

Composing

KS3

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Introduction

Composition is one of the crucial components of any music curriculum. Students need to be given the opportunity to compose, and the guidance to succeed. They also need to see how composition links in with listening and composing. This resource will consider the purpose of composing and some approaches to composition in the Key Stage 3 classroom.

The importance of composition in the classroom

How often do you find yourself thinking about how many students play instruments and take lessons?

How often do you think about how many students are composers?

We often look at composition and performance differently, and yet when it comes to GCSE and A level, they have the same weighting. Composition is therefore an important aspect to consider when looking at your music curriculum.

It's also one of the inter-related dimensions of music, and links nicely with listening and performing. Playing an instrument can be the starting point for any composition, and listening to music can help generate ideas. Students shouldn't see composition as a separate entity, and must believe that they themselves are composers.

Next time you teach Key Stage 3, ask your students if they consider themselves to be composers. For future GCSE students in year 9, ask them if they understand the importance of composing when compared to performing. The results are often interesting, and we must pursue a situation where students do see themselves as composers. This resource will bear this fact in mind, and look at how we can help students on that journey.

Curriculum design and composing

When designing a curriculum, we need to consider the journey our students will go on. The sequence of lessons and the incremental development of knowledge is an important factor to consider. As music teachers, we need to focus on the knowledge we wish to impart to our students, and move away from a topic-based curriculum where one unit may not lead well into the next.

When designing a curriculum, we should consider how students will develop their compositional skills, as well as looking at how composing can help them with their listening and performing. Composition tasks should not live in isolation, but should instead be linked to the knowledge we wish to impart to our students.

Curriculum design is about taking your curriculum and starting to consider not only why you teach something, but also why you teach it at that point in the year. When it comes to composition, it might be helpful to look at your current schemes of work and consider how composition might be used to support some other learning.

Composing for learning

Consider a lesson focused on rhythm and metre, specifically 4/4 time. In a lesson such as that, which may come at the start of term, students need to be given the chance to listen, perform and compose. Once the 'theory' is delivered, the understanding will often be achieved through a practical task. This is where composing for learning is a possible approach.

Giving students the chance to compose their own rhythm in 4/4 time will help to solidify the knowledge, and it will also encourage them to think about composition. This aspect will be considered later in this resource, but hopefully the principle is clear: we can use composing to help with understanding and the delivery of key knowledge.

Short compositional tasks can also be used to give students a flavour of compositional approaches. Creating a 30-second piece of music related to a specific word, picture or atmosphere can be a very effective way of building students' confidence as composers. Composing for learning is all about how we can use the process of creating musical ideas to embed key musical knowledge.

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Deliberate composing

In my earlier resource on listening skills ([Music Teacher, October 2022](#)), I discussed the idea of deliberate listening. Deliberate composing is a similar concept: it's where we encourage students to compose something in order to understand it more fully.

Consider a situation where a student has completed a listening test and has clearly not understood the concept of dotted notes. A deliberate composing approach would then involve them creating a short piece, which includes dotted notes, helping them understand how they work in context.

Deliberate composing can also help students to understand a genre, a chord progression or an approach to melody. Encouraging students to create music to understand it more fully goes hand in hand with deliberate listening and performing. If we're aiming to grasp why a melody is so effective, for example, we can listen to it, perform it and then also play around with it from a compositional perspective.

Unlocking the elements using composition

Deliberate composing can also be extended to focus on the elements of music. Students will increase their understanding of the elements when they have a chance to work with them. Here are some short compositional ideas that deliberately focus on different elements of music (there are more ideas later in this resource):

- 1 Rhythm and metre:** create a piece of music for a drum that uses triplets and dotted notes. You could extend this in any way you wish, and insist on a specific time signature and structure. The key thing is to keep the piece short but to think in bars rather than seconds. Another option is to give all your students a rhythmic starting point, and then ask them to extend it further.
- 2 Melody:** give your students just three notes and ask them to create a short melodic idea. This idea can then be extended to four or more notes as you see fit. In order to help them, make sure that they know how many bars the melody should last. You could also combine this melody with the rhythmic ideas used in the idea above.
- 3 Harmony:** provide your students with a bassline or chord progression, and ask them to create a melody above it. Alternatively, give them a melody and ask them to create chords or a bassline underneath. You should consider creating differentiated versions depending on your students' individual abilities.
- 4 Dynamics:** give your students a short piece of music without any dynamic markings. This could be on paper or in a piece of notation software. Ask them to add dynamic markings to the music where they feel dynamics are needed. You could scaffold this task by giving some students a list of dynamic options.
- 5 Spot the mistakes:** give your students a melody that you've created, or maybe a famous melody that they're likely to know. Make sure that you include some mistakes that they then need to correct. Using this same melody, ask them to create a variation by changing the rhythms.

