

Listen and Compose

Paul Jones - Director of Music, St Marylebone School
Kerry Andrew - Freelance composer based in London
Pauline Adams – Designated researcher

Context

The St. Marylebone School, a Church of England Foundation School, is a multi-faith 11-18 comprehensive for girls based in central London. Provision is made to embrace a broad and balanced classroom curriculum, and there is a thriving additional enrichment programme in the form of a range of extra-curricular activities, including music.

The school was awarded Specialist Arts College status in 1998. The Performing Arts Faculty offers music, dance, drama, and music technology. The school values the arts and embeds creativity across the whole curriculum. With the school being situated at the heart of the capital, access is easily gained to prestigious London venues and to arts in the wider community. A Saturday morning Performing Arts School, based at St Marylebone, is aimed at primary children from Years 3-6 and at Year 7 at secondary pupils. In addition, the school manages the Westminster Saturday Music Centre.

A performing arts scholarship system operates on Year 7 entry to the school, with awards granted through audition. The music audition test does not assume previous training and experience, instrumental and choral scholarships being awarded to those students who demonstrate potential and aptitude. Scholarships are also awarded to Year 12 students who are intending to pursue the arts at 'A' level.

The Year 10 class chosen for this project was a large, mixed ability group of 30 students of which 7 had gained scholarship places. Musical skills across the group reflected a wide range of experience, with a number of the students proving to be capable and confident instrumentalists and vocalists. Others, at this stage, demonstrated minimal playing skills, resulting in a small number of students displaying a lack of confidence in their own potential. The student groupings for the project were allocated in advance to ensure representation of a range of skills and experiences across each group.

The music department comprises purpose-built accommodation to include three teaching rooms, specialist equipment, and a number of small instrumental teaching spaces. Over the course of the six taught sessions undertaken for this project there was some flexibility for groups to be given adequate working spaces in which to develop their improvisational and compositional ideas. However, the time factor, only 40 minutes per lesson, severely challenged the planning of a balanced range of activities and somewhat restricted developmental possibilities within the short time-scale.

The Research Question

What is the role of listening and reflection in the creative process?

Literature

. . . the actions of music making can be seen, fundamentally, as the 'em-body-ment' of musical thinking, knowing, and understanding.

Elliott, D. J., *Music Matters*, 1995.

The American philosopher Susanne Langer suggested that there are two kinds of symbolism, one being linguistic or discursive, the other non-linguistic or presentational (Langer, S., 1942). Langer's theory was influential in engendering the 'feeling' aspects of the inner mental life as a way of knowing. Music, with its moods and emotions, tensions and resolutions, can therefore be viewed as 'a presentational symbol of emotional life' (Budd, M., 1985, 109). Within the world of the regulated classroom, with all its limitations, music is a subject that can play its own important role in embracing the inner world of the participant/listener as an important aesthetic component of artistic activity.

The very act of composition engages the composer as critical listener, their intentions being realised in the form of musical communication. If a student's awareness, when relating to and appraising music, is to be viewed as a complex form of thinking and knowing, it appears that deliberate and careful interlocking of practical music making and listening is desirable (Elliott, D., 1995).

This project's intentions have been to focus specifically on the relationship between music making and listening, by providing musical experiences that promote intelligent responses, including the active appraisal of recordings of recognised composers and their works. Compositional insights gained through aesthetic and cognitive understanding, in the form of listening and reflective learning, have been viewed as crucial to the project, and to the understanding of music as an art form.

In 2000, findings on the effectiveness of arts education in secondary schools noted that, for students opting for GCSE courses in music, 'enjoyment, relevance, skill development, creativity and expressive dimensions were often absent' (Harland, J., et al). Such findings indicate a lack of transparency of purpose within some music lessons, particularly when students are not viewed as part of a democratic community of musicians, or awarded respect when bringing their own cultural perspectives to their musical observations. It is the personal and cultural histories of students that teachers can observe, and purposefully harness when introducing students to unfamiliar musical worlds (Swanwick, K., 1999).

Western-style music making is often undertaken through the interpretation of the visual symbol, but many practical musicians are also able interpret and achieve musical invention through the acquisition of aural skills and developed aural memory. Musical memory and critical aural perception, which stem from right-brained activity, are certainly areas worthy of careful consideration by teachers when designing a music curriculum, and when interpreting examination requirements (Odam, G., 1995).

