



2013

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Recommended Citation

O'Farrell, Anne-Marie and O'Connell, Lorraine, "Composers in the Community" (2013). *Teaching Fellowships*. 36.
<http://arrow.dit.ie/fellow/36>

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1 Composers in the community

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Abstract

Today's ever-changing contexts of music and music education demand that composers are increasingly required to be an artistic voice for the communities in which they live and work. Yet much teaching of composing in third-level institutions in Ireland, while developing a high level of musical craftsmanship, often fails to promote the vital connection between those skills and the social and civic contexts in which many composers work. The aim of this project was to enhance the learning experience of students in the Conservatory of Music and Drama by giving them the opportunity to apply, adapt and transfer their musical knowledge and skills through leading composition workshops in a primary school, and composing works appropriate for junior performance groups.

Working within a qualitative research paradigm and with a focus on reflective practice, data collection included questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and reflective journals. The projected outcomes included the development of the composers' critical reflection on the nature and social responsibility of their creative work and a growing awareness of the importance of composition processes in the emerging artistry of children. The study also has wider implications for curriculum development in the Conservatory of Music and Drama, for primary teachers' professional development, and the development of resources for teaching.

Keywords: *community groups, composing, practice-based learning, transferable skills*

Real art is one of the most powerful forces in the rise of mankind, and he who renders it accessible to as many people as possible is a benefactor of humanity (Kodály, 1954: 199)

Introduction

Composition at third level

Within the ever-changing contemporary contexts of music and music education, composers are increasingly required to be an artistic voice for the communities in which they live and work. Many music graduates will find themselves taking up positions as music specialists in schools or as composers-in-residence within community arts projects or as musicians within such initiatives as the recently established Music Generation¹ programme, all of which emphasise the need for composers to have a dimension of "outreach" to their work. This requires the ability to devise participatory workshops inclusive of all ages and musical abilities, to facilitate participants to communicate through music composition and to compose repertoire at an appropriate level for a given group. Yet much teaching of composing at third level, while developing a high level of musical craftsmanship, often fails to promote the connection between composition skills and the employment contexts in which many of these composers will find themselves. At Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) Conservatory of Music and Drama students develop expertise in applied and stylistic composition, while composing exclusively with the professional performer in mind. Generally students have the freedom to choose the instrumental resources for which they compose. Opportunities to hear the results of their work, if any are available, are limited. In addition, in some cases students are reluctant to undertake further studies in composition as a result of their experiences of hearing new music that is based solely on conceptual explorations of sound at the cost of good principles of musical communication which advocate a balance between expectation and surprise (Mitchell 1976).

The research question

Reflecting on our students' limited preparation for life as a professional composer within today's society led us pose the following question:

- How can we enhance the learning experience of third-level composition students so that they would acquire the core skills and competences that would equip them for work in diverse contexts, including community-based projects?

This question aligns with the aims of DIT's *Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy*. We needed to provide our students with practical first-hand experience through which they could creatively adapt their musical proficiency and develop the necessary leadership skills to facilitate composing workshops and also to write appropriate music for specific and diverse music groups within a given community. With this in mind the answer was to find a community in which our students could work both as workshop leaders and as composers for a variety of ensembles.

We are fortunate to have a musically active and forward-thinking primary school adjacent to the Conservatory of Music and Drama and so in collaboration with the school a two-strand project was developed. It was hoped that such collaboration would be mutually beneficial as there are challenges in teaching composition in the primary school.

¹ Arising from Music Network's 2003 report, *A National System of Local Music Education Services: Report of a Feasibility Study*, and funded by U2 and the Irelands Fund, Music Generation was established in 2010 in order to develop a national framework for music education in Ireland. To date Music Generation has established nine Music Education Partnerships: Carlow, Cork City, Laoise, Limerick City, Louth, Mayo, Offaly/Westmeath, Sligo and Wicklow.