When you're teaching a lesson about a specific piece of musical knowledge, it's essential that students have a practical way to learn. They won't compose an entire piece, but working with an isolated element will help them on their composing journey, highlighting useful ways to approach key components such as melody, harmony and rhythm.

I do, we do, you do

The principal of 'I do, we do, you do' is straightforward. First, model something to the class, for example creating a melody from a starting point of just two notes. Then work with the students, asking them what they would do next. In other words, put up the same two notes, and ask students what to do next. Then the students should go off and do something themselves using the same two notes.

Giving students a starting point is a suitable approach for a task such as this, and they could create something on paper, on computers or using an instrument. When you're creating something in front of your class yourself, there's no need to try and create a masterpiece. Instead, focus on showing the students what can be achieved, giving them practical ideas that they can use themselves.

Composing in the Key Stage 3 classroom: some practical approaches

Peer composing

This is an interactive and engaging approach to composition that is possibly best suited to a lesson where you have computers available with either a DAW or notation software. However, you could also complete this task on paper with more able students.

Send your students a chord sequence that you've created (you might consider a common progression such as I-V-vi-IV).

If you're using cloud-based software such as Noteflight (see [Music Teacher, February 2022](#)) or Soundtrap (see [Music Teacher, July 2021](#)) it's possible to create an assignment that you can share with students. If you're using something like Sibelius, you can create the file and share it with students using your VLE or on email.

- 1 Each student should open the chord progression and spend five minutes adding something to it. This could be a melodic idea, a drumkit pattern, or something percussive.
- 2 After five minutes, each student should move to the computer or paper to their right or left (ie to another student's work), and add something to the piece in front of them.
- 3 Continue this process for a couple of moves, with students required to add to the work each time they move.
- 4 To add some variety, on one of the moves, insist that they focus on one particular thing: maybe dynamic markings, accents or percussive colour, for example.
- 5 Repeat this process for as long as the lesson or sequence of lessons allows.

By the end of the lesson, you will have 25 to 30 different compositions, and students can go back and see what they added. The skill being developed here is the art of thinking about what you can quickly add to make something develop or improve. Students have to think fast and consider what they can do in the time they have. The product isn't the most important thing: it's the process here that's powerful.

Drumkit composition project

Students love to play on drums, and most schools have access to a drumkit of some kind. This composition project focuses on creating a piece of music for drumkit. The process of creating this piece will not only secure students' knowledge of rhythm and metre, but will also teach them to think about the drumkit as an instrument rather than an add-on to a piece.

Drum notation is also a nice way into reading notation more generally, while avoiding the worry about pitch – that can be tackled later. This project might work well at the start of your Key Stage 3 programme when you're likely to be introducing rhythm and metre.

- 1 Take your students to a drumkit and ask them if they can play anything. If you're lucky, you will have a drummer. If not, you're looking for students to step up and create something.
- 2 Now teach them all the basic 4/4 rock beat (see below.) Get students involved using stamping and clapping, as well as a couple of students trying out the rhythm itself on the drumkit.
- 3 Once they know what the basic rhythm sounds like, ask the confident drummers if they can build on it, change it or enhance it. Start to discuss how this can be the beginning of a composition – creating ideas based on an initial starting point.
- 4 Once you've established the rhythm and looked at developing it, show the students exactly what it looks like when it's notated:

Drum Set

You can also show them how this rhythm is used in a Grade 1 drum piece. Showing them this video will prove to them that this rhythm, albeit basic, is part of an existing composition:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2vZXxNvohc

- 5 The students' job is to now recreate this drumkit rhythm using music technology – or, of course, pencil and paper. Once they can create this rhythm, they can expand it, develop it and make it more interesting.
- 6 There are several ways they can develop the rhythm, for example these ideas:

Drum Set

- 7 Once the students have played around with ideas, it's time to think like composers. Their brief is to compose a piece of music for a Grade 1 drummer who's looking for something with a bit more challenging than 'Another One Bites the Dust'. They need to consider structure, and you may like to suggest a ternary form approach. Students who show an aptitude for composing may like to try writing their B section using a different time signature, creating a ternary form structure.

