Teaching texture

KS3/4

Liz Dunbar

Introduction

This resource will take you through a range of techniques and approaches aimed at developing students' understanding and application of textural devices. Its focus is KS3 and KS4, but the early stages could easily be explored before secondary school, and later stages used as foundation for KS5.

You shouldn't teach texture as a standalone scheme of work. Instead, take the concepts and techniques here and use them as a thread that runs through your teaching in a way that works best in your own setting.

For both key stages, we'll explore ways in which we can improve students' musical understanding of texture through:

- Listening and analysing.
- Performing: particularly ensemble work and rehearsing.
- Improvising, composing and arranging.

KS3: introducing the fundamentals

It's likely that you'll be working with year 7s from a wide range of primary schools, and it's also likely that some of them will have had no music teaching at all before they get to you.

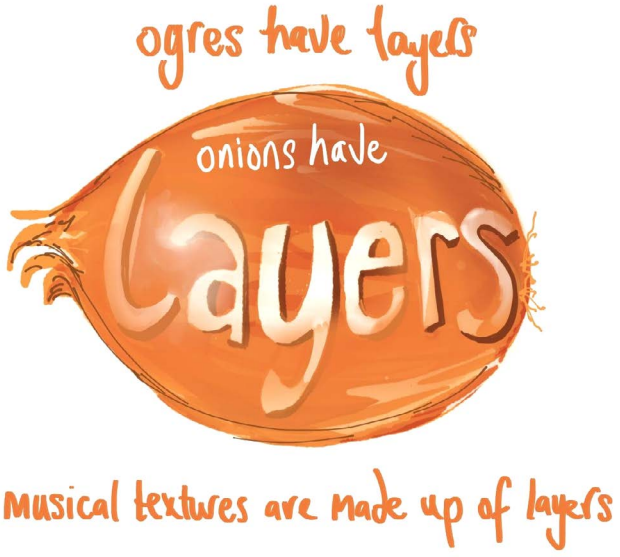
In the early stages of teaching students how to engage with sound analytically, it's important to provide a singular focus. Texture won't be the first element you do this with: you'll probably start with simpler ideas such as dynamics and tempo.

Explaining and describing texture in music is tricky. We associate the word 'texture' with tactile surfaces, which is why you'll sometimes find students and teachers using words such as rough and smooth. The only problem is that rough and smooth don't get you very far in terms of where you're trying to get to.

Here's a memorable place to start talking about texture:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FtCTW2rVFM

Watch this video with your students, particularly the section from 0:37 to 1:05. It might sound daft, but it works. When you're embedding some of the fundamentals of the elements, you need something for students to hook onto, and this one sticks well in the memory. Ogres have layers, onions have layers, musical textures are made up of layers:



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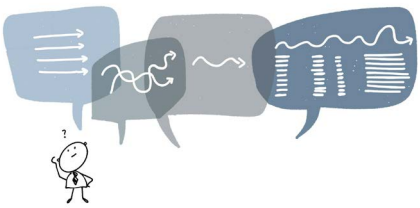
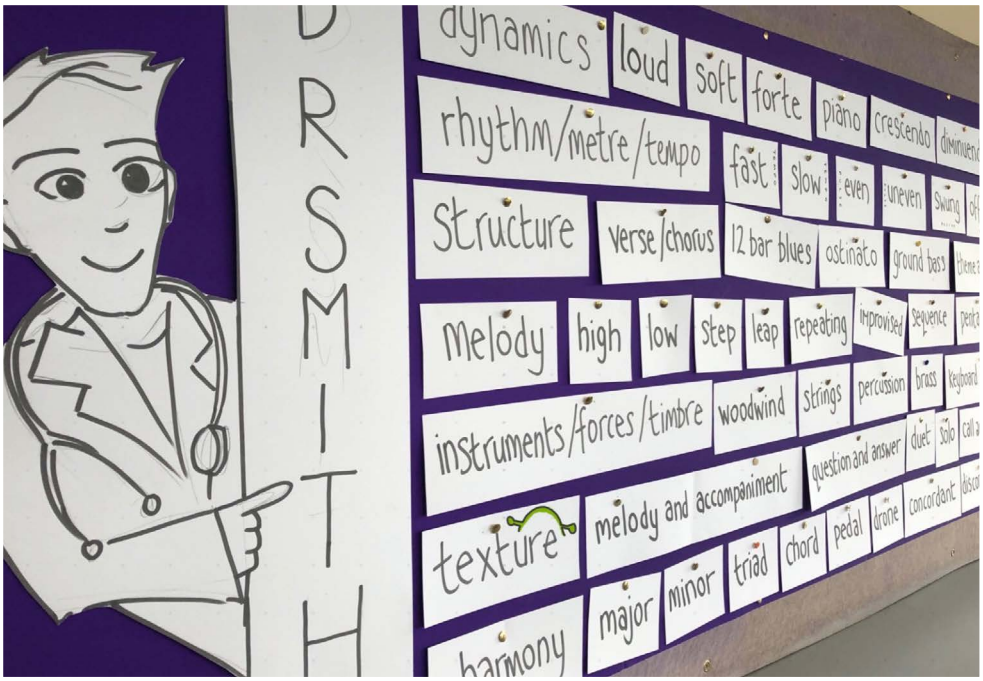


