

The Family Band

Edward Maxwell

Introduction

As a child, I was a very reluctant musician. My mum had a terrible battle trying to get me to practise, and she still delights in telling people how I used to hide under the bed rather than play my trumpet. The one thing I did enjoy, however, was making music with other people, and if I had not had opportunities to do that, there's no doubt that I wouldn't have ended up enjoying a career as a professional musician.

I'm passionate about enabling pupils of any standard (and age) to play music with other people. At the time of writing, all school and music service ensembles are suspended due to the Covid-19 pandemic. But there's still an opportunity to make music in a family setting – and obviously those opportunities will only continue and expand as the current restrictions are relaxed. And there's no reason why music making in small groups should be restricted to times of lockdown, of course: it's a valuable, enjoyable activity for school holidays, or even evenings and weekends during term time.

The problem is finding suitable music to play. Last Christmas, a trumpet student told me: 'I tried playing "Silent Night" with my brother on saxophone and sister on violin, but it sounded funny.' Well, yes, it would, because the instruments are all pitched in different keys. That gave me the idea to produce compatible mixed-ability parts that can be played by students in a family setting. Maybe parents can be persuaded to dust off the instrument they used to play, but which has long since been banished to the loft.

Encouraging students to make music in the parlour might sound decidedly Victorian, but it's an activity that should be revived – a lot of family fun and laughter can result (and probably a few furious rows, too).

The Family Band is arranged in five parts (including piano accompaniment):

- ▶ a simple tune
- ▶ a descant part for a more advanced player
- ▶ a simple harmony part
- ▶ a bass part
- ▶ a piano accompaniment

Everything is compatible with everything else, and it's not necessary to have all parts covered, so just find a part for your instrument that's most suited to your standard.

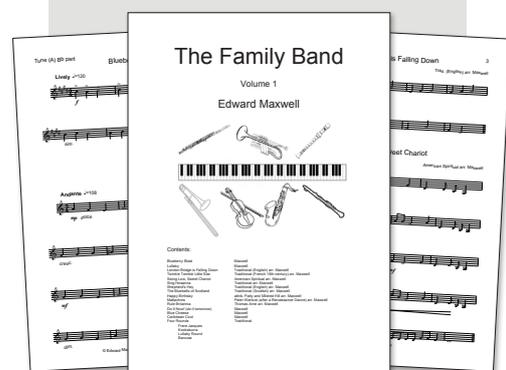
Each of the five parts has the following versions and transpositions:

- ▶ Tune (A): 'high' and 'low' versions in C (flute/violin/oboe), B flat (trumpet/clarinet), E flat (tenor horn/alto sax), F (horn), and bass clef C (trombone/cello/bassoon/tuba).
- ▶ Descant (B): parts in C, B flat, E flat and F.
- ▶ Harmony (C): 'high' and 'low' parts in C, B flat, E flat and F.
- ▶ Bass (D): parts in bass clef C (trombone/cello/bassoon/tuba) and treble clef B flat (brass band instruments).
- ▶ Piano accompaniment (with guitar chords).

Simplicity is the key: it's more important to play something easy fluently, rather than stumble through something that's slightly too hard. If you think of performances you may have heard in school concerts, something simple played immaculately is always more impressive than something harder that's played badly. Don't ever think something is too easy for you – you can always play it better. If you want, you can even make it harder for yourself by improvising a more elaborate part, or reading a part in a different key to practise your transposition. In ensemble playing, the rhythm is far more important than the actual notes, so make sure you always play with a solid beat.

A note about keys: an easy key for one instrument can be very hard for another. There's a lot of published mixed-ensemble music for schools that's arranged very much with violinists in mind, but the trumpet parts (to take an example) are completely unplayable for a beginner: A major is an easy key for the violin, but B major is virtually impossible for a beginner trumpet player. Taking a one-size-fits-all approach inevitably involves compromises. I've mixed the keys up a bit, and if you find that they don't quite work so well for your family or group combination, feel free to transpose the music into more suitable ones. It's good practice for grade 5 theory too. Of course, each instrument's range is different,

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so you may wish to transpose a part into a different octave, but I've written a 'high' and 'low' part for concert pitch instruments, so you can choose which is most suitable (flute players will probably choose the high version, but violinists might prefer the low one). The E flat part is more suitable for alto saxophone than tenor horn, so you may need to transpose some of the tunes down an octave if you're an E flat brass player.

The first tune, 'Blueberry Blast', is only eight bars long and the actual 'tune' is all on the same note – it's written for a complete beginner. As with all the pieces, students can extend this: try repeating it several times, improvising different rhythms. Players on the other parts can also feel free to depart from the written notes and improvise. Here's a suggested extended format:

- ▶ Everyone plays what's written.
- ▶ Everyone keeps repeating what's written, with a different player improvising each time.
- ▶ Everyone improvises at the same time.
- ▶ Finish it off with the written tune.

'Blue Cheese' is written in a standard 12-bar blues, so there are endless possibilities for improvisation. I've included a blues scale, which will make any improvisation sound more authentic. Don't forget to swing the quavers.

This model can be used for all the tunes. For further variation, get students to try with different dynamics and articulations to create different moods. See if they can think of a story that goes with the music. They can even try and come up with some words, to turn them into songs (of course, some of the tunes are songs with words already – look them up online). The title of the tune 'Do It Now! (do it tomorrow)' is to help with the syncopated rhythms. I didn't write any words beyond the first two bars, so it would be great if they could finish it off!

At the end, there are some rounds – each entry point is marked with a snowflake symbol.

If you'd like to buy paper copies, they can be ordered from my website (www.edwardmaxwell.com). Backing tracks as MP3 files are downloadable from my website too (www.edwardmaxwell.com/page18.htm). If you've enjoyed playing this, The Family Band Volume 2, which is a larger pack, can also be purchased from my website (www.edwardmaxwell.com/page14.htm).