



## **Musical Composition - creative expression for young people**

School-age children and teenagers learn to become articulate through education in writing, discussion and visual art. However, musical composition is a less acknowledged and infrequently taught form of personal expression.

Musical composition gives young people a creative voice and develops their own sense of identity and confidence. Once a young person is confidently engaged in the process of musical composition, it can be inspiring and absorbing for them.

It is not difficult to acquire some simple compositional tools, and there are many of these available. There are also many different starting points. Musical composition is a highly individual form of expression and different composers respond to different stimuli.

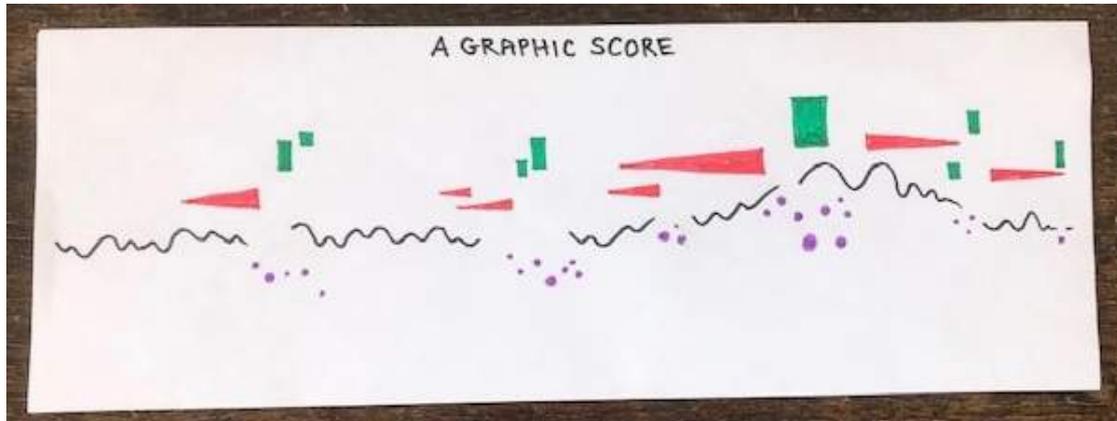
In early stages there are lots of tried and tested ways of working which may be helpful. I shall describe a few of these, in the hope that composers and teachers will evaluate them and contribute new ideas of their own. Between us we can begin to build up a library of useful composition teaching resources which can be used by teachers and young composers all over the world!

This document is aimed mainly at music teachers who are working with a group of school-age students. The teachers and/or the students may have had little or no previous experience in musical composition. They may have few resources. However, the material I am going to share can be adapted for use anywhere – in a bare room with tables and chairs, or in a fully equipped computer studio running top-of-the-range compositional software.

From the outset, it is vitally important for young people to both hear and see their compositional efforts as often as possible. It is very helpful if there is a good musical performer present to play everything written. In many cases, this can be the teacher.

Music can be created through improvisation, performing, listening and writing. Voices and or instruments or sounds created from the environment may be used.

Music may be written in notation or drawn as shapes, colours and diagrams. Here is an example of a graphic score which can be used as a starting point for performing or composing at any level of experience.



A music teacher may also be able to **transcribe** compositions created by young people which are too complex for them to notate by themselves.

For all young people studying composition, it would be very helpful indeed if they could also spend some regular time outside the composition class working through the ABRSM Theory grades. This may or may not already be happening in their musical establishments.

Students should also be encouraged do as much improvisation as possible! This can be organised by the teacher at the beginning or end of the lesson, and can be highly enjoyable for the students, as well as reinforcing the work done in class.



*Young musicians in Guyana learning how to improvise*

The Commonwealth/International Composition Award team will work closely with all organisations involved and help them to develop a composition teaching programme that is perfectly suited to their students, teachers and resources.

