

MUSIC

BASIC SKILLS

MAKING INSTRUMENTS

You do not require a great store of 'conventional' instruments to make music with children (although if you can get your hands on them – especially tuned instruments – it obviously helps!) Most household items can be used to make interesting sounds! Others can be adapted. Old favourites include: milk bottle tops shaken together on strings, wire, or nailed to sticks; sandpaper rubbed together on blocks; plastic containers or tins used as drums or filled with various materials as shakers; various sizes of sticks for knocking together; brushes (including old tooth brushes); rustling paper and crisp packets; rattling/rubbing sticks on wire mesh or ridged surfaces; pans used as bells, and lids as cymbals; jangling keys; clingfilm drumskins over bowls; elastic band 'strings' stretched over open tubs and boxes; blowing across/tapping bottles filled with varying amounts of water; balloon filled with dried rice.

Two vitally important things to remember: (1) SAFETY – several of the suggestions above have the potential to be hazardous, so children should always be well supervised and instructed. (2) RESPECT – once a household or junk item has been 'turned' into an instrument, it should be treated with the respect that is due to a musical instrument! It should be used in a disciplined, controlled and careful way!

And the spiritual dimension of amassing your instruments is simply to reflect on how even the most humble domestic item, or even a bit of junk has much more potential than is immediately obvious! Our God-given creativity working in God's created world can produce endless wonders. The children could be encouraged to look at other humble and discarded parts of creation (including, sadly, some human parts) and think creatively about how their hidden potential could be liberated.

COMPOSING

Most of what follows presupposes that children will 'compose' some musical response in a given situation. They will benefit from some guidance before being 'let loose'!

Having made their instruments, they will need to become familiar with the range of sounds they can make. Get the children to record the 'quality' of sounds each instrument can produce – how many adjectives can they think of that will be helpful – eg 'hard/soft' 'rough/smooth' (they often come in pairs!). But make sure there is some reflection involved – ask the children to think of moods and emotions, scenes from their lives or stories they have heard in church which would go with each different kind of sound.

Children also need to explore the different effects achieved by playing any instrument fast or slow, and loudly or quietly. With tuned instruments (a glockenspiel or set of chime bars set out in a pentatonic scale such as A C D E G is highly recommended!) the effects of playing mostly high or mostly low notes, and of changing from one end of the scale to the other should be explored. Again, the exploration should be anchored in some reflection as to what moods and scenes are evoked by the effects.

The voice is also a highly versatile instrument - and not just for singing words. A good way to explore the variety of sounds the voice can make is to go through the letters of the alphabet. Get the children to repeat a single letter sound, forgetting that it can be used to make a word, and talk about what the sound makes them think of – again, linked to moods and feelings.

PLAYING TOGETHER

To play anything of any length, you either need a good memory, or something written down. You don't need to master conventional music writing – make up your own. All you need is agreement in the group as to what the symbols mean (little hieroglyphic style illustrations can often be helpful) and when to move from one bit to the next. A conductor (which doesn't always have to be an adult!) can help with this by simply pointing to different parts of the 'score' when s/he decides it's time to move on.

Another way of organising a group to play together is for the conductor to point at different sections of the group, or individuals, when it is their turn to play. The rule is – 'only play when you're being pointed at'

A slightly less restrictive form of organisation is for the conductor slowly – taking about 20 seconds - to move their hand in a circle in front of them. The rule is that each child can make *one* musical contribution only, on the theme being explored, during one revolution of the conductor's hand – although *within* the 20 second revolution, they can make their contribution whenever they like. As soon as a new revolution begins they are allowed another contribution.

This aspect of music is all about rules, and to give it a spiritual dimension children can reflect on what rules enable us to achieve together; what God's rules are, and what they help us achieve; what 'scientific' rules there are in the nature God has created, and what would happen without them.

RESPONDING TO STORIES

SOUNDTRACKS

Younger children can produce sound effects to accompany a story; the older ones can work on 'mood music'. In either case, the activity requires reflection on what are the

key points and how moods and feelings change and contrast with each other as the story progresses.