I've been through all manner of visual aids in an effort to communicate the idea that texture is all about layers, but the Shrek/onion connection is the best I've found to date. And there's no harm in providing a little visual reminder for students:



Many teachers start exploring texture with the terms 'solo' and 'unison'. These are the two words connected with texture that students are most likely to have encountered at primary school through singing – though it's unlikely that the terms will be embedded as part of an understanding of musical texture.

You might, however, find it more valuable to begin conversations about texture at KS3 with the idea of 'melody and accompaniment' (which is what we do in my own music department). If we want to engage students in thinking deeply about how music works and hearing like a musician, we have to start where they are, and hear music with their ears. Students predominantly listen to songs (in fact most of them refer to all music as 'song', but let's park that issue for another day), and most songs are built from a combination of melody and accompaniment. It's not a magic bullet, but it's an entry point that will bring everyone with you.

Listening and analysing

Here's an example of how you might like to begin your journey into texture at KS3.

- Explain to your students that you're going to play them a piece of music made up of two layers, one of which is vocal, and the other instrumental.
- Then listen to this track by Stormzy, especially the section from 0:09 to 0:36: **https://open.spotify.com/track/4CEGyF5A5u5BjweVvkgCsn?si=1698c28313d54215**
- Ask which one of the two layers is melodic: voice or piano?
- Let students listen again, this time with that very specific focused task.
- Ask what the piano is doing if it's not playing the melody.

Words like 'background', 'backing', 'chords', maybe even 'harmony' will emerge from discussions. Distil all of this into the term **'melody and accompaniment'**.

Go through the same process with another familiar song, one in which the texture is still 'melody and accompaniment' but one that uses different kind of voice performing the melodic role accompanied by a different instrument. You might like to use this song by the Beatles: **https://open.spotify.com/track/5jgFfDIR6FRogvlA56Nakr?si=17f94376b1fa4e6d**

Engage students in recognising what's constant. This song is completely different to the first song, but the fundamental texture is the same. Talk about the differences between the two songs (in terms of timbre, tempo, and other aspects), but emphasise the fact that the layering of 'melody and accompaniment' remains the same.

What's nice about using the Beatles' 'Blackbird' is that you can hear the pulse being marked out in addition to the voice and guitar. Does that marking of time prevent the texture being 'melody and accompaniment'? Discuss the role of the 'click': is it a third layer in the texture? Encourage those discussions, and engage students in analytical listening.

Reinforce the story so far by comparing the two songs. Do both songs begin with both the melody and accompaniment? Does the voice enter first? Does the accompaniment enter first?

Now introduce something that's likely to be unfamiliar, replacing the voice with a single-line instrument, but maintaining the textural focus of 'melody and accompaniment'. Here's an example from saxophonist Jess Gillam: **https://open.spotify.com/track/5EhlCMMTMOYtlDbstuSvhw?si=b7dad755aae84a72**. It might take students out of their listening comfort zone, but that shouldn't matter because their engaged listening focus should be locked into listening for those two fundamental layers: melody and accompaniment.

Talk about the fact that one of the instruments plays alone at the start. Is it the melody instrument or the accompanying instrument? How can you tell? Bring it to life with a clip of the same track on Youtube (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=gq7wVHr91RI**). Seeing the moment when Jess Gillam begins to play will help many students make the connection between the number of layers and the function of each layer.

It might be tempting to revert to the theory book approach of dry dictionary definitions. But resist that temptation. Texture – and anything else in music – will mean nothing without students having had plenty of opportunities to hear it, talk about it and, most importantly, make it in sound.