## Lesson 1 – composing drum rhythms

Learning to compose with crotchets, quavers and their rests

Dynamic levels *p* and *f*

Introducing the idea of structure in a musical line



### RESOURCES NEEDED

- A teaching white/blackboard or large sheet of paper
- At least one small drum or other unpitched percussion instrument
- Enough sheets of 1 line/stave manuscript paper for each student (give web link to resources)

### Warm-up games and activities.

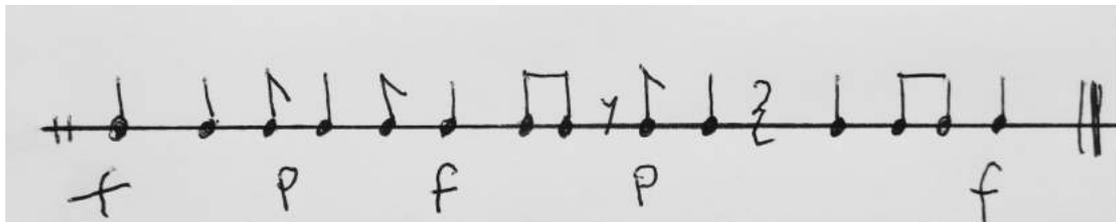
- Write the note values of a crotchet, a quaver, a pair of quavers, a crotchet rest and a quaver rest on a board where everyone can see them (*these can be written on paper if no board available*)
- Explain and demonstrate to the students how the values work.
- Use these values in a ‘call and response’ game where the teacher plays short drum rhythms mixing up the values and students clap it back. Do this several times, starting with just one or two values then gradually making the passages longer. Try and ensure a high success rate.
- Give the students a sheet with one-line staves on it. Get them to draw each of the values accurately on the staff.
- Play a drum rhythm and get them to write it down

- When they all have it, explain how dynamic levels *p* and *f* work and demonstrate. Make them write one of each under notes.
- Play the passage again, with different dynamic levels which they have to fill in

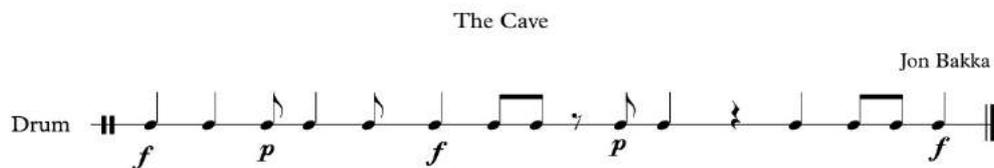
### COMPOSITION TASK

Students use the sheet of paper with a single line stave. They each compose a short drum piece using the values and dynamics learned. No time signatures or bar lines yet. However, students should be encouraged from the outset to give their pieces titles and to put their own name as the composer in the usual place.

Example of a student's drum piece composed by hand.....



..... and also written out using Dorico composing software



Teacher should play the drum pieces to the students, making them sound as exciting as possible indicating natural divisions in the piece where strong beats are implied (this will introduce the idea of bar lines).

### Variants and possible extended work

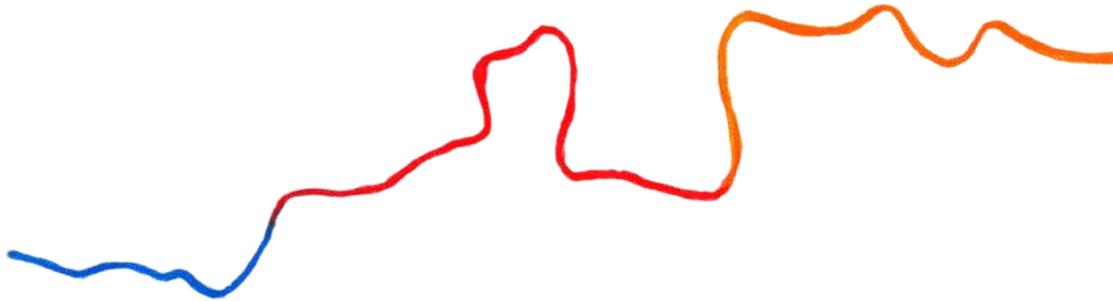
- Students could all have their own drums to work with for this exercise. They might also be able to play their own pieces.
- After composing the pieces, students could work in pairs playing their drum pieces together whilst starting at the same time, creating counterpoint.
- A small informal concert of all the pieces could take place at the end of the session for members of the group
- The pieces could be recorded.
- There are lots of different ways to make this introductory lesson fun.
- It would be very helpful if the teacher can research online and play the students one or two drum solos performances. (Youtube)?

