

Get Creative in the Classroom: Level 2

Minuet II from Music for the Royal Fireworks

Improvisation Ideas for Classroom Ensemble CE004

In a mixed ability setting, it can be very helpful to combine creative work with ensemble playing. This allows the teacher, in addition to covering the creative aspects of the programme of study, to focus attention on parts other than the melody and to give less able performers longer exposure to the piece without boring the high-flyers. It is important, though, that everyone should have the opportunity to work creatively, at various times. Even where all pupils are capable of playing the melody, it is sometimes useful to play the synthesized music, online, freeing everyone to try other things.

Minuet is a dance with three beats to a bar. Most of us used, as we are, to alternating left and right feet, find this metre a little trickier. Pupils are helped in this piece by the strong accents and by the rhythmic nature of the accompaniment patterns. Less rhythmically-accomplished classes may benefit from marking each beat with a distinct movement. The first beat of the bar should be a little stronger than the second and third, so the following works well:

1. Tap on a hard surface 2. Tap shoulders 3. Tap head

If desired, individuals can create their own movement sequences for others to imitate.

This is noisy music, intended for outdoor performance and it is robust enough not to be ruined by some fairly heavy percussion. We will take this as an opportunity to explore more purely rhythmic aspects of improvisation, less subservient to a melodic line. Play the synthesized music online and let everyone immerse themselves in rhythm.

In the first section, the tune falls into, fairly obvious, 4-bar phrases. However, as four bars is a lot for inexperienced players to remember, we will initially subdivide each into 2-bar sub-sections. Let individual pupils invent a 2-bar rhythm to be clapped or played by everyone. Try this, first of all, without the music. After a little practice, it should be possible to use the Minuet as a backing track. The next stage is for individual pupils to improvise 4-bar rhythmic 'questions' to which everyone answers by playing, twice through, an agreed 2-bar rhythm.

If there are sufficiently able pupils in the class, the children would probably be interested to hear how effectively the Minuet can be accompanied by just two pitched notes:

Repeat the last activity but, this time, the improviser plays a 4 bar 'question' on low D. The 'answer' group also play on D until the last bar of the section, where they rise to an A. In the second section, the improviser plays on A. The 'answer' group play on A until the last bar where they fall to D.

It is easier to make the change of note at the end of a phrase when improvising and pupils can do this in pairs (without the Minuet music): The 'question' player improvises three bars on D followed by a long note on A. The 'answer' player responds immediately with three bars of rhythmic improvisation on A, finished off with a bar of D. This is a very satisfying thing to do and there is quite a lot of music that contrasts two pitches in this way.

Returning to *Minuet II*, remind pupils of the two distinct sections. We need to find ways of contrasting them. Playing D and A was one good way. How could we achieve contrast with just untuned percussion? Can the pupils find ways of achieving it, in turn, by the rhythmic patterns they play and by the timbre (sound quality) of the instruments used? If conventional untuned percussion is not available, just play on the furniture, books, etc.

Older, or more able, classes can explore further the idea of basing a melody around a single note, or chord, changing only at the end of a phrase. This is a very common method of organisation in folk music and pupils should be encouraged to listen out for it and to try playing such tunes by ear.

It will probably be easiest to work with the chords C major and G7 (C E G C / G B D F), avoiding sharps and flats, but the following pairs may be better suited to your particular instrumentation.

D major/ A7; (D F# A D / A C# E A)

G major / D7 (G B D G / D F# A C)

F major / C7 (F A C F / C E G Bb)

Where pupils can play all the pitches, with some fluency, they can work in pairs to improvise 4-bar 'Question' and 'Answer' phrases. This is the chord sequence:

1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3
C /C /C /G7

1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3
G7 /G7 /G7 /C

Where this is not possible, divide the class up into 2 chord groups. Each person in group 1 plays a single note from C major chord and each member of group 2 plays a single note from G7 chord. A 'conductor' can then create the melody by pointing to individual players, as though leading a handbell group. As a single chord is held for three bars of the phrase, there is more opportunity to think melodically. To achieve really satisfying results, though, it is very necessary to have internalised the underlying pulse and to have a strong feeling for phrase length.