

Music and multimodal text

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Children are increasingly becoming literate in a range of modes, as evidenced by their enjoyment of complex picture books. Sound is one of the five modes through which we communicate, but can children make meaning through organised sound, i.e. music, when linked with words and visual images?

The background

As a musician and teacher, I spent several years training non-specialist primary teachers to develop children's creative skills through the medium of music. I liked to use a variety of media to stimulate ideas – this might include images, words, art, colour, movement or patterns. We found inspiration in poems, dance, maths, weather, seasons, plant growth, wrapping paper or the children's art itself. In one school, I suggested that we could use some stunning Chinese silk screen prints that the children had created, with expert guidance from a resident artist, to compose music. I was met with puzzled silence, dubbed 'off the wall and a bit weird' and asked discreetly by the Head to continue with singing nursery rhymes, as the staff were rather worried by my approach.

Despite moving from this training role into full time class teaching, I have not abandoned my fascination with children's creativity, or my belief that we hasten children's compartmentalisation of creative thinking through formalised education. The curriculum restrictions of the last ten years have accelerated this process; most of the children I teach today regard creativity as the province of people who are 'good at' art, music, design or writing poetry.

What is multimodality?

We communicate in a range of different modes, or semiotic systems (Anstey and Bull 2009). These are *gesture* (body language, movement, dance), *language* (both spoken and written), *sound* (music, sound effects, tone of voice), *vision* (images, film, art) and *space* (how objects occupy space, either separately or in relation to each other). As adults, we 'read' the communication of language (gestural, spoken and written) fluently and without a second thought. We are also skilled in reading the subtext of conversations and written communications. We are able to intellectually interpret and respond to the meaning, or communication, of

a piece of music or a work of art. But we have lost the skill of communicating through these media ourselves, unless we have chosen to pursue an interest in music, art or dance into adult life.

Young children see no such distinction. A baby's first response in life is to the mother's voice or familiar sounds, followed by visual perception. Very young children are able to combine these modes with an understanding of gesture and facial expression to 'read' the mood of those around them and respond accordingly. They develop skills of spatial awareness and an understanding of their own position in that space. By the time children start to experiment with spoken language and long before they can read, children can empathise, infer, deduce, interpret actions and understand layers of meaning. When formal education begins, children rely on these skills to interact with their environment. So in key stage 1, children will often describe the music they are composing in any mode, saying they are looking for a 'red' sound or a 'jumpy' sound. This multimodal approach to learning is slowly subsumed in the need to become literate and numerate. Arts education becomes formalised into separate disciplines and just a few, fortunate people, remain naturally synaesthetic into adult life.

What is a multimodal text?

For a text to be described as multimodal, it must operate within at least two semiotic systems. Picture books fulfil this criterion perfectly and for many years have been a key resource for readers – in a well designed picture book the words and images work together to support emergent reading skills. But recent years have seen an explosion of complex picture books designed for older readers, which call on an understanding of a range of semiotic systems to read both the story and the subtext – Anthony Browne is a leading exponent of multimodal authorship.



The authors of 'Don't Read This Book' receiving the Hampshire Illustrated Book Award

Children today live in an image dominated world, much of it electronic. They are proficient in communicating via new technologies. But I first began to wonder if children were as aurally astute when they failed to respond to aural stimuli during the *War of the Worlds* project (Robins 2009). So when an opportunity presented itself to explore the link between music and words, I was keen to pursue it.

Don't Read This Book

As part of the Hampshire Illustrated Book Award reading panel, our Year 5 children have become very familiar with the 2009 winning text *Don't Read This Book*, written by Jill Lewis and illustrated by Deborah Allbright (2009).

This is a very complex multimodal text; at the surface level it tells the story of a king who has ordered a story to be written, but whose storywriter has lost the draft. But the book also operates at other levels. As the reader you become a participant, as the king repeatedly tries to stop you turning any more pages, worried that his book isn't ready for a reader. Having drawn you into the action through direct address, the king and his storywriter then discuss you as if you were no longer there. The king never realises that he is, himself, the story.

Intertextuality plays a strong part in the structure of the book as various fairy tale characters are woven through the text - the king's completed story turns out to be the Princess and the Pea, lying on mattresses provided by Little Red Riding Hood's Wolf-Grandmother. Just in time, as the disobedient reader turns to the last page, the pea arrives and the fairy tale characters can tell the king's story.

