

KS3 & 4

VOCAL ARRANGING ACTIVITY: 'THE PILLARS OF GROOVE'

Explore a practical and physical approach to vocal arranging
A KS3 & 4 Music Project by Dave Camlin

KEY CONCEPTS AND VOCABULARY

- Groove
- Bass
- Beat
- Riff
- Melody
- Improvisation
- Reflection

Ideal for... This project is ideal for exploring approaches to vocal arranging. The activities will work best if you have already tackled some whole-class singing and improvisation and have established respectful behaviours for music-making. There is suggested repertoire below that suits this approach, however the activities will work best with repertoire that is appropriate to the age and skillset of the group considering, for instance, vocal range and melodic and rhythmic complexity.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Pillars of Groove is a practical and physical-based approach to vocal arranging using three core and interdependent aspects of a song – beat, bass and melody – as the foundations upon which creative arrangement choices can be made. It encourages students to experiment and move between these different parts, to build up a working knowledge of what it *feels* like to be 'in the groove', and how vocal grooves are constructed. The project features opportunities for introducing and developing improvisation work. Reflection, evaluation and discussion are essential elements to support and develop musical choice-making and embed knowledge.

Vocal activities in this project can be performed entirely a cappella, or you can introduce instruments to serve particular musical functions, eg. chord-based instruments to reinforce harmonic content, bass instruments to reinforce bass lines, simple percussion to help 'pin down' the beat. Instruments could also be used to support students' singing if they find it difficult to keep pitch or maintain their part in group work.

SUGGESTED MATERIALS

Warm-ups and games:

- *Beats of the bar* (Beale)
- *Vocal improv* (Beale)
- *Do your dooty* (Beale)
- *Wo-oh* (Beale)
- *Ken and Barbie beatbox groove* (L'Estrange)
- Any games that focus on developing group work

DESIRED SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING (desired outcomes)

Students will:

- Learn and accurately reproduce musical motifs using the voice, body percussion and/or instruments.
- Manipulate vocal sounds to produce desired percussive/tonal effects.
- Contribute to the making of a musical arrangement by listening and responding 'in the moment' ('comprovising' – literally composing and improvising) to emergent musical themes and relationships.

Songs:

- *We will rise* (Owen)
- *In harmony* (Barden)
- *Wish* (Mather, Derbyshire)

Other:

- Instruments – chord-based, bass, percussion (optional)
- Understand the roles of song parts (bass, percussion, melody, harmony etc.) and how in combination they can produce a 'groove'.
- Understand the nature of the interrelation between parts, and in particular how different voice types, ranges and timbres can combine sympathetically to good musical effect.
- Apply that understanding in the composition of a musical arrangement, accounting for and attending to underlying structure(s), texture and layers, key and time signatures, tension and resolution, maintaining musical interest.



The teacher's role is to act as facilitator, reining things in when students seem anxious, providing opportunities for extension when students start to appear bored, and recognising opportunities to respond to the emerging music and supporting its development in a different direction.

APPROACHES TO DEVELOPING SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

There's a focus on collaboration in the main activities in this project, so it would be good to start off the session with games designed to facilitate that. *The 'Yes' game* is a good example, or use your own favourite if you have one:

- Everyone stands in a circle facing inwards.
- Change places with one other person across the circle but only once you've established eye contact with them and they've said 'yes'.
- Keep going for several rounds until everyone is in a different position from when you started.

Activities that involve a high degree of call-and-response are good as well, eg.:

- Establish a group pulse and begin with teacher-led clapping or vocal riffs.
- Then pass the 'call' around the circle.
- Everyone should get the chance to invent a new call for the group to respond to.

This will help prepare for the arranging and improvising aspects of the main activities and will get students used to listening to one other voice. If you are working with an unfamiliar group, it also provides a good opportunity to see who might need some support, or who would benefit from some additional challenge. For younger or less confident groups keep to clapping only or use your own names to create some short vocal patterns for the group to repeat back.

In addition to these 'icebreakers', devote some time to making sure that voices are properly warmed up and prepared for singing.

Main activities: The Pillars of Groove

Choose a song that can easily be divided into its constituent parts – beat, bass and melody – any of the suggested songs will work well. Each different part of the song will become a 'pillar' for students to work with. Before you begin, establish each 'pillar' as an independent physical space in three different parts of the room, leaving a clear space in the middle.

- To begin, the whole group should learn all the different component parts: melody (or melodic riff), bass line and vocal percussion (beat) parts.
- Once each 'pillar' is established, students choose one of the three pillars as their starting point and move to that space in the room. Bass lines/vocal percussion parts are often easiest, so less independent learners might find these groups most secure.
- Begin constructing your arrangement by musically introducing each 'pillar', with arrangement choices made collectively between teacher and students. You may want

to decide on your own collective decision making process. Asking appropriate questions can help to elicit suggestions from the group.

