excellent resources available if you feel that an off-the-shelf workbook would suit your students. Alan Charlton's book *GCSE Music Composition Workbook*, and its music theory companion volume *Step Up to GCSE Music*, are both very useful. Rachel Shapey's award-winning site I Can Compose (**www.icancompose.com**) has a whole range of composition resources and courses, some of which are free, including the free e-book *Getting Started with GCSE Composition*.

Whatever you do, there are certain threshold concepts that need to be covered. Without a firm grasp of these, students will be unable to approach their composing coursework with anything but a vague feeling for how it ought to go. Relying on inspiration and natural creativity is both unreliable and time-consuming. By covering some essential knowledge first, you will be able to give your students some starting points for composition, and also a deeper understanding of the music they will encounter in other parts of the course.

These are the essentials:
▶ How melodies are constructed, including small-scale structural ideas such as intervals, motifs and phrase length/shape.
▶ Techniques for melodic development, such as sequence and inversion.
▶ How to create interesting rhythms, including syncopation, anacrusis, rests, and the idea of a rhythmic cell.
▶ Chords and how to construct them: major and minor at the very least, but perhaps also looking at inversions, added-note chords, suspensions, quartal harmony and cluster chords, depending on the abilities and appetites of your class.
▶ How chords and melody work together.
▶ The idea of key, perhaps including modes.
▶ Musical structure.

All of this is quite a lot to take on board in one go, and indeed the first chunk of a GCSE course may feel like a steep learning curve – this is no bad thing. You may decide to cover these areas as part of an immersive, elements-based approach to the start of the course, tackling each musical element in turn and covering all the essential knowledge that will enable students to deal with their set works and styles, as well as composing. How long this takes depends on you and your class, but even if it takes three or four months, it will be time well spent.

Set works and musical examples

If your exam board is one of the ones with set works (Edexcel, AQA or Eduqas), you can draw upon these for examples of all the techniques and musical features you want to cover. However, if you would rather tackle set works separately, or are doing a course without set works, examples can be found everywhere that will be useful for teaching these ideas.

Folk songs are a good place to start, as they are generally simple and extremely well constructed, having been smoothed like a pebble over the centuries of oral tradition. Something like 'The Ash Grove' can give us lots of teachable points.

Keeping sets of cards separate will save you from time spent sorting cards after they've been used. Colour code each complete set so that you have a blue set, a yellow set, and so on. This makes them very easy to sort out if they get mixed up.

You could present students with a score straight away, or get even more value out of getting them to sing it first of all, then work it out by ear. Draw out the following points:

▶ Phrasing and structure: there are four eight-bar phrases, in an AABA pattern. This has just the right amount of repetition and variety.
▶ The melody begins (in the first full bar) and ends on the tonic.
▶ Tonality: the song is in G major, with a modulation to the dominant at the end of the third phrase.
▶ The A phrases have an imperfect cadence at the midpoint and a perfect cadence at the end. The dominant key is established with a perfect cadence in bars 16-17.
▶ The melody is constructed mainly from chord notes, with some passing notes.
▶ The descending running quavers in the A phrase turn into an ascending pattern in the B phrase, giving a very pleasing balance of unity and variety.
▶ Both phrases contain a two-bar motif that is made into a descending sequence.
▶ The harmonic pace speeds up during the A phrase, with two bars on the tonic chord at the start to establish the key, and then increasing to one chord per bar and then two chords in bar 7.

By leading students through the analysis of a simple melody, you are showing them what to look for in other pieces. An excellent follow-on from 'The Ash Grove' is 'I Got Rhythm'. This also has an AABA structure, and is based on a two-bar cell that is used in a variety of ways. This cell is a great example of how rhythm can be used to create a small idea that is distinctive enough to withstand extensive development. The rest at the beginning, together with the syncopation that follows, gives us a memorable idea that is heard in ascending, descending and extended formats.

You can choose musical examples for your students from any style. Once they've got into the swing of analysing pieces, you could even get them to suggest their favourite pieces for the class to dissect. The overarching aim of what you're trying to achieve at this point is to get students thinking about each piece at the micro level (rhythmic and melodic cells) and the macro level (the balance of repetition and variety) at the same time.

One online resource that I can't recommend highly enough is Kirk Hamilton's podcast Strong Songs (www.strongsongspodcast.com). In each episode, a 'strong song' is analysed in a highly engaging way that is pitched brilliantly for GCSE students and will reinforce the terminology that you're using in lessons. You could set listening to some of these for homework, or create questions to go with them for a cover lesson.