Parallel ABRSM Theory material used - Grade 1

This exercise can be developed each week, reinforcing previously learned rhythmic values and adding new ones, plus new dynamics. Always use active imitative movement games like call and response using clapping or drums with learning how to write information correctly on paper.

**Needed – Video recordings of pieces using all these elements, played on different kinds of drum, featuring both boys and girls.**

## **Lesson 2 – Composing a melodic line**



Learning how to compose a musical line using graphic shapes initially and then moving to simple notation on 5 staves. Creating rhythmic ideas and using them as ostinati in a texture.

### *RESOURCES NEEDED*

*A teaching white/blackboard or large sheet of paper*

*A competent musician with a single-line pitched instrument who can read musical notation and improvise (can be the teacher)*

*Sheets of strips of plain paper for each student*

*A five-line staff for each student*

*A graphic score and a notated score of a single melodic line (see web link to resources).*

### **Warm-up games and activities**

- The instrumentalist will play short melodic fragments, and students will all clap (or sing) them back. If they are to sing, care should be taken to keep the melodic fragments within the vocal range of the students.
- Choose one of the student names (or use the teacher's name) and the teacher and students work together to create a rhythm for the name, shaped as closely as possible to the way it is spoken.

**Names can be composed as simple rhythms, repeated as ostinati and built into a chant**

Rhythmic names

Sam Sam A - li - son A - li - son

3

Ste - ven Ste - ven A - nna - be - lla A - nna - be - lla

NOTE ; the rhythmic shape of some names may suggest upbeats and anacruses. The teacher may choose to avoid these, or maybe write them out in a more simplified way.

- Once the name rhythm is created, the group chants it four times as an ostinato. Repeat with another student if necessary. Each student is then asked to do the same with their own name.

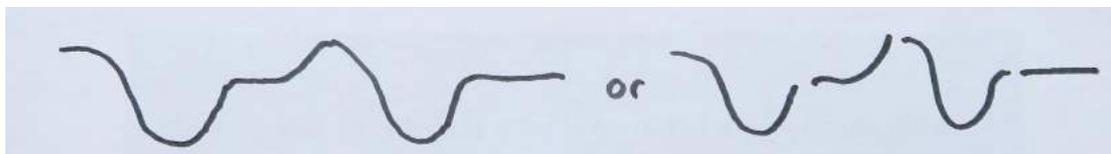
**Example of a name repeated 4 times as an ostinato**

Ca - ro - line Ca - ro - line Ca - ro - line Ca - ro - line

- Stand in a circle. Each student chants their own rhythm/name four times as an ostinato. Immediately after this, the instrumentalist plays whatever the student chants as a short simple musical fragment.

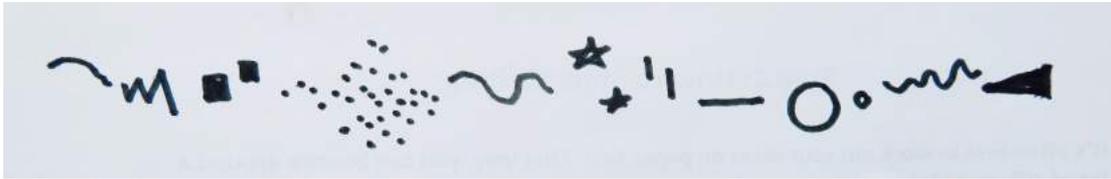
Ca-ro-line Ca-ro-line Ca-ro-line Ca-ro-line

- As this is happening, the shape of each melodic fragment played by the instrumentalist will be drawn on the board as a line by the teacher



- The teacher, player and students can now work together, asking the player to create sounds and choosing shapes to represent them. These will be drawn/written on the board.
- Teacher should explain to the students what a graphic score is, and produce one to show them. They should also be shown a piece of notated music for the same piece as the graphic score, which should ideally be a single melodic line. Teacher encourages students to compare them.

