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Key Stage 2 Resources for Non-Specialist Teachers

Sounds Like Fun...

Experiences in timbral composition for Years 5 and 6

This resource has been compiled by the staff
of MusicTeachers.co.uk's Resources and
Journal sections.

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Introduction — What is timbral composition?

One of the most effective ways of teaching composition at Key Stage 2 is to allow pupils to experiment with sound and express themselves through the observations they make. The intention of this booklet is to provide specialist and non-specialist teachers alike with short projects that will allow their children to develop an awareness of sound in the every day environment and develop it into musical composition.

Looking to the environment is perhaps the most effective means by which we can teach:

1. Children to *listen* rather than hear
2. Children to be able to discern what makes up a particular sound, that is, the *sound sources*, and manipulate these to their own particular requirements

Many of the tasks seem initially difficult, since to understand what makes a sound what it is requires a good deal of analytical listening (and, in cases, a good deal of imagination). The first project requires the identification and manipulation of household sounds. You will need to prepare a tape or CD of various sound effects, which are generally available on the Internet for free from such sites as <http://www.stonewashed.net/sfx.html>. These can be successfully transferred into Wav files and burned onto a CD. If you are uncertain how to do this, talk to members of your school's IT department, who should have the knowledge and equipment for this task.

Notes



Notes



Project 1: Soundscapes

Stage 1

Using the recording, ask your children to identify the sounds in the order that they appear. Here is a list of suggestions that you can easily find on the Internet:

1. A door bell
2. A dog growling
3. A toilet flushing
4. Knives and forks on a plate
5. A computer being booted up
6. A car engine being started
7. Glass bottles being clinked together
8. A car passing in the street
9. A car door being opened and closed
10. Sawing wood
11. A fridge starting up
12. A match being lit
13. A mobile phone ringing

Your pupils should not have too many difficulties with these. When you discuss the task, ask them either verbally or in writing to try to describe the sound (this could also make an effective creative writing task for their English studies). You will need to explain and constantly reiterate that, in fact, each sound is made up of several base or source sounds. Can they identify these?

One parallel that can be drawn is that sound, like colour, is a giant mixing pot of others: just as we can make brown by mixing red and black, the sound of the car engine being started is made up from the whirring and clicking of the

starter motor, the turning of the crank shaft, etc. There is an *overall* sound-picture, made up from several different sources and, importantly, rhythms.

Stage 2:

Having discussed the sounds and their sources, it is time for your children to try to categorise sounds according to their qualities.

Step 1: Ask your pupils to draw (or you could provide them with) a table that has three separate headings: Animal, Vegetable and Mineral. In groups, they should then proceed around the school listening to various sounds and classifying these according to the categories:

Animal sounds are those that are made by humans or animals, such as rumbling stomachs, someone talking, etc.

Vegetable sounds are those made by inanimate objects that are not metallic in their makeup.

Mineral sounds are generally metallic, such as keys clinking, etc.

This task has few unlikely outcomes, but it allows your pupils the experience of listening carefully to the sounds that them in everyday life. A variant of this exercise might make use of blindfolds for your class and you provide a variety of objects for them to hear.

An extension of this task might include building a Sound Table, on which could be placed everyday objects that have

pupil down again and, with the marker pen, draw the outline s/he makes. You have formed an island!

This leads to the final stage, which is using the island shape as a notation board. Ask your children to draw some of the words they used in Stage 1: they have to try to express the sound they made through the shape and colouring of the lettering. These may then be cut out and attached to your island as a permanent record of their work.

There are alternatives to the final part of this exercise, depending on how much time you have at your disposal. The island could be the starting point for all manner of other work. For example, you could venture into:

1. English — storytelling, drama work centring on the people how inhabit this newly-formed island, etc.
2. Geography — map-making, etc.
3. Art — making masks, ‘primitive’ painting, etc.
4. Music — creating tribal music.
5. Dance
6. PSE/Drama — Developing and maintaining a community, e.g. what’s required, etc.

There are all sorts of possibilities.

The education staff at MusicTeachers.co.uk hope that this has proved to be a successful project; it has certainly been tried and tested over a long period, but if you have any suggestions for improvement, extension and support activities, please do let us know by emailing, telephoning or faxing the numbers found on the last page of these notes. Alternatively, you might wish to write to us at the address supplied. We will be pleased to hear from you.

