

Practical learning using instruments

KS3/4

James Manwaring

Introduction

There are so many key concepts, terms and ideas that we want our students to learn about in music, from learning to understand rhythm to grasping how to write a melody to understanding chord patterns. Some of these things can be unpacked using listening or composing, but other concepts really come to life when tackled practically.

This resource considers how we can use instruments to teach key concepts in music. It will focus on practical learning and how we can best approach it. Although not all instruments will be available to you, some will, and this resource may even give you the impetus to invest in new resources for your department.

What is 'practical learning'?

Practical learning simply means a key concept being explored using physical resources and practical work. This might take place individually or in a group, and it's likely to involve a much more kinaesthetic approach than other learning methods.

Simply put, practical learning is about giving music students a chance to understand something using an instrument. In this resource, we're considering traditional instruments rather than music technology: ukulele, glockenspiel, bass guitar, acoustic guitar and drumkit. I hope, however, that the ideas presented here will give you the support to use any instruments available to you in your department.

We are not learning instruments

In July 2021, Ofsted released a research review (www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-music/research-review-series-music) that's well worth reading. In it, they discuss various aspects of music education and approaches to teaching. It considers how students need to develop 'Procedural Knowledge', and the example is given of students learning an instrument. The review goes on to say that students need substantial amounts of time to practise, and often teachers don't allow for this. It also highlights that for most schools, Key Stage 3 music will amount to around 20 to 40 hours per year, so maybe a maximum of 120 – but sadly this is often not the case. And so, while plenty of time is needed to practise in lessons, it would seemingly be impossible to think that we're going to 'learn' to play an instrument in the classroom.

This resource is therefore not suggesting the use of such language. Instead of learning to play an instrument, we're using instruments to gain knowledge. Students shouldn't be told that they can learn the guitar over the space of maybe a half-term of lessons – it's not feasible, and it's unrealistic. What they can do, however, is learn some skills that will then help them to understand a key musical concept. The hope is that they will enjoy using the instrument in their learning and want to carry on playing outside the classroom, something that we as teachers can and should encourage.

Knowledge at the centre

As you work through this resource, it's important always to think about the knowledge you want your students to gain while they're in your classroom. Consider your current schemes of work and look at what knowledge you impart to them, and when. At this point you can begin to consider what practical options are available to you to help deliver that knowledge. Using instruments to understand music will allow students to experience music, explore instruments and build a deep knowledge along the way. Variety in terms of how students learn and the instruments they use may also help with behaviour management, as you create an exciting and varied learning environment.

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How to approach practical learning

The best way to approach practical learning is to look at your curriculum and then consider your resources:

- ▶ What topics, projects, schemes and concepts do you already teach?
- ▶ Do you include practical work in your current curriculum?
- ▶ Is your current approach more focused on learning an instrument rather than using an instrument to learn?
- ▶ What instruments do you have available to you?

When it comes to instruments, you should ideally have at least one between two students, but a full-class set is advisable. The only exception to this would be a drumkit, although if you happen to have 30 drumkits available, that's certainly not a problem.

Look for moments in your curriculum where you might be able to enhance the learning with some practical work, using some ideas from this resource.

Drumkit

A drumkit is always a popular instrument among young people. It's big, loud, and exciting to play. A drumkit can be used in a variety of ways in a classroom situation, but obviously it's unlikely that you will have enough of them for every student.

So how can a drumkit be used, and what are some of the key concepts that students can learn through practical drumkit work?

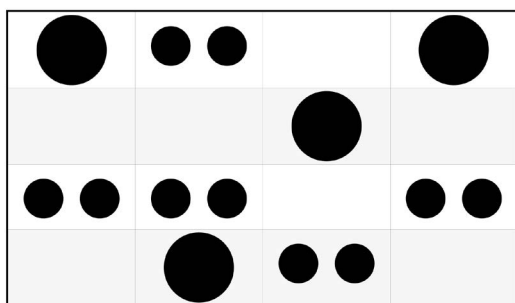
Here is some of the knowledge that can be gained using a drumkit in the classroom:

- ▶ Understand note values, tempo and time.
- ▶ Learn how to read basic rhythmic notation – a good introduction to the stave.
- ▶ Understanding of timbre and the different sounds created by a drumkit.
- ▶ Learn how to create rhythms and develop them using dotted notes and varying values.

