

Raising standards after mock exams



Catherine Barker
Head of Music
and Performing Arts,
United Learning

Why This Moment Matters

Term 2 is a pivotal time for Year 11 GCSE Music teachers. The first round of mock exams is behind us, and the real challenge begins: turning information from the exams into real action. In Music, we often have relatively small cohort sizes, and these can feel daunting: every student really matters in your percentage results. But, small cohorts are also a gift. You can get to know every student, their strengths, and where they may struggle. That level of insight is rare in education, and it's the key to driving rapid progress.

So, how do we make the most of this window of time? Our experience in United Learning, learning from colleagues across school improvement, has led us to understand that there are critical levers that can make a huge difference: **data-driven teaching, pace planning, NEA management, homework routines, and absence strategies**. Unapologetically, this doesn't include much discussion of actual music! We are looking at how we can drive improvement, no matter what kind of musician or student is in our class.

Responding to Assessment Data: Marking beyond the surface

Mock exam results are more than numbers; they provide your plan for the final push to the GCSE submission and exam. A single grade or mark won't be able to tell you the full story of each student. As soon as we can, we break down assessment data by component: **composition, performance, and listening/appraising** and use the weightings of each component in assessment. In Year 10, a notional composition mark and performance mark can be used alongside an appraising grade – using as much of a paper as possible (possibly a whole paper). This can also be effective as a baseline at the start of Year 11, following 'holiday homework' to practice one of their pieces.

In the first Year 11 mock, we use a double weighted mark of their first composition and performance alongside a full paper. This helps to understand a 'Working at Grade'. From here, we can look closely at grade boundaries – who is in reach of Grade 4, 5 or 7 – for example, if a student needs 15 marks to hit their target grade, that's actionable intelligence that we can use, informing us of where marks can be gained across the specification components.

Considering the appraising paper, **Question-Level Analysis (QLA)** is an important tool to pinpoint weaknesses across your cohort – take care, as individual QLA data is small as a sample, and arguably not reliable enough from the mock exam alone i.e. just because they didn't identify a plagal cadence this time, doesn't mean they won't be able to in another context. Across your cohort, look for trends: it may be terminology, set work familiarity, or listening accuracy. Then, reteach with precision: quick "Do Nows", spiral quizzes, and guided re-listening sessions (or a 'walking talking mock') can transform gaps into gains. Redoing the exam question won't address the main problem: that they haven't remembered the domain knowledge. So, going back to the unit and reteaching is the best next step.

This year, we are also thinking about '**threshold marks**' in the NEA components: we are being clear with students about the raw mark that we want them to get in each part of the NEA, as a minimum target, as this gives us a relatively secure foundation going into the appraising exam. It won't be needed for many students, but for our students who are on Grade 3-4 border lines, it's an important message to hear and a target to aim towards.

As teachers, we will worry the most about students who don't come into school, or have no NEA at all. But, and this is a hard message to hear/say, try your best not to over-focus on these students: most likely, they are a