

Composing ‘Musique Concrète’ at Secondary School: Lessons learnt from pre-pilot work

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‘Musique concrète’ is composed from transformed, everyday sounds and is not built from conventional musical elements such as a beat or instrumentally-generated pitches. An example of the genre is a work by Hugh le Caine in which a single drop of water is the sole sound source. The composer looped, stretched and compressed the taped sound to produce diverse sonic colours and rhythmic motives, which he then wove musically together to become “Dripsody” (1955). Although musique concrète such as this has been a recognised branch of contemporary Western Art music for over sixty years, it has a narrow fan-base, emanating mainly from third-level music technology departments. As a secondary school teacher, I would like to find out if it could become a creative experience for younger students as well. This is not straightforward. When we follow customary classroom practice, my students and I are unable to engage with it or to judge its worth. Since it is not a widely-researched topic, I have had to undertake much testing of ideas with several groups of 15- and 16-year-olds before being ready to embark on the pilot stage of my research. These pre-pilot explorations were devised to answer some basic questions, including the following: (a) How do young students compose musique concrète when they have few, or no, task constraints? (b) What degree of scaffolding enables students to compose a piece of musique concrète that is not simply a series of sound effects? (c) What influence does formal musical training have on the process and product of this music? (d) How can the imitation of established pieces of musique concrète lead to creative composing? My paper focuses on the methods used to gather this information. I will report on different learning environments, the challenge of engaging with abstract pieces, the use of video in my research and most of all, the difficulty of assessing this music. Findings from these preliminary investigations have helped me to plan the pilot stage of my ethnographic study.