Rock beat to rhythmic composition

Teaching rhythm is all about students understanding note values, time signatures and tempo. Creating rhythms with a class can be done in several ways:

- ▶ Stave notation can be used to write, explain and perform rhythms.
- ▶ Rhythms created by students using body percussion and clapping.
- ▶ Rhythm grids can be used to create patterns. Students can assign dots to boxes on a page that can then be turned into rhythms and linked back to stave notation (see the example below).



These simple rhythms can then quickly become short rhythmic pieces of music, and this is where the drumkit can be effectively used. The starting point for this is a basic 4/4 rock beat on drumkit. This beat is going to be used to teach note values and get students thinking about how to create a rhythmic piece based around the drumkit. Here is the basic beat with a drum-fill at the end:

- ▶ Start by getting students to explain what they see, checking that they can recognise the note values.
- ▶ Perform the drumkit rhythm using body percussion:

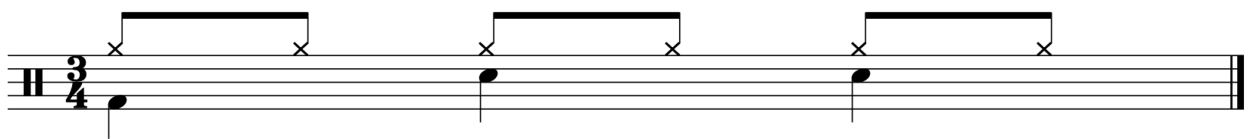
- ▶ Students can improvise ideas for the semiquaver drum roll – they need to try and come up with sounds that are similar to a drum kit, perhaps chest slaps, clicking or vocalisations.
- ▶ Now it's time to use a drumkit to play the rhythm, and it's essential to get as many students trying this as possible. The rest of the class can keep the pulse going or play along with the drummer behind the kit. It will be useful for you to be able to play this basic rhythm in order to demonstrate it to students.
- ▶ Discussion can then take place regarding coordination and how playing instruments often involves coordinating hands and feet. This is where students can begin to see that learning an instrument involves a range of skills and takes time to fully master.
- ▶ Using the rhythmic ideas created above, students can then start to create their own rhythms that can be performed on the drumkit. If you have a student who already plays drums, enlist them to help. These rhythms might be created using music technology, or on paper. The focus must remain on exploring note values and time signatures.
- ▶ You can now start to discuss the impact of tempo changes and how they affect the rhythm. Changing the tempo doesn't change the note values or the rhythm itself – it just makes it faster or slow. Heading back to the drumkit or using body percussion at this stage will be helpful.

Using this basic rock beat is a suitable way to introduce the drumkit, but more importantly introduce some concepts about rhythm. This beat can easily be expanded to involve more note values and variation. Here are two examples:

Drum Set



Drum Set



The next step in this project is to ask students to compose a Grade 1 drumkit piece. There are some useful examples of these online and on YouTube, based around songs including 'Uptown Funk' and 'Another One Bites the Dust'. Taking all their knowledge of rhythm, students can create their own pieces and then have a go at playing them. This will bring them full circle back to the drumkit. Although they haven't learnt how to play the drums as such, they've learnt the key skills and have understood in practical terms what rhythm is and how it can be varied.

Glockenspiel

Now that we've considered rhythm and note values, it seems right to move on to pitch and melody. If you're teaching melody, then you might like to consider using glockenspiels. Although keyboards are often used in music classrooms, glockenspiels don't require power and give students a different perspective. Having one per student is an excellent set-up, although it's also possible for students to share a glockenspiel.

This is the kind of instrument that I am considering for this part of the resource:



Here are some of the concepts that students can learn to understand with the help of glockenspiels:

- ▶ Pitch and how it changes from low to high.
- ▶ Melody and how it's created.
- ▶ Scales – major, minor and pentatonic.
- ▶ Melodic sequences and development.

