

Teaching composing in secondary schools: the creative dream

George Odam

Professor George Odam, Bramble House, The Street, Farmborough, Bath, BA3 1AL

E-mail: Georgeodam@compuserve.com

Composing is an obligatory activity at Key Stage 3 in the present National Curriculum in music for England and for Wales. The research programme, based on field visits, seminars and questionnaires, seeks to identify a basis for effective classroom practice through direct observation of experienced teachers and their pupils in twenty-six State secondary schools across England. Visits have also been made to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Group-work is the dominant working method in most secondary schools. Much time is at present wasted in group-work and it contributes significantly to stress in both teachers and pupils. Composing is largely an individual activity and this is insufficiently acknowledged or planned for at Key Stage 3. Too many teachers use methods inappropriate to the resources available to them. There are problems of progression and preservation of pupils' work. Despite these problems there is strong evidence that many children enjoy composing activities in school and compose music in and out of school for a variety of reasons and occasions. Composing is firmly established in our music education curriculum and provides a unique feature of practice in the United Kingdom. When composing is taught well, pupils look forward to their music lessons in the secondary school and approve of and enjoy composing activities.

What though the dream crack!

We shall remake it.

Staring with those startled eyes at what we are –

Michael Tippett, Third Symphony, final movement.

Background: how the creative dream emerged

Surprisingly little has been written on the teaching of composing in schools. There had been early experiments in the first decades of this century. Emile Jaques-Dalcroze, who visited London to teach composition in conservatoires in the first years of the century wrote, in 1914, 'The study of solfège teaches the pupils to hear and mentally envisage melodies, and all sorts of melodic combinations, to identify and vocally improvise them, to notate and compose them'. In the USA, Satis Coleman's early work in New York with children and composing stated that it seems rather inappropriate to let anything so formal as a fixed method stand between the little child and his experiences in so elemental an art (Coleman, 1922). The basis of her work was with individual pupils as was that of Walford Davies whose mission through early BBC broadcasts was based on 'a belief in the ability of children to compose their own melodies' (Cox, 1997: p. 45). One of the first written records of the early practice of composing in an English secondary school is that of the young Peter Maxwell Davies where he states 'It was here that the *creative* work with music

in the school began – born of sheer necessity’ (Davies, 1963: p. 108).¹ Books on classroom composing published in Canada and taken up by Universal Edition here in England brought the views and experience of composer R. Murray Schafer to the attention of music educators in the mid-1960s. Schafer was influenced greatly by the New York group of composers centred on John Cage. George Self’s Cage-inspired work written from the experience of working with lower ability secondary children was published as *New Sounds in Class* (1967) by Universal Edition. This publishing house did more than many to awaken interest in and support the practice of composing in schools largely due to the enterprise and enthusiasm of Bill Collieran.² There was a growth of publications around 1970 including Wilfrid Mellers’s composition and philosophical schools material *The Resources of Music* (1969) which preceded Brian Dennis’s *Experimental Music in Schools* (1970) and Paynter and Aston’s *Sound and Silence* (1970) by one year. It shows Mellers to have been a powerful influence on music education from his York University base.

At the same time a movement in developing creativity was strongly evident in primary education. It is not insignificant that many of the leading activists working in teacher education, such as the young Paynter himself, spent some of their professional lives supervising students and teachers in primary schools. In the late 1950s, the principles of Carl Orff’s *Schulwerk* were brought to the attention of British schools through the work of, amongst others, Margaret Murray and Doris Gould. Creativity in music received special mention in the Plowden report *Children in Their Primary Schools* (DES, 1967) and two further government papers *Music and the Young School Leaver* (Schools Council, 1968) and *Creative Music in Schools* (DES, 1970) encouraged composing practice throughout our school system. Composing at secondary school was the focus of the N. W. Region Development Project’s report, *Creative Music and the Young School Leaver* (1974).

Two films were made which had considerable impact in the profession. For television, the *Monitor* Unit film was made on Peter Maxwell Davies’s work at Cirencester in 1961³ and the BBC 2 in-service training film *Discovery and Experience*⁴ co-ordinated by Walter Drabble HMI in 1965. Both showed direct evidence of classroom methods.

The York University Schools Council Project *Music in the Secondary School Curriculum* (1973–82) gave rise to a huge amount of practice-based material on tape, slide and film and was followed up by the book *Music in the Secondary School Curriculum* in 1982. Paynter gives a more comprehensive picture here of methodology in composing than in the earlier book, and continues to see small group workshops as the main way of organising things. His advice on the problems of noise and group-work could be construed as less than helpful and he feels that part of the problem of motivation and control is teachers’ lack of experience in making music themselves (Paynter, 1982: 82). These issues will appear as important elements in our findings.

Research focus

In the 1970s, *Sound and Silence* (Paynter & Aston, 1970) provided a practical educational focus for composing, which eventually coalesced into the previously mentioned School’s Council Secondary Project based at York University (1973–82). The ideas developed through this work were profoundly influential on a whole generation of music teachers and represented what I have chosen to call the ‘Creative Dream’. A great deal of idealism and

lateral thinking was built into the original concept. For instance in *Sound and Silence*, Paynter and Aston recommended that creative work should take place in the lunch-hour and break times. New generations of teachers have struggled with the reality of trying to adapt their inadequate teaching environments, equipment and training opportunities to accommodate and develop this work. At the heart of the problem is the difficult balance between co-operative learning techniques which encourage groups of children to work with minimum supervision in order to maximise limited resources in a mixed-ability environment, and individual learning needs.

Composing was a dominant and revolutionary feature in the revision of the General Certificate of Secondary Education in England and Wales in 1987. The formulation of the National Curriculum for England and for Wales (1992–5), confirmed the teaching of composing as a requirement, not just for secondary music specialists, but for all primary teachers as well. The challenge this provided both to teachers and their pupils was far-reaching and its consequences enormous. It brought music education officially into the realm of arts education where pupil-centred learning, creative work and problem-solving techniques in other arts disciplines had been the norm for decades. For many teachers it has become the vehicle not only for composition itself but also for the delivery of listening and performing. In many classrooms composing has become the dominant working mode. ‘Composing is . . . the surest way for pupils to develop musical judgement and to come to understand the notion of “thinking” in music’ (Paynter, 1997: 18). Effectively, the promotion of composing as a central curriculum activity has changed the balance of what is traditionally called ‘musicianship’. It requires skills which have not been universally practised by musicians in the last century or so, and draws on models of practice more common in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in our own culture. It challenges the notion of the specialist musician and looks to a more holistic model much more common in other cultures.

Composing as a national requirement is also to be found in Scotland, where the guideline approach to ‘inventing’ at primary level is very similar and rather more formal in outlook at secondary level. The new National Curriculum requirement to teach composing within the music curriculum in 1992–5 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, although unfamiliar to many generalist primary-phase teachers, was not unfamiliar to most music specialist teachers, particularly those at secondary level. However, as acknowledged by Paynter in 1982, the majority of these teachers lacked composing in their training and for many it was and is quite outside their own experience of music-making. New teaching skills were needed of an order very different from standard music education practice. Without any co-ordinated or strategically planned in-service education, teachers had been left to learn on the job. The demands of a secondary music post leave little time for reflection on practice. As a result, teaching methodology in composing has become fixed and highly dependent on a dominant teaching method using small group-work.

As a music-educator that has been implicated in the promotion of composing in the curriculum in the United Kingdom over the last thirty years, I felt that it was time for a good, hard and critical look at what we do. As a teacher-trainer my main concerns leading me to this research project were focused by a new government emphasis in the last five years on teacher-led initial teacher training.⁵ One direct result of this initiative has been that student teaching programmes have also become heavily dominated by group-work

approaches. This style of teaching demands the practice of highly advanced teaching skills in the classroom by inexperienced trainees. Also there is worrying evidence of an unbalanced music curriculum practice emerging as a direct result of an emphasis on composing, despite clear national guidelines to the contrary. At secondary level, through personal observation in schools I identified the following problems to be of most concern especially at Key Stage 3 (eleven to fourteen):

- Group-work in composing seriously dominating curriculum time;
- Attendant problems of pupil discipline and stress accumulation in trainees;
- Evidence of 'burn-out' in good and experienced teachers;
- Recruitment into secondary music teacher-training was continuing to drop;
- Lack of evidence of skills development in composing;
- Little evidence of progression in composing either from primary to secondary or within secondary until examination work took over at Key Stage 4;
- Inadequate resources in many schools even though nearly all used electronic keyboards;
- Inspection evidence which suggested that non-specialist primary-phase teachers were more successful in teaching music than were the specialists in secondary schools (Mills, 1997).

Aims of the 'Creative Dream' research project

The most immediate aim of this project has been to search out and identify good and effective teaching of composing in secondary schools and to make information on this available to teachers nationally. The ultimate aim is to revitalise and remake the 'creative dream' through a clear and thorough investigation of current practice. The new 'dream' is to continue to find composing firmly at the heart of music education practice in the United Kingdom and for it to affect all stages of our national music education process from nursery to higher degrees in the first decades of the new century.

Objectives

- To observe, investigate and document effective methods used to teach composing in the secondary classroom for eleven- to eighteen-year olds with special emphasis on Key Stage 3;
- To undertake an in-depth appraisal of the use of keyboards and associated equipment for composing, since they are the most commonly used equipment;
- To develop understanding of the effectiveness of whole-class, group, paired and individual pupils' work in composing;
- To identify, document and define progressive learning in composition;
- To recommend developments and to disseminate ideas of good practice

Presenting our findings

Although the initial impetus and bias of the above basic questions came from me as a composer and teacher-trainer in discussion with my Research Fellow, Anice Paterson, it

must be understood that she has been my ears and eyes in carrying out the fieldwork. My analysis of the data she has gathered may present a different view from hers. Anice is an experienced teacher, adviser, INSET leader and inspector. What we present is the product of many hours of discussion, letters, telephone conversations and e-mails. We do not claim to have arrived at any particular theory and are both aware that we analyse what we have with different experiences and priorities. This article presents my interpretation of the results of our work. Hers will be available in a different form through a publication by the National Association of Music Educators in July 2000.

Neither of us believes that it is possible to present our readers with simple objective facts about the practice of composing in the Key Stage 3 classroom. Such objective information is unavailable. Although we used a questionnaire as the only feasible way of testing pupils' reactions to what they do in class, we are very wary of suggesting that the results of this survey are an objective statement of fact. The questionnaires used were given to pupils by their teachers. We had only limited control over how this exercise was presented and could not be certain that teachers had provided any bias intentionally or unintentionally. Results should be read as indicators and readers can take from the figures what they may.

Composing and the individual: the unanswered question

'It [composing] should be child-centred and start from the needs of the individual' (Paynter & Aston, 1970: 2).

The above list of aims and objectives gives the overall emphasis of our enquiry and the reasons why I have been worried enough about the way composing is taught to invest so much time in this study. What it does not make clear is an underlying concern I have about the place of the individual in creative work.