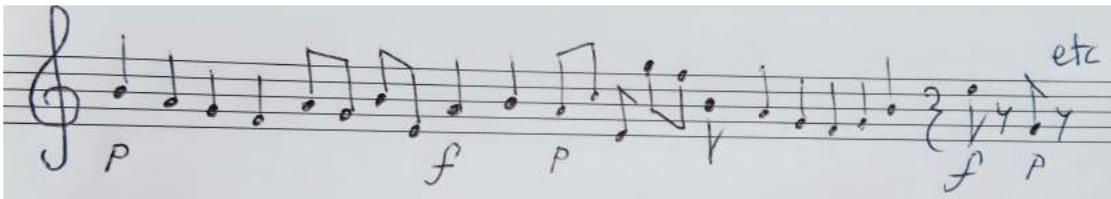
**Composition Task – students are given a sheet of plain paper and asked to create a graphic score for the player. This can be all in pencil or black pen as below, or if preferred, the students can use colour**



### **Example of a graphic score**

**Player ‘performs’ the graphic lines expressively and colourfully, always asking the students afterwards for feedback and suggesting possibilities for additional structure and dynamic contrast.**

Students are then given a five stave line and the teacher demonstrates to them (using crotchets, then single quavers, then pairs of quavers) how notes can move around on the staff, using lines and spaces. Look at the way stems work. (directed up or down). Students should try and write a section of their graphic line on 5 staves using the skills they have learned so far.



**Example of part of the single-line graphic score in the above extract turned into notation based on material learned so far.**

Instrumentalist will play this material through for them.

NOTE : If during this exercise, the students ask to use longer/shorter notes, or express a need for different ways of playing them, the teacher can introduce material to be learned in lesson 3. This can occur naturally, as the need arises.

### **Variants and possible extended work**

- **A small informal concert of all the pieces could take place at the end of the session for members of the group which could be recorded**
- **If there is a teacher and an instrumentalist present, then they could do an exercise playing each student’s graphic score together, sharing the material between them.**
- **Two players could also play the students’ notated fragments as a canon, starting at different times**
- **It would be helpful for the teacher to find some online examples of solo pieces to play to the students.**

Students can be encouraged to create different graphic scores

### Lesson 3 - Percussion rhythms, time signatures and rhythmic structures. Learning about 2-part writing and counterpoint.

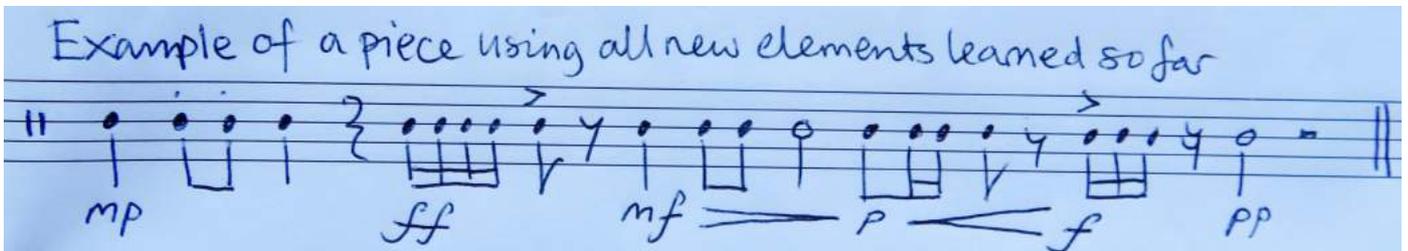


#### RESOURCES NEEDED

*A teaching white/blackboard or large sheet of paper*  
*A competent musician with an unpitched percussion instrument who can read music and improvise. Should NOT be the teacher if possible.*  
*2 stave manuscript paper – one sheet of each for every student.*  
*A second percussion instrument (different) for the teacher*

Learning to compose with semibreves, minims, semiquavers and their rests, 4-4 3-4 and 2-4 time signatures and dynamic levels *ff*, *pp*, *mf* and *mp*. Also starting to use accents, staccato, diminuendo and crescendo

- 1) Do a call and response game reinforcing the crotchet and quaver rhythms and rests learned in lesson 1. Use the musician to play the 'call' extracts
- 2) New rhythms to be learned are minims and semiquavers and their rests. Demonstrate these on the board.
- 3) Get students to try composing a rhythmic piece using everything they have learned so far.



- 4) Teacher can clap or play the student rhythms, whilst the instrumentalist improvises over the top of them.

