

Group teaching for visiting music tutors

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Introduction

The aim of this resource is to give advice for visiting music tutors teaching small groups. One of the main challenges that a tutor faces in these situations is to find repertoire and content for the lessons that can engage students learning at different levels. The students may have very different abilities, experience, knowledge, personalities and sometimes even different instruments playing in different keys!

Through this resource, we'll look at four topics to build a lesson around:

- 1 Learning a scale
- 2 Improvisation
- 3 Solo and ensemble performance
- 4 Aural and theory

We'll examine approaches to teaching each of these four areas to small groups, give a typical case study with specific activities for a lesson, and examine the principles behind these activities. We'll also look at longer-term ideas for maintaining good teaching over several sessions.

Learning a scale

If you want to focus on a particular scale for a group lesson, first consider what to expect from each student, and what you want them to gain. It's important for students to understand the reasons and goals for the activity. Go beyond 'You're learning a scale' to 'You will be able to play pieces that use this scale more fluently', or 'We're preparing for an exam in which you need this scale', or 'This will help learn new notes/fingerings on the instrument'.

Plan how to make learning the scale engaging and attainable for each student. Are you going to have different ranges of notes for some pupils? Are there transposing issues with different instruments? Be creative in how you plan to teach it, and always prioritise active music-making. Think of how you can make the process of learning the scale as musical and active as possible.

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Case study 1

Scenario: You're a woodwind tutor in a secondary school, teaching small groups of mixed woodwind instruments. One group you teach is a Year 7 beginner clarinet, Year 8 Grade 2 clarinet (classical), and Year 11 Grade 4 alto sax (jazz).

You want to work on a scale with the group. The jazz saxophone student needs to learn the C jazz minor scale (ascending melodic minor). You want the others to learn and become fluent with the first five notes of C minor.

Here's an exercise to engage the learners throughout this process:

Start off by discussing the notes of C minor, what it sounds like, and the fingering for the note E flat. Ask the players to show each other their way of playing low E flat (different on the two instruments). Invite the more advanced clarinet player to help the beginner with this.

When you're ready to work on the scale together as a group, the challenges are to accommodate different abilities, knowledge and transposing instruments in two different keys. A process like this would meet those challenges:

"play the first 5 notes of the scale, 1 bar each"

Beginner Clarinet in Bb

Grade 2 level Clarinet in Bb

Grade 4 Alto Sax.

"call out the notes they have to play"
"C" "D" "E flat" "F" "G"

6 "repeat your notes again"

Beg. Cl.

Gr. 2 Cl.

Alto Sax.

"play them in quavers, then wait for a bar"

"play 1 oct in quavers then wait for a bar"

10 "hold the last note!"

Beg. Cl.

Gr. 2 Cl.

Alto Sax.

"hold the last note!"

"play F with the last note of the saxophone scale"

"play high F with the last note of the saxophone scale"

"and back down the scale"

With the transposition, this would create a satisfying musical effect. For instance, the ending would sound like this at concert pitch:

The musical score is for three instruments: Beg. Cl. (Beginner Clarinet), Gr. 2 Cl. (Grade 2 Clarinet), and Alto Sax. (Alto Saxophone). The score is marked with a '10' at the beginning. The first two staves (Beg. Cl. and Gr. 2 Cl.) play a sequence of notes: a whole note G4, followed by a half note F4, and then a half note E4. The Alto Sax. staff plays a sequence of notes: a whole note G4, followed by a half note F4, and then a half note E4. The final measure shows all three instruments playing a sustained note together, which is a G4 for the Beg. Cl. and a G3 for the Gr. 2 Cl. and Alto Sax.

You wouldn't need to give them a score, perhaps just the basic notes of the scale as notation or note names. Talk them through the instructions, trying it bit by bit, repeating bars or sections if needed. You could add in articulation and dynamics if you need more complexity, or you could do it in a simpler way, using the idea of call and response over held notes. Your aim is to create a sense of music making, listening, engagement and teamwork throughout the activity. Enabling a creative performance is far more worthwhile than moving around the group learning and playing the scale separately while the others wait.

Notice the amount of learning going on throughout the example above:

- ▶ Learning how to play the notes of the scale.
- ▶ Introducing the sound of a jazz minor scale.
- ▶ Improving the fluency of the notes of the scale in a logical process.
- ▶ Peer teaching with students helping each other.
- ▶ Executing call-and-response phrases.
- ▶ Playing in harmony (which could lead on to understanding how their instruments transpose).
- ▶ Playing with different durations and speeds.
- ▶ Ending together on the same note to help tuning and ensemble awareness.

