INTRODUCTION

Arguing the case for musical creativity in the classroom is easy. Few, if any, teachers would contest the importance of creative thinking and skills at any stage of the curriculum. And yet, defining what musical creativity means both in theory and practice is notoriously tricky, and has had educationalists and social psychologists dancing in semantic circles since the 1960s.

This is the first of two Music Teacher resources bringing you up to date on the latest creativity research, and hopefully helping you consider the subject afresh, encouraging reflection on who you are as a creative musician and what that could mean for the classroom.

Part one looks at how creativity has been defined in the broadest sense, before drawing out theoretical implications for music education. Part two then looks at applications of these theories within the KS3 curriculum and beyond.

The questions around creative identity are as valid to the teacher as they are to the student. We access our musical creative self in different ways throughout our lives. Whether through attentive listening, playing or composing, we are all expressing ‘creativities’ at every stage of musical learning.

These two resources are based on the premise that everybody is creative, and that the pursuit of creativity should be at the core of the music curriculum at every stage.

EXAMINING YOUR OWN CREATIVITY

The ancients had a mystical appreciation of creativity. It was seen as a gift from the muses, attainable only by an ordained few. The history of the subject has been about moving from that sense of mystery to a place of rigorous, empirical analysis. In the 1950s that journey accelerated with the development of the cognitive sciences, and creativity has now been researched from multiple perspectives, including those relating to educational theory, anthropology and artificial intelligence.

Despite the proliferation of research, creativity remains a very personal and experiential subject. Sometimes it’s almost as if we are loath to relinquish the mystery that surrounds it. The first step into uncovering the subject is to analyse our own expression of creativity and to remind ourselves, if need be, that we are creative.

As teachers, re-establishing our creative identity is a prerequisite for being able to encourage creativity in others. And yet, the routine and busyness of a teaching schedule can often subtly erode our self-belief as a creative artist, whether musically or otherwise.

A common observation is that music teachers also find their practical skills on an instrument under-challenged after a few years of juggling the multiple demands of delivering a curriculum, along with the deskwork, pastoral and non-curricular tasks that go with it. And with that depletion comes a lack of conviction in the ability to be creative again. The energy has been sapped for personal creative projects. Most modes of creativity require a commitment of time and private space, both of which are precious commodities in an average teaching week.

‘All children are born artists. The problem is how to remain an artist as you grow up.’ Pablo Picasso on how creativity is a lifelong pursuit.
The challenge, then, is to come back to who we are at root as musicians, and to reassert that time and time again. Start by reflecting on the following:

- Do I consider myself a ‘creative’ person?
- How do I express my creativity outside of music?
- What is my favourite mode of musical creativity? Where do I feel most comfortable being creative?
- What are the similarities between musical and non-musical creativity, for example between writing a poem and composing a piece of music?
- How do I feel before consciously taking on a creative task?
- How do I feel afterwards?

Ways of being creative

In answering the questions above, be wary of jumping to the more ‘active’ expressions of creativity. When asked what the typical roles of a creative artist are, most people would list the writer, the poet, the composer, the improviser or the painter. The listener, the editor, the sound-mixer or the producer do not spring to mind as readily. And yet these outwardly less generative forms of creativity are equally important and valid, as we will explore later. Creativity can be expressed in a whole range of activities, however ‘non-creative’ they appear.

We are all creative

One of the biggest barriers to creativity is the critic-on-the-shoulder. At some previous point, we might have been told that we are no good at composing – or drawing, or whatever the creative pursuit is – and the comment has stuck, lodging itself deep within the subconscious. The critic-on-the-shoulder that develops its voice in adulthood is often the result of a self-fulfilling prophecy. We have been told we’re unable to compose, and then we contrive to make it so.

We might compensate by developing other less overtly creative skills instead, delegating the responsibility for generative creativity (e.g. composing, writing, painting) onto those apparently more disposed to it. Of course, it’s true that some are more talented in certain creative disciplines than others, and that creativity has to be combined with competence in order to grow. And yet we mustn’t lose sight of the fact we are all fundamentally creative, and that this needs to be exercised regularly as part of the quest for complete musicianship and self-individuation.

