

Music

A conversation with Liz Dunbar

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Where do you begin in Year 7 constructing your key stage 3 music curriculum?

It is really interesting when you meet Year 7 and you discover just how varied their experience has been to date. In a large comprehensive school, there's a huge range of students, from the National Children's Orchestra violinist to students who have had little or no formal teaching of music at their primary school. When you start teaching a group, your most important job is to make everyone feel welcome and bring everyone with you, regardless of their individual starting points. You have to emphasise that every single one of them has the potential to make progress with their understanding and appreciation of music.

There are challenges at all levels. You will meet parents of very capable musicians, who will assume that you have nothing to teach their children. This may be based on their own experiences of classroom music, or from their awareness of the national picture of what is happening in secondary school music departments at key stage 3. Many believe that their child is going to be treading water for three years until they get to GCSE. Their fears and doubts are completely understandable, so you have to be prepared to have the conversation and demonstrate that yours is a curriculum that challenges all students at all levels, that you are providing worthwhile and meaningful learning opportunities beyond the classroom as well.

At the other end of the scale, you will have students who have no experience of the subject whatsoever who will quite quickly go into defence mode and pretend that they 'don't even like music'. They, and often their parents, have already decided that there's no point in music education. So, one of the key things you have to do is make sure that there's a way into your curriculum for absolutely everybody. I'm constantly thinking about how we should set our stall out in a way that is engaging, challenging, welcoming, creative and imaginative, but also non-threatening. (Not too many things to consider...)

Straightaway, the first thing to do is to get everybody making sound. Music departments are full of exciting looking equipment, just like science labs. Students want that hands-on learning experience straight away. So – make it happen. Start small and grow it, bit by bit, in fast-paced activities, where students are on their feet, responding in sound.

In the early stages, you might use material that students already know, things they are already familiar with. And, through the familiar, you create hands-on tasks that everyone can attempt. So, something that is of the moment in their musical world, something that is current, a riff, or a rhythm, or a chord sequence from something, that will immediately make them say, 'Oh hang on, I know this, I want to be able to do this'. You don't begin with the abstract; you begin with something that is familiar and immediately appealing. Something where there's an element that everybody can attempt. Then you read the room and when there's a lovely buzz, without missing a beat, you say, 'Right, who wants to show us what they've done? I'm not looking for perfection, just an example of something you've come up with.' And if you've created the right conditions, you will

get students with no experience whatsoever, who will say, 'I'll do that'. And, if it's doable by everybody, you cross that first threshold – gotcha!

Once you have hooked them with hands-on making in sound, you can start to introduce the vocabulary necessary to talk about music with authority and understanding. This is when the modelling process becomes your primary tool. You model in sound first, describe it yourself using the musical term, then 'model' it again. Then 'model' a different version of the same technique or device and ask students to make it in sound and verbalise it using musical language. The key thing is to make sound the principal language of learning, whether it's your live model, students' live responses, or a recording that you analyse and discuss. And you do this at different levels, depending on a student's starting point, so that no one is left behind. You reshape and modify the tasks, live in the room depending on the responses you're getting. One size fits no one.

Once you've established this kind of engagement in the room, you can start to move from the idea of students simply copying something and describing it in the musical vocabulary, to creating something new that builds on what they have learnt so far.

It's a really interesting moment when you first present a task that isn't just a copying task. You have to test the water because there's no point in going for it unless your audience is ready. One lovely, and sometimes surprising outcome, is that it's not uncommon to find students with little or no prior experience being more at ease with creative tasks than those who have 'read the dots' for years. If established instrumentalists have had good tuition, it won't be an issue, but for those who haven't been challenged beyond reading notation, it's a real shock when there is no single 'right answer'.

One of the hardest things to convey to non-specialists is that musicians are most comfortable demonstrating their understanding and their ideas through sound, either on an instrument or by vocalising it. It's not enough to simply know what a musical term means. You have to hear it; you have to know how to apply it in context. It's also something that is felt, sometimes it's in a gesture, and a lot of its beauty is in its transience. And here's yet another layer of complexity – it's rare to find the individual component parts of music in isolation – there are hundreds of things that are happening at once even in the simplest pieces. So, yet another thread running through the language of music is teaching the art of how you tease out those component parts. This takes time, and it takes a

really skilled teacher to know how to facilitate each of these connections.

And you know that students are starting to separate out these threads when you can ask, 'Would you consider changing the pitch?' and they know you're not asking them to change the rhythm or the texture. You can say, 'Would you consider changing the texture?' and students know you're talking about a combination of material, its density, or the roles within the layers. Bit by bit, you build up that language. The learning is iterative, thorough and focused, spoken in the language of sound.

