



**London  
Sinfonietta**  
making new music

**Teacher Resource**

# **COMPOSITION** **CHALLENGES**

**Open up the world of composition and  
invite your students to write music for the  
London Sinfonietta.**

**For KS2 and KS3 (all levels of experience and ability)**

# COMPOSITION CHALLENGES

Welcome to the London Sinfonietta's Composition Challenges. This series of special commissions for schools invites young people to compose music for us.

We want to support your students to become composers, develop their creativity, explore different sound worlds and craft interesting and innovative new music. With each challenge we encourage you and your class to think like composers and ask these key questions:

**Why** do I want to create a new piece of music?

**How** can I do this using sound?

**Who** am I creating it for?

I love the sound of the violin,  
I want to show off those  
beautiful sounds for  
other people to enjoy

I want to write music to  
warn people about  
climate change

I want to experiment with sounds  
to invent something that nobody  
has ever heard before

Sitting in the park on a warm,  
sunny day makes me feel  
really happy, I wonder if I  
can recreate that feeling  
using music?

I want to write a piece of music  
that tells the story of my culture  
and where I come from

# COMPOSITION CHALLENGES

**Each challenge consists of three simple steps:**

- 1. Watch the composition challenge film.** This will be your starting point for creative composition. It will introduce your students to how they can compose and invite them to listen, evaluate and discuss what they see and hear.
- 2. Use this teacher resource** to help support practical composing in the classroom.
- 3. Submit your students' compositions to the London Sinfonietta.** We will share their work on our website, perform it or perhaps showcase it in our annual Sound Out Schools Concert. We can also offer live, interactive sessions (online or in person) with our musicians who can give your students feedback on their compositions.

**Submit your compositions to [compositionchallenge@londonsinfonietta.org.uk](mailto:compositionchallenge@londonsinfonietta.org.uk)**

## Curriculum learning

Each challenge will support KS2 and 3 curriculum learning as well as developing young people's wider creative and musical skills. Challenges are focused on composing but also include listening and performing activity. Young people will develop their skills;

- as composers working on their own and with others
- to understand how music is created and communicated
- to organise and manipulate ideas within musical structures (including pitch,

# COMPOSITION CHALLENGE #1: POSTCARD PIECES

## SUITABLE FOR:

All ages and abilities  
No instruments or notation  
necessary

### Create a Postcard Piece

Write down your musical ideas using colours, shapes, lines and images, write instructions, create a collage and add in musical notation or try a combination of all of these, all on the back of a postcard.

It can be as simple or complicated as you like!



The Postcard Pieces challenge is inspired by American composer **James Tenney** who wrote *Postal Pieces* in 1971. Saying that he hated writing to his friends, he decided to create short musical compositions for them instead. Many other composers have also used graphic notation or non-traditional notation to compose - in this resource we present two such pieces created especially for the London Sinfonietta by **Deborah Pritchard** and **Samantha Fernando**.

**Postcard Pieces** invites young people to create short compositions on a postcard. There is no need to use any traditional notation and it encourages young people to be imaginative and inventive in the way they communicate their ideas. Working on the small scale of a postcard also sets out to make composing seem less daunting a task and allows for ideas to be as simple or as complex as you want them to be. It also gives the young composers the opportunity to think about who their composition might be for – who would they send their postcard to? Who might their audience be?

# COMPOSITION CHALLENGE #1: POSTCARD PIECES

## GET STARTED

There is no right or wrong way to create a Postcard Piece and it can be as simple or as complex as you want to make it. We suggest that you spend at least two or three sessions with your class, developing and trying out ideas before you create your final Postcard Pieces. Use our [short film](#) and the [activities in this teacher pack](#) to get you class composing.

Watch the film with your class. Pause it whenever you like to talk about what you are seeing and hearing and encourage observations and comments.