- Focus on achieving a strong, steady beat: break the beat down into its constituent parts, either by sounds (kick, snare, hats, etc.) or rhythm (beats of the bar, pulse, syncopation, etc.) and if necessary reduce it to its bare minimum before re-building it.
- Have a group discussion about which elements of each pillar 'lock' together to form a cohesive arrangement.
- Encourage movement between pillars so that students get the opportunity to experience each one. As a group, you could decide on some rules regarding movement, eg. asking students to move on a given signal, swapping places with someone by mutual agreement (like *The 'Yes' game*), to move to a different pillar when they feel like it and/or to never leave a pillar empty.
- Continue to play with the different elements and arrangement choices until you have a piece that the group is happy with.
- Next, explain that the space in between the pillars in the centre of the room is the improvisation space. This is used to devise additional elements to enhance the arrangement. Whilst each of the other pillars is running, students can enter the improvisation space to try out ideas.
- You can explore the improvisation space in a number of different ways, for example, it could be a purely vocal or purely instrumental space; it could be used for rhythmic or melodic ideas; it could be for solo work or for work in pairs or small groups. These rules/decisions about the space could be teacher-led, or student-/group-led.
- A good way of introducing improvisation is to split students into two roughly equal groups: 'A's and 'B's. On a given signal, the 'A's step into the improvisation space and invent something *freestyle* with whoever they find there. This could be a bass riff, descant, clapping pattern, body or vocal percussion sequence – anything goes! Then the 'B's take a turn. If this is still a bit daunting for the group, make a section where *everybody* freestyles! To build up confidence, keep the sections short to start off with and let students quickly return to their pillars. Once they get used to 'comprovising' like this, they'll want to do more of it and creative ideas will flow.

Whole-group reflective dialogue after the activity (reflection-on-action) is important to support students to identify the choices they made 'in the moment' (reflection-in-action), and help make tacit musical knowledge more explicit.

Students' and teachers' perceptions of how well they're able to perform these activities may vary – neither is necessarily 'right', but the teacher's role is to highlight things currently outside of the students' awareness – positive musical aspects that less confident students may not have accounted, or fine detail that more confident students can direct their attention to.



Find more Music Projects online, along with the digital version of this Project:
bit.ly [URL not created yet]



You can watch a video of The Pillars of Groove featuring *We will rise* by Beccy Owen here
bit.ly [URL not created yet]

Music Project format based on Daubney A. and Fautley M. (2014 and 2015) – *The National Curriculum for Music: and assessment and progression framework*. Published by The Incorporated Society of Musicians (ISM). Visit www.ism.org/nationalcurriculum to download these documents.



ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

The statements below can be qualified using the following – working towards, able to (working at) and confidently able to (working beyond):

- Sing with good tone, blend, tuning, timing, diction and projection.
- Identify different elements – beat, bass, and melody – of vocal arrangements.
- Listen to and reproduce vocal motifs, accounting for subtleties in tone, production, technique and effect.
- Listen to other contrasting musical parts, and maintain a steady part in relation to them.
- Move independently between parts, whilst maintaining a consistent rhythm and confident production, manipulation and expression of musical sounds.
- Improvise original musical ideas.
- Reflect on musical decisions during music-making.
- Identify areas for improvements in their own work and that of others.

(For suggested assessment methods and evidence, see the version online, here: [\[bit.ly, URL not yet created, same as 1st bit.ly for extension activities\]](http://bit.ly))



BE MORE HUMAN – SING!

Group singing isn't just about performance; it's a way of building and reinforcing a sense of community

The history of group singing is as old as our species. That's maybe 60,000 years that human beings have been singing together. It's only relatively recently – in the last 600 years or so, and only in some cultures – that music and singing has become something that we *listen to* more than something we *do*. However, singing remains one of those activities that literally strikes a chord in our collective unconscious; to participate in group singing is to participate in an activity that our earliest ancestors knew.

So why is singing such an enduring phenomenon? Why do we do it, and what benefit does it have for us as individuals within much larger communities? It's not merely a coincidence that singing has been a consistent feature of *homo sapiens* culture – it's actually one of the means through which we've been able to evolve as a species, by facilitating cooperation between large groups of people. Today, singing remains one of the most potent means of uniting people in communities, and in my opinion, it's a key part of a healthy school culture.

