

Working with instruments

In terms of the development of musicianship and aural skills, the relationship between vocal experience and learning to play instruments provides complementarity of both aptitude and motivation. Since the initial emergence of Harmony Signing arose through the activities of a children's choir, it is natural that the voice-leading and harmonic procedures focused on what could best be achieved through group singing. Subsequent exploration of how such skills could be transferred to instrumental performance revealed that the process depends on participants having fluent and confident initial experience of Harmony Signing as a vocal method. This is not based on any prejudice against instrumental extension of the technique – far from it. Some of the most creative and convincing student leadership and performance that has arisen has been achieved by groups of instrumentalists. But it must be conceded that these were accomplished by students who were able to build expressively on procedures that they had learnt through the vocal applications that has been outlined and mastered up to this point.

Transferring Harmony Signing from voices to instruments poses obvious challenges. The performance techniques of the modern instrumentarium one encounters in schools and youth schemes is highly varied, covering the full range of strings, woodwind, brass, keyboards and tuned percussion, several of which embrace transposing instruments. The aural anticipation, discrimination and capacity for self-correction built through vocal engagement with Harmony Signing are essential to developing the self-sufficiency and capacity to tune and relate to others that instrumental work within the method demands. If students cannot in the absence of notation or verbalisation find a unison with others and complement them in well-tuned harmony, they are not yet ready for this step, and progress will be slow and frustrating.

However, given that moving to instruments requires a certain amount of patience and careful management, the eventual benefits and possibilities are highly rewarding. Teachers and directors leading activities involved in this step are advised to break down through component exercises that revisit some of the original experiences of vocal Harmony Signing, and that ensure secure responses in returning to the level of participation that was previously apparent.

Here are some suggestions for this approach. The precise ordering, as well as the period required for each, needs to be decided on by the teacher, who will best understand the needs of the participants to whom they are responsible.

- Commence with a named unison, which is sustained by everyone together, and then 'passed around the room' (we often stood in a circle for these activities) through a series of overlapping duets. The purpose of naming the pitch of the unison is to ensure that everyone understands and is sympathetic to those players of transposing instruments (in B flat, F, E flat, etc.) who need to locate the correct unison;
- Play a unison 'call and response' around the circle: each individual selects by turn a pitch that everyone joins and then sustains for about eight seconds (players of guitar, marimba, etc. need to be able to gently strum or roll in order to contribute to the sustained effect). They might be advised to start simply, in terms of what pitches are easiest for the majority, as well as in terms of range and register, and then slowly push the boundaries while always aiming for a successful outcome;
- Play 'call and response' again, but each player starts on one pitch, and then moves to another. Everyone joins them on the 'new' pitch for six seconds, leaving one person to

continue before themselves moving to a different pitch, onto which everyone joins in unison, repeating the process until everyone has led this. It could prove useful to commence with single step changes (tones or semitones) before moving onto wider intervals up and down once participants are ready for this;

- A new version of ‘call and response’ arises from each participant by turn silently signing the ‘old and ‘new’ notes using Kodály gestures. This has to commence with an agreed starting pitch that everyone plays together, treated as *Doh*. The first signer moves from *Doh* to a new pitch of their choice, and then plays this change in unison with everyone else joining in. If they feel that this has been done successfully, they pass responsibility onto the next player, who commences by signing the final note heard. But where the group fails to perform a precise unison, the player who presented the two notes repeats them, first signing them and then playing them, until it sounds perfect in the group’s performance;
- Everyone plays any pitch they like, all starting on a signal at the same time. Listening to the outcome, they all then move either by step up or down in search of a note that contributes to a well-tuned Major triad. When, however long this takes, the triad is achieved, it is brought off by a gesture, and the whole exercise repeated with everyone starting on a different note (this can of course also be done vocally);
- A selected performer plays a pitch, and after a few seconds’ listening, everyone adds either the same pitch, or a pitch (the 3rd or the 5th) that forms with it a well-tuned Major triad. If necessary, it may be necessary to wait for this to occur, as in the previous exercise;
- A director names a pitch and leads exploration of either its Major or minor triad through the appropriate left-hand position while invoking the right-hand ‘infinity spiral’ (*Quixote*) to encourage slow but rhythmically free progress up and down its arpeggio so that the sound of the chord resonates in varied ranges;
- Naming a specific pitch, an individual leads the progression I-IV-I;
- Naming a specific pitch, an individual leads the progression I-V-I;
- Building on this, the progression I-IV-V-I can be signed and performed;
- Exploring all the harmonic properties of chords I-IV-V-I while dwelling on each so that performers respond to the *Quixote* ‘infinity spiral’ to ensure they are familiar with the triads of the chord and the harmonic interaction of their pitches across a wide range;
- The secondary triads ii, iii and vi can be introduced to progressions;
- Exploring all the harmonic properties of chords I, IV, V, ii, iii and vi in a selected order while dwelling on each so that performers respond to the *Quixote* ‘infinity spiral’ to ensure they are familiar with the triads of the chord and the harmonic interaction of their pitches across a wide range;
- The Pachelbel *Canon* progression can be signed and performed, together with its bass line (see [The secondary triads for Major and minor] and [Adding bass lines and getting into four harmonic parts]);
- Participants can improvise using Kodály hand-signs in the right-hand melodies that can be accompanied by the group playing the Pachelbel progression, or any other harmonic accompaniment that they can sign with the left hand.

The range of musical experience these exercises cover ought to be sufficient to getting performers to the same kind of level they should have reached as singers before attempting them. From this point onwards, and new activity or technique introduced vocally can with care be transferred to instrumental performance as well.

