Getting started with Cubase Elements 10: part one

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Introduction

This resource is designed to provide an introduction to Cubase Elements. Cubase software has various levels, and this is the entry-level version. It's an affordable piece of software for most schools, and offers great opportunities for both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4.

This resource will provide you with key information on the product and ideas for lessons. There is so much that can be done with music technology and digital audio workstations (DAWs) that it would be impossible to include it all here. But it's vital that if you do invest in the software, you're able to use it quickly and efficiently.

Music technology myth busting

There are a few myths about music technology in the classroom that need to be challenged.

1 **Music tech is expensive.** This is a big issue for many teachers, and in some respects, there's an element of truth in it. To get set up with a classroom of computers isn't cheap. But if you already have the hardware, the software itself is affordable. You don't need to buy the professional version in order to be able to teach with music technology, and you don't need lots of fancy technology. Later in this resource we'll look at what you might need in your music classroom.

2 **I need to be an expert.** You don't need to be an expert in music technology in order to use Cubase Elements. It's a piece of software that you can quickly navigate, and your students will be able to do the same. As this resource will show you, what you mainly need is a good grasp of what you're teaching, and Cubase Elements can support your current scheme of work.

3 **I need rewrite my schemes of work.** No, you don't. Music technology should be used to enhance and support the teaching of music, and you don't need to completely rewrite the scheme. You can use technology to bring a musical concept to life, or for composition skills. Music technology supports listening skills, and also gives students the chance to consider topics such as texture, instrumentation, structure, harmony and so on.

Simply put, music technology in the classroom is an excellent tool for learning. But it must be taught alongside other areas of music, and used to enhance our students' learning experiences. We need to look at technology and see how it can best fit in with what we do and how our students learn.

The basics

Within the boundaries of this resource, it's impossible to cover every step of how to use Cubase Elements. There are certain things, however, that you can quickly learn by watching online videos, especially those on the Cubase YouTube Channel **https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCcQBdibdDxH2ngu3kNPYOEA**. Bear in mind that the versions used in the videos might be different from the version you have, and the software might look different depending on whether it's being used on a Mac or PC. Ultimately, however, the principles and key functionality are the same. Some of these videos jump straight into the deep end, so don't let them overwhelm you.

Like any new technology, or any instrument for that matter, you will need a certain amount of time to get things started. Emphasise this point to your students – music making of any kind takes time. A guitarist needs to be able to plug their guitar in, tune it and replace strings. An oboe player has to think about setting up the instrument and reed maintenance. A trombone player needs to learn how to prepare a slide and make a sound using the mouthpiece. Similarly, music technology is something we have to devote time to learning how to use.
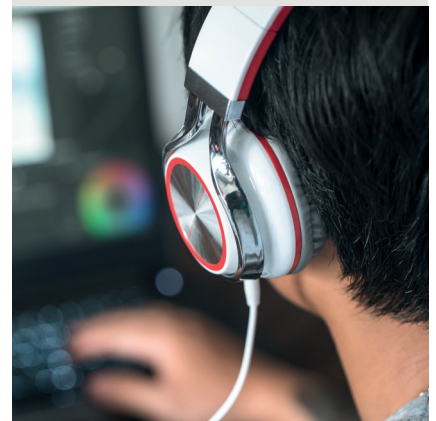
Key terms in music technology

▶ DAW: digital audio workstation
▶ MIDI: musical instrument digital interface
▶ VST: virtual studio technology
▶ VSTi: virtual studio technology instrument
▶ Synth: electronic musical instrument that generates audio signals that in turn convert to sounds.
▶ Loop: a repeating section of music with a set length.
▶ Sampling: reusing a section or sample of music in another recording.

What can I use Cubase Elements for?

Cubase Elements has a huge amount of potential, but as a music teacher you need to know what you'll be able to achieve before you purchase a copy. Here are some of the things that you'll be able to do with your students:

▶ Create a piece of music using the loops and samples that come with your copy of Cubase.
▶ Create your own drum loops and patterns.
▶ Create your own samples and use them within a piece of music or to create a piece of music.
▶ Record your own audio from an instrument or voice (requires Audio Interface).
▶ Create a chord pattern using chord pads facility.
▶ Play in a melody and edit it – this can be done using a MIDI keyboard or just using a computer QWERTY keyboard.
▶ Create a piece of music virtually using a drum pattern, chord track and melody.
▶ Add simple effects to a piece such as panning, reverb, delay and fade in and out.

