

concern across the whole school, and a co-ordinated approach will be needed alongside your Year 11 team. It is a better use of your energy to prioritise students within reach, within 20 marks of the grade boundaries, and plan targeted interventions that help them to make incremental progress.

Pace Planning: The Countdown Map

From January onward, every lesson counts. Pace planning isn't just a scheme of work, it's more of a training plan, like an athlete would put in place before a big race. Map out every session from now until the exam, ensuring time for revision and exam skills. This can be shared with students, so that they fully understand how important every lesson is. It also ensures that you are aware of any changes coming up – when there might be an additional set of whole school assessments, or changes to the school calendar.

Our view is that the GCSE Music course can be delivered in one year, but only with brisk, purposeful pacing. This allows time in Year 2 to review content and go deeper into the challenging concepts such as harmonic analysis. This approach is also supported by research, as retrieval supports stronger learning over time.

Define weekly priorities, pre-plan listening starters, and build in regular quizzing. Schedule NEA checks and sprinkle exam question practice throughout. This structure prevents the April/May panic and gives students a sense of steady progress.

NEA: No Excuses, Always

Non-examined assessments (NEA) can make or break your year. From January, timelines must be tight and predictable. Set clear internal deadlines for composition and performance, and share them with students and parents. Aim to wrap NEA by early March – at the latest. This can be a challenge with a big cohort, so interim deadlines (work in progress submissions, as well as low stakes performance submissions as homework, can really help).

Learn from chief examiner reports: these are golden CPD! They regularly encourage teachers to record

performances early, keep composition logs concise, and guide students to compose within their strengths. In our experience, we have noticed that recording days for performances can be more efficient and raise the status of the NEA process, but remember to accommodate performance anxiety with any reasonable adjustments, allowing for warm ups and multiple takes.

Our experience with composition has taught us that focusing on contrast and development in students' writing enables them to access the highest mark bands: often this is facilitated by the forms that they compose in, but deliberately teaching young musicians how to create musical contrast (through dynamics, tonality, tempo, metre, rhythm etc) can lift marks effectively, as well as encouraging ideas that change over time – no looping allowed in the DAW!

Homework: Building habits for success

Homework isn't something to be set as a formality, it's a driver of progress. In order to build great study habits, consider how your students can revise independently in homework: reviewing and becoming more confident with the musical elements, including set work recall, accurate use of terminology, practice of score-reading, and instrument recognition. There are helpful online tools out there, such as **Elemental** or **Focus on Sound**, but creating AI-generated quizzes for retrieval practice is accessible to every school, no matter the budget. Consistency is key: weekly low-stakes retrieval, coupled with playlists where students can review terminology, build

fluency. This in turn will give them more confidence in the exam, as well as ideas for their compositions.

Managing Absence: Protecting your curriculum impact

In small cohorts, one or two absences can derail progress, as you may not want to move ahead with taught content if all students aren't in the room. What systems can you put in place to mitigate this? You could consider emailing lesson resources to students on the day of the lesson, or using shared folders for easy access to lesson resources. The research in this area tells us also about the importance of culture on attendance, keeping your communication positive so that it increasingly builds belonging. Including quick check-ins on return "What did you miss? What do you need?", help students reintegrate smoothly, as well as welcoming students back to school - "So great to see you, we've missed you."

The Big Takeaway

Great results rarely happen by chance.

Think about what you can do tomorrow. It might be acting on your mock data, mapping your countdown curriculum, tightening NEA processes, strengthening homework routines, and safeguarding against absence. Success isn't about doing more, it's about doing what matters most, with precision.

Wishing you every success with your exam cohort in 2026!

This article draws on content from the online session that took place on Monday 5th January 2025. If you'd like to review the session so that you can follow the guided reflection, scan this QR code



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