Improvisation

Learning scales and arpeggios can lead seamlessly on to improvisation. I've outlined advice on doing this in a previous resource, From Improvisation to Composition (*Music Teacher*, September 2020).

Improvisation is one of the most straightforward activities to lead with students of mixed abilities and experience. The freedom and open nature of the process lends itself to students working at very different levels (and different transpositions) without much preparation from the tutor. The main things are to be able to communicate clearly to each student what's expected of them, and to choose a framework that can easily accommodate those different levels.

Case study 2

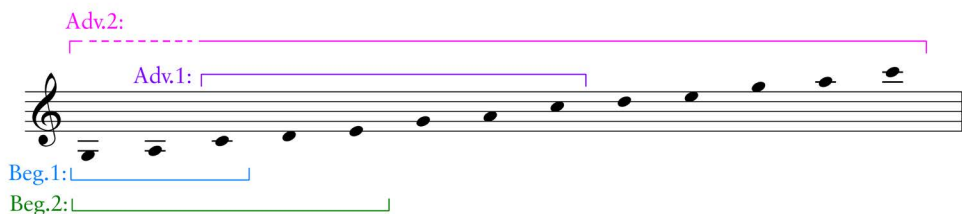
Scenario: You have a group of four violinists who are all at different levels ranging from beginner to advanced. One of the beginners has been working on 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot' (in C major) and you want to do an improvisation activity that will involve the whole group.

The main 'Sweet Chariot' melody uses a C pentatonic scale, offering a great opportunity to use this scale to learn about pentatonic modes, improve fluency of the melody, and learn to improvise similar melodies.

Start off by asking everyone to play the chorus melody in unison, with the more advanced students playing up the octave. To spend the whole session on the chorus itself would be too basic for the advanced players, but using it as the framework for improvisation opens up more complex challenges and justifies playing it together as a group. Advanced players can help the beginners to play the melody too.

Analyse, play and discuss the pentatonic scale. Again, use the knowledge of the advanced students to teach the beginners. Make sure all the students can hear that the notes of the tune use that scale. Now you can set up the different levels of expectation. Ask the students to use these notes from the scale:

- ▶ Beginner 1 = G A C
- ▶ Beginner 2 = G A C D E
- ▶ Advanced 1 = C pentatonic 1 octave
- ▶ Advanced 2 = C pentatonic 2 octaves (plus)



Spend a few seconds asking everyone to play up and down their scale notes in their own time and speed, perhaps over a rhythmic accompaniment on piano or backing track. Notice that even though this is messy, the pentatonic sound will create a pleasing texture and sound.

Now outline a simple structure for the students to take turns and have an improvised 'conversation' using their given notes, for example:

- ▶ Play **'Sweet Chariot' chorus** together.
- ▶ Play **two-bar improvisation** each: Beg 1, Beg 2, Adv 1, Adv 2.
- ▶ Play **chorus** together (*p*).
- ▶ Play **four-bar improvisation** each: Beg 1, Beg 2, Adv 1, Adv 2.
- ▶ Play **chorus** together (*f*) with Adv 2 improvising on high notes.

With an activity like this, you may just want to start students off playing the chorus and call out instructions for students as you go in real time. It may be worth explaining the structure beforehand or setting up some simple hand signals ('play chorus' and 'your turn to improvise') to help keep the flow.

Stop, evaluate and suggest ideas for making it sound better (for example, ask them to listen carefully to each other, suggest mixing long and short notes for the beginners or grace notes for the advanced players to match the gospel/spiritual style). Repeat as necessary.

Ensemble performance

The simplest way to work with a group is for them to play the same solo piece together at the same time. This can work if the group is at roughly the same level and working on the same repertoire. It's also a great opportunity to encourage peer learning: students can support each other's playing, and stronger students (or ones who have practised!) can carry other members of the group along and help to find momentum, correct mistakes and trigger improvements.

There are still creative ways to use this simple approach, for example:

- ▶ Give 'solo' sections to certain students.
- ▶ Assign one student the role of speeding up or slowing down, and challenge the others to follow.
- ▶ Ask them to listen and copy how another student is interpreting the music (dynamics, articulation, vibrato, etc).