Throughout the text, gingerbread men move across the openings with ladders and wallpaper samples as if they were building a stage set, or maybe just the book itself. Fonts and colours change rapidly as the use of pastiche underpins the fractured, layered nature of the book.

Exploring the text through music

As they are reasonably well experienced in reading images, the children quickly grasped the character of the king and the storywriter and understood the multiple layers of the action. But in discussion they made no reference to the soundscapes, so I decided to work with a group of children, creating music suggested by the story in order to discover if this enhanced their understanding of the text in any way. This needed to go beyond merely adding sound effects to an exploration of the enhancement of words with music.

Music has six main components: *pitch* (high/low sounds, rising and falling by step or leap), *dynamics* (loud/quiet contrasts, getting louder and quieter, either suddenly or gradually), *tempo* (fast/slow, getting faster or slower), *duration*, including silence (long/short, how long each layer of sound lasts), *texture* (one sound or multiple layers), and *timbre* (the quality of the sound). Composition requires a thoughtful balancing of these components within some sort of structure.

In the second half of the twentieth century, musicians began to explore the element of chance. Music was partly composed (in order to limit outcomes), but one aspect, such as the order in which sections were performed, would

<p>1 <i>Once upon a time, on a dark and stormy night...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 slow cymbal crashes • each sound louder than the previous one • drum roll getting gradually louder • 1 cymbal crash • 4 seconds of silence when the cymbal sound has stopped 	<p>2 <i>I had it on this piece of paper here, you see, but it's...um...torn.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tear a piece of paper slowly • wait 2 seconds • tear another piece of paper • wait 2 seconds • tear 6 more pieces of paper, each one more quickly than the one before 	<p>3 <i>Well, I've just come back from Beanstalk Crossroads. I was sitting there thinking. It might be there.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • slowly whisper, 'It might be there' • repeat, with other voices gradually joining in at different pitches – don't speak the words together • get gradually louder • suddenly stop and wait for 3 seconds • one voice says clearly, 'What are we waiting for?'
<p>4 <i>Keep your eyes fixed to the front and keep riding.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using an instrument which sounds like horses' hooves, play slow, steady sounds • add another instrument • get gradually louder and faster • decide how many seconds to continue • gradually get quieter as if the horses are galloping away 	<p>5 <i>What about the story? What's going to happen?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using a xylophone or glockenspiel, improvise tunes that go gently and slowly up and down • after 10 seconds, make your tune fall gradually to the lowest note of the instrument 	<p>6 <i>We just need one more thing... I thought you were never coming!</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using a xylophone or glockenspiel, bounce happily from one note to another • at the same time, other voices say, 'fantastic', 'exciting', at different pitches and speeds • gradually fade away to silence

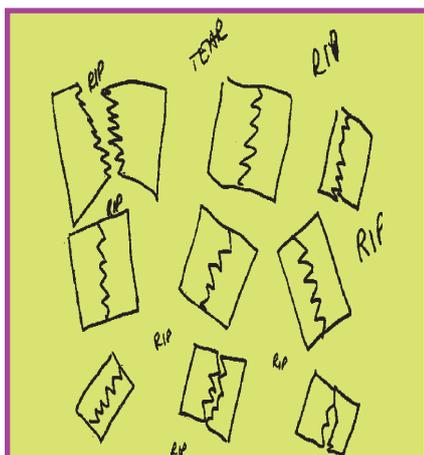
Figure 1: Interpreting the six phases of the book

be left to the choice of the performers. This is known as 'aleatoric' music, from the Latin *alea*, meaning 'dice' or 'dice game'. Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen explored this through a classical idiom: Radiohead also explored chance in their track *Go to Sleep* on the album, *Hail to the Thief*, using an electronic medium to randomly generate note sequences.

