Musical creativity in the classroom: part 2

by Jonathan James

INTRODUCTION

In the first part to this two-part resource (Music Teacher, July 2018), we tried to pin definitions on what it means to be musically creative, finding that the more you try to corner the concept, the more it slips beyond grasp. We discussed the implications of ‘thinking in sound’, alongside multiple expressions of creative musicianship and the theories that underpin them.

This second part asks: so what? We’ll look at the application of the theory across the following core areas, with ideas that are relevant to both GCSE and A level:

- Listening
- Analysing set works
- Performance
- Composing

Creativity is a very personal subject. The following tips, exercises and suggestions may well have you muttering in dissent at the page or the screen. Good! The aim is not to give fail-proof recipes but to provoke a reaction. Even if the specific ideas don’t quite fit with your current practice, the hope is that you’ll be inspired to adapt them to your own teaching situation.

THE STORY SO FAR

Aside from looking at the theory of musical creativity in the previous resource, a few foundational principles were proposed that are worth bearing in mind as you work through this one. Here is a quick résumé:

WALK THE TALK

It’s hard to inspire genuine creativity in your students unless you are creatively active yourself. Try to model the curiosity, risk-taking and experimentation you want to see in them. And that may mean carving out some extra time to invest in yourself as a creative musician.

WE’RE ALL CREATIVE

Some may be drawn to creative roles more naturally than others, but to be human is to be creative. Don’t let the critic-on-the-shoulder tell you otherwise.

IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT COMPOSING OR IMPROVISING

Musical creativity can be expressed across the spectrum of musical activity, from listening attentively to a song, to soloing over a middle eight, mixing it in a studio, spinning it on a deck or writing about it in a review. We should refer instead to ‘musical creativities’.

CREATIVITY FLOWS ACROSS BOUNDARIES

If I write a haiku, I can put myself in a better space to write a symphony. It’s about a general disposition to go beyond the first, most convenient thoughts and finding ways to break the deadlock of routine, overcoming the natural resistance to create something out of nothing.

THE TEN-MINUTE RULE

Often the difference between feeling utterly blank and finding a flow of inspiration is ten minutes. Ten minutes of facing the void and pushing into it regardless, and not being critical about the random thoughts that spill out as a result.
DISRUPTION
In order to find something that is ‘new, surprising and valuable’ – the standard definition of a creative product in any domain – we often have to find ways of disrupting habits and patterns of thought that keep us returning to what we know. As teachers, we need to recognise those ruts in our students and find ways of changing the pace, style or approach of our lesson so that they can break into the unknown.

PEER AND SMALL-GROUP WORK
Most creative tasks benefit from a peer learning approach, providing there is a degree of symmetry in competence across the small group or pair. It’s too easy to hide in a large group.

ATTENDING TO THE ENVIRONMENT
Aside from having posters and student work on your walls to provoke thought and discussion, do you have a space in your classroom that is dedicated to free-flowing ideas? A ‘splurge board’ is what we called it in the last resource. Somewhere where creative thoughts, however small, however related to the curriculum or not, are sown and watered.

CREATIVE LISTENING
One of the main distinctions of musical creativities, as opposed to other artistic pursuits, is that it requires thinking in sound – or audiation, to use the more technical term. The ability to hear a sound, recognise and dissemble it, configure it into some form of code (eg notation), then either store or manipulate it according to different creative ends, is absolutely vital to creative musicianship.

In an ideal world, children would be encouraged to develop creative listening habits from year one onwards. Whereas that might have been the case in a dim and distant past in the UK, our current reality is very different. We have to play catch-up, more often than not. Most year nine students have not had formative training in ear skills, and struggle to discern pitch and rhythm. But it is never too late to start.

Here are some exercises for encouraging attentive or ‘purposive’ listening, to be combined with the usual development of vocabulary and syntactical knowledge around intervals, chord types and other musical building blocks.

PRESSING PAUSE
When playing a new piece of music to the class, press pause at key moments and ask them to guess what will happen next, describing it in as much detail as they can. If possible, prompt some options from the piano.

A fundamental principle here, and for all of the following exercises, is to get the students thinking like a composer, songwriter or producer. They need to step into the creator’s shoes, inhabit their world for a moment, and try making some independent choices.