- 5) Do very simple aural tests in 4-4 getting them to write down sequences – example - minim, 2 crotchets, 4 quavers, 8 semiquavers, then gradually mixing them up more. Use the musician to play the aural tests.
- 6) Explain the purpose of a time signature to them and show them 4-4, 3-4 and 2-4
- 7) Show the students how to conduct in 2, 3 and 4 and get them conducting (all together initially) the musician who will improvise in these time signatures.
- 8) Use the musician also to demonstrate crescendo, diminuendo and a wider dynamic palette with the teacher conducting. Write everything on the board as soon as it is demonstrated.

**Composition Task - students to write a short musical 'conversation' for two percussionists in 4/4 (allow them to use time signatures of 2 or 3 if they ask).**

**This is suitable for 2 stave manuscript paper.**

**Use the example of a conversation between two people to explain counterpoint. Discuss with students the kind of interaction that can happen in a conversation and how this could help to create musical ideas.**

**As they are composing, remind them of the wider dynamic palette. *ff*, *pp*, *mf* and *mp*. Also remind them about crescendos, diminuendos, accents and staccatos. Try and get them using everything in a short piece.**

Instrumentalist and teacher will play the pieces through for the students. As the duos are performed, musicians should emphasise the conversational element of them strongly.

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### Variants and possible extended work

- **A small informal concert of all the pieces could take place at the end of the session for members of the group which could be recorded**
- **Students may be able to rehearse and perform their own pieces if there are enough percussion instruments available.**
- **Students could be encouraged to conduct their own pieces as they are being performed.**

- It would be very helpful for the teacher to find online examples of duo performances and play them to students - either from the Western Classical tradition or from their own cultural background.

## Lesson 4 – Texture and timbre and simple writing for the voice



### RESOURCES NEEDED

*A teaching white/blackboard or large sheet of paper*

*A competent musician with an unpitched percussion instrument who can read music and improvise. Should NOT be the teacher if possible.*

*1 sheet of 5 stave manuscript paper for each student, writing materials, scissors and glue*

*1 graphic score (downloaded) for each student to perform and analyse*

*1 graphic score blank document (downloaded) for each student or paper for them to create their own.*

Learning how to compose for voices. How to create a semi-graphic score. How to create and combine vocal sounds, based upon a soundscape.

### Warm-up games and activities

- Teach the students the chant 'Uba-Chaka Sa Sa' (available in resources)

Chant 1: u - ber cha - ka sa sa u - ber cha - ka sa sa u - ber cha - ka

Chant 2: u - ber cha - ka sa sa u - ber cha - ka sa sa

Chant 3: u - ber cha - ka sa sa u - ber cha - ka sa sa u - ber

Chant 4: u - ber cha - ka sa sa u - ber cha - ka sa

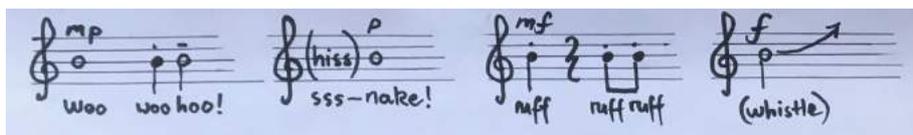
- Sit or stand in a circle and try passing vocal sounds around the circle quickly – ‘Hsss’ ‘ Bzzz’ ‘Tck’ ‘Boing’ etc. They will probably find this amusing. Try sending more than one sound around the group quickly and keeping them going. Change direction.
- Try some rhythmic sounds – for example use individual voices to create the different elements of a drum kit and combine them together in different ostinato patterns.
- Ask everyone to create their own vocal sound and turn it into an ostinato. Try combining them by adding one person at a time so that the texture builds up.

Using the board to demonstrate, choose a note that is comfortable in everybody’s vocal range and write it as semibreves, minims, crotchets, quavers and semiquavers on 5 staves, using a treble clef (explaining this if necessary).

Also choose a ‘Soundscape’. This could be a factory, a rainforest, a marketplace or anything they like. It could also be their own environment if the lesson is happening in a place where there is an interesting natural soundscape.