It’s hard to instil confidence in your students to take the first steps as a composer unless you have put yourself through the same process, engaged with the barriers of the blank stave yourself, and observed how you personally manage to overcome them. What tactics did you use? And how did you feel once you’d completed an idea? There’s often nothing more satisfying than seeing an idea having come into shape on paper, no matter how small.

Have you heard these typical barriers to creativity in the classroom?

- ‘It’s all very well, but there’s no time for that. It’s enough just to get through the syllabus.’
- ‘They get to be creative when composing. That’s enough.’
- ‘If the child isn’t naturally creative, it’s like getting blood out of a stone. Not everybody can be creative.

Have you told yourself you ‘aren’t a composer’? If so, where does this idea come from? Don’t we all have the ability to craft musical material, even if just for our own ears?

How do we challenge similar limitations in our students when they self-identify as non-creative?
"Creativity is contagious: pass it on."

This quote by none other than Albert Einstein reminds us that one expression of creativity can ‘infect’ another. Seeing and appreciating a creative person in full flow is deeply inspiring.

Have you noticed that this can happen on an intra-personal level as well? An act of creativity in one artistic area can unlock the confidence to attempt something in another. Creativity has an essentially transferable quality. When writing a haiku, you are opening cognitive pathways that can be travelled down to create something else, such as a sonata or a sculpture. Just the act of taking the time to conceive a new idea and see it through to a finished product is an emboldening experience in itself. It frees the mind from its trammels of day-to-day thinking and suggests patterns of associative thought that can lead to unexpected discoveries, whatever the area in which you have competence.

So, if you’re experiencing resistance to settling down to do the arrangement of that pop song for the school band and your mind is feeling numb, try warming it up with a haiku or a still-life sketch first. You’ll be surprised how quickly the mindset can shift and how productive that warm-up exercise can be.

The ten-minute rule

Opening creative channels can be just a simple matter of insisting on individual thinking time. Many students, when asked to write some lyrics on a given subject, for example, will just blank. This initial freeze is just symptomatic of a lethargic mind that does not like to have to burn calories to go through the effort of creating something from (apparently) nothing.

Generally, an expectant ten minutes of alone-time is enough to get ideas flowing. Students are often surprised by what they can create given a firm expectation, a deadline and a few well-chosen prompts. Ten minutes and suddenly the floodgates can be prised open. It’s a small act of intellectual boldness – to use Goethe’s phrase:

“What whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it.”

CREATIVE THINKING AND CREATIVE LEARNING

When the music syllabus states the objective is to ‘create, develop and extend musical ideas’, our first response is probably to think about the traditional activities of composing and improvising. And yet we have now come a long way from the dominant concept of the ‘Great Composer’ (usually male, usually dead) as the main embodiment of musical creative genius.

As Pamela Burnard, a Cambridge professor in music education and creativity, has constantly advocated in her work, it’s more pertinent to refer to ‘musical creativities’ rather than stick to a singular conceptualisation. The modern music industry requires that we expand our vision to incorporate roles such as the DJ and producer, as well as activities such as a jamming session.

Mastery and mystery

Oscar Odena from the University of Glasgow, in an overview of recent research into the area, talks of a split between ‘mastery and mystery’.

Definitions concerned with mastery argue that creativity should be a daily habit, a skill that can be worked on and improved. All it takes is effort and persistence.

On the other hand, the ‘mystery’ approach returns us to the figure of the ‘Great Composer’, where creativity is a gift, a property that emerges from the subconscious and is primarily irrational. Here the aim is to achieve a ‘flow’ state (to use the term popularised by Hungarian-born psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi), where the artist is completely absorbed in their art and at one with it.
Most people’s experience of creativity lies somewhere between the two approaches, a combination of both ‘irrational’ flow and ‘rational’ craft, both subconscious prompts and a concerted development of competence.

**Divergent and convergent thinking**

This combination of mastery and mystery reflects a deeper cognitive process that flows between divergent and convergent patterns of thinking. In 1950, Joy Paul Guilford spoke to the American Association of Psychologists with what was to become a benchmark address on the nature of human creativity, claiming that it derived from ‘divergent thinking that is fluid, flexible and original’.

