

# Music and well-being

KS3

## Simon Rushby

### Introduction

Today's teenagers have more pressure in their lives than in previous generations. The reasons for this situation are numerous: the sources of pressure can be at school, at home, among friends, in social media or just generally in day-to-day life. The levels of pressure, anxiety or stress, and what causes them to rise, are different for every person. Some students feel it more than others, and some show it overtly while others cover it up.

Well-being has become an increasingly important part of business and work communities, and quite rightly it's growing as a concern in schools, too. Schools recognise that students need help to find their own balance, to learn about their minds and bodies and how their emotions work, and, most importantly, how to look after themselves emotionally and develop a level of resilience that will help them face the natural highs and lows of modern life, whenever they need it. With guidance from their schools, they can learn about how to respond to a variety of situations and how to find strength and resources from within themselves, as well as, crucially, how to look after each other.

Schools' well-being programmes are diverse, and can include things like mindfulness and meditation, 'safe spaces' or 'calm rooms', professional and peer-to-peer counselling, and a myriad of other excellent resources. Importantly, they also encourage the consideration and inclusion of well-being into the day-to-day curriculum, and it is here that music can play a strong part.

This resource explores the role that music plays in our lives, and how we use it to support ourselves and help us deal with things. It then looks at ways in which we can challenge students to think more actively about the role music plays in helping people to improve their well-being.

### Music in our lives: a discussion and research activity

Music plays a key role in the lives of young people, as it does for all of us. Whether consciously or unconsciously, most people use music as a key part of their well-being strategy. By way of introduction, use the following points as starters for discussion as a class, in small groups or pairs, or perhaps as a class or homework activity to gather more thoughts and present them to the group.

- ▶ Listening to music is one of the most popular leisure activities among young people.
- ▶ Music helps young people to claim cultural space, by being 'into' a particular genre, artist or style associated with particular music. This has been true for many years – think of mods and rockers, hippies, punks, goths and so on.
- ▶ Linked to the above point, young people may identify personality characteristics in line with their favourite music – lyrics, dress style, activities of famous musicians (which can include poor examples set by them, like drug-taking).
- ▶ The media uses music to change, adapt and enhance emotion and mood in listeners – for example in TV, film, shopping centres, advertising, and so on.
- ▶ Music is widely used for relaxation but also for pleasure and social interaction – for example at parties and clubs.
- ▶ Music therapy has been around for years, and is a proven success for many people.
- ▶ After exercise, music is the second most commonly used mood regulation strategy in young people (see the paper *Self-regulation of mood* by Thayer, Newman and McClain, 1994).
- ▶ Music is increasingly being used to assist with treatment of mental health problems.
- ▶ Well-being, meditation and mindfulness apps commonly use music as a major part of their offering.

**Simon Rushby is a freelance musician, writer and education consultant, and was a director of music and senior leader in secondary schools for more than 25 years. He is the author of a number of music education books and resources, an ABRSM examiner, and a songwriter, composer and performer.**



### A universal language – a universal therapist: finding examples

After the opening discussion activity, encourage students to think more deeply about the use of music as an aid to mental and physical well-being.

One of the most powerful characteristics of music is its ability to appeal to everyone on the planet, regardless of age, culture, race, social surroundings or language. There is plenty of research and evidence to suggest that even unborn babies and certain animals respond positively to music. You could show students this video ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=39xq5AATMp4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39xq5AATMp4)) to prove it – and also to provide some light relief!

Access to music is key to finding opportunities to improve well-being, so it's no surprise to find examples of music making that are central to community life all over the world. Music is used to celebrate, communicate, motivate and reflect in all cultures.

A suggested classroom or homework activity is to encourage students to find examples of the use of music in different cultures for these four basic community activities:

- ▶ Celebration
- ▶ Communication
- ▶ Motivation
- ▶ Reflection

This work can link not only with the PSHE curriculum in your school, but also with your school's SMSC policy. Examples are numerous and can be found not only with internet and library searches but also from students' school and local community life, travel experiences and through interviewing people from different generations or cultural backgrounds.

Here are a few suggestions to get things started – with many of the examples below, I've included YouTube links, some of which you may want to use:

#### Music for celebration

- ▶ Weddings and parties (see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=09R8\\_2nJtjg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09R8_2nJtjg) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tDYMapp6Dk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tDYMapp6Dk)).
- ▶ Carnival, for example in Brazil or parts of the Caribbean (see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTc3pv7d5vY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTc3pv7d5vY)). As with all YouTube videos, check this one yourself first – it contains some images you may decide are unsuitable for younger Key Stage 3 students.
- ▶ In TV game shows (see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UoXyG7QCAo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UoXyG7QCAo)).
- ▶ Community festivities, for example in parts of Africa (drumming and dancing) or Indonesia (gamelan) (see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGJKpgspIow](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGJKpgspIow)). It is worth watching this final one just to marvel at the ensemble skills of the musicians.

