# LISTEN – IMAGINAGE - COMPOSE

# Sound and Music (SAM) Project

**Creative collaborative practices for empowering GCSE composing as creative learning**
Project Team: Pamela Burnard (researcher), Bex Lewis (teacher) and Tim Steiner (composer)

> 'We shall make lively use of all means, old and new, tried and untried
> deriving from art and deriving from other sources, in order to put
> living reality in the hands of living people in such a way that it can be
> mastered.' (Brecht, 1995 [1938]: 189)

## INTRODUCING THE PARTICIPANTS AND THE RESEARCH FOCUS

This paper presents a snapshot of an exploratory case study in teacher education, creative collaboration and creative learning in the context of GCSE composing. The case is a detailed study of one research entity (GCSE composing, practised as essentially a set of practical activities involving composing, performing and listening) at various points in time across a six-month period (two terms). It reflects upon the value and development of creative collaboration (Meill and Littleon, 2004) as a fundamental social process and on creative collaborative practice across the domain of music composition teaching developed between the composer, Tim, the GCSE class music teacher, Bex, professional performers from Britten Sinfonia and the GCSE student composers.

***The school,*** Parkside Federation, a secondary academy school with 600 children aged 11-16, is located on two sites in Cambridge (Parkside and Coleridge) It gets well above average results in GCSE – the best for state schools in this area. It has a dynamic music department which is well known for its resourcefulness, outstanding quality, inclusiveness and creativity. The Music programme is excellent. It caters for students who are capable musicians with musical aspirations but also inspires and caters for the diverse needs of all students, whether formally trained or not.

***The music teacher,*** Bex, is in her eighth year of teaching as a secondary music specialist. The year she started was the year Parkside Community College became Parkside Federation and took over Coleridge Community College. Bex expressed great interest in this project because of the many complexities and challenges she had experienced teaching GCSE[1] composing. In discussion of her practice, she emphasised (a) the time constraints that encroach on teaching composition 'successfully', (b) her lack of confidence, ideas and pedagogic strategies (particularly in planning for progression) in teaching composing to GCSE students; and (c) the lack of resources to promote both personal expression and individual voice and engage in the complexities of creative processes and creative learning. Her ambition for her students is for them to 'strive for excellence', 'become musicians' and 'work as composers'. Bex felt composing was a particular 'weakness' which she wanted to

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[1] General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is an academic qualification awarded in a specified subject, in this case, music, generally taken by students aged 14-16 in secondary education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

learn to both do and teach more confidently. Her own ambition, as a GCSE teacher of composing, she explained was to develop confidence and identity as a composer. This was the outcome that she hoped for in participating in this project. As the head of department, Bex strives 'to expose students to a variety of music and musical experiences, facilitate a love of learning, discovery and creativity, and to inspire and awaken her students' minds to the belief that anything is possible.'

*The composer*, Tim, a mid-career composer 'with 25 years teaching in contexts including primary and secondary schools, further and higher education (GSMD, City University), adult education (Goldsmiths College)'. When reflecting on the complexities and challenges of composing, Tim emphasises the need to develop students' confidence and ways of thinking as composers. He is motivated by the 'unique artistic opportunities of any given context. The value of art is intrinsically linked to context. The challenge of making work in any time and place which is fundamentally inspired by the conditions of that time and place is infinitely inspiring and stimulating. There is no ideal context. All contexts are the best.' Tim passionately believes that composition should not be taught as a 'genre-based discipline assessed according to characteristic traits of these genres'. He believes in the development of the individual personal voice of the composer and their desire and ability to embrace context. In the course of the project he shared diverse tools and techniques for working as composers with the students, whilst at the same time giving them freedom to determine how they work best as composers. Tim believes that the world of popular music is likely to be the best starting point with most students. Tim also emphasises that if teachers are to understand composing they need to share, pool, collect and document 'their own experience as composers journeying' along with their students; in this way they will be able to explore the tools and technologies that best support and nurture GCSE student composer's creative learning. In order to support the development of the students' composer identity and empower students to take more time to experiment, take risks, and pay more attention to performance details, he arranged for two players from the Britten Sinfonia to come to two of the GCSE composing class sessions. Opening up the GCSE music classroom to guest composers, performers and others, allows both teachers and students to experience the personalised dimensions of composition and enhances their motivation and interest in GCSE composing.