About twenty-five years ago I was involved in one of the summer school courses run by the Music Teachers' Association at York University. I remember clearly being challenged then by a sceptical West Country music adviser who could not grasp how any teacher could get round a class, in the time given, to view and comment upon each pupil's composition. His comment was greeted at the time with laughter and derision from the floor, most likely encouraged by me. But the real concern behind his question has stuck in my mind and remains unanswered. 'How do you promote individual creativity in pupils when their total experience of the work is corporate?' is a question that so far remains unanswered by practice up to and including Key Stage 3. 'What is creative music?' asks Paynter in *Sound and Silence*; 'First of all it is a way of saying things which are personal to the individual' (Paynter & Aston, 1970: 7).

Of course, as soon as they meet examination work at Key Stage 4, pupils are expected to become individual creators. But where is the experience of self-expression and of being totally in charge of what you create before examination work begins? Does any other arts subject expect creativity to be totally corporate and why has group-working been so exclusively promoted in the music classroom? Is it inherent in the subject or has it arisen, as I believe, from more practical priorities?

My concerns over the effectiveness of group-work, embodied in the research

questions, are very much driven by these unanswered questions. As will be obvious, the questions remain unanswered by observation of current practice and form for me, the area in most need of development. If these difficult questions remain unaddressed or unanswered I fear that composing, as a central classroom activity, may be under threat in the longer term. So far, just as in Charles Ives' vision of the unanswered question, the ancients remain mute and immobile.

Effective educational activity depends ultimately on the motivation and commitment of the individual learner. Although other cultures provide us with a few models of co-operation in creative music-making, the most common practice all over the world stems from the individual's response to sound and what it can express. The experience of drama and sports education specialists could well be helpful to musicians in this area. There are now, at last, encouraging signs appearing of individuals choosing to compose out of school.

New socially driven models for making music arise within our own society all the time, and the last decades have witnessed much work in community music group improvisation and workshops run by amateurs or workshop leaders. It has often been stated that rock music is founded upon group practice, although this is not clearly demonstrated in practice. Most of the music education projects financed by public funds and involving composers and orchestral musicians reinforce the socially interactive model. It may be that this practice will prove to be so artistically fulfilling to both performer and listener that co-operative practice in future becomes the norm, but as yet, the evidence of this happening lies within a small and rather specialist area of post-modern jazz. There are some music educators whose greatest wish now is to see and hear this approach to the creation of music become the norm in our society. One of the hallmarks of jazz is its co-operative approach to artistic behaviour. It may be, however, that the dominance of this collaborative workshop technique is partly founded upon an administrative convenience of the classroom, necessitated by poor resources, inadequate accommodation, and driven by political and philosophical convictions that need constant revision and renewal.

However, arising from present practice in schools, imperfect as it is, is a growing number of young people who like to write and perform their own individually created music in a variety of styles and for diverse occasions.

Research methodology

The main approaches were:

- By observation in the classroom and analysis using key questions;
- By interview with teachers and pupils;
- Pupil questionnaires;
- Seminar and discussion with teachers;
- Follow-up projects.

Objective 1: investigating, observing, and analysing

Pilot project

A pilot project was set up in 1997 with twelve schools in Dorset, identified for me by Kevin Rogers, the Dorset Music Adviser and David Walters of the Music Research Institute. The

Institute also provided the venue for our first meeting. Kevin Rogers identified the Dorset teachers as interested teachers who had previously had no formal contact with me through INSET or school supervision.

Through an analysis of lesson plans and comments from these teachers received by e-mail through the Music Research Institute, I was able to determine that as much as two-thirds of the music curriculum time was currently being used for composing activities. All these teachers used keyboards as a primary resource. The most dominant classroom organisation was small group-work. A joint seminar with these teachers following up my findings confirmed my figures and gave me the evidence I needed to launch upon a much larger project.

Recruitment of sample teachers

Through the good offices of the Yamaha Educational Supplement magazine, distributed free to all secondary schools in the country, we were able to recruit volunteers for this project. Many teachers volunteered and twenty-six schools were identified as possible participants. The Research Fellow was appointed in August 1998 for two years and the largest part of the investigation took place between September 98 and July 99. There were geographical considerations governing our final choice of locations as well as school type, resources and evidence of practice. We worked through music advisers in some areas and were able to involve teachers in all areas of England, one each from Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. Inevitably these teachers, being volunteers, single themselves out for investigation and therefore already have an interest both in composing in the classroom and the use of keyboards. All our results must be read in the light of this knowledge and the inevitable 'skew' which results must be taken into account.

1,170 questionnaires have so far been returned to us from the above schools, providing pupils' views and opinions, which we have analysed. We have included both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 results in the overall figures since it has been impossible in some of the early questionnaires to identify the age and stage of the pupils. In later questionnaires we have been able to look at figures separating out Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4; and we have used this information whenever possible. Individual school results have been returned to the teachers concerned for their own use. In some cases this has resulted in teachers reassessing their own practice.

Key questions

We used the following key questions which are the central issues governing the focus of our research to guide our observation work in the classroom and in interviews with teachers. We wanted to find out:

- How do pupils work when they are composing?
- What do they do?
- What skills, attitudes and understanding do we need to develop in pupils to improve their composing?
- What processes and techniques do we need to ensure pupils have experience of?

- How do we plan progression across those skills and processes?
- What is the most appropriate pedagogy to achieve the above?
- What are the best conditions for composing? Physical? Technical?
- What is the relationship between, on the one hand, the building of craft skills and techniques and, on the other, providing the learning environment and ethos to encourage creativity and allow for the possibility of inspirational work?