What do I need to get started?

To get started you need a copy of Cubase Elements 10, which can be purchased from a range of different suppliers. Once you have the software – and a computer, of course – you can get started straight away. Using just the software and a QWERTY keyboard, you can start creating music using the bundled sounds, samples and VSTis.

You don't need anything else, but of course in an ideal world there a few other bits of equipment that you might like to obtain. If you can only get the software, then start there and build up the other stuff as you can.

The list below shows what I have in my classroom at school: this is not necessarily the best or recommended kit or set-up, but it might help you in your decision making:

▶ Headphones: Sony MDRZX310 foldable headphones. These headphones fold up nicely and sound great, and students respect them enough that they don't break them. Buying headphones that are really cheap can be counterproductive. These are also easy to pack away and store if you're not using a music room for your music tech lessons.
▶ MIDI keyboard: AKAI Professional LPK25. This keyboard is a great size for a classroom, and in terms of collecting in and storing if you're moving to a different room in the school for your music tech lessons, as well as good plug-and-play functionality. Start with a single keyboard to make sure it works as you want it to with school machines.
▶ Audio interface: Steinberg UR22mkII Production Pack. This pack gives you all you need to record directly into the computer and start creating music using acoustic instruments and vocals. Because it's produced by Steinberg, which also produces Cubase, it works quickly and easily with that software. Get one to start with (at the moment I only have one, for my teacher's machine), and obtain more when you need to record more widely.

Your first project window
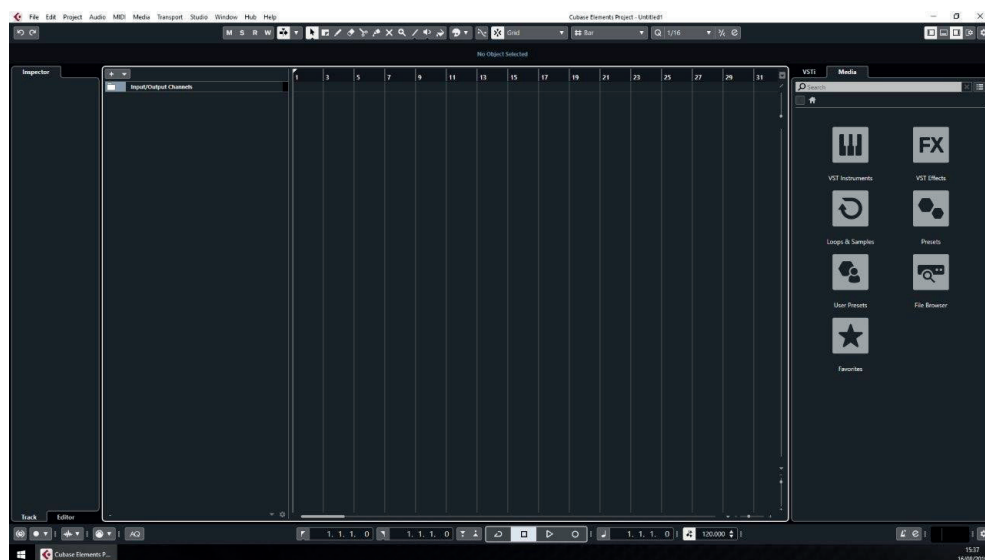
This screenshot shows an empty project window, which is what you will see when you launch your first project.

On the right-hand side, you will find the VSTi & Media section. This is where you can find your instruments, loops and samples. Cubase comes loaded with some great sounds, samples and loops – more than enough for a Key Stage 3 class to enjoy.

The main part of the window is where you will create your music, and begin to layer your chosen sounds. This is your blank canvas, and you'll quickly start to fill this area with sound.

At the top of the screenshot you'll see some tools that we will be using to select, draw and cut: an arrow, pencil and scissors. At the bottom of the screenshot is the play bar, and this is also where you can find information on bars, time and tempo.

Sounds, silences and structures

Cubase is a similar to Garageband in that it comes with lots of pre-made loops that can easily be dragged into the project and used to create music. We're going to start with Loops and Samples, which is great way to get to grips with the software, and of getting students using the software.

