Composition in instrumental lessons

VMT

Richard Barnard

Introduction

This resource looks at *why* and *how* to include composing activities in instrumental lessons, regardless of your own composition experience. (This can also be applied to vocal teaching, although the issue of lyrics and song writing won't be covered here).

Composing can be a highly rewarding experience for any musician. It can be a short, manageable activity, and one that's flexible enough to fit with other tasks during lessons. It can also be an effective social exercise in group teaching, bringing out unheard voices, and a way of learning about music from the inside out, enriching other areas of study.

I've led composing work with a wide range of students from large groups to individuals, from primary age to university students and adults affected by dementia. There are certain tools and techniques that work (with slight adaptations) with most people, but there are other aspects of your approach that should differ depending on the students you are working with. As with other areas of instrumental and vocal lessons, it's good to have a broad range of strategies to allow you to be flexible, respond to your students and tailor your plans to fit the situation. This is particularly true with composing, since so much depends on the freedom of the student to express themselves and their ideas within a supported environment. Getting the balance of freedom and framework is challenging. This balance changes from group to group, student to student, or even within a single teaching session as you respond to a student's ideas.

Don't be afraid!

You don't need to be ***A Composer***™ to include composition in your teaching. Even if you're not a confident composer yourself, there are plenty of ways of supporting students in their own composing. All tutors can successfully lead their students in a composing activity, focusing on simple techniques and tools. For example, basing this activity on a familiar piece and using that piece as a model (examples of this will be discussed later) can make the process more accessible to both you and the student.

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Seven reasons to compose in instrumental lessons

It may seem difficult to fit composing into short weekly lessons, but there's usually an opportunity during the year to include composition as a natural part of your teaching plan. This can be a one-off short activity, or a more regular elements if your students are particularly keen composers.

Why do it? Here are some of the benefits of composing in lessons:

1. A new challenge

If you're stick in a rut learning a particular piece, or if students aren't making progress in other areas, composition can provide a fresh change, a different dynamic or renewed focus to a lesson. If you feel that students are too passive in lessons, it necessitates a more proactive attitude: they must use different ways of thinking and interacting with you and other students.

2. Motivating practice

I've found that in some cases, students are more motivated to work on their own compositions than other pieces, particularly when they might have previously been highly averse to doing practice between lessons! They're often keener to get the details right, and prepared to put more work into learning the piece to a higher standard. Connecting skills as a performer with skills as a composer enriches both activities.

3. Giving the students a voice

Although it's often a scary prospect at first, composing can bring some students out of their shells. It gives them a voice, and ownership of *their* piece, and therefore a deeper feeling of investment in their own learning. In group lessons, it can be a great leveller for students who feel they're inferior in areas of their performance skills.

4. Lifting the lid on the music they play

It's easy for students to assume that the music they play has always existed, descending from the clouds as completed works, fixed by divine decree. Composing a piece themselves can give them an understanding of the choices, fluidity and flaws involved in creating a piece of music. It gives them more appreciation for the details of a composition (eg dynamics and articulation) that can be taken for granted if you haven't spent the time to make those decisions yourself! Understanding how to compose for an instrument is a bit like **reverse engineering** their skills as a player. They gain insights into *why* something works well for the instrument (the choice of notes, rests, range, structure, harmony, etc) and *why* the composer wrote what they did.

5. Reinforcing musical language

Students' progress can be seen in how they talk about music. Musical terms, ideas and ways of describing sound can 'hit home' when they need to describe their own compositional ideas and creative imagination.

6. Connecting their musical worlds

Composing in instrumental lessons can help students to make clearer connections between their lessons with you and their other musical activities, eg their GCSE/A level music work or writing songs in a band. Many of the students I've taught have also been working on composition as part of their GCSE or A level music course. I often ask students if they have a composition to do during the year. They may appreciate a chance to share that with you, particularly if they're writing for their own instrument or voice. Providing feedback or working on their composition during their instrumental lessons can provide them with a feeling of relevance and focus, giving them a greater sense of your interest in their general progression as a musician beyond your lessons.

7. Understanding who you are teaching

You can gain a lot of insight into the tastes and interests of the student by observing what and how they compose. This is more obvious if you can give them more freedom to select style, mood or other musical elements. This could then feed back into the repertoire you select for them to learn, or spark discussions about style and genre.

What is the tutor's role?

Your job as a tutor is to provide the framework that the student needs, the map to begin a composing journey. This can be done in many ways and, as mentioned already, you need to balance freedom with instruction. A general rule to follow is that the student must always feel it's *their* piece. They must continue to have *ownership* from beginning to end. Some may require a lot of input from you in the form of starting points, interpretation, suggestions and collaborative ideas, but it's always important to empower the student. The student must remain the composer and overall decision-maker.