Using the chosen note, ask students to invent short sounds with their voices which could suggest the chosen soundscape. Teacher should compliment all good ideas but choose sounds can be notated in ways that the students can understand. Write them on the board. See examples below. Try and write the sounds exactly as one would normally write vocal music.



Suggest that the teacher chooses between 6 and 10 different short sounds

Students will make their own copy on manuscript paper of every sound written by the teacher on the board.

Teacher will show them an example of a 1-minute score 'Machine' for 6 voices created from simple vocal fragments and they will try performing it together.

**Machine**

1  $f$  Boom tik-a tik ping! (Repeat)

2  $mf$  chung chung chung ..... (Repeat quickly)

3 (Whistle)

4  $f$  Rer chou herchou herchou (Repeat, steady, not too fast)

5  $mp$  der-ge der-ge ..... (Repeat continuously with short breaks)

6  $mf$  to-ca-pa to-ca-pa (Repeat)

6 voices, each using high, medium and low pitches in their own vocal range.

Vocal range  
 ○ high  
 ● medium  
 ○ low

10"  $f$  Boom tik-a tik ping! (Repeat) 20"  
 35" Boom tik-a tik ping! (Repeat) 45"  
 50" Boom tik-a tik ping! (Repeat) 60"  
 0"  $mf$  chung chung chung ..... (Repeat quickly) 30"  
 45" chung chung ..... 60"  
 25"  $f$  whistle once 25"  
 40" whistle 2 or 3 times 50"  
 55" whistle 60"  
 10"  $f$  Rer chou herchou ..... 40"  
 50" Rer chou ..... 60"  
 0"  $mp$  der-ge der-ge ..... (Repeat continuously with short breaks) 60"  
 5"  $mf$  to-ca-pa ..... 15"  
 35" to-ca-pa ..... 45"  
 55" to-ca-pa ..... 60"

0" 10" 20" 30" 40" 50" 60"

A one-minute piece using experimental vocal sounds

After performing it, the teacher will discuss this score with students – how the vocal fragments are combined. How they can stop and start at different times and be repeated. How they can move at different speeds. How dynamic levels can create variety and interest. How the voices can be pitched high, medium and low to create more character and contrast.

**The graphic structure with small manuscript blocks on the left can be recreated easily by the students, or prepared and copied in advance by the teacher to save time.**

**Composition Task – students will use a graphic score structure**  
**Each student will choose a theme. Using high medium and low pitches in the voices, they will create and write down interesting vocal fragments**  
**Using the 'machine' piece as a model, they will each try to create their own piece**

When the pieces are finished the teacher will choose one or two for the group to perform. Ideally this should happen before the end of the session, but it may be necessary to quickly photocopy the pieces first. If this isn't possible, then the pieces can be collected in and tried out during the following lesson.

Here is a very helpful link for vocal writing

Kerry Andrew – voice <https://vimeo.com/album/942863>

### Variants and possible extended work

- It may not be possible to have enough time to perform and record all these pieces, but try to run through and record at least one of two of them at the end of the session.
- They might be interested in watching the presentation by Kerry Andrew (see link)
- Some students may wish to use more than three voice ranges in their pieces. If they are capable of doing this, it should be allowed.
- Some students may also try to create new fragments of their own. This should obviously also be facilitated if possible.
- It may be possible after the lesson for the teacher to combine several pieces written by the group into one continuous piece for them all to perform.
- Students may want to make up their own chants, based upon the idea of 'Uba-chaka Sa Sa'

### Lesson 5 – more about melody and 2-part writing, use of a mode and an introduction to the idea of harmony.

#### RESOURCES NEEDED

- A teaching white/blackboard or large sheet of paper
- A competent musician with a harmony instrument. This could be a piano, a guitar, a harp, an adungu, a sitar, a kora or whatever is available. The musician should NOT be the teacher. The instrument must be tuned to a system which can be notated clearly on 5 staves.
- A sheet of 5 stave manuscript paper for each student.

Students will learn more about melody-writing and start exploring simple ways to create harmony.

