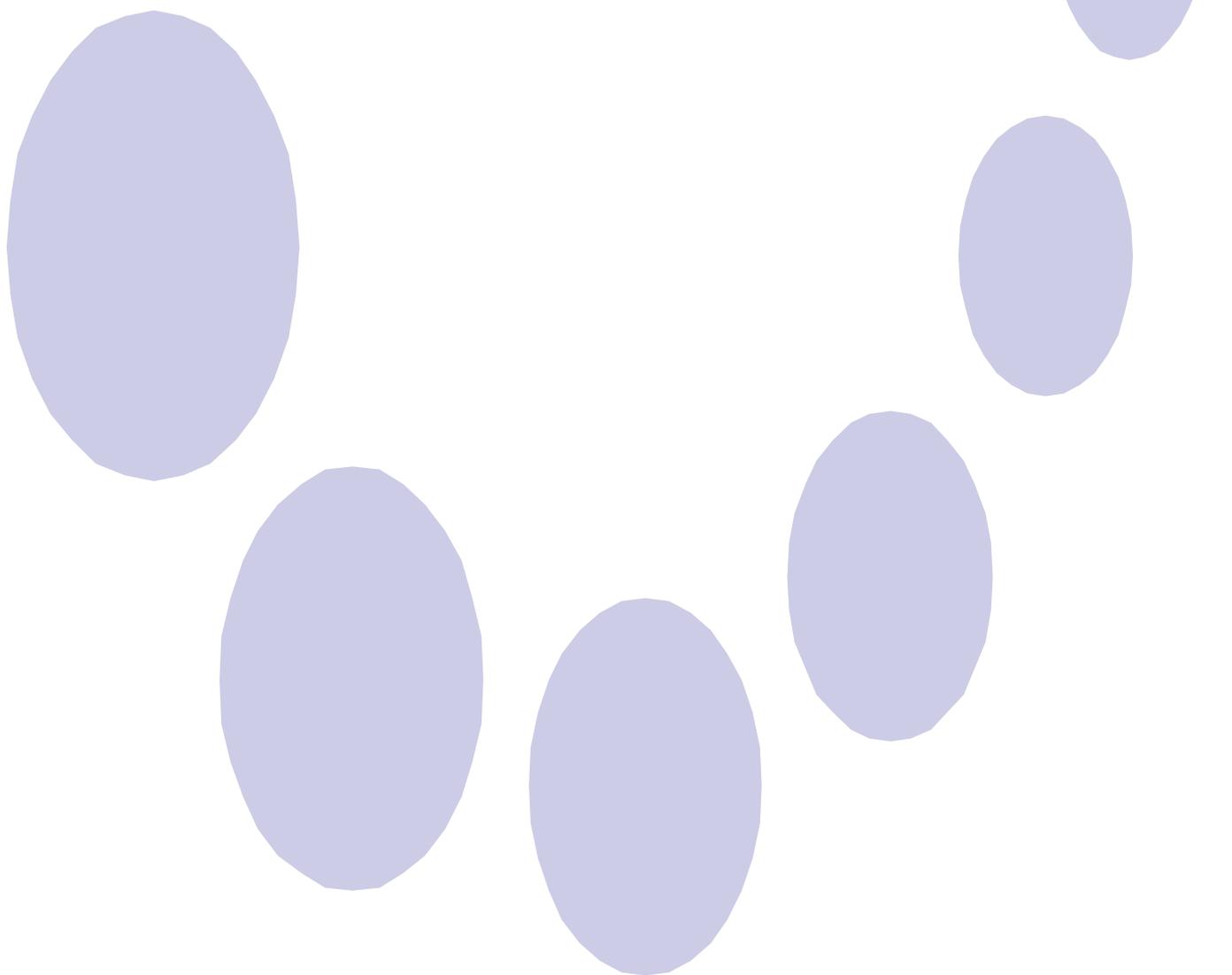


KEYBAND!

