**Creative Thinking in Music**

*Mr Laing, Artistic Director (Music) reflects on the role of performance classes in promoting creative thinking.*

I feel very fortunate that, at King's High School, the concept of creative thinking has been placed formally at the heart of the curriculum. For me as Artistic Director (Music) this is the best possible initiative. Music has creative thinking as its very foundation. The practice of music is a collaborative one, from which we naturally learn from our fellow practitioners, whatever their age and stage of learning, if we have an open mind and lose our fear of making mistakes.

With music, as with other disciplines, regular practice is the key to success; and if we are not willing to experiment, explore and make mistakes we never give ourselves a chance to learn from them. We know as teachers that we are getting something right, if our students are clearly achieving results from good quality practice. Every student, or seasoned professional for that matter, needs help from time to time. But personal practice can become mundane, slipping into routines, which lack imagination, thought and care. The best practice is, of course, focussed and understood practice. Practice should be the rediscovery of what was learned in the lesson, but in the student's own mind and in her own terms. This inspires and initiates the student's own creative and imaginative thinking and allows her to become her own teacher.

As a string specialist I am always keen to build strong cohorts of young string players. One of the ways this can be achieved is through developing a team spirit. I always look forward to group performance classes, which need occur only occasionally, perhaps once or twice each term, but the benefits of which (from my experience in fostering them in previous posts) can be exciting and inspirational.

A typical performance class might last about an hour, and features three or four students performing to their peers. Performing to one's peers is more stressful than performing to other audiences. It is crucial that the performers find it a positive experience, so the atmosphere of the

class needs careful handling, especially at first. In introducing it, I ask the audience of peers first to come up with aspects of the performance that they appreciate, whether it be musical, emotional or technical. Everyone must notice something good, and express it clearly to the performer. In this way, the atmosphere is always a collegial and supportive one. When one performs, one tends to focus on the things that go wrong, or that could have been better. It is so encouraging to be told by a dozen of your peers that they have noticed good things.

As the leader of the class, if I hear views from the student audience that I disagree with, or that have not been expressed very clearly, I never contradict. If a student is expressing a genuine reaction or idea, it cannot be dismissed. I do, however, like to be at least as demanding of the audience as I am of the performers. We make the discussion an open one. I may question an opinion, but always respectfully. This keeps everyone focussed, and the experience can be positive in both directions – a shared view arrived at via discussion between performer and audience becomes reinforcing for all. If a student makes a general comment on sound quality or character, I ask her to explain more fully. This is especially important in relation to positive aspects of the performance, as it provides more specificity to the praise, giving confidence to performer and listener alike. For instance, if an audience member says, 'I liked the dynamics', that tells the performer very little and will be forgotten. If the commenter expands to say exactly what diminuendo was effective or which crescendo to the climax was exciting, it shows the performer that her clear preparation was noticed and appreciated.

Only after the class has explored the positives in some detail do we turn to aspects that they felt needed work. This too needs handling with care. We as performers tend to be negative about our perceived 'failures'. I emphasise that the criticism must be constructive, banning words like 'bad', 'awful', 'screeching', 'painful'. The student critics must try to get their point across in a well thought out, positive way, which promotes creative thinking towards solving the perceived problem. I like to hear phrases like: 'I think it may have worked better off the string' or, 'I am not sure what you meant in the middle section. Could you think of a way to put your idea across more convincingly?' Such comments can lead to responses involving the whole room. The performer then feels part of the discussion rather than the target of criticism, becomes more comfortable with addressing issues in her performance and freer to suggest her own creative solutions.

Technical criticism always provides interesting group discussion. We all have aspects of our technique that we struggle with, and these tend to be the very things blocking our ability to get the message of our music across. When students notice technical deficiencies in others, it is often because they recognise that same weakness in their own technique. There is empathy and sympathy with the performer. A fellow student who has fixed the problem can give invaluable advice, which may come better than from a teacher.

The camaraderie produced by performance classes is striking. The participants become comfortable in each other's company. The best players acknowledge that those less adept may still help with a unique observation or pertinent point. Less able players may thus discover that they are superior observers. The students start to ask each other's advice outside the classes. They may even sometimes practise together, trying each other's studies and pieces, talking and laughing. Practising can be lonely; it is good to have another pair of ears to help. Practice becomes not only self-teaching, but also the teaching of each other. If you can explain an aspect of technique or music to someone else, then you truly understand it yourself.

If playing to their peers is nerve-racking to start with, the students tend to shed these nerves very quickly, as they feel supported rather than criticised. One enormous benefit of establishing this ethos is that when it comes to public performance or instrumental exams, the problem of nerves is lessened. The performer is much more focussed on the positive.