



The Creative Skills Podcast  
Episode 9: Rhythm, Self-Expression and Child-Led Music with Fraser Stone  
**Transcript**

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**Heather Armstrong (00:09):**

Welcome to episode nine of Creative Skills Online. I'm Heather Armstrong and on this podcast, we're hosting a series of chats with amazing artists who usually deliver our Creative Skills training the early years workforce in Scotland.

This is our final episode before the summer, but the good news as we will be back! Over the summer, we'll be working hard on some exciting plans for season two of the podcast. Follow [@StarcatchersCS](#) on Twitter and sign up to our newsletter to make sure you're first to hear what we're up to.

And get in touch with any feedback or ideas - Creative Skills Online is here to support the early workforce in Scotland to feel and be more creative, and we always love to hear from you and learn how we can make things better.

One of the formats we're going to be looking at next year is something called Agony Artist, where we'll take a look at some of your problems and practice and find creative solutions. So, if you have any queries for our artists, then get in touch now!

For our final episode of season one and chatting to musician and educator Fraser Stone. Hi Fraser, how you doing?

**Fraser Stone (01:09):**

Hi, Heather. Thanks for having me. I'm good, and yourself?

**Heather Armstrong (01:12):**

Yeah, just trying to encourage people to be creative from afar!

**Fraser Stone (01:18):**

I'm sure you're doing a wonderful job.

**Heather Armstrong (01:19):**

Aw well, it's great to have you on today!

**Fraser Stone (01:19):**

And hopefully I'm not going to put an end to that! Hopefully I really encourage people as well.

**Heather Armstrong (01:28):**

All creativity stops here! No, no, no! Lovely to have you on. So, I will kick off the way I do with everybody with a completely open-ended question - tell us a wee bit about your practice with wee ones?

**Fraser Stone (01:41):**

As long as I can remember, I've been fascinated by rhythm and I've used that interest to develop and build my skills as a musician and an educator. I've been lucky enough that this passion has allowed me to travel around the world, meet some fascinating people, and explore different cultures and traditions.

And, in my downtime, when I wasn't going on tour, another passion was community engagement work as a practitioner. So, you know, these, professional experiences have informed the work that I do with wee ones and groups up and down the country.

I try and deliver activity that that folk can connect to in their own ways. I think that's incredibly important. All the activities are pretty versatile, and the idea is that you introduce like a kind of blueprint that groups and individuals can then build upon in their own settings.

I suppose my work with wee ones is all about encouraging them to explore the sound and rhythm found in both musical settings and non-musical settings. I know that's a pretty hippy thing to say! But often I find the lines between musical and non-musical settings are blurred, you know? There are so many things around you in the world that we live in that create noise and make cycle patterns. Kind of everything is music. And as I say, it's a fairly hippy thing to say, but I do believe that by developing a better understanding of surroundings we can connect to our environments a bit better.

With rhythm itself, to many, it kind of runs deeper than the parameters set in a musical context anyway. So, you know, I think it's a natural part of everyone. And again, with the groups that I deliver, or help kind of facilitate, it's about tapping into that and highlighting that it's a natural part of everyone. At the end of the day we're anchored by pulse - it accompanies us through life and everything we do - our very existence.

**Heather Armstrong (04:17):**

It's that idea that the first rhythm we hear it is when we're still in our mum - it's the heartbeat?

**Fraser Stone (04:23):**

That's right! I've developed a resource and I'm currently staring at the picture of my wee girl, and she's about maybe a year and a half, and she's sitting on one of these wee djembes and I've got a fascinating fact - and that's the fascinating fact - I have been building my sense of rhythm and pulse since the second trimester of fetal development.

And I think there's something quite beautiful about that before you had even born into this crazy world you're already taking on sound. And you just obviously kind of build on that

throughout your life.

I always use this example of my colleague in the RCS, he's an old LA percussionist and session player - he's done lots of the famous Hollywood films - but he said: "If you can walk in a straight line, you've got rhythm." And he goes on to say - he runs this rhythm theory course at the RCS - and he goes on to say: "the capability to comprehend and produce rhythm is hardwired in our anatomy and your neurology, just like our ability to interpret what we see touch, smell and taste. It's an essential survival mechanism and a fundamental part of our humanity." So, you know, whether we like it or not, we've got it. You know, there's no getting away from it!

