Composing activities at KS3

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Introduction

I've often heard complaints by young musicians looking back at their secondary composing that they were asked to compose a piece and largely left to get on with it, often with little or no previous composing experience. It's crucial for any non-experienced composer to understand specific steps to navigate their way to a finished composition. They must have sufficient guidance in achieving each step, so that they feel confident to find their way to a successful goal.

Composing should be thought of as inextricably linked with other aspects of musical learning. In fact, composing helps other musical skills, and those other musical skills help composing. It's rare that any worthwhile piece of composing tuition doesn't involve or reference analysis, listening, theory, performance or all of the above. It would also go a long way to solve the problem of students lacking experience if small composing tasks were woven into other musical activities throughout their musical tuition (eg a quick composing task to explore a musical genre, improve fluency in a scale, or understand a theory concept).

The earlier students see themselves as composers and get into the composing habit, the easier they'll find it to produce a composition when the deadline approaches! Think about how you can drip-feed micro composing tasks through students' lessons to build confidence and a foundation of technique.

Context is key

The biggest stumbling block for students is to understand and operate successfully within a style or genre. They often find themselves unclear as to the reference points, influences or stylistic grammar that will help them create a satisfying piece. Pieces that have an integrity of style have a much better chance of high marks, particularly at GCSE level. Having a stylistic model and framework also provides students with an aim to hold in their imagination. If they can recognise the shape of the mountain summit (eg 'My ragtime piano piece will sound something like this'), it's a lot easier to get there.

The best way to give context is to make sure that students have enough knowledge of the style they're composing within. They must have a wide range of listening and analysis experience. This could inform what you advise them to do. If a student has an in-depth knowledge of a certain type of music, for instance, encourage them to compose within that style. Alternatively, you can link it in with set works or the listening and analysis you're working on with them.

Here are three examples of activities that exploit a particular genre or context which will hopefully spark ideas for many other styles.

Exploring texture in contemporary styles using sequencing technology

Online platforms such as Soundtrap (**www.soundtrap.com**) and BandLab (**www.bandlab.com**) can be an excellent way of giving students composing assignments with helpful starting points and a stylistic framework. They can help you set up an activity that can teach students how to handle texture and compose music in a pop, hip-hop, electronic or dance music genre.

First, set up a framework for the students to begin their composing. This should be simple enough for the most inexperienced student, while allowing the ideas and ambitions of more able students to flourish.

Using texture effectively means understanding the role of each musical layer and how it fits with other layers. Here's an activity in which students compose three distinct layers that fit together to produce a piece that could feel at home within various electronic pop and dance styles:

Layer 1: Beat
Layer 2: Drone
Layer 3: Riff

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Step 1

To create the first 'beat' layer, set up a starting one-bar template for all of the students using the Beat Pattern in Soundtrap (or similar). This would be a repeating bar using the default kick, snare and hi-hat – something deliberately plain and generic.

A one-bar Beat Pattern (divided into 16th notes):

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Kick	■															
Snare									■							
Hihat (closed)	■		■		■		■		■		■		■		■	

This establishes a pulse, a sense of 4/4, and a drum pattern that can be manipulated to fit a few different styles of music.

Ask each student to make it their own. Instruct them to change the pattern by adding kick and snare or hi-hat notes. Do this *one change at a time* while the bar loops to hear how each addition alters the feel of the beat. It's crucial that this is a *listening* exercise, not a visual inputting exercise, as you want the students to choose the beat using their ears to guide them.

Example of a developed one-bar Beat Pattern:

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Kick	■						■									
Snare									■			■			■	
Hihat (closed)	■	■		■	■		■		■	■		■	■		■	

Ask students to repeat their bar eight times, with suggestions to encourage creativity within stylistic conventions (eg make the fourth and eighth bars different to the others).

More advanced students could construct much more complex beat patterns adding in other percussive layers and parts of the kit.

Step 2

Add a drone. This must be *one pitch* held for the full eight bars. The creative choices here are the instrument to use (it must be a sound like strings that can be held and not 'overpower' the texture) as well as the pitch, register and dynamic.

