BBC 10 PIECES: DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO THE CREATIVE RESPONSE FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Secondary music teachers are very used to setting students creative tasks based around the music being explored across a unit. Usually, these creative tasks will take technical aspects of a given style, genre or tradition (polyrhythms, call and response, master drummer role, etc), and challenge the students to explore the techniques in their own creative work. This enables the students to:

a) understand the genre in more depth because they are exploring its key components
b) develop relevant technical composing skills, and understand the underpinning theory
c) generate their own creative response, within the constraints of the style

This approach can also be used with individual pieces of music, and there are examples of such tasks within each of these collections of resources.

However, when working with a single piece as the basis for learning at KS3, it is also possible to adopt a different sort of approach. Rather than taking the piece simply as an example of a range of technical features which have to be explored, it is possible to:

a) consider the underpinning creative idea or process that drives the piece forward; or
b) consider how the piece reflects the characteristics of a genre that crosses stylistic boundaries and time constraints (i.e. 'opera' is found across many periods of the western classical tradition; and is fundamentally different from 'film' music – which has its own multiple classifications of style and time).

Each of these approaches is likely to lead to a much more creative, personal response to the music: the range of specific techniques required is likely to be much smaller, and there may well be just one or two musical or creative 'gestures' that drive the work forward. This offers a much greater freedom to students as to how they should respond, and usually leads to a much greater variety of outcomes: rather than, in effect, producing pastiche compositions, we are asking the students to take a musical or creative idea and see where it takes them.

So each of the units in these materials also provides an open-ended creative challenge, enabling students to immerse themselves in the processes of composition and the exploration of broad artistic challenges.

When using this second approach, it is worth remembering:

a) individual pieces do not always demonstrate a wide combination of musical ideas which students can meaningfully engage with – composers rarely 'stick to the rules', so although we can find parts of pieces which demonstrate a particular strategy or technique, it is rare to find to a perfect combination of ideas in one piece. This means that, unlike the ability to pick out a range of devices from a style, genre or tradition which can be exemplified by judicious selection of extracts (blues scale, walking bass, improvising, 3 line structure; or off-beat chords, triadic bass line; verse-chorus; minor chord sequences) individual pieces very often have just a limited set of ideas or principles underpinning them. Determining what these few 'ideas' are, and making them explicit for the students, is a crucial part of the process

b) look for features or ideas, not devices and processes: rather than identifying 'chord clusters' or 'syncopated rhythms' , see how the piece might be used as the starting point to explore a single rhythmic gesture (Siegfried's Funeral March), or a specific melodic idea (Fur Elise).

c) avoid too much complexity: a full classical period sonata movement has so much going on that it is hard to focus student attention on specific and relevant details, so keep the focus clear and precise.

For these reasons, we may need to think more creatively around our chosen pieces, how to explore them, and how to use them as the springboard for creative work. The following are examples of questions that might be usefully employed:

1. What is classical music?

This is a big topic, but very relevant: what links Machaut, Palestrina, Bach, Mozart, Wagner and Anna Meredith? Their music all sounds very different, but it can be argued that there are specific things that link them – one of which is the idea that, in classical music, the essential musical material is usually developed in some way (not just stated and contrasted), and that this development is completely fixed by the composer in advance (unlike jazz, for instance, where the material is developed but by the performers, not the composer).

If this seems like a fruitful way of moving forward, can we now use any of the pieces as an example of a musical tradition, with defined characteristics which mark it out as being different from film music, or music for dance, or contemporary popular music? If so, how can we explore that tradition, and what activities could we set up?

One activity might be to try out a composer's notebook, in which the ideas are drawn from the piece in question: can the students explore the ideas, work out how to develop them, and fix the performance in advance? And then compare how different groups develop the materials? This will require a series of exploratory tasks, learning how to develop ideas, but could be set up with material, for example, based around The Lark Ascending: how many musical ideas are there, how are they developed, and what could be created from similar processes?

2. What is this genre?

There are examples of opera, concerto and toccata amongst the 10 pieces. But what is opera – how is it different from theatre, or musicals, or film music, for instance? Similarly, what is a concerto? One might argue that in the Haydn Trumpet concerto there are some key ideas such as setting a soloist against (competing with?) the orchestra; some flashy virtuoso elements (chromatic runs); some aspects of the material which are exclusively derived from the sound / techniques of the solo instrument (triadic calls); and some contrasting ideas.

Given these points for a concerto: could students explore ThumbJam on the ipad – explore some specific musical ideas which are unique to that instrument (scales or sounds); find a way of playing the instrument that is unique (using the effects / movement features); and start to contrast these ideas with other sounds sources to create a series of sectional ideas?

3. What sorts of musical processes do composers use?

Can we compare the ways that composers work in different genres: how, for instance, are the Haydn and Prokoviev different in the way that they expect the performers to play, and what difference does that make to the music? How are the opera examples different from film music (especially given the fact that the versions used by the BBC have no singing)? How do composers make arrangements from original materials (Bach and Bernstein)?

All these are different ways of working, and can be explored effectively in the classroom with both short, sharp activities, or longer pieces of work. The focus might be on just one of them

(arranging is always an interesting process), but the notion of different processes and their effect on the creative work of a musician is a powerful one.

4. What creative ideas, gestures or features does this piece have?

A final, very creative approach: can the students find for themselves a single musical gesture, or perhaps two or three from one piece, which really stands out for them? Could it be the chromatic descending scale from the Verdi? Or the free, rhapsodic opening of the Bach? Or the sounds of the 'Night Ferry'?

Then, can they take that idea, and use it to create their own piece using the same gesture? This is hard, and forces the students to think imaginatively about where they want to take the piece, but it can be very productive and very creative . . . !

We recognise that this more open-ended approach can feel daunting: it is harder to scaffold the learning, to tick off the objectives that have been met, and to grade the outcomes against fixed criteria. However, we hope that the examples in these materials can encourage more teachers to be daring, and to explore exciting creative possibilities with their students.