*The professional players* are seasoned players used to playing new music as well as heritage art, and were keen to work with students' drafts and revisions. Of the two class sessions they attended, the first involved each player working for 10 minutes with each student composer rehearsing their part (together with the group for whom they were composing a piece). The second session was the final recorded first public performance of each student's newly composed and individually directed piece of music. Each piece magically appeared to mature, even after the first rehearsal with the professional players, so that when it was played and recorded, two weeks later, with a listening audience of classmates and class guests, some alchemy had occurred: a development of identity and confidence, ownership and a transference of skills and understanding. It was clear that both the students and teacher had been inspired and extended as composers

This project addresses three key questions.

1. **How does 'GCSE composing' facilitate 'creative learning'?**

Understanding 'GCSE composing', within the field of artistic human endeavour and the context of this study, involves learning through participation and through the creation and performance of new pieces (i.e. compositions). It is a way of learning strongly associated with popular and classical music; it is socially acquired and developed disciplinary knowledge particular to a school-based curriculum, interconnected within educational contexts, and related to examination board criteria. 'Creative learning' in the context of this study is defined broadly as 'simply any learning that develops our capacity to be creative' (Spendlove and Wyse, 2008:11[2]); it is related specifically to the capacity to generate, reason with and critically evaluate novel ideas. Both 'GCSE composing' and 'creative learning' provide valuable theoretical perspectives on the teaching of composing as well as useful tools for evaluating practice when composing is used to further creative learning in music (Burnard, 2011, 2012, Burnard and Lavicza, 2010))

2. **How does *creative teaching in and through* 'creative learning' enhance composing?**

This question explores the broad conceptual distinction between *teaching in* and *teaching through* creative learning. Although the two constructs overlap to some degree, they provide an indication of specific elements associated with pedagogic strategies of composing that pertain to music. *Teaching in* creative learning focuses on the creative learning which happens within the specialist subject of music. *Teaching through* creative learning looks to outcomes that are extrinsic to composing within an educational context. These two categories of *teaching in* and *teaching through* embody different approaches to pedagogic aims, content and curriculum organisation. *Teaching through* creative learning is about the specific use of creative learning experiences and the way in which the learning outcomes are formulated in assessing composition (and performance) creativity. *Teaching in* creative learning focuses on the intrinsic rather than extrinsic benefits of engaging with the creative process. For example, the intrinsic benefit of engaging with the creative process, whether or not in the context of creative learning, is the act of composing and the object of composition (Sefton-Green, Thomson, Jones and Bresler, 2011; Thomson and Sefton-Green, 2011; Craft, Cremin and Burnard, 2008).

3. **To what extent does creative collaborative practices of teaching GCSE composing enhance (improve) teacher and learner confidence in GCSE composing?**

The literature shows that teachers and students experience contradictions and tensions that are at the heart of formal learning settings, especially in the case of practices followed in the formative assessment of composing in GCSE coursework. Very often the teaching and learning of musical composition and approaches to composing in schools are far from open and often detached from the 'real-world' journeys of student's informal experience outside of school. Additionally, GCSE composing is often heavily framed within specified musical