Step 3

Add a final layer of a looped melodic riff. This is a more complicated step, so set some rules and parameters to help your students:

▶ It must be one or two bars in length, looped to fill the eight bars.
▶ It must use the pitch of the drone at least once (to help connect the drone and melody).
▶ It must be inputted by being played in *live* (ie recorded, not inputted on the piano roll). This encourages a more instinctive, improvised and intentional approach, crucial to the composing process.

Next steps

With these three distinct layers, you have the basis for creating an effective piece that could be the backing track to a vocal song or rap. It could also be extended with added layers and sections to become a piece of electronic dance music.

Make sure students understand *why* these three layers work well together. Each layer has a clearly defined role, and occupies its own space in the overall texture (an underlying beat, a background drone, a foreground riff). Any other layers must also have a clear role, and work with all the other layers without 'muddying' the resulting sound.

If you're designing your own plan for students to follow using software and sequencing, the most important thing is to foster a sense of intentional composing, improvisation and always listening to the way the music develops over time. Avoid anything that disconnects from this. Bad examples would involve inputting random notes in a trial-and-error fashion without hearing them, having too many instruments and layers so that the music becomes unwieldy and messy, or copying and pasting fragments of music into bars and tracks without considering how they connect or develop through time.

Give your students clear, satisfying starting points and simple composing techniques with lots of possibilities for taking the music off in different directions within a loose stylistic framework. Make it easy for students to develop ideas bar by bar, section by section.

Tip: remember you can use the laptop or Chromebook keyboards as substitute MIDI keyboards if necessary. For example, the bottom row Z X C V B N M < > keys become musical notes C D E F G A B C D, and the row above the black notes, just as on a piano. It's a really useful tip for quick and easy composing in a limited range with just a laptop!

We need to talk about harmony

Harmony is often the most complex and challenging compositional element to handle, so it's important to help students have a suitable toolkit of chords, chord progressions and functional harmonic knowledge. For example, if they're composing in a Classical- or Baroque-influenced style, they must know about the use of tonic and dominant chords, probably dominant 7ths and preferably chord II, IV and VI in the key they are composing in. This could be done as simply as teaching them those triads in C major on a keyboard, making sure they 'hear' the relationship between the chords – especially tonic and dominant. More able students can learn and use these chords in other keys. This will be slightly different for other styles (although these same diatonic, functional chords are the basis of many styles including jazz, traditional music, pop, etc).

This will then lay the foundation for creating successful sections of original music underpinned with stylistically appropriate harmony. This goes a long way to creating a strong and convincing piece of music.

You may want to build on the diatonic foundation and add in other harmonic ideas from other styles. For example, using the music of Debussy as a model, you could explore modal harmony. Again, it's important to focus in on techniques that are easily understood and can be used convincingly by the student. They need to be generic enough to encourage creativity and originality, but specific enough to help the students control the harmony and make it stylistically consistent.

Composing in a French impressionist style: creating a piano piece based on Debussy's 'La fille aux cheveux de lin'

'La fille aux cheveux de lin' (or 'The Girl with the Flaxen Hair') is a short solo piano piece, **(www.youtube.com/watch?v=KYLjHziapRs)**, so there's time to listen to it a couple of times and discuss moments that you want students to take inspiration from. If you zoom in on bars 8 to 9, Debussy goes between two modal chords using this mode: Fb Gb Ab Bb C Db Eb (Fb) – a Lydian augmented scale. This is a tricky mode with that many flats, so make it easier for students to understand, play and use by transposing up a semitone:

F G A B C# D E (F)

Here's a version of the Debussy phrase in this mode, which you can easily include students in playing it on various different instruments (eg the RH arpeggio, or notes from the LH chords). It works as a two-bar loop.

The trick is to extract simple techniques that can be replicated by the students to create something original but connected to Debussy's style.

With this example, there are two clear techniques: first, an arpeggio-like melody moving in 3rds; and second, an accompaniment in which the same shaped chords shift up and down a mode in step. (The opening to Gershwin's 'Summertime' is another great example of this second technique).

You can set a class task in simple steps for individuals or pairs as follows:

1 Learn to play the Lydian augmented mode on F (F G A B C# D E F).
2 Compose a two-bar melody that moves in 3rds (make sure the rhythm is different to the Debussy by varying the long and short notes).
3 Compose a chord (chord 1) that uses four different notes of the mode.
4 Compose a second chord (chord 2) by moving *each note* of the chord up or down one step in the mode (be careful to use the notes of the mode only – check if notes need to be sharp or natural).
5 Put all the elements together by moving between chord 1 and 2 in the LH and adding the melody over the top.

