

Curriculum thinking and curriculum planning

As part of the series of presentations that Simon and Liz have given at MTA conferences in recent years, the session they presented at the Warwick conference explored the principles and purpose of the music curriculum at KS3, alongside starting points and approaches to creating teaching materials as part of a progressive and cohesive curriculum, centred around the development of musicianship for all students.



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We also need to consider how our subject organises itself. What are the organisational categories that illustrate the fundamental structures of music as a subject?

Here's an overview of that session:

'Key Stage 3: The Ambitious Years – Why Years 7-9 matter more than we think' is the inspiring title of a forthcoming book from the educational thinker Mary Myatt. Just as the late Sir Stephen Cleobury described his morning trebles rehearsal as 'the engine room of the choir' (and would never miss a morning rehearsal), Myatt calls the KS3 classroom 'the engine room of thinking, curiosity and confidence'. Can we achieve this as music teachers with our own KS3?

Naturally, we believe that the answer is an emphatic 'yes'. But for this to happen, we first need to be clear about what the ultimate purposes are of studying Music in the classroom. We also need to consider how our subject organises itself. What are the organisational categories that illustrate the fundamental structures of music as a subject?

There's been much activity in the music education world over the past few years considering this, together with a number of associated publications. The Curriculum and Assessment Review latched onto this, offering helpful clarity: the purpose of classroom music is to develop pupils' musical understanding, exploring in depth how music works and how music conveys meaning. 'How music works' encapsulates not only how pieces of music are constructed (the workings and combinations of the core musical elements creating distinctive musical sound) but also how we make and create music, individually and collectively. It also explores the vital ways in which music communicates, both in the moment and over time. And how it shapes pupils' musicianship and their identity as musicians.

Ofsted's research review (2021) and subject report (2023) proposed three organisational categories – called 'pillars of progression' – which, taken together, contribute to the development of pupils' musical understanding. It described the need for robust, direct, incremental teaching of the technical and constructive aspects of music, learnt in the context of music's history and cultural provenance (the expressive 'pillar'). In a similar vein, Kevin Rogers's model of KS3 learning (Hampshire Music Service, 2013) detailed strands of Music Thinking and Music Making combining in classroom sequences of learning to contribute to the overarching aim of developing musical understanding.

Having considered the 'Big Picture', we now turn our attention to shaping the content of a KS3 curriculum, and to how we make learning happen in the classroom, in every lesson, and over time.

Shaping content – starting points

Getting started with content creation isn't always straightforward. If you've got nothing and you've never written a scheme of work, let alone a progressive three year curriculum, start with a well respected, tried and tested model, until you've found your feet. If you're pretty experienced and looking to update materials or fill a few holes, the following starting points may prove useful:

1. **The development of a skill**
2. **The application of a technique/device**
3. **Exploring a style of music/musical tradition**
4. **A specific piece of music**

1. Development of a skill

Useful when progress appears slow or stagnant:

- Extending musical memory
- Improvising over a given chord sequence
- Rehearsing as part of an ensemble
- Editing and arranging performance work in a DAW
- Structured analytical listening
- Working things out by ear
- Using specialist vocab to describe what's happening in sound
- Recognising devices by ear
- Composing and refining ideas acoustically
- Reading and using notation systems
- Developing an awareness of context
- Storing musical ideas both visually and in sound

2. The application of elements driven techniques and devices

Useful for building an iterative skill set that can be applied across a wide range of musical traditions, styles and genres:

- The relationship between melody and harmony
- The use of drones and pedal notes
- The effect of homogeneous, imitative and conversational textures
- Melodic writing, scales and modes
- Chordal ostinati and ground bass
- Rhythmic ostinati and polyrhythm
- Simple, compound and asymmetric metres
- How musical ideas are extended and developed using harmonic/melodic sequences
- Clear structural frameworks

3. Exploring a musical style/genre/tradition

Helpful when evaluating the cultural breadth and balance of the curriculum. 'Walk in their shoes'. Start with the familiar, and gradually move outwards, connecting the unfamiliar with practices, techniques and devices across styles, genres and traditions.

- Oral traditions - local, regional, national, international
- Styles of music that are written down and communicated/shared visually as well as aurally

- