



“A TERM IS A LONG TIME – ISN’T IT?”

Ways To Structure Group Music-Making Over A Term Or Course

INTRODUCTION

Creating a single, large piece of music over a course or a term or course can seem daunting at the outset, but there are plenty of tricks that help to keep things manageable, achievable and fun.

This document outlines the approach taken by Pier One. This approach has served us well: it works, and it helps the tutors work in a clear and focussed way. That doesn’t mean that this approach is the only one that works, or that these tips are infallible. But they can serve as a tried & tested starting point for your own explorations. Pier One works specifically with young people with SEN/D, but these approaches are appropriate to any group.

I’m not going to offer suggestions about how to generate, write or arrange music – that’s covered in the Pier One resource ‘Arranging Music’. Instead, I’m going to give some general tips about ways to structure a course over time. After that, I’m going to discuss in some detail the creation of Epic Journey, a large-scale piece created as a group by Pier One over the course of a whole term. The resource on ‘Arranging Music’ also focuses on Epic Journey, so you may find it useful to read both documents.

A term can be a long time, if you structure it well and remain flexible. Hopefully this document will give you the ideas and the confidence to do that, and to support some wonderful, complex and beautiful music-making.

TIPS FOR THE TERM

1) Where to start?

The first session should usually start with some name games & musical improvisations. Let the participants settle in, have fun and get to know each other – if they don’t already. After that, you can introduce the theme (see below) and discuss how the group might respond to that theme.

2) Work towards a goal

Having a final performance, recording or filming at the end of the course helps to keep all the participants focussed and excited. Even if it’s as simple as recording the final piece on a phone &

sharing it with parents, there should be some kind of target which all the participants understand.

Everything you do should keep that target in mind. Even if an activity doesn't directly feed into it, you should know why you are doing it – for example, starting each session with an improvisation may not produce material for your composition, but it may help to settle and focus the group before starting to write music together.

This might seem prescriptive, but it can help create a sense of focus and direction over the term. It also helps to ensure the piece keeps developing.

3) Use a theme

Having a theme is a great way to bring musical elements together. It can suggest moods, arrangements, structures, lyrics, instruments etc. And it can help to link them all if they seem a bit mismatched.

The theme doesn't have to be fixed before the first session (see the notes on Epic Journey below), but if it isn't then the group's first job is to agree on one.

The theme could be as concrete as 'A musical version of War and Peace', or as abstract as 'Making the noise of a squiggly abstract picture'. Anything that helps to suggest a direction will work, so long as all the participants understand it.

4) Debrief after every session

If there's a group of tutors, it is invaluable for all of them to talk through the session as soon as possible afterwards, and also plan for the following session. Having a forum to discuss ideas while everything is still fresh in people's minds is the single best tool for effective planning – both musically and pastorally (and it's usually best done in person and with cake :-))

If you are running sessions on your own, it is still very well worth taking the time to reflect & plan as soon as possible after the session (and you can still have cake!).

5) It's never too early to write a score

Written scores are incredibly helpful tools during the process of composition, they're not just there to represent the finished product.

Scores can be written as traditional music notation, but often it's more useful to write them down using words, shapes, textures. Get creative & use your best felt-tips! (And see below for the finished score of Epic Journey.)

Writing a score can be a useful activity during each debrief. It helps to highlight and clarify the musical ideas, helps you to see what material you have and what you still need to generate, and gives you a great overview of the progress of the piece.

6) Think about musical Chunks

Breaking the whole composition into Chunks is a very helpful way to approach developing your material. Chunks can be sequential (ie 'Intro', 'Verse 1', 'Chorus' etc), compositional (ie 'chords', 'lyrics', 'beats' etc), topical (ie 'music about a particular character', 'music about a particular place' etc) – anything that helps you and the participants to conceptualise how the music fits together.

You can then plan your work around those discrete Chunks: you could devise the Chorus one week and the Verse the following week, or ask Group A to work on chords while Group B works on lyrics, and so on.

It is important to fix your terminology. Don't call it a 'bridge section' one week, and a 'middle eight' the next week. The terms aren't important, but the consistency is.

7) It's never too early to look at the score again

Keep referring back to the score as your piece develops. Make sure you haven't changed anything without noticing, and make sure that you haven't forgotten to include anything.