It was here that the ideas of divergent and convergent thinking took root. The classic test of divergent thinking is the ‘paperclip’ question:

![Paperclip](image)

**How many uses can you think of for this paperclip?**

Guilford proposed psychometric ways of assessing the levels of creativity in the answers to this and similar divergent tasks, based on the number, range and novelty of responses.

Convergent thinking – where one particular solution to a problem is envisaged – also requires a certain style of creative thought. We flit between both convergent and divergent thought in any creative task. It’s just a question of emphasis. An example of an exercise that is designed to test primarily convergent thought, but inevitably involves some divergent thinking as well, is Duncker’s candle problem from 1945:

![Candle Problem](image)

**Using just the box of drawing pins and the matches, how do you fix the candle to the wall such that it doesn’t drip wax onto the table below?**

The answer is to overcome ‘functional fixation’ and see the box that houses the drawing pins as part of the
solution. Emptying the box, it can now be tacked to the wall with a pin and the candle placed stably in it. Problem solved.

Which musical activities best demonstrate primarily convergent thinking? And divergent thinking?
How do you encourage both modes in your teaching? What are the implications for the class environment and lesson plan?
We’ll return to these issues in the second part of this resource.

**When is an idea or artefact creative?**

Three factors have been consistently cited in research as being essential to being able to claim an idea or product is ‘creative’. You have to ask:
- Is it new?
- Is it surprising?
- Is it valuable?

When discussing each of these, the initial question has to be: ‘To whom’? New just to the creator, or to society as a whole? Surprising and valuable just to the students in the classroom, or beyond those walls?

Psychologist Margaret Boden has argued that all these iterations are valid manifestations of creativity, with categories of ‘Historical’ or ‘H-’ creativity for those findings that are demonstrably novel on a societal level and shape culture, and ‘Psychological’ or ‘P-’ creativity for smaller-scale breakthroughs. This has also been referred to as ‘Big C’ and ‘little c’ creativity respectively.

As teachers, we are concerned with cultivating ‘little c’ creativity, moments of discovery that are novel to the individual or to the class. Again, it’s a refutation of the ‘Great Composer’ complex mentioned before. Rather than trying to emulate ‘Big C’ genius, we are trying to set up and spot small, individual breakthroughs, praising the learning involved and nurturing the confidence to find out more.

Out of the three conditions for creativity named above, finding ‘new’ facets of knowledge for the learner is relatively straightforward. But how do we aim for learning that is ‘surprising’ and ‘valuable’?

‘Surprising’ connotes that, for the individual involved at least, the creative act or thought has gone beyond their expectation, taken them out of their rut of habitual thought and practice, usually by demonstrating a level of competence they didn’t realise they possessed. We want to get them saying: ‘I never thought I could do that.’ The tasks set need to push them out of their comfort zone at some point in the process. Compose for a tuba; use five-note ideas rather than three in an improvisation; recognise sonata form in a new piece unaided – whatever represents a challenge to their self-set boundaries.

Often paired (rather than small-group) work can set the right learning context here. In a well-chosen pair, each individual still ‘owns’ their own discovery process – there’s no hiding – and can stimulate the other to leave their safe space and advance into new, surprising territory.

The notion of ‘value’ is a harder one to tie down. From a pedagogical perspective, it could be argued that creativity is most valuable when the process serves a specific learning objective tied in some way to the student’s performance in the curriculum. More broadly, creative learning is ‘valuable’ when serving the student’s overall development as a creative artist, the super-objective of any learning programme in a performing art, akin to the ‘self-actualisation’ phase in Maslow’s hierarchy of learning needs.

Too often, creative exercises lack potential to drive learning forward. They are fun and can help bond a group (or not, if people feel left out or self-eject from the exercise), and quite possibly tick copious boxes for an observation. We have to be really focused on the desired outcome here – how does this creative exercise help embed knowledge, and will it genuinely engage everybody in the room?

