

Beginning Songmaking and Tunemaking

The following notes are by Ewan McVicar, who has used this approach with great success in dozens of schools and projects.

I emphasise and continually illustrate what metre and rhyming are, and how they are working well or badly in what we write. I translate these words as follows. 'Metre' means fitting the tune or working well with the beat. 'Rhymes' means sounds the same as.

I quote from the song we are working to make new words for, to emphasise how metre and rhyme work in it. The discipline of fitting words to a tune helps the process, and we sing the new lines over and over as we make them.

Some Tips for writing songs with groups

BEGINNING

Introduce the idea by first making new couplets for songs - e.g. 'The World Must Be Coming To An End'. You can also insert local names into songs, or customise songs (see the 'On The Hoof' project in this website), then move on to making a whole song.

THE WORDS

- ❖ Rhyming can be very hard and limit using good ideas for lines, so avoid a rhyming scheme which is too demanding. For example, rhyme lines two and four rather than one and two, then three and four. (I. E. rhyme your verses as abcb, defe. Not aabb, cddd.)
- ❖ One key tip is, when you are working on a line which will need to rhyme with another, do not commit the line to the blackboard till you are sure you have a useful rhyme to couple it with, and if possible identify the other complete rhyming line. In other words, write up line one, get ideas for line two, but then ask what words will rhyme with the suggested last word of line two. That will usually lead to creation of a good line four. Now, write up line two, leave a space for line three, and write up line four. Now go back and write line three. The order of creation is therefore line one on the board, line two and four agreed verbally then put on the board, then line three is created.
- ❖ When a number of lines are on the board, one can often rearrange the order of lines or couplets, or edit earlier lines to reduce repetition or strengthen weak lines.
- ❖ Neat finishing lines are the hardest for the children to create, and often I or the teacher step in at this point. The class will embark upon the project willingly, but if we are struggling to finish a verse or end the piece they will quite quickly lose heart.

THE TUNE

- ❖ It is not essential to start off with a tune in mind. One may occur to you, one can be composed, or you may be making a chant or performance piece made up of short chants, rather than a song.
- ❖ Children will be eclectic in their choice of songs. - the 'Match Of The Day' theme has been used to make a song about whaling.
- ❖ The Scottish way is to reuse or amend a traditional tune, rather than create a 'brand new' tune.

When you think you have made up a new tune, it can be startling to realise that you just remembered an old one, or remade an old one a little. But that is an excellent place to start making your own tunes. Take an old one you like, that fits the feel of what you want. Start by

taking the second line of that tune. For example, 'Auld Lang Syne'. Take the notes for "And never brought to mind". Sing them over, and think of them as the first notes of your tune. Where do they want to go next?

How about taking the last line of the line, for 'mind' and changing only it? Trying making it go up. What comes next? Go back and change the note for 'mind' again, and make it even higher. Or maybe go lower instead. Now, what comes next in your new tune?

Let's change it some more. Make the first line of your new tune longer. Instead of "And never brought to mind", start with "I never thought I'd find that note" and decide where the notes of the tune want to go now. See if you can add more lines to your tune. Don't worry about the words just now, sing what kind of fits till you have a tune that starts and finishes well, and sounds good in the middle.

Time to make sure you don't lose your work. Get some kind of recorder (keep singing the tune over to yourself as you do so) and sing or play it. Don't worry that it's not exactly right yet, you are just making a note of the idea for yourself. As you work it over, and add proper lyrics if it is a song, it will change itself. If as you try singing it you stumble over the tune or words in one part, that is a sign that it needs to be changed, usually to be made smoother somehow.

If you are learning an instrument and would rather made up a new tune, the same ideas can be used, but working from a favourite tune you play rather than a song. You can probably work out how to write down your new tune so you can remember and share it.

If you can play a little, try just 'messaging about' on your instrument, putting together notes or chords, and the notes inside chords, and see what shakes itself into a shape. Record or write down bits you like and want to keep for a while.

New Tunes For Old Words

One way many songmakers started was to take a poem they liked and to make up a tune for it. Or they liked the words of an old song but not the tune they heard. Remember if the poem is modern you cannot just help yourself to the words, they belong to the poet and their family. When Burns put his own words to tunes that he already knew, he was following an old Scottish custom that songwriters still follow today. Some of our tunes have had many sets of words put to them. A dance tune can be slowed right down to become a dramatic ballad, a noble old war tune can survive as a children's song, a singer can take the words of one song and the tune of another – because they want to. New words to old tunes are not parodies unless the new words work from the old ones to be funny.

DEVELOPING

- ❖ Children (and adults) take particularly strong joint ownership over the songs they have made, and express surprise and pride at what they have achieved.
- ❖ Individuals may take the idea forward, and write their own verses or whole songs. Sometimes such new songs are produced in Top Twenty style, and come complete with group choreography and costumes!