Tip: if students seem lost and lacking confidence to make composing decisions, give them simple binary options to choose from, for example:

- 'Do you want the note to go up or down?'
- 'Do you like this ending, or this other ending?'

This will still give them a sense of autonomy and ownership.

Starting to compose

The first bar is the hardest bar. Students (and professional composers!) often struggle to find that first idea. This may just be fear of making a decision: striving for the perfect starting point can hinder getting on with the job! There are many tips and tricks to help take that first step.

Prepare the groundwork

Here are the practical things you and the student may need:

- Blank manuscript paper
- A staved notebook for all the student's composing work
- Recording device
- Software needed to notate or sequence compositions
- Room set-up to facilitate improvising, recording, notating and playing back ideas

Assess what else the student needs. All students will need encouragement and reassurance, clear explanation of your aims and what you expect of them (particularly if they've never composed before) and a simple outline of the steps. Some may need a demo of the process.

Think about how you're going to capture the students' ideas:

- Make audio recordings?
- Write down their ideas as they play them?
- Play their ideas back to them on your instrument?

Choose your strategy

It's not good enough just to ask your student to 'start composing' and sit back waiting for the magic to happen. They will nearly always flounder without a clear set of parameters to narrow their choices and indicate possible pathways. Another *Music Teacher* resource, *From improvisation to composition* (September 2020) discussed ways of using scales and improvisation as a route in to composing. Improvisation is a crucial aspect of composing in any style of music, not just jazz. Creating an effective feedback loop between improvising and composing is often the key to creating a successful new piece.

Set a brief

Some students who are confident with expressing themselves, or keen composers, will respond to a brief. You could commission them to compose a piece that conveys a specific mood, emotion, character or story. If the student themselves comes up with a good suggestion, all the better. Discuss with them how to approach this: maybe 'What would make the music sound exciting?' or 'How could your melody move like a flowing river?'

Tip: you can set up parameters without being explicit or even using words. Begin the composing process without them realising by playing a musical call and response game, or performing a section of an existing piece together and encouraging students to improvise or change notes or rhythms.

Here are a few other strategies to try.

Use a model piece

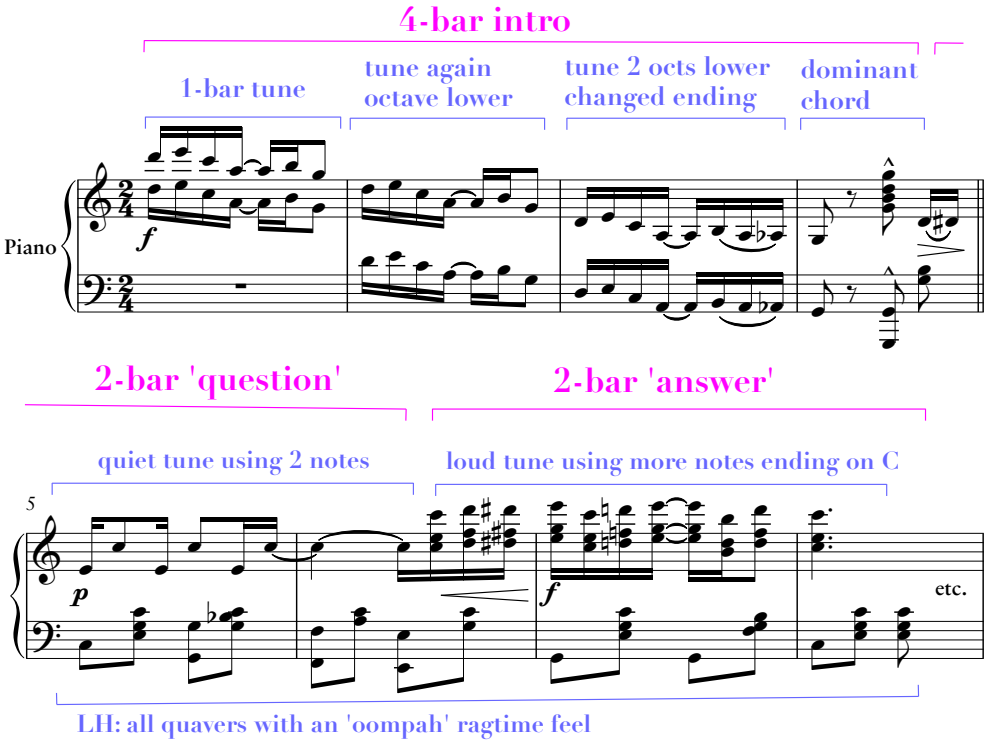
Take an existing piece (or even another piece by the same composer) that your student is playing to use as a framework or starting point. Choose a piece or composer that they have a clear connection with, one that they've enjoyed learning and know well. Your framework could be a structure, technique, opening phrase or building blocks.