Composition in the primary school

Music is an integral element of primary school curriculum encompassing three strands: listening and responding, performing, and composing (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 1999).² The value of composing in music learning has long been advocated in music education literature (see, for example, Schafer 1975; Swanwick 1979, 1988; Paynter 1982, 1997; Mills 2005; Burnard 2006). It gives children the opportunity to be artists, to be makers and creators of music and not just consumers of art (Small 1977). Through engaging in composition children explore various soundscapes, engage in decision-making and problem-solving, while selecting, ordering and structuring sound, and while communicating their music through performance. Due to the child-centred nature of education in Irish primary schools the classroom teacher is expected to teach all subjects. However, research has shown that many teachers do not feel fully equipped to teach music, with composition in particular being the most neglected of the strands (Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) 2009). Limited access to instrumental education in Ireland further hinders the advancement of musical activity in the classroom (INTO 2009).

Outline of Project

Strand 1

Strand 1 comprised four one-hour composition workshops with two separate classes, one 4th class and one 5th class, each led by two third level students under our guidance as project leaders.³ These workshops took place between February and March 2013 and culminated in a performance of the pupils' composed music. A profile of the classes is illustrated below:

	4 th class (9-10 years)	5 th class (10-11 years)
Number of pupils	25	25
Girls/boys	12/13	15/10
Number of nationalities	11	4
Number of pupils receiving instrumental tuition	4	7
Number of pupils in school choir	8	7

Table 1.1: Profile of classes in Primary School

As already noted, third level students develop expertise in composition, or what Shulman (1986, 1987) refers to as "subject matter knowledge". However, in order to lead composition workshops they also need to develop "pedagogical knowledge" and "pedagogical content knowledge"⁴ which includes skills in the areas of lesson planning, pedagogical strategies, communication, classroom management, group work, familiarity with teaching resources, and the ability to be flexible, to think on one's feet (or what Schön (1987) describes as "thinking-in-action"), and to respond positively to participants' creative endeavours. In order to develop these skills, we met the students before the project began and introduced them to a variety of teaching strategies, methods for managing larger groups and organizing group work, and teaching resources. We encouraged the students to also suggest materials or activities that might be incorporated. In addition, as the project is grounded in reflective practice, we suggested guidelines for reflection and asked the students to keep a reflective journal. We met with the students after each session to reflect on what happened during the workshop and to plan the next one.

Before commencing the workshops both classroom teachers completed a questionnaire through which we gained insight into their thoughts on the teaching of composition and ascertained the needs of the class. At the end of Strand 1 we carried out a semi-structured interview with both teachers in which they spoke of their experiences of the project, their observations of its impact on the pupils, and their reflections on its potential impact on their own thinking about the teaching of composition.

The group compositions created by the children of both classes explored an impressive range of musical dimensions including: rhythmic dialogue, polyrhythms, an arrhythmic soundscape of texture, and a graphic score (Appendix C).⁵ In addition, the 4th class children incorporated an Adagio movement by Mozart with glass harmonica accompaniment made by the children.⁶

2 Through these strands pupils are introduced to musical elements: pulse, duration, pitch, tempo, timbre, texture, dynamics, structure and style.

3 Throughout the remainder of this report we will use the term "students" when referring to our third-level students while we will use the term "pupils" when referring to the primary school children.

4 In offering a framework for understanding the concept of "knowledge for teaching" Shulman identifies a number of different types of knowledge that effective teachers possess. These include "subject matter knowledge", that is knowledge of the subject (in this case expertise in composition), "pedagogical knowledge", the knowledge of principles and strategies of classroom organization and classroom management, and "pedagogical content knowledge" which is a blend of content and pedagogy and is concerned with organising and sequencing the presentation of material in order to make it comprehensible to others.

5 The graphic score was based on a Vocalise by Peter Hunt as published in his *Voiceworks*. The template used by the children during the workshops is found in Appendix C.

6 The glass harmonica comprised a number of drinking glasses filled with water to different heights in order to produce different pitched notes. The rim of the glass is rubbed with a wet finger. Mozart had written Adagio in C K. 356 for glass harmonica.