**Heather Armstrong (05:53):**

So, I know you've run lots and lots of Creative Skills sessions before. Do you ever find practitioners to say that they don't have a sense of rhythm?

**Fraser Stone (06:02):**

Yeah, I think any trainer that will go on some of the Creative Skills courses and teach a group will have that element of breaking down barriers. Obviously, it's about kind of building up confidence and I mean, I always kind of say "You have it, you have it in you,". It's about connecting the dots and developing that sense of coordination.

But I think as a facilitator, we all come up against that feeling of "Oh, I can't do it". It's just about nurturing that and just everybody understanding and being mindful that everybody is on their kind of own journey with it. And it's about helping to kind of nurture that and bring the best out and slowly but surely - obviously, kind of injecting a bit of fun in the workshop as well - but slowly but surely these barriers come down and by the end of it they're all loving it, you know? I like that challenge.

**Heather Armstrong (07:22):**

It's a nice thing to keep in mind. I think, and I know that I'd probably be guilty in the past, of thinking "Oh, I don't think I have a good sense of rhythm" but I've taken part in your workshops and I'm actually fine. I think sometimes-

**Fraser Stone (07:36):**

I was going to say, and now you're a master!

**Heather Armstrong (07:37):**

No, no, no no! Oh god, I thought you were going to say "Actually Heather, you don't have rhythm"!

**Fraser Stone (07:37):**

*[jokingly]* You were on *that* list!

**Heather Armstrong (07:38):**

*[jokingly]* It's innate in all humanity - except Heather!

I think sometimes, you can think about it too much - that's what I find anyway. If you think about it too much and put a lot of pressure, particularly if other people are relying on you and that kind of performative state of - I was going to say "If you need to hit the triangle" - you've never given me a triangle!

**Fraser Stone (08:13):**

*[jokingly]* No, triangles are banned.

To be honest, I think if you think about anything too much, you trip yourself up over it, you know what it's like, anything you're learning. Even like in a professional setting, I can play some pretty complex music in some of the band situations that I play with, and if I know that there's a really intricate bit of music coming up, if I think of it too much, I'm going to freak myself out and trip up! It's like learning to drive, you know, if you're on approach to the roundabout and you think about it too much, you're going to stall!

**Heather Armstrong (09:05):**

I love the fact that you used the word "explore".

**Fraser Stone (09:08):**

Yeah. I mean, again, it kind of connects with that idea that everybody's different and everybody's coming to this in a different way, they might have a different approach. They might have a different learning style.

They could be coming to your session having had the worst morning so you're really kind of playing to the dynamic of the room and the easiest way to do that is to deliver and facilitate activity that's incredibly flexible. And it has to be like that. Especially like rhythm-based exercises and activities - it has to be super flexible to encourage people that might be coming to this for the first time and not to automatically for their barriers to go up and think "No, I can't do this" because, I mean, I've had kind of horror stories of the way trainers have approached sessions and it's totally put folk off for life, you know?

That's not what I'm about encouraging and nurturing. And you know, all the sessions are different, and all the outcomes are different - and if they're the same, then I'd probably be doing something wrong, you know? It's about celebrating the individual and what they bring to it rather than like a product of the end.

**Heather Armstrong (10:37):**

It feels quite different from that - I think a lot of us maybe kind of grew up with ideas of music being quite a formal thing that you need to go through repetition, repetition, repetition, and the practice, the instrument and that the creativity only comes once you're really, really, really, really accomplished at a musical instrument, but that's not the case at all, is it?

**Fraser Stone (11:00):**

No, I think when you're going to start and approaching anything you have to have this initial freedom to explore, especially if you're trying to encourage wee ones. I mean if they then show interest in that particular kind of area, then you can start introducing the idea of how you kind of build on that and setting kind of realistic goals. How do you get to somewhere where you want to go?

Obviously, I have endless amounts of resource - I have spent my life collecting drums and cymbals and I always say to my son, who's seven, I'm like, anytime you want to come to me and learn how to play the kit, I'll teach you. But I'm really aware not to kind of put too much pressure on it and make it more of a chore, and to try and encourage that freedom just to kind of explore to see if he likes it.

