



Technology in Music Education UK
Collaborating for Impact

TiME Member Spotlight: Rachel Shapey – I Can Compose **Interview by Kate Rounding, Development Manager, TiME**

This week we caught up with Rachel Shapey, founder and Director of the award-winning 'I Can Compose' to find out more about her nationally acclaimed courses. I Can Compose is an interactive music platform, created to help students and teachers with composing music, and to help take their composition skills to the next level.

Rachel set up I Can Compose in 2018 and in 2019 she won the Music Teacher Award for Outstanding Music Education Product. I asked Rachel to tell us about I Can Compose, and what sparked the beginning of this journey. "I had been teaching for over 12 years in Secondary Schools, and had consistently found there was a lack of resources for supporting teachers and students with composition. I thought it would be great if there was a website to direct students to, where they could get inspiration and practical guidance to help them with their composition techniques."

Through her teaching practice, Rachel had developed a substantial set of composition resources of her own, and with some high-quality material ready to be shared, Rachel set to work developing the site and building a set of purpose-made online composition courses. Rachel explained, "I had lots of great resources and thought I could expand my offer. I initially developed 6 courses, and encouraged by Industry colleagues, I launched the site in 2018"

In each course, Rachel provides a 'model' composition, breaks it down lesson by lesson to show the students how it is built up, and to give students the information and techniques to create a composition of their own. The courses take learners through a series of steps to demonstrate how different styles of music are composed.

Rachel explained that she found students lacked confidence in composing as part of their GCSE and A-Level music studies "Students often think 'I couldn't do that' but the exemplar compositions in the courses show how it can be done". The courses are agnostic and are not linked to a specific exam board and for teachers there are a lot of time saving and high-quality resources including homework packs, listening banks, and a free GCSE guide for starting with composition.

Rachel explains, "When teaching composition, it can be difficult to know where to start, it is such a vast area of music and there are so many styles to compose in. Many teachers have expressed that they lack confidence in teaching composition, this can be due to their own negative experiences of how composition was taught in school. Sometimes the solutions available to teachers can result in the courses becoming too prescriptive, with the whole class working on the same exercise and unable to utilise their specialism's or interests. Alternatively, the opposite can happen and the brief lacks structure. I Can Compose offer an approach which is somewhere in the middle, providing a clear structure, but also allowing the freedom for students to utilise their unique instrumental skills, their musical interests and to take the composition in their own direction."

Each course combines listening and practical exercises and offers inspirational tips and guidance throughout, providing the tools that young musicians (and adult learners) need to develop their composition skills. Rachel's carefully planned courses have translated the classroom experience to an online format, with teachers feeding back that they bring the lessons to life and feel 'like an interactive textbook'.

For example in the course "How to compose a great melody" you are taken through a series of steps demonstrating the elements that make a great melody, how to create a good melodic shape, and make your melody interesting and memorable. The course moves on to some useful techniques such as how to use stepwise and triadic movement and how to establish the key in your melody. There are lots of musical examples and plenty of tips on how to approach this from different perspectives, so the course is accessible for all students, whether they are an instrumental player, a computer music maker, a more advanced musician or just setting out on their composition journey.

This need for differentiation and to be able to respond to the changing needs of today's young musicians and composers leads our discussion on to how music technology is playing an ever-increasingly important role. Whilst Rachel has preferred programmes for writing herself she is well aware of the range of platforms and software that students are likely to use and has incorporated this into her courses, providing options for students to use their preferred choices. There are tips on how to work with notation software, for DAW users, and there is manuscript available to download for those who prefer to work with paper and pencil!

"More students are blending their musical creation and using DAW's, there are now more teachers who are introducing a range of platforms from Year 7. Teachers are thinking further down the line and helping them to develop these skills earlier. This early training will enable them to be more creative when they reach GCSE and A-Levels as they will have overcome some of the barriers to creativity that can be presented when learning how to use DAW's. Teachers are so pushed for time and the courses offer a structured approach, which ensures students have material to work

with and can develop their musical skills alongside their increased confidence in using music software.”

Rachel has observed a change over the past few years in how teachers are approaching and rethinking the music curriculum, “teachers are more aware of how individual topics can link together and in some cases developing music curriculum ‘maps’ to show progression over a much longer time, not just during one academic year, but from year 7 to year 10 and beyond. They are also introducing a more diverse range of musical styles, for example exploring video game music and fusion styles.”

Rachel has embraced this musical diversity with courses on composing in a range of genres including Jazz, Blues and Latin styles. In “How to compose a Tango” you are taken step by step (slow, slow, quick-quick, slow) through the characteristics of tango music, the instrumentation typically used, building bass lines and structuring chord progressions, through to creating that all important passion of the tango and finally how to create a recording of your music – Es muy bueno!

The I Can Compose website has many positive testimonials and it must be a rewarding experience to see students going on to achieve their musical goals, move on to Higher Education, even gain a recording contract or simply enjoy music as a constant part of their life – Rachel highlighted that receiving feedback was a real pleasure and reminds her why she set out to develop I Can Compose. “It is an intensive process to create the courses, and can take months, so hearing from students and teachers on how the course has supported them reminds me of why I started this journey.”

The courses are flexible with some teachers utilising it as the main focus of the lesson, working through it with the whole class, whilst others support individual students who work through the material at their own pace. There are a range of options of how to access the courses and people can choose which works best for them in their circumstances. Details of the options are available on the I Can Compose website including purchasing a years subscription to the courses, or classroom access with a pay per student option, or simply buying a one-off course.

In addition to winning the Music Teacher Award and gaining recognition for her courses, Rachel has recently been interviewed by The Sunday Times Style magazine and this will be available as a podcast within the next few weeks, with so much achieved already, we asked Rachel what was next. “I have been working on a set of new resources and I am in the process of creating a new course on composing music for film.” Rachel isn’t stopping there though and is currently writing a book for Harper Collins on teaching composition in the secondary classroom – this is due to be published in 2021.

We can’t wait to hear more, and for Music Hubs and Schools, Rachel has also been delivering school CPD sessions, some of which are in collaboration with Passing Notes Education and some through I Can Compose.

If you would like to find out about the CPD sessions or any of Rachel's courses you can find out more on the website: <https://www.icancompose.com> or contact Rachel on info@icancompose.com