Intended key outcomes of the project

- To introduce the idea of listening and appraising as an important tool in the composition process;

- To introduce the idea of improvisation as a compositional device;
- To embed reflection in the creative process in order to ensure that the musical outcomes are richer;
- To create group pieces, whose elements students can be drawn on in future GCSE composition work.

Methodology

This small-scale project took place during the Spring Term of 2012. The research base was conceived as a three-way collaborative venture during which both observation and discourse allowed for a democratic exchange between teacher, composer and researcher. In order to address the research question, it was decided that the methodological approach should be that of action research, it providing a critical tool for understanding and improving practice.

The evidence gathered was to include:

- Student diary logs;
- Audio recordings of student work in progress and associated dialogue;
- Audio recordings of final performance of compositions;
- Systematic observation undertaken by participant researcher, particularly with reference to pedagogical approaches of teacher and composer, and of student musical responses;
- Annotated notes of discussions between teacher, composer and researcher as a record of the reviewing and reflective process.

Session 1

. . . in too many instances there was insufficient emphasis on active music making or on the use of musical sound as the dominant language of learning.

Ofsted, Music in Schools: wider still, and wider, 2012.

Principal aim: To introduce the students to improvisation as a compositional tool

Approach: Using vocal exploration and improvised extended vocal techniques; linking vocal sound to the visual, in this instance Van Gogh's 'Starry Night'; teacher/composer/student appraisal of musical ideas through brainstorming; encouragement of use of both descriptive and musical vocabulary to convey thoughts about mood, form and artistic intentions; composer modelling as a way of extending possibilities. This session steered clear of a 'formulaic' way of working with composition.

Student response: After some initial reticence on the part of some students, all gradually engaged in vocal activity. Physical drawing in the air of the shapes of sounds and good response to composer modelling broke the ice. Productive analysis of the initial activity fed into a group piece task with students selecting five vocal sounds from which they were to create a short composition. The key instruction was for students to listen carefully to each other, and to ensure the piece came to a natural end. Within these parameters there was total freedom to employ ideas from the initial improvised sounds, alongside the suggestion that new ideas could be tried out with a

melodic element a possibility. The resulting compositions were varied, with some incorporating a melodic element and/or body rhythms, and with one group introducing harmonic ideas.

Teacher and composer feedback to students: When participating in a group composition try and be objective when appraising. Listen in two ways, not only to your own contribution but also listen to the whole ensemble.

Researcher observation: Students were made aware of the project by their music teacher, and given insight into its aims. They were to be viewed as equal participants, thus promoting a democratic forum for learning. The decision only to use voices and not instruments during the first session was a deliberate one. Firstly, the composer herself is a vocalist who enjoys working in her own medium and, secondly, it was decided that if all students were using voice it would place everyone on a more level playing field. The focus on improvisation encouraged experimentation and active listening, and the short composition task allowed for the transference of ideas and a way of working that flowed naturally from whole-group work. Teacher and composer comments promoted musical behaviour within a whole-group setting, and encouraged the breaking down of inhibitions. For homework, students were asked to look at other artwork that could stimulate compositional ideas and to bring any examples to the lesson the following week.

Student written reflections:

Musical features of the first improvised piece:

I liked it because nobody knew what it would sound like and it actually worked out really well because everybody was experimenting

On hearing the second version:

It was more structured and after the first try everybody knew what fitted well where.

Did the approach to composing differ from the way you normally compose?

When composing I would usually think about the overall piece/effect but today I focused more on individual parts/sounds being out together.

It was more trial and error, experimenting on the spot and going from there, rather than making notes and brainstorming etc. which is what usually happens.

It differed because usually I wouldn't use a stimulus. I would just write what I was thinking of. Also my compositions usually include set lyrics and a melody.

Most of the music we did was improvised and we listened out for other people more so we could add our own musical sounds.

It was more spontaneous and experimental.

Session 2

The relationships between pitches, durations, inflections and timbres that constitute musical sound are vastly complicated, even in the simplest, shortest piece.

Loane, B. 'Thinking about Children's Compositions', BJME Vol.1 No.3 Nov 1984.

Principal aim: Groups to focus on mood, shape and structure of a whole piece

Approach: Continuity in use of paintings to stimulate discussion, this week Kandinsky's *Composition V, 1913*. A young composer and trombonist, Hannah, who recently had been awarded the title 'BBC Young Composer of the Year', and now in her first year at music college, was invited by Kerry to attend and participate during this session. Improvising on piano and trombone Kerry and Hannah responded to the shapes and colours within the Kandinsky painting. Both musicians gave insights into their interpretation and there was exploration with the whole group being involved in discussion about the crucial role that listening plays when improvising. Divided into their groups, students were given a choice of using instruments or voices, and set the task of creating a piece of music to be based on a selection of different sounds chosen in response to visual stimuli. Graphic notation was to be used to structure 60 seconds of music to be recorded during performance.