#### Music for communication

- ▶ Birdsong, which inspired people of parts of the Canary Islands to use a whistling language to communicate over large distances. There's a ten-minute documentary about it here ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=CoCIRCjoICA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CoCIRCjoICA)).
- ▶ Calling people – church bells, the Islamic call to prayer, even ice cream vans!
- ▶ Drumming as a method for communication between settlements – particularly in parts of Africa or South America (see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=JT3tIJzAkcc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JT3tIJzAkcc)).
- ▶ Educational songs, for example for very young children (see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=j6W7p7EYH3k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j6W7p7EYH3k)).

**Music for motivation**

- ▶ National anthems ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=AM4mIYKG9s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AM4mIYKG9s)).
- ▶ Crowd songs and chants at sporting events.
- ▶ Military songs and marches.
- ▶ Wartime songs – such as those by Vera Lynn (see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HsM\\_VmN6ytk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HsM_VmN6ytk)) or Glenn Miller.
- ▶ Music used in tribal cultures to motivate – such as the haka in Maori culture, or Zulu war dances (see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=lt6GRghrmaU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lt6GRghrmaU)).
- ▶ Motivational songs from pop culture – for example Heather Small’s ‘Proud’ ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=OygsHbM1UCw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OygsHbM1UCw)) or the Script and will.i.am’s ‘Hall of Fame’ ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=mk48xRzuNvA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mk48xRzuNvA)).
- ▶ Music used in advertising – a different kind of motivation!

**Music for reflection**

- ▶ Music that accompanies sadness or grieving – at memorials, in films, to spark an emotional reaction (such as that used for charity appeals) (see [www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFvASiMTDzo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFvASiMTDzo)).
- ▶ Playlists made for relaxation, concentration or meditation.
- ▶ Music for remembrance – for example ‘The Last Post’ ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDS3TxtGaQo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDS3TxtGaQo)) or ‘Nimrod’ from Elgar’s *Enigma Variations* ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQWAO9d43LY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQWAO9d43LY)).
- ▶ Protest music – for examples, look at artists such as Bob Dylan ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=DIHOkyXSsy8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DIHOkyXSsy8)) or Bob Marley ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOFu6b3w6co](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOFu6b3w6co)).
- ▶ Music that overtly expresses feelings or tells stories – folk songs, love songs and so on.
- ▶ Relaxational music – found in spas, shops, mindfulness apps and so on.

Additionally, you could ask students to consider the role of music in world religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and others. Is this music used for celebration, communication, motivation or reflection? Or maybe all four?

**New age music**

Much of the music written for relaxation and its associated activities (such as for spas, or in apps to aid sleep, and so on) comes under the very broad umbrella of **New age** music, which has been around since the 1960s. This genre is concerned more about the atmosphere it produces than the actual elements of music at play, but to write effective New age music is actually very challenging.

To start students on the road to understanding not only the form but also the power of this kind of music, and its ability to help with relaxation and mindfulness, here’s an accessible listening exercise based on music by **Steven Halpern**, a major composer of New age music since the 1970s.

Listen to *Deep Bamboo* by Steven Halpern ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnWUM81JxYY&list=PLqbjJPSSLlqgaZ3Oi3GLoSzivy\\_Kk6TZTs&index=3](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnWUM81JxYY&list=PLqbjJPSSLlqgaZ3Oi3GLoSzivy_Kk6TZTs&index=3)) from the beginning up to 1:36 and write or discuss answers to the following questions:

- 1 How would you describe the instrument playing the melody? Which orchestral instrument is it like? Does the title of the track give you any clues as to what this instrument might look like?
  - 2 How can you describe the melodies that this instrument plays? Think about the range of pitches used, how they rise and fall, and anything interesting about their rhythm and metre. Are these melodies ‘catchy’?
  - 3 How would you describe the sounds that accompany this instrument’s melodies? What kind of instrument or instruments might be playing them? What kind of harmony or tonality do they make?
- ▶ Why might this music be suitable for relaxation, yoga, meditation and so on? What does it have that helps to relax you? What does it *not* have?