Each school was visited for a day by the Research Fellow who took every opportunity to talk with all staff and, where possible, with pupils, especially those at Key Stage 4 and beyond. Contact was maintained with the teachers by letter, e-mail and telephone and they were all invited to a day seminar held at Bath Spa University College's Michael Tippett Centre in July 99. Many have also been involved in follow-up studies.

Objective 2: keyboards and other resources

Keyboards are the most commonly found and possibly most under-used resource currently available. Their potential in aiding pupils' work has still to be realised in many schools. Those schools choosing to invest a great deal of time in teaching sophisticated formal piano skills to all pupils do not achieve the same standards in composing as those achieved by schools who do not do so. We have observed some very good practice in which the teacher, to help pupils practise basic keyboard skills, has invented backing-tracks.

Keyboards alone are not an adequate resource and must be complemented by a wide and good quality set of pitched and non-pitched percussion. Where possible orchestral standard instruments should be used – including pitched percussion. Although there is a place for 'educational' pitched percussion, and we have seen it used well by some teachers, secondary schools need a much more sensitive and wide range of sounds, including a good selection of bass sounds, both electric and acoustic.

Despite the increased security problems, keyboard equipment must be set out, fixed and ready to use if it is to be used efficiently. It is not good practice to manhandle keyboards every lesson and the equipment soon becomes damaged or faulty. An important principle is that the pupils should move to the keyboards.

We have seen some good work using keyboard laboratory set-ups, having at first been rather prejudiced against them. A skilled teacher can be extremely encouraging and monitor work efficiently from a console. Given the right urgency and planning, the experience need not be alienating, and can be very pleasurable for the teacher as well as the pupils. As information and communications technology (ICT) develops in schools there should be more networking of computers and keyboards allowing teachers to set up tasks and projects from the main computer. 'Using them in combination with computers, some pupils compose music which can be compared favourably with the best in visual art' (Salaman, 1997: 149).

The development of ICT in the music room is one of the most significant areas. Schools where practice is good in the use of ICT display remarkable results in composing. There is an urgent need for all music teachers to become fully computer literate. It no longer is acceptable to rely on the pupils knowing more than the teacher does. We would strongly recommend that at least five computers should be available for use by pupils as

regular classroom equipment. At present there tends to be one computer kept in the cupboard or office and only used by the teacher or older pupils.

This presupposes a new look at the planning of the delivery of the curriculum using a mixed-economy approach in some lessons. In this approach the teacher plans groups working in a variety of modes and on a variety of tasks including one group on computers. Performing, listening and composing tasks may well be happening at once. Or alternatively, similar tasks in one discipline are experienced by the pupils in working in different mediums. All groups can then experience these in turn.

Good practice in the use of keyboards for composing requires good support materials specially constructed and designed for the pupils and their equipment. Task sheets need to be laid out in order of process, graded and including extension material for the more able or experienced pupils. Assessment needs to be built into the process and guide-sheets provided for the pupils to enable them to keep track of their work. Pupils need 'idiot guides' to computers and projects. All idiot guides, backing tracks and templates can be pre-loaded.

The resources of most keyboards are rarely maximised by teachers at present. The variety of voices has great potential, but too often the voice is chosen at random by the pupil. Keyboards offer an excellent resource for ensemble performance, but this happens rarely. The manufacturer's attention has already been drawn to the intrusive nature of the demonstration facility. They have taken this matter very seriously and are addressing it. Keyboards provided must have full sized keys and a memory function. The memory should link into a storage system. Some of the most effective practice observed has used the storage of material by MIDI disc or on to the hard disc of a computer. This enables the encouragement of individual progression through the teacher's analysis of work in progress and provides the same practical method of notating and storing now used by most professional composers.

Technician support is now necessary in all music departments using ICT. Technicians must be appropriately skilled and regularly available and could also function as demonstrators. One school we visited spent over £600 per year on repairs and such a sum would pay for a technician about once every three weeks to do repairs and therefore release teacher time. One school has regular weekly half-day technician support, another had a five-hour per day technician for the performing arts department, but the majority of schools we visited still have none.

Objective 3: managing creative work in the classroom

Music makes a noise. In an art room, a class can work in silence if necessary on their own ideas for the whole lesson. By contrast, in a music room, more than one group or individual working on a composition 'spoils' the canvas of the others by the sounds they make. This has been one of the most significant practical issues which teachers have had to try to solve. They have not all solved it satisfactorily yet. Too many teachers still are struggling against a hostile physical environment and subjecting themselves and their pupils to stress levels that are at best unacceptable. Our advice is to stop trying to adapt completely unsuitable and inadequate accommodation and resources to small group-work and to teach more whole-class lessons, balancing the curriculum as appropriate. The develop-

ment of ICT may well be a powerful answer to making the best use of space and time in such circumstances.