Case study: *The Entertainer*

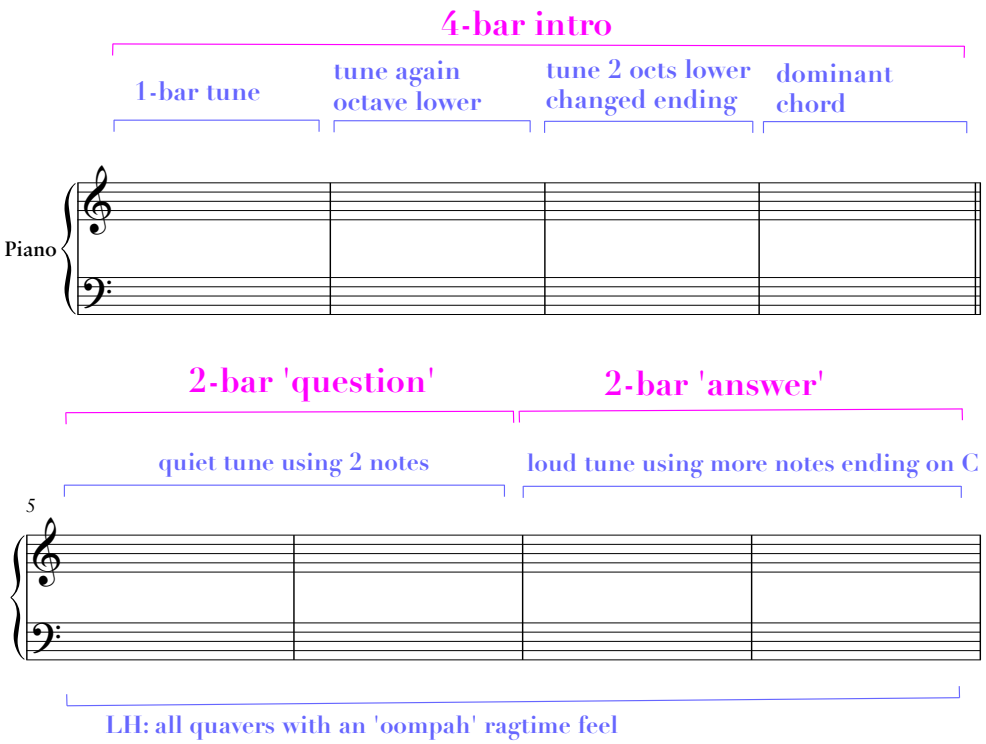
Here are some different ways you can use Scott Joplin's *The Entertainer* as a model piece for students of different abilities and ages on a variety of instruments.

Structure

Lead students in an analysis of Joplin's piece. Ask them to take the structure as a template and compose their own new composition following the same structure. For more advanced students, ask them to base their composition on the more general macro structure of Joplin's piece, modelling their composition on the four-bar intro, and two-bar question/answer phrases. If less experienced students need more guidance, use the micro structure of the piece. For example, ask them to create an introduction by composing a one-bar tune in C major, then play it again in different octaves, changing the third repetition to land on a dominant note or chord.



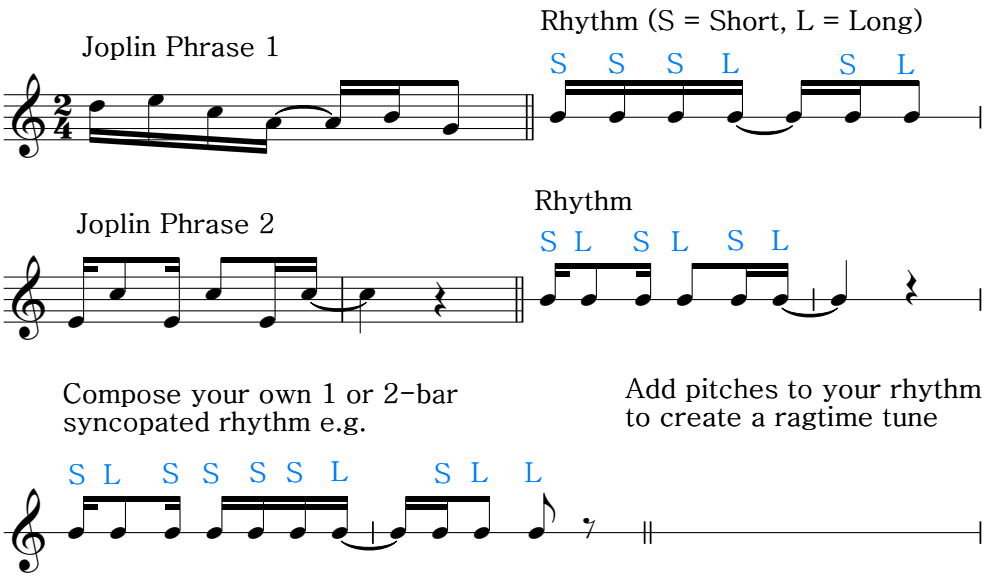
Use the macro (pink) or micro (blue) structure – or both – as the template for a new ragtime composition:



Technique

Compositions can be based on specific techniques taken from an existing piece. With the Joplin, **syncopation** is a crucial element to the music's character. To create syncopation or off-beat rhythms, combine long and short notes (ie quavers and semiquavers, or crotchets and quavers) over a steady beat. Tailor how you do this to match the student's knowledge of notation. You could just use S/L (or short/long) as a form of notation, or convert that to stave notes.

Look at examples of Joplin's syncopated rhythms. Younger, less advanced students can simply use one of the rhythmic examples given, learn to play it on one note, then use different pitches to create their own melody, using a set of notes or a scale you give them. More confident students can create and notate their own syncopated 'long/short' rhythm and add the pitches to create their ragtime theme.



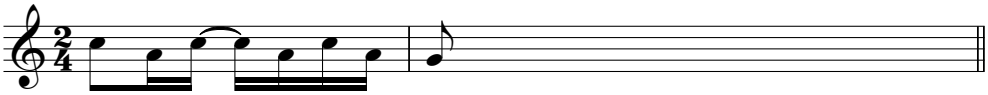
Note how composing can be a valuable way to learn about a musical technique as a player: analysing and composing a syncopated rhythm will help to unlock that idea for the student.

Opening phrase

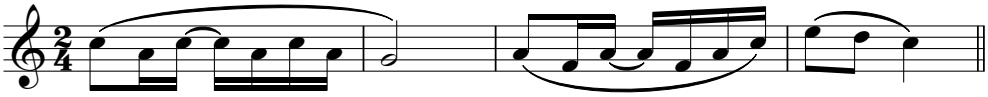
This idea works well for younger and less experienced composers, especially those struggling to form a first idea. Your choice of opening phrase is important. You want to give enough material to spark an effective composition, but not too much to dictate the content and direction of the music. It's better to pick a phrase that is not too well known and does not lead on obviously to the next bar. People find it very hard to 'unhear' what they know comes next in the music.

With our Joplin model, using the first bar of the intro or main tune would be too obvious, and it would be hard to avoid playing the rest of the tune. Here's an example using a more ambiguous phrase in *The Entertainer* as a starting point:

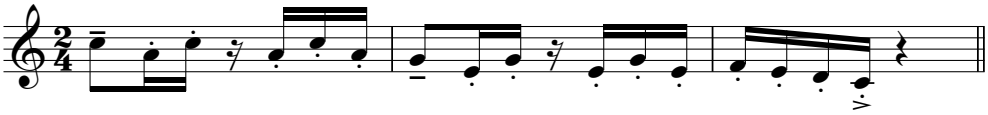
Starting phrase taken from *The Entertainer*



Starting phrase plus student's next phrase (legato)