And keep updating the score – it's not fixed in stone. Your composition will develop over the course, so you should make sure that the working score is up-to-date, and has information presented in a relevant way. At the start of the course a paragraph of text might be enough, but later in the term you might need a colourful visual representation with some traditionally notated 'dots' included.

8) Record & share, where necessary

Recording sections of music as they develop can be really helpful. You can listen back to check that you're happy with the composition, participants can play along as a practice tool, and it helps everyone hear how much musical progress you're making. So keep a recording device handy (mobile phones are great for this), and share recordings with the whole group.

In general, you won't need written permission from parents/carers for audio recordings, specially if they're only shared within the group. Don't use video – it significantly complicates the legal position.

It can also be helpful to share the score with participants. But use your judgement about how often to do this – if you send out an updated score every week, it could be overwhelming.

9) Move fast, and be flexible

There is rarely time to obsess over detail when creating music in a group - it is usually best to make decisions quickly, and move on. If you are planning to finish a Chorus in one session, it is (almost) always best to accept the end result 'warts and all' rather than return in the next session to continue tinkering.

And you should remain flexible. If a Chunk doesn't develop in the way that you had expected, see if you can make a feature of it. Whilst planning and working with Chunks is important, you should always be willing to change the structure & plan in the light of actual material developed by the group.

You'll see examples of this in the Epic Journey case study below.

10) Know when to rehearse

Don't over-rehearse week-to-week. Devising and composing is more important, and being sure that the participants understand their role within the structure.

You should aim to have the whole piece finished two weeks before the final performance or recording. That way, the week before the performance can be dedicated to rehearsing the whole piece.

I I) Celebrate the sound!

Music written in this kind of workshopped group setting, whether SEN/D or mainstream, rarely sounds like conventional pop/rock music - it's often a bit more open-ended, a bit more textural, and a bit less 'clean'.

This is something to celebrate! Ours is a music of participation, not a music of consumption, and that different ethos will create different sounds and structures. If a group tries to sound like an R&B single, they may be disappointed by the final result. But if they value the way this music lets each individual participant shine, then they will realise the deep creative and social power of group music-making.

EPIC JOURNEY by Pier One

A case study in structuring a term.

You may find it useful to see the Pier One resource 'Arranging Music', which also uses Epic Journey as a case study.

And you should definitely watch the video of the final performance of the piece.

INTRO: *Electronic Drone () Fades in.....
 * **LOUDER**

EPIC JOURNEY!

* **ALL** improvise gentle sounds over the top!

* () cymbal roll signals the end.....

CARIBBEAN
 "Reggae"
 * Drum kit reggae beat ()
 * Guitar off beat stabs ()
 * **ALL** off beat stabs (0 major)
 * VIOLA LONG 4 NOTES ()
 * Call + response
 → () + respond
 → () + respond
 → () + respond
 * IPAD solo ()
 * **ALL** back in with off beats
 * Drum fill to end!

SPEED UP 1: CARIBBEAN WORDS
 Spoken words, follow on forms, cymbal crash, top stop

MONGOLIA
 "Drone"
 * Morin Xuur Drone ()
 * **ALL** humming / playing drone D/A
 * **ALL** get quieter on cue
 * VOCALS: Singers improvise over drone ()
 * Toms start up to signal Speed Up 3...

SPEED UP 2: MONGOLIA WORDS

INDIA / JAPAN
 "Fusion"
 * Keyboard (sitar sound) starts texture 1
 * Group 1 joins in + Ipad Shakuhachi solo ()
 * () plays 3 notes to signal 'Stop'!
 * Sitar + Group 2 play texture 2 (with Ipad part)
 * 3 notes to stop
 * **ALL** play your textures
 * Toms start up to signal Speed Up 4

SPEED UP 3: INDIA/JAPAN WORDS

OUTRO: () End with the Electronic Drone, fading out.....

SPEED UP 4: TRAVEL WORDS
 (to outro)

FINE!

(Finished score for Pier One's composition Epic Journey)

OVERALL TERM AIMS:

We had a 9-week course (including half term) to develop an ambitious piece of music, which we would be performing in a concert which we would be sharing with other ensembles.