Some teachers have been able to find practice spaces for small groups of pupils to go to work undisturbed by the noise of others. This is advantageous to the pupils working but teachers then cannot always supervise pupils adequately or be sure that all of them are working equally within their groups. Teachers can become manically active, running from group to group to 'keep the pot boiling'. New schools are being provided with purpose-built group-work areas. Too many teachers, however, are still trying to teach in inadequate environments and becoming frustrated by their pupils' lack of progress. A good deal of what is delivered through group-work at the moment would be better and more efficiently taught through whole-class lessons. As one teacher advised us, 'working in groups is a highly complex and disciplined skill and should be included in the skills defined as composing skills'. Co-operative learning techniques need to be addressed by teachers as such and pupils need guidance and practice in using them.⁶

From the beginning of Key Stage 3, the teacher should determine the construction of groups and they should strictly control them. Careful records must be kept of the groups and their working, and an 'on-the-hoof' assessment policy is essential. Teachers should understand that the work that takes place in groups must be predicated upon sound ideas already well understood by the pupils. Too many lessons at present lack a strong modelling process. The best practice is where the teacher works through the task using some pupils as models, but there is still a central place for the teacher as demonstrator. Too few teachers at present show themselves as composers by working with the pupils in a creative way. There is too much 'do as I say and not as I do'. Where the teachers are perceived as working composers the pupils will follow. Teachers who fear that they may influence too heavily or harm their pupils' creativity need have few fears. The problem is most often to keep pupils on task and exploring those elements planned by the teacher. Working within a given matrix is one of the most powerful stimulants for creativity.

Teachers must guard against the wily pupils who improvise on the spot when asked to demonstrate or who will argue strongly that they were exploring an avenue of music education more suited to their abilities than that set by the teacher. We have observed several groups who coast during rehearsal time and then improvise their responses – in one case getting praise for it. Pupils who do not feel challenged by an activity tend not to value the experience and lose interest and motivation.

Where small group-work is used it is important to limit the time and to consider the tasks carefully. Tasks must be planned with a real empathy for those working through them. It is not good enough to place four pupils at a keyboard and expect them to sort out who does what. Tasks should be set that will produce truly musical results and produce compositions on cassette tape that pupils can take home to be admired. Work should rarely be completely open-ended at Key Stage 3. Sometimes work with one class goes so well that the class can be given an open project and the pupils can largely determine the outcome. This is, however, a rare occurrence and can rarely be planned. Paired work aids collaborative work more positively and creativity is less hampered. Keyboard work should never involve more than two pupils at once on one keyboard.

In observing work in the volunteer schools we were impressed by the array of approaches and techniques these teachers use in engaging pupils in composing. We

observed a mixture of whole-class, small group-work, paired work and individual. We have encountered no single method that we could recommend as being the most effective. Observations and teachers' comments have focused clearly on the high level of teaching skill needed. Composing in the classroom presents some very particular problems with which the most experienced teachers sometimes struggle. Many have had to adapt inadequate teaching environments, equipment and training opportunities to accommodate and develop this work. Building in the unexpected becomes more of a problem now that the government demands that all lessons must be planned in detail in advance. Traditionally trained musicians are often more accustomed to order and hierarchical discipline and find the freedom of choice unfamiliar and without a basis in their memory-bank. The multiplicity of skills needed by the teacher in teaching composing are not easily or quickly learnt and are very challenging to many trainees, although newly qualified teachers can be subjected to full inspection scrutiny in their very first weeks in the profession. Many older teachers, and indeed even a fair proportion of those newly qualified, lack composing skill and experience from their degree courses. Teachers who feel themselves at a disadvantage in subject knowledge and skill can often lack essential confidence.

The skills a teacher of composing needs

Structured short observations of good teachers at work in a composing class reveal many ways of working. One teacher in one five-minute observation was seen operating in the following differing modes, demonstrating clearly the complexity of the job. In that short time span she was seen:

- demonstrating by using her own musical and technical skills;
- being a musician composing and improvising on the hoof;
- being a technician mending equipment;
- listening to pupils playing their ideas;
- moving pupils on faster by challenging them;
- responding to pupils' requests, queries and interruptions;
- suggesting refinements to pupils' work;
- making sure of their understanding by getting pupils to show what they meant, not explain it;
- making sure everyone has a turn on equipment;
- making observations and judgements about pupils' work;
- correcting false information;
- structuring pupils' practice;
- giving pupils choices about how to proceed;
- reminding them to save their work.

Analysis of pupils' perceptions from the questionnaires

We had to establish whether composing was a regular activity in the class and the score was 81 per cent, confirming this. A high 72 per cent said that they liked composing in lessons very much and 57 per cent looked forward to their music lessons. Despite this

information deriving from selected schools it demonstrated clearly that pupils' antagonism to music is not as in-built as previous research may have suggested. It shows how good teaching through composing has significantly added to the effectiveness and pupils' credit rating of music teaching in secondary schools. We were pleased to find this positive evidence which counteracts some of the largely negative evidence found by previous researchers.

We wanted to find out what pupils experienced in groups and how they felt about their working environment and the resources provided. The evidence gave some conflicting results. A large majority of pupils liked to work with others when they were composing (86 per cent). 68 per cent of pupils however, said that they found it hard to concentrate with a lot of noise in the room as against 32 per cent who said they could do so. The received wisdom has been that teachers should 'learn to develop a thick skin' (Paynter, 1982: 78), and that pupils do not notice noise. 57 per cent of pupils agreed that it is hard to hear their own ideas with other people working in the same room. Working in pairs appears to be a more equable mode and 79 per cent of pupils said that they shared in the work in this working mode, whereas 59 per cent admitted to coasting in larger group-work. A significant 28 per cent preferred working on their own. From the fieldwork and interviews we conclude that very few Key Stage 3 pupils have the opportunity to work on their own in school composing and therefore lack this experience when they start their Key Stage 4 work.

Pupils like using keyboards, which were regularly used (75 per cent) and find they make the composing tasks easier (81 per cent). 60 per cent of pupils use headphones with keyboards but only 27 per cent used memory devices to store their work. This points up a clear matter for development. 79 per cent preferred using keyboards to pitch percussion. As pupils said:

I do think that some percussion instruments are a bit babyish.

