

Get Creative in the Classroom: Level 2 Portsmouth

Improvisation Ideas for Classroom Ensemble CE005

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.

Portsmouth is an eighteenth century dance tune and its rhythmic drive makes it an excellent stimulus for movement and improvised rhythmic patterns. The ideas presented here are particularly suitable for the junior classroom.

First, check that the children are able to clap the pulse, accenting the first beat of each bar of 4/4. (Note that the tune starts with an ‘upbeat’ on the 4th beat of the bar.) A secure sense of pulse and metre is an important foundation for confident improvisation. If there are difficulties, play the music, online, inventing 4-beat movement sequences for the children copy, e.g:

1. stamp (L)
2. stamp (R)
3. clap hands
4. tap knees

Individual children can, likewise, invent movement sequences for others to follow.

Once the pulse is secure, individuals can invent 1-bar rhythms for others to clap or play on percussion instruments. Each rhythm can also be used as a repeated (ostinato) rhythmic accompaniment. Pupils should listen carefully and determine which rhythmic patterns work best. More able classes can extend the movement sequences and rhythmic invention to 2-bar phrases. If percussion instruments are available, the children can determine which would provide the most effective accompaniment to a solo melodic line.

Individual pupils can add pitched notes to the rhythmic phrases previously explored, playing on tuned percussion or on the instrument they normally play in the ensemble. (The former is, generally, found easier.) They should use the notes G, A, D, E (D and E can be low or high register). With the focus on rhythm, they are inventing melodic accompaniments. For a more independent melodic approach, it is necessary to have a secure sense of pulse and phrase length.

If we add the note B to those we used for the melodic accompaniments, we have the following pentatonic (5-tone) scale: G A B D E. (As in the previous activity, the notes D and E can be played in the low or high register, as preferred.

First, practise some of the repeated rhythmic patterns created in the course of earlier activities. Then, in groups of three, pupils can take it in turns to play the rhythmic ostinato while the other two group members improvise alternate melodic phrases, using the notes of our pentatonic scale. Initially, the phrases should be two bars in length. Later, as pupils grow in assurance, they can work in four bar phrases. To begin with, the opening phrase should start on G and end on some note other than G. The answering phrase should end on G. More able pupils may, then, dispense with these restrictions. Each group member should be responsible, in turn, for rhythmic ostinato, ‘question’ and ‘answer’.

It is easier to respond with a satisfying ‘answer’, balancing the phrase just heard, than it is to invent a new rhythmic and melodic idea for the ‘question’. With this in mind, some preliminary class demonstration may be necessary, with the teacher, or the whole class playing a ‘question’ for individual pupils to answer, in turn.

Example ‘questions’:

Three musical staves, each consisting of five horizontal lines. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a 'G' key signature, and a '4' time signature. It contains six quarter notes followed by a repeat sign. The second staff begins with a treble clef, a 'G' key signature, and a '4' time signature. It contains a eighth-note followed by a quarter note, then a eighth-note followed by a quarter note, then a eighth-note followed by a quarter note. The third staff begins with a treble clef, a 'G' key signature, and a '4' time signature. It contains a eighth-note followed by a quarter note, then a eighth-note followed by a quarter note, then a eighth-note followed by a quarter note.