

# Teaching notes: Storytelling (part 1)

In the first of this two-part series, **Richard Steggall** explores using stories as a teaching tool

As pupils move through school and beyond, their progress on a musical instrument is rarely smooth. A common serious stumbling block for many is performance anxiety. This can emerge at any stage of a player's development but often comes as a pupil becomes quite proficient but also increasingly self-aware. The pupil then looks for help in overcoming their anxiety. One common piece of advice is to stop worrying about the notes and think about what you're trying to express to the audience; think of a story to help you deliver your musical message and focus your attention on that instead.



Many classical-instrument music teachers wait for anxiety problems to arise before working through solutions. We ask pupils to practise the notes and the rhythms and then, when in performance and their desire to get the notes right is at its maximum, we ask them to think in a completely different way. How can we expect them to suddenly change their mental approach when we've been constantly speaking of correct notes and rhythm up to that point? This style of teaching contributes massively to our own pupils' anxiety. Surely there's a better way. How about "storytelling" from the very beginning?

## What is "storytelling" in music?

In essence, it's developing an internal narrative to give music direction and meaning in order to engage a listener. We are creating a mental journey to keep a performer engaged and focused for the duration of a performance. The story can be anything the performer chooses and is never explicitly told to an audience. In the end, the content of the story is fairly irrelevant – it's purely a tool to immerse both performer and listener in the music.

Let's look at a traditional teaching method:

1. Get the notes and the rhythm right (one section of music at a time).
2. Add dynamics, phrasing and articulation.
3. Then start thinking about the "music". What's the correct style? In what direction is the music going? What's important when performing it?

For some pupils, this method will seem satisfactory. They will be happy to combine music theory (note names/lengths, etc.) with bodywork (instrumental technique) to create a series of sounds. They will enjoy the challenge of getting the notes right, much like solving a puzzle, and success (playing what's on the

page, and being praised for doing so) can bring a great sense of achievement and self-worth.

But some may struggle with reading note names, or getting the correct pitches, and won't have the motivation to practise what seems like a purely technical exercise. What's the point in learning these particular notes, in this particular order, with these note lengths? Some pupils will take so much time learning to get the notes and rhythm "correct" that they never even get as far as phrasing or articulation, let alone thinking about the music or what they're trying to express. A piece is "finished" when the notes and rhythm can be fairly successfully reproduced.

The result of this method is that we send pupils out for performances or exams with the pure aim of getting the notes right. For some it's the only instruction they know, and for others (those that actively engage in "note getting") it's their definition of success. I hope we can all agree that's not a good mental state for joyful, anxiety-free performance.

## Choose storytelling instead

Storytelling is fun and creative. All children will have experience of telling stories, so this is just an extension of skills they already have. The only difference is that they're telling their stories through sound. Success in storytelling is completely subjective. There's no right or wrong. If a pupil thinks they've told a good story then that's an excellent result.

Some of the benefits of teaching through story:

- Diverts the mind from right and wrong – makes playing creative
- It's a fun way of learning
- Helps to understand why we perform music
- Helps to engage with the music

- Aids expression and emotional awareness
- Takes the focus away from the notes on a printed page
- Allows success without technical perfection
- Aids (and leads) technical development

## How to use storytelling

We have to start by finding a story to match the particular piece of music we're studying. We're aiming to musically engage our pupil and give them the confidence to take a listener on a musical journey.

Of course, we can't just tell any story; it must be one that respects and compliments what the composer has written on the page. We should therefore start by looking for clues to our story, then look for characters in the themes and finally create a story arc for the whole piece.

Some clues may be written down on the page in front of you:

- The title of the piece. This may provide you with a lot of information for your story (e.g. "Ghosts of Fountains Abbey") or very little (e.g. 1st movement from Concerto No. 1).
- Speed and/or style directions. A piece marked "Allegro giocoso" is not going to be about a sad elephant who can't find its friends!
- Dynamics and articulation. Here we start to require a little theoretical knowledge (for example what does p or f mean?) These give us clues as to the characters in our story. Loud notes with a lot of accents might indicate an angry character while quiet, legato phrases could indicate a calm and gentle character.

Some clues may need a little more research:

- If the title is a theme from a film or musical, what is it about?
- Is the piece a song? (Not in the way that many children these days call pieces "songs" but an actual song, with words!) Are there lyrics to the song?
- Who is the composer? Do you know anything about them? Is there any useful information about when and where they wrote the piece, and under what circumstances?

In part 2 we'll learn about different types of stories and look at examples of how to put storytelling into practice. I try to teach storytelling from the very beginning so we'll finish this part by looking at a very simple piece indeed.

## "Hot Cross Buns"

This is generally the first tune that I teach to my brass pupils, especially when they're learning in groups. It may seem dull and old-fashioned to some, but when you have the intention of teaching through story from the very start it can be great fun.

We're going to use the clues in the title and lyrics as inspiration. We first find the theme in the title "Hot Cross Buns" which occurs three times (E, D, C). Then we research the lyrics: "Hot cross buns, hot cross buns. One a penny, two a penny. Hot cross buns!"

Now let's imagine we're selling hot cross buns in a market (probably a while ago looking at the prices!) We have to play the theme clearly so that people know what we're selling, so let's say it twice so everyone hears. Then they need the information of how much they cost (1p each) but then suddenly there's a half-price sale – exciting! So the music moves up a tone. Now that everyone in the market's interested, we need to remind them of what we're selling. Hot Cross Buns!! **RS**

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 4/4 time. The first staff contains the melody for the phrase "Hot cross buns!" repeated three times. The notes are: G4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), C4 (half), G4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), C4 (half). The second staff contains the melody for the phrase "One a penny, two a penny, Hot cross buns!". The notes are: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (half), G4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), C4 (half).

To watch a video demonstration of learning "Hot Cross Buns" using storytelling go to [www.british-horn.org](http://www.british-horn.org) > members > videos