

Songs for JAPAN



Anxious to support the Japanese earthquake and tsunami victims, pupils in Aberdeenshire worked with **Donna Minto** to compose a class haiku for a fundraising performance...

The devastating events in Japan on March 11th 2011 shocked the whole world. One of the P7 classes I was working with at Meldrum Primary School in Aberdeenshire had coincidentally taken Japan as their context for learning in the term from January to April and the class were immediately anxious to do something to help the thousands of Japanese people so badly affected by the earthquake and tsunami. In their discussions of the event, the children were keen to find an appropriate way of raising money to send to the aid agencies working to alleviate the overwhelming effects of the disaster.

As part of their learning in literacy, the children had been writing Haiku poetry with its idiosyncratic syllable pattern of 5, 7, 5. They chose their own subjects and produced some beautiful examples of the poetry genre, for example:

*Cherry trees blossom
Red flowers in the garden
Smiley children play.*

*Mornings are sunny
Spring weather getting warmer
Lambs play in the fields*

by Grace

*Judo
A Japanese sport
Throwing people onto mats
You can get injured.*

by Alex

A few days after the earthquake, the class had their music session and I asked if they would like to choose a subject for a Haiku that we would set to music. They unanimously voted to write words about the Japanese disaster and having brainstormed what had happened and what might be done to help in Japan, the children produced two verses. Although there is no requirement for rhyming in Haiku poetry, the children said that, as it was going to be a song, they would like the first and last lines to rhyme.

*Earthquake in Japan
Tsunami, devastation
Rescue if you can.*

*How can we rebuild?
Equipment, money, first aid
Thousands have been killed.*

We then started the task of setting the Haiku to music.

Composing as a class

During their music classes, the children had already learnt about a major scale and we used the music room glockenspiels and xylophones to play a scale starting on the note C.

C D E F G A B C

Making music

THREE REASONS TO EXPERIMENT WITH GROUP COMPOSITION...

1 Composing is a creative activity and the music produced can be presented to an audience. This practical and experiential way of working is highly beneficial for learning in music and it also develops the soft skills of working in a team, thinking critically and creatively, problem-solving and synthesising information.

2 The training of inner hearing ability is encouraged and progressed. In order to develop a lesson to the point where the class is ready to record it, learners have to listen to each other and continue to listen as the recording takes place. Each recording is their own work and is a permanent record of what they have achieved. When the work being recorded in class is an item of their own composition, then the benefits are even greater.

3 Learners' self-esteem is greatly enhanced by being able to share something they have produced themselves, and every time the composition is performed their confidence grows. Giving children ownership of their own music makes them feel they are driving their own learning.



**Music teaches beauty.
Creating beauty is an act
of compassion. When we
make music, we are
making the world a more
beautiful place – Nick
Page, composer and
ethnomusicologist**

The advantage of using the C scale is that there are no sharps or flats to worry about when it comes to composing.

I then explained to the class about the Pentatonic Scale, which is based on five notes from a major scale (you remove the fourth and seventh notes). In the scale of C, the notes left are:

C D E G A C

We played the C Pentatonic Scale a few times – ascending and descending. The advantage of using this scale for writing music to do with Japan is that the notes give the music created an oriental sound.

Another advantage of using the Pentatonic Scale is that it is very difficult to produce something that won't work musically. Virtually any combination of notes will give a reasonable melody line.

There are various ways in which a whole class can contribute to the composing process and I used a voting system, with a small amount of decision making by myself. This means that the melody writing is broken down note by note and after each possible movement has been explored, everyone votes as to what is their preference. The highest votes decide which direction the melody moves in.

I dictated that the start and finish notes should be the keynote of C. Everyone voted as to whether that would be high or low C and the low C was decided upon. For every subsequent step in the decision making process the class were given two options – i.e, should we repeat the same note or move up the scale? Each option was then played and the children listened a few times before voting for whichever they preferred. This system works well as everyone feels they have contributed to the decision making process and therefore to the finished item.



Our completed music was:

**C D E G A
A A G E D E C
A G E D C**

In any composing of a song, the difficulty is often how to get all the words to fit for each verse. A Haiku solves this problem before you've begun as the strict syllable pattern of 5, 7, 5 means that every verse requires the same number of notes. Once the melody line was decided upon, I used the chords of C, A minor, F and G7 to accompany the song. The children were rightly quite proud of what they had produced and were eager to perform the song. I recorded the class performing and produced a CD of their efforts and a written version of what they had composed.

At the end of the term, the class had a fundraising day during which they shared their Haiku poems and also the song they had written. They managed to raise £350 for sending to the Japanese Red Cross! It

was coincidental that this class started in January with Japan as their learning context but the end result was that the children were able to respond in a most mature and empathetic way to a disaster which happened on the other side of the world and feel that they had managed in a small way to make a difference.

