

# Why the MMC approach to composing is so poor – Robert Bunting April 2021

## **Craft and Technique**

The MMC defines the essence of composing as “the craft of creating melodies” and “familiarity with music in a range of styles and genres” (p.10). But neither melodies nor pastiche are the only approach to teaching composing, and for school purposes they are emphatically not the best.

## **Expressiveness and Inventiveness**

*In KS1 children “start to learn some simple compositional techniques and structures .... The curriculum is technique-based” (P.11)*

This would be fine if it were based on a more fruitful idea of what composing ‘technique’ might mean. For MMC, ‘technique’ must mean tonal, metrical and note-by-note. But young people work with a broader brush, a freer ‘whole-piece’ approach. This might include expressive gesture in sound – experimenting with timbre, dynamics, texture, and pitch patterns – inventing motifs, sequences and structures – beginning to get the hang of design processes. These too are techniques, aurally and intellectually demanding ones, and techniques that provide a rich field for imaginative thinking, inventiveness and expressiveness, which are the true foundations of music. Of course, formal note-by-note harmonic and melodic techniques are an essential part of the curriculum, and at a later stage, if enriched by this imaginative approach, their contribution can be extremely fruitful.

But there's no hint of such an approach, as we soon discover.

*In Y3 children are expected to “combine known rhythmic notation with letter names to create rising and falling phrases using just three notes (**do, re and mi**).”(p.23)*

Where's the imagination and expressiveness in that? Where's the fun? Is Y3's time really best used cobbling together meaningless three-note phrases? Why the insistence on notation? What is going on here? It's a stifling note-by-note approach, like painting by numbers, or constructing a toy car from a set of instructions – not in the least creative. Children are being trapped in a box, moulded to think in a certain way. No Art or Drama teacher would work like this.

Instead of asking themselves how young people think musically, how their understanding grows, or what fires their imaginations, the committee has fixed an academic ideal of what techniques should be known by age 14, and invented a progression going backwards by ever simpler steps to arrive in Y3 at *do re mi*.

Moving on from Y3 with its 3 notes, by Y6 we arrive at this (p.34):

*“Plan and compose an 8- or 16-beat melodic phrase using the **pentatonic** scale... and incorporate rhythmic variety and interest.... Notate this melody. “*

*“Compose melodies made from pairs of phrases in either G major or E minor or a key suitable for the instrument chosen”*

What strange briefs! How children's thinking is boxed in! See how once again notation quite gratuitously rears its head! Variety and interest should be where composing starts, not something to be tacked on afterwards.

*And in KS3 (p.37) "... by the end of Year 9, all pupils should be able to form and use primary chords in a number of keys and embellish these with bass lines, melodies and rhythmic accompaniment. Many pupils will have developed confidence in handling more sophisticated harmony ..."*

Does creative thinking always and only start from a chord sequence? Are melody, rhythm and bass merely 'embellishments'? Is our over-riding aim simply to become more 'sophisticated' in our 'harmony'? The unexamined assumptions in every word of this one sentence are quite suffocating.

### **Quality, progress, progression**

The Model Curriculum shows no understanding of the musical imagination, no recognition of exploration and inventiveness, no awareness of the power of design processes. It can thus provide no measure of quality in composing, nor of progress in the mastery of craft and technique. For the MMC progression exists merely in a mechanical sense, as the use of increasing numbers of notes and more complex chords, scales and textures – however poor the resultant thinking may be.

This is all the more depressing because the UK can draw on a much richer vision of classroom composing, with a fifty-year history, which has generated a wealth of brilliant practice embodied in current major national projects and recent publications. Was any effort made to draw on this?