### Discuss one of the postcards created by James Tenney, Deborah Pritchard or Samantha Fernando

Which is their favourite and why? How do they imagine it sounding? Encourage them to use descriptive language to describe how the music might sound – loud/soft, gentle/lively, smooth/jagged. You could even try performing one of them in class or set it as a task for homework and compare the different versions.

### Ask your students to make musical decisions

Answer the questions in the film about James Tenney and Samantha Fernando's pieces or discuss how you might perform Deborah Pritchard's *Colour Circle* - How does a green oblong or a yellow shard sound different? What instrument(s) would you choose to perform the piece?

### Encourage your class to think like composers

What would they like to write music about? It might be about a person, place, special memory or to highlight a specific issue they feel strongly about. Who would they like to write music for or who would they like to hear their music? Think about why music is a good way to tell a story, convey a message or share a feeling - what are their favourite pieces that describe people/places etc.

# COMPOSITION CHALLENGE #1: POSTCARD PIECES

## GET CREATIVE

**This challenge allows you to compose music using just a single line or create a more complex piece encompassing different materials, words and written notation.**

Get your class creating and composing using the practical activities on the following pages:

1. Line Drawings
2. Musical Colours
3. Symbols and Patterns
4. Musical Maps
5. Starting Point
6. Instructions

### Need some inspiration?

Hear other people's Postcard Pieces being performed by London Sinfonietta musicians

<https://londonsinfonietta.org.uk/channel/lockdown-live-video/postcard-pieces-view-all>

See postcards created for the London Sinfonietta by young people and adults

<https://londonsinfonietta.org.uk/channel/lockdown-live-photography/through-lens-postcard-pieces>

# COMPOSITION CHALLENGE #1: POSTCARD PIECES

You will need:  
A pencil/pen  
paper

## LINE DRAWINGS

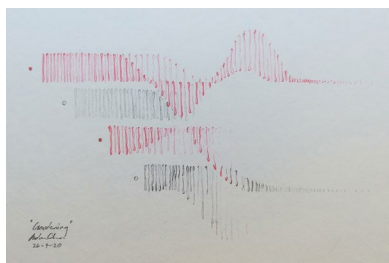
Ask everyone in the class to use a pen or pencil to create a composition by drawing a single line.

Encourage your class to think about what direction the line moves in.

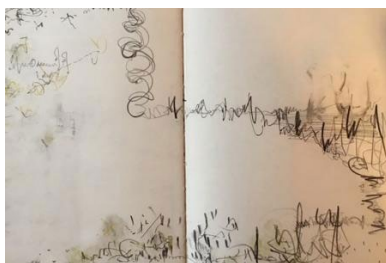
- If it moves up and down, how will this affect the pitch?
- How will they affect the dynamic of the music?
- How might you be able to make the music sound calm or more frantic?

Swap compositions with a partner and ask them to trace the line slowly with their finger and, at the same time, hum or sing to follow the line/finger and perform the piece.

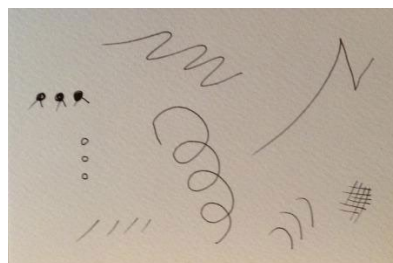
Is it how the composer expected it to sound?  
What would they like to add or change?



Andrew Chen



Marega Palser



Claire Barwell

### Extension:

Repeat the exercise tracing your finger along the line but moving it the other way along the line. How does it sound different? Which version of the melody do you prefer?