Strand 2

During Strand 2 third-level students composed repertoire for performance by ensembles within the school, culminating in a workshop in which they assisted in rehearsal and direction. The aim was to familiarise our students with the challenges faced by children as they develop their musical skills and working within limited compositional contexts, such as, the children's vocal ranges, their breathing technique and their ability to read music. The reality of school life and its schedules provided useful insight into unavoidable restrictions encountered by composers. For example, working with non-specialist choirs in limited rehearsal time was a useful reminder to the student composers of the parameters within which they could conceive their creative ideas. Most importantly, the aim was for the students to develop the skills to communicate effectively with children, making an interpretative connection with them, and assisting the direction in their rehearsals. They were also required to make revisions to their compositions based on their findings in the reflective process. Furthermore, the music written for the ensembles will now remain in the young performers' repertoire.

Findings

Although this project was focused primarily on the third level students we had hoped that it would also be beneficial to the participating primary teachers and their pupils. In this section we outline the impact of the project from the perspective of these three groups. Data have been generated from:

- Students' reflective journals
- Notes from weekly review meetings with students
- Project leaders' reflective journals
- Transcripts of interviews with classroom teachers

Impact on third level students

All students involved in both strands reported that it was an invaluable experience for them as workshop leaders and as composers. Over the course of the project we as project leaders and the classroom noticed that the students grew in confidence and skill in facilitating composition workshops. As the weeks progressed we were able to step back and allow the students to take more responsibility in running the workshops. The students became more aware of the skills, effective teaching strategies and good pedagogical practice required in such contexts as exemplified in the following quotations:

It is important that children are confident in their performance and I feel the way to achieve this is to do just a couple of ideas (i.e. not too many) and to rehearse these well. (Ciara)

As a facilitator I must be enthusiastic and find the way to bring enthusiasm to the kids [...]. It is essential to gain their full attention [...]. Indeed, the new task might be challenging, watch out that the task isn't too difficult, and if so, introduce the parts gradually. (Jamie)

While the students recognised the importance of reflecting-in-action and reflecting-on-action, we found that in their written reflections the students gave a "descriptive reflection" rather than a more analytical "dialogic" or "critical" one (Moon 2004). They tended to evaluate the content of each workshop but found it more difficult to reflect on and comment on their individual roles, the skills and knowledge they gained through practice, and what they learned about themselves as workshop leaders and as musicians. Interestingly, however, they were able to engage in such a process orally during the meetings.

In outlining the rationale for this project, it was noted that third level students generally receive little opportunity to see the practical application of compositional choices. However, in both strands, they found themselves having to address issues of layout, ease of performance, timbral results and optimum use of available performers. For example, in preparing the performances from Strand 1, the students had to decide on the optimal layout of players and instruments, including the use of glasses for the glass harmonica.

Making such decisions links directly with the students' academic work. For example, students would have learned that Bartók also encountered such decisions when composing his Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta (Lindlar 1984). The use of the Vocalise resource provided the possibility of using an example of "crab canon" and "table canon", which are encountered by the students in the music of Bach and Webern.⁷

It was also very worthwhile for the third level students to discover the level of musical complexity in which the children could operate comfortably, sometimes dismantling the perceived notion of linear progression in the development of a child's musical ability. For example, the children dealt easily with a polyrhythm of eight against nine, something which is perceived to be difficult within the teaching of music (Hindemith 1949).

Impact on primary school pupils

The research provided evidence that the project made a significant impact on the children involved. Both teachers commented on the pupils' excitement for and their enjoyment of the project. The workshops can be seen to have contributed to the development of the children's musical and creative skills as reported by one of the third level students: "I was very encouraged by the fact that the children were becoming very aware of the sounds they were creating".

7 J.S.Bach, *A Musical Offering*, BWV 1079 (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1981) and Webern, *Symphonie Op. 21* (Vienna: Universal, 1929)

The children's sense of ownership of their work brought them immense personal satisfaction. The 4th class teacher reported that the children liked the fact that it was they who decided what went into the graphic score. She went on to quote one of the pupils who stated: "This was our work, it wasn't something someone gave us to play". The 5th class teacher reported:

[...] what was really important and what [the pupils] said was that their ideas were used [...] you were doing something and then James came up with something and it was added in and he was really chuffed that his bit had been added in. The fact that they could all see and hear the things that they had created come together, I thought that was great.