-tion was to give a single (and very loud) bang on a drum, which you could play yourself, or which could be appointed to one of your class. Repeat the exercise several times, until you get to a point when they can automatically create the crescendo without the need for direction.

Stage 2

You will need a large sheet of cardboard and a marker pen for this stage: this can usually be obtained from a somewhere like Comet or Curry's without any difficulty.

Since the volcano has been completed from an oral perspective, you now have to create one through movement. In concentric circles with the drum and drummer at the very centre, your children should kneel down, make themselves as small as they possibly can and put their arms around each others' shoulders. Without making any noise (there's plenty of time for that later), ask them to practice growing from that position to one in which they are all standing — they will need to do this slowly and as one body, so this might take a little rehearsal. When they are at their fullest height, signal to the drummer to beat the instrument in the same way s/he did in Stage 1. With this signal, all the children should throw themselves on the floor and hold that position. Be careful that they do not do this dangerously.

When the movement has been rehearsed to your satisfaction, combine it with the activity you did in Stage 1. When the human volcano has 'exploded', choose one of the children who has made an interesting shape on the floor and ask him/her to hold very still (but also tense up) so that the others in the class can lift him/her very slightly off the ground whilst you slip the cardboard underneath. Put your

interesting qualities of sound, and keeping a wall chart for anything your children might have heard away from the classroom and want to share with the rest of the class during their music or group-tutor time.

Stage 3

This activity concerns your children copying some of the sounds they have heard using voices and/or classroom instruments. They should work in groups for this exercise, since each will be asked to copy the sound-source in an attempt to make up the complete sound.

You might want to return to the recording used in the first activity, asking each group to copy one particular sound; alternately, they might want to choose one of the sounds they heard around the school. In either case, they should try to identify and make a note of all of the source-sounds that make up the sound they have chosen. They have also to consider that many sounds, especially mechanical ones, are not only made up of individual timbres, but also rhythms. They will need to identify what the rhythms are and how these will fit into their chosen sound.

To all intents and purposes, transferring these to instruments is the composition process and, in this respect, it is important that they have access to a range of percussion instruments that they can use to develop their compositions to their fullest potential. Therefore:

1. Have a range of instruments that the children can access during the planning and composition stage, so that they can experiment with different ways of playing them to get the effect they need.

2. Encourage them to try combining different instruments in a manner that will help them achieve their potential.
3. Where necessary also use voices — they are much more flexible than instruments and are a constant source of variety.
4. Make sure that they *exaggerate* their sounds so that the end result remains interesting: in some of the tests of this project with Year 5 children, the results were often flat and uninteresting since they tried to copy their sound exactly, rather than making it larger-than-life.

Notation

Notation is an important aspect of any creative project, but is also something that is a constant bug-bear for teachers and pupils alike. Essentially, they need to show what they have created using, symbols, written descriptions (preferably in boxes), colours, etc., to show what happens and where it happens. Again, it is important to see that they are used to thinking in terms of what a particular source-sound is like, so it is useful for them to try to draw what a sound might be like (there are implications for cross-curricular links here, so have a chat with the art co-ordinator to see what could be arranged).

One way of developing a graphic notation is to:

1. Work out how long a composition lasts.
2. Provide each child with a piece of quadrille paper (5 mm squares) and, in landscape format, ask them to draw a scale along the top edge with so many squares representing so many seconds — some more complicated compositions will need a lot of detail, so check that they have a scale that will suit their purposes.

Project 3 — Volcano

In this project, your children will make a volcano through sound and movement. This could be used as a one-off activity, although there is scope for developing this further. Ideas for extension work will be provided at the end of the project.

Stage 1

This involves a brainstorming session with your pupils. Ask your children to think of words that might be appropriate to describe volcanoes. They might want to think in terms of onomatopoeic words, such as *whizz*, *bang* or *plop* — remember that although volcanoes do erupt, they are almost living and rumble away for many years between exploding into life — or they could use real words such as lava, danger, eruption, etc.

Ask them to call out their words and write them randomly on the chalkboard. Accept any, including made up words since these can be discarded later if necessary.

When the board is full, ask your children to randomly choose words and say them quietly counting to any number between 15 and 20 between each. If they chose onomatopoeic words, they should make the appropriate sound with them. You will need to stand somewhere near the front of your class and signal them to gradually get faster and louder in their recitation: this could easily be a stirring movement with your hands.