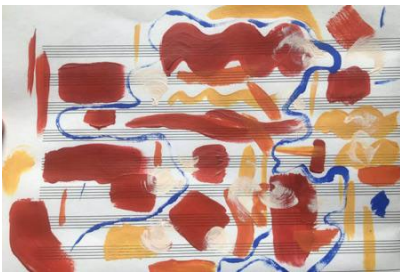
# COMPOSITION CHALLENGE #1: POSTCARD PIECES

You will need:  
A pencil/pen  
paper

## MUSICAL COLOURS

- Choose one colour from the rainbow and describe what character or mood it has – you can use three adjectives
- Then, try and describe what this mood might sound like? Loud, bright, sparkling, deep, smooth slow, calm etc
- Encourage the use of musical terms such as high/low pitch or quiet/loud dynamics
- Which instrument or instrument family could best represent your colour's characteristics or mood?

**You could ask everyone to work with the same colour for a really interesting class discussion or split into small groups with each group describing a different colour to create a musical rainbow.**



Joanna Ward



Mermaid Cafe



Anna Appleby

### Extension:

Choose a different mood for the same colour (e.g. red can mean danger or it can mean love) and create a separate piece – how will it be different? Or pair colours with different shapes – how does a green circle sound different to a yellow triangle?



# COMPOSITION CHALLENGE #1: POSTCARD PIECES

You will need:  
A pencil/pen  
paper

## SYMBOLS AND PATTERNS

You can compose using written instructions or symbols.

- Ask small groups to create a list of three simple body percussion actions
- Decide as a group how many repetitions of each action you will do (this must add up to 8 actions in total)
- Assign a visual symbol for each (these can be any shape or symbol they like)
- Ask each group to draw out their series of actions using the three symbols
- Ask each group to perform their piece – REMEMBER, keep a steady pulse/beat throughout (It might help if an adult does this for all the groups so they can concentrate on their actions). You could even try all the groups performing together as an ensemble – if the pulse is steady and all the pieces are 8 symbols long everyone should start and finish together

*Tap your knees*  
*Clap your hands*  
*Click your fingers*

*Tap your knees x 2*  
*Clap your hands x 2*  
*Click your fingers x 4*

*^ = tap your knees*  
*! = clap your hands*  
*@ = click your fingers*

*Final piece:*  
*^ !! @@@@*

### Extension:

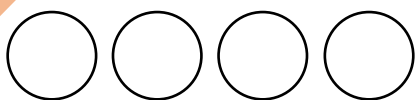
Is there any way the group can show in their written symbols that at one point in the piece, the music gets louder/quieter or faster/slower? You could also try creating a longer 16 symbol composition or add some extra actions.

# COMPOSITION CHALLENGE #1: POSTCARD PIECES

**You will need:**  
A pencil/pen  
paper  
scissors

## MUSICAL MAPS

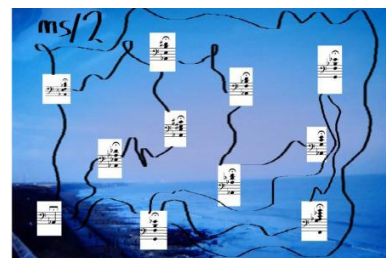
- Cut out four small pieces of paper about the size of a 10p piece



- Create a different 'sound' for each circle, using colours, shapes, lines, words etc



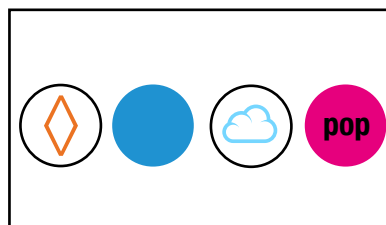
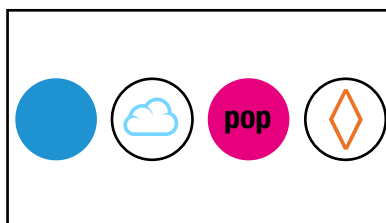
- Arrange them on your postcard. Think about what direction you might read them in as a performer. Do you start on the left and move across the page as if you were reading a book, move in a circle like Deborah Pritchard's *Colour Circle* or maybe allow the performer to choose how to play the piece and jump from one place to another.
- Now put them in a different order or rearrange them on the postcard – how does this change the shape of the piece? You could do this in pairs with one child arranging the sounds and the other performing it then swapping.



