

Developing a composition

KS4/5

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Introduction

In a previous resource – From improvisation to composition in the classroom ([Music Teacher, May 2021](#)) I outlined ways of creating initial melodic ideas with improvisation, covering basic techniques and tips to develop a melody further. In this resource I'll delve deeper into the development process, looking in more detail at techniques and suggestions to create sophisticated musical progression in composition from a starting idea.

This resource will examine how to support students through this development process in practical steps, using a composer's perspective. How do composers compose, and what frameworks, techniques, knowledge and guidance help them do it successfully? We'll look at two 'case studies', imagining the kind of thing you may encounter with your students' compositions, and exploring how to enable the development of initial musical ideas into more substantial sections.

Where next?

Your students have made a start on a composition. They have an idea, a series of ideas or a short section of original music created and recorded, notated or memorised. Now they need to develop those ideas further, flesh them out, and begin the process of creating a fully structured piece...

Step back and interrogate the ideas

Those initial ideas will give an indication of style and genre. The students may already have had a clear style and genre in mind, or they may not be aware at all, especially if composing instinctively or using improvisation. There could also be some stylistic ambiguity, particularly if the ideas lack definition or if they could be used in different ways.

Discussing and defining the style and genre in which their ideas fit can help a student in making decisions about next steps. This isn't about closing down their horizons, but instead about giving clarity and confidence, opening up influences of relevant exemplars that can help give them techniques to use.

For example, a student might play you their initial four-bar idea for piano. It's clearly in 4/4, with a simple, modal right-hand part and triadic chords or arpeggios in the left hand. Ask the student what they think are the influences on their music. What kind of playlist would their piece fit into? Could it be the start of a contemporary 'neo-classical' or minimalist piano piece (think Max Richter or Ludovico Einaudi)? If they're imagining it with a vocal line, could it become a piano-based pop ballad (Adele, Elton John, Alicia Keys, etc)? If they're keener to create atmosphere and drama, it might belong to a film music style. They may want it to connect with older traditions, particularly if it has more functional, diatonic harmony (lots of chord I and V), so it could fit with the keyboard music of Mozart, Schumann or other composers.

Their choice of instruments and technology also will feed into these discussions. A particular beat or combination of instruments and sound samples could position their idea within a genre or sub-genre. The more you can give them confidence and clarity in the style and genre within which they're composing, the better. This gives them a listening palette to research and borrow from. It will make it easier to make decisions about developing their ideas, easier to assess whether something 'works' or not, and easier to find inspirational templates for a high-quality composition.

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Prepare a toolkit

If you want your students to develop their ideas imaginatively, make sure they've been exposed to a variety of practical examples of how to do this. They should have a range of tools that they can use with confidence. This could be obtained through listening, discussing and analysing other music; having techniques for development modelled for them by the teacher or other students; or trying out techniques themselves.

Present a range of development techniques, especially those that can cut across many different musical genres and styles, and discuss how students can embed them into their own musical language. It isn't enough to just give a long list of random development techniques: students need to absorb these into their understanding through listening, analysing and using the techniques in practice. Think of the following process:

Hear a technique ⇒ Understand it ⇒ Explore it in practice ⇒ Use it in a composition

Maybe start with some group activities or all your students, to go through this process with a variety of useful techniques.

Group activities to provide tools for development

- ▶ Listen to pieces of music, and ask students to identify and describe the ways ideas are developed.
- ▶ Compile a list of all the techniques students can think of for developing an idea. Make sure each technique is discussed, ideally with a practical example to listen to or perform together.
- ▶ Connect development techniques to other creative artforms or subjects that they are already familiar with. This will help give a richer understanding. Use analogous processes in visual art, maths, dance, etc – for example, Paul Klee's idea of 'taking a line for a walk'; the changing geometric patterns in works by Bridget Riley; mathematical processes of division and multiplication relating to rhythmic development; how dance uses texture, layering, canon and counterpoint.
- ▶ Explore ideas for rhythmic development using group percussion. This could be moving round the group asking for a new version of a two-bar rhythm from each student, or an 'answering phrase' for a given rhythm. Each student's contribution should be different from everyone else's in some way.
- ▶ Use technology to demonstrate how to play with and develop an idea or section of music (eg putting a four-bar loop through filters, changing the instrument, shifting pitches, taking out or adding layers, etc). Discuss how the phrase changes, and how this could create a sense of development and structure. Ask students to compose or select three different versions of one short phrase using the software.

