

GRADE V THEORY – COMPOSITION

An introduction by Joan Gregory

Grade V Theory - Composition

As teachers, we are expected to provide a modicum of theoretical training for our students, especially when it comes to that time when they need to take a higher-level performance exam. Theory training is important since it compliments much of what the student does in the way of practical work. I have often wondered how much a pupil might benefit by understanding the structure of a piece of music, or the manner in which a theme is developed and extended as a composition develops. But time in lessons is often far too limited to go into too much detail and a forty minute slot, for example, quickly passes just taking pupils through technical and musical problems.

Many of the requirements for Grade V theory are, in reality, common sense and students often seem to view the examination with the same trepidation that they would on visiting a dentist! As an invigilator for ABRSM theory examinations, I have seen youngsters quake with fear as they enter the examination room. Often parents display similar symptoms and the manner in which they nervously pace the corridors outside, suggests that a somewhat fraught atmosphere has existed in the family nest that day.

It seems that such a situation is set to stay; although recent legislation regarding compulsory testing at the end of key stages should ensure that children become used to such trying situations, a combination of factors will ensure that it does not. Pupils want to please their parents and teachers, teachers want their pupils not to let them down and parents want their children to succeed - a veritable mixing pot that can be unsettling for all.

How we make pupils understand the relative ease of the task they are about to undertake is not easy. They should know their scales, rubrics and terminology through the practical work they have done. The approach to clef reading, transposition, intervals and score writing can be technical and done without much musical sense. So it appears that the only real problem for them to overcome is the composition element of the paper, a problem that, with a methodical approach, can be solved without too much of a headache.

Composition is an element that is ever-present in a child's musical education since it is a statutory requirement at all key stages and plays an important part at GCSE level. But there is a difference between providing a portfolio of compositions for assessment and writing a melodic composition under exam conditions, where there is only real access to a musical instrument is the one the pupils carry in their heads. We have all come across the problems associated with endeavouring to get a student to tap this musical instrument when trying to get them to hear a melody in and recite it back through aural training. Transferring this into written notation only seems to compound the dilemma. The following process might provide an expedient solution to the problem, especially for those for whom the 'inner ear' is not fully developed.

A primary problem is getting the pupil to inwardly hear melodic intervals, but this is not a daunting task that requires hours of aural training since it requires only a return to the 'basic' human scale, the pentatonic. As children, we all sang such ditties as *Cry Baby Bunting* or *It's raining, it's pouring* without ever realising the accuracy with which we pitched the notes, either inwardly or outwardly. I would bet that if you attempted this now, without even opening your mouth, you would be able to inwardly hear every interval distinctly. The pentatonic scale, C D E G A is natural and forms the basis of a musical language for just about every culture that exists, whether it is the slendro scale of the Balinese gamelan orchestra or a lullaby sung in South Africa. It is not for any other reason that Zoltan Kodály's early years' training relies on this scale so much, and there is no reason why it cannot be adapted to form the basis of the composition of a melodic song in an exam

The first stage requires making the pupil aware of the scale - they are often not. Get them singing short verses on a single note and trying to transcribe the rhythm and accentuation into notation. This is often best approached by tapping a beat to a recital of the words, finding where the stresses lie and drawing in bar lines:

| Lullaby, | lullaby, |

Little one to | Dreamland fly. |

From there on, the notation of the rhythm should be a relatively simple matter. When the basic pattern is ready, refinements may be made. The rhythm should, however, be written out on alternating notes of a minor third - the age-old sound of a police car. Referring to the notes in terms of tonic sol-fa might be of use also:

Here we have the two most used notes of the pentatonic scale. The next phase requires the pupil substituting some of the notes with an A:

after which the same process should continue substituting the notes D and C:

It is important to follow this sequence verbatim, since the gradual addition of notes allows the pupil to inwardly reinforce the melody.

So far, we have a pentatonic melody- possibly enough to satisfy an examiner, but conversion to a diatonic melody should be a relatively quick and painless process. This example only requires the addition of an F to make it complete:

s m d l s m s l s f s l d
 Lull -a -by, lull -a -by, lit -tle one to dream -land fly

Although this is a relatively acceptable melody, should the pupil have time, a series of improvements may still be made. For example, two quavers might be used for a single syllable and the inevitable rubrics added.

pp sotto voce *mf*
 Lull -a - by, lull -a - by, lit -tle one to dream -land fly.

I hope that the plan I have presented here will be of as much use to your pupils as it has to mine. It can easily be adapted to suite composition for a single instrument, but the beauty of setting words is the structure and rhythm they provide. Methodical approaches are often of more use than unstructured attempts at writing 'from the heart' and although this might not seem a musical approach, it nevertheless fulfils a function under what can be trying situations.