plugging into music

ensemble music in four parts for
electronic keyboards

written and devised by
andrew eales



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**This publication is dedicated to
the original members of the MKMS Premier KeyBand, 2001 :**

***Dominic Sindall, Vikki Morris, Helen Pritchard, Nick Comerford,
Matthew Maguire, Beth Georgiou, Jessica Lane & Alex Lugg***

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INTRODUCTION

What is KEYBAND?#

Keyband is the name I have given to the portable electronic keyboard ensembles that I have developed and worked with as part of my wider role as a keyboard player and teacher. A “Single Keyband” consists of four players, while a “Double Keyband” consists of eight, with two to each part.

The music that I have composed and arranged for Keyband is written in four parts. The pieces are short, and provide the basis only for the pieces which the Keybands themselves develop using improvisation and arranging techniques. Although conceived for “single” and “double” Keybands the music can be adapted for use by electronic keyboard or mixed ensembles of other sizes.

Keyband music fuses together the classical notion of part-writing and chamber ensemble with a jazz musician’s approach to structure and extemporisation, and the popular music cultures from around the world which are represented on a modern digital keyboard.

While portable electronic keyboards offer the player a wonderful opportunity to recreate popular music for their personal enjoyment and satisfaction, the notion of Keyband encourages players to move beyond these pleasures to a shared fulfilment and creativity. Keyband allows players to discover the joy of taking part in a more complex musical tapestry where each player has a distinct contribution to make, but where the music ultimately transcends its component elements.

Keyband uses electronic keyboards creatively, not merely attempting to replicate other sounds or cultures. Keyband *is its own* culture, a true and radical ensemble music which uses the resources of the instruments to create a wholly new music.

Why KEYBAND?#

The Keyband approach has many benefits and advantages over other approaches. Among these:

- ▶▶ Keyband is a style of music unique to the portable electronic keyboard, but which draws on the models of other instrumentalists and strengths learnt by musicians across many genres
- ▶▶ Keyband teaches players to work together, learn rehearsal technique, give signals, listen to balance and contribute to group decision making
- ▶▶ Keyband pieces are written with four distinct parts which can be learnt from the notation (encouraging better music reading skills) or by ear using the floppy disk interactively
- ▶▶ Keyband players learn to contribute effectively to a polyphonic texture, each part adding fresh elements to the music. But the music is so designed that it is not necessary to include all parts, so smaller groups can play selected parts only
- ▶▶ Keyband provides a secure structured basis for keyboard players to develop musical improvisation skills
- ▶▶ Keyband allows considerable freedom to arrange pieces and learn about effective musical structures

Most importantly of all, Keyband is real fun! Observing keyboard players taking part in other ensemble formats it is clear that they easily become bored, particularly if their part is in effect “filler”. In Keyband *all* the players have an interesting melodic part to play, and *all* have their turn in the spotlight.

The Beginnings of KEYBAND!

During the late 1990s I considered a number of options for viable keyboard ensembles which would enable my pupils to gain enjoyment playing together and enlarge their musical experience. I was determined to create a format that would be true to the nature of the instrument, and arrived at a number of possible models.

In Spring 2000 two colleagues and I took some 20 students away for a residential week at the Longrigg centre in Cumbria. We played through ensemble music including “unaccompanied” transcriptions of classical music, lengthy scored-out pieces written for the occasion, and improvised music based upon catchy riffs. Each of these proved useful, but it was the last which most particularly pointed the way forward. We found that the use of simple pentatonic patterns over auto-accompaniments with idiomatic chord sequences provided a secure foundation for improvisation. A higher level of musical and technical accomplishment than we had expected also served to highlight a distinctive asset of these instruments.

The Longrigg course was followed in July 2000 by the event “DJX 2000” which showcased the Yamaha DJX keyboard and featured several groups performing as ensembles. It was at this event that the name “Keyband” was first used, and it was here that I announced the launch of the ongoing Keyband programme.