Performing and rehearsing

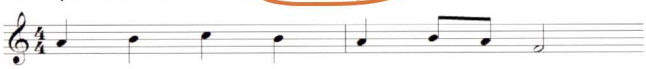
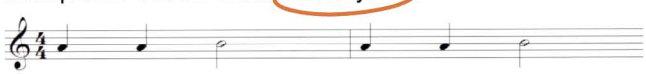
Don't work on developing students' understanding of texture as an isolated listening activity. Make it an integral part of performing work. Keep students' analytical, musical thinking alive by continually referring to texture when describing and discussing what's going on live in the room. There are many opportunities in the rehearsal process to highlight how parts relate to one another:

- Why do we shape a dynamic landscape, asking some parts to come into the foreground and others to take a back seat?
- Why do we naturally want to make tutti sections forte?

As you model the rehearsal process, point these things out using focused textural language, so that students start to adopt key terms when rehearsing and commenting on their own and others' work.

You can reinforce the simple concept of textural layering, focusing on melody and accompaniment, using this activity based around the Japanese melody 'Sakura' (which I use as part of my Year 7 materials). In this scheme, made up of largely performing and arranging tasks (see the task 'ladder' below), the language and handling of simple textural layers is explored and reinforced repeatedly:

Year 7 'Sakura'

	Create an ensemble performance in a group of 3 or 4. Swap roles during the performance, at least once.	2
↑	Compose a 2 bar melody using the pentatonic scale A B C E F to replace phrase 3.	2
↑	Compose a 2 bar ostinato using the pentatonic scale A B C E F using the techniques modelled in lessons. Incorporate it into your work.	2
↑	Accompany the melody using a drone on A and E. Play the drone on the downbeat of each bar.	1
↑	Team up with another person and play it in unison.	2
↑	Perform a complete melody by playing the 4 phrases in the following order: **1 2 3 2 3 1 4**	1
↑	Learn phrase **4** of the Sakura melody: 	1
↑	Learn phrase **3** of the Sakura melody: 	2
↑	Learn phrase **2** of the Sakura melody: 	1
↑	Learn phrase **1** of the Sakura melody: 	1

Textural language being used here:

- Single layer: melody in unison or octaves.
- Two layers: melody accompanied by a simple drone.
- Three layers: melody accompanied by an ostinato and drone.
- Three or four layers: doubling and role-swapping in the final arrangement.

Improvising, composing and arranging

In this unit of work, students improvise and compose an ostinato and a two-bar melody. As they experiment, rework and try out combinations of material, ask them to discuss some of the following:

- How complex or simple should an ostinato be?
- At what point does the texture feel overcrowded?
- What difference does it make if I create a two-bar rather than a one-bar ostinato?
- Does the finished work need to have textural uniformity throughout?
- How does textural difference/uniformity impact on the ensemble's togetherness?
- When might be a good time to have the most/least dense textural moments?
- What impact might a section in unison or octaves have?

You can learn a lot about students' musical understanding by eavesdropping on these conversations. Listen to how textural language is used to communicate ideas. It's really rewarding to guide small group conversations and gently fix common misconceptions.

There's a myriad of things going on here. Students are engaged in embedding key language by creating, auditioning and discussing. There's a load more engaged musical thinking going on here than what's involved in simply copying something off the page.

Games to reinforce textural language

It's very effective to interleave the intensity of 'making and doing' work with a few games. It's always astonishing how engagement levels in the room can go through the roof when you gamify material in this way.

Game 1

Demonstrate in sound, and ask simple questions:

1. Am I playing a single line? Yes/no
2. Are the two lines I'm playing identical or different?
3. Is this an example of melody or accompaniment?
4. What type of accompaniment am I providing – drone or ostinato?

Game 2

Hand over the role of performing to pairs of students who have been working well together. Ask them to perform a section of their work, and devise questions on the hoof as they play, for example:

- Is this pair playing in octaves?
- Is the texture melody and accompaniment?

Game 3

Ask groups of three students to secretly prepare their texture of choice based on where they are up to in their rehearsing together. Provide options for students to choose from, for example these ones:

