Practical starters and warm-ups for the classroom

by Anna Gower

INTRODUCTION

Three-part lessons exist in many different areas of education. In Montessori teaching, very young children are encouraged to learn through introduction, then association and recognition, then recall. John A Van de Walle, a mathematician at Virginia Commonwealth University, developed an inquiry-led approach to ‘student-centred mathematics’ with three phases, complete with timings for each:

- Getting started phase (10 to 15 minutes)
- Work phase (30 to 40 minutes)
- Consolidation and practice phase (10 to 15 minutes)

Then there are music activities that have often followed these same structures by the very nature of what is involved. A warm-up, designed to get everyone sounding and functioning musically together. Playing, exploring, refining through rehearsal, unpicking the detail to take it apart and then put it back together for a final performance at the end. Within this refinement stage, ‘mini-plenaries’ just happen as the music is rehearsed then played section by section, then knitted together again for a final play-through.

In the UK in 2001, the KS3 National Strategy brought recommendations for teaching strategies including the three-part lesson. This was straight-jacketed into a model of starter, activity, plenary, linked to clear lesson objectives to be identified and shared with students from the start of the lesson and embedded throughout.

So began the culture of tick-box lesson observations, and the challenge many teachers faced of shoehorning their lessons into the required structures, regardless of how learning was unfolding in front of them, because they thought that was what was required of them by their school leadership.

Beginning with Literacy and Numeracy, then expanding out into other subjects (including what were known as the Foundation Subjects), this model became the focus for staff training that included the sharing of ideas for ‘starter’ activities designed to engage students from the very start of the lesson. Practical warm-ups such as singing, icebreakers and pulse games were replaced by word searches, hangman or card-sort activities laid out ready on the desks in the music classroom.

The three-part lesson structure quickly took hold. Then came four- and even seven-part lessons, mini-plenaries, peer testing, quizzes and keywords, and a minefield of obstacles for music teachers to navigate around when delivering what has always been embedded into musical practice so beautifully.

Warm-ups and starters: what’s the difference?

The connotations of the term ‘warm-up’ feel very different to those of the term ‘starter’. In sport and singing, we warm-up our muscles before we use them, and in music we tune up, or we warm-up our instruments. In drama, a warm-up might be a game or icebreaker, or in a choir a scale or pattern designed to get a large group of voices to work together before exploring harmonies and more complex vocal exercises.

However, there is something else that is perhaps harder to describe, in which warm-ups play an essential part. It’s about warming up the musical space so that all those hard-to-define aspects of making music together can click into place. To be part of a musical activity or ensemble, we need to be able to listen, to adjust what we are playing to make it fit, to flex and respond musically to what’s around us. And it takes a little time and a lot of practice to develop that with a class. That’s where warm-ups can play a vital part in creating a musical culture and ethos to enable all students to engage with the musical tasks planned for them.
This article suggests warm-up activities that can be used in a range of musical contexts in the ‘starter’ part of the lesson. However, they should always be adapted to suit the needs of the group, and are meant as ideas to encourage teachers to develop their own toolkit of activities to draw on with different classes.

**SETTING UP THE SPACE**

**Desks or no desks?**

Every music teaching space is different, and the debate about whether to have desks available or not is one for the teacher and department to decide upon, depending on how they structure the planning of their curriculum and the types of activities and resources available. Space is at a premium in many schools, and one room might be used for many different classes, even different subjects, so thinking about making the space work for the content you want to deliver can pose challenges.

However, removing desks to create a new space is a great way to engage students and to help set the expectation that in music they will be expected to play and participate from the very first lesson. If the classroom just looks like any other classroom in the school, it’s easy for students to assume that yours will be a lesson that involves written work – and motivating them to think and behave in musical ways within those structures can be a challenge.

If you can’t change your space, think about taking the class out to a different place for the warm-up part of the lesson. Alternatively, if your space allows it, mix and match lessons where one week you may have desks out, and the next the chairs are in a circle – thereby making the aims of the lesson clear from the minute the class comes into the room, but always keeping them guessing from week to week about how this lesson might be different from the last. The suggestions below work best with students sitting or standing in a circle, but can be adapted as appropriate.

**Written work vs practical**

If possible, try to avoid a culture where practical tasks are a reward and written work a punishment. It’s fine to use both, and a good tip is to try to mix them up so that students don’t get too used to one approach or the other. There is so much flexibility within the KS3 curriculum that the teacher can decide on what they feel is the most appropriate approach for their students, in line with the aims and values of the department. Introducing visual cues – whether traditional notation or graphic representation – helps students get used to following as they play, but try to balance this by having some kind of audio playing, to give all activities a musical context.

**Why use a practical starter or warm-up?**

Practical starters and warm-ups can:

- build a sense of teamwork and community needed for effective group music making.
- improve concentration.
- scaffold to and embed essential core musical skills such as pulse, rhythm, singing, pitch.
- help to teach listening skills, listening to each other, listening to music and making sense of musical sounds.
- help the teacher get to know the group in front of them in terms of personality, group dynamics and relationships.
- help the teacher get to know students musically, spot those with particular ability, or those that need support in certain areas.
- build confidence and create an ethos of playing, performing and creating music together from the very start of the first lesson.
help the teacher to identify as a musical leader making music with the group.

break up a longer unit or task to avoid students getting bored, or progress coming to a halt.

fix things that might not be going well, provide an extra chance to rehearse, and consolidate learning to improve the overall outcomes.

help students to understand that making music as part of a group is about creating and contributing to a group outcome rather than being about each individual performer. Some students find it hard not to play the loudest or fastest, or to take it in turns to play then listen. These short tasks really help to build and embed that whole-group ethos.

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

Many of the ideas below are already used widely in classrooms to get lessons off to a musical start. However, if your stock of warm-ups need a refresher, or if you perhaps haven’t used any for a while, there may be some that you’ve forgotten or haven’t tried before that would be great to use in a lesson this week.

Remember that all warm-ups should have a purpose and be either linked to the lesson activity or be used to build relationships or confidence within the group. As students respond, think about how you can tie in the outcomes from these activities with a key learning point you want to reinforce – whether that’s simply identifying why or how something works well, or addressing issues within the group that may prevent students making progress with a task later on in the lesson.

ICEBREAKERS

Why use icebreakers?

Icebreakers are good for:

- building confidence.
- getting to know a new class.
- getting Year 7 off to a practical start.
- establishing and building positive relationships.
- building trust within a group.
- supporting transition or cross-curricular links as they may be used to these activities from primary school or from drama.

Ideas to try

1. ZIP, ZAP, ZOOM

Good for:

- encouraging students to keep going even when they go wrong.
- team work.
- concentration.
- co-ordination.

Students pass the sound ‘zip’ around the circle to the right, indicating the direction with their thumb. They can reverse the direction using the sound ‘zap’ and indicating the direction with their other thumb. The idea is to pass the sound as quickly as possible around the circle but always remembering the direction and which hand to use. If they use the wrong hand, the game stops and has to restart, but the challenge is to do this with the minimum disruption – something that’s good to aim for in a performance (don’t stop, keep going!). Once students get zip and zap established, add in ‘zoom’ where they can throw the sound across the circle, and the person indicated has to pick up the game and keep it going, working together to ensure that the flow isn’t interrupted.
**FIND THE KEYS**

Good for:
- teamwork.
- teaching basic musical elements.
- non-verbal communication.
- listening.
- controlling sound.

One student leaves the room, and another hides the keys somewhere in the room. All the class need to know where they are. Decide on a musical element to use as the focus. Dynamics is an easy one to do first, but pitch and tempo also work well once the idea of controlling sound (ie that the sound the group makes as a whole is key to the success of this task, not the sounds made by individuals) has been established. Agree how the sound will be changed to indicate whether the student finding the keys is close or far away. Then challenge the class to communicate where the keys are using only the sounds they make collectively, and in how they vary the chosen elements.

**DON’T CLAP IT BACK**

Good for:
- listening.
- copying.
- concentration.
- hearing the difference between simple rhythmic patterns.
- keeping in time to a beat or pulse.

Explain to the class that you will be clapping some rhythms for them to copy and clap back. Some rhythms are ‘forbidden’, however, and when they hear those they mustn’t clap it back. You can write these up on the board as well so there is a visual link between sound and symbol embedded into the task. Students who clap when they shouldn’t or don’t clap when they should are out and should sit down. The last person standing becomes the leader for the next round of the game and can select the forbidden rhythms and lead the group.

**NAME GAMES**

Good for:
- getting to know each other.
- listening and responding.
- concentration.
- teamwork.
- non-verbal communication.

Most teachers have a favourite name game. This example starts simply, then builds to a team game that can be a great way to incentivise the group to work together to get more points each time it’s played.

Set up the ‘We will rock you’ rhythm: two taps on your chest, followed by a clap and a rest. All the class keep this going while one by one each person says in turn ‘My name’s xx’ and the class say, ‘Hello xx.’ There should be no breaks at all between each person, and the rhythm keeps the momentum going. If anyone goes wrong or isn’t ready, they can wait then join in again on beat 1 (which is a great skill to encourage for when they start to play in a large group on instruments).

