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London

Building Blocks for composing

RCM Sparks is the Royal College of Music's learning and participation programme.
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Building Blocks for composition

You have great ideas for your composition, but what do you do with them? How can you use these ideas?

Think of it as a journey: where can you take the ideas and what happens to them along the way?

Step One

You have a rhythmic “cell” = a few of notes (could be one repeated pitch) with a nice rhythm. Or a short melody (1 or 2 bars)...

Add **dynamics**! This detail is integral to your material.

Then, you could:

- Repeat your cell
- Repeat it but add a note (or 2) = **additive** blocks
- Repeat it and **vary** it eg.
 - make it **loud** instead of **soft** (or vice versa)
 - **smooth** (legato) instead of **spiky** (staccato)
 - change one pitch or alter one rhythm
 - add a line: a **melody** on top or below, a **drone** (sustained note), a bass line.

Once you have generated a bit of **material** (some notes), you could try changing the order of the cells. Mess it around.

Try one of these processes:

- Invert (turn upside-down)
- Retrograde (turn backwards)
- Retrograde inversion (turn backwards and upside-down)
- Augment (make bigger)
- Diminish (make smaller)

Step Two

By now, you should have quite a lot of material. You might not like it all and that's okay, not all of it needs to end up in your final piece.

Try to think of the **bigger piece** now and the **overall structure**. Try drawing the shape of your piece on a plain piece of paper, or as a graphic score, or even try to describe with words.

- Is it on a winding or straight path? Tarmac or stone?
- Are you (is your idea) you walking? Or on a train... or a plane?
- Is the weather sunny, cloudy, or raining? Warm or cold?
- Can you see snow or sand?
- Create your own 'world' for the piece.

All these things help to **shape** your ideas, let you see clearly and **sculpt** your piece. This takes time and concentration.

Step Three

Now you have lots of material and a plan for the overall structure of your work, you need to piece everything together. This stage involves lots of experimentation. Pieces are not always composed from the first to the last note.

You might:

- Reshape or re-order your material
- Add some **layers**
- Invent some joining material
- Add **decoration**
- Add **something new**, something **special** and **individual**

Keep **building** and with these **strong foundations** you will create a magnificent piece.