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[2] Spendlove and Wyse Chapter, 'Creative Learning: Definitions and Barriers' in Craft et al (2008:11)
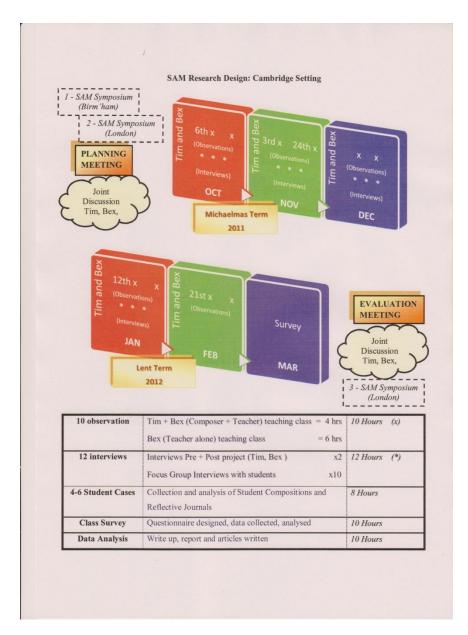
styles that link to particular assessment purposes classified by examination boards (Fautley and Savage, 2011). Research has also revealed: analyses of classroom interactions that privilege assessment boards' (rather than students' and teachers') subject position; unclear conceptual understanding of what constitutes creativity and creative learning; and a need to develop sharper insights into the processes of composing and the progressions involved. Both students and teachers lack confidence composing; they don't see themselves as composers; they often see composing as intentionally collective in nature rather than characterised by individualised goals and targets; and therefore they find it difficult to rise to the challenge of individual composition (rather than group composition). (Whilst the normal mode for teaching and learning composing at KS2 is in groups, there is no adequate mechanism which allows for progression from group composing, which is the norm, to individuated composing.)

This case study has **three key questions**, outlined below:

1. What practices promote creative learning in GCSE composing?
2. What approaches to GCSE composing feature in and characterise the teacher-composer collaboration?
3. What are the potentials and implications of these practices for enhancing the teaching and learning of GCSE composing?

**INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH DESIGN AND CONTEXT**

This classroom-based research project used the methodology of a case study. The case study is 'a versatile, qualitative approach to research which enables understanding and insights of a complex issue or object. It is an attractive research method because it has 'face-value credibility', which means that it can provide evidence or illustrations with which readers can readily identify' (Demetriou in Wilson, 2009:203). The case boundary was the collaboration between a GCSE class music teacher and composer (and researcher). A wide range of data-collection methods were used. Data were collected throughout a six month period with multiple sources of evidence drawn from group interviews, observational/descriptive data, digital video data, student journals and their musical compositions (i.e. the collection of physical artifacts and archival records of rehearsals and performances) (Wilson, 2009). The use of multiple cases, each exemplary cases treated as single cases, focus on the reflections of 3 students selected to represent a variety of students who participated in separate group work activities. A plurality of composition tasks were devised collaboratively by Tim and Bex, along with many options, in the early and mid-planning phase discussions of the project. The commission task was framed within a specific musical style for particular compositional assessment work purposes by an examination board in combination with what was specific for the students in terms of their progression and motivation.

**SAM Research Design: Cambridge Setting**

| 10 observation | Tim + Bex (Composer + Teacher) teaching class = 4 hrs | 10 Hours (x) |
| | Bex (Teacher alone) teaching class = 6 hrs | |
| 12 interviews | Interviews Pre + Post project (Tim, Bex ) x2 | 12 Hours (*) |
| | Focus Group Interviews with students x10 | |
| 4-6 Student Cases | Collection and analysis of Student Compositions and Reflective Journals | 8 Hours |
| Class Survey | Questionnaire designed, data collected, analysed | 10 Hours |
| Data Analysis | Write up, report and articles written | 10 Hours |

Phase 1 of the project took place across three months (October to December, 2011) involving 3 visits by the composer. Phase 2 took place over three months (January to March 2012) involving a further 3 visits by the composer, plus two visits by the professional musicians. The project began and ended with individual interviews with the composer and the teacher.

Each student was involved in:

1. *Whole class ensemble workshops* led by Tim, the composer. What struck both Bex and students in these practical music making sessions was Tim's facility to brainstorm and communicate multiple musical ideas and musical possibilities – being able to transform from what is to what might be, quickly and easily, by wondering 'what if' and multiple opportunities to act 'as if', for instance: how a simple set of notes can be varied, their relationship within a structure, their transfer to other instruments and application to different genres; and formal-informal boundary crossing, making changes and sustaining the impetus of ideas in the process of putting a new piece

together. An important theme in these workshops and Tim's discourse generally is the 'voice' of composing and composers and the potential for taste, personal preferences, genres, traditions and styles of music to give inspiration, impetus and new identities to an emerging piece.