The key to this approach is that content and pedagogy are inextricably linked. The development of this approach is a thorough and cumulative process. And we have to be humble enough to recognise that the refining of what we do is a process that never ends. I look back at my planning and thinking from five years ago and can see how much my practice has changed. I look back ten years, and it's embarrassing. I find that I constantly feed off the expertise and experience of others, either within my department or in the wider music teaching community. It's not my brain as a subject leader that counts, it's the collective musical intelligence of many that forges how I go about doing things.

It is crucially important to be part of the wider musical community when developing the curriculum. You have to be constantly honing your skills and keeping up to date with what's going on in music professions and in the wider music world. It's a good idea to make contacts with the best university music departments in your area. And if you are lucky enough to forge strong links with higher education, then you need to think carefully about what you want to learn that will improve your practice, and what you want your students to gain from the partnership. What we need to foster is a relationship that is going to create something long term that can grow and benefit a wide range of students and teachers. A relationship that enables school music departments to be the best that they can be, day in, day out, in every single class that they teach, with every single student that they work with.

One of the hottest topics right now in curriculum design is what to include and what to leave out. And people get very hot under the collar about it. Music, like any subject, is vast. You need to be flexible. Keep on thinking, changing and moving with content choices. Keep it fresh, with a balance of the familiar and unfamiliar. Be responsive to what's going on around you. You need a balance of cultural traditions, things that reflect the people and

places around you, as well as the wider world. Challenging preconceptions and prejudices about different kinds of music is a key part of this.

I'm constantly looking for the holes in our curriculum. What are the things we don't fully explore? What things are we not spending enough time doing, and why? This might be skills driven or repertoire driven. Every school is different, and every cohort and each individual within it is different, so, you have to be responsive and have a living, breathing curriculum. And be really honest about what needs to change.

When you get to the end of key stage 3 and you have a Year 9 music class in front of you, how do you know you have done your job well?

I think you know when you can do things like ask any student to demonstrate their work and they feel completely at ease with doing that. You've built a culture that enables them to do that. It's when students are receptive to feedback, understand the language you are talking, understand what's happening in the sound models you demonstrate, and can translate and incorporate that into their own work.

You know you've done your job when students understand how to refine their work and have the confidence and skill to respond imaginatively and creatively, sometimes outside or beyond the brief. It's the kind of thing where students aren't afraid to take musical risks and fail. And, sometimes, students will go really left field and create something that you really were not expecting. Those creations can be disastrous, but they can also be magnificent in their daring too.

You know you've done your job well when a student creates something that not only satisfies the brief, but is actually really musically satisfying. And it's great when everybody goes, 'Wow! That's good.' And you can be daring yourself and ask really open questions like, 'What do you think? Do you like it?' And because students have established a musical vocabulary, they can respond like a pro using the language that you have taught them.

You know you've done your job well when students who arrived in Year 7 with little or no experience can hold their own amongst those who arrived with loads of experience, or when a student knows what your feedback is going to be, and what their mark is going to be before you do. I love that.

It's important for non-specialists to understand that in music there's a balance between creativity and accuracy. Talking about music is an

interesting thing. Without training, students (and adults) want to tell you how it makes them feel, or what it reminds them of. They want to try to translate it into a visual image or an emotion, to make the ephemeral more tangible. In music education, you have to train students how to talk analytically and objectively. Students really like this level of linguistic challenge. It's not something to shy away from.

Students enjoy showing that they have engaged with all this very demanding, intellectually stimulating musical knowledge. They enjoy being able to talk about it and translate it into sound. Most of it will be derivative, but nothing is created in a vacuum. If you look at any subject, whether it is science, literature or whatever, each subject has its own long-standing traditions. You find your own voice through working within that tradition to begin with. Seamus Heaney talks about how the first few steps towards becoming a poet are to mimic another poet who writes in a way that speaks to you directly, and then you find your own voice. Somerset Maugham was the absolute epitome of this. He wrote in lots of different people's styles, other authors' styles that he admired, and this was not copying or plagiarism, it was a route into finding his own voice.

The final and perhaps most important point that line managers and non-specialists need to understand about music education is that only a third of what actually happens in music takes place in allocated curriculum time. There are three parts to music education in schools – curriculum time, extracurricular time and, scattered around this, the small group or one to one tuition of visiting specialists.

Music is not like most other subjects, it's not just what happens in the classroom. How can it be with only 40 hours of music a year at key stage 3? That's the equivalent of someone's average working week. When you view it in those terms you can see how little curriculum time the subject actually gets, and yet how much is expected to happen with that tiny allocation of time.