Through this project, students will learn more about rhythm and metre, and they'll start to think about notation on a score. When creating their own drumkit composition, they'll consider time signatures, note values and structure. They can also start to think about dynamics, tempo changes and accents. By the end of the project, they will have a piece of music that they've created, and you can return to the drumkit and see if anyone can play the pieces that have been created.

Texture and arranging composition project

Texture is often a topic where students benefit from a practical approach to understanding. This project involves them focusing solely on how they arrange ideas, rather than worrying about creating them in the first place. This does, however, rely on you as the teacher to create the ideas for the students. This could be done in a DAW, or you could give students ideas to work with on instruments. Either way, the goal is to allow students the space to think about structuring a piece from some initial starting points, exploring the different approaches to texture.

What do you need to provide?

You'll need to consider your specific class, and how you might want to scaffold this project. It might be that you provide them with a complete set of ideas that they can then arrange and use to create different textures. Here's an example of a set of ideas that you might like to use:

Texture & Arranging Task

A musical score for Xylophone consisting of six staves. Each staff is labeled 'Xylophone' on the left. The score is in 4/4 time and features a variety of rhythmic patterns:

- Staff 1: A melodic line starting with a quarter note, followed by eighth notes, and ending with a quarter note.
- Staff 2: A rhythmic line with quarter notes and eighth notes.
- Staff 3: A rhythmic line with quarter notes and eighth notes, including rests.
- Staff 4: A rhythmic line with quarter notes and eighth notes.
- Staff 5: A rhythmic line with eighth notes and quarter notes, including rests.
- Staff 6: A rhythmic line with quarter notes and eighth notes.

 The score includes repeat signs and a key signature of two flats.

A musical score for Xyl. (Xylophone) consisting of six staves. Each staff is labeled 'Xyl.' on the left. The score is in 4/4 time and features a variety of rhythmic patterns:

- Staff 1: A melodic line starting with a quarter note, followed by eighth notes, and ending with a quarter note. A triplet '3' is indicated above the first measure.
- Staff 2: A rhythmic line with quarter notes and eighth notes.
- Staff 3: A rhythmic line with quarter notes and eighth notes, including rests.
- Staff 4: A rhythmic line with quarter notes and eighth notes.
- Staff 5: A rhythmic line with eighth notes and quarter notes, including rests.
- Staff 6: A rhythmic line with quarter notes and eighth notes.

 The score includes repeat signs and a key signature of two flats.

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Once you've provided students with a stimulus, they can start to think about how they're going to use the ideas:

- 1 They might consider starting with the **bassline**, gradually adding more of the layers.
- 2 Once all the ideas have been added, maybe all instruments could play the same thing to create a **unison** section.
- 3 They might choose to add some **unpitched percussion** to give the music some more rhythmic drive.
- 4 Another option would be to **change the instruments** so that they're using strings, wind or brass.
- 5 Some students might like to explore some **more advanced techniques** such as an inversion, retrograde, augmentation or diminution.

No matter how they approach this task, students have been given a starting point and now have the chance to focus on structure and texture. They can, of course, then add dynamics, and before long they will have a finished piece of music. More able students might be able to generate their own ideas and then follow a similar process.

Atmospheres composition project

Creating an atmosphere is an important aspect of composition. Writing melodies, adding harmonies and choosing dynamics are all important compositional processes, of course, but students need to be able to think about the purpose behind music too, and should be given the chance to create atmospheres.

There are several possible approaches to creating atmospheres using music, and you can use a range of different stimuli:

- ▶ A picture, painting or drawing
- ▶ A film scene or still
- ▶ A poem, sentence, word or stanza
- ▶ A video game in progress
- ▶ A place, space, age or moment

Students should be given a range of options, or you can ask them to find a stimulus of their own for their composition. Once they have something to work on, it's down to them to choose how they will approach it. They may want to use a DAW, an instrument, their voice or some notation software. There are a few things to suggest to them as they start this process:

- 1 What instruments do they associate with their chosen stimulus?
- 2 What kind of 'sound' are they aiming for? Do they want the music to be calm, uncomfortable, eerie or sad? Do they want something happy and upbeat, or slow and serious? Get students to think about the atmosphere they're trying to create before they start.
- 3 How will they structure their music, and how will their structure differ from, say, ternary form? The key thing here is for students to realise that the music will need to change as the stimulus changes.
- 4 You might like to help your students by offering them some approaches to harmony. Cluster chords, for example, where notes are piled on top of each other can be effective in creating atmosphere: they can sound ethereal and open, or crushed and harsh.
- 5 Percussion is a key component when it comes to creating a musical atmosphere. Ask students to consider how they create sound effects using percussion, as well as creating rhythmic drive and energy if needed.