This first project is about asking students to create a piece of music using loops. They will be required to open a project and select Loops to form a piece of music. The piece will be in ternary form, and should explore one particular style.

When students click on the loops within the media panel, they will find a huge range of different options. The screenshot below shows the coloured boxes that they click on to find the loops:
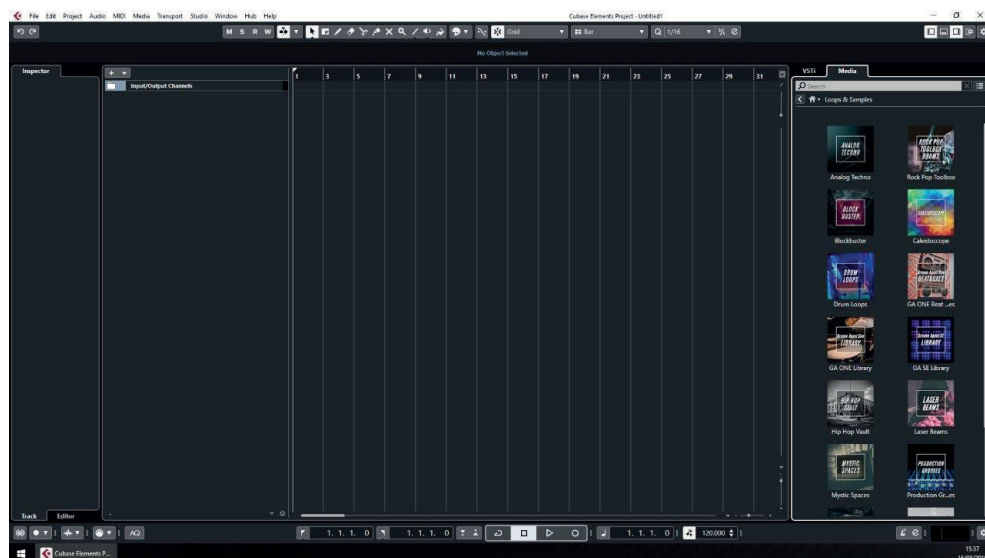
Here is a step-by-step guide that you can use with your students, and adapt as you need to: ultimately, this project is about getting familiar with Cubase.

1 Open Cubase, and select an empty project.
2 Within the media panel, click on Loops and Samples.
3 Listen to as many loops as you can, to work out what you want to use. You should aim to create music that has a clear sense of style and structure. Avoid using the first loop you hear, or the one at the top of the list. Explore, listen and select.
4 Once you've found a loop you like, click and drag the loop into the project. A new line will be created.
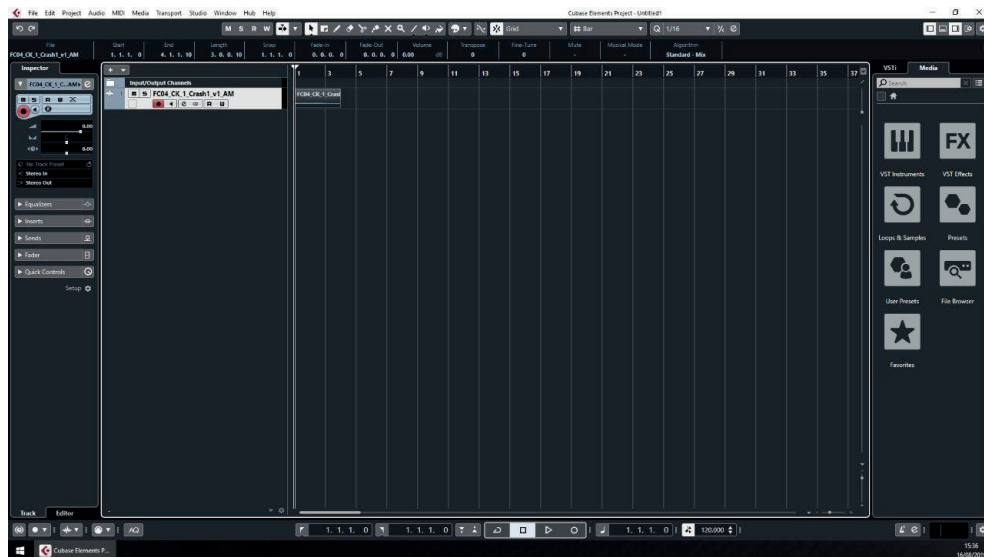
5 You'll notice that a loop is only a short section of music, and the 'block' that has been created in your project is only short. If you want a loop to continue for longer, you will need to copy and paste the loop after the first time it occurs. You can also ALT-click-drag a loop to create another copy of it.
6 Repeat this process with other loops until you have all the parts you want for your piece. Every time you add a loop, it will add a additional line to your project.