And you know, it's kind of worked because now he, he does go out and play and it's almost like that kind of special time for me and him to connect and just kind of play drums, you know? It's that kind of whole thing of not putting too much pressure on, I think that's incredibly important at the start, not to put folk off.

**Heather Armstrong (12:30):**

It's about that age and stage appropriate thing, isn't it? Because I know when I've spoken about creativity, across all art forms, that were taking that kind of exploration and some people who are really experts in their field have said "Oh, but at some point, you need to learn the skills". And I'm saying, yeah, but I don't think when you're three or four that's necessarily the time!

And what you're talking about, it still sounds like a really child led positive approach because it's his choice.

**Fraser Stone (12:57):**

I mean, I remember before he was even born, I was trying to connect through the belly, and I remember playing different rhythms to him, and all that kind of stuff.

**Heather Armstrong (13:12):**

I'm imagining you actually like drumming on the bump.

**Fraser Stone (13:15):**

I did! I wasn't even playing simple stuff. I was playing 7/8 patterns. I was like, my kid's gonna come out a genius!

I think kids naturally have that, you know, picking up the likes of their mother's heartbeat, the sense of pulse, the rhythm found in language. Then you add an additional layer, which is obviously dad's totally crazy about drums. I know that he has it in him so when he sits down at the kit, I know that it doesn't take him too long to feel like he's getting somewhere.

And to be honest, I think that's the beauty about rhythm and drums, particularly in the sessions that I can deliver. You've got folk that have had kind of major barriers, you know, to music, thinking "Oh, I'm not, I've not got any rhythm at all" but drums are, you know, to get kind of sense of achievement is really, really easy. I just make it look difficult!

**Heather Armstrong (14:19):**

So, let's talk a little bit about those sessions. I'm particularly thinking about, wee ones who haven't been lucky enough to have you as the dad drumming on the mum's belly.

**Fraser Stone (14:29):**

You say lucky enough, but it goes two ways!

**Heather Armstrong (14:35):**

I know the sessions that you've run for us, you start off that warm up, you talk about kind of "Rhythm Explorers". Can you talk us through that?

**Fraser Stone (14:44):**

I suppose the main kind of aim of this is to help your child or a group to connect with the rhythm around them by exploring pulse and pattern found in a non-musical context. So, we kind of chatted about that before, obviously developing workshops to explore them both the musical and non-musical context.

So, a really easy one is to do non-musical first and getting them to kind of think slightly outside the box - thinking about the likes of swaying trees, footprints in the sand, ticking clocks, you know, rhythm found in language. So, this is an activity that can be delivered anywhere. All you need is your, your senses - your eyes, touch and a way of capturing sound. So, we've used the likes of dictaphones before or mobile phones - a recording device to kind of capture these sounds around you, but you can also do things like collect

things in buckets, or you can draw sounds and that's linked in with the second activity that we'll talk about as well, or simply by remembering the kind of things you hear.

So, as a Rhythm Explorer - again, it's either individuals or groups - you head out and explore your tools and environment, whatever that may be, and you're taking time to tune into your surroundings and connect with the sounds around you, you know, what can you see? What can you hear? And I suppose, can you hear any sounds that are making a constant pulse or making a cycle parent?

A cycle pattern is just a pattern that's repeated. So, for example, you know, especially just now, given it's springtime, the birds are going absolutely crazy! And so, there's constant cycle pattern and there's also this idea of call and response because they go and "Hey, how are you doing?" "I'm trying to attract a mate!" There's this kind of [*pretends to be birds having a conversation*] tweet, tweet, tweet to it. So, you've got this kind of thing - spring - you've got this phonic kind of thing happening which is incredible. So, it's a great time to do this activity.

You're wanting to kinda collect maybe several different kinds of rhythms that you hear in your environments that you're exploring. And if you're in a group setting, you can come back to discuss your findings, you know. So, we've delivered it before where people have recorded the sounds on mobile phones and one group plays the sounds, and the other group has to kind of guess what that sound is. There are other ways of doing it. Maybe kind of drawing the sound.

Then again, it's a bit of a kind of competition, you know, almost like a quiz. Thinking about like the likes of the texture of the sound as well. Can you describe these sounds that you've collected? These are all ways of kind of building upon. An extension could be if you have the likes of musical instruments can you replicate the sounds or the rhythms on a musical instrument?