Approaching composition from the perspective of atmosphere takes away any need for students to be able to read music. Instead, it will require them to think about sounds and silences, a helpful thought process for any young composer. A student will be able to bang on a drum, cluster notes together almost at random and create any sound effect they like – if it fits their chosen stimulus, of course. This kind of composing is exciting, slightly risky, but highly creative.

Here’s an example of some ideas that you could provide to your students:

Cinematic Suspense

The musical score for 'Cinematic Suspense' is written for strings and includes the following sections:

- 6** **Big Wide Ranging Held Notes**: A section with five staves of strings, each holding a single note across the entire duration of the section.
- 8** **Cluster Chords - Dissonant**: A section with one staff of strings playing a series of dissonant cluster chords.
- 12** **Ostinato**: A section with one staff of strings playing a rhythmic ostinato pattern over a series of cluster chords.
- 13** **More Rhythmic Cluster Chords**: A section with one staff of strings playing a more rhythmic pattern of cluster chords.
- 17** **Chromatic Patterns**: A section with one staff of strings playing a series of chromatic patterns over cluster chords.
- 21** **Huge Dramatic Bursts of sound - cluster chords**: A section with one staff of strings playing large, dramatic bursts of cluster chords.
- 23** **Exciting Rhythmic cluster chords**: A section with one staff of strings playing an exciting rhythmic pattern of cluster chords.
- 24**: A final section with one staff of strings continuing the rhythmic cluster chords.

Melody writing

It's important that students learn how to use their instruments to create melodic, rhythmic and expressive ideas. Music technology can be helpful, but there's nothing like the real thing. For some students, it's simply a case of giving them a push to use their instruments in a more creative way. But some students may need more support.

One possible approach is to provide students with a backing track, asking them to create a melody over the top of it. Most students will have access to a recording function on a mobile device, and they can use it to capture ideas. YouTube can be useful here, since there are several backing tracks that can be given to students for them to write a melody over. Students can start by listening and improvising – an excellent skill to develop in itself. But as students generate ideas, they should be encouraged to record them.

Here are some links to YouTube backing track videos, or you may want to create a backing track yourself:

- ▶ Four-chord (I-V-vi-IV) song backing track: www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9lMtDRBNrs
- ▶ Slow blues backing track: www.youtube.com/watch?v=HKfEtmizqBw
- ▶ Rock 'n' roll backing track: www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNtoJRo1qg

Encouraging composing at home

Have you ever set composition homework?

It's an interesting thought, and something we should pause and consider for a moment. With the development of online learning and cloud-based software, it's now easier than ever for students to create music at home. There are several resources online that students can use to get them composing at home:

- 1 **Ableton** (<https://learningmusic.ableton.com>) makes a digital audio workstation and provides an interactive learning platform that explores composition within a web browser. This could form the basis of an easy standalone homework task where students have a chance to explore the various layers that make up a composition. (See [Music Teacher, December 2021](#), for a resource devoted to Ableton.)
- 2 **Hookpad Theory** (<https://hookpad.hooktheory.com>) is a website that allows students to start creating chord patterns within a browser. It's free and easy to use, and should help them to develop the basic understanding of triads and how they can be put into a progression.
- 3 **I Can Compose** (www.icancompose.com) is an ideal place to go for compositional ideas, projects and general advice on composition. It offers a range of composition projects for you to work through with your students.
- 4 There are several online DAW offerings, and I've had success myself with **Soundtrap** and **Noteflight**. Both are cloud-based, and although they're not free, they're affordable for most music departments. Students can work collaboratively, and teachers can easily set compositional tasks that can be shared with students. You could provide a chord sequence in Soundtrap for students to write a melody for, for example. In Noteflight you could give them a melodic idea and ask them to extend it.

Conclusion

We need students to be confident composers who use the process of composition to learn. Composing isn't just about creating a piece of music – it's about understanding the musical building blocks that make that composition sound the way it does. If we can encourage our KS3 students to compose effectively, then we can show them that GCSE and A level music are within reach.