Part two of this resource will address how to ensure creative learning serves session objectives.
Another paradigm is useful here, in order to put an overall shape on the sequence of operations involved in moving towards ideas and products that are new, surprising and valuable. Graham Wallas proposed that, whatever the field, the creative process typically observes four phases:

1. **Preparation**
   - Consider what prompts are required to inspire the student and help their intrinsic motivation to complete the task. What will they find relevant and exciting?
   - Include visual and non-musical prompts that promote associative thinking: a picture of a bird in flight; a film sequence without soundtrack; a dancer, etc.
   - Consider small-group and paired work to throw the net wide and give a voice to every participant.
   - Record some short musical ideas for later development.
   - Encourage any ideas, however small. One rhythm or gesture can unlock so much.

2. **Incubation**
   - A seed-idea is fertilised through a period of ‘incubation’, a predominantly divergent phase with no fixed end-goal in mind. After sitting with the idea, walking it through in the park, talking about it with peers, there will come a moment of ‘illumination’ where the idea takes wing and promises the possibility for both true novelty and value to a domain. The process of verification is then involved in testing its appropriateness and feasibility. It is at this point that the process can typically break down and we are sent back to the ‘preparation’ phase (the ‘drawing board’) to revisit the idea afresh.

3. **Illumination**
   - How inspiring is your classroom?

4. **Verification**
   - Much of the above also relies on a building a creative work environment. Primary school classrooms are often exemplary in this respect. Think of the colourful displays, the cross-disciplinary touches and the students’ work adorning each wall – the room becomes a temple to creativity and an affirmation of individual expression.

While this is understandably toned down in secondary environments, the spirit needs somehow to be kept. The standard set of posters on musical instruments or notation, or tired motivational quotes need to be refreshed and updated.

How do you make the displays relevant to the current cohort of learners, and not just generic? How do you send a message that their creativity matters?
Incubation

- Research has found that giving a set time – 30 minutes, say – to stick with a thought is more productive than keeping this phase open-ended.
- Ideally, ideas should be ‘incubated’ independently or in pairs.
- Encourage some form of notation or recording of the process, for later review.
- Don’t rush to have students share their thoughts in a larger group at this stage. It’s a vulnerable time, creatively!
- So many composers and creative artists have found walking (ideally in a lovely countryside setting, of course) assists the flow of thought at this stage. Maybe for older learners this can be encouraged, outside of school hours.

Illumination

- Once ideas have been gathered, this is where teacher assistance is helpful to hone the final product.
- Can you play students’ ideas for them, giving the learner a sense of where they could lead?
- Very rarely do you have that ‘eureka moment’. Illumination is more about persistence, based on a conviction that the seed idea has the right potential.
- This phase has the most ‘humps’, the most barriers to progress. Praise and encourage as much as possible.

Verification

- Will it actually fly? Every idea needs that moment of testing viability, in a constructive environment.
- Ask your students to feed back on specific areas of their peer’s work. Open questions tend to lead to vague, back-patting answers even when the work needs some helpful criticism.
- Ensure enough time in the schedule to go back and hone the product afterwards.
- Ideally there should be several testing points, and an acceptance that the process is reiterative.
- Sometimes an idea has to be returned to the incubation phase. Openness to revise and the patience to see it through is key.
HOW DOES MUSICAL CREATIVITY WORK?

We can easily point to the outward expressions of musical creativity, the roles and the principle activities. However, trying to encapsulate the breadth of internal thinking processes involved is a real challenge. Music taps into the affective domain in a way that can resist empirical definition. Irène Deliège, one of the early leading lights into this area of research, speaks of the ‘blind alleys’ of trying to explain musical creativity from a purely psychological perspective.

Peter Webster has been influential in attempting to give some definition, however. Here is his model of the thinking process in music from 2004:

You’ll notice the imprint of Wallas’s four-phase model, and the cyclical quality at its core. Creativity is a reiterative process, passing constantly between divergent and convergent thinking. Webster has summarised this model as follows:

‘Musical creativity… is the engagement of the mind in the active, structured process of thinking in sound for the purpose of producing some product that is new for the creator’ (my italics)

There are three points to this definition that are worth highlighting.

First, the acknowledgement that musical creativity is not the product of mystical meanderings, but rather a ‘structured process’ that involves active engagement of the mind. We can plan for creativity.