Music departments are nothing without a vibrant extracurricular provision and a knockout team of visiting specialists, yet it's all supposed to happen in the gaps. That needs fixing if you want your music specialists to feel valued. Parents love to see and hear a final product, both they and their children love the sense of community and camaraderie these magical events bring to their lives. Senior leaders need to nurture and protect this because it is something that should be the beating heart of a school.

Music background

Music is found in every known society, past and present. The oldest known song was written in cuneiform, 3400 years ago in Ugarit, Syria. It was taught from Roman times until the end of the sixteenth century, as one of the four subjects in the quadrivium, along with arithmetic, geometry and astronomy. It's always been part of the fabric of society. It helps us identify who we are, how we feel, our history and our stories.

When the national curriculum was created in the early 1990s, music was given equal status alongside the other 'foundation' subjects (art, geography, history, physical education, technology and MFL).

The Ebacc, introduced in 2011, excluded the arts and technologies and thus began a period of decline nationally in the uptake of GCSE and A level, which has seen numbers at examination level in music halve in a decade. It has led to the subject's extinction beyond key stage 3 in state schools in some areas of the UK.

The now-withdrawn (2019) Russell group 'facilitating subjects' list has also taken its toll, as has the practice of schools running a three-year key stage 4, and an arts carousel system at key stage 3. This has led to a phenomenon of one-person music departments, where extracurricular music is unsustainable, and innovation and creativity stagnate. The recommendations of the new model music curriculum and the July 2021 Ofsted's music 'research review' seek to reverse this trend.

In March 2021, the long-awaited new model music curriculum was published, and in July 2021, Ofsted's music 'research review' was released.

The latter states:

Music touches the very heart of our humanity and a sense of the wonder of music has touched human societies throughout history. Music education offers young people the chance to understand, perform and create in an aural dimension that often sits outside our capacity to describe in words. For many pupils, the music they love will be part of the narrative of their lives and bring colour to the experiences that shape them.

In England, all pupils should study music until the end of key stage 3. The requirement for maintained schools and

academies to offer a broad and balanced curriculum is set out in the Education Act 2002 (for maintained schools) and the Academies Act 2010. This expectation is reflected in the national curriculum and is at the heart of the education inspection framework.¹

While both documents have caused heated debates in music education circles, they are both very welcome reminders of what music education could and should be. And while you can argue about the detail, there is clarity and vision and a recognition of the value of music education for its own sake. Once these two key documents have been read, alongside the additional recommended reading list, it is helpful for subject leaders and coordinators to discuss and agree with colleagues, the reason why music is important for the pupils in their school.

This moves us away from the territory of ‘we teach this subject because of the SATS or GCSEs’. While the external tests and exams are important, they are not the totality of the subject.

Professional communities

Subject associations are crucial in music leaders’ work on curriculum thinking, development and resources.

The leading subject associations for music are the Music Teachers Association and the Incorporated Society of Musicians.

It should be the case that any member of staff with responsibility for a subject should be a member of the relevant subject association, and this should be paid for by the school.

Twitter subject communities are important for the development of subject knowledge because it is here that there are lively debates about what to teach, how to teach and the kinds of resources that are helpful. It is worth following the Music Teachers Association and ISM on Twitter and the hashtag #MusicEdSummit.

LINKS

Ofsted research review series: music – www.bit.ly/3k80mnp

Model Music Curriculum: Key Stages 1 to 3 Non-statutory guidance for

1 www.bit.ly/3k80mnp

the national curriculum in England – www.bit.ly/3y7BSQh
New Music Curriculum Guidance – www.bit.ly/3AR9kfv
ISM: A Framework for Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment – www.bit.ly/3sq5E18
BBC Ten Pieces – www.bbc.in/3mbPqrg
Arts Council Music Education Hubs – www.bit.ly/3iUOKoc
SingUp – www.singup.org/why-sing
Friday Afternoons – www.fridayafternoonsmusic.co.uk
Listen Imagine Compose – www.listenimaginecompose.com
The Full English: Folk Music in schools – www.bit.ly/3k7czsk
The Music Education Centre – www.mec.org.uk
Music Mark – www.musicmark.org.uk

An overview of the Huntington School key stage 3 music curriculum

Key Stage 3 is delivered over three years at Huntington. Students are taught for one hour per week by a music specialist. In each year, there are five units of work. The purpose of the course is for students to begin the process of learning **how music works**.