Teacher and composer feedback: Discussion was promoted through whole group appraisal of these short compositions, which encouraged analytical listening, use of musical vocabulary, sharing of work in progress, and suggestions for extending and refining. Within such an open forum both teacher and composer were able to stress the importance of emergent ideas, experimentation, listening, and selection when creating a new piece of music. A focus on extended instrumental and vocal techniques, as demonstrated by Hannah and Kerry during their improvisation, flagged up additional possibilities.

Researcher observation: The musical modelling of improvisation by the two composers, in response to a visual stimulus, was listened to intently, and was effective in communicating the purpose of the session. The students were given permission to view their composition work as gradually evolving, and consideration of constructive comments by others a part of the whole process. On one level, the ensuing thinking and experimenting process led to dissatisfaction with musical outcome, but on another level the strong message of the importance of trial and selection prompted insightful critical appraisal, both verbal and written. Some students related their music closely to a chosen piece of artwork, whilst others started to move away from this idea, finding a different set of criteria for their responses. Student diaries demonstrate that whole-group musical sharing and discussion promoted useful reflection during compositional activity. The presence of two composers, both female, provided a positive role model for the girls.

Student written reflections

To recorded work in progress:

Our piece started with the guitar, and then the instrumental sounds came in, in order to build up the atmosphere. We could have developed the glockenspiel melody and also added harmonies.

It started off with a solo glockenspiel which played a soft, repeated motif. Then the other vocal parts gradually came in. I think it would help more if we all actually used our instruments and actually discussed ideas more. I felt that the vocals and other instruments didn't compliment each other and it sounded odd.

In response to art work:

We have chosen very dark patterns to represent the dark colours, sometimes changing from minor to major to represent splashes of colour. We also have staccatos to show the circles and dots. I think that we could have developed the drum part and maybe added some vocals.

We came up with the idea of the piece being messy like the artwork. We also used tremolo and glissando to depict the dimness of the art. As well as that the piece was in a minor key. I think we could have developed the cello further to be more lyrical. I think the ukeleles could have been louder. I didn't like the ending much. I think it could have been further developed to a proper finish, instead of stopping in mid-air.

The structure of the performance was to firstly start with the whistling as a monophonic texture then to build on that with a melody. As we were improvising, vocal people could add in any sound they thought would fit at any point. I feel we could have developed the melody on the glockenspiel - maybe changed the melody instead of being ostinato. We could have changed the tone or even used the glock in a more contemporary way. We also could have developed the vocals to something more, maybe come up with a few more sounds to make the piece a bit more exciting and interesting.

Sessions 3 and 4

At this stage we might see some of the groups' work and discuss the possibilities of music with the whole class. Help them to see the opportunities, but leave the choice of sounds and the actual nature of the music to those who are going to make it.

Paynter, J., and Aston, P., *Sound and Silence*, 1970.

Principal aim: Session 3, Groups to focus on choosing pitch material for their piece
Session 4, Groups to focus on refining and their piece, and to structure it in more detail. Some focus on rhythm.

Approach: Session 3: Instruments divided into high/middle/low/unpitched sections. Work on pitch and chord patterns. A focus on structure, with some teacher input on ways of creating the building blocks of music, and notating them in the form of a graphic score. Students provided with a grid on which they could annotate their own ideas for structure and instrumentation. However, some elements of the piece were to be deliberately kept loose in order to provide improvisation possibilities. Recording to be made of work in progress.

Session 4: After listening to the performance of one group's piece, time was given to refining one element. This was achieved through whole group input in a master class setting, with the chosen group trying out additional ideas and techniques in real time, and with Kerry modelling possibilities. Areas to be considered during the follow-up small-group work were the development of rhythmic ideas, tempi, thinking about time signatures where appropriate, and creating a more detailed score. All pieces were to be recorded twice during allocated group time, listened to and discussed. With limited time for refinement the students were given the task of revisiting the first section of their composition. Recordings were to be uploaded on to the system after the lesson so that students could access them.