Once you’ve got all the way round the circle stop, and explain part two. This time, instead of saying your own name say hello to another person across the circle. That person then says hello to another and this has to continue without dropping a beat or missing a turn. Encourage them to look over at the person they have chosen to give a visual cue. It’s harder than it sounds, and they can tally up how many people get a go before someone misses a beat and try to beat their high score in subsequent lessons.

**PASS THE SOUND**

Good for:
- awareness of other parts.
- keeping going.
- teamwork.
- concentration.

Play an audio track while you do this task. It could be in a related genre to what you’re currently working on, or music from any style or genre that has a steady pulse. This gives the task some context and lifts the energy, as well as making it a more musical experience.
Start by passing a sound around the circle. This should be passed from one to the next as fast as possible. Encourage students to look at each other so as the sound passes around, there is a visual cue to follow as well. Try sending it straight back around the other way. Then send one sound to the right and a different sound to the left. The sounds should get back to you at the same time, crossing over somewhere in the middle. Send the same sound twice or three times in the same direction. See if all three sounds make it back. Discuss with students why this is difficult and how watching, listening and offering support to each other can help create a successful outcome.

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**WARM-UPS FOR SUPPORTING PULSE AND RHYTHM**

**Why use these?**

Warm-ups for pulse and rhythm are good for:

- teaching students to play in time with each other.
- teaching students to play in time with a backing track.
- spotting students with a good sense of rhythm and pulse, who may later become your drummers able to hold a beat and keep the ensemble together.
- starting some simple improvising activities that encourage students to think on the spot.
- introducing simple rhythmic notation in a practical way.

**Ideas to try**

**WARM-UP TO MUSIC**

Good for:

- finding, keeping and sharing a pulse.
- counting beats in a bar.
- hearing and copying key rhythms from music heard.
- playing in time to a backing track.

Warming up to music is an essential part of encouraging students to assimilate characteristics of a musical style. When asked to improvise with a track as it plays, they often copy rhythms they can hear in the track. If a piece has key riffs or patterns they often hear, copy these, which then opens discussion about the main characteristics of a musical style or specific piece of music.

This task is not genre-specific. As long as there is a steady, strong pulse throughout, it works. Try a piece of Baroque music with driving motor rhythms, or some jazz where students will pick up and copy the swing rhythms just by listening. Encourage them to nod their head in time to the pulse as this makes it much easier to clap in time.

This task is a simple, step-by-step approach that can be used over and over again:

- As the track plays, nod your head in time with the pulse.
- Find and clap on beat 1.
- Clap the pulse.
- Taking it in turns to clap once, pass the pulse around the circle.
- Do some call-and-response rhythms where the teacher claps then the class copies.
- Repeat, but this time take it in turns for every student to clap a rhythm, then the class to copy, before the next person takes a turn.
- Ask students to improvise their own patterns clapping or using body percussion.

If students lose the pulse, model the ‘stop, listen, join in on beat 1’ approach so they get used to doing this when they get lost, rather than stopping. If they look like they’re losing the pulse, just clap on beat 1, get the heads nodding again and have another go!
MINIMALISM PATTERNS GAME

Good for:
- maintaining one part while being aware of another.
- co-ordination.
- teamwork.
- getting the inner voice working to support playing in time.

Play a track with a strong beat or pulse. As a class, tap head, shoulders, knees then toes in time with the beat. Chant ‘head, shoulders, knees and clap’ out loud as you do so. Count down from 4 then reverse it to ‘clap, knees, shoulders, head’. Get half the class starting with their head and the other with their toes. Keep shouting ‘change’ so they have to keep swapping. Once they’ve got the hang of this, divide the class into three groups:

- Group 1 does head, shoulders, clap and repeats it.
- Group 2 does head, shoulders, knees and clap and repeats it.
- Group 3 does head, shoulders, knees, toes and clap and repeats it.

All groups start together, and as the patterns cycle tell them to listen out for when all three groups will clap at the same time. They have to maintain their own parts while being aware of others, a really useful ensemble skill to practise!

WARM-UPS FOR THE VOICE

Why use these?

Warm-ups for the voice are good for:
- getting the muscles ready for use.
- getting rid of tension in the body.
- making sure the body is relaxed and ready for singing.
- ensuring that breath can move freely.
- experimenting with vocal range.
- making sure students are singing on pitch.
- improving pitch matching.
- emotional engagement with the task.