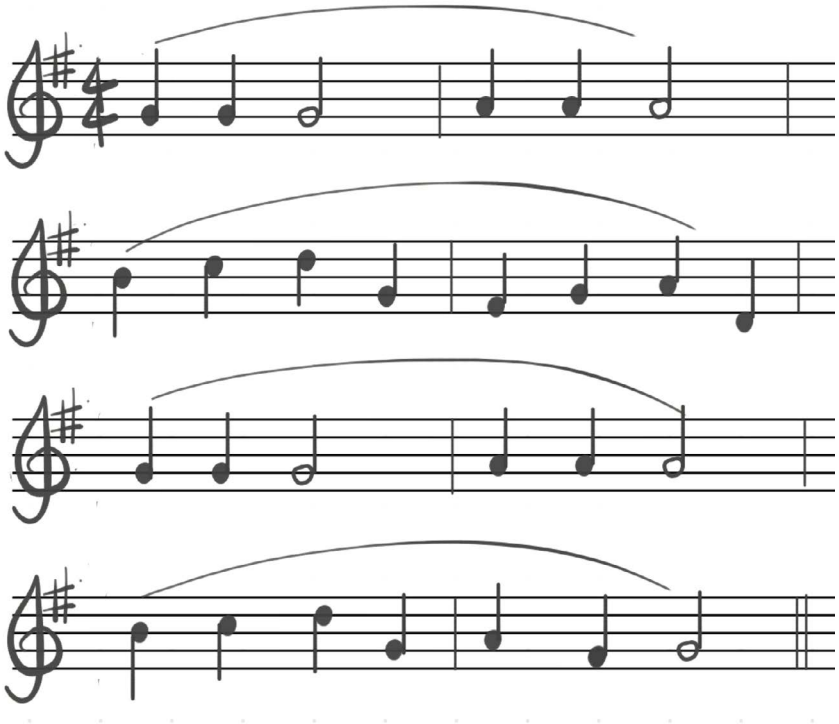
Other KS3 starting points

Expand your textural language from this point, but go for depth on a few terms rather than skimming through a vast list of terms, and make those terms the textures that students live and breathe in their hands-on work for a decent amount of time in each unit.

The following textural terms are embedded in my current KS3 schemes. It's a short list for a reason: I want it to stick.

Canon and imitation

You might choose to introduce canon and imitation through an investigation of the melodic phrase shapes of 'Sur le pont d'Avignon', teamed up with a bit of functional harmony:

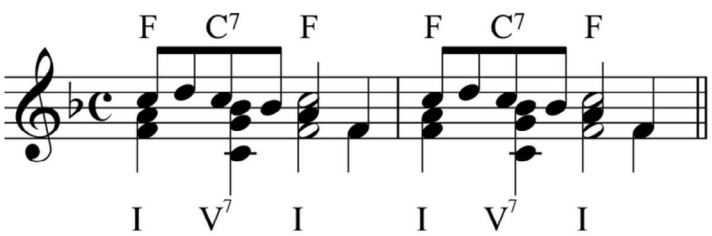


Here's how you might incorporate textural language into a scheme based on this work:

- **Solo melody line:** aural training, development of pitch understanding and visual equivalents.
- **Unison/octaves melody line:** ensemble performing and rehearsing the single line.
- **Melody and accompaniment:** ensemble performing and rehearsing over chords.
- **Imitation:** ensemble performing and rehearsing with staggered entries.

Explore different entry points for imitation. Investigate what works harmonically and why. Discuss what happens in the final bar that prevents the whole thing working as a canon.

Now dissect a round such as 'Frère Jacques' and take its harmonic framework to write an original canon together:

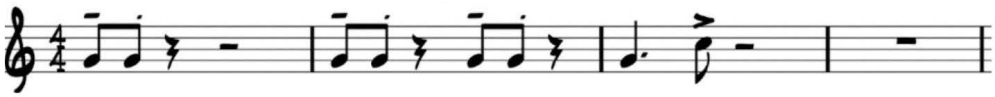


Call and response/question and answer/conversational textures

Jazz and blues schemes can be really useful for introducing textures that involve interplay between lines and changing roles within an ensemble.

Take 'C Jam Blues' by the Oscar Peterson Trio, example: **https://open.spotify.com/track/4aThNuFztJ15YremppiZUJ?si=7ad452dbc3d54d7d**

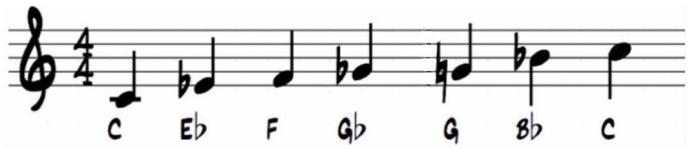
- **Four-part texture (melody, chords, bass and rhythm):** ensemble performing.
- **Unison/octaves presentation of the head:** ensemble performing and rehearsing over accompaniment.
- **Call and response:** improvisation in ensemble performing, and rehearsing with changing roles.



This simple yet mighty two-note motif is a really powerful tool for teaching the concept of call and response. The empty fourth bar is crying out for a bit of musical doodling...