Secondly, it starts with ‘thinking in sound’, the operation of active listening or manipulating musical ideas in the mind. ‘Attentive’, or ‘purposive’, listening, as it has sometimes been referred to, is an essential starting point for the creative process. The listener has to move beyond a passive state and start applying an interpretation
to what they are hearing, ‘recreating’ the material in that sense and considering how they might apply similar processes to their own creation.

Thirdly, Webster talks of the product just having to be ‘new for the creator’, an example of that ‘little-c’ creativity from earlier. Even if students are just creating what seem like well-worn licks for a 12-bar blues, as long as this is a new step for the learner involved, that’s what counts. Our job, though, is to discern when students are just relying on old tricks, and to challenge them with other creative possibilities, pushing them into genuinely new territory.

**Thinking in sound**

‘Thinking in sound’ is a great phrase, and one that distinguishes musical creativity from its counterparts in the other arts. Consider composers you know. Do they have a strong inner ear, an ability to replicate ideas on their instrument and manipulate them in their mind? How do we foster this in our student composers?

Jazz musicians put great store on developing the inner ear. Part of the training is being able to sing an idea before committing it to the instrument or paper. As jazz pianist and pedagogue Fred Hersch says: ‘Any jazz player should be able to scat sing their solo.’

Getting teenagers to sing ideas is notoriously hard, but we shouldn’t be easily dissuaded. It is a skill that could usefully be reinforced in one-to-one instrumental lessons initially. Can students sing a melodic phrase or rhythm on the page before playing it? How about trying three different ways of expressing the same idea, again just using the voice? All of these techniques consolidate the inner ear and, crucially, build the confidence to vocalise what they’re hearing.
This action of making an abstract thought more concrete, of giving it some shape and initial expression, is essential to kick-starting the creative process, whatever the skill level.

Flowing on from this, interpreting and performing a piece of notated music also is a valid expression of creativity. The key is to engage a wider concept of the piece rather than just following the directions on the page. The student needs to engage their own ‘active, structured process of thinking in sound’, to use Webster’s words, to find their original voice in their interpretation.

What does the music mean to them personally, and what can they display of their individual creativity when practising and performing it? Can they get into the mind of the composer and see the printed material as fresh inspiration rather than as an antique document?

**BENEFITS OF ENCOURAGING MUSICAL CREATIVITY**

Being creative may involve frustrations along the way, but ultimately it makes us feel good, put simply. It answers a fundamental calling we all share as musicians and creative artists. Studies have found there are multiple associated benefits for the learning process.

Being creative helps to:

- activate passive learning.
- increase stylistic awareness and in-depth listening.
- build motivation and engagement with the subject.
- develop an affective language, giving a means to express emotion.
- create a ‘shared vulnerability’, which in turn helps group bonding.
- promote combinatorial thinking and problem-solving abilities in other areas.
- encourage both independent and collaborative modes of learning and exploration.
- move the learner towards self-actualisation and finding their own artistic voice.

These points may appear self-evident, but they speak to our initial vocation as teachers. We go into education to help students find out who they are, to help them express themselves effectively, work together well and develop problem-solving abilities beyond the classroom. Attending to creativity in the learning process addresses all of these motivations. It is not a luxury extra, but the cornerstone to a fulfilling learning environment.

**A look ahead to part two**

This resource has been about delving beyond the surface understanding of musical creativity, putting it into a wider context, and provoking reflection on who we are as creative musicians and how we might share that in class. It has established some reference points for discussion on what this might mean in practice.

Part two will look at the application of these reflections within the current GCSE and A level specifications, focusing on how we can ‘animate’ the curriculum and and encourage a creative response at all stages. It will address strategies and practical tips for:

- Creative listening
- Creative analysis
- Creative performance
- Creative responses to the composing brief

Sight-singing is not the final frontier, but the first step.

Can you get your students singing short intervals, phrases and rhythms on a regular basis? Start with small musical ‘words’ and move to sentences.
We will cover a variety of musical styles, from popular through to classical, and look at how computers can both enhance and inhibit the process.

Until then, here’s to acts of creative boldness every day and re-engaging personally with what it means to be creative!