Here's an example of the kind of thing you might produce:

If you haven't got access to keyboards, this can work on other instruments by dividing it up with the tune on one instrument (eg flute or ukulele) and accompaniment on another (eg guitar or glockenspiel).

Building harmonic sophistication

Composing within a fixed mode is straightforward, but it can be restrictive and lack interest over long periods. The ability to use harmonic progression or modulation is a high-level composing skill. Looking at the rest of the piece, we can hear Debussy shifting between different modes. Zoom in to a moment later on in the piece where Debussy creates a series of parallel chords just from four of the black notes of the piano from bar 24:

He also shifts through different major pentatonic scales through the piece (for example, E flat major pentatonic bar 19-21, C flat major pentatonic five bars from the end).

A simple way to introduce this idea of changing harmony and modulation is for students to do the same steps as before, but use the 'black notes' pentatonic. They could compose a new section or adapt their previous melody and chord shape, this time using the black notes of the keyboard only.

Here's an example:

Now ask students to play their first (Lydian augmented) section before their second (pentatonic) section to hear how the harmony and colour of the music changes. Ask students to create a longer passage of music by moving between these two sections. They could think about which order to play them in, how many times to repeat each section, finding a transition between the two, adding details like dynamics and articulation, and so on.

This process can be applied to other musical styles and models. Home in on two or three techniques that can be easily replicated by students of different abilities so that all can hear the connection with the original piece as they compose. Make sure you're giving scope for creativity within a clear but flexible framework with step-by-step tasks (eg using a set mode, structure or rhythm patterns).

The outcomes of a successful activity would be lots of diverse pieces within a broad stylistic umbrella. Each one would reflect the different skills and choices of the composers while sharing an integrity of style, inspired by the original piece.

This might also be a good time to talk with your students about the influence of East Asian and gamelan music on Debussy, and how other types of music use pentatonic scales.

Songwriting, fado style

It may seem counterintuitive, but often the more specific your stylistic framework, the more freedom students have in their composing. The clarity of the sound world helps clarity of thinking where students can then feel safe, confident and emboldened to go 'off-piste'. If you're looking for a different style and one that fits into the songwriting skills of your students, you could choose a style like Portuguese fado.

The following activity as an example of moving from analysis to whole-class composing to small group and individual composing work.

Model piece: 'Só à noitinha' by Amália Rodrigues

There are good recordings of 'Só à noitinha' available from Sara Correia (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=wEjDiqBeod4**) or Amália Rodrigues herself (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9E5xjO_wEY**).

This is a famous example of a song in the fado style. While listening to this song with the students, isolate the various elements that make it specifically fado-like, and which can be used to compose their own version.

First, analyse the chords used. In most of this song these can be boiled down to chords I, IV and V in the minor key:

▶ A minor (I)
▶ D minor (IV)
▶ E major (or E7) (V)

Another section uses chords VII and III (G major and C major), giving the music a more major feel, before it moves back to A minor.

Other music elements to flag up include these:

▶ **Structure:** repeated chord progressions and vocal verses, often with dramatic pauses.
▶ **Rhythm:** slow and simple 4/4 beat, often with bass notes on beats 1 and 3 and chords on 2 and 4.
▶ The **bassline** plays notes from the chord sequence, linked with chromatic passing notes.
▶ **Emotive and expressive vocal melody** using notes of the minor scale.
▶ Lots of **ornamentation** on the vocal line and extra guitar parts, adding bursts of ornate countermelody.

Now lead an activity in which you're composing a fado-style song with the group inspired by these elements.

Accompaniment

Ask the group to choose a short sequence of chords using A minor, D minor and E major, eg D minor / A minor / E major / A minor for two bars each.

You can set up a simple accompaniment that students can join in with. Assign roles: some play the bass notes on 1 and 3, others play chords or notes from the chords on 2 and 4, some play percussion to keep a steady 4/4 beat. Someone could even be charge of signalling a dramatic pause!