Percussion instruments aren't very interesting. If you wanted to be interesting you'd need two or three percussion instruments.

Pupils felt that their music wasn't really listened to (56 per cent) and that the music they made in school did not compare in any way with the music they listened to outside (82 per cent). 60 per cent of pupils found it exciting when they heard their music played but 66 per cent felt that their music rarely sounded as they thought it would. One pupil commented:

Though I like composing, sometimes it seems a bit daunting and also pointless because no one will ever get to play it or hear it.

Most composition exercises take more than one lesson (81 per cent) and teachers often recorded their work (64 per cent). 91 per cent of pupils agreed that you have to think and work very hard when composing, and 81 per cent of pupils felt that they had improved compared with last year. Despite the fact that 49 per cent felt that it was hard to compose if you can't play an instrument well, it was particularly pleasing to find that pupils showed a clear sense of challenge and purpose in composing activities.

Teachers have been surprised by the fact that 63 per cent of pupils said that they could hear the music that they wanted to compose in their head. Following a discussion in the subsequent teachers' seminar, we took this on as a follow-up area and tested the result

using a variety of differently worded questions. Pupils in the follow-up enquiry described the audiation experience in a variety of ways:

I sort of listen to them in my head: but sometimes they just sing to me.

When I hear songs in my head I do remixes of them in my head.

The results have shown very positively that many pupils really do hear what they want to compose in their head before they play or write it and we are delighted to return this information to teachers, since this skill seems more advanced than they would have predicted. It provides more good ground for further building and development. The results also tally significantly with our concern about noisy conditions.

Objective 4: defining progression in composing

One very interesting aspect of the developing composing curriculum has been the accent on free choice of style, especially in the more advanced stages. The 'Creative Dream' was clearly based on a high-art model and the first experiments with children, such as those undertaken by Canadian composer Schafer, arose directly from Cage-influenced music. Paynter did not approach music outside the high-art model with great enthusiasm. 'Indeed a case can be made', he writes, 'for starting afresh with new stimuli in a "neutral" region of sound that does not automatically create associations with the "classical"/"pop" dichotomy' (Paynter, 1982: 117). Yet what has happened when young people are encouraged to think freely and make choices is that they do just that. The result has been a strong rejection of the high-art model and a clear aspiration towards popular culture. This, at last, has begun to increase the street credibility of music education and bring it nearer in philosophy and practice to visual art education. There can be little progression without motivation.

Whereas few art teachers would describe themselves as non-practising artists, few of the music teachers in the study describe themselves as composers, though most do occasional arrangements or write class material where appropriate. One teacher was happy to admit that her only purpose in teaching composing was so that pupils would become better listeners. Whilst this is an admirable sentiment it suggests also that there is an area that still needs addressing in higher education both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Regular composing practice by the teacher is essential as a basis from which to assess progress in others and to explore and experience their art for themselves.

Observation has confirmed that it is essential that the first composing activities in Year 7 should be practical and searching in order that teachers can construct a baseline from which to work. As Janet Mills put it 'planning teaching that is diagnostic' (Mills, 1996: 13). No progression can be observed without this first step. It is important to seek out, to recognise and to record different levels of experience and ability at the start of the secondary school. In some schools visited there was good evidence of local cross-phase planning. Teachers in primary and secondary schools had come to some basic agreements about content and processes in composing and helpful information had been exchanged.

Progress in composing must be based on the work of individuals and cannot be decided on that of groups or by curriculum content. There must be clear planning for

individual work at some point in Year 7. Year 8 needs several individual assessment points and by the end of Year 9 composing assessment should be largely based on individual achievement. There is strong evidence of pupils hiding low levels of technical skills in small group-work right through to Year 9. Many pupils coast (overall one in five of pupils readily admit to coasting in group-work). About 50 per cent pupils feel it is hard to compose music if you don't have good instrumental skills but this is an area that the development of the computer can aid considerably.

Many teachers already keep on-going records of individual progress by noting what skills and processes are being understood and applied with knowledge and understanding. Much of this evidence is collected as teachers progress round groups and individuals to review their work. This provides evidence of the absorption and application of curriculum content.

Perhaps it will be helpful also to look for an additional kind of evidence to determine whether pupils are progressing. It is in the process rather than the products that we can best determine movement forward. Pupils who practise their art regularly are most likely to progress, even if individual works are uneven.

There will be clear evidence of progression when:

- Individual pupils are motivated to compose on their own initiative;
- Individual pupils (or groups) respond eagerly to commissions;
- Compositions figure regularly in school performances or other performance opportunities, ensuring that work is completed satisfactorily;
- Individuals and groups enter composing competitions at local and national level;
- Groups meet regularly to improvise, compose and perform;
- Compositions are carefully preserved, displayed and performed.

We can now show that a surprising number of pupils voluntarily compose music outside school. The evidence from our sample of pupils is that 35 per cent at Key Stage 3 compose on their own outside school for their own enjoyment and at Key Stage 4 this figure rises to 53 per cent. This suggests that the 'Sunday composer' may soon become as much a feature in our society as the 'Sunday painter'. Pupils spoke of composing as a relaxation, a relief from depression and from boredom. One pupil described the experience as 'playing with sounds'.

The research has provided conclusive evidence that pupils often compose music outside school. Once this evidence is fed back into the school assessment system there will be further evidence of progression. Such evidence could help to avoid trying to assess the quality of individual compositions in detail and setting up artificial guidelines for 'more progressive' or 'more complex' compositions equating this with progression.

The following list provides pupils' answers to the question 'what do you compose for?'