Catering for different levels

A good way to lead group work to accommodate different levels is to find or design ensemble repertoire that can do this for you. There are many ensemble packs available from most music publishers that have flexible instrumentation and mixed-ability options. I have used the free *BBC Ten Pieces* orchestral arrangements (www.bbc.co.uk/teach/ten-pieces/all-resources/zdg3t39) in the past, which have multiple options for different abilities and combinations. There are many others.

You may need other alternatives, perhaps if one student in the group has a particular solo piece to learn, or you can't find the arrangement you require. Making your own arrangement is an option (I've done this many times myself) but it's time-consuming, particularly if you're not fluent with computer software or experienced in arranging ensemble music.

Conjuring an ensemble piece from a solo

One way of saving lesson preparation time is to create the arrangement **as part of the lesson**, involving the students themselves in arranging the piece. This also taps into other valuable skills for your students to learn. Here is an example of the process.

Case study 3

Scenario: You teach a small group of trumpets/cornets, comprising one Grade 4 player and two students around Grade 1 level. The intermediate player is preparing to perform 'Greensleeves' as part of a school solo performance.

In this case, the intermediate student has the 'Greensleeves' music (in E minor) and needs to work on the fine detail of the piece, but it's too difficult for the other students. One solution is to create an accompaniment part for the other two players. You can also do this in a way that teaches aspects of the harmonic structure of the piece.

Ask all three students to play four descending notes for two bars each: **E, D, C, B**.

Ask the intermediate student to play the first eight bars of the melody and the other pupils to play the four long notes again.

$\text{♩} = 52$

Trumpet I (Int.)

Trumpet II & III (Beg.)

mp

Discuss with the group how this ‘bassline’ works with the melody, taking the opportunity to give feedback on details like upbeats, phrasing, tuning and ensemble balance.

Try it in the same way with the next eight bars. Ask the students whether the same notes work. Suggest they speed up the last two notes (one bar each) before going back to E again. Now it sounds like this:

Trumpet I (Int.)

Trumpet II & III (Beg.)

one bar each

(perfect cadence)

This could be an opportunity to talk about cadences, identifying the B to E bass notes (V to I) as a perfect cadence, making the phrase feel more ‘finished’.

To go a step further and make the music sound even richer, ask one of the Grade 1 players to play the same thing starting two steps (a 3rd) higher. Encourage them to work out the first three notes themselves by ear (G, F sharp, E) while the other Grade 1 player plays the notes as before. Bring in the more advanced student to assist them. Then suggest the player on the higher part keeps repeating up and down those three notes: G, F sharp, E, F sharp, G etc. Speed up at the final cadence as before.

Dig further into this process by highlighting how they’ve created attractive harmony by adding 3rds or 5ths above a note (or simply ‘the same thing a few steps higher’ if you don’t want to get embroiled in interval chat!). Make sure they can all hear and understand this idea.

If you put the three parts together it becomes an impressive three-part ensemble piece created from scratch during the lesson:

♩. = 52

Trp I (Int.)

mp

Trp II (Beg.)

mp

3rds

5th

Trp III (Beg.)

mp

9

You can see how the accompaniment is easily created using repeated stepwise patterns and can be played from memory without the need for an additional ensemble score. Note also how this exercise will inform and enrich the student playing the tune: you’re encouraging rhythmic precision, an analysis of the underlying harmony, and an appreciation of cadences and phrase structure.

Many other pieces can be arranged in real time like this. Try to spot a simple harmonic approach (picking something out from a piano accompaniment part, for example) that uses straightforward patterns or loops, or adding an interval above or below a melody to create harmony. Drones may work in some cases, or finding certain points for students to join in where a particular chord or riff would work. Use the students’ creative ideas and skills. Don’t be afraid of trying things out and discussing why something *doesn’t* work – this is an important part of learning too!

Active listening

With some repertoire, you may not be able to create an accompaniment in the same way. Think about other skills that the group can use instead. For example, if you move on to the second half of 'Greensleeves', there may not be time to arrange an accompaniment as above. Instead, could the beginners listen, evaluate and give feedback, spot other cadences, count the length of phrases or conduct the 3/4 beat? In this example, a simple way of keeping the other students engaged is to invite them to join in with the last two notes of the piece (either playing unison Ds or split into a D minor chord). Listening for the right moment to play, and working out how many bars to count keeps them engaged and active when not playing.

Go experimental!