Teacher/composer feedback: The improvisatory nature of some of the music making during whole group sessions, with emphasis on shared interaction was clearly resulting in some students feeling exposed, with one particular performer exhibiting some distress about the sound and quality of her own contribution. The distinctive

tone of her brass instrument left her feeling vulnerable and open to criticism. This was picked up on immediately as an area for open discussion with the whole group involved. The arising situation highlighted the need for teacher/composer sensitivity when encouraging experimentation and illuminative evaluation. In both the improvisation and composition group sessions this pupil continued to bravely execute and gradually realise her musical ideas on an instrument that presented her with technical challenges.

Discussion focussed on how to make the leap from experimental improvisation to the more extended composition task to be undertaken within small groups. There was encouragement for students to discard any ideas that they felt not to be effective within their compositions. Democratic decision-making, based on critical listening and evaluation, would result in some students having to relinquish some of their ideas and musical contributions. As ideas proliferated, students did become more selective with discourse, based on listening, being viewed as vital to the development of the composition work.

Researcher observation: Ethical caring for the sensitivities of individuals by teachers and those working with young people are paramount when exposing them to new ways of working. It needs to be made clear that process, which involves musical exposure with its selection and inevitable discarding of musical ideas, is not an objective measure. The message to the students was that experimentation could push the boundaries of what they already knew. The limited time frame, only 40 minutes per lesson, began to impact on what students were able to achieve in terms of listening, recording, appraising and developing musical ideas. Also, the issue of teacher intervention, when and how, is a difficult one to balance. This was achieved mainly through discussion and suggestion within the whole-group setting, and during the time given for group work. However the 'listen and decide' approach can be more time consuming, and this has to be balanced against the time frame for completing a unit of work. There are implications here for re-considering the length of units at KS3, particularly in Year 9, in order for students to engage more closely and deeply with their music making as a preparation for Year 10.

Session 5

The most effective assessment practice observed helped students to listen accurately to their own work, helped them to identify for themselves where improvements were needed, and showed them how to improve through expert musical modelling . . .

Ofsted, Music in Schools: wider still and wider, 2012.

Principal aim: groups to complete pieces. Refining dynamics, articulation, etc

Approach: With a two-week gap before the composer returned to lead the last two practical sessions, students had been allocated time to work on their pieces. At the start of Session 5 each group's composition was performed and feedback/demonstration given. Further ways of refining were suggested through whole class and composer analysis, with active listening placed at the heart of this lesson. The strong message arising from the exercise was that decisions would have

to be finalised to ensure the compositions were meaningful and structured. The skills of a professional composer were especially useful at this stage, highlighting the efficacy of productive musical collaboration between teachers and the professional musical community. In addition, students were asked to write down their own thoughts when listening to each group's composition. Guidance included: What were the most interesting sounds or combination of sounds?, Did the piece work structurally?, Was there enough 'space' within the piece?, Which sections of the piece might be extended?. This more musically focussed questioning steered clear of the more generic approach, which uses questions such as 'What did you like best?' and 'What could they do better?'.

Student responses:

Xylophone part could be developed and drums louder. Really good texture built up throughout the piece.

Base the piece less around the piano? Equal roles. Develop a clearer ending.

Sequence ending too abrupt and rhythms didn't really fit with the mood. Cello part was really good.

When the glockenspiels came in they sounded a little uncertain and too quiet – beaters need to hit a little harder. Too much space between sections – fill up – transitions.

Vary the playing style on the cello – plucking - Add in transitions – blend together sections.

Piano part was good. Guitar could be louder. Drums came in well-maybe use more of them. Voice went well with the piano.

Nice call and response between the saxophone and the clarinet. Repetitive piano – could have more key changes? Drum kit worked well.

Student response to comments about their own composition:

The suggestions the class gave us was firstly for Paige to play the cymbals louder, secondly for Isabelle to improvise even if mistakes are made.

Play the guitar louder. Play the beginning section at the end to give an ABA structure.

Researcher observations: Over the period of the project students had become much more comfortable and unthreatened when giving and receiving constructive criticism. This listening exercise focused mainly on connection of musical ideas, blending of sections, instrument combinations, and analysis of structure. The aim of creating a democratic forum for listening and musical discourse was clearly in evidence throughout this session. Teacher and composer feedback blended with student comments and there was more confidence in the use of musical vocabulary.

Session 6:

In artistic composition it is we ourselves who become composed; in artistic creativity it is, ultimately ourselves we create. So, at the heart of any form of evaluation in this sacred domain will be self-evaluation.