2. *Song-writing in pairs.* The 'voice' of composers, song writers, singers and bands and the creative opportunities offered by pluralities of activity, materials, idea sources and of experimenting with a partnering player present and contributing to sustained engagement in being the composer/song writer and in developing new forms of performance practice, were emphasised. Students enjoyed being able to link their work instantly with multiple relevant examples of diverse styles which Tim was able to draw on through YouTube, Vimeo, and use of ipods and ipads From the students' perspective there was a general view that they felt empowered as composers in a democratic space, where all ideas are welcome, where ideas are shared, musical opportunities imagined can be explored and experienced through improvisational co-expansion both extended through rich paired working and generating building blocks (early drafts) which lead to the commissioning of a personalised composition task.

3. *Individually personalised commissions.* The main compositional task was personalized, *focused* both on the needs of the individual student and their interests and *framed* by the exam board, Edexcel, whose criteria for assessment included demonstrating a specified contemporary style. Individual tasks ('commissions') were discussed, developed and 'commissioned' by Tim and Bex after spending 2 hours viewing and critically reflecting on video materials of each student's work in progress, particularly their individual song writing. This meeting between teacher and composer involved: scrutinizing and negotiating each other's views about students and ideas about progression; and sharing and evaluating feedback from previous snapshots of performances showing the students' progress in GCSE composing. The commissions (tasks), specifically tailored and designed to meet the interests and needs of each student, to expand on their own sound vocabulary, were delivered in a named envelope addressed to each composer. Students were then required to form small groups where each composer would act in a Director role, generating content, focusing their ideas into a piece, and directing/rehearsing their group. Pieces were to be notated to preserve them using any form of notation. The professional musicians were well briefed by Tim to act in a mentoring role, helping out with performance decisions, encouraging consideration of different performance methods, but not to generate new material.


## PRACTICES, PROCESSES AND PLURALITIES

The analysis of data collected over the first and second phases of the project identified three key themes which are characterised by three key points that we have learnt through this project. These themes, amongst many, are as follows.

*Creative collaborative teaching PRACTICES*

➢ **The Ensemble Workshop Form:** Ensemble work is a key part of any performance-based school music programme. The ensemble provides the basis for young people to develop the complex levels of musical and social knowledge required to produce the collaborative social art which comes from acting together[3]. Tim, the composer, promoted active learning, drawing out students

➢ ' creativity, and fostering exploration, experimentation and playing with ideas by engaging students in whole class ensemble workshop activities. The <u>ensemble workshop form</u> positions composing as an activity of experimenting, trialling, exploring, developing and combining ideas and it reflects several aspects of contemporary music and compositional practices. These practices are characterised by processes which are relational, and beholden to the participatory skills, interests, enthusiasms and performance contingencies of the particular class, the instruments played (in this case a circle of electronic keyboards) and the students' motivations. The workshop form that Tim developed formed a key part of his modelling strategy for emphasising: open-ended participatory exploratory processes; composing as contemporary composers with their interdependence on each other; and the underlying (and contextualising) values of a real-world music workshop (whose pedagogy differs considerably from that of a music lesson in a typical GCSE composing classroom).

➢ **The emergence (and 'voice') of young composers - a discourse of empowerment - inspiring 'real' composing**: During interviews with students, a pile of photographs – still shots from videos taken during the lessons – were laid out on a table. Students were free to search for examples to illustrate their points. Student participant commentaries about the Workshop Form, reflections from video capture of drafts, and the tasks set as commissioning briefs for even the briefest 2-note exercises introduced students (and Bex, their teacher) to the recognition of what constitutes real world practice as composers. Bex made lively use of ipads as a means to share old and new drafts, using tried and untried sources, in the co-expansion of compositions.

➢ **Digitally documenting/recording composing processes and playing new scores: maximising composer reflection on the playing and performance of their piece.** Composers and players need each other: theirs is a symbiotic relationship. Some players run a mile from new music and prefer to bury themselves in Bach and Beethoven, just as there are composers who avoid interpreters and write for machines. But, by and large, composers – whether they are professionals, students or teachers – need players simply so that their music

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[3] The social knowing which comes from acting together in an ensemble reflects Friere's concept of 'indispensable' knowledge: 'The kind of knowledge that becomes solidarity, becomes a "being with". In that context, the future is seen, not as inexorable but as something that is constructed by people engaged together in life, in history. It's the knowledge that sees history as possibility and not as already determined – the world is not finished. It is always in the process of becoming' (Friere, P. (1998:72). *The Pedagogy of Hope'* New York: Rowman and Littlefield.