Students will very quickly pick up how to drag and drop loops, and how to form a piece of music using loops. Strress to them that it's fine to use loops, but only in a musical way. Spend two or three lessons engaging with loops, depending on the class and lesson length. They should be encouraged to avoid anything that sounds random and unorganised, and you can judge how musical they are being. Some simple questions can help them assess their loop-based music:
▶ Why did you select this loop? What did you like about it?
▶ What does this loop bring to your piece?
▶ Does your piece have a sense of balance? How did you achieve this?
▶ Does your piece have a clear sense of structure, and how did you achieve this?

Creating your first drum pattern

Working with beats and drum patterns is really rewarding, and something that students enjoy. You can intersperse it, too, with some theory on rhythm and metre. Spend three or four lessons on this project, depending on how much theory you weave in.

There are various ways of creating beats in Cubase Elements. Students will have already come across pre-made loops that are beats, but now they are going to create their own beat.
1 First, start a new empty project in Cubase Elements.
2 Navigate over to the Media section on the right-hand side, but instead of selecting Loops, select Instruments.
3 The instrument we are going to be using is called Groove Agent SE. Select Groove Agent, which will open up a library of drumbeats. We are going to create our own beat, but first let's have a look at some of the beats that are already on offer. Groove Agent comes loaded with beats that fit each different part of a song. Choose one of the kits, for instance Break Me Down, and double click on it to launch the Groove Agent window:

4 Click on Pattern to open up the patterns window for Groove Agent SE:

5 The circled section of the pattern window above allows you to select different parts of your song and then start to create your own beat. By clicking on the 'dial' you are able to select an intro, main, fill and ending beat, and add them to your piece. The smaller blue circle on the right shows where you need to click in order to add your chosen pattern to your project window. In essence, you're using pre-recorded parts of a drumbeat to start to create your own beat. This screenshot shows that I have added the 'Main' pattern from the kit named 'Alive' to my project window, highlighted below:


We have now taken a step closer to creating our own beat, and we're beginning to interact with the instruments that come with Cubase. But now we should go a step further and start to edit the beats themselves using Drum Editor.

Using Drum Editor

Drum Editor allows you to start changing exactly what the drums play. In essence, we can decide which drums play, and on which beat of the bar.

The screenshot below shows the drum editor window for that 'Main' beat that we added in the previous section. Click on the main beat, or any beat that you've added to your project, and then go to the Drum Editor, which can be selected via the MIDI menu at the top of your Cubase screen.
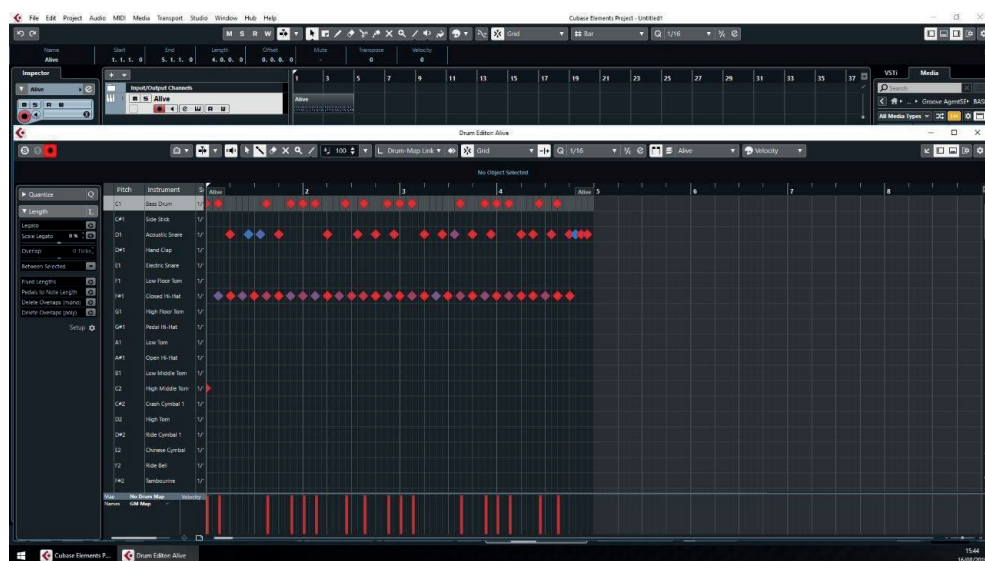