Workshopping compositional ideas

It's a good idea to get students doing some practice of compositional ideas before they embark on their coursework. This practice could be made up entirely of individual exercises, which may be a very valuable strategy, and one that has great potential for personalised learning. However, another good strategy is to do some classroom workshopping of compositional ideas. The idea here is to create a safe space for trying things out in the context of a whole-class activity.

Doing this takes a mixture of planning and improvisation on the part of the teacher. You need to have an idea of how things will proceed, but you also need to be prepared to be very reactive to what happens, and think on your feet to pick up on or abandon various ideas as they happen. It may take a bit of practice to feel really confident leading a workshopping session, but it's worthwhile persevering, as the value it can have is tremendous.

You can use any combination of instruments. Students can be encouraged to use their own instruments, although it's going to be necessary to get drummers to engage with pitch, so although you will need a timekeeping rhythm, do not let any one student do this exclusively. Arrange the class in a circle – to start off with, they won't need their instruments.

Do some rhythmic call and response over a pulse – this could be provided by a student playing a cowbell or drumkit, or you could use a rhythmic backing track from YouTube if you want all students to be equally involved in the workshop. Once this is established, get each student to improvise a rhythm which everyone else then claps back. You could, if you wish, introduce an extra rhythmic requirement at this point: a good one is that whatever rhythm you choose, it must have a rest at the beginning of the bar. This is a good way to avoid rhythms that are too four-square or dull.

After the call and response, build up the rhythms as looping ostinatos. One person starts, and each bar another rhythm is added until everyone is clapping their individual rhythms continuously. Then play with the texture by introducing some visual signals for different instructions, for example one for clapping the pulse, another for the individual ostinatos, and a third for one agreed ostinato that everyone can clap together in unison. Practise this and then mix up the texture further, perhaps having some students on the pulse, and some on their rhythms, with maybe some solo sections or some call and response between two students. Introduce visual cues for dynamic changes. You can either lead yourself, or invite a student to lead, with everyone following the visual cues, or you could agree on a set structure for your rhythm ostinato piece.

The purpose of all of this is to show how simple ideas can be used in lots of different ways, emphasising that a good musical structure has that crucial balance of repetition and contrast. Starting with rhythm in this way is reassuring, as it's unlikely to sound bad, and by taking pitch out of the equation you allow students to focus on other elements.

However, it's now time to introduce pitch into the workshop. Here are some ideas you could try:

► Each student could stick with the rhythm they've already got, or devise a new one if they think they can improve upon their original idea. Add pitches to the rhythms to make melodies. You will need to limit the pitches that can be used in order for the resulting piece to work harmonically, and reinforce the idea that nearly all music uses a set collection of pitches, not all of the available notes. Pentatonic scales are ideal for multi-layered pieces, as there are no semitones to create dissonance. Simply tell students to use the 'white' notes without F and B to create an A minor or C major pentatonic scale (adjust accordingly for transposing instruments). Once they have had a few minutes to try out their melodies, perform in exactly the same way as before, discussing what went well and eliciting ideas for improvement as you go.

► Get students to come up with their own leitmotif by creating a rhythm with the same number of notes in it as they have letters in their name. Convert this into a melody by using this grid:

A ←	B →	C	D	E ←	F →	G
H	I	J	K	L	M	N
O	P	Q	R	S	T	U
V	W	X	Y	Z		

Spell out your name, reading up to the top to find which note to play for each letter. Because we are keeping this pentatonic, if you land on a B or F, choose whether to adjust downwards or upwards. Practise playing your name leitmotif: a good bit of differentiation for quicker students is to practise playing it using rhythmic augmentation or diminution, or even in a sequence. You can then agree on a structure for combining the leitmotifs to create a whole-class piece.

▶ Use chords or a set of notes to create a riff-based piece together. Two alternating adjacent chords make a good starting point, for example A minor and G. Play the chords over a rhythmic backing, creating melodic ostinatos from the chord notes. Seize upon a good idea from the class (or impose your own if necessary) to use as a head section that everyone can play together. Be responsive and adaptive to pick up on any great ideas that arise, take on board students' suggestions, and make use of student leaders to develop a piece collectively.

