

# C is for Composing!



**C**elebrations, choirs, carols, concerts and competitions are all elements beginning with 'C' that we commonly associate with musical activity in school. But C is also for composing! For children, composing is often the aspect of the Music Curriculum they enjoy most: it is fun and it provides them with opportunities to experiment and to have access to a range of percussion instruments. The process of composing is the same as any other creative classroom activity. It involves the children making choices, trying out ideas, practising, presenting and evaluating. The choices they make in relation to composing involve sounds, patterns, rhythms and notes as well as deciding on the way and the order in which they are played.

#### Exploring sound.

Before engaging in composing

activities, children need plenty of experience and practice at exploring and experimenting with sounds. They can explore

vocal sounds such as talking, whispering, singing, humming, shouting, wailing, muttering, hissing, whistling and so on. They can also explore body



percussion which includes clapping, tapping, stamping, slapping, clicking and rubbing. Children will have great fun

creating sequences with vocal or body percussion. Manufactures or homemade instruments can provide all kinds of sound experiences. Children should have opportunities to handle and play freely with these, thus enabling them to choose suitable instruments to produce various sounds.

#### Sound effects

Children will compose for a variety of reasons. One of these may be to accompany a story or a poem with simple sound effects. To this end, the teacher

**“The material of music is sound and silence. Integrating these is composing.” John Cage**

should choose stories or poems which lend themselves to lots of sound possibilities, and which allow the children to make the sounds with their voices, their bodies, or with percussion instruments. When pupils are experienced at creating sound effects, they can write or tell their own 'sound stories'. To extend this activity, they might choose a few of their favourite sounds from the sound story or poem and arrange these to create an overture or a piece of music. This can be played before the main story in order to give a flavour of what is to come.

As the children gain more confidence in creating sound effects for stories and poems, they may choose to illustrate a character, a sequence of events or an atmosphere in their sound stories. As before, they select different kinds of sounds using the voice, body percussion or percussion instruments.

### Musical elements

Once pupils have had experience in choosing and using sound effects, they can have fun exploring the musical elements in their compositions. They can work as individuals, in pairs or in groups to create short compositions. Simple work cards could be made with different tasks such as:

- Make up a composition using sounds and silences.
- Make up a composition using long and short sounds.
- Make up a composition which has a repeated section.
- Make up a composition using high and low notes.
- Make up a composition using your voices only.
- Make up a composition using your body only.
- Make up a composition which gets faster/slower.
- Make up a composition using two instruments.

### Recording Compositions

Talking about and recording compositions is also a very important part of composing. When engaged in the composing process, children will be involved in making choices, offering opinions, asking questions and critically evaluating their work. They can discuss what they liked about their own work or the work of other children and make suggestions as to how they might change or improve their work.

Notation, either invented or standard, helps the process of thinking and planning in relation to musical compositions. Using a system of symbols, words or pictures which can be easily understood by themselves and others will help children when recalling their compositions.

Compositions can also be recorded electronically. As we are now in the digital age, we can use computers to record children's compositions. All that is needed is a microphone and a computer. Most computers have an inbuilt sound recorder which can be found by clicking on Start – Accessories – Entertainment.

A better quality of sound can be achieved by downloading an open- source software package such as Audacity. This is free to download and requires a microphone to use it in the class.  
<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>

MP3 players with built in voice recorders are another simple way of recording compositions. They are now relatively inexpensive and the composition can be uploaded onto a class computer and played for the class. Compositions recorded in this way can also be stored in an electronic portfolio of children's work samples.

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