For reasons of logistics & finance we were running some sessions in-person, and some online. We decided to focus on writing the music when in-person and writing lyrics online, and to intersperse the sessions. We used ideas from James Redwood's Online Games and Exercises to help structure & deliver the online sessions.

In the previous term, Pier One members had done some drawings & paintings in response to music. For this term, we decided to use some of those pictures as inspiration for new music. We felt that the pictures would give us a really good starting point, and would let the theme grow out of that.

SESSION 1 - face-to-face

'Chunk' being focussed on: **Musical Seeds**

Aims:

- Welcome the players back
- Review & remember the paintings from last term
- Improvise some musical textures inspired by those paintings

Activities:

- Warm up & welcome
- Group improvisation
- Discuss plans for the term, and for this session
- Break into groups, each with 1 tutor. These groups are only for this session
- Each group chooses one or two paintings to work with
- Groups discuss & improvise textures/sounds to reflect those paintings
- Groups come together & share

Outcomes:

- Four contrasting musical Seeds were developed
- Tutors recorded the Seeds and wrote descriptions of them in words,

SESSION 2 – online

'Chunk' being focussed on: **Lyrics**

Aims:

- Get used to working online
- Develop lyrical theme inspired by the musical Seeds

Activities:

- Start with Zoom games & housekeeping
- Make sure all participants can use Zoom functions & are happy with their level of privacy
- Try making music using 'scribbling' improvisations and Call & Response
- Listen to each Seed in turn, and use Chat Waterfall to share words about how they make everyone feel.
- Discuss common threads & try to find a lyrical theme

Outcomes:

- Participants enjoyed the online experience more than they thought they would (including tutors!)
- Not everyone understood the Chat Waterfall. Many people shared whole sentences & phrases rather than single words
- There was a very clear common thread about travel round the world, which will provide the lyrical theme for the piece.

SESSION 3 – face-to-face

'Chunk' being focussed on: **Musical structure**

Aim:

- Develop each of the 4 Seeds into broader musical material.

Activities:

- Warm ups & welcome
- Group improvisation
- Divide into 4 groups. Each group takes one Seed to work on.
- In groups, develop and extend the basic Seed into a bigger musical work.
- Share the Seeds back to the whole group.

Outcomes:

- We had less staff than originally planned so split into 2 groups, each looking at two Seeds.
- Problems with space, technology and noise meant that one group wasn't able to get much work done, managing only to remember the 2 seeds & play them through. They didn't manage to develop or extend the Seeds at all.
- The other group developed their Seeds well, and also created a possible rhythmic linking motif – the 'Speed Up'.
- In the tutor debrief, it was agreed that each Seed could generate its own 'standalone' material all linked by the Speed Up.
- Keeping the four Seeds distinct from each other feeds well into the notion of travel that emerged in Session 2: each Seed could be used to develop a section representing different countries or regions.
- We agreed to have four Country Sections, based on the Caribbean, Mongolia, Japan, India (see Notes below for an explanation of why those countries/regions were chosen).

SESSION 4 – online

'Chunk' being focussed on: **Lyrics**

Aims:

- Start writing lyrics based on lyrical theme from Session 2

Activities:

- Zoom games & warm-ups.
- Watch short videos/images of the 4 countries
- Remind participants that Chat Waterfall works best with single words
- Chat Waterfall of single words to describe the films
- Try combining those individual words to create lyrics/lines of text

Outcomes:

- Again, participants offered whole sentences rather than single words.
- Although many good concepts developed, there were few specific lyrics.

SESSION 5 -in person

'Chunk' being focussed on: **Musical structure: links between Country Sections**

Aims:

- Clarify and develop the Country Sections, making sure they're distinct
- Finalise choice of instruments for each Country Section
- How to link the Country Sections using the Speed Up.

Activities:

- Short warm up & welcome – no group improvisation
- Teach the Speed Up to the whole group, using one set of sample words
- Teach each Country Section to the whole group. Allow participants to find their own parts, and let the texture & structure of each Section develop.