Four concepts for developing ideas

There are many ways for developing ideas, ranging from simple changes of dynamics, articulation, instrumentation, tempo, etc, to more sophisticated development of rhythm, pitch and harmony, which can give the music more substance and complexity. There are a few common concepts that crop up frequently in many types of music, however, and can prove very useful.

Sequence

The sequence is one of the most useful techniques for any composer. It can be used effectively in most styles of music, and is often used to develop material from the simplest of folk melodies to the grandest of symphonies.

Make sure every student is able to turn a phrase into a sequence by singing or playing the phrase once and again a note up or down using a particular scale. Discuss the possibilities of this, and show examples in a variety of styles. Make sure students understand the difference between transposing something exactly and shifting it up and down starting on a different note of the scale.

Repetition and change

Developing musical ideas is nearly always driven by what you repeat and what you change. It's rare that you only hear a musical idea once: Look at melodies in pop songs, the looped samples in a hip-hop track, or the music of Debussy, where each idea or phrase is nearly always repeated, even within an ever-changing and juxtaposing flow of ideas.

Layering

Adding or removing layers is an effective way of developing an idea across many genres. This could be harmony notes added to a melody, adding or subtracting instruments, a new countermelody, a beat, a drone, a bassline, and so on. Encourage students to think about the direction the music is going, and what impact the changing layers have. Are you gradually adding more texture and complexity to the sound, or reducing the texture? Is it a sudden change for dramatic effect?

Ornamentation

This can be a fairly superficial way of developing an idea, but it's a widespread and important tool for giving the music freshness and adding sophistication when repeating ideas. Show your students examples of Baroque and Classical composers adding ornamentation to repeated simple melodies (for example Mozart's Variations on 'Ah vous dirai-je, Maman', K265, www.youtube.com/watch?v=NO-ecxHEPqI), and the way a singer will embellish the repeat of verses and choruses in many genres such as Portuguese fado music (Mariza's 'O gente de minha terra' is a good example: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ClugVwAceRo). Vocal ornamentation of a repeated melody becomes an expressive tool to build emotion and sophistication through the song.

Case study 1: Piano phrase

Here is a four-bar loop using repeated arpeggio shapes, a type of idea that will crop up regularly in students' initial ideas:

Piano

Next steps

- 1 Help the student clarify the style and intention for the piece. This idea can easily become a traditional piano piece in a formal classical style, but it could also be the start of a more minimalist-influenced contemporary piece, a film score or the piano part of a pop song.
- 2 Encourage them to take this as the starting point and ask, 'Where next?' This may not even end up being how the final piece starts. However, it's so often easier and more efficient for inexperienced composers to develop ideas from a starting point, in a linear, moment-to-moment way, rather than assembling a piece from disparate building blocks.
- 3 Now you have a style and starting point, you should interrogate the material. As the tutor, it's important to glean what the material shows you about the student's knowledge and technique. For example, these four bars demonstrate:

- ▶ An understanding of D minor triads in root position and inversions.
- ▶ Confidence using chords I and V and a perfect cadence (as it loops back).
- ▶ Feeling for a four-bar phrase structure.
- ▶ The technique of composing using sequences.
- ▶ An ability to compose idiomatically for piano.

Encourage the student by pointing these skills out – they may not realise that they are doing all of these things! Interrogate the material again and look for techniques that could be added. In this example, there are no four-note chords (eg an A7 chord), the bassline is very simple, and there are no dynamic or phrasing details.

Be careful, however, not to think that more is better. This opening idea would work perfectly as it stands, and its good qualities may be ruined by trying to add in complexity for the sake of it. If the student feels happy with their starting idea, it's better to think of where the material can go *next*, keeping true to the student's imagination and concept for the piece. Affirm the student's idea and its potential. Only suggest they change it if you feel they do not like it themselves, or there are obvious technical problems (for example if it's unplayable on the instrument it's intended for, or includes a clearly misheard note or rhythm).