There are several areas of musical understanding that can be explored using a glockenspiel. It's important to remember, though, that it's about developing musical understanding. What are the students learning about in the lesson? They are not learning to play the glockenspiel, but instead using it to learn something. They will, of course, pick up understanding of the glockenspiel, and they'll need to play it correctly. But the musical understanding is the key focus of the lesson.

Melody in C major/minor

Playing a melody in C major is helpful for students who are starting out with pitch. It's a distinct group of notes, and they will quickly see that those notes are on the 'lower level' of the glockenspiel.

But we also want our students to understand how minor scales are formed, and a glockenspiel also provides a visual way of doing this. Some glockenspiels may allow you to remove notes, leaving only those required for C minor. If not, then visual guides will help students. But you can also allow them the chance to discover the scale through trial and error. Playing it to them and allowing them time to think through what notes they need to play is an engaging and useful task. Instead of simply teaching the theory, allowing students to explore it for themselves encourages them to understand it.

Melodic shape

It's important for students to learn that melody is all about shape, direction and combinations of pitches. Using the glockenspiel, ask your students to create melodies that fulfil different criteria:

- ▶ A melody that includes two leaps in pitch.
- ▶ A melody that contains only three notes.
- ▶ A melodic pattern that descends before rising back to the starting note.
- ▶ A pentatonic melody that only uses the notes CDEGA.

Ukulele

Ukuleles are very popular in schools because they're small, affordable and accessible for most students. The benefit of a ukulele is that it has only four strings, making it quick and easy to tune. There are a huge range of instruments available to purchase, and they're similar in quality and sound.

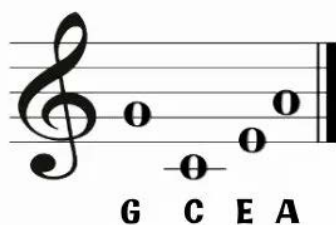
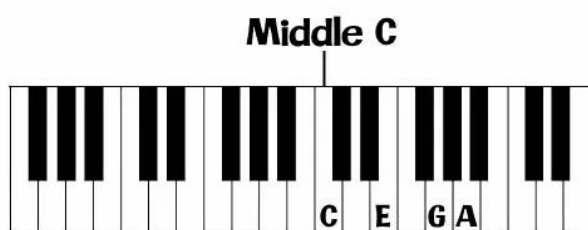
Here are some of the concepts that students can learn to understand with the help of ukuleles:

- ▶ Understand more about pitch and tuning.
- ▶ Learn to recognise intervals – 3rd, 5th, 6th, minor 3rd and major 2nd.
- ▶ Understand how to recognise when something is out of tune.
- ▶ Gain knowledge around triads – what they are, how to create them and what they sound like.
- ▶ Recognise the difference between major and minor triads.

Understanding melodic intervals and tuning

Tuning an instrument is an important skill. A ukulele is tuned to the following pitches:

Soprano Ukulele Tuning (GCEA Re-Entrant)



Getting students to understand tuning will help them to begin to understand pitch and intervals. This is important, because it's a skill that will continue to develop. It's also required for some GCSE and A level exams, where students must complete melodic dictation exercises.

The first three strings that they need to tune form the C major arpeggio or triad, and you should start by singing these notes as a class. Adding the high A string then allows for the introduction of singing a tone interval from G to A.

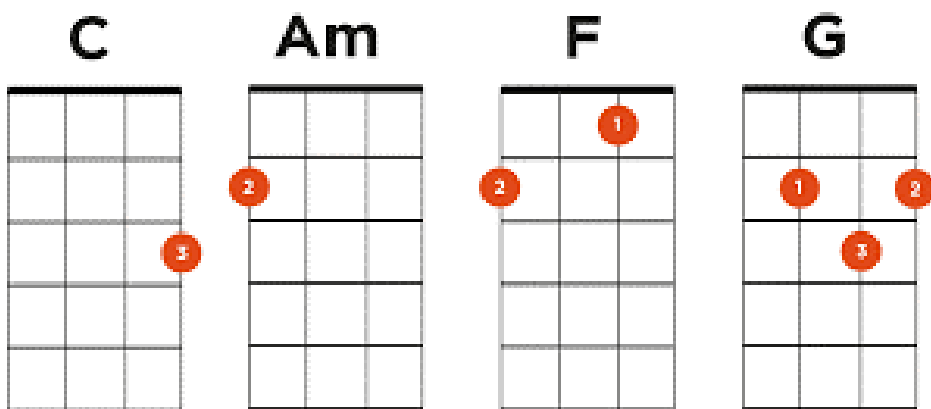
Once students have grasped singing these notes, you can begin to discuss the other intervals that are created by playing the open strings – C to G, C to E, E to G and C to A. This will give students a good basis for understanding melodic intervals, and will help them with their aural training.