Our first Keybands began in earnest that autumn. A number of schools where our keyboard teaching programme was well established invited us to run lunch-time ensembles – Chestnuts Combined School, The Radcliffe School, Sir Frank Markham Community School and Stanton Middle School. These groups performed within their school events. Two Music Centre groups were also begun. These groups performed within the Music Centre and at the Great Linford Waterside Festival – a local open-air event. Alongside the successes of that first full year, a number of important lessons were learnt which have continued to govern the development of the Keyband initiative.

The groups based in schools needed to overcome the challenges of finding suitable available accommodation, and sufficient time during the school day when the players would be consistently available and willing to rehearse (in addition to their regular lesson). We also found that while most children can be brought to Music Centre activities at the weekend or in the evening, many walk to school and cannot bring in heavy keyboards. Since 2001 Keybands based within schools have therefore tended to function as “Single Keybands” within regular lessons, or as “Massed Groups” put together in connection with specific up-coming performance opportunities.

The Music Centre based groups in 2000-2001 contained a mix of players who had differing levels of commitment to learning their parts, practising between sessions, and performing in public. It was clear that groups should be established at different levels in order to accommodate the enthusiasms of all the students and engage them at an appropriate level of commitment.

In September 2001 we therefore launched the MKMS Premier Keyband, a “Double Keyband”. The players were selected following a rigorous programme of auditions and interviews. When accepting places offered in the group, they each signed a “Keyband Code” in which they agreed to:

- ▶▶ Attending all sessions unless otherwise agreed in advance
- ▶▶ Regular and effective practice between sessions
- ▶▶ Learning all agreed ensemble parts
- ▶▶ Contributing constructively to the group
- ▶▶ Respecting others and acting responsibly
- ▶▶ Demonstrating a commitment to regular public performance

We have also started a number of other Keybands which operate somewhat less formally.

The Keybands rehearse for an hour a week and perform undirected. Players are recommended to have higher specification keyboards incorporating disk-drive facility and orchestration controls, which are essential for the co-leaders of the group.

As of November 2002 the MKMS Premier Keyband has performed several times locally as well as taking part as a guest attraction at a major event in Eastbourne, and giving a workshop in Oxford. They “headlined” the MKMS Keyboard Spectacular in May 2002. Plans for the coming year include a second Longrigg conference, workshops in Cumbria, and entering the National Festival for Music for Youth.

The Keyband concept has now been disseminated throughout the UK and beyond by the inclusion of a “Unit of Work” plan for teachers based around the piece “Electro Energy” within the nationally adopted instrumental curriculum *A Common Approach 2002* published by the *Federation of Music Services, National Association of Music Educators* and the *Royal College of Music*, and distributed by *Faber Music*.

From small beginnings, Keyband is beginning to attract wider recognition as perhaps the most viable way forward for keyboard players to engage in relevant and musically stimulating ensemble music.

How to perform the **KEYBAND!** pieces

Keyband music is partly composed and partly improvised. The structure and approach are flexible and players should feel free to experiment with their own ideas about arranging. The following points are offered as a starting point. This approach is the one that we have most often used with the MKMS Premier Keyband to date.