As ever, this kind of exercise works best when splitting the group into pairs or small groups and insisting on a range of responses, not just the first one that comes to mind.

To that end, try to find corners in the music where it takes a surprising turn, to keep everyone on their toes.

UPSIDE-DOWN EARS
‘Inverting the ear’ to trace the bassline is a good way of bringing more discipline to the listening process, as well as encouraging better harmonic understanding. Take a pop song they know well and encourage them to try and ignore the melody and sing along with the bass instead.

For more on purposive listening, see Lucy Green’s book Music, Informal Learning and the School.
Assigning a different hand-shape or signal for each step of the bassline can be fun, particularly if it's repetitive. Kodály hand signs are an obvious choice here, but you could ask the students to create their own, based on how the sound makes them feel.

**KARATE EARS**
To bring in a light element of competition, why not award different colour ‘belts’ for listening attainment? Those with the sharpest ears can work towards their black belt, third dan. It beats a star chart!

**SIGHT-SINGING**
Sight-singing is the best way to activate an appreciation of pitches and intervals, alongside other musical elements. It is also admittedly an uphill struggle for most year nines and older, particularly if singing has not been part of their class culture.

The only answer has to be persistence and patience, together with consistency and creative, fun exercises to sustain the interest. Ideally, every session would start with, or at least include a short (two-minute?) session of sight-singing. They could:
- guess the song by singing the first line of its chorus.
- build musical sentences by stringing together different intervals, taught incrementally and memorised.
- sight-sing a one-bar phrase and then sing a response.
- be given a short phrase, sing it by ear, then try to notate it on the board, correcting each other as they go.
- sight-sing the same phrase forwards then backwards.
- sight-sing a phrase and then transpose it into a new key.

**QUICK DIVES**
We tend to play students extended extracts of music for them to analyse or comment on. This is good for exam preparation, and for dealing with appreciation of form and structure as well as enhancing musical memory.

As a surprise, you could play just a few seconds and ask them to comment in as much detail as possible, repeating the snippet several times. It shows how much can be communicated in such a small space and gets them listening with extra focus, to plumb the information in the brief time available.

This can then be slowly lengthened over time. Generally, ‘chunking down’ a musical sentence into a couple of bars and their constituent elements, supported at the piano or sung, is a great way of honing the ear and building confidence.

**MAESTRO MOMENTS**
In primary school, you can get away with expressive dance responses to a piece of music. From year ten, perhaps the closest you can get is through conducting along. Aside from building a useful skill and reinforcing concepts around time signatures and phrasing, you are trying to help them embody the music in some way.

They can start off conducting the piece, full of interpretive gestures of course, in a group. And then perhaps a different student can be selected for a ‘maestro moment’ as a reward.

**CREATIVE PLAYLISTS**
Playlists from online platforms such as Spotify are often used to demonstrate a breadth of interpretative response to a single piece, most typically a set work.

How about asking students to build a playlist around a musical element? They can then share the reasons for their choices in the group. Each list should seek to draw on a wide selection of musical styles and genres. They could, for example, be asked to find a cross-section of works that clearly demonstrate:
- ostinato patterns
- a dramatic key change
- imaginative use of register
- poor ensemble or out-of-tune playing
- pointillism
- a fierce argument
SHUFFLING THE CARDS
You will have no doubt already tried a version of giving students a mix of cards with musical vocabulary on and asking them to sort them according to the piece and its elements.

A fun variation of this is to ask the students to make up their own vocabulary cards for three different pieces. The cards can be a mixture of technical terms and more general descriptors, where they have free range. The game is then to pit one group against each other and see if the competing group can match the right cards to the right pieces.

GRAPHICS
Having distributed large, blank A3 sheets and a host of coloured pens and pencils, you can ask students to respond to an unfamiliar piece of music either through free drawing or through something more narrative-based, such as:
- a storyboard.
- a form of graphic notation.
- a colour-coded timeline that shows the different ‘temperatures’ of the piece.
- an emotional map.

Why leave it at just one graphic interpretation? If time, ask them to reinterpret the piece using a completely new design or graphic approach. Compare and contrast their responses.