Tuning is also a key skill for learning an instrument, and if students want to learn the ukulele outside of lessons, they'll need to know how to tune it. Your goal is to be able to hand out ukuleles and have your class tune them when given the note C by you as the teacher.

Understanding chords and triads

Ukuleles are more than suitable for introducing students to chords and triads. In fact, simply playing the open strings will create a chord of Am7. It's possible for students to quickly learn four chords on the ukulele and in turn understand what makes a major chord sound different from a minor chord. As mentioned above, this isn't about learning the ukulele. Instead, it's about learning four chords through the ukulele, as well as how to tune it.

Here are the four chords that students can learn:



Allow them time to play these chords – the more time the better. And keep the focus on listening to the chords – how do they know they're playing the chord correctly? What happens if they change one note in the chord? What's the difference between A minor and F major, for example?

Once the class can play at least C major and A minor, move the focus to listening to the difference between major and minor. This is an important skill, and something that students will grasp quickly in a practical and aural setting. Get the whole class to play the two chords one after the other. Ask them to listen to the change.

Then move on to looking at chord progressions and how changing the progression affects the sound. Even if a student can't play every chord, they can still contribute to a whole-class performance of a progression or series of chords. C major as a chord should be in in reach of all students, so make sure that everyone participates in any performance work.

Acoustic guitar

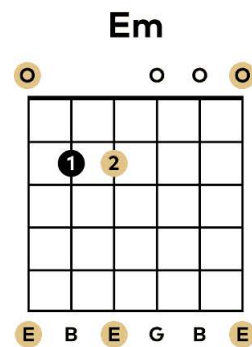
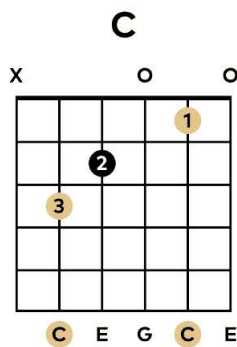
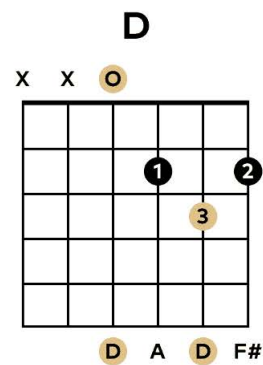
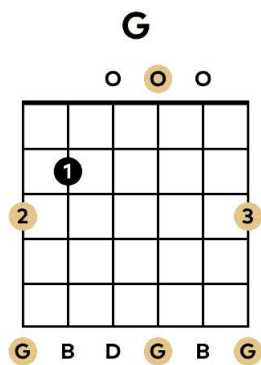
Acoustic guitars make a good progression from ukuleles, because they're bigger and have more strings. You can get guitars in different sizes, and so you may need to consider the age of your class. One guitar between two students works well: they can then help each other out by looking at where fingers are placed on strings. Acoustic guitars work well because they don't need to have an amp. Students may want to use a plectrum, but strumming with their fingers helps to keep the volume down.

Using acoustic guitars in the classroom can help students with the understanding of:

- ▶ Chords
- ▶ Chord progressions
- ▶ Cadences

The progression from ukulele is that we will now work in the key of G major, a good starting key on guitar. This does, however, require students to have bigger hands or to be using a guitar that's small enough for them to hold. If the guitar is still too big for them, then consider moving them back to ukulele.

Here are four important chords that students can learn in G major:



Ukuleles were used to understand chords and progressions, and we can take the same approach on guitars. But you can also add on the understanding of cadences: students can learn to play them and also hear what they sound like.

