

Starting a school band

Following the very successful programme of music inservice courses, and the provision of a tin whistle to every teacher in Ireland, courtesy of the IRMA Trust, PCSP has had many requests for ideas and suggestions on starting a school band. This article is designed to offer some guidelines for establishing a band in a meaningful and sustainable manner.

The three strands of the Music curriculum, (i) listening and responding (ii) performing and (iii) composing are equally important, and over the course of a school year, equal time is devoted to all three strands. The performing strand has three strand units: (i) song singing, (ii) playing instruments, and (iii) literacy, and it is in the performing strand that opportunities to develop the school band occur. Children enjoy playing percussion instruments from infants to sixth class. Tuned percussion instruments such as chime bars and glockenspiels and bells are also very popular, and children enjoy picking out familiar tunes on these. Many schools also introduce a melodic instrument such as the tin whistle or recorder in the middle and/or senior classes, and, while learning such an instrument in primary school is not mandatory, it certainly enhances the child's musical understanding as well as his/her self esteem and confidence. Participation in group music making is also a valuable form of artistic expression for the child.

Getting the band started

The maxim 'Make haste slowly' applies when setting up a school band. Ideally, a long term and whole school approach is needed. The following suggested steps may help to make the concept become a reality.

Stage 1: Identify the core melodic instrument

In the primary school, the core instrument is usually either the

recorder or tin whistle. It is worth putting some thought into the choice of instrument, as this will influence the subsequent repertoire. The tin whistle is very popular in Irish schools, and is the cheapest instrument available. It is particularly suitable for Irish music. Every teacher in Ireland was introduced to the rudiments of tin whistle playing as part of the PCSP music inservice programme, and teachers responded enthusiastically. The D tin whistle is the most appropriate in primary schools, as this key is suitable for combining with class singing, and the size of the D whistle is very manageable for children.

The descant recorder is also an ideal school instrument. It combines very well with children's voices, and with other instruments. As a stepping stone to other instruments, the recorder is excellent, as the same fingering is employed in many wind instruments such as the flute and clarinet. The children are not confined to one key, as the recorder has more notes than the tin whistle has. Tenor and treble recorder may be included at a later stage. There is also a very wide range of music available for recorder ensembles and bands.

The school staff should spend some time in debating the choice for their school. The *Music Teacher Guidelines* (pages 104-109) provides a fuller overview of both instruments, and will prove useful in helping schools to come to a decision. There is no right or wrong answer; rather it is a question of deciding which instrument will

be more appropriate for the individual school. Some important factors to consider are: Does any member of staff play either recorder or tin whistle already? Do any children already play one or the other? Can any parents help? Is there a tradition of Irish music in the school or neighbourhood? What instruments, if any, do the pupils learn outside of school? Instruments such as the clarinet, flute and violin will combine very effectively with the recorder, while Irish instruments such as accordion and bodhrán would combine effectively with the tin whistle. Having considered

these issues carefully, the school staff is in a better position to make an informed choice.

Stage 2: Introducing the instrument

The ideal time to introduce a melodic instrument is in middle classes. It is not necessary that the teacher is a skilled player – rather s/he is a facilitator of learning. Indeed, many teachers have successfully taught the tin whistle or recorder to their classes, while never actually playing a note themselves. Ideally, the teacher could stay one tune ahead!

Nowadays, there are many excellent tin

whistle and recorder tutor books on the market, and many have CDs of the actual music and of the backing tracks – a great bonus for the busy teacher. Your local PCSP Arts Cuiditheoir will be able to show you a range of these tutors, and/or they may be available in your local music stores.

Through learning to play the instrument, the child is also learning to read music in a meaningful way. The child can also compose simple melodies when s/he knows a few notes. It is not necessary that these are notated (written down). The important thing is to encourage the child to be creative and to experiment with the instrument, as well as to learn tunes from his/her tutor book.