Outcomes:

- The Country Sections for India and for Japan were developing similar structures and sounds. Both included electronic instrumental solos (iPad and keyboard) over drones. It was decided to combine those two sections into a single Asian section, with a call-and-response duet rather than solos.
- The Speed Up was rehearsed, and understood by everyone.
- The name 'Epic Journey' was agreed for the finished piece.

SESSION 6 – online

'Chunk' being focussed on: **Lyrics**

Aims:

- Generate a unique pool of words to use in each Speed Up, to help keep each Speed Up distinct.

Activities:

- Zoom games & warm-ups
- Listen to recordings of the Country Sections & view images/films from those countries
- Read through previous texts
- Use Chat Waterfall generate words relevant to the Country Sections
- Practice the Speed Ups, using those words (it's not dependent on synchronisation, so works acceptably on Zoom)

Outcomes:

- Participants seemed more confident with Chat Waterfall & use of single words
- Speed Ups worked well, and a number of Pools of words were developed

SESSION 7 – face-to-face

'Chunk' being focussed on: **Rehearse whole piece**

Aims:

- This is the final rehearsal, so needs to tie up all loose ends and finish with a play through.

Activities:

- V short warm-up and welcome
- All sections of the piece were rehearsed in turn, each led by a different tutor. Those tutors had reviewed the scores & recordings, and had identified any issues that needed resolving.
- Short break
- Complete run-through of the piece, followed by discussion of any issues arising.
- If time allows, another complete run-through.

Outcomes:

- All sections clarified & rehearsed.
- Good, focussed run-through.
- There wasn't time for a second run-through, but we were able to pick out two or three danger points to play through again.

SESSION 8 – PERFORMANCE

2 tutors set up the stage & equipment, while the remainder talk through the structure and rehearse the Speed Up.

Performers take their places on stage as soon as it is set, and run through

Welcome the audience, and off we go!

OBSERVATIONS & ISSUES ON EPIC JOURNEY:

We started the first session with only a loose theme, but with the intention of tying it down during the first session. The development of the musical Seeds in that session and then discussing them in Session 2 (online), created a strong theme that supported our music making throughout the term and underpinned the final piece.

As mentioned above, Session 3 presented us with some logistical problems that created some difficulties. We weren't able to try blending the Seeds together in the way that we'd anticipated and created some uncertainty for the tutors. After discussing it in the debrief, this became a positive structural feature, as we decided to keep the Seeds separate and develop them into distinct Country Sections.

Having made this decision, the tutors created an outline score which helped guide the rest of the term.

- Electronic intro
- Speed Up Country Section 1
- Speed Up
- Country Section 2
- Speed Up
- Country Section 3
- Speed Up
- Country Section 4
- Electronic Coda

nb - we hadn't allocated the countries by that point – just the outline structure.

We initially chose the following countries/regions to represent:

- 1) The Caribbean - One of the Seeds had a reggae feel which we decided to emphasize
- 2) Mongolia - Two of our participants are interested in Mongolian folk music and were keen to use a Mongolian stringed instrument as part of the performance.
- 3) One of our participants was exploring the iPad app Thumbjam, and was particularly interested in the sound of the Shakuhachi (Japanese flute), and that became the focus on a section.
- 4) When working on a Seed there was a lovely improvised duet between a student using the sitar sound of a keyboard, and a tutor playing violin. We decided to keep that duet, and work on an Indian feel

As the term progressed, it became clear that the Indian and the Japanese Country Sections were developing some similar musical features. In the end, we took the decision to merge the two sections with a duet between the keyboard/sitar and the iPad/shakuhachi. This prevented any duplication of texture, shortened and focussed the overall piece, and meant that the duet was between two students rather than a student and a tutor.

It was harder to develop lyrics than hoped, and working in a group over Zoom probably didn't help. In the end, we developed different 'Pools' of words relating to each country. This helped give the different Speed Up sections their own sense of identity and function, as they were each unique and related to the music that followed.

IN CONCLUSION

Hopefully this resource, and the case study it includes, has given you some thoughts about how to plan a term. But just as importantly, it has shown you some examples of some of the unexpected musical and logistical issues that might crop up, and ways of responding to them creatively. Your experience will be different, but the type of issues that arise are often surprisingly consistent and you are likely to encounter something similar.

So plan carefully, stay flexible, and have fun!