can be heard. This is also true of learning environments where, as with this study, GCSE composing emphasises the written music the composer provides for the performer. In this project, it was the digital dimension for which composer Tim introduced new possibilities concerning being able to generate the notes, the durations, the dynamic markings, etc. – all crucial elements for the professional players to work with – while extending the reach of students' agency as composers. The players then interpreted the music, offering different ways of playing and conveying its emotion and character, thus introducing the dimension of performance creativity as a fundamental tool that helps make sense of music, gives it character, makes it come alive and lift off the page.

**Appendices A-to-C, Photos 1-to-3- HERE**

*Creative learning  PROCESSES  on becoming composers*

➢ **Asking questions of composers and questioning their revisions:** Tim set up the student composers in groups. The task was for each group to compose music to be played by the instrumentalists / vocalists in that group. Composers were given the role of Directors – a role given to each composer to provide leadership for a small group of players whose members rehearse and play each other's pieces. Players and composers need and rely on each other. This help and reliance encompasses: understanding the composers' values; helping the process for composing; enhancing the identity of the composer; and gaining and using trust to push the boundaries on compositional and performance creativity. For some, the role of Director in the context of a rehearsal situation was 'like working with trusted friends', 'being in a community of like-minded people', 'where you can get lots of supportive and immediate feedback without having to play it safe because of the pressure of being judged and assessment', involving 'give and take and being fluid and open', where 'you could explore risk-taking and failure without consequences', and 'being encouraging to continue trying new ideas.'

➢ **The symbiotic relationship between composers and players.** The composers were commissioned to write a piece and act as the Director of the group they composed for. As composers of new music, the students had to take up the challenge and responsibility for delivering within a time limit using the resources made available to them via the players in their group. Tim provided a model of a contemporary eclectic creative individual – an inspired, enthusiastic, engaged contemporary composer whose taste spanned a wellspring of styles and an expansive range of musical genres. Tim didn't portray himself as the exceptional creative genius but rather acted as a collaborator and facilitator. He promoted a democratic view of creativity, embracing a broadly held belief in empowerment through participation in the creative process. He expressed his dislike of cultural hierarchies, specifically the distinctions made between high art practice and other forms of creativity located outside the discourse and physical locations of fine art. He shared his belief in the

creative potential of all sections of society, and inspired students to see themselves as composers. For both teacher and students, working with Tim and the professional players who allowed students to reach for and achieve at a higher level than would otherwise be possible, gave them access to specialist professional skills and intentions; important for young people and their teachers to consider, yet it also promoted a collaborative relationship with Bex, the teacher, as co-artist. This motivated and encouraged both students and teacher to reach beyond their apparent capabilities and confidence levels as composers, to attain at a higher level than would otherwise be possible (e.g through the Zone of Proximal Development as demonstrated by the professional musicians).

➢ **The relationship between players and composers.** Both professional musicians visited the classroom setting twice, providing specialist, professional performance skills not often seen in the classroom setting. One pupil said 'I was amazed when I heard my composition played by the professional player who played my piece. I felt like a composer for the first time. I felt the power of my intentions'. Composer and professional musicians played different roles (including those of collaborator, role model, facilitator and enabler). Each asked different kinds of questions of the student composers. The professional players, as with the student players in the groups, performed a variety of functions, frequently at the same time as the composer, in mentoring, questioning, and scaffolding students as composers. In addition, seeing individual students work in the role of directors yielded detailed insights into the specifics of the creative learning process, with valuable original ideas being provided by the composer and the performers who modelled composing as an activity and a process, and valued the emerging music as music emerging. Tim described creative composing as 'identifying a pattern that can be broken, a new way to use an already existing idea or taking the influence of another composer and tweaking it so it has a fresh new look'. It is significant that composers' pedagogy was regarded by Bex, the teacher, and the students as the strongest influence on the composing practice ('Composing is something everyone can do naturally and I encourage my students just to dare to be creative and get 'stuck in' practically'), while the professional musicians were regarded as having a strong influence on the composers' identity development ('these students are much more than students doing a school music subject, they are young composer whom I hope come to see themselves as such because of this wonderful project).

