

## Session 2.4

# Facilitating Composition With Your String Ensemble

with Karen Kyriakou

### Why compose?

Students enjoy making up their own music, and encouraging creative thinking should be a part of our daily practice as instrumental teachers.

Teachers generally are quite positive about the prospect of incorporating composition into their classroom and ensemble settings, but often feel ill-equipped to teach or include compositional activities in their curriculum. This is likely because composition and improvisation may be quite removed from the experiences teachers have had in their own learning and professional practice.

Few teachers confidently provide compositional activities into the string setting, and yet composing offers some of the most rewarding musical experiences for students. When composing in the classroom environment, students learn to trust their ears, apply their known skills, take risks on new skills (less pre-determined notions on what the music 'should be') and improve their musical intuition. Developing strong musical instincts in students should be a priority for all music teachers.

Compositions need to be performed so that students know that the activity is valued. Students play technical work under performance situations, so it is easy to justify the performance of the students' original work in our concerts or assessments also. Performance is generally the intended outcome of instrumental teaching, be it formal, social or otherwise, so to approach composition as having equal importance to that of technical work and repertoire in the curriculum makes sense.

Composition and creative activities also channel engaging ways to explore technical and musical elements. Set a task that focuses on a single technique in a creative and exploratory way; for example composing in a new key, composing with hooked rhythms, the use of specific bowing techniques, etc. Students are likely to engage with enthusiasm in an apparent 'low-stakes' environment, and they are more likely to be relaxed when trying newly learned skills.

Composition facilitates high levels of enjoyment for students and teachers alike, and students always do better when they are enjoying what they are doing.

### Teaching Tips

- Keep the activities student driven
- Reflect through each creative stage
- Allow time to create and time to respond on the sound and the structure of their work.
- Give students time to explore before committing to a plan
- Ask students for ideas and try/road-test them.
- Provide activities that promote musical thinking but do not need a 'right' answer.

# Composing With Your String Group

some ideas & tips for you and your class or ensemble.

## Ideas for Composition

- Soundscapes
- Limitation of notes, then expand range
- Orchestrating selected rhythms
- Creating and layering loops and grooves
- Body Percussion creating a framework
- Combining melodic fragments
- Creating underscoring to pre-composed melodies (rhythmic or melodic)

Ask students to **describe** their composition. This develops an awareness of **musical language** and vocabulary and in turn, ideas.

Thinking about music, reflecting on music and discussing music will lead to new insights.

Keith Swanwick (1994)  
'Musical Knowledge: Intuition, Analysis and Music Education.' London. Routledge.

Is the composition experience for the **listener** or for the **composer**?

Students will embrace the idea of having opportunities to express themselves musically.

## For the Teacher

Maintain an environment that is enjoyable, so that creativity 'flows'.

Start composition activities with creative games & activities that stimulate creative thought.

Allow time to explore before ideas are set and committed to.

Know before-hand what it is you wish to achieve with your composition activity;

**Theory-based activities** tend to have 'right and wrong' outcomes.

**Process-based activities** can help students in their creative thinking & musical development.

Use composition free from notation. Memory and aural skills are important. Making music without reading notation is a liberating skill for all musicians.

Set time limits for creative tasks, as sometimes creativity knows no bounds!

*"...thinking in sound and being able to appreciate and convey artistic expression through music... There is ample proof...of the creative urges and ability of all children and its power as a medium for learning."*

Philip Priest (1989)  
"Playing By Ear: Its Nature and Application to Instrumental Learning."  
British Journal of Music Education. 6,2,173-191

Ask students for their input when composing in groups. Students need to contribute meaningfully to their own compositions and creative work.

The teacher uses their skills and knowledge to facilitate good musical outcomes.

# The 60-Minute Symphony

- Karen Kyriakou

## Warm-Up's & Exercises

Warm-Up's & exercises may need to be teacher-centred.

They should create a positive environment for learning, with the full participation of the class. Warm-Up's accommodate all levels and abilities.

Warm-Ups & exercises are ideal for introducing any new concept for the class - a new rhythm, groove, scale, song, etc.

## Recipe

Warm-Ups  
Exercises  
Create/Compose  
Perform

Discuss  
Develop  
Perform/Record

## How to Start

There are no precise rules. Use **simple musical games** to begin with - clapping patterns, with the teacher modelling first. Never under-estimate how difficult clapping a 4-beat rhythm may be for some students.

**Keep the pace** activities and games moving along, and make sure everyone is participating.

Change activities when the class is **playing/clapping/moving together** in time.

Incorporate **body-movement** in the warm-ups.

Students spend a lot of time sitting down; most music classes require students to sit down to play. Students can orchestrate rhythms with their own made-up body percussion ideas; Clap, Stamp, Knees, Cheeks, Hips, Shoulders, etc., and then re-orchestrate on their instruments.

## Clap, Stamp, Knees & Play!

Invent a rhythm (Rhythm 1). Two bars of 4 is a good length. Students can help with this.

Learn it; clap it, say it, etc., as a class (in unison) until correct.

Remove a note and make a rest. Try a few ideas until one idea is selected. Orchestrate the rhythm.

Divide class into 4 groups. (Rhythms 2 -5.) Each group needs to invent their own rhythm the same length as the Rhythm 1. Use a rest! The groups will demonstrate their rhythms then orchestrate them.

Allow time to practice this. The groups will perform their compositions to the class.

### Performance Idea # 1

Everyone plays Rhythm 1. Each group takes it in turn to perform their rhythms and the whole class joins in for Rhythm 1, which becomes the chorus. Explore the form RONDO with this approach. Try again with the orchestrated version. Take advice from students to develop this activity.

### Performance Idea # 2

Try different combinations of groups together. Listen and see which rhythms work well together and why. Do some interlock well? Do some have unison moments? Have students conduct different groups in and out of playing their rhythm. Use this whole section as an 'A' section then create a new contrasting section for the 'B' section — consider the use of improvisation, textures, solos etc.