CHARACTERS

Children could produce rhythm or melody motifs to reflect the characteristics of figures from the story. This requires reflection on the nature of the characters in the story and empathy with them – it is a way of encouraging the children to live inside a story and make it theirs.

FEELINGS

Children could be asked to express their feelings about a story in a single sentence or phrase then sing the sentence/phrase in a way that reflects its meaning. This can be repeated as a chant. Some element of the rhythm or melody can be developed as the basis of a composition. This activity can be used to explore and express feelings in response to any stimulus or situation.

THOUGHT BUBBLES

If a story is explored in a series of illustrations, cartoons, photographs, or ‘freeze frames’ (see Drama section) children can imagine a ‘thought bubble’ coming from each character, but instead of words, they could make a short piece of music to express the thought.

‘TELLING TALES’

CPAS have produced a series of ‘Telling Tales’ books in which the ‘audience’ respond with different actions, sounds etc when certain specified key words are repeated in a story. This approach could be followed, but just using musical responses to the key words. Here, the important spiritual element is in discussing and reflecting on what the key words/phrases will be and what would be an appropriate musical response to them.

POETRY

Poetry is a special kind of story and is very suitable for putting a musical accompaniment to, exploring its themes and moods. But where do we find good poetry to work on? There is a lot of good nature poetry for children – it may not mention God, but *you* can, and turn the poem into a celebration of God’s creation. Many prayers are also ‘poetic’ in their language, even if they don’t rhyme! Another good source of material is the hymn book. Some ‘hymns’ were originally poems, and others can be read as poetry. Forget the tune you know from church – just read the words aloud, and make up a mood accompaniment as a background to the reading.

MEDITATION

BE STILL

Get the children to listen to a note which will take time to fade (eg a plucked guitar string) – ask them to keep still and empty their minds of everything but the note until they can't hear it any more. This can be extended to two or more plucks of the string, or another instrument could be brought in such as a triangle. The children could develop a piece of music using two or three 'sustaining-note' instruments – making use of very long notes, given time to fade away.

ATMOSPHERE

The beginning of a session, and changes from one activity to another are crucial times. Why not set the mood for a session by playing appropriate recorded music as the children come in, and getting them in the habit of being quiet to listen to it. Recorded music can also be used to signal a change of activities within a session. A good choice of recorded music can be a stimulus for reflection leading to a response using art or drama. The experience of prayer time can be deepened by the use of recorded music.

CHANT

A steady rhythm, perhaps marked by a gentle percussion accompaniment whilst quietly and slowly repeating a simple prayer or verse is a powerful way of letting the words sink deep into us.

EXPLORATIONS

BEING SPECIAL

Our names are one of the things that mark our individuality – the children can reflect on the way that God knows us as individuals, and we are called by our name at our baptism. Names have rhythms – Stephen = 2 beats, Caroline = 3 beats – and if we add in our middle and last names there are many variations. Children can beat out their name rhythms on percussion, or make up a simple melody to go with their rhythm which they could sing to you at register time.

Our voices are also distinctive. Children could stand in a circle with a blindfolded volunteer in the middle. A shell is passed round the circle to music, and stops when the music stops. The volunteer sings, 'Who's got the shell?' to a melody they have made up. The person who has it sings back, 'I've got the shell' to the same melody. The volunteer has to guess from the voice, who has the shell. The children can reflect on how unique each part of us is, and even if we can't always guess who has the shell, God knows.

MANY IN ONE BODY

Music depends on things that are different working together – it can therefore be seen as an image of the Body of Christ which is his Church. Some specific activities can highlight this, and if introduced in this context can help children reflect on the importance of diversity within the unity of faith.

The same rhythm played on different instruments, or even on different parts of the same instrument can sound quite different. The children could explore the different 'feel' of playing the same rhythm on different instruments, or at different speeds, or played loudly and softly. Listening to different recorded versions of the same song can also be interesting, especially with the current vogue for 'cover versions' in the pop charts. Another variant is to take a given rhythm and respond to it in different ways – 'say' it (eg dum dum dum diddle dum!), play it on something, move to it, sing it – reflecting on the way we can all respond to the same message from God in different ways.