IMPROVISED RESPONSE
If instruments are easily to hand, listening exercises are best accompanied by a quick practical response to the ideas being discussed. For example, if students have just spotted a descending bassline in a ‘trace the bass’ exercise, a small group could find the same line on their instruments with some basic held chords or melodic improvisation above.

Activating the learning through doing will be a central principle to all the creative responses discussed here.

CREATIVE ANALYSIS
Those words may appear oxymoronic, or even suggestive of poor practice (rather like ‘creative accounting’) but perhaps one of our hardest challenges is making the set works come alive, particularly those by composers who died 300 years ago.

A previous resource (Animating the set works, Music Teacher, May 2017) has been dedicated to this. The rationale was to draw on the techniques of an animateur to find practical ways of responding to Edexcel’s GCSE set works, often through an improvised response, or searching for ways of getting inside the mind of the composer.

A lot of the listening exercises suggested above could also be applied, with some adaptation, to analysing the score on the page.

The typical student response is to see analysis as a primarily intellectual exercise and therefore as dry and boring. An emphasis on narrative can help combat this knee-jerk response. Every piece can suggest a story, regardless how abstract it is. Our job is to help the students to construct the narrative that works for them, rather than impose our own.

To help build story and keep the metaphors multi-sensory, why not ask:
- What does this piece smell of? (Careful…)
- What does it feel like?
- How does it taste?
The following thoughts and examples are about creating a distance from the detail of the score for a moment, to allow the students to see the wood for the trees, so that they can re-approach the score with new depth afterwards. This can involve dissecting a paragraph of the music, putting it in a Petri dish, so to speak, and giving the elements a new prominence. Or it can be about temporarily alienating the material, making it seem less routine and familiar.

Sample creative response: finding the pathos in Beethoven’s *Pathétique*

One of the more demanding set works on the Edexcel GCSE specification is the first movement from Beethoven’s *Pathétique* Piano Sonata (covered in its own Music Teacher resource, November 2016). Its length alone may be offputting to some new to the classical genre. The first task is therefore to ensure a good grasp of the overall shape of the movement, its form and basic structural points.

**MULTIMEDIA TREATMENTS**

Play the movement in its entirety to the students, having split them into small groups. Assign a specific narrative treatment of the material to each group:

- an outline of a one-act play or short film.
- an abstract piece of art.
- a choreography for a dance piece.
- ideas and images for a poem.

Discuss their ideas, the basic characters, images and metaphors in plenary and trace the common themes in them. Then have them commit the overall story of the piece, in their own words, to writing. What is the trajectory of each section and why?

Looking at these stories, what is Beethoven expressing about ‘pathos’ in this work? Is there a balance between suffering and fighting back, perhaps?

**CONTEXTUAL SHIFTS**

A good way of re-hearing the piece is to imagine how you would arrange it for a different ensemble. If students were transcribing the piano solo for orchestra, which instruments would they pick and why? Can they imagine the *Allegro* rearranged for a swing band or a rock group?

It would be fun to use production software to recreate a small portion of the Beethoven Sonata with startling new sounds, even if just eight bars. Bhangra Beethoven, anyone?

**Improvised responses**

The principle here is to pick out key characteristics in the music that will help analysis later, sticking close to the spirit of the score and ‘channelling’ Beethoven into the response, even when straying from the original.

In sonata form, it makes sense to focus on the first and second subject material and look at how they are developed. In this particular movement, Beethoven also includes a dramatic introduction in the style of French Baroque overture. This contains several important motivic ideas. For those not teaching that specification, excerpts are given below, for ease of reference.
ANIMATING THE GRAVE INTRODUCTION

Beethoven grabs our attention at the beginning with an eloquent statement of suffering in C minor. Look at the sudden accents, the dotted rhythms and the languishing falling semitones:

How do we get the students feeling the power of those dotted rhythms, the diminished chords and weeping couplets? Perhaps start with the rhythm, set over a basic chord progression:

To enhance the funereal mood, there could be a deathly rattle on drums played as a finger roll, to accompany the ‘fp’ chords.

Then add a simple lamenting line over the top that demonstrates the falling couplet and a bit of the free fantasia to come:

Thicken out with thirds and a countermelody:
Less able students could help underpin the dotted rhythm on hand percussion, or hold a single note per bar.