There are many different styles, genres and traditions of music that can provide imaginative ways of engaging students who are at different levels. Be brave in exploring more 'left-field' repertoire. Some pieces that involve freedom in how they are scored and interpreted can provide rewarding experiences (eg Terry Riley's *In C*, graphic scores by Cornelius Cardew or Cathy Berberian). Music from different cultural traditions can involve improvisation, learning by ear, or different ways of notating (eg gamelan music) that can give a unique experience and a level playing field for everyone in the group. Even within classical repertoire there could be opportunities for more advanced students to create original cadenzas to a group piece or decorate a simple notated melodic line with extra ornamentation.

Aural exercises and theory

Aural training and theory are often woven through each lesson and certainly part of each activity we've discussed so far. It's helpful to zero in on a musical concept during students' active listening or group discussions, making sure everyone in the group has understood something new for themselves.

Let's take the idea of **syncopation**. You can ask some students to clap a simple pulse, other students to clap, play or sing an off-beat rhythm, and someone else who has notation skills to try to notate what they hear. Or when teaching a lesson on a topic such as **intervals**, the greater the variety of ways the group has in experiencing and thinking about intervals, the better chance of something 'sticking' for them – and even better if you can link it with practical music making.

Here's a final case study to show how you can use a mixed group to your advantage when leading an activity on intervals.

Case study 4

Scenario: You're teaching a lesson on intervals to a group of four singers. Students A and B are confident sight-singers. Students C and D are much less confident, with no experience of interval theory, and they mainly sing by ear.

Consider how to use the structure of the group to design a way for them to work together in an imaginative, engaging manner, while deepening their understanding of intervals.

Kick off with an activity or game for the whole group singing the numbers of a major scale ('1, 2, 3, 4, 5' etc) with fluency. This could be a call-and-response exercise, jumping around the scale or working through different patterns. Ask pupils A or B to sing the call (perhaps improvising their own number pattern) and the others to sing the response. Your main lesson activity could involve a mixture of singing, notating and evaluating:

- ▶ Student C sings a held 1 (on 'ah').
- ▶ Student A sings a note above that they choose within an octave (on 'ah').
- ▶ Student D identifies the note number ('Is it 3?').
- ▶ Student B notates the major 3rd interval on a blank stave.
- ▶ Everyone sings from '1' root note, counting up the scale to the top note to double check.

Now reverse the process:

- ▶ Student B notates a different interval of their choosing with the same bottom note.
- ▶ Student D identifies and names the interval on the stave ('a perfect 5th').
- ▶ Student A sings the top note by ear.
- ▶ Student C sings the bottom note (note 1, as before) to create the two-note chord.
- ▶ Everyone sings from '1' up the scale to the top note to check.

There are many other ways of exploring these ideas, using other games, exercises or pieces of music, but the main point is to distribute different roles within the group to cater for each individual. You should help the high-fliers soar ever upward, while supporting the ones at lower levels to raise their musical ambitions and abilities.

The long view: working with groups over several sessions

You may not be able to do whole-group work as outlined above throughout every session. If you need to spend some of the session focusing on individual students, schedule activities that involve the whole group making music to start and end the session. This will give a sense of fairness, structure and focus to the lessons, particularly if it becomes a habit that the students know will happen. It could be as simple as ‘Let’s play a note together and listen to our tuning’ or a call-and-response game.

Give each session a ‘sandwich’ structure:

GROUP ACTIVITY	INDIVIDUAL WORK + ACTIVE LISTENING	GROUP ACTIVITY
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What’s their role?

During lessons where you have to shift focus between students and include more independent work, the trick is for every student in the room to have a **clear role at every moment** of the lesson, even if they aren’t using their instrument or voice. There are countless ways of achieving this. If one student is playing through a piece on their own, explain to the other students what you expect of them as active listeners. Their role could be to analyse the music, follow the score, spot certain aspects of the piece, prepare to give feedback, draw the melodic shape, pick their favourite bar, or write down something about the performance that they can use in their playing.

Keep asking questions

The best way of assessing if your students have learnt something is by asking them questions and encouraging them to explain or demonstrate an idea back to you. This is particularly relevant in group situations where you need to know that a concept, technique or skill has landed with each member of the group. Keep a flow of simple, open questions, targeting pupils equally, to make sure the group is engaged and connecting with the activity. Perhaps end the session by going around the group and asking for one thing they have learnt or enjoyed in the lesson and will take with them in their practice at home during the week.

Use the group to your advantage

One important benefit of teaching a mixed group is that the less experienced students have extra knowledge in the room to learn from and aspire towards. Your more advanced students can be fantastic pro bono teaching assistants and role models!