Stage 3: Identify what other instruments are available for inclusion in the school band

Pupils in the school may already be learning an instrument such as the flute and/or violin. These children will, of course, learn the core instrument with their classmates, but they may also be encouraged to bring in their other instrument from time to time. In addition to playing their own pieces, they can be encouraged to sight read the pieces that the class are studying. At first, all the children could play in unison (ie, play the same tune together) but later, some instruments could be assigned a harmony part.

Classroom percussion instruments also work very well with the core melodic instruments. Instruments such as the tambour or claves may be used to play either the pulse or a rhythmic ostinato, and this will add colour, variety and texture to the tunes.

Stage 4: Differentiation

Just as with other subjects, some children will make rapid progress, while others will lag behind their classmates. It is important that all children feel valued and assured that they have a place in the school band. The child who plays fluently and easily may be challenged by being

asked to play a harmony line. Children who learn the piano will find that they can play the tunes very easily on glockenspiel or xylophone, and this will enliven and enhance the overall sound. Chimebars may be used to provide a chordal accompaniment. Some children, on the other hand, will struggle with the tunes. However, there will be many 'jobs' or positions in the band. Can these children keep the pulse? If so, they can be assigned to play a percussion instrument such as the tambour or wood block. If they can keep a rhythm, they could be asked to play a rhythmic ostinato. Rather than being rejected because of lack of instrumental fluency, the child becomes a valued and valuable part of the band.

Stage 5: Arranging a tune

The secret behind an effective school band is to maximise the potential of a simple tune. For

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the purpose of this exemplar, let's consider a simple tune such as *Here Comes a Bluebird*, in the Key of D. The children learn to play the tune over the course of a few weeks. They are encouraged to learn off the tune, perhaps for a performance to other classes. The teachers asks the children to suggest ways in which the tune may be arranged, and their ideas could be written on the board, and various combinations tried out, so that a varied and effective arrangement of the tune is derived. A possible arrangement might be:

- An instrument such as the tambour sets the pulse by playing a certain number of times on the pulse.
- A small group of children (about five to six) play the tune through once, while accompanied by the tambour playing the pulse.
- Some lighter percussion instruments play a short rhythmic ostinato.
- The entire band play the tune through once more.
- The entire band plays the tune through again, while instruments such as violins play a drone by playing a long D note, while chime bars play the chord of D throughout (the notes for this are D, F# and A).
- The whole tune is played through once more, this time with the drone and chordal accompaniment as above, but also with a group of children playing a melodic ostinato – in other words playing the same line over and over again.

G. Towards the end the piece, the ostinato group could play their part twice through, getting softer and softer.

The arrangement as outlined is only a suggestion. The list of possibilities is endless, and it is a good idea to involve the children in arrang-

ing the tune, and trying out different combinations and possibilities. A varied arrangement is a great way to maximise the performance of a simple tune, and is a key ingredient in a successful school band. If children are used to singing simple songs with drones and ostinati, they will have no trouble in transferring this to instrumental performance.

Stage 6: The first public performance

When they have mastered a few tunes, the children will be eager to perform to a wider audience, and their parents also will be keen to witness their musical debut. There are many platforms for the first public performance of the school band. Such opportunities may include the end of year concert, the local Christmas concert, or events such as *Córfhéile na Scol*. It is probably better to avoid competitive events at first. Encourage maximum participation of all children, and make the event a real celebration. Invite the board of management, and the local inspector. Invite the local press – they will be keen to maximise a good photo opportunity. Compliment the children on their achievement. And give yourselves a pat on the back!

Conclusion

The stages as outlined in this article are designed to maximise participation of all children, rather than to showcase a few talented performers. However, this is only one possible approach to starting a school band, and many schools have other approaches which will work equally well. The *Music Teacher Guidelines* are well worth re-reading, in particular pages 86-87, and pages 104-109. Your local Arts Cuiditheoir will be happy to offer you more ideas and in-school support. Please feel free to phone him/her, or contact info@pcsp.ie

Submitted by the
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