Here's how you might go about bringing call-and-response textures to life using 'C Jam Blues':

- Students form melody pairs: one to call, the other to respond.
- Start by using an exact copy of bar 3 as the response in bar 4.
- Vary the rhythm and number of Gs and Cs, but stick to responding in bar 4 only.
- Introduce the option of using additional notes – drip feed them one by one into the response line:



- Introduce the idea of an anacrusis, making use of beats 3 and 4 in the third bar.

With a collection of material and techniques at their disposal, you can now begin challenging students to start thinking about how they might want to layer their ideas and bring a performance together. Because a blues harmonic framework has the same fundamental looping quality as a chordal ostinato, it's easy to build vertically. Lines can be easily stacked, one on top of another.

The call-and-response layer can be used to encourage students to make musical judgements about the density of material. Encourage musical thinking and discussion in student-led groups.

These are some of the questions you might ask Year 9 students:

- Does 'call and response' need to happen in every line of every 'chorus' of the blues cycle?
- Should 'call and response' happen at the same time as free improvisation in another line?
- Should 'call and response' happen in the head?

It's about bringing texture to life in the 'making' process: students are being encouraged to have analytical discussions that inform their musical decision making, not in a dry summary at the end of a unit, but at every step along the way.

KS4: developing students' understanding of texture to equip them for GCSE

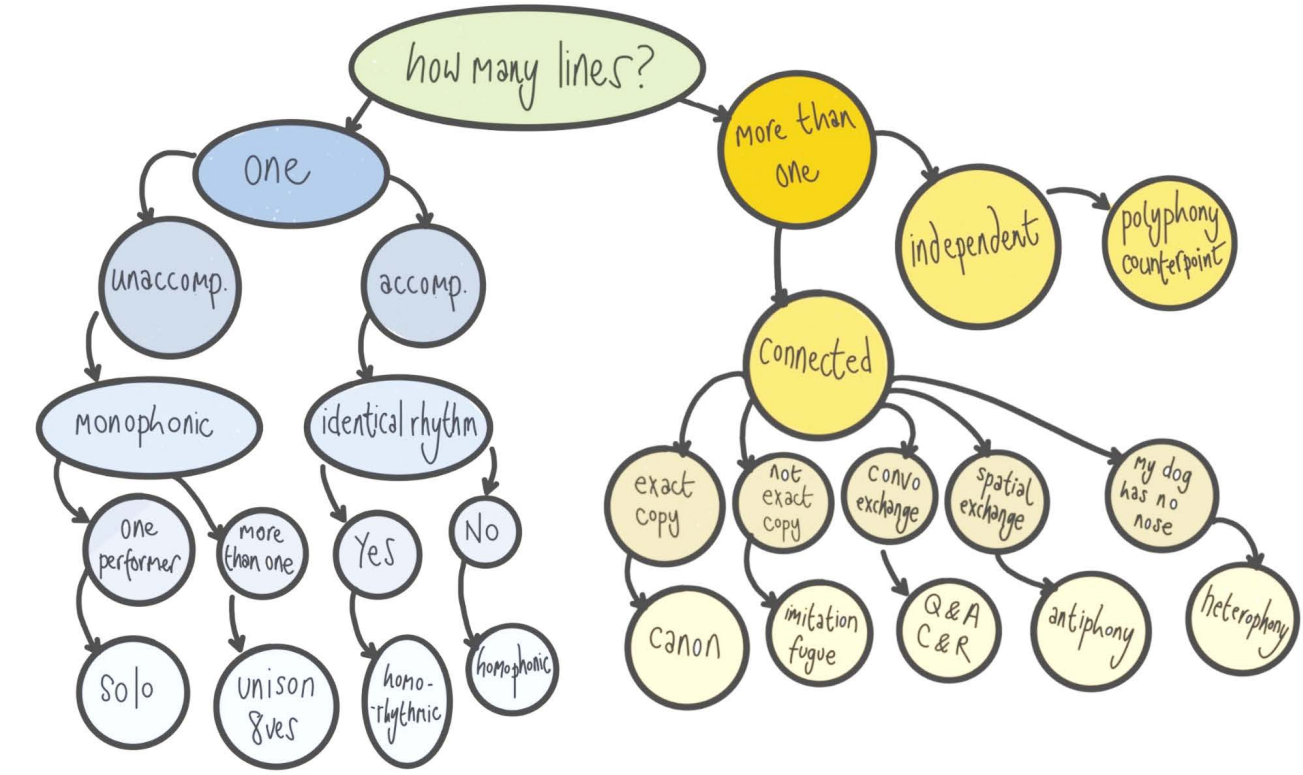
At GCSE, you should continue teaching texture across each of the three strands (listening, performing and composing) in an integrated way wherever possible – in lessons, in rehearsals, in the corridor, you name it.