More able students could be asked to improvise a suitable pathos-filled line using C natural minor (Aeolian) over the first three bars and C harmonic minor in the final, in the style of a Baroque fantasia.

**REINVENTING THE FIRST SUBJECT**

The first subject in the Allegro then represents a fight back against this suffering, the melody surging up over a pedal in the bass before tumbling back down again:

![Allegro di molto e con brio](image)

A devised response could develop each of these ideas in turn. First, a pedal with a sense of fighting upwards, picking up on Beethoven’s off-beat idea:

![Allegro con passione](image)

An element of contrary motion would help build tension:

![Contrary motion](image)
Students could use hand percussion to play on the off-beat throughout, maintaining a four-bar crescendo.

Then, to emphasise the importance of the falling couplet as a motif throughout this first movement:

![Musical notation](image1)

This four-bar idea could then be taken to the subdominant for variety:

![Musical notation](image2)

**REINVENTING THE SECOND SUBJECT**

The second subject is all about gracefulness, and is marked by dialogue between bass and treble voices, in call and response. It has earlier Classical features and is highly ornamented:

![Musical notation](image3)

We could start by picking the accompanimental figure in E flat minor:

![Musical notation](image4)
Then adding a simple ornamented idea over the top:

Finally, an element of imitative dialogue could be integrated, either improvised or worked out:

All of these ideas could now be run together, with other improvised elements, to form a new exposition to the *Pathétique*. The *Grave* section could interrupt the process at different surprising points, as it will throughout Beethoven’s original.

**CLASSROOM DISCUSSION FOLLOWING THIS DEVISED SESSION**

- Which bits did students enjoy playing, and why?
- Can they now name, without looking, the principle musical elements in Beethoven’s exposition section?
- Do they feel like they’ve got inside the mind of Beethoven?

All of the above is just a sample of how a response might be methodically layered together, differentiating for ability. This rationale can be successfully applied to pieces of all styles, deconstructing the source material, then reconstructing it in the class’s own language.

**CREATIVE PERFORMANCE**

The above ‘reinvention’ technique can also be used in a one-to-one setting, to coax the student into a more imaginative response to the piece they are performing, and to help them see the score as a live, dynamic document, not inert and beyond reach.

Here are some other ideas to help disrupt performing habits and encourage students to play with more creativity:

**TRIGGER WORDS AND PICTOGRAMS**

Can they pencil in either poetic words or simple images that help them reconceptualise the music? Going back to the *Pathétique*, how would the words ‘damp, dark earth’ over the *Grave* change their sound? Or a picture of a firework over the *Allegro* first idea?

This is all about promoting right-brain free association alongside the left-brain sharp analysis, reaching for provocative images that lift the performer into a different interpretative space.
FINISH THE SENTENCE
With a piece of card, cover the next line in the music and ask the student to improvise their selection of responses over what could come next. This is a well-worn technique for enhancing memorisation, but it can be used creatively as well. Demonstrate some responses yourself, too, to get the ball rolling. Breaking up the musical sentences in this way draws attention to their underlying syntax and rhetoric, and keeps a playful connection to the score.

GOING TOPSY-TURVY
Ask the student to play a passage with the opposite dynamics or articulation to those marked, or radically to change the character of the rhythm. How does this affect the expression and message of the music? The reversal of the markings and the composer’s intention in this way brings renewed attention to the original material and the detail of the score.

CHANGE THE STORY
It may be that the student has already attached a story to the piece they are playing, to give it extra life. This story also risks becoming stagnant, though. Challenge them to come up with a different narrative that still observes the main character and structure of the piece, just from a new angle. Is there a change in their playing as a result? Which stories suit the music best and why?

You may have noticed an insistence on narrative responses throughout this resource. We interpret our lives as story and have a natural impulse to ‘storify’ what we can’t understand. Even if there is resistance to creating stories with the older learners – as it is an exercise they may associate more with primary school – press into the task nevertheless. Nobody is too old for stories – they are part of our human fabric.

TURN OFF THE LIGHTS!
Once a piece has been memorised, a brief recital in the dark can be fun and creatively productive. It invites a more intimate connection to the sound from both the performer and listener, and can shed new light on how it might be interpreted.

Failing that, ask the performers and listeners to close their eyes for the duration of the piece, contrasting it to the experience of having eyes wide open. Does it deepen their understanding of what is being communicated?

