

**GREENMILL**  
  
**STRINGS**  
**PROJECT**

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## **Introduction**

The Greenmill Strings Project began in March 2010 as a joint venture between East Ayrshire Council, Drake Music and the RSAMD's Musicworks programme. Funding was secured from the Scottish Arts Council , Access to Excellence Fund.

The programme was designed as a pilot programme to evaluate two different yet inter-related learning and teaching concepts:

- Try out a full class approach to string tuition using Figurenotes notation and gauge its effectiveness in accelerating the process of learning to play and read music with larger groups
- Work with educators and string teachers experienced in orchestral tuition with young people to develop an approach combining other proven methods with Figurenotes

## **History of Full Class Strings Tuition**

The use of full class strings teaching originated in the UK in the late Nineteenth Century and was introduced by an instrument manufacturer and distributor called J.G.Murdock & Co. They provided everything a school would need and within a short period of time developed a substantial following which at its height provided over 500,000 young people with quality instrumental tuition in full class settings. This innovative project was brought to an end with the start of the first world war, however not before a group of entrepreneurial American educators had the chance to observe the programme in action.

Following the first world war and over the many generations to follow the US introduced and subsequently mastered full class tuition techniques ultimately providing quality musical experiences in an openly accessible and economic way. However in the UK a return to a more traditional one-to-one approach in our instrumental teaching was adopted.

## **Figurenotes**

Figurenotes is a music notation system developed in Finland by Markku Kaikkonen and Kaarlo Uusitalo and used to teach music to people before they can read conventional notation. The inventors of the system developed it as a way of teaching music to adults with learning

difficulties at the Resonaari Music School in Helsinki. Figurenotes uses colour and shape to identify the musical elements of pitch and duration and is based on the ability to match identical symbols. Each musical note has a corresponding symbol. Players match the colour and shape of the note they see on the music to a sticker on their instrument and simply 'play what they see'. Figurenotes conveys the same musical information as conventional notation, and has a sequence of three stages of transition making it possible to progress to reading standard music notation. It is not a method or way of teaching but a notation system that can be combined with other teaching approaches.

Drake Music Scotland decided to introduce the system to Scotland as an interesting approach to music making for those in the community with learning difficulties, who were physically able to play an instrument but for whom reading music was the barrier. Funding was secured from the Scottish Arts Council (now Creative Scotland) for a pilot project and during the pilot several ways Figurenotes could be useful for learning and playing music making in mainstream settings also started to be explored.

## **Teaching Methodology**

It was important in the design of the programme to ensure that the two key aims of the pilot, stated above, were addressed effectively as well as providing the young students with a quality opportunity to learn core skills at their chosen string instrument. It was also important that the students gained a broad musical understanding and to develop enhanced team working skills. In addition to their development as; successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors.

The pilot focused on working with two full primary 3 classes receiving two lessons per week of 40 minutes in duration. The lessons were delivered by two practitioners one in a lead role and one assisting. The class teacher was always present in the lessons, however their role was as a learner and not as a teacher.

Students were assigned instruments which were retained in school between lessons to ensure that bad habits were not formed outwith lesson time, a recognised difficulty in conventional teaching settings. This also ensured that the project costs remained within acceptable boundaries as one set of instruments were used by both classes.

The use of Figurenotes as an alternative notation format was introduced to one class with the second class working with conventional musical notation, a structured evaluation and

comparison study was created. Both classes received the same lesson formats and resources, adapted to the relevant notation format.

All resources were newly created for the programme, to ensure that a fair and easy comparison of progress from the students could be made.

It became clear early in the programme that a structured behaviour management system was required not to curb bad behaviour but to help control the students over enthusiastic approach to their lessons. It was also felt that the introduction of such a system could support the development of an effective learning community.

A coloured star and black spot system was introduced to :

- Develop a motivation for good, controlled and respectful behaviour
- To develop a responsibility to their section and to the orchestra as a whole

Pupils were divided into their instrument sections (Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, Cello, Double bass) a star (reward) would be given either to one individual, with the section benefiting, or to the section as a whole. A black spot (penalty) would be given for poor behaviour, following one warning, this spot would be given to one person but would penalise the section.

This behaviour management system proved to be a significant success and has developed an exceptional understanding of group responsibility and also created a disciplined and respectful learning community.

## **Research Methodology**

To ensure an effective analysis of the use of figure notes and full class string teaching multiple research methods were used ;

- Weekly student feed-back

Students were polled weekly on their musical development using two different systems :

- Thumbs – Three stage feedback, thumbs up, positive, thumbs down, negative and thumb in middle, okay.

- Fist to Five – Fist being zero out of five and five fingers signifying five out of five<sup>1</sup>.

- Weekly music leader and assistant feedback

Both the music leader and assistant kept personal reflective diaries following each teaching session and any notes from informal discussion made. These diaries have been used as qualitative evidence.

- Literacy programme – Letter writing

In order to obtain qualitative evidence from the young people involved in the programme a project focusing on letter writing was introduced with the classroom. As music leader I wrote to the students asking for their feedback on the project. Students replied as part of the class project.