- ▶ **Perfect cadence:** almost like a full stop in music – D major to G major (V to I).
- ▶ **Imperfect cadence:** more of a comma, where we're left hanging – G major to D major (I to V).

Even if a student can't move from one chord to the next, they can still contribute and listen out for the key knowledge – what does that cadence sound like? They can also consider why chord progressions sound different depending on the order of the chords. This is also possible on ukulele: choose which will work best for your students. In fact, all of these ideas transfer well between guitar and ukulele, but spreading them between the two instruments adds variety for your students.

Bass guitar

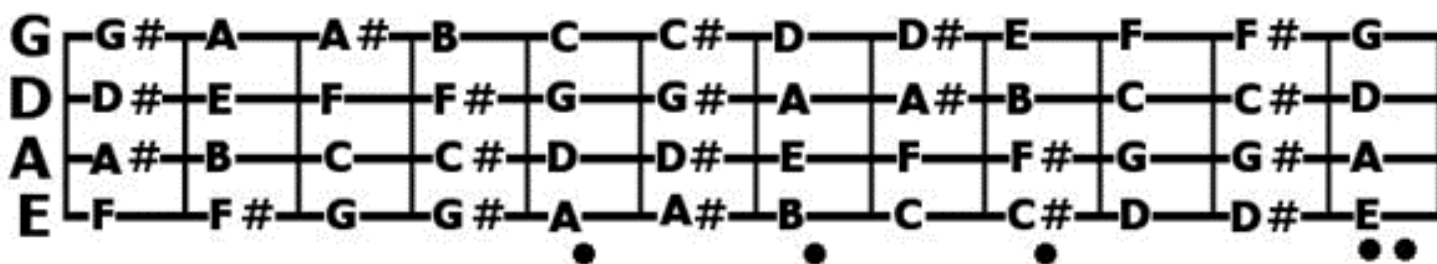
Bass guitars can work well alongside guitars. They come in different sizes, and although they're slightly heavier than guitars, they can still be accessed by upper Key Stage 3 students.

Using bass guitars in the classroom can help students with the understanding of:

- ▶ Basslines, including ground bass and ostinato patterns
- ▶ Chord inversions
- ▶ Bass clef notation

If you're looking to teach any of these concepts, you might like to use bass guitars to help bring the learning to life. A student may find a bass guitar slightly easier than an acoustic guitar because they're playing single notes. They don't need to use multiple fingers to play chords, but can instead focus on the bassline. If you don't have bass guitars, use the acoustic guitar in a similar way, asking students to hold down single notes.

Bass guitars can also be used to introduce students to the concept of chromatic scale, which can then lead on to discussing the difference between a tone and a semitone. The image below shows the notes on the bass guitar: students can use it to find the notes needed to play along with the acoustic guitar chords from the previous lesson.



Ukuleles and acoustic guitars do not require amplification, and can be played as they come. A bass guitar, however, does require an amp to make it enjoyable for the students. This may be a challenge: it can be tricky to find space for 10 to 15 bass guitar amps in a classroom. It's worth considering beforehand how you might make this work.

Combining everything

All the ideas in this resource can be combined to move towards a whole-class band-style lesson. Allow students to choose the instrument they feel most comfortable with.

The drumkit can be used alongside body percussion to create a rhythmic beat. Ukulele and acoustic guitar can combine with the bass guitar to play the chords and bassline. Glockenspiels can then play or improvise a melody in either C or G major.

This process will bring together all the ideas in this resource, and you can then start to look at structure and texture, and how instruments can be used to create both of these elements. A simple ternary form piece is easily possible with these instruments, and you can consider the nature of homophonic texture, unison, call-and-response and ostinato.

Conclusion

We can encourage and help our students to grasp the key concepts in music by giving them practical opportunities to learn. Listening to music is a great place to start, but there's nothing quite like a chance to pick up an instrument. This resource has focused on instruments commonly available, and the hope is that an introduction to an instrument will spark curiosity in the student and lead them to continue playing outside of the classroom. The practical ideas here can also combine to create whole-class instrumental lessons where students continue to explore music using instruments.