- ▶▶ The “Leader” (who is normally the Keyboard One player in a “Single Keyband” or one of the Keyboard One players in a “Double Keyband”) plays the chords and controls the auto-accompaniment. For individual pieces one of the other members of the Keyband may take the lead, so spreading out responsibility and sharing the left-hand playing
- ▶▶ Players select their own voices, experiment with alternatives, discuss balance and how the mood is effected by the choice and combination of sounds, and finally agree on the registration. It helps if players write registration directions on their part using a pencil. In a “Double Keyband”, players sharing the same part should match and/or balance their voices/sounds carefully
- ▶▶ Leaving the full orchestration on within the auto-accompaniment results in an over-wrought texture. The Leader should therefore adjust the “orchestration” by switching off the parts usually described as “chord” and “phrase”, and leaving only “drums/rhythm”, “bass” and “pad”. In each particular style it is worth experimenting with alternatives, and the Leader may decide to leave all the parts on during the Intro/Ending.
- ▶▶ It may also be desirable to “remix” the auto-accompaniment by increasing the individual volume of the “bass” and/or “drum” part. The Leader may equally find it necessary or advantageous to increase the overall “Accompaniment Volume”.
- ▶▶ These issues of balance and registration must be continuously monitored by the whole Keyband.
- ▶▶ A typical structure for a piece is as follows. A keyboard Intro heralds the “Head”, i.e. the scored-out section featured in this publication. This is followed by one or more improvised “solos” using the suggested notes given as a fifth part in the published music. As an alternative, the solos can be pre-composed using the blank staff given. The Leader continues to repeat the chord pattern throughout – and as the basis for – the solos
- ▶▶ Two or more players may improvise solos simultaneously if they wish. They should be careful to use contrasting voices/sounds, avoid overlapping, and can “bounce” ideas off each other in a most effective way.
- ▶▶ After the solos, the Keyband repeat the “Head” before the Ending of the piece.
- ▶▶ The Leader should use auto-accompaniment fills and other suitable registration changes to link sections and signal to the rest of the Keyband.
- ▶▶ Sections may be repeated at will. The structure should normally be agreed in advance, but more experienced groups might adapt the format to allow greater scope to improvisation by giving each other clear signals.

This format is followed in all of the recorded examples given on the floppy-disk that comes with this publication. Listening to these recordings will familiarise Keyband players with the typical structure for Keyband pieces as I have outlined it above.

Using the MIDI files

The website contains complete recordings of all 12 Keyband pieces contained in the initial Keyband publication; arranged in accordance with the guidelines given above. At the most basic level, the MIDI files can therefore be used to listen to and get to know the pieces by playing them back through your own keyboard.

More advanced keyboards will also allow you to switch the individual parts on/off. If you have the facility to do this you can use the MIDI file recordings interactively. Typically you may wish to switch off the three parts assigned to other members of your Keyband and so listen to your part in isolation. Having done this you can reverse the process, removing your own part and playing along “live” with the recorded band. Used in this manner the MIDI files are an outstanding aid to your personal practice.

Please Note: *The MIDI files were recorded using Yamaha XG sounds. The recordings are fully compatible MIDI files which can be played back using any MIDI compatible device, but some sounds may be altered where XG is not available.*

Composing your own **KEYBAND!** pieces

All composers should be encouraged to find their own “voice” and develop an individual approach to writing. The following tips serve only to give an insight into my own working methods, which others may of course feel free to adapt.

- ▶▶ A standard piece may be about 16 bars long, made up of 4x4 bar phrases. Try to vary this if you can, without lengthening the piece overall.
- ▶▶ Make sure that all the parts are enjoyable to play, and contain sufficient challenge to interest the players you are writing for
- ▶▶ Avoid strange chord changes, as these make improvising difficult
- ▶▶ For improvising, recommend the appropriate major or minor pentatonic scale for the key of the piece
- ▶▶ Make a sequenced recording of your piece. Listen back and make any necessary changes
- ▶▶ Above all, make sure that the basic tune is as catchy as possible; the audience only has a few moments to pick up and remember your Keyband piece!

Once you have composed a Keyband piece, print it out on durable card so that it can provide a permanent addition to this Keyband Music File!

Also please send me a copy – our Keybands will usually have a go at any new piece that comes our way!

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank those colleagues who have particularly encouraged me throughout this project, and am also particularly grateful to the many students and parents who have supported our Keyband project in Milton Keynes. Thanks also to the parents who have accompanied and transported the MKMS Premier Keyband on our various excursions.

A special thank you goes to the original **MKMS Premier Keyband**. This publication would not have been possible without their enthusiasm and commitment!

And as ever, my biggest thanks are reserved for Louise, Jonathan and Ruth – the biggest Keyband fans of all!

Andrew Eales