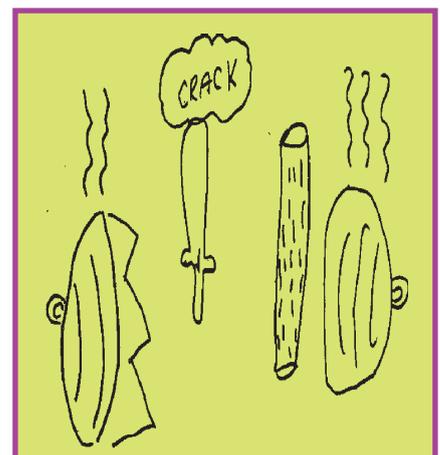
At one point in *Don't Read this Book*, the king and his storywriter go in search of their mislaid story, passing a signpost which tells them variously to, 'Go there', 'Don't go there' and 'Follow your nose'. Taking this latter instruction as my hook I decided to explore aleatoric music. I chose six phrases from the book (Figure 1), composing brief 'sound bites' of music to interpret the words. The children then worked on each section until it was secure. Some sections took longer than others – section 2 prompted a lot of experimentation with how fast or slow to tear, what sort of

paper to use and how big each piece should be. What sort of paper would the storywriter have used? What other sorts of papers were represented in the book? Section 3 was also challenging – how many voices would be too many? How quiet would be too quiet? How long should the voices go on and in what combination? Should it be planned or improvised? By now the music had received some refinements – an ocean drum added rain to section 1 whilst different sizes of cymbal created close-up thunder and far-away thunder. Then I introduced a dice and we created our composition. Each number on the dice represented the corresponding piece of music, so throwing a 6 meant performing section 6. We limited ourselves to 8 throws of the dice, performing the sections in the order determined by the dice.

Next, I gave the children a blank grid and asked them to produce a graphic for each section (Figure 2). They



I had it on this piece of paper here, you see, but it's... um... torn.



Once upon a time, on a dark and stormy night...

Figure 2

considered how to represent their music, including how to show volume and number of sounds for each section of the text. Finally, armed with our aleatoric composition, we braved a public performance, not only with their peers as an audience, but also the author, illustrator and publisher of the book.

The children's response

The children were enthusiastic about their composition and very vocal in articulating the fun they had. They enjoyed preparing for a live performance and they were certainly aware of their audience. They learnt a lot about controlling, manipulating and evaluating sound to create a cohesive piece of music. They developed their skills in collaborative problem solving and decision making and all of these are worthwhile outcomes in themselves. But I wanted to know more than that – did the music have any effect on their appreciation of the text? Did they create new meaning? Here are some of their comments:

'It helped me remember the details of the story and notice some details that I had never seen before.'

'I liked playing in the storm. It made the start of the book realistic and made you imagine you were really in a storm – I won't forget it.'

'When you read the book, you remember the music and that gets you into the book more.'

'It draws your attention to detail. When I read the book now I have the sounds in my head and I can hear them while I'm reading the story.'

'The thinking tune (section 5) made me stop and think about the different things that might happen in the book.'

'I might hear music next time I read a different book and I'll understand the book more.'

This last comment is the most telling of all, as it shows that the children are not only starting to consider the mode of sound in *Don't Read This Book*, but may also be able to create soundscapes in their heads in other picture books that they read. They were also confident in their ability to choose their own phrases from the book and create another, completely different, composition.

The way ahead

When I started working in primary music education, I found that most teachers regarded music as a curriculum area which needed specialist input. And whilst specialist teaching is required for instrumental tuition, creative composition of the type explored above can be led by anyone who is given the right tools, such as an understanding of the building blocks of music described in section 5. Sadly, the dominance of some aspects of the National Curriculum, together with requirements to deliver a Healthy Schools agenda and 2 hours of weekly PE, have all had an effect on the funding and provision of quality-first teaching of music for all children.

This study demonstrates a possible route for linking music-making to a creative curriculum which both enhances understanding of text and image, and gives children the opportunity to creatively construct meaning through the mode of music. As primary ICT provision grows, we should also be facilitating children's electronic creation of music through software packages such as *Compose World*. This would enable them to communicate independently through word, image and sound as they create their own multimodal texts. How powerful a learning experience would this be?

Children's books

Lewis, J. (2009 illus. Deborah Allwright) *Don't Read This Book*. Egmont. ISBN 9781405236423.

References

Anstey, M. and Bull, G. (2009) 'Developing New Literacies: Responding to picturebooks in multiliterate ways' in Evans, J. (editor) *Talking Beyond the Page*. Routledge.

Robins, G. (2009) 'Contemporary Approaches to Classic Text - H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*' in *English 4 – 11*, 35, pp. 6-11.

Software packages

Compose World Create. Expressive Software Projects Ltd. (www.espmusic.co.uk/composeworld_create_desc.html).