- For practising
- As part of school work
- As part of music
- To test ideas
- For my school choir
- For a school concert
- For competitions/festivals

- Just messing about on the keyboard
- To enjoy it
- To express my own feelings
- To have fun with my family
- When I just feel like it
- For my Mum
- For a birthday/wedding
- For a project on bottle-banks

Objective 5: recommending developments and disseminating ideas of good practice

All participating teachers were invited to a one-day seminar at the Michael Tippett Centre, Bath Spa University College in July 1999. Fourteen were able to attend and, having been presented with the original research questions and the results of questionnaires in their own schools, were asked to form discussion groups, concentrating on composing skills. The uncertainty we found in school when questioning all the participating teachers was again reflected in the following discussions. This list presents some of their ideas on what composing skills are. Each category is far from exhaustive and can be divided into many sub-categories. Part of our continuing debate about composing skills and processes and part of the unique contribution any individual teacher makes will be found in how these categories are identified, added to and given priority.

What we use	What we do with it	Place it in time	How we use it
Melody	Copy	Binary	Vocalise
Scales	Plan	Ternary	Instrument
Pulse	Hear in the head	Rondo	Record
Rhythm pattern	Compare	Song form	Draw
Concord	Contrast	Blues	Write
Discord	Sequence	Dance forms	Notate
Timbre	Repeat	Stories	Use sequencer
Texture	Change	Film sequences	Use notation software

Summary

These final bullet points are a summary of the main issues, which both Anice Paterson and I consider to be the most important learning points we have encountered on our journey of the last two years.

- Planning for individual work is the main area that needs addressing by nearly all teachers. Without this development the composing curriculum will continue to be an uphill struggle. There should be a planned accumulation of individual projects making a tentative start later in Year 7 and rising to a major part of pupils' composing work by the end of Year 9.
- There is a strong need for regular exchange of ideas between teachers. This is

especially the case for those in single-teacher departments. Music departments where there is more than one enables a higher level of analysis and understanding about the nature of the job.

- Teachers should work with rather than against their resources. They should plan work that can be achieved without putting themselves or their pupils under unnecessarily heavy stress. Noise stress is very damaging both to pupils and teachers and should be avoided whenever possible. Valuing sound and being sensitive to its properties is at the centre of the composing experience.
- Music lessons should be practical. Teachers must aim to make every lesson a musical experience at some point.
- Time and energy in setting up composing tasks is time well spent. Teachers must always present their work well and preserve it for future use by themselves and colleagues.
- Develop whole-class strategies for composing where the teacher works with the pupils using the whole class as a resource both for ideas and for performance. Show them how to do it by doing it with them.
- Be prepared to teach as well as facilitate. Don't be afraid to have opinions and ideas. Learning by copying has noble precedents. Pupils tend to gain their own ideas because of you, and most probably in spite of you.
- Develop strategies, spaces and equipment to enable pupils to hear their work undisturbed by the noise of others.
- Develop the use of ICT and master the technology.
- There is a clear and unequivocal need for regular and specialised technical support. This is essential to all well-run music and efficient departments.
- Ensure that all pupils have the opportunity to share their work in class, in the public domain through concerts, events and opportunities inside and outside the school.
- Ensure that taped work is well presented and pupils have the opportunity to take work home. Involve parents' interest in their child's composing work by working in class on take-away projects such as songs, musical Christmas cards or their seasonal equivalent to be sent home.
- Good examples of carefully presented notated work should be displayed on the walls as well as graphic scores. Use both handwritten and computer-generated examples. Sketches and designs for compositions, in words or drawn should also be seen.
- Hearing in the head results suggests that we may seriously underestimate children's abilities. We must be careful not to assume that because they don't have additional instrumental lessons they are not a 'musician'. Put together with the evidence on noisy classrooms, it suggests even more strongly that we must do everything we can to provide the best conditions for pupils to work.

Conclusion

Composing is firmly established and provides an unique feature in our music curriculum practice in the United Kingdom. It is the envy of many other countries that wish that they could establish a similar practice in their own schools. When taught well, pupils look forward to their music lessons in the secondary school and approve of and enjoy

composing activities. A growing minority of pupils now compose on their own initiative outside school and view it as an opportunity to improve the quality of their lives and as communication with their families. A majority of pupils experience the ability to imagine their music in their heads before they externalise their ideas.

The development of information and communication technology in the music classroom is essential for the continuing growth and good health of music education in the coming years. Skilled technician support is also both vital and cost effective. Without both of these the development of the composing curriculum will be severely retarded in the foreseeable future.

Music classrooms must be equipped for the purpose and secure. Pupils should be able to move to equipment that should be fixed and/or easily available. Keyboards with a memory facility are an important resource and must be able to be linked with computers, but both add to and do not replace good acoustic resources in percussion and other instruments. The more we rely on electronically produced sound the more important it is to balance this with the best live sound sources of all types to increase and develop pupils' sensitivity to sound which is at the heart of the musical experience.

The voice is a basic composing instrument and tool. All early musical experiences have involved and still involve the voice. This is true of all cultures and histories. Melody is a basic in human communication and the ability to distinguish sound contour develops in all children before birth. Pupils experience composing most often in school by going to an instrument and using their fingers. Singing experience of all kinds in the classroom and in the extended curriculum is an essential part of a composer's music education, helping to guide those composing fingers to the interesting places following the lead of the 'songs in the head'.

Acquiring the language of music requires immediate experience of it and the chance to use and experiment with it, finding out what it says and how it works by using it. As with language teaching, there is also a need at an early stage to teach grammar and technical matters, but even these can only be experienced fully through using them, as the best teaching in the current primary literacy hour is showing. Writing about things and making up poems and stories go hand in hand with the excitement of acquiring language and being able to express yourself accurately and precisely.