Later on, we're going to be chatting about junk percussion. So, it doesn't matter if you don't have any musical instruments, because if you stick to the end of the podcast then you'll learn how to make a can drum!

**Heather Armstrong (18:25):**

Coming up soon!

Actually, I love the idea of like two different groups going out - I'm not product driven at all, but having that kind of like "Oh, the other group can guess what this is", I think can sometimes be a great motivator. But I love really encouraging those listening skills, which is so important can be quite difficult to do, particularly in quite a kind of busy, noisy

setting where there's so much going on. But that idea of just like getting outside and really tuning in is just fantastic.

**Fraser Stone (19:00):**

It's one of these things that life can be so busy and as you say, it's all very frantic and, you know, if you just like stop and listen for a while, it's amazing what you actually realize you're missing. Being able to connect with your surroundings on such a basic level is such an important thing to remember to kind of check in with here and there, you know?

So, I think it's a great start to learning about rhythm before you've even played anything to, you know, learn any kind of drumming or whatever it is you're learning about. What's already around me? And how do I kind of tap into that? How can I use that to then kind of build and develop on?

**Heather Armstrong (19:48):**

I really love the idea that you were saying as well about the kind of vocabulary that can be developed around it. So is that kind of - how can you describe that sound as if it's a swishing or a squishy or, and I think, you know, as young children, as vocabulary starts to develop the way they can share that imagination with you is absolutely massive. And you will find that just by having those collaborative discussions, there'll be new words being explored and sometimes even new words being invented!

**Fraser Stone (20:16):**

Yeah, absolutely. And I think, as you say, there's something quite special about that particularly kind of working with children of that kind of age. It's incredible what they can come up with, you know? So always a joy to kind of deliver that, that warm up.

**Heather Armstrong (20:36):**

Yeah. Amazing. Thank you. Okay, what we're moving on to after that then? So, we've warmed up! We've found the rhythm in life!

**Fraser Stone (20:43):**

So building on that - rhythm art came from, you know, an early age, my kids loved music moving to music and I became fascinated about how it made them move.

So, this kind of got me thinking about how to capture this innate response of what they were doing - you know, dancing and moving. It's that kind of psychophysical response to music, you can't help but move.

So, rhythm art, then, is a multi-disciplinary activity that encourages creativity to capture and celebrate yours or your children's, or a groups, rhythm by creating a colorful journey in

response to what they hear. So, you and the tiny tots are invited to think about and respond to music in different ways - exploring music through the likes of color texture movement, mark-making on paper. So, you need probably to think about what clothes you're wearing!

You're going to need rolls of paper - if you're delivering on a kind of large scale, I tend to use, lining paper that you get from your local B&Q. You need a music player. You need a range of water-based paints, different tools for mark-making - anything goes. But most importantly, you need some cleaning products at the end! Buckets of water, wipes, towels.

I mean, I think it's important to consider as you're kind of planning this activity to think about the music that, you know, initially the group is going to connect to rather than like sticking on some free jazz, you know? And they kids go "What? Where the hell am I?" You know, something to get them moving. It depends on the group that I'm working with but for younger kids if you take a Disney movie and use the soundtrack, I mean, you're onto a winner because they love it. They know all the words.

I think there's three main things to think about. You're thinking about music and color, music and texture and music through movement. So, with color, again, you might want to just chat about this first with a group. So, once you've done all the prep, once you've kind of set up your space, you invite the group onto the page, and you maybe introduce them to the particular track.

And what you're doing is encouraging to think about what colors that they can see when they listened to the music - if it helps they shut their eyes. That might be a strange question and kids will be like: "What?" but if it helps - music can be incredibly emotive as well. So, you're thinking about the emotions that you feel when you're listening to a piece of music and maybe you can connect the color with emotion, maybe that's an easier way of doing it. It might be the case that if you're working with very, very, very young children, you just let them choose their favorite colour.

And it can link in the likes of the rhythm explorers session that you just said - the warmup - you're thinking about kind of texture within the music itself. You're thinking about the science, the instrumentation of the piece. Again, this needs to be kind of pitched where it's obviously age and stage appropriate. You could try and encourage responses, like is the music jaggy? Is it smooth? That's kind of fairly basic when you're thinking about dynamics - is the music loud? Is it soft?