Hugh Morris



Sky Shah



### Extension:

What if you added one word or a phrase to the postcard - where would you put it? What difference would this make to the performance? What other information would that give the performer?

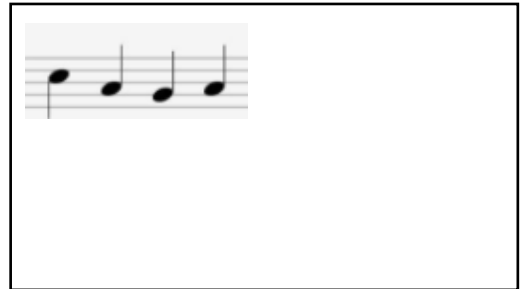
# COMPOSITION CHALLENGE #1: POSTCARD PIECES

You will need:  
Your choice of  
art materials  
paper

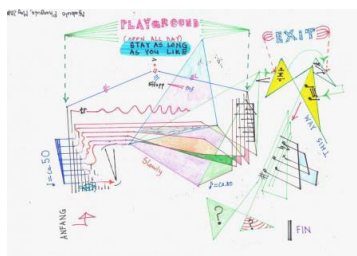
## STARTING POINT

This task is designed to incorporate some traditional musical notation but you could easily follow this same idea using one of the symbols, shapes or colours from the previous tasks.

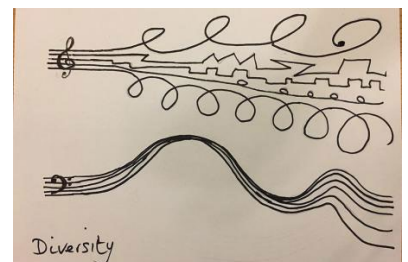
- Choose a short musical phrase and get the whole class to copy it onto their postcard/ paper (This could be anything – a well known melody or randomly selected notes). You could even make photocopies of it and get them to glue it onto their postcard.
- Ask them all to then complete their postcard piece however they like using lines, shapes, colours, words and maybe more musical notation if you would like. You will then end up with a whole range of variations starting with the same theme.



Sumi Perera



Njabulo Phungula



Linda Hanraads

### Extension:

You could add some other musical notation such as a crescendo marking or an expressive marking. Or you could try manipulating the existing phrase – move its position on the page or copy it out upside down – how does this change the sound or mood of the piece?

# COMPOSITION CHALLENGE #1: POSTCARD PIECES

**You will need:**  
A short musical phrase  
A selection of  
art materials

## INSTRUCTION

- Write one instruction for the performer. This could be really simple or more abstract – it could even include some poetry or descriptive prose.
- Swap with a partner to perform each other's pieces.

Play as many very  
high and very low  
notes as possible in  
27 seconds

Start calm and quiet. Play  
for as long as you want  
and then get even quieter.  
Pretend your audience don't  
exist. Get louder if they look  
confused. Stop as soon as  
you have decided what you  
want for lunch today

Choose 3 notes.  
Short. Short.  
Short.  
Buzz  
Looooooooooooooooong.

### Extension:

Can you write your instruction in a physical shape (i.e. a spiral) – how does this affect the performance of the piece?

# COMPOSITION CHALLENGE #1: POSTCARD PIECES

## CREATE YOUR POSTCARD PIECE

**Once you have tried out some (or all) of the activities in this teacher pack and discussed them with your class you are ready to create your Postcard Pieces.**