Chords are a great way of seeing how different things can combine to make something much richer and more satisfying than the individual parts on their own. You will need to own or borrow a tuned instrument for this - chime bars or a glockenspiel are good. It will only take a minute for your organist to write down trios of notes that make chords – s/he might even be able to pop into your children's meeting for five minutes to demonstrate! The children can play the trios together, then progress to trying to *sing* the notes as they play, and finally (perhaps!) sing the notes without the support of the instruments.

Singing 'rounds' also helps children focus on the importance we have as individuals, and on the way that different strands woven together form something greater and richer than 'the sum of the parts'. A round also requires the twin skills of concentration on what *you* are doing, and making sure you are doing it right, whilst being aware of and responsive to what *others* are doing. What better metaphor for working together in the Body of Christ?! To create a 'round' suitable for your needs, take a popular one such as 'Frère Jacques' and make up new appropriate words for it.

Using a pentatonic scale (an easy one to remember is A C D E G – no sharps or flats) is a way of getting children to appreciate how differences can be harmonised. Two children both make up different tunes to the same rhythm pattern, using two glockenspiels prepared with only the notes A C D E G on them. They then play their tunes together and they will harmonise. We can be different as long as we have something deep and basic holding us together: in the music it was the rhythm and the scale; the children could reflect on what, in life can draw and hold us together with all our differences.

RELATIONSHIPS

The interplay of instruments in a piece of music is all about relationships, and developing basic skills in this area can help children reflect on the way they relate to each other, God and the world.

Children can work in pairs – one child plays a musical idea and the other has to echo it as accurately as possible. This requires great attention from the listener; but it also requires the initial player to be sensitive in not 'overloading' the listener with too long or complicated a piece of music.

Another pairs activity involves 'conversation' rather than echo: one child plays a short musical idea, and the other 'replies'. It's a bit like, 'The Lord be with you. And also with you.' The children may well need a few examples to get the idea. If the children are just using rhythm, one way of replying might be to reverse what your partner just

played eg ‘dum dum didum’ gets the reply ‘didum dum dum’. If tuned instruments are being used ‘high low high’ might get the reply ‘low high low’. It’s all about listening carefully to what someone else has to say, then being creative with it – the children could be led to reflect on how this relates to how we listen and respond to God, and how God listens and responds to us.

CONTRASTS

Exploring the potential of the instruments will have shown how they can be used to achieve contrasting effects. Children can find poems or psalms with contrasting moods, and use what they have found out about their instruments to illustrate the contrasts. They could reflect on the ‘highs and lows’ of life, and where God is in each.

Children could also look at stories they have heard in church or in your group where there is a change of mood. They could do a ‘before and after’ illustration – producing some music to show the mood before the main event of a story, and the mood after. They could use the contrasting music to deepen their reflection on what has happened to the characters in the story.

The constant strife between Good and Evil gives ample scope for developing contrasting sounds then putting them in competition. The children could be challenged to create a musical illustration of the text: ‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness have never put it out’ (John 1:5 GNB) and use the process of creation to help them reflect on and express what the words mean to them.

NATURE

The children can work from a set of cards giving animals names or natural phenomena (eg storm, sunrise) and make up individual pieces of music to express what the animal or phenomenon means to them. The process will help them celebrate their personal response to that element of God’s creation. The rest of the group can listen to each other’s music and try to guess which of the animals or phenomena on the cards the music illustrated. Reflection here could explore the variety of our responses to nature, and the way one person’s response can make us see/appreciate things we hadn’t thought of before.

Nature can also be celebrated by using its own songs to inspire us. The children could listen to recordings of bird songs and try to record the rhythm and changes in pitch (high or low) of one bird’s song. The pattern can then be used as the basis for their own composition. The process should help children appreciate the enormous complexity of something that seems as simple as a bird’s song. God is a pretty amazing composer!

Many of the above ideas have been adapted from material in the following:

‘Bright Ideas Music’, Richard Addison, Scholastic 1988

‘Called To Lead – Unit Three’, National Christian Education Council 1990

‘Sound Waves’, Leonora Davies, Unwin Hyman 1985

‘50 Musical Activities For Children’, Alison Hedger, Kingsway 2001