SINGING IN DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES

It may be harder for those of us immersed in the heavily commercialised world of western culture – and the social isolation that comes with the amazing technological achievements that define our existence – to understand the fundamental power of singing together as a form of social life. However, anyone who has had the good fortune to experience other cultures where singing and music-making are an everyday form of social activity will attest to the power of singing as a way of uniting people in a spirit of cooperation and collective creativity. One of the things that has struck me from my limited time in South Africa has been the way in which singing is a form of communication always just below the surface, prone to bursting out in spontaneous moments of joy and unity – just look at the amazing spontaneous outpourings of song and dance that erupted during Nelson Mandela's funeral!



While we may have glimpses of this kind of 'social cooperation through singing' in western culture (for example, if we attend large public concerts or football matches and other sporting events), ethnomusicologists document the phenomena of music and singing as a form of social life the whole world over, from the Conima region of Peru to the Shona tribes of Zimbabwe to the ancient vocal traditions of Georgian song, and all points in between. Singing together appears to be something that our whole species benefits from participating in, and it's little wonder that we turn to singing for its therapeutic benefits and its ability to lift our spirits.

THE MAGIC OF SINGING

So what is it about singing that is so powerfully unifying? In his excellent book *The singing neanderthals*, Steven Mithen argues that music is a communication system, just like language is, but serving a subtly different function. While language is an excellent way of communicating information, music – and singing – is a way of communicating *emotion*. At its most basic, the

prosodic *motherese* (baby-talk) that is shared between mother and infant in every human culture is a way of being able to maintain an emotional bond of trust between them, even when the infant is not being physically held. It's not just humans that do this – all mammals sing to their young as a way of maintaining emotional bonds of safety and security, but for humans the need is perhaps greater. One of the impacts on our species of *bipedalism* – the ability to walk on two legs – has been a narrower pelvis in women that constrains the width of the birth canal, and which means that all human babies are effectively born prematurely, dependent on being looked after for an extended period after birth.

The kind of *communicative musicality* that unites mother and infant during this period of enormous vulnerability has other benefits. Evolutionary biologists like Robin Dunbar suggest that singing facilitates cooperation precisely because it enables us to maintain cooperative relations with much larger groups: the so-called 'vocal grooming' hypothesis. Our nearest primate relatives can only maintain harmonious relations with much smaller groups, limited by the number of individuals one can have an intimate physical 'grooming' relationship with. Singing or *communicative musicality* enables the same kind of trust among groups, but in much larger numbers.

The emerging scientific field of Interpersonal Neurobiology may reveal still more potent arguments for the importance of singing. The limbic parts of the brain – which all mammals possess as part of the neural chemistry which facilitates emotional bonding – function as an 'open-loop' system, ie. they require the presence of other mammals, ideally of the same species, to regulate them. Singing together may help to synchronise this *resonance circuitry* between individuals, leading in turn to a greater sense of individual wellbeing and social cohesion. It's the same emotional sense we experience when we feel loved, and something that everyone therefore deserves.

SINGING IN SCHOOL

Because singing facilitates cooperation – and has done for tens of thousands of years! – it's a great way of building trust beyond friendship groups and also between staff and students. It's a timeless approach to saying, 'I'm not a threat to you – I'm willing to cooperate with you,' but in a much more powerful way than mere words ever could. Singing together is also therefore a means of manifesting your school's principles and values of cooperation, trust and mutual respect. When we sing together, we are literally 'hearing' everyone's voice.

START MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Building and reinforcing your school community through group singing doesn't have to be complicated. Here are some tips on how you can use singing to develop your school community:

- 1 Stop thinking about singing as purely a performance, and think of it more as our human birthright. When we sing together, we are more fully human. Part of our role as community leaders – whether in school or outside of it – is to facilitate cooperation and mutual understanding within our community, and singing together can play a big part in that.
- 2 Sing when nobody's listening – in the shower, in the car, out walking... The more comfortable you are with singing naturally and effortlessly, the easier it will be to introduce singing into your school without feeling anxious about it.
- 3 Integrate singing into the curriculum – teach core concepts through simple songs. As well as building trust and mutual respect, learning new concepts in this way supports learning: 'multiple coding' (engaging a number of different parts of the brain to create stronger neural pathways) facilitates knowledge retention and recall.
- 4 Sing together in assemblies. If you have a choir, think of them as facilitators of singing, as well as performers. Choose repertoire that promotes singing – songs that everybody knows or can join in with. Get past the idea of 'performers' and 'audience': everyone is a potential participant.
- 5 Remember: it's not about you, your voice and how it sounds; it's about the joy that comes from everyone in the community participating in acts of collective creativity.

However we may feel about singing, it's our birthright as human beings. When we sing together, we're not just making music; we're also participating in one of the oldest traditions known to our species that helps us to cooperate with our fellows. So when we promote group singing for our students and our school communities, we are not just helping them to have fun and learn together, we are facilitating their full participation in what it means to be human.

Words by Dave Camlin