Turn four bars into eight bars and beyond

Identify what's ripe for development in the music. In this example, the fourth bar (chord V) is a good place to start. Ask what the student thinks about the function and emotional impact of chord V. Discuss what the role of this chord is, how it brings you back to chord I (the C sharp leading to the D), the idea of dissonance and resolution. With this in mind, ask how they could stretch this idea and take it further. How could they add more dissonance and sense of 'moving away' from the tonic to make it sound even more satisfying when we arrive? Point out that composers in the past have added other notes like 7ths and flat 9ths to chord V. Ask them to improvise with the RH melody and make the sequence more decorated and different when it repeats, as if soaring further away and then landing again.

The student can try out a few different ideas on the piano and choose the best one. If they're not confident playing both hands simultaneously, tell them to work with other student playing the left hand, or use software to create a looping accompaniment part. Are there other bars that would sound better if they were also developed in the repeat?

The result could be something like this:

Flowing

extra melodic movement in both hands

5

new dynamic added 7th b9th

Now the student has turned four bars into a more sophisticated and developed eight bars, and given a sense of momentum and increased intensity to move into the next phrase, creating a more substantial section of music.

This example works because we're building on what the student has already done and understood, helping them rise to a higher level using their compositional voice and set of skills. We've given them new knowledge and expanded the horizons of the style that they've chosen and are confident in.

For the next phrase (bar 9 onwards) you could talk to the student about *texture*. Could the next phrase have a different texture and 'weight' to match the emotional drama of the music? Again, encourage the student to try out and imagine different ideas: play the first eight bars and imagine, improvise or describe what could come next. They might come up with a new texture like this:

9

thicker texture to match
the louder dynamic

etc.

repeated notes in the LH to
add more driving movement

Or it could be a dramatic shift to a thinner texture and quieter mood, perhaps influenced by film music examples involving surges and sudden drops of dynamic:

9 simple idea of the LH arpeggiating the RH chord applying it to the rest of the chord sequence etc.

sub.p

sudden change of dynamic to match the lighter texture

Modulation

Up to this point, development on compositions has come through repeating a four-bar harmony and altering the melodies, textures, rhythms and dynamics. Students often want to (or feel they should) modulate and shift the harmony of their music, but are not confident doing so convincingly. Modulation is often the go-to suggestion from tutors wanting students to develop an idea, but it can easily be mishandled and feel forced.

Modulating to the relative major or minor is the easiest shift in many styles of music. Here is another example of a possible next section of our piano piece:

9 ornamentation to develop the melodic character etc.

mf

changed bass notes to alter the harmony

By simply changing the bass notes in the left-hand part, we've developed the material and begun a potential modulation to the relative major key. Make sure the student notices how the *emotion* of the music changes when we move to the left-hand B flat. It also creates a richer harmony: a four-note major 7th chord rather than a simple triad. The major feel gives a different mood and the unexpected chord change also has an emotional impact – something familiar but surprising.

This could lead on to a section in F major. Repeating these bars (or an alternative involving F major) would establish the modulation more solidly.

The modulation could be more advanced and ambitious, and move to different tonal areas, but the emphasis should be on creating a musical argument. Ask the student to try out different ideas for the next bar and see what emotional impact each chord or altered/added note has.

To help the idea of modulation, you could explain the role of a **pivot chord** – a chord that is shared by the key you're in and where you want to go. In this case the B flat major 7 chord belongs both in the D minor key (chord VI) and in F major (Chord IV). It's probably more important to emphasise the need to trust your ear and think of the modulation in **emotional** terms, rather than technical ones, and listen to examples. The uplifting tonal step up is sometimes used at the end of pop or musical theatre songs, for example, and mood changes are associated with minor and major shifts in a Schubert song. Likewise, sliding around different chords or keys in a film score can disorientate or surprise the audience. This will then give students a *reason* to modulate, and make it an expressive tool linked to their musical instincts.

Developing material using structure

Creating a successful piece will involve considering the structure of the piece, and how ideas develop and fit together. Familiarise your students with common forms and structures to give them frameworks in which to develop and extend their material. For example, understanding the various verse/chorus structures of a pop song or a theme and variations form will provide useful templates.

As ever, it's crucial that using formal structures doesn't stifle imagination or break the thread of a musical argument. If students appreciate the reasons *why* a structure works (for example observing the satisfying symmetry and feeling of closure and return to familiarity of an ABA arch structure), it makes it more likely that they'll use it with intention and success. Always consider how your students are working and what methods of structuring their music can give them the best chance of a successful outcome.