**Appendices D-to-E, Photos 4-to-6- HERE**

*PLURALITIES of enhancing composer confidence for both students and teacher*

At the end of the six month project, both the students and the teacher were asked to reflect upon their own journeys. These reflections were captured through focused group discussions, presentations and individual interviews with the teacher, Bex. The main themes identified in their accounts of their learning experiences were: the importance of engaging in workshops,

where they were given permission to try things and brainstorm ideas openly; the benefit of a 'safe space' to trial multiple ideas in response to both narrowly defined and open-ended activities; the potential of playing in workshop ensembles to serve as a critical starting point for the development of ideas; the challenges of judging the value and worthiness of ideas when assessing the worth of a composition in relation to assessment board criteria; the contribution of iTunes, play lists, YouTube and other material resources for sharing and documenting ways of working as composers; and how the challenges of acting in the role of Director and composing for peer groups helped their growing understanding of the need for compromise, improvisation and commitment to notating (in whatever form was necessary) in response to players' needs.

Teachers' reflections on their own perceptions of practice, and learning about their own identity as composers, as well as the composing process, draw attention to the importance of teachers working both inside and outside of the pressures of the GCSE assessment culture. The benefits of technology (e.g. iPads/ iPods) include: making students' work explicit and visible; allowing multiple drafts of students' work to be replayed as often as needed; providing access to a wide range of exemplars; allowing new forms of interaction between composers and players; supporting and enhancing the composing activities themselves; and enabling new interactions between the activities.

The positive contribution and benefits of creative collaboration (between composers and teachers, professional players and musicians) in terms of making 'musician' and 'composer' part of a student-teacher identity and facilitating creative learning in GCSE composing, needs to be recognised and supported by senior management in schools. Given the added value that composers and the zone of proximal development that professional players offer, it is important to move beyond designating the composer as 'special' or uniquely creative, but rather to see the contribution creative collaborations make to developing pedagogies which yield insights not only into what composers do but also into how, and perhaps most crucially, why they operate as they do.

This case study suggests that there is real value and much to be learned from creative collaborations in GCSE learning environments. In these environments the spotlight is on the coming together of music makers in schools and communities; developing symbiotic relationships between composers and players; composing and performing new music from new scores; and the challenge of seeing creative learning in action for both students and teachers in the GCSE classroom programme.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Together we have learnt:

1. Composing pedagogy involves recognising that creative learning and doing composing are interrelated.

2. Composing is a process that needs daily practice

3. Workshops work well in developing collaborative creativity which is fundamental to the compositional process.

4. Visiting professionals offer distinctive and valuable contributions to the development of creative learning through collaborations with teachers

**Key questions:**

1. How can time and resources be found for sustained collaborations?

2. How can creative learning be included and assessed as part of the practices of teaching and learning composing?

3. How is this student composed identity empowerment perspective in tension with the dominant perspective which views children and young people as adults-in-waiting to be composers?

**Implications for practice:**

1. For Bex, that she continues to explore ways of developing authentic composing opportunities for herself and her students.

2. For Tim, that he continues developing new practices for extending and increasing empowerment perspectives and capabilities of children and young people as open minded and practicing young composers

3. For students, that they compose daily.

4. For Pam, that she thinks more deeply about ways of documenting change in collaborative compositional practices and perceptions of change in compositional confidence.

**Unexpected outcomes**:

1. For Bex, the value of ipads for documenting, developing, reflecting on and assessing composition.

2. For Tim, the unpredictability of students' creative responses and changes which co-emerge with blending digital media and engagement with professionals and their approaches to composing and performing new music

3. For Pam, that composers, performers, teachers and students are able to generate alternative futures which engage with learners more authentically, which offer and recognise the creative leadership which co-emerge from blending experiences and perspectives.

4. For students, how distinctive and valuable engaging as composers can be.

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Appendix A: Photos 1-6 explained

Appendix B: Activities/ Tasks 1-6 explained

Appendix C: Composers and compositions performed 1-6 explained

Appendix D: Six statements by composer, teacher and students explained