- Teacher and Head-teacher feedback

Participating teachers were asked to provide written information on their experience which was reported at the end of the project period.

- Case study (main focus on full class teaching as an intervention)

Participating teachers were asked to provide two short case studies on children participating in the strings programme.

## **Results**

*'The approach of the whole class lessons has, in my opinion, built a real and meaningful community between class teacher, pupils and music instructor. This community is supportive and encouraging of each other and every challenge becomes everyone's responsibility whether it is a challenge faced by the whole class or by one individual.'*

Christine Wilson, Head Teacher

*'Figure notes as a training tool for rhythm became a powerful resource progressing students significantly quicker than those learning using conventional notation.'*

Christopher Gray, Music Leader

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<sup>1</sup> It was important that when students used a thumbs down or fist they were asked to explain their response.

The initial resource design process for this project took over three months, throughout the process it became clear that Figurenotes as a resource would be of significant value, however there were reservations as to the complexity of using the method in full (shapes and colours) and the introduction of this to all the instruments within the class setting, and therefore the six octave variance in those instruments.

However on implementation it was clear that Figurenotes as a rhythmical training method was highly successful: throughout the period of the initial pilot it was estimated that students in the Figurenotes class progressed in relation to reading and rhythmic security at least two months in advance of the class learning with conventional notation.

On a weekly basis using both forms of immediate feedback students in the Figurenotes class reported that the method was easy to work with and mainly answered yes on a unanimous basis. Students found the method to be clean and easy. Both Music leader and assistant also noticed an enhanced development of rhythmic and reading abilities early in the project.

Figurenotes as a method also supported the development of bowing technique, with particular reference to bow distribution and control. The visual relationship between Figurenotes and bowing technique ensured that students in the Figurenotes class found it easier to develop these skills. (information interpreted from immediate feedback methods).

Although students in the Figurenotes class were moved onto conventional notation during the projects summer school, the difference between classes in relation to rhythmic accuracy and reading skills has been maintained.

The use of full class string teaching has also provided significant results, particularly in the area of creating of learning environments and engagement and motivation of students.

*Everything is set as a 'challenge'; can they have a look over what they have been learning quietly? Can they 'have a go' quietly? What I have noticed very quickly is that it is not only the academically gifted pupils who are playing well but some of our less able pupils have gained confidence in themselves and not afraid 'to have a go'.*

Kay Mitchell, Principal Teacher

It is important to consider the technical and musical quality of the project. Although progress can be considered slower than small group

or one-to-one tuition it would be fair to say that students have a more consolidated understanding technically and a broader musical understanding particularly in the area of ensemble skills (an comprehension of ensemble techniques).

Additional information that can be considered in this area is as follows:

- Student sign-up to summer school was as follows
  - 15 students of 22 in the Figurenotes class attended
  - 5 students of 21 in the conventional class attended

In further investigation students within the Figurenotes class felt more motivated to learn due to the accessibility of Figurenotes as a notation method.

- Student attendance at East Ayrshire YMI Concert
  - 19 students of 22 in the Figurenotes calss attended
  - 13 students of 21 in the conventional class attended

Although no substantial evidence could be gathered as to why this discrepancy exists it cannot be discounted as having been in response to the use of Figurenotes.

- Following the conversion of the Figurenotes class to conventional notation students responded unanimously that Figurenotes was easier to understand and read and was their preferred method of choice.

Student quotes:

- 'I didn't not like anything really because it was just fun fun fun all [the] time'
- 'I liked reading the music sheets' (Figurenotes student)
- 'I won't be here next year because I'm moving so I am very sad I will be missing my lessons'

## **Conclusion**

Due to the success of the Full Class teaching programme East Ayrshire have committed to the development of the programme to become a full school initiative. The method is already in development in a further two Local Authorities following observation of the original programme in Greenmill Primary.

Although Figurenotes was phased out the benefits of the system are still strongly in the minds of those leading the programme. Therefore further research and development has been undertaken and Figurenotes will be introduced in the induction of new students in the future of the project.

Much research is still required in the development of both Full Class Strings Tuition and Figurenotes however the initial success of the programme warrants further research and development.

## **Next Steps**

Due to the success of the initial year the project commenced its second cohort of students in September 2010. Lessons are now provided weekly to the new Primary 3 classes as well as continuing with last year's Primary 3.

The approach has remained similar although the teaching is being undertaken by only one instrumental teacher which has proved to be successful.

Following further research and development the project will begin the induction of students in Primary 1 and Primary 2 of Greenmill Primary School in April 2011. The approach that will be used is a further development of materials designed for the initial project and will incorporate Figurenotes as the central method for introducing rhythm and reading skills with both classes.

Classes from the project have already been asked to perform at national events showcasing innovative and successful teaching approaches as well as local events focusing on musical excellence.

The project continues to be successful and it is hoped that it will eventually become not just a full class but a full school initiative.

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