As with all volcanoes, you will need a large explosion to complete your soundscape. This is where your children, who, hopefully, will have risen to a huge climax, have to stop. When tried with a group of ten year olds, the best solu-

Stage 2

The second stage involves your children taking their sounds and developing these into movements. Just as their sounds work together to form an intricate machine, so will their movements. See if their movements match the sound they make. Perhaps one, or both might need modifying.

It is not important for them to stick only to the sounds they made in the first stage, since the movement stage might bring about new stimuli. Again, children should be encouraged to watch other groups, evaluate what they see and, where necessary, adapt and develop ideas.

Notation

Although the intention of this particular project has been to provide a challenging but fun activity for which notation is perhaps unnecessary. However, should you want your children to make a record of what they have done, refer to the section entitled *Notation* on page six of this booklet.

They must try to do this in a single line...if they need to go onto another, they must use the same scale.

3. Ask each pupil to draw their individual part, making sure that they know where it happens, for how long, etc.
4. When they are completed, cut out each individual part and assemble one above another on sugar paper. This way you will have a complete record of the composition from beginning to end.

Remember: although it is pleasant to see a picture, it is more important to make sure that your pupils make a permanent record of their work, one that in the future could be played again without too much difficulty.

Project 2: The Voice Machine

This project provides your children with opportunities to develop larger scale soundscapes and combine these with dance or drama. Rather than using instruments, however, children are required to use only body sounds and voices. The intention is to:

1. Create the sounds of a wonderful sweet-making machine that Willy Wonker would be happy using in his Chocolate Factory (in this instance, called a Snuzz-Whurzler, but any name will suffice).
2. Make the machine come to life by developing appropriate movements for its individual parts.

Possible extensions or other curriculum links could be: using the machine for an imaginary scene from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*; developing a short drama-based short plays written by your pupils, etc.

Stage 1

You can begin this activity with a game, the intention of which is to allow your pupils to experiment with vocal and body sounds in a creative, but fun manner.

Sitting with your class in a circle, ask each member of the group to make a voice or body sound in turn. It doesn't matter how ludicrous the sound is, the only rule is that each noise has to be entirely original — if someone else has made the same noise, then the offender is 'out'.

You could try all manner of variants with this particular game. For example, you could introduce restrictions such as: only vocal sounds can be used; pupils may use only words; pupils may use only *one* word, which they have to find a different way of saying.

From here, it becomes quite an easy task to build a Body Machine. Play your class the recording of the car engine (Track 6 from the downloadable MP3 support material — see page 2 for details) and discuss with them the different sounds they can hear, the most important aspect of which is that it is not a single sound, but a collection of sounds that makes up an overall *timbre* (use this word).

Divide your class into groups of five or six and explain that they have to develop the sounds of a machine using only their voices and body parts. Pupils will need to experiment with sounds on an individual basis to develop the sounds of a part of the machine and then to put these into context.

Things to question them on or help them with might include:

1. Will all the parts of their machine fall into one pulse or will there be many different speeds and rhythms occurring?
2. Have they managed to come up with a variety of sounds? Children will often copy each other when working in 'creative' mode, which, in this instance, should be discouraged.
3. Is their sound repetitive — in other words, could it act as an ostinato — or is it going to change as the machine whirrs into life?
4. As individual parts of the machine, can they combine vocal sounds with body sounds to make their part more interesting?
5. Will they have to adapt their own sound when they start to assemble the machine?
6. How are they going to start and stop their machine? Perhaps it might only begin with a single member of the group, slowly, with the others joining in one by one. Perhaps it will simply spring into life. Could the machine go haywire and fall to pieces at the end? Discuss these possibilities with each group.
7. Make sure that they exaggerate their sounds — children have a remarkable propensity for making as much noise on the playground as they can, but when it comes to activities such as this, a modicum of stage fright usually seems part of the course.

This composition stage can also act as a rehearsal stage, so every so often, bring the class together to listen to what each group has done; try to get them out of the habit of feeling that if one group has a good idea that another decides to use, it is *not* copying but reacting to stimulus. If this does occur, however, encourage pupils to develop the others' ideas in a different way, to use it as a starting point.