Thinking about the range of tools that you might have for your mark-making. I have all sorts of things. Paint, rollers, brushes, drumsticks. I have a heap of old drums, so I use the drum shells. They're pretty cool. I use some giant Jenga blocks as well, and kids can build

towers which is pretty cool. So, if you think about what mark-making tool you could use to best represent the sound you can you hear.

So, the kind of next step when you're thinking about texture is then you get onto movement. So now that you've chosen your color, and now that you've chosen your tool, how can I move to explore movement with your child in response to what they hear? For example, you may find slow, smooth music encourages longer brush-like strokes. Faster music features more kind of vigorous movements, you know, they might just start busting out some disco moves - you never know! Everything goes really.

For an additional sensory experience, try and encourage the use of hands and feet. And again, I think this then connects with that whole kind of primitive caveman type thing, that rhythm is in there.

Something to bear in mind when you're doing this is actually how you're managing the use of paint and who is in control of that. The important thing is that it's child led, but if you hand over the reigns of the paint pot to your child, your activity is probably going to be quite short because the whole page will be covered incredibly quickly. And one thing to bear in mind as well, is that if you have an excess of paint on the page, it gets pretty slippery. I think initially you can be in control of the paint, but they're in control of where they take that initial amount of paint you put on the page or wherever it is. That's probably a safe way to start. There's lots of things you can do, you know?

**Heather Armstrong (27:11):**

When I've seen you taking part in these sessions, actually, what I've really loved - and obviously when we do Creative Skills it's adults who are going through this training-

**Fraser Stone (27:24):**

And they can be really wild! They can be the wildest!

**Heather Armstrong (27:24):**

Well, this is the thing! What I love is that people start by exploring - whether it's the Jenga blocks or the drum shells or wherever it is that they're starting to explore - and then maybe there'll be a little bit of paint, but then at the moment the music kicks in, you'll skoosh a big bit of paint along this length of the paper and you really see people - it's like a provocation!

That's the way I think of it. It's not about you controlling the paint, although it is, but it's also about saying "Well, actually here's a new provocation and what happens when the blue suddenly appears?" and you do see people suddenly they'll move in a different way. They'll open up, they'll start to become more engaged.

**Fraser Stone (28:02):**

It's kind of like, here's your next little step up - where are you going to take this?

**Heather Armstrong (28:06):**

Yes, exactly. And I think that paint management was exactly what I was thinking about. Because it is that thing, if everything gets dumped on all at once, then, you know, it can be messy. It can be dangerous. It can be short lived.

**Fraser Stone (28:23):**

Well, I think that's the thing. Obviously, you can kind of build up to that - handing over that control, but yeah you want to let people get the most out of the experience. So initially by holding something back and introducing things slowly, that's the only way you're going to do that.

And I've been in Creative Skills sessions before where, you know, there's kind of characters there that want to take a bit more ownership over that. And the thing is it is kind of then short-lived because they do just go wild with the paint. And suddenly it's just a massive, like brown splodge on the page rather than there being multiple layers because the paint has had time to kind of dry and there's some really interesting kind of patterns emerging - and you can see those layers on the page, complimenting the layers on the music.

**Heather Armstrong (29:16):**

Yeah. And I think it's about being sensitive to the fact that there will definitely be people within groups that will be responding in different ways. And I love the idea of again, across any art form, of introducing different elements gradually because particularly with wee ones, if there's a whole new experience, if you introduce really dramatic music and the paint and they're there all at once, as many colours as you want - it can often be overwhelming.

**Fraser Stone (29:41):**

Yes, it's a sensory overload, isn't it?

**Heather Armstrong (29:45):**

Yes, exactly. But if you take it stage by stage, then it gives them the chance to explore each different element!

So earlier you were telling me about using recycling to build percussion at home. Could you tell us a bit about more about that?

**Fraser Stone (29:59):**

So this is a drum kit in a can, you can call it Stan or Fran and it's a man or a woman!

