Composing the curriculum: Teacher identity

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What is composing and how is it valued? What does a good education in composing look like; what constraints hinder it and is it possible to overcome such constraints? Can composing be a personal, creative and valuable activity for the school student? What role does the teacher play in all of this? These are questions that I discuss in this reflective study of composing in the classroom.

Task: You have 15 minutes to write a piece of music. You will then perform your composition to your peers

At a recent conference, I presented the above task to a group of music teachers. It was clear, when reflections were fed back, that the initial response was one of panic concerning the vagueness of the task. Further discussion confirmed however that, underlying this panic, was the fear of sharing what had been created. The teachers lacked confidence, not only as teachers of composition but as composers and this is something with which I, a secondary school music teacher of eight years, empathise completely.

Teachers wear many metaphorical hats. My favoured, most prominent, hat is that of 'teacher'. 'Musician' is secondary in my identity (in and outside of my profession) and, interestingly, I don't believe I owned a 'composer' hat until recently. 'Composer' is a term that I have never engaged or identified with and I often wonder how I arrived at this stage of my career with significant insecurities in such an integral area of music. Western society generally pigeonholes the musician into separate categories (composer, performer and theoretical/historical expert) and this is promoted in an education system where these categories are so often taught as discrete and only loosely related subjects. Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, that at an early age I considered composing to be either something you could do or something you couldn't do and that those who couldn't 'do' composing would soon be able to specialise in some other area of musical activity. Consequently a restricted skill-set in this area need not cause too much concern.

I was a 'couldn't do' student. Within the world of composing I felt inexperienced, idea-less and out-of-my-depth; I associated the term with uncomfortable feelings of exposure, judgement and risk and inevitably 'dropped' composing at the first possible opportunity. Criteria for success when composing seemed ambiguous and contradictory; was the concept of composing one of self-expression or academic rigour, higher-order thinking and rule following? If composing was purely a form of self-expression, should it perhaps not be interfered with? Or should composing rather follow a path of refined thought? Paynter wrote that:

> the mistake is to conceive of emotion and feeling as being entirely divorced from and in opposition to thought. (Paynter, 2000, p. 7)

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After many years of confusion I now understand and embrace the idea that the compositional process should involve careful, considered placing, and the editing and refining of *personal expressions* (if only I had been exposed to this idea sooner!). However, this revelation is seemingly irrelevant because, having distanced myself from composing so early in my musical development, I still feel those same insecurities and uncertainties. I feel inexperienced; unsure of how to create, never mind develop, good ideas and completely unaware of how to value or measure my success as a composer.

In this article I reflect on my recent journey as a composing teacher, identifying significant influences, desires and constraints on my practise. One inevitable and, no doubt, widely shared constraint is that of assessment (the requirement to meet externally imposed criteria) and its potential impact upon creativity. I will briefly discuss the perceived compatibility of assessment and creative composition before reflecting on six key themes that have played a significant role in my quest to facilitate a better composition education for my students: (i) searching for solutions; (ii) identity; (iii) student desire; (iv) addressing the problem; (v) time and (vi) resources.

Assessment v. creativity

The relationship between composing and assessment is something I constantly struggle with. I believe that assessment, if used correctly, can transform and significantly enhance the development and output of a composer but I fear that the constraints of assessment and the curriculum can strangle the creative experimentation and exploration that is fundamental to the compositional process. Winters (2012) strengthens this notion by commenting on how:

> the word composing (a dynamic and engaging process) has been replaced by the word composition . . . implying that the value of this creative process, at the heart of lesson planning, has been lost to the high worth of a musical product. (Winters, 2012, p. 19)

Within this sphere of assessment, criteria, accountability and league tables I also question the validity, ownership and authenticity of the voice of the composer. Given the constraints of exam board criteria, the demands of the Senior Leadership Team and my intervention (as a teacher) throughout the composing process, who does the composing and who does the composition belong to? Is all of this important to consider when teaching composing?

(i) Searching for solutions

The above experiences and questions inevitably have implications for the way I teach composing, and though my students achieve respectable grades I am not confident that I am giving them sufficient support in this area of their musical education. Thus, the invitation to participate in a research project surrounding composing was much needed and appreciated. Though the idea of working alongside a professional composer in the classroom filled me with dread it presented me with an opportunity to face my demons and address my weaknesses. The very nature of the project challenged me to reflect further upon my attitude towards and feelings about my teaching. After some guided thought I

established that the constraints affecting my practice could be grouped into three key areas: identity, time and resources.

(ii) Identity

Having established that teacher identity can restrict a student's development as a composer, I needed to work on improving my confidence in this area. Immediately, the research team challenged my perception of the word 'composing', and thus my identity. Like all music teachers, I regularly write musical arrangements for both classroom and extra-curricular ensembles; I constantly create differentiated parts for lower attainment and gifted performers, often 'on the spot'. This is composition many music teachers do daily. Why then, did the term 'composer' not form a more significant part of my identity? This, coupled with the earlier discussed idea of compartmentalising the musician, prompted me to consider how my students might perceive themselves as musicians. Did they see the terms 'composer', 'performer' and 'analyst' as being discrete, mutually exclusive concepts? Did they consider themselves to be a specialist in one of those areas? Were they threatened by the term 'composer'?

Before the project started, Tim (the professional composer I was working alongside) asked one question and made one comment, both of which resonated strongly with me. In hindsight I have, in the past, completely overlooked these two ideas, which should be integral to my teaching:

> Do you encourage your students to practice composing? Do you compose?

On reflection, it seems absurd that I have not required my students to practise composing. All music students are expected to devote time to daily instrumental rehearsal, so why not composing? Yes, when starting a project, students may work through task-related exercises but daily rehearsal of composing is something I had not previously considered. That single question changed my perception of composing; how could I expect my students to become composers without frequent rehearsal? Very quickly, my adopted mind-set of composing being something you could or couldn't do evaporated. An exciting prospect!

I rarely compose outside of school (and certainly do not share my compositions), nor do I attempt the activities I set within class, predominantly because it has not occurred to me to do so. Often as teachers we are driven (for whatever reason) by professional development, yet something as simple as the idea of being an active learner and facilitator, which could transform our practise, is overlooked. Though I struggle to find the time, I have and will continue to prioritise this in my work because the benefits are valuable.

Tim passionately advocates the idea of students editing and refining ideas and constantly searching for their unique sound and voice, but more specifically an 'excellent' voice. In the world of assessment and accountability the term 'striving for excellence' reminds me of a requirement to meet set criteria; of regular constructive criticism and never quite being good enough; and of students being encouraged to fit a mould. In the world that Tim had created, free from external imposition, this notion of 'striving for excellence' was an exciting term; it required a living creativity and engagement with a set of musical challenges.

(iii) Identity: Student desire

Fuelled and inspired by Tim's comments, I felt passionate about my students striving for excellence in every aspect of their musical lives; for the term 'musician' to form a strong part of their identity; and for 'composer' to be seen as equal to and inseparable from 'performer' and 'analyst'. I wanted such terms to be secondary to the idea that my students are excellent, creative and practicing 'musicians'. In order to help facilitate this I needed to address the two remaining constraints: resources and time.

(iv) Addressing the problem

The variety and extremity of student background, need and ability in each class is always striking and often induces intense worry about how to facilitate a good enough education for each individual. Teaching composing to classes of 20 or more GCSE Music students with just three small practice rooms, eight unreliable computers (with outdated software), one small recording device and an incomplete complement of classroom instruments can seem impossibly difficult. It may be that a small number of the class are Grade 8, classically/formally trained musicians, whilst others have has little to no formal musical education experience. Some students may live for hip-hop; some may love their folk; some may live in the world of classical piano and some may care very little for music (perhaps for them, music was the most preferable/seemingly easiest subject on offer). There may be those students who have no voice in music lessons whilst others demand attention throughout, whether in a needy or undisciplined way. When considering that music teachers see this diverse group for just one triple period per week, the task of promoting an inspiring, musical and meaningful composing education seems very difficult. The additional daily pressure to meet imposed criteria (at a school, local and national level) means that the job of a music teacher is, at points, overwhelming.

The above represents my opening sentiment to Tim. His response was one that, at the time, I treated with great cynicism but which since (through guidance and experience) has become central to my teaching: 'make use of the resources you *do* have'. Tim did not see my predicament as I did; he saw useful resources and great opportunity. He also saw the 'predicament' as a reflection of the professional world of the composer. For, as a professional composer, when Tim receives a commission he is required to write for the resources, abilities and time frames stipulated within the commission. There are restrictions imposed and creative solutions must be sought. Tim does not consider this an additional problem or constraint but rather, an integral and vital part of the composing process. This alternative perception of 'constraints', seeing them as exciting challenges, is refreshing and energising not to mention reassuring to know that the 'real' composers grapple with similar problems to teachers. Surely this reinforces how useful and relevant classroom experiences of composition can be for our students?

(v) Time

When considering the constraints posed by (often a lack of) time, there are three themes that I would like to discuss in relation to supporting composing in the classroom: best use of time; meeting individual needs; and preparing for continuity.

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Best use of time

Typically, a group of students, when sent away to work on a task for 30 minutes, will not use their time effectively. Perhaps there will be a 10–15 minute period of social interaction before instruments are sought and tuned. Maybe the students will then struggle to create that key initial idea before realising that time has elapsed. The group then inevitably improvises its way through a 'show-and-tell' performance.

In response to this, Tim and I created the Seven Minute Challenge (which we extended to 15 minutes in the later stages of composition) where students complete composing activities in just seven minutes. Our experience shows that restricting activity time promotes a sense of focused urgency, which eliminates early indecision and requires carefully considered selection of ideas and effective refinement. Immediately, students work smarter.

Teachers always plan for the long term and set regular submission dates for coursework but perhaps we should take advantage of the fact that these deadlines are flexible. When is a composition complete? Is a composer ever satisfied with their creation? When should teachers stop demanding more of their students?

Working alongside a professional composer taught me the reality and value of public and external deadlines. At the start of our project, Tim and I commissioned a Year 10 GCSE group to produce a class album with 20 excellent and unique tracks. Each track would be written by a different student and would involve a performance from a professional musician. The class album would be recorded live in a given lesson in front of an audience. This commission to record a CD was not only much more exciting, inspiring and celebratory than a dry coursework submission date: it made us accountable. The end point was intentionally grand, public and immovable; we had to use time SMARTly.

Meeting individual needs

My students and I both value individual supervision (or put simply, conversation) time where I can listen to, discuss and offer feedback and guidance regarding their composing; it is a vital, interactive process but not easy to deliver given constraints of time. Without this, how can useful intervention and support be offered?

Preparing for continuity

Some students do not play instruments. The majority of my students struggle to read and notate music. Both of these facts have implications for their development as composers and the creation of a musical 'product'. Despite recording their ideas on paper (graphic scores with detailed annotations, written commentary, some form of traditional notation and so on), students often struggle to understand this and thus remember compositional ideas from session to session. In effect, each new session revolves around remembering or recreating new ideas because previous records are not substantial enough. Such a habitual pattern results in limited learning and development across a unit of work.

Our solution: mobile phones. Early in the project Tim asked 'Doesn't every child in the class have a phone or an iPod in their pocket?' Mobile technology is an integral part of

student identity and culture today and we should embrace this technology-driven lifestyle in the classroom. Most students always have, on their person, a device that can record (mobile phone, iPod). They know this device completely and can record effectively in seconds. Surely such devices present an invaluable tool for recording and storing ideas, thus enabling continuity between music lessons?

(vi) Resources

An all too often overpowering constraint for music teachers is that of resources or the lack of, whether in terms of the physical environment, equipment or teaching material. The three key resource constraints I have identified in terms of composition are discussed below.

The physical environment

As alluded to earlier, limited physical space is not conducive to 20 or more students composing successfully. Aside from anything else, students are unable to hear their ideas. With only eight unreliable computers the music technology solution is not a viable option.

Student ability

Josh is a drummer. He can sustain a simple beat on the drum kit and plays with expression but is intimidated by any other instrument. Not surprisingly, composing beyond the drum kit is daunting and something Josh deems as inaccessible. Clare is a Grade 7 (ABRSM) singer and pianist. To deliver a class composing programme that both Josh and Clare find accessible, suitably challenging and engaging is difficult.

Tim's response was, once again, 'use the resources you *do* have'; surely the students are any music teacher's biggest resource? This was an exciting and often overlooked concept and one which we created our plan around. The stages of our creative solution to the problem are outlined below.

The 20 students in my Year 10 class were split into teams of five so that they could inhabit the four available workspaces each week (this eliminated the sound space problem).

Every student in each group was asked to fulfil the role of composer-director for 15–20 minutes each week (with close monitoring). This meant that the student-composer-director had complete autonomy over the process, thus owning the piece and rendering it suitable for external submission. Such an approach to composing required much logistical preparation on the part of the teacher but was very effective.

Each student was commissioned (individually) to write and direct a piece of music for the skills and instruments represented in their group. For example, should a group host a beginner violinist the composer-director would be required to compose a part that (a) catered for the instrumentalist's ability and (b) enhanced the composition. Tim explained that professional composers can be commissioned to write for beginner ensembles in primary schools; this task is not beneath a professional composer and does not require them to write boring, uninspiring music. Thus, our task not only provided an authentic

composing experience for the students but enabled Josh and Clare to fully engage and learn. Josh could now realise his imagined sound creations through the performing skills of others. He could select and manipulate the tones, timbres and styles presented by his team. Clare was challenged to think beyond piano and voice, to explore and expand her mind (and the skill-set of her peers) in order to find creative solutions to problems.

At the end of each directed session students were required to record the work they had produced. This enabled the composer-director to go away, listen to and reflect on the process/product in order to prepare for their next session. Such reflection was an essential part of the process as it facilitated the student's search for using limited group time to good effect. The record would also provide an invaluable tool for the notation process.

This approach to composing was powerful and transforming and in hindsight is so obvious and simple a solution. Initially I was cynical; I questioned the sensibility of incorporating 'mobile technology' in lessons, concerned that it would invite inappropriate use of the device. I questioned the group work idea, convinced that in reality it would promote group composing over individual directorship. I was dubious about student ownership and authenticity and thus whether it was sensible to devote such time to work that may be unsuitable for external submission.

In context, however, students did not have the time or desire to misuse their devices; the tight schedule and public deadline did not allow for it. With clear expectations from the onset and the constant reminder that the commission was for students to create something in their own, unique voice, the students took their roles seriously. Yes, there were times when performers would say 'I can't physically play that' or 'I think this note sounds wrong' but would I, as teacher, not be asking those questions anyway in feedback sessions? Peer feedback meant that the composer-director had a creative decision to make based on external information and public response, just as a professional composer would. The final CD was a diverse and eclectic mix with each track having its own unique voice despite being played by the same group of performers. Since witnessing the development and end-product of the project I would be completely confident about submitting any of the completed compositions to the exam board.

Students were commissioned to incorporate a solo line for a professional musician (either a trumpeter or a violinist) and this was an effective additional resource, which enhanced learning and inspired a greater search for excellence. The soloists gave a workshop displaying what each instrument could offer (demonstrating a variety of styles, effects and techniques), thus presenting students with a library of ideas/resources to record and document. The professional musicians then attended one rehearsal before performing in the final recording, which was an exciting yet daunting experience for all. This interaction presented a significant learning curve for students in terms of the practical realities of composing, since they had to communicate their ideas and intentions clearly. Notations (or written descriptions) and transpositions had to be accurate whilst technical and expressive requirements needed to be conveyed appropriately. When soloists performed exactly what was written, notation was placed in a very realistic context for the students; notation now felt like a necessity and not a chore. The professionals, not surprisingly, also inspired the students to practice and dream of future careers as musicians. For such an easy resource

to secure (perhaps the inclusion of a talented A-level or local undergraduate student) the effect was beyond measure.

Ideas

Before embarking on this project I felt ill-equipped to offer ideas and starting points for my students.

Tim's knowledge of and passion for music is immense. He is like a walking encyclopaedia of music. He engages with, listens to and remembers music and enjoys sharing his findings with others, which inspires students. Whenever a student played something they had created, Tim would be reminded of (or search for) an existing piece of music and encouraged the composer to listen to and explore that piece. Such knowledge is priceless and something we can all acquire; I need to take similar opportunities to expose my students to as much music as possible so that they can identify, compare and explore a rich world of music.

All of Tim's composing starting points were simple but encouraged students to explore, edit and refine material. The first task, for example, was to compose using a single note: 'a'. This task did not overwhelm students with a vast array of possible harmonic combinations but did require them to work hard to create a unique and excellent sound. They had to explore timbre, dynamics and rhythm, texture and so on whilst constantly editing and refining ideas. Throughout the task we developed this initial idea in many ways: adding a second and then third note; writing a melody line over a two-note accompaniment; writing a contrasting section, and so on. I was fascinated by Tim's modelling of a variety of ideas over a 20-minute period at the onset of the initial one-note task. This was something he did at the start of every task. Consequently, students were inspired and alive with ideas, keen to compose. They were reassured that it was natural not to get things right straight away and learned the value of editing and refining material. So often music teachers close lessons with a share-and-tell activity, perhaps in the hope that students will be exposed to new ideas, yet those ideas are forgotten by the following session. To share a wealth of ideas before composing practice and inspire creativity, as Tim did, is much more effective. Yes, the students are perhaps our biggest resource but, as Tim persistently demonstrated, the teacher-composer is also an invaluable resource.

Final thoughts

My search for solutions to the problems presented when composing in the classroom has been a steep learning curve fuelled with challenging self-reflection, interesting revelation and exciting musical development. The topic of composing in the classroom will always trigger debate and require further investigation, but perhaps by addressing issues surrounding teacher (and student) identity, adapting our perceptions of the constraints posed by time and resources and responding to the challenges presented by Tim we can facilitate a positive and inspiring composing education.

After such a fruitful learning journey filled with ideas, opportunity and creativity I am now inspired by composing and the musical challenges it embodies. I enjoy creating, refining and editing ideas and am proud of my students, who are vibrant, confident

musicians with clear composing voices. Composing in the classroom does not need to be an insurmountable challenge, asphyxiated by external factors of scrutiny and accountability; it can be a fresh and vibrant practice.

References

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