Successful teaching of composing is very dependent, not only on the attitude of the teacher but also on the physical provision of an appropriate classroom environment where teachers and pupils can work without battling against intrusive and stressful noise throughout the day. This can be achieved in a variety of ways using a variety of teaching methods. Small group-work is highly effective when it is tightly controlled and used as one of the variety of ways to deliver the music education curriculum. It can be the best way to spark off really exciting ideas about music. At present, far too much time is invested in poorly conceived small-group activities and wasted by the majority of pupils. Small-group activities can be very effective but need to be prepared in detail with a better understanding of the pupils' point of view. Control of such activities needs to be more vital and urgent. At present there is too much off-task and undisciplined work and this prevents lack of progress. Teachers need to be more willing to take a lead in composing activities with their pupils. They must share the composing experience and become confident enough to model, demonstrate and participate in whole-class activities.

'Teachers often play for their classes, sometimes play to them, but rarely play with them' (Ross, 1995: 195).

Whenever possible teachers should strive to involve parents in their children's composing. They should make certain that some work is heard and seen by the parents through homework, take-way projects on tape or in writing, and in concerts. It is very good policy to involve the parents themselves in the experience of composing through special focus parents' meetings.

Composing now occupies a central place in our music curriculum nationally. It can be a powerful medium for delivering listening and performing skills. Composing activities, however, must not overpower the curriculum and should be carefully balanced with performing and listening activities in all planning.

The ultimate aim of the composing curriculum must be to fire individual pupils' imaginations and motivate them to produce work of their own. Composition is a powerful form of self-expression in the individual and this should be at the centre of our work. Much of the creative dream of the last forty years has become a reality even if it has suffered some serious cracks in the process. These faults can be mended through the continuing development of teachers' skills and support of their needs.

Acknowledgements

Although this article appears under my name, I wish first of all to acknowledge my indebtedness to my Research Fellow, Anice Paterson, who has so actively involved herself during the last year, collecting evidence in the field and co-operating in the writing of papers. I am also deeply grateful to Yamaha/Kemble Music (UK) Ltd. for their generous financial support for the Fellowship without which, together with partnership funding from Bath Spa University College, this project could not have been mounted. This funding by Yamaha/Kemble was given freely and was obtained largely through the help and good offices of David Walters of the Music Research Institute, which has strongly supported the project throughout. The funds came without any specified criteria or expectation of commercially determined outcomes. I am also indebted to Gordon Cox of Reading University for his interest and insight.

Notes

- 1 Jack Dobbs gives an amusing account of visiting the school at Cirencester and finding that the lower-school children had very formal exercise books with one semi-breve = two minims etc. He expressed his surprise to Peter Maxwell Davies who readily explained that his assistant taught all the lower years' work and that it was important that this formal work was done. This ties in with his declared views on the importance of teaching formal harmony through primary triads.
- 2 Bill Collieran worked mainly in the sales department of Universal Edition, London. It was through his personal commitment to and interest in contemporary music that contacts with writers and composers were made.
- 3 *Two composers: two worlds*. Peter Maxwell Davies and Dudley Moore. Monitor Unit. BBC Television. 26 February 1961.
- 4 Series directed by Eileen Maloney.

- 5 Essentially, the responsibility for the content and methodology of a student teacher's practice has been passed from the training institution to the teacher-tutor in the school.
- 6 Issues such as dominance, reticence, sharing and achievement all need to be discussed with pupils and techniques for dealing with them practised.

References

- COLEMAN, S. (1922) *Creative Music Making for Children*. New York: Putnam.
- COX, G. (1997) Changing the face of school music: Walford Davies, the gramophone and the radio. *British Journal of Music Education*, 14 (1), 45–55.
- DAVIES, P. M. (1963) Music composition by children. In Grant (Ed), *Music in Education* (The Colston Papers). London: Butterworth.
- DENNIS, B. (1970) *Experimental Music in Schools: towards a New World of Sound*. Oxford University Press.
- DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT (1995) *Music in the National Curriculum*. London: HMSO.
- DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE (1970) *Creative Music in Schools. (Reports on Education No. 63)*. London: HMSO.
- DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE (1970) *Children and their Primary Schools* (The Plowden Report). London: HMSO.
- MELLERS, W. (1969) *The Resources of Music*. Cambridge University Press.
- MILLS, J. (1996) Starting at secondary school. *British Journal of Music Education*, 13 (1), 5–14.
- MILLS, J. (1997) A comparison of the quality of teaching in primary and secondary schools. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 133, 72–6.
- NORTH WEST REGION DEVELOPMENT PROJECT (1974) *Creative Music and the Young School Leaver*. London: Blackie.
- PAYNTER, J. & ASTON, P. (1970) *Sound and Silence*. Cambridge University Press.
- PAYNTER, J. (1982) *Music in the Secondary School Curriculum*. Cambridge University Press.
- PAYNTER, J. (1997) The form of finality. *British Journal of Music Education*, 14 (3), 5–16.
- ROSS, M. (1995) What's wrong with school music? *British Journal of Music Education*, 12 (3), 189–201.
- SALAMAN, W. (1997) Keyboards in Schools. *British Journal of Music Education*, 14 (2), 143–9.
- SCHOOLS COUNCIL (1968) *Music and the Young School Leaver*. London: Evans/Methuen Education.
- SELF, G. (1967) *New Sounds in Class*. London: Universal Edition.