You can now see what this pattern looks like in Drum Editor. Each little diamond represents a beat on a particular drum. At this stage you might like to look at a rock drumbeat using Drum Notation to show how a beat is put together. You could also turn to score writing software such as Sibelius or Dorico to show how a basic drumbeat is broken down. In Drum Editor, we can start to dissect the beat and then create our own.

On the left of the Drum Editor, you will see a list of drums. To use it, it's simply a case of clicking on

the beats to the right of this list to add beats. Clicking on one of the existing diamonds will allow you to delete it by using delete on your QWERTY keyboard.

Now we've explored the Editor, let's create our own beat.

1 Select a drumkit from the Groove Agent SE menu, and double click on it to add it to your project.

2 This time, instead of using a pattern within the instrument, we're going to create our own. In order to do this, we need to use our pencil tool and draw in what are essentially blank bars of music: The pencil tool can be located at the top of the Cubase Screen:
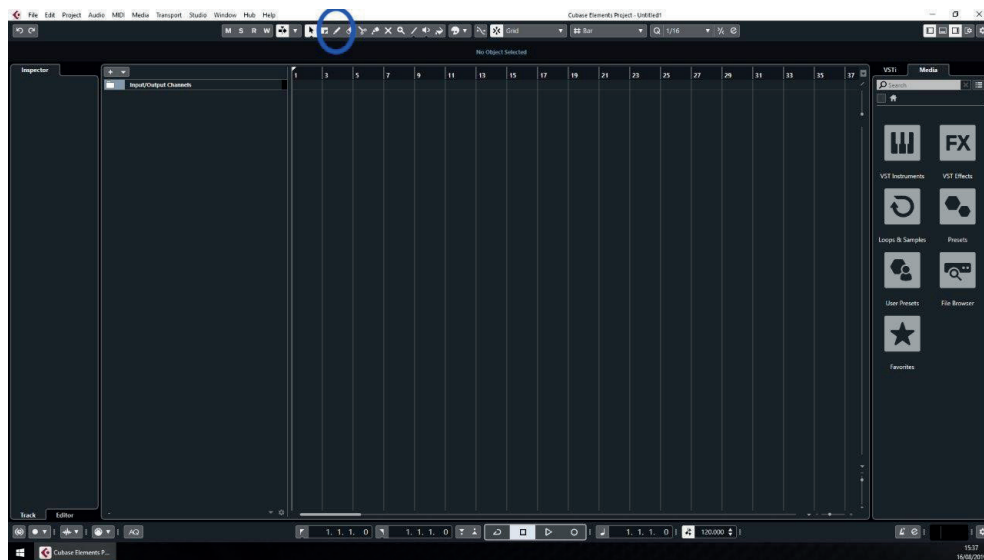
3 Now that we have a blank section of music, we can open the Drum Editor (located in the MIDI menu) and start to put in our own beats. Cubase has lines that run vertically down the screen to help indicate the subdivision of beats and bars.

4 The aim for this project is to create your own drumbeat pattern. Once you have one part of your beat, you can copy and paste it, thereby creating the following part. Having already looked at the pre-made patterns within your chosen kit, you should have a good idea of what makes a good intro, main, fill and ending beat.

Working with Drum Editor will help students engage with the idea of creating music by clicking on the screen to indicate where they want something to happen. This will show them that they don't have to be able to read music, play the drums or have piano skills to create music.

You can also couple this work with a look at drum notation. Showing students a drumbeat written out using drum notation, and then allowing them to re-create that beat in Cubase, is a great way of bringing theory to life. Students should leave this project with a clear grasp of rhythm, beats in the bar and how to make great drumbeats.

Conclusion

This resource is designed to be an introduction to Cubase Elements, and has been unavoidably selective in what it covers. In part two, we'll look at how you can start to build up a four-chord song using Cubase's Chord Pads feature. **MT**