Vocal melody

There are various ways to create a vocal melody, and the experience and personality of your group should guide which approach you take. Vocal composing can be more nervewracking and exposing for students, but also very rewarding.

Firstly, select a suitable text that can fit with the wistful mood of the song. A keen student could write a four-line verse, or you could present them with a found folk song lyric, for example this one:

> **I've heard there is a flower,**
> **I wish that I could find;**
> **Hearts-ease is its name,**
> **Can it ease my troubled mind?**

If you have confident singers in the group, ask them to improvise a melody for the first line over the chord sequence played by the rest of the group. This may work better with a small group of singers, or a mix of singers and instrumentalists, encouraging each one to have a go until they find something they like.

From there, you can guide them in repeating the melody or using sequences to create the full four-line verse. (Simple is good!)

You may need to provide a more scaffolded framework for less confident singers or improvisers. This is another opportunity to provide context and stylistically appropriate techniques. In the example below, you provide the final notes of each phrase, thereby creating clear end points that fit with the chord sequence and encouraging the short, expressive phrase structure common in fado music.

Scaffolded vocal phrases

This could lead to a vocal line being created as below, perhaps with a different student improvising and composing each phrase in turn:


The final step would be to add more virtuosic and ornamented melodies on instruments. This could be done by simply doubling the vocal melody and adding grace notes, or 'filling in the gaps' between the vocal tune. Use improvisation and turn-taking with a few able students to do this.

Once you've done this exercise with the whole group, you've modelled the process step by step and can ask them to do more independent composing in small groups. Assign roles that each have a sense of creative composing within them. For example, a group of four could be given these tasks to be carried out in this order:

1 Compose a new chord sequence using the three (or five) chords from the original song.
2 Compose a bassline to go with the chords.
3 Compose a vocal melody over the chord sequence.
4 Composing short instrumental countermelodies in the gaps between the vocal phrases.

To move on to individual work, students could then score and notate their compositions, or develop longer and more complex versions of their group songs, adding further lyrics, chords, sections, textures and composing new structures with the material.

Whatever composing activity you choose, my final advice would be the power of sharing. Students tend to enjoy presenting and hearing their friends' work. They also learn a huge amount from seeing how other students approach the same task, and the advice you give to them. Most sessions benefit from a concluding guided sharing session, where pupils can perform and hear others' work and give feedback.
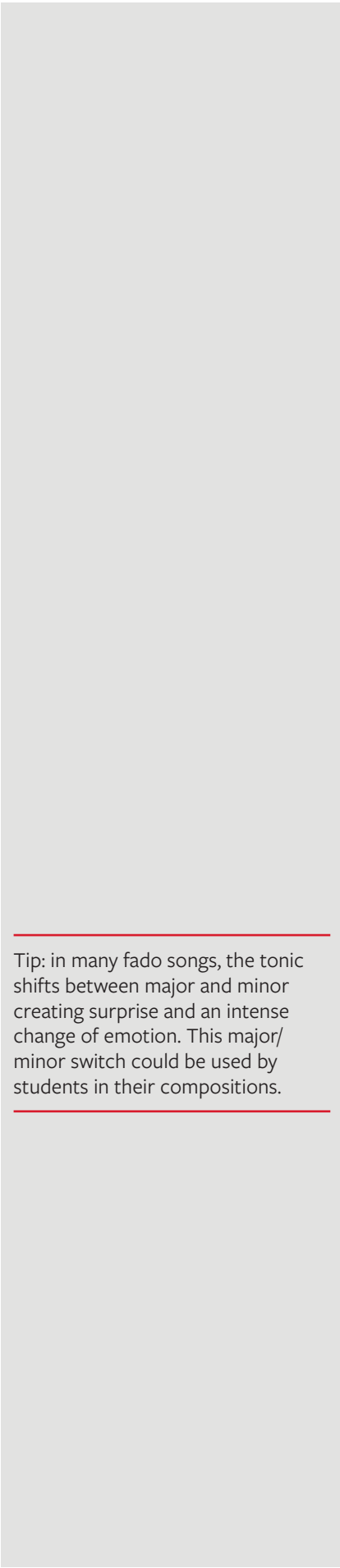
Tip: in many fado songs, the tonic shifts between major and minor creating surprise and an intense change of emotion. This major/minor switch could be used by students in their compositions.