I've used junk percussion in many sessions. I mean, you'll never view your rubbish, or recycling in the same way again if you start experiencing this. With percussion and rhythm you can use anything - I spent my life hitting table tops. The breakfast table tends to be me starting something off and suddenly the kids jump in. My wife's probably sitting there going "Where did I go wrong in my life?"

But for this drum kit in a can obviously you need a tin can. You want to make sure that there's no sharp edges. That's incredibly important. Obviously, if you're working with wee ones, you can take a wee bit of a grip paper or sandpaper to any kind of sharp bits, or try and get a can that has no sharp bits once you've opened it up.

You need a few other things: you need a good quality balloon, some tape - some sellotape - scissors, a lollipop stick, elastic bands and anything to decorate your Stan or Fran in any way you want.

So, you're going to take your can to make sure it's washed. To add a bit of shake to your can you can put up some pasta in it, some pulses, you can pop some giant couscous in it if you're really posh!

Then, you're going to take your balloon. Now, if you hold your balloon and the tip of the balloon, as in the bit that you blow into, is pointing to the floor, then what you want to do is make a horizontal cut about two thirds of the way up. So, you're kind of left with the kind of biggest part of the balloon and what you're going to do there is you're going to stretch it over the open end of the can. So, you're almost creating - if you picture like a drum - you're almost using this balloon as a drum skin.

And then taping it into place. People can find this bit a little tricky, there's some trial and error. Just make sure you have that tape maybe cut to size. And then suddenly you've got like a playing surface really, really simple.

So, you've got a playing surface, you've got your balloon and you've got obviously the metal playing surface in the end. So, you've got two playing surfaces as well as your shake.

**Heather Armstrong (32:59):**

Nice!

**Fraser Stone (32:59):**

Incredible! Genius! So, what are you gonna want to do then is attach - you're looking for a bit of snap - some texture. I mean, the thing is you can explore different textures. So again, this is just a basic drum kit in a can idea.

So, for that snap, you're attaching your lollipop stick, use your elastic band. Put an elastic band at the top of the can at the bottom of the can, and then slot in your lollipop stick. I have gone for a giant lollipop stick. You should be able to hear a bit of a snap now.

**Heather Armstrong (33:38):**

Nice! Yep.

**Fraser Stone (33:41):**

Cool. And the last step is obviously to decorate the can to make it into like - you could decorate it to make it into a little character. So your Fran or Stan character, and Bob's your uncle, Barbara's your aunty, you have your very own drum kit in a can!

**Heather Armstrong (33:58):**

Now, you've kind of talked us through how to make that we will work to make a video so that people can really see the potential of that and real life.

Listen, thank you so much. This has been so much fun, and it's been lovely to think about music and such a kind of exploratory and fun way - that's really, really important. And yeah, just an absolute joy as ever! And you'll be joining us on zoom in a couple of weeks to run some live sessions as well.

**Fraser Stone (34:24):**

Fantastic. Looking forward to it. Listen Heather, thanks so much for having me. It's great to be connecting with the Starcatchers team, even though it's over Zoom and not in person. It's so fantastic to be here.

**Heather Armstrong (34:36):**

Brilliant. Thanks so much, Fraser, speak to you soon!

**Fraser Stone (34:38):**

Thank you, cheers!

**Heather Armstrong (34:41):**

Bye!

**Catherine Wilson (34:41):**

Thank you so much for listening. The Creative Skills podcast was hosted by Heather Armstrong and our guest was Fraser Stone.

For resources that tie into this episode go to <http://www.starcatchers.org.uk/episode9>, where you'll find videos, Wee Inspirations idea cards, and a reflective practice worksheet that tie in today's episode. You'll also be able to sign up for a live online chat with Fraser.

There, you can also find all of our past episodes and their resources all for free a time that best suits you.

Our intro music is "Road Building" composed by Abigail Sinar and performed by the RSNO for "Hup" in 2014.

The Creative Skills is part of Starcatchers' Creative Skills programme - training and resources for the ELC workforce in Scotland funded by the Scottish government. To find out more head [www.starcatchers.org.uk](http://www.starcatchers.org.uk) and click on "Training and Development".

As Heather mentioned, we're going to take a break now, but we'll see you in September with more ideas. And don't forget to submit your Agony Artists' ideas to [catherine.wilson@starcatchers.org.uk](mailto:catherine.wilson@starcatchers.org.uk)