Ideas to try

Remember that you don’t use your vocal chords in isolation: your whole body is your instrument. With all of the warm-ups suggested below, try to get students to move and sing at the same time.

As with previous activities, having something for students to sing along with gives additional energy and context to the activities. This could be setting up a body percussion rhythmic backing (as simple as clapping on beats 2 and 4), creating a backing track in a style or groove, moving in time to a beat or pulse (stepping from one foot to the other), or accompanying students from the piano. Setting a line of vocal percussion by getting some students to use beatboxing can also be effective. Most important, though, is for the teacher to sing along.
GET READY TO SING: LOOSEN THE BODY

Good for:
- spatial awareness and awareness of others around you.
- body awareness and awareness of good posture for singing.
- understanding that singing is a holistic activity, not just limited to singing some notes.

There are many physical warm-ups and stretches that can be used. The following are just a few examples to try:
- Face massage: rub your face, under your chin and the top of your head to relax the muscles in your face.
- Shake your hands and move from foot to foot (ideally in time with some music).
- Clean your teeth with your tongue. This is great for relaxing the tongue, which is key to good singing. Then stick your tongue out as far as you can.
- To relax the neck, ask students to draw a figure of 8 with their nose.
- Stretch up then fall forward and shake out your arms to the floor.
- Roll your shoulders forward and backwards and as if swimming back stroke, then change direction.
- Try to push your shoulder blades together. and hold that stretch to allow for more relaxed breathing.
- Run on the spot.

GET READY TO SING: WARM UP YOUR VOICE

Good for:
- preventing putting strain on vocal chords by warming up slowly.
- singing gently and not shouting.
- developing warm-ups that students get to know and expect in preparation for singing activities.

1. Sirens: Use a lip trill (a ‘brrrrr’ sound with the lips) and make a siren noise by changing the pitch using that sound. Ask a student to conduct and lead the change in pitch. If students find this hard, they can push their cheeks up with their hands or practice until they can do it.

2. Scales and slides: still using the lip trill, have a go at five-note scales or sliding octaves to pull the sound into a defined pitch range. This also helps to identify the difference between chest voice and head voice: asking students where they feel most comfortable in their own vocal ranges is a good learning point to pull out from this activity.

3. The blow buzz: students put one finger against their lips as if saying ‘shhhh’ and ask if they can feel their top lip start to vibrate to make a buzzing sound. This is a great way to discourage them from shouting rather than singing, and can also encourage support muscles to work as they make the sound.

4. Digger: sing the work ‘digger’ as you sing five-note scales, then an arpeggio, and ask the class to sing it back then sing it with you.

5. Five-note exercises: sing five-note exercises starting on middle C, the repeat going down a semitone each time to A, then jump back up to D. Experiment with these exercises until students can comfortably sing five notes from G above middle C and back down again without shouting and comfortably using their head voices.

PARTNER SONGS

Good for:
- starting to develop musical skills of singing in parts.
- adding harmonies.
- singing in time together.
- keeping a pulse.

Once students have learnt the parts, you can start to experiment with changing musical elements such as varying dynamics or tempo. You can also play with how you group the class. Start in larger groups where each group sings the same part, but then mix them up so they may be standing next to someone singing a different part for an extra challenge.

Partner songs are an essential stepping stone to introducing harmonies. Blending the different songs means that harmony is created through the mixing of the different vocal lines. Students then become aware of the resulting harmonies without having the challenge of trying to pitch a second part against a main melody.
NUMBERS TO SCALES

Good for:
- singing scales.
- distinguishing between major and minor scales.
- building vocal harmony.

Sing a scale using numbers the numbers one to nine, for example CDEFGABCD then back down again. Then divide the class in half. Group 1 sings up to eight, group 2 sings up to nine. When they come down again they will be singing in 3rds. Allocating movements to different numbers of the scale is a great way to get them moving and to help concentration. Change key, change the tempo, try it in three groups and see how this activity can help to produce triads.

FINAL THOUGHTS

One thing to remember is that although these activities are suggested as warm-ups and starters, they are just as valuable at any stage in the lesson. If something isn’t working, pull the class back and do a whole-class activity to refocus learning.

Although the three-part lessons have been firmly entrenched into teaching structures, these activities can fix a multitude of issues that arise in music lessons on a regular basis. Whether that’s a breakdown in relationships, students getting bored and going off tasks in groups, students not quite engaging with a task in the way you had hoped, a problem playing in time, or a need to re-establish relationships with the whole group together, it’s great to have a bank of activities. These should always work for you and for your students, and will have value whether these happen at the beginning, middle or end of the lesson.