Ross, M. (ed.) *assessment in Arts Education: A necessary discipline or a loss of happiness*, (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1986).

Principal aim: Each group to give a final performance of their piece.

Approach: Straight run through of pieces with each being recorded. There was little time left for final analysis. Final thoughts were to be written up in the form of self-evaluation.

Researcher observation: Students, with the exception of one group, 'played safe' in the final performances of their compositions retreating from improvisatory sections to giving more conventionally fixed performances. The question to be asked is whether students thought that they would be given a summative grade, a common form of assessment at the end of a KS3 unit, for their compositions and so took fewer risks. In their minds was it the final performance, and not the listening and improvisational and compositional development that was important and which, in the end, dominated their thinking? Those students who played an orchestral instrument or were receiving some form of instrumental tuition performed more confidently than some of those playing, for example, glockenspiels. In the end, performance and not compositional ideas dominated the final outcomes, indicating a real need for future consideration of the role and purpose of performance at the end of a listening/composing unit.

Student response:

The sound world for our piece was very mysterious and confusing because of the off-beat rhythms and strange melodies underneath the repeated off-beat call and response from the oboe and flute.

It was my visual art of the melting clocks that was chosen and used as a stimulus for the piece. I contributed to discussions by saying my ideas that were musically connected to the art. To make the structure, we simply put our ideas in order so they lead on in a way so the piece will move onwards.

How useful was listening to student/teacher/composer analysis and feedback?

I think it was quite useful because it gave us ideas that we incorporate within our piece.

How will this experience affect future composition work?

I think that I would find it easier to listen out for other parts and to make sure we are all in time and in the right key. I would also find it easier to improvise because I would be able to fit notes to a stimulus.

What skills will you take away with you from the project to try again in your own musical activities?

I think that I might use improvisation in my own musical activities because we've done so much work on it I feel more confident in it.

Key learning

The observations and discussions that the teacher, composer and researcher engaged in over the time of the project led to an agreed consensus about its positive impact on aspects of student learning:

- During the time span of the project regularly written reflections and ongoing vocal discourse resulted in growing student awareness of the importance of listening when improvising and creating new compositions;

- Activities that demanded careful listening and the sharing of responses verbally endorsed the more frequent use of sophisticated musical vocabulary;
- Improvisation proved to be an excellent learning tool for composition work, and promotes better interlocking of practical and listening.
- The students opted not to use notation, relying on listening memory when working from week to week on their pieces. The conclusion by the Director of Music was that less reliance on notation had encouraged enhanced listening skills;
- Within the whole class and within groups, the confidence of students to both discard and select musical material and ideas increased;
- Guided learning experience, in the form of a master class scenario, allowed for building blocks of compositional techniques to be explored in stages, and encouraged focussed listening and discussion;
- It is envisaged that the experimental nature of the project, which resulted in broadened musical experience and the opening up of new compositional avenues for students, will be influential in the creation of future GCSE practical coursework.

Key areas that emerged for consideration:

- How can we allocate more time for students to play, experiment, listen and decide within the current constraints of the curriculum? Improvisation is an excellent tool for and composition but it takes time. It needs to be embedded within the curriculum early.
- It became clear early on that students found it difficult to respond openly to each other's compositions. This hi-lighted the importance of integrating listening as a balanced activity across the different strands of the music curriculum. Is there a case for rethinking the timing of activities to ensure listening is not sidelined as an 'add on' for example, is undertaken in the last part of a practical lesson, but is viewed as an equally important developmental tool?
- In addition to teacher observations undertaken during practical work, talking with students about the processes involved in creating improvisations and compositions can provide clear insights into the students' musical understanding and development. In addition, it is within this kind of forum that appropriate musical vocabulary can be encouraged and developed. This would lead naturally to a deeper analysis and appraisal of music, both verbally and written.

Implications for practice:

- It is important for students to be made aware that listening is not a separate skill;
- Sharing and reflecting on students' work, own and others, throughout the compositional process is invaluable. This has implications for planning and timing of activities;
- Ethical caring is desirable in situations where students' work is being critically evaluated, and sensitivity needs to be displayed when engaging with the personal and interpretative aspects of students' listening responses;
- In this project, artwork provided a stimulus for musical response, and was also effective in placing art and music into its historical context, place and time.

- For the students at St Marylebone School, where all the arts are valued, this approach acknowledged wider philosophical and pedagogical aims;
- Sufficient and suitable technology should be readily available for recording and listening back to work in progress, and for recordings to be uploaded and accessed online.

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