Intervals and chords: two useful starting points

Students should by now be comfortable with the idea of creating a rhythmic cell that can be used as the basis of a piece, just like Gershwin does in 'I Got Rhythm'. Another way to add pitches to a rhythm is to use a distinctive interval, chosen for its emotive qualities:

Major intervals	Brightness, strength
Minor intervals	Dullness, weakness
Large intervals	Power
Small intervals	Weakness
Minor 2nd	Melancholy, displeasure, anguish, darkness
Major 2nd	Pleasurable longing, displeasure
Minor 3rd	Tragedy, sadness
Major 3rd	Joy, happiness, brightness
Perfect 4th	Buoyancy, pathos
Tritone (*diabolus in musica*)	Violence, danger, tension, devilishness (of course!)
Perfect 5th	Cheerfulness, stability
Minor 6th	Anguish, sadness
Major 6th	Winsomeness, pleasurable longing
Minor 7th	Irresolution, displeasure, mournfulness
Major 7th	Aspiration, displeasure, violent longing
Octave	Lightheartedness (ie sudden melodic leap)

This list is adapted from the website How Music Really Works (**www.howmusicreallyworks.com**), which is well worth a look. It is always a good idea to get students thinking about intervals; however, if this seems too daunting for your class, simply cut down the number of options for them to choose from. You could use some of John Williams' film themes as a starting point, looking at how he uses rising 5ths to create a sense of heroism (in *Superman*, *Jurassic Park*, 'Raiders' March' from *Star Wars*), falling 5ths for pathos (*Schindler's List*), and minor seconds for danger (*Jaws*). Students can then experiment with injecting their established rhythms with different intervals, and then developing them in various ways.

A very detailed guide to classroom workshopping can be downloaded free from the Musical Futures website (**www.musicalfutures. org/resource/classroom- workshopping-project-1-free- download**).

An alternative is to try using chords as a starting point. Students will probably have encountered some standard chord progressions at KS3, such as 12-bar blues and the I-V-vi-IV 'four-chord trick'. These are worth revisiting, but here is another idea to explore, taken from this video (**www.youtube.com/ watch?v=YSKAt3pmYBs**):

▶ M2M: protagonism (a hero)
▶ M6M: outer space
▶ M8M: fantasy
▶ M4m: sadness, loss
▶ M5m: romantic, Middle Eastern
▶ m5M: wonder (also M7m)
▶ m2M: mystery or dark comedy
▶ m11M: dramatic sound popular in recent films
▶ m6m: antagonism (a baddie), danger
▶ m8m: antagonism, evil

Here, M is a major triad, m is a minor triad, and the number between is the interval, expressed as a number of (upward) semitones. Hence M2M could be C major followed by D major, as heard in the *Jurassic Park* theme. Again, if all this seems like too much overwhelming choice, narrow down the options and get students to explore perhaps just two or three. Once they've decided on a progression they like, they can try using chord notes to put melodies on top, perhaps using their distinctive rhythms from before.

Solution no. 2: setting up the conditions required for successful composition coursework

Establishing the right conditions for composing is just as important as musical knowledge and confidence. This boils down to two things: managing students' expectations about what the composing process is going to be like, and being upfront about what you expect from them.

Managing students' expectations
Students may well find composing difficult. This needs particularly careful handling, especially in cases where they think they're terrible at it, or are unused to finding things hard.

Be uncompromising and absolutely honest about the following:
▶ There is no one 'right' way to compose. You may need to try out lots of different methods before you find one that works for you
▶ Some people find composing hard, while others find it easy. For some it is a long process, but for some it will come quickly. This has no relation to your previous musical experience, or your performing ability.
▶ Composing is about perspiration, not inspiration. It's not magic: it's a job that needs to be done and that requires hard work.
▶ Any idea is better than no idea. Ideas can be refined and developed. Most really good pieces go through several – or perhaps many – drafts.

Student attributes: what they need to be like
It can be very useful to include attitudes among your success criteria. Letting students know how they need to approach their work is crucial, but often neglected.

Tell them that you expect the following from them:
▶ Be prepared to have a go: ideas can always be improved upon later.
▶ Don't wait for inspiration to strike – it may never come.
▶ If you don't have great ideas of your own, be prepared to choose one from the range of starting points presented by the teacher.
▶ Don't change your mind all the time, or start a new piece each week: work at what you've got.
▶ Act on the feedback you're given – this is absolutely crucial.
▶ Acknowledge that a chart-topping song may not meet the criteria for a GCSE composition, so there's no point in using it as a model.
▶ Don' be put off by students who may be working faster than you, or producing pieces that sound amazing straight away.