In each unit, we take an existing piece of music, put it in context, and look at other works that are similar to it in style, or share some of its musical features. We explore the work in various ways – this might be by analysing it, performing sections of it, improvising ideas based on fragments of it, composing new ideas to replace or sit alongside it, or arranging the material we've made to create a finished whole. Our primary language is **sound**, and we model endlessly in **sound**. Lesson content is designed to enable students to work at a pace that is right for them, to dwell a little longer, or to push on with more challenging tasks guided by their teacher. We expect **musical responses** from everyone. Students are taught what this means and how to improve their responses. During the process, students develop and hone skills, broaden their knowledge and – hopefully – their appreciation of what's out there in the wider musical world.

From the beginning of Year 7, all students are treated as musicians regardless of their starting point. Some students will have lots of musical experience, some will have very little. It doesn't matter – there are entry

points in our curriculum for everyone, creating routes through to GCSE for every student.

We assess musical artefacts and musical understanding through:

- **sound** (sung, played, sequenced, spoken)
- visual means (written, drawn/graphic/notation, physical gesture)

Formative assessment takes place every moment of every lesson through:

- hearing instrumental and vocal **sound** created through experimentation, improvisation, rehearsal, reworking, performing, refining
- hearing informal 'music chat'/working conversations, group discussion, direct questioning relating to live and recorded material

Summative assessment takes place at the end of each unit of work in the marking of:

- listening and analysis questions
- finished/partially finished/extended artefacts

Units of work come and go quite rapidly to keep things fresh, current, relevant, and balanced. At present the unit headings are as follows (though these headings tell you next to nothing about what elements of musicianship are actually being developed)

| Year 7 | Year 8 | Year 9 |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| <i>Ode to Joy</i> | <i>Happy Birthday</i> | <i>12 bar blues</i> |
| <i>Rapper's Delight</i> | <i>Cal me Al</i> | <i>Ain't Nobody</i> |
| Sakura | <i>Valerie</i> | <i>These Days</i> |
| <i>Pachelbel's Canon</i> | <i>Ajo Billa</i> | <i>Take 5</i> |
| <i>Shape of You</i> | <i>Uptown Funk</i> | <i>We Found Love</i> |

Music

Progression mapping reveals a bit more detail, e.g., Year 7: **Sakura**

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Context | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing awareness of music used to celebrate the seasons, e.g., Sakura, Hanami from Japan which celebrates Spring in the blossoming of the cherry tree. |
| Repertoire | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> trad. Japanese 'Sakura', Vivaldi 'Winter', Copland 'Appalachian Spring', trad. Bhangra 'Harvest'. |
| Language | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rhythm: note values, downbeat. Melody: pentatonic scale, phrase, ostinato. Texture: melody & accompaniment. Harmony: drone. |
| Performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Playing 2 bar phrases, then joining these together to create a 14 bar melody. Working in pairs to create melody and drone accompaniment. Ensemble extending to four musicians. |
| Composition Improvisation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improvising and creating an ostinato in context. Composing a 2 bar phrase using pentatonic scale and given rhythms in context. Improvising, refining, composing a counter melody in context. |
| Technical | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using 2 note chords. Managing combination of step and leap. |
| Notation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Widening playing range of notes to a 9th. Exploring of ledger lines and bar lines. |
| Extended Learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exploring cultural context. Consolidating language. Consolidating pitch notation. |
| Extension | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Writing a 14 bar melody from scratch. Arranging parts for acoustic instruments. Performing with mixed timbres. Spontaneous melodic extemporisation. |

You can find more details here on KS3 progression mapping, our approach to training ears, how we assess, what we mean by 'a musical response' and examples of schemes of work here: <https://huntschoolmusic.com/ks3.html>

Three documents for your senior leader line manager to read about music

1. Civinini, C. (2001) '6 ways Ofsted wants schools to teach music', *Tes*, 21 June. www.bit.ly/3k13sJW
2. Toyne, S. (2021) "Music" in *What Should Schools Teach?* edited by Alka Sehgal Cuthbert and Alex Standish. UCL Press.
3. Weale, S. (2019) 'Russell Group scraps preferred A-levels list after arts subjects hit', *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: www.bit.ly/3gfdndw

Five questions for your senior leader line manager to ask you about music

1. How do you know if what you are doing is any good?
2. Where did you start in the process of designing your curriculum, and where are you up to in the process?
3. Who are you listening to/reading?
4. What have you changed in your practice from this time last year?
5. What are you going to do next year to improve as a musician?

Music leaders need their line manager to be an advocate for the subject.

We need senior leadership to help shift mindsets and challenge the perception that the arts have nothing more to offer than transferable skills. We need senior leadership to challenge the perception that music education is the preserve of the middle class. And we need senior leadership to stop calling music a 'practical' subject. It is a challenging, deeply intellectual academic subject. Its lowly status at the bottom of the Ebacc food chain has cultured a perception of it being a pretty little add on. That has to change if you want music to survive in the comprehensive system.