CREATIVE APPROACHES TO THE COMPOSING BRIEF
The most obvious creative component to the specification has been left until last: composing. The reason for doing so is to demonstrate how all the previous activities – listening, analysing and performing – involve a composer’s mindset at one stage or another, and how they all feed into good compositional practice.

Practise, practise
Often, and for very good reason, the composing component is treated as a concentrated project, with several weeks dedicated to the completion of one part of the brief or the other.

In an ideal world, students would see themselves as composers the moment they step into the classroom. They need to be happy using the tools in a composer’s toolbox throughout the academic year and not be shy of committing ideas to manuscript. What often appears to be a barrier of self-confidence is just fear of the unknown. As with anything else, all it takes is a little familiarity and routine before composing becomes a less formidable proposition.
Can a ‘little and often’ approach be applied here, whatever that means for your curriculum? If the take-home task is about analysis, for example, could it not also involve an eight-bar composition? Or how about ‘Manuscript Mondays’, where there is a fun notation exercise, regardless of where you are in the scheme of work?

**Record your curiosity**

Composers craft sound, and inspiration can come from any sound at any time. Ask students to pin back their ears and listen attentively to everyday sounds, capturing them on their phone for later. Specific tasks could be built around this practice:
- Create a ‘sound journal’.
- Loop samples of everyday sounds into an underscore.
- Complete a worksheet detailing sounds from different environments: travel, kitchen, somewhere green, somewhere grey…
- Create a ‘soundtrack’ to your typical day.

An interesting exercise is to pair students up and get one to respond musically to the other’s recorded samples.

Can you demonstrate how you would respond to the prompts of one of the sound journals? It’s so helpful to model the creative process at this stage of turning raw sound material into notes, phrases and musical paragraphs.

**Take your thoughts for a walk**

Mozart used this phrase for trying out ideas on paper. Here, though, it is meant more literally, in the sense of getting out and about and allowing the mind to wander freely as you stroll.

In the last resource we mentioned Graham Wallas’s four-part model of creativity, seeing it as moving through distinct phases: preparation – illumination – incubation – verification. Two of these phases are typically rushed within the creative process, due to the pressure (often self-imposed) to leap ahead and produce something: preparation and illumination. Research has shown that walking during the creative process helps unlock peripheral thinking and prompts the brain to make unexpected connections and associations.

The more complex the creative task, the more we need to allow time for rumination during these all-important phases. It is part of the discipline of being a creative artist.

**Zero in**

When we’re practising the piano, we often play with just the left hand or right before putting them together. Isolating problematic areas of the process is instructive.

The same is true for composing, and it can be productive to focus on just one parameter at a time, to grapple with the theory involved, and not to be distracted by too many other concerns. You could therefore devise some tasks that help isolate different components in the musical language. For example:
- For rhythm, create a sword-fight in sound, using two lines and surprising off-beat accents…
- or write a two-minute piece that is based on morse code…
- or create a rhythmic pattern using a sequence of twos and threes.
- For colour, write a series of bright and dark chords…
- or imagine a red melody, then a silver one.
- For sonority, write four bars inspired by silk, then concrete, bubble wrap or nails…
- or imagine an ink blot spreading. How do you do that in music?
- For melody, write the catchiest tag-line to a number one hit…
- or create a four-bar tune to sell dark chocolate, birdfood or petrol.

An interesting exercise is to pair students up and get one to respond musically to the other’s recorded samples.
Look twice

Take the picture below and devise a range of different musical underscores that tell a range of different stories:

- They're kissing for the first time.
- They're about to say goodbye forever.
- She's really a ghost but he doesn't know it yet.
- Connery is thinking about a career move as a spy (cue James Bond leitmotif).

CONCLUSION

Creativity at any level and in any musical activity requires boldness and taking risks, and these are qualities that lie behind the success of every artistic pursuit. They are fundamental to any artist’s individualisation. Although some of the exercises suggested above may appear time-consuming, they can actually be applied as brief lesson-openers, regularly across the term.

When you notice you are drying up creatively, reach out to others for inspiration, keep challenging yourself to think innovatively, and refuse to be stymied by a stale scheme of work.

Good luck!