Starting phrase extended by student with added articulation

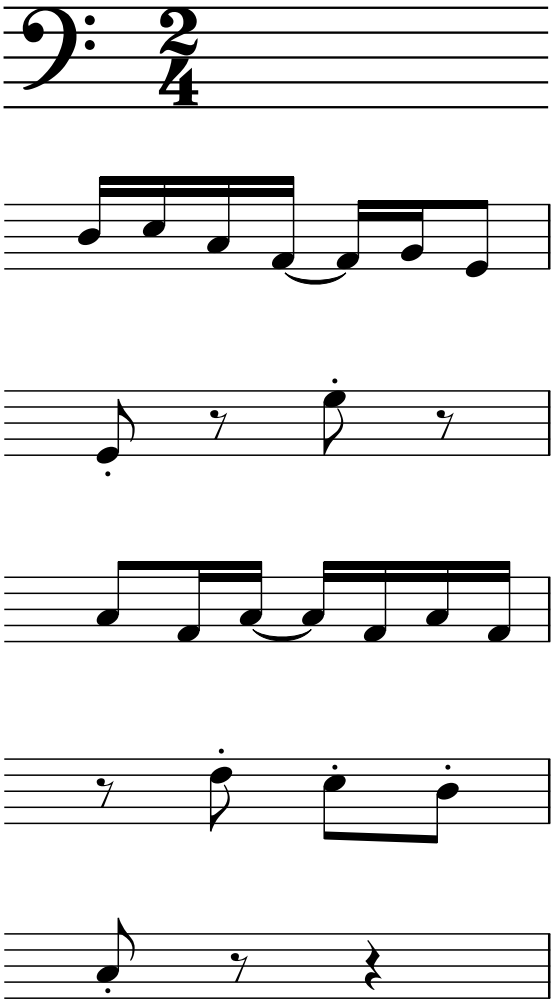


A related approach is a theme and variations form, using an existing short, simple theme to create different versions or variations. This works well if you want to base the composition on complete section of music and look at developing and adapting musical elements rather than creating melodic and harmonic ideas.

Building blocks

For students who need even more scaffolded learning, use building blocks of music for them to assemble in their composition. This avoids the pressure of creating any musical elements from scratch, and focuses on selecting and repeating material to create an original composition.

Here is a Joplin-inspired 'building blocks' activity for a cello, bassoon, bass guitar or any bass clef instrument:



Activity steps:

1. Cut out a few copies of each of these bar 'blocks' for a student to arrange to form a score.
2. Begin with the bass clef and 2/4 time signature
3. Ask the student to lay out some or all of the bars in whichever order they choose.
4. Write on how many times to play each one (eg x2).
5. Add details of tempo, dynamics and articulation.
6. Play the finished piece.

You could then discuss how this creates a musical score like other pieces they play. Ask the student to compare it with Joplin's original piece to notice the differences and similarities.

Developing compositions

Developing and extending ideas can come more easily than creating initial ideas. You're likely to want small-scale compositions of only a few lines of music, so aim for short, vivid ideas with a sense of beginning, middle and end. It's important to use the ear, use improvisation, and always ask the question: what comes next?

Positivity

The golden rule is to continually encourage the student. Never shut down or immediately criticise ideas. Use positive suggestions and ask the students to evaluate their own music to see if something could work better.

Repetition, repetition, repetition

Repeating ideas is crucial and often underused by the novice composer. Look at Joplin's piece for a masterclass in repeating phrases, rhythms, patterns and sections of music – sometimes exactly, sometimes with changes. It's rare that a piece only uses an idea once, and a composer will often change one aspect while keeping another the same.

The social side

Use musical interaction and dialogue to develop or extend ideas. A conversation-like interplay between two parts can create call-and-response structures, and shape the piece in a satisfying way.

Also, use the composition as a way of strengthening bonds between students. They could work together on a piece, adding a phrase in turn, or different lines of a duet (with less confident players playing a more repetitive or simple accompaniment). They could write a piece for the other students to play.

Use the dynamics of a group lesson as a positive tool for effective, differentiated composing work. A less confident player can describe or sing an idea, and a more confident player can interpret it on their instrument, while another could notate it.

Technology

Some students may be keen to use music software at home (common and accessible apps or programs include GarageBand, Logic, Soundtrap, BandLab or Musescore). They can develop their ideas, record their composition, add layers, or compose backing parts to perform over. If they're particularly interested in technology, this can be an excellent way of connecting that with their instrumental or vocal studies. Ask them to bring backing part recordings or scores to share with you each week to give feedback and suggest next steps.

You may also wish to use software yourself. This could involve notating drafts of the piece on computer software, creating a final score, or creating backing tracks or accompaniment chord progressions. Adding to their piece in small chunks week by week (with some of this done during lessons) can avoid too much extra work for you in one go, and provide a useful learning experience for the student as they see their composition take shape over time.

Finishing the piece

Aim for a short composition: quality, not quantity! A few bars can be a real achievement, because sustaining a musical argument over a longer structure is one of the more advanced skills to master. Make sure it feels complete in some way. Discuss with the student how the piece should end, perhaps bringing in ideas of cadences, tonality, dynamics and tempo (eg slowing down or fading away). Try a few different options and ask the student to choose their favourite.

Once you have the completed piece, with a title and all appropriate musical details added, how can you celebrate their work? Consider creating a sense of a formal performance of the finished work, make a recording, share it with their family. Are you going to give them a printed copy of the score? When a student sees their piece in the same context as the music they play – as a professional-looking score with title, composer, etc – this can give them an enormous sense of pride and stay with them for a long time. Students who respond well to taking exams and achieving formal qualifications may like a certificate to recognise their completion of an original composition.

However you choose to celebrate their finished work, remind them that they are now a composer!