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Composing in Irish secondary schools: Sustaining the momentum

Although composing has equal billing with listening and performing in the Irish secondary school music curriculum, the term is now more usually equated with prescribed skill-building exercises than creative exploration or musical self-expression. During the past decade fewer and fewer candidates have chosen the composing elective at Leaving Cert level and a similar option at Junior Cert is largely ignored. An effort was made early in 2011 to ‘buck the trend’ and to encourage teachers to tackle free composition with their students in 1st and Transition Years. Nationwide workshops run by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) attracted large numbers of teachers who attended on a voluntary basis. They tried out ideas and resources which had been compiled especially for classroom use. The purpose of this paper is to find out how this initiative has impacted on the teachers’ attitude towards free composition, if at all. Feedback gathered at the workshops is considered, together with an updated response from delegates at the conference of the Post-Primary Music Teachers Association (PPMTA) in October. Data are collected through questionnaires, a focus group and video clips of the workshop compositions. Results show that teachers are ready, willing and able to nurture free composition, provided that this impetus does not buckle under exam pressure. The discussion hinges on three questions: In what way can secondary teachers incorporate composing into their long-term lesson plan? Is notation really the only obstacle? Finally, how might technology support composing at this level? The paper ends with some recommendations for continued progress in the area.

Key words: free composition, secondary school, teachers’ attitudes