To give students a flexible approach to structure, present them with more general principles that can feed naturally into their composing process. I find the concept of 'getting from A to B' is particularly useful across many genres. This is especially pertinent when students have a couple of contrasting ideas and are unsure how to link them together.

Here's a simple case study to show this process in practical terms.

Case study 2: the 'missing link'

A pair of students are composing using electric guitar and bass guitar. They've composed two simple, two-bar loops by ear, and they want ideas for how to use them to create a longer section of music:

The image shows two musical ideas, IDEA 1 and IDEA 2, for electric guitar (Gtr) and bass guitar (Bass Gtr). Both are in 4/4 time and G major.

IDEA 1: The guitar part consists of a sequence of eighth notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The bass part consists of a sequence of quarter notes: G2, B1, D2, G2.

IDEA 2: The guitar part starts with a sequence of eighth notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, followed by a chordal sequence: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5. The bass part consists of a sequence of eighth notes: G2, B1, D2, G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F#3, G4, A4, B4, C5.

The first thing to bear in mind when students present multiple ideas for a piece is that the best advice can be to choose one idea and stick with that to create the piece. Other ideas may be a distraction and can be kept for future use (or find their way into the piece naturally as the students continue composing). Students often try to cram too many ideas into a piece, so assess carefully whether the ideas are likely to work together. In this case, the two ideas above are suitably related and could easily be part of the same section of music.

As with the first case study, it's good to clarify the context and intention for the piece as well as delving into the nature of the material. For example, the first idea goes between A major and an E sus chord, while the second has a D major feel with use of the flat VII chord, a bluesy minor 3rd in the bassline, and elements of syncopation. Both have a clear driving 4/4 beat and work at the same tempo. Again, if the students weren't aware of any of these elements when they composed the material, identifying them can help them hone and develop the music further.

Set the student composers the task of getting from idea one to idea two. In doing this, they can create a longer section that could become part of a pop song (if adding vocals) or a rock-inspired instrumental composition.

They should first imagine how to get from one to the other, then try improvising and altering idea one to make it move towards idea two. Examine the core elements of both ideas and how one could lead in logical steps to the other. Using sequences can be a way of shifting the riff and bassline higher to give a sense of building towards a new idea. There could be a transition moment where elements of the two ideas combine to lead satisfyingly to the second idea.

Here's a potential outcome of this task:

The musical score is written for guitar (Gtr) and bass. It is in the key of D major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The first system, labeled 'IDEA 1', shows a guitar melody starting on a middle D (D4) and moving up stepwise, and a bass line starting on a low D (D2) and moving up stepwise. Both parts are marked *mp* (mezzo-piano). A blue annotation above the guitar staff reads: 'idea 1 begins lower so it makes sense to use a rising sequence moving up to idea 2.' The second system, labeled 'IDEA 2', shows a guitar melody starting on a higher D (D5) and moving down stepwise, and a bass line starting on a higher D (D4) and moving down stepwise. Both parts are marked *cresc.* (crescendo). A blue annotation above the guitar staff reads: 'idea 1 begins lower so it makes sense to use a rising sequence moving up to idea 2.' The third system, labeled 'IDEA 2', shows a guitar melody starting on a high D (D6) and moving down stepwise, and a bass line starting on a high D (D5) and moving down stepwise. Both parts are marked *f* (forte). A blue annotation above the guitar staff reads: 'combination of both ideas (chords from idea 2 plus the phrase structure of idea 1) leading to...'. A pink annotation above the guitar staff reads: 'echo of idea 1 to reinforce link'. The score ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Game theory

The strength of the approach above is that you're setting up a problem to be solved, like a puzzle or game, which gives a clear sense of purpose to the students' composing.

Scoring a particular scene in a film, setting a text, or writing a fugue already establishes an obvious 'puzzle' to be 'solved', but this approach can also work for abstract compositions. There can also be lots of 'mini puzzles' within the larger puzzle (eg getting from A to B within a section). It can be a good way of framing students' development work and make composing an enjoyable, manageable process rather than an intimidating blank page of possibilities.

Here are some other examples of other musical 'puzzles' to set student composers to stimulate development:

- ▶ Can you move as far away from Idea one as possible, and then find your way back?
- ▶ Can you build gradually to the highest note of the instrument/voice?
- ▶ Could each melodic phrase start on a different note/different beat of the bar?
- ▶ Could the phrase have an extra note each time it repeats?