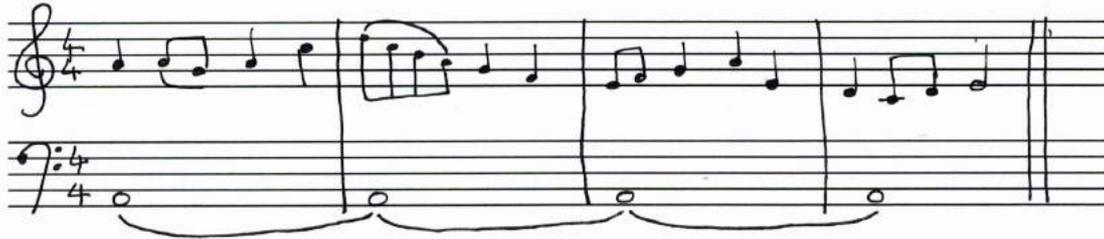
#### Warm-up games and activities

- The instrumentalist will play a pre-selected group of 7 notes from lowest to highest slowly, one at a time. As the notes are played, the teacher will write them on 5 staves on the board as semibreves, with their letter names underneath. It will be helpful to the students if the 7 notes can run A B C D E F G (A) (Aeolian mode). The teacher will number them 1-7.
- Students will be divided into 2 groups and asked to quietly hum A and E (1 and 5) as a kind of continuous drone. They will also be given some directions by the teacher who will conduct the piece.
- The instrumentalist will improvise a melodic line, using the 7 notes of the scale over the drone. Teacher will conduct the piece, creating the texture.

Hand gestures can be used to give variety to the drone, or to bring in different vowel sounds like ' ah' 'oo' 'ee' . The time signature can be 2, 3 or 4.

Teacher will show the students a piece of music similar to the one they have just sung and encourage the students to comment about what they see. They should be able to identify how a melody works against a drone.

### Example of an Aeolian melody against a drone



**Composition Task – the students will be given a 2-part rhythmic structure in 4/4 to add a melody to. The melody will be based around the 7 notes of the Aeolian scale which have been explored. Students will be allowed to choose any notes from the scale.**

**The upper part will be shorter rhythmic values than the lower part. There will be some combinations of quavers and semiquavers which have not previously been used, and occasional dotted notes. These should be explained and demonstrated.**

**Students will be given advice about how to arrange the notes, stems and beams as they are working.**

Write out the rhythms below, adding a different pitch to each note as you do so

Towards the end of the session, the instrumentalist and teacher will play the pieces through and comment on them as the students finish.

### Variants and possible extended work

- **Students can be asked to create their own rhythmic structures**
- **If students play instruments, they may be able to include themselves as performers in their pieces, maybe alongside the teacher.**
- **If there are a number of students with instruments, the teacher could direct improvisation sessions with them, based around melodic lines and drones.**

Nowadays, composition lessons often include a combination of work using written and graphic notation, instrumental improvisation and composing software. Young people enjoy composing using software because it facilitates much of the process for them. However, we would strongly encourage teachers to encourage them also to work by hand when composing music, especially in the planning stages.

We would also strongly recommend that students learning to compose are also given lessons in ABRSM Music Theory alongside this. It will help them to gain understanding and fluency when composing their own music.

<https://us.abrsm.org/en/our-exams/music-theory-exams/>

It is definitely possible to learn how to compose music to a high level without any computers or software at all. This is how it was done for hundreds of years! If music schools or organisations do not have computers, this is not a problem. However, if these resources are available, they can help to greatly facilitate score and part-writing.

We may be able to help and support organisations who cannot afford nor source computers and composing software.

Please contact Sam for more information [s.buttler@purcell-school.org](mailto:s.buttler@purcell-school.org)



# Free Composing Software

There is a free notation software program called Musescore, and it is available for mac or pc.. The sound is usually not the greatest, but you can also look for SF2 sound files on the internet and load them into the program.

We are currently working with Dorico, a new composing software company who may be able to offer free support to students in our pilot countries

Composing software

[Musescore](#)

[Dorico](#)

[Sibelius First](#)

[ScoreCloud](#)

[Noteflight](#)

[Flat](#)

And here are some free soundfonts. These can be used with Musescore to get a better sound out of the program:

<http://nando.oui.com.br/pages/soundfonts.html>

<http://www.schristiancollins.com/generaluser.php>

Other interesting links

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMs3LTtgwY8>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=prdHCPdkg4w>