Contained in the children's sense of ownership was the desire to communicate as composers and performers, as evidenced in their endeavour to ensure that the performance was successful. The 4th class teacher affirmed this saying: "The children wanted the performance to go well".

The inclusive nature of the workshops was paramount. The process of composition was not bound by lack of linguistic or musical literacy, or by lack of musical experience. All were included, resulting in feedback from the 5th class teacher that even children normally disenchanted with music were fully involved. Therefore they also developed the capacity to work as a group and to appreciate one another's contributions to the whole.

When the third level students composed for the school's ensembles, this stimulated the children's interest in the process of composition: they were curious to know about the point of ignition for a composer when they begin to compose a new work. They enjoyed having the composer present at rehearsals and the resulting discussion about the content of the pieces.

Impact on teachers

The project became a form of professional development for the teachers concerned. The teachers commented on the fact that they have been introduced to new resources. As noted earlier, composition is the strand which is most neglected in school. The 5th class teacher reported that she was now incorporating composition more regularly into her music programme. She feels better equipped to use classroom instruments, and is no longer inhibited by fear of chaos that might ensue. The teachers have also gained further insight into the children they teach. The 4th class teacher remarked that through the workshops, she saw another side to her pupils, noticing that children normally disinclined to volunteer were now taking leadership roles.

A further impact was the strengthening of cross-curricular links between subjects. Listening to an Austrian folk song, the children had learnt, connected to discussions about landscape and the origins of yodelling, the home country of Mozart and then to the glass harmonica for which he composed. The connection between volume and pitch was drawn when we made our own glass harmonica and used it in the class performance.

Evaluation and Conclusions

Earlier we referred to the DIT *Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy* and we believe that the benefits gained by the students who participated in this project can be aligned to a number of areas within this strategy.

- Students have engaged in practice-based learning in which they have had to meet professional standards and have had to respond to the needs of the community in which they have worked (composition workshops and composing for specific ensembles).
- They have developed "key skills and competencies" which are applicable to a wide range of local interest groups, from those attending day-care centres, to youth groups and diverse community settings.
- The participating students have become more flexible in their thinking, have gained wider experience, have engaged in reflective practice and therefore have gained greater employability skills. However, students need further support and guidance in the skills of reflective practice.

The primary school also believes that the project has been a valuable one and has asked for it to be repeated next year. As noted in the findings above, observing the workshops has been a form of professional development for the classroom teachers.

Recommendations to DIT

- Such a project should be included in the curriculum for third level composition students. It could be extended beyond the primary school to include other outreach projects, both those that are already within DIT's remit (for example, Ballymun music project) and other community groups including youth groups and day-care centres. Ultimately such a dimension could attract students to the Conservatory in the future.
- Given the challenges in teaching music and composition in the primary school, DIT could develop Continuing Professional Development courses for primary teachers, which could also be extended to include second level music teachers.
- Strategies for "dialogic" and "critical reflective practice" should be embedded in as many modules as possible.

Proposed future work

As noted previously, there is the potential to develop this project beyond the boundaries of the local primary school. There is also the potential to develop teaching resources for composition to be used in school. Such resources should be designed in order to engage all pupils regardless of previous musical experience and help teachers develop cross-curricular links between subjects.

Concluding words

We have outlined how the project will benefit DIT students' employability and career prospects. Ultimately in education, our aim is to enhance a person's humanity, and by engaging in such a venture the scope for creativity is increased. The third level students, by being given the opportunity to share their talents with children, have, in the words of Kodály become "benefactors of humanity".

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their heartfelt thanks to Ms Marie McCabe, principal of St Louis Senior Primary School, Rathmines, and to all who participated so enthusiastically in this project: the 4th class and 5th class pupils and their teachers, Ms Máire Barrett and Ms Ailbhe Lowery, the school choir and its director Ms Maura Eaton; the instrumentalists and their director Ms Marion Ryan. We also acknowledge the support of the DIT Learning, Teaching and Technology Centre and our fellow Fellows.

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