

Curriculum Close-Up

12

focus on:

music

Welcome to Issue 12 of Curriculum Close-Up. For the Summer term 2002, we've chosen to focus on music. The lead article gives an introduction to some of the issues you should think about when teaching music in schools. In addition, Adam Ockelford has written a great piece on playing by ear, Lisette Wesseling tells us about the music software package Goodfeel, Susan Wynn from Linden Lodge offers hints on getting hold of Braille and large print music, Paula Speare from Dorton School gives an insight into music technology and there's also a piece on community music. And last in this music focus, you'll find a report on the work of the Music Teachers' Support Group.

A new addition to the regulars in Curriculum Close-Up is Spotlight – a chance to recognise the accomplishments of staff or pupils around the UK. This term I've shone the spotlight on five year old Ben and his LSA June. Please get in touch if you have suggestions for other features you would like me to include.

Finally, just to let you know that I've received lots of enquiries after last term's focus on tests and exams. Keep them coming in – you're all really keeping me on my toes!

Have a really lovely Summer Holiday and see you in the Autumn term – we'll be back with a Maths focus!

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Playing by ear

'Playing by ear' means being able to play music by hearing, remembering and then re-creating it – using little or no notation. Very often, what is heard, remembered and then re-created only approximates to the original version. No surprise, then, that in some styles of music, such as jazz, where freedom and individual expression are valued, playing by ear is the usual thing to do. However, in other styles, such as Western classical music of the 19th century, where performers are typically expected to play exactly what the composer wrote, playing by ear tends to be frowned upon.



It is widely believed that the ability to play by ear is the gift of a lucky few – those who are truly 'musical'. In reality, though, it is a skill that can be learnt by the great majority of people, although, admittedly, to become fluent usually takes a good deal of practice. For visually impaired pupils who are keen to perform, it can be a particularly useful skill to acquire – both in its own right, and to complement the use of notation.

In the early stages, learning to play by ear is largely a matter of trial and error – matching melodies and, perhaps, harmonies that are remembered with the physical movements necessary to play these on an instrument. Pupils with 'perfect pitch', for whom each note leaves a distinct impression, almost inevitably find playing by ear easier than those without. Whatever their pupil's level of aural processing, however, teachers can assist learning in a number of ways: through explanation, demonstration and physical guidance, and by providing, among other repertoire, a series of pieces that are carefully graded according to the number of different notes they use. These need to be pitched in a key best suited to the instrument in question.

On the keyboard, for example, pupils could start with a selection such as the following. These are in E major, which beginners may well find easiest initially (particularly those who can't see the keys, since patterns of black and white notes used together may be easier to navigate by touch than those that use only white notes – a feature typical of most tuition schemes).

E F# G# : It's me, O Lord (chorus); Au Claire de la lune (beginning)

E F# G# A: Love of the common people [Vurley & Wilkins, 1968] (chorus);
Super trouper [Andersson and Ulvaeus] (chorus)

E F# G# A B: When the saints go marching in; Jingle bells (chorus)

E F# G# A B C#: Oh, Susanna! [Foster, 1857]; It's a heartache [Scott & Wolfe 1977]

E F# G# A B C# D#: Every day [Hardin & Petty, 1957] (1st section)

E F# G# A B C# D# E' : Kookaburra; All my loving [Lennon & McCartney, 1963]

Other instruments may require pieces in other keys: for beginners on the violin, for example, D major would be the obvious choice.

Many more pieces than this will, of course, be needed – ideally culturally relevant and of genuine interest to pupils. The relative scarcity of tunes suitable for the early stages, which utilise only three or four notes, is offset by the fact that there is no need to use complete pieces, as the examples show. Whatever the piece chosen, the crucial thing is that the pupil knows it really well.

One of the main challenges facing teachers when pupils start learning to play by ear is sustaining their enthusiasm for what is likely to be a modest repertoire of musical fragments, which need to be oft-repeated! By making music with others, however, or through the judicious use of taped material, even the most basic snatch of rhythm or melody can potentially form part of a satisfying, even sophisticated, musical texture. Pieces that use 'ostinati' (short passages that are repeated a number of times) are particularly suitable. Ostinato-based structures are characteristic of a number of styles, and pupils may enjoy playing pieces on (or intended for) the gamelan (a east-Asian orchestra of chimes and gongs), as well as providing the bass lines for songs ranging from *Summer is a-coming in* to *Feelin' groovy*.

Group performance can provide a useful introduction to learning to play harmonies by ear. Here, a systematic approach can be adopted comparable to that suggested for melodies, with its incremental increase in the range and number of notes used. It is even possible to start with one chord (usually 'chord I') which can be used, for example, throughout the first section of *Au claire de la lune*. Common two-chord combinations are I and V, and I and IV. However, it is with three chords – I, IV and V – that the most significant threshold is reached – these harmonies being sufficient to support a large number of melodies. For instance:

I : Au claire de la lune (beginning)

I IV: Kookaburra

I V: Clementine

I IV V: Love of the common people (chorus); When the saints go marching in; Jingle bells (chorus); This little light of mine (chorus); The sloop John B; Oh, Susanna!

I IV V vi: Every day (1st section)

I iii IV V vi: It's a heartache

I ii iii IV V vi: Karma chameleon [O'Dowd, Moss, Hay, Craig & Pickett, 1983]

A natural development of the ability to play by ear is the capacity to improvise – in fact, the two abilities may well evolve alongside each other. Suggestions for teaching improvising, as well as other ideas for helping pupils to play by ear are to be found in *Music matters*, priced at £7.50 and available from RNIB Book Sales Service on 0845 7023153.