Many who compose New age music deplore the term, partly because they do not want their music labelled in such a way. But from the 1970s onwards, a number of now quite famous compositions found themselves tagged with this term. Many of them are either repetitive or minimalist in nature, such as Mike Oldfield's album *Tubular Bells* of 1973 ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXvtDm82ozl](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXvtDm82ozl)), or relied heavily on synthesisers and electronics, such as Vangelis's music for the film *Chariots of Fire* in 1981 ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=8a-HfNE3Elo&list=OLAK5uy\\_nUm1b53HQP1v-CFVbrWXN4BbsCPlzv8o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8a-HfNE3Elo&list=OLAK5uy_nUm1b53HQP1v-CFVbrWXN4BbsCPlzv8o)).

### Butterfly Waltz

In fact, there is much music in the New age genre made by acoustic instruments, and our next focus for a listening session is a very simple piece of piano music, written by US film and TV composer Brian Crain. Crain is best known for his piano works, of which there are thousands, and though your students are unlikely to have heard of him, he has a very big following, particularly online. His music appeals partly because of its simplicity, its lyrical melodies and its emotional impact.

Show students this video ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7oUlw-l1g4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7oUlw-l1g4)) of Crain's *Butterfly Waltz*, written in 1999. The hands belong to Crain himself, and the sheet music is available on his website ([www.briancrain.com/sheet-music](http://www.briancrain.com/sheet-music)). Only the first page is available unless you wish to buy it, but in tandem with the 'top down' video it allows students to look at the way in which Crain uses melody and harmony to create such a simple but effective piece.

Depending on the year group and musical experience of your students, you can adapt the following questions and the amount of information you offer to them – the questions are intended to start discussion and a simple analysis of the opening of *Butterfly Waltz*.

- 1 What do you notice about the metre and rhythm of this piece?
  - ▶ It's in 3/4 time (since it's a waltz) and has a very straightforward crotchet-based left hand, allowing it to sound dance-like but also graceful and relaxing. The rhythms of both hands are very repetitive.
- 2 What do you notice about the structure of the melodic phrases? How long is each one? How much repetition is there?
  - ▶ The melody is divided into four-bar phrases, of which there are four in bars 1-16, making an ABAC structure. The C phrase is very similar to the B phrase, so you could call it ABAB'. All four phrases start with the same three notes (A, B flat, C) and three of them start with the same six notes.
- 3 What do you notice about the harmony? What key is the music in? What chords are used? The clue is in the first crotchet of the left hand in each bar.
  - ▶ The music is in F major and in bars 1-16 there is a simple, repeating four-bar chord sequence of I-VI-IV-V or F-Am-B flat-C, outlined by a tonic-dominant-tonic pattern. The A minor chord could be seen as Ib (F/A) due to the presence of F in the melody in this bar.

At this point, there's a good opportunity for a class performing session. You can use the three accompaniment parts below, plus perhaps some gentle percussive colour such as triangles and shakers. The chords part can be played on keyboards using string sounds or embellished in different ways by whichever instruments you have. The result should always be calm and warm sounding.

**Bass part**

**Chords part**

**Moving bass part**

A group of students on melody instruments, glockenspiels or even with voices could then use the Crain sheet music sample to perform the melody over this backing. Take the opportunity, if you can, to emphasise the repetitive and simple accompanying parts, ready for the composition task that follows.

### Composing well-being music

Having studied *Deep Bamboo* and *Butterfly Waltz*, your students will hopefully be beginning to formulate some ideas about the characteristics needed to compose music that could be used for relaxation, meditation and so on. They can usefully collate these ideas into a grid or mind map, based on the elements of music.

Divide them into small groups and ask them to think about the key features of each element:

- ▶ melody
- ▶ harmony and tonality
- ▶ rhythm
- ▶ texture
- ▶ sonority/instruments
- ▶ structure

To help focus their thinking, get them to listen to more examples by Halpern or Crain, or to do a YouTube or Spotify search headed 'relaxation music' or something similar. They could also try some initial ideas out on keyboard to get an idea of what could work well. If they're struggling for ideas, ask them: 'What relaxes you? What would you like to hear?'

As a start, here are some of the characteristics you might easily find in music of this kind:

- ▶ Melody:
  - ▶ very simple.
  - ▶ stepwise.
  - ▶ repetitive.
  - ▶ maybe starting on the tonic or 3rd degree.
  - ▶ few if any chromatic notes.
- ▶ Tonality:
  - ▶ static key.
  - ▶ either major or minor would be fine, but a lot of meditation music is major as it mustn't sound too 'dark'.
  - ▶ little if any key change.
- ▶ Harmony:
  - ▶ very simple, primary chords.
  - ▶ three or four chords on a repetitive cycle.
  - ▶ sometimes only one static chord or drone.
  - ▶ possibly some more gentle dissonances (such as major 7ths or 9ths) but used sparingly.
- ▶ Rhythm:
  - ▶ slow-moving.
  - ▶ static.
  - ▶ repetitive – though there does need to be some sense of gentle movement.
- ▶ Texture:
  - ▶ warm.
  - ▶ sometimes full but without feeling 'thick'.
  - ▶ piano music would be quite thin-textured.
  - ▶ monophonic or homophonic.
- ▶ Sonority:
  - ▶ warm, low sounds and distant high ones.
  - ▶ nothing that 'cuts through' or dominates the sound.
  - ▶ pianos and guitars.
  - ▶ electronic sounds.
  - ▶ flutes, low strings.
  - ▶ use of relaxing sound effects like the sea, birdsong, and so on.
- ▶ Structure:
  - ▶ repetition is key but with a sense of gentle motion.
  - ▶ avoidance of key change.
  - ▶ organic development (ie repetition with small changes).
  - ▶ perhaps a returning 'refrain' idea.
  - ▶ some pieces will be formless or just very slow organic 'builds' of texture or pitch.



Having identified some of these and other characteristics, you can guide your students in starting to make their own New age or well-being music, either individually, in pairs or in small groups. For this project, keyboards or tuned percussion can be very effectively used, along with any other instruments your students play, and singers can use their voices wordlessly when it comes to melody or chordal parts. However, if you are lucky enough to have access to music technology for your Key Stage 3 classes, this could be an ideal project for improving their knowledge of notation or DAW software that you routinely use – perhaps Sibelius or GarageBand.

### Breaking the composition down

There are some golden opportunities here for encouraging students to think constructively and in small steps when composing. Most importantly, perhaps, they can learn about the value of working out harmony, melody and rhythm parts *before* thinking too much about instrumentation. This has a variety of benefits – it allows the whole group to work together from the outset rather than each individual concentrating only on what their own instrument does, and when it comes to using keyboards or computers, it gets them thinking about the core musical elements before they get distracted by the huge choice of sounds available to them.

All too often, students get stuck because they let their choice of sounds dictate what they write, rather than thinking about the melody, harmony and rhythm first and then *arranging* it for suitable instruments or sounds.

### Well-being music: harmony

There are two valid approaches that we have studied, and either would work very well in a composition. The first choice for students can therefore be:

- ▶ Will we have static harmony – perhaps only one or two chords?
  - ▶ In this case, they should think about how these chords change over time to keep a sense of momentum in their music – perhaps by using added notes or gentle dissonance.
- ▶ Will they use a chord progression?
  - ▶ If this is the option, they can use *Butterfly Waltz* as a model. Choose a tonality and a specific key – perhaps a simple one such as C, G or F major – and pick three or four chords that work well together. Primary chords can be all-powerful here, with perhaps one secondary chord such as VI as an alternative. If they are more experienced, they might want to experiment with inversions.

### Well-being music: rhythm

Rhythms, as we have seen, should be gentle, repetitive and even static at times. Once a harmonic plan has been established, students can choose a metre (probably two, three or four-time) and some simple rhythmic ideas that can feed into their melody or accompaniment parts. If they are going for a more static, *Deep Bamboo* style, their rhythmic patterns might be freer, but there should still be a sense of motion and repetition to make their composition work.

### Well-being music: melody

Even with freer or static music, the most important aspect of the composition is the melody. For the music to be effective as relaxation or meditation music, the melody needs to flow easily and gently, without drawing too much attention to itself. If – as could be argued with *Butterfly Waltz* – it becomes too ‘catchy’, it will make it harder to relax one’s mind while listening to it.

Students could usefully spend time researching a little deeper here before deciding on the melodic features of their compositions. Here are some suggestions for some wider listening:

- ▶ This Japanese shakuhachi (flute) music ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=miUKO5goONk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=miUKO5goONk)) is a good example of the use of repetition within a very slow-moving melody, focusing on long notes and embellishments.
- ▶ Satie’s famous *Gymnopédie* No. 1 ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyUNbrgLezl&pbjreload=10](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyUNbrgLezl&pbjreload=10)) is a good piece for learning how to compose a melody that is repetitive but relaxing, over a simple chord pattern.
- ▶ The music of Irish artist Enya ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=qIT3TFU4kTw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qIT3TFU4kTw)) is full of haunting vocal melodies over quite rhythmic but relaxing accompaniments. It’s also a good example if you have singers. What is particularly relaxing about this music?

Once these three key elements have been worked through, and your students have a basic idea of melodic, rhythmic and harmonic content, they can think more appropriately about textures, sonorites and structure, using the guidelines brainstormed earlier.