Listening and analysing

It's not surprising that students commonly come unstuck with the nuance of textural language at GCSE. Quiz a non-musician friend with texture questions – it will act as a reminder that not everyone can hear like trained musicians can hear. (Try it on your line manager next time they try to tell you that music isn't an academic subject.)

With decent KS3 training in place, however, your students will have a head start in knowing what they're listening out for. Here's a reminder:

You might find the following visual tool helpful. You read from the top downwards:



This flowchart concept is the brainchild of my colleague Tim Burnage.

Before handing it over to students, model how to use it. Here's an example of how you might do it, using a passage from near the start of Copland's *Appalachian Spring*:
https://open.spotify.com/track/7i6FaSrFIw2bYv1m9TJqGn?si=49da47a56e9c4819

You might model using the texture flowchart along these lines:

I can hear there's just one melody line and it isn't accompanied. I can hear there's more than one performer, so I'm not going to choose solo. Now, unison or octaves? I can't hear the line doubled higher or lower in pitch, so I'm going for unison.

Here's a second example, Sara Bareilles's 'Kaleidoscope Heart': **https://open.spotify.com/track/ouwm2EOditziKCWSRRLNoA?si=2e18eac222194e11**

There's one melody, but there are voices accompanying the soloist. The accompanying voices are singing exactly the same lyrics using exactly the same rhythm as the lead voice, so I'm thinking this is homorhythmic.

Other ways of using visual aides to support listening

There are some fabulous animated graphic scores out there that allow students to focus on textural layers. Here are a few of my favourites:

- Bach's Three-Part Inventions: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lao8x1bHWEg**
- Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IXMpUhuBMs**
- Beethoven's Symphony No. 5, first movement: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qglck7rpI3w**
- Brahms's Piano Quartet No. 3 in C minor, Op. 60, fourth movement: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytsLzJxAizw&list=RDG2tEVVeGCko&index=17**
- Bach's Fugue in C from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book 1: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfJAiCSZgzU**

Don't be put off exploring conventionally notated scores, though. If students are focused exclusively on texture, all they're listening or looking for is density, uniformity, variety and pattern. Familiar film scores are a useful way in, for example 'Becoming One of the People' from James Horner's score for *Avatar* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=GnOSTBTQNMo**).

You might compare the use of unison and monophonic lines in Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QxvRtRe5_4**) with Stravinsky's *The Firebird* Suite (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=HDqR1qHLKEc**). This might even form the beginning of a discussion on why composers use solo, unison or octaves to open a work, and how the use of these textures might be made even more arresting when you examine how tessitura, tempo, rhythmic complexity, dynamics or articulation have been applied (all ideas worth squirrelling away for students' composition work).

Performing and rehearsing

By bringing textural language into performance work during the making and rehearsing process, you'll increase students' familiarity with key terms. Challenge yourself to do it – as needed, and in the moment – across genres and styles, whether it's a full-class ensemble with double parts, small group work with one person per part, a purely sequenced realised performance or a blend of sequenced and live.

If you use textural language when directing ensembles and accompanying soloists, students will start to do the same in their own self-guided rehearsals.

- 'Let's go from the bit where you two are in unison...'
- 'Let's go from the tutti section in the middle...'
- 'Let's go from that lovely call-and-response section between bass and piano...'

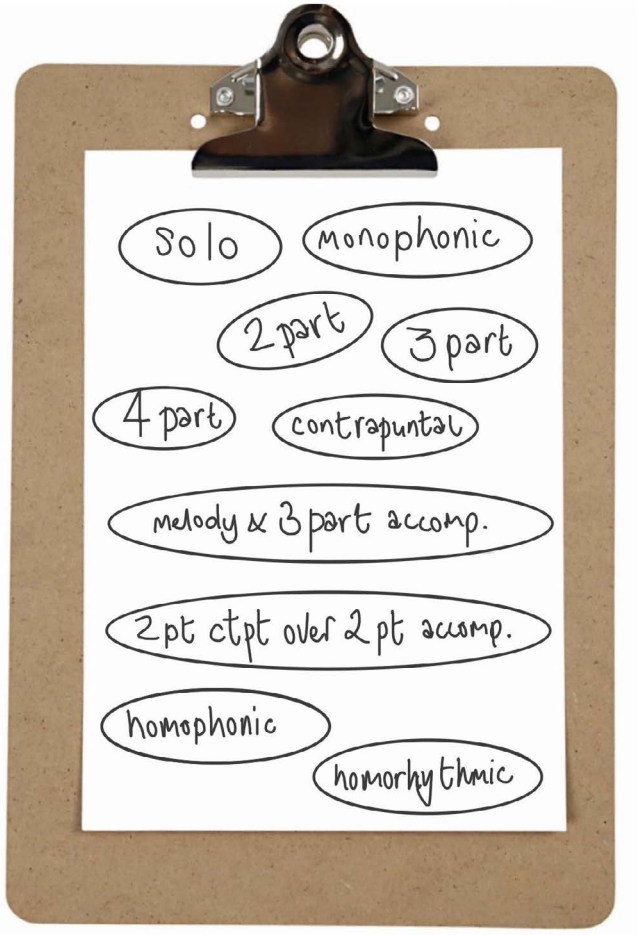
Here are some example texture questions that work with or without conventional notation:

1. When is the texture at its lightest?
2. Where's 'melody and accompaniment' used for the first time?
3. What's the texture in the opening section?
4. How does the texture differ between the opening and this new section?
5. Where does the string countermelody come in for the first time?
6. How can you tell it's a countermelody?

Here's a useful example of a four-part ensemble that can be adapted for a range of pitched single-line instruments, the traditional Danish tune 'Five Sheep, Four Goats' arranged and performed by the Danish String Quartet: **www.youtube.com/watch?v=xO8sdeZFT9g**

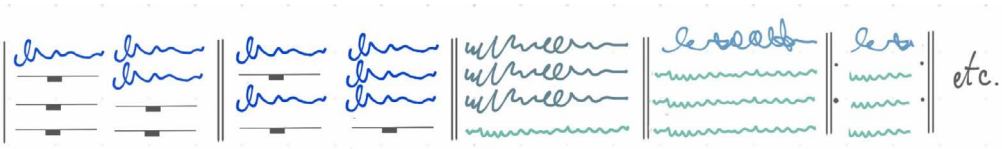
Start by listening to the piece before looking at the score. Provide students with a range of terms. Ask them to discuss what's happening texturally, and perhaps write a handful of bullet points about what happens at particular points. Take one of the texture words, find a complex textural moment, model the term in a sentence, and ask students to slot it into their description.

Your texture term bank might consist of the following for this particular piece:



Once you've explored the piece aurally, support aural identification by taking a look at the score (**https://issuu.com/edition-s/docs/ww-54_score-1sq**) and match textural terms visually to support aural recognition. Talk about how parts relate to one another, why textural change might take place at certain points, and perhaps what other textures the arrangers might have employed and when.

- Highlight each of the textures on screen as you listen with the score.
- Point out the subtle rhythmic pairing of parts, both in melodic and accompanimental roles.
- Model specific textural combinations.
- Use different timbral combinations and talk about what difference that makes.
- Use tessitura or articulation to both highlight and blur combinations of lines.
- Play it, sequence it, arrange it, introduce transposition through it, teach the bass and alto clefs with it.
- Sketch out the texture of the whole piece, screenshot it and save it in a shared drive composition folder named 'Textural frameworks' to begin a collection of hand-scribbled scores:



Developing students' knowledge and experience of where and how to use a particular textural device can have a significant impact on how they think about their own arranging and composing.

As you blur the boundaries between the language of rehearsal and the language of analysis, students will gradually start to hear the layers, combinations and roles, and become increasingly aware of useful ways in which they can apply texture to great effect.

Improvising, composing and arranging

As composers, students will naturally gravitate towards the familiar. 'Melody and accompaniment' is pretty much everyone's compositional go-to texture.

Here's a tried-and-tested 50-minute composing workshop aimed at developing students' textural thinking from that familiar starting point.

How to write a countermelody

Let's say you already have a great melody, great chords and a great bassline, but you need something extra to create structural interest. What you need is a countermelody. Why?

- Countermelodies can transform a piece, providing new harmonic, rhythmic and textural detail.
- They provide a new focus for the listener – we love picking out new layers and lines.
- They provide both contrast between sections and unity across the whole work when used skillfully.

Characteristics of a strong countermelody:

- It can stand on its own two feet and isn't just a broken chord.
- It works with the existing harmony, and complements the original melody.
- It contrasts with the original in terms of rhythm, timbre and tessitura.
- It's used at strategic points in the structure of a piece to enhance everything around it.