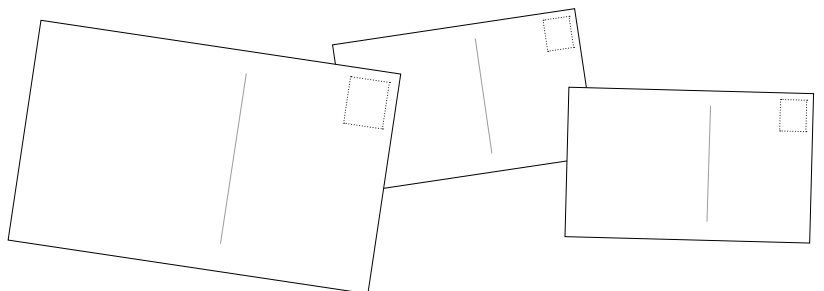
It can help to give your class the same starting point or approach (for example, it must be created using only three colours, it must include only words and images, it should start with a short notated rhythm or melody). Or you could give them a theme such as to celebrate the life of a well-known figure (this could be someone from a current class topic) or something in the news.

**Encourage your students to think how they want their piece to sound by asking:** How will my piece start? Will my piece move quickly or slowly? What sort of energy do I want it to have? What instrument can produce the sound I want to hear? How will I structure my piece?

When you have created your Postcard Pieces, try performing them or swap postcards with a friend and try performing each others. If you can, record your performances and send them in to us – we'd love to hear them.

**We look forward to receiving you compositions!**

Send them to us at [compositionchallenges@londonsinfonietta.org.uk](mailto:compositionchallenges@londonsinfonietta.org.uk) or share them on social media using **#compositionchallenge** and tag us!



# GLOSSARY

**Composer** someone who writes/imagines/creates music. In Latin, the word means ‘one who puts together’

**Commission** the act of inviting someone to compose a piece of music (and, at professional level, the act of paying the composer to write it)

**Graphic notation** a way of writing music using non-musical symbols which can include almost anything from abstract colours to the written word.

**Dynamics** a term that relates to volume in music. We can use English words like loud or quiet. Traditionally, we use Italian words for these: forte and piano

**Pitch** the musical notes from the lowest to the highest. In science, these terms relate to frequency of vibration. Low notes have a low number (the unit is hertz or hz) The note we call ‘A’ which an orchestra traditionally tunes to (the A just above the middle C on the piano) has a frequency of 440hz i.e. the sound vibrates 440 times a second. Interestingly, if you play an A one octave higher than this, the frequency is exactly double – 880hz

**Texture** this describes how dense or light a piece of music is. If there are many notes being heard at once, the texture is often described as dense. If the music has fewer instruments or perhaps the notes move more slowly, the texture can be described as lighter. There are many imaginative ways of describing texture in music as there are in visual art or even food.

**Phrase** a musical phrase is akin to a sentence or even a clause in written language. It may be only a few notes long or it may last several bars of music.

**Expressive marking** in music, this is the ‘how’ not the ‘what’. In traditional musical notation, pitch, volume etc are often absolute but the expressive marking will tell the performer what the mood or intention of the note is. Playwrights use this when they give an instruction prior to a line being spoken. Like many musical terms, musicians have traditionally used Italian words (i.e. dolce means ‘gently’) but in modern times, words in the language of the composer are very common.

**Extended technique** a technique of playing your instrument that is in some way unorthodox – using a different part of the instrument to generate the sound or creating a very different sound from what is expected. Lots of modern composers ask for extended techniques and many of them are now very common for instrumentalists to learn. A good example would be for a piano player to lean inside the piano and vpluck the strings with their fingers.

# COMPOSITION CHALLENGES

**The London Sinfonietta is one of the world's leading contemporary music ensembles. We focus on performing works by living composers. We often commission composers to write music especially for us.**

**Composition Challenges is part of our Sound Out Schools Programme. For more information please contact us at [compositionchallenge@londonsinfonietta.org.uk](mailto:compositionchallenge@londonsinfonietta.org.uk) or visit our website [www.londonsinfonietta.org.uk](http://www.londonsinfonietta.org.uk)**

All example postcards featured in this pack have been created by young people and members of the public as part of the London Sinfonietta's Postcard Pieces project.

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 [@London.sinfonietta](https://www.instagram.com/London.sinfonietta)

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