Here's a recipe for how to make a successful countermelody:

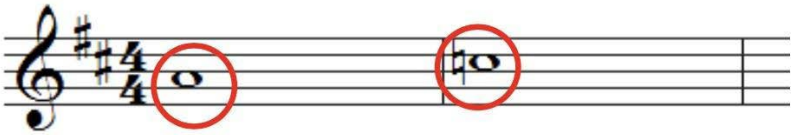
Listen to Robbie Williams's 'Millennium' (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIS_73wkszo**) from 2:28 to 3:46. There are three great countermelodies here:

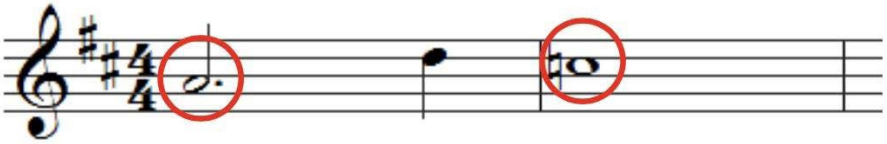
1. unison strings
2. backing vocals ('ooo')
3. horn section

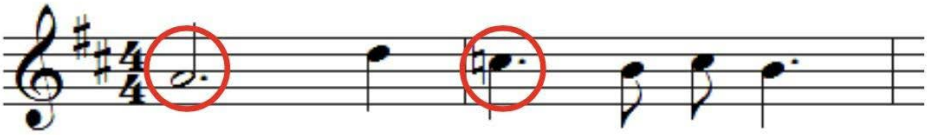
Listen to the extract again and pick out each of these lines. Which of the three lines is the simplest? That's the one we'll work with first.

Here's a recipe for the backing vocals countermelody:

1. Identify the two alternating chords: D (D, F sharp, **A**) and Am7 (A, **C**, E, G)
2. Take a note from each chord (in bold above) and hold it for a bar.
3. Add an additional note from the first chord and use it in the first bar.
4. Decorate bar 2 with auxiliary notes.
5. Use syncopation and/or dotting to give bar 2 a bit of life.



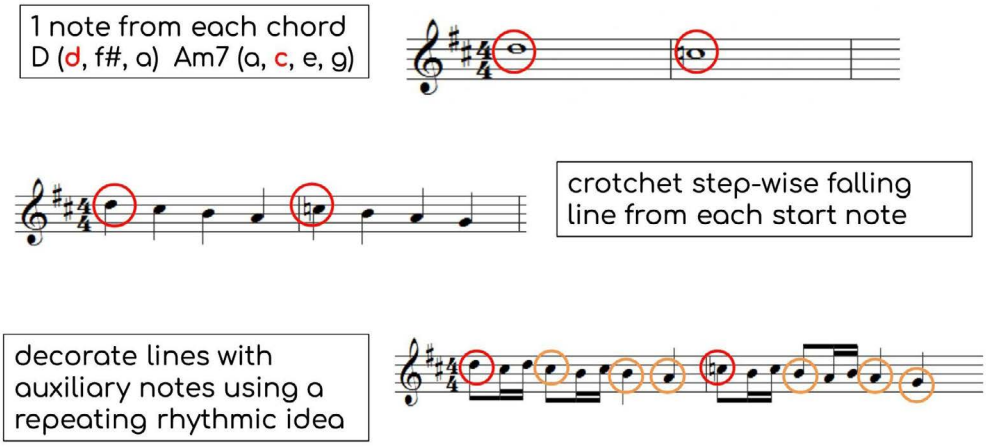




Textural density tip 1: use this countermelody for two bars, then rest for two bars.

Here's a recipe for the unison strings countermelody:

1. Identify the two alternating chords: D (D, F sharp, **A**) and Am7 (A, **C**, E, G).
2. Take a note from each chord and play them on the downbeat of each bar.
3. Create a stepwise falling line from each start note.
4. Decorate the falling line with auxiliary notes using a repeating rhythmic idea.



Textural density tip 2: think really carefully about where you want each of these countermelodic ideas to be heard:

- Which line needs to be used most sparingly?
- Which line blends well with other lines?
- Can all three exist at once (heterophony)?

Generating your own workshops

Use these two workshops to create further workshops on counterpoint, imitation, canon, fugue, call and response, and antiphony, using a similar approach of recipe writing. Here's a playlist to get you started: **https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1dlRdoEF6Ru5lfoQKKVzoW?si=fe13fc1cc8474a66**

If you want to bring all your students with you in understanding what texture is, it can't be done by just using a dry word list. They need to experience hearing, identifying and making specific textures week after week. Like any 'element' of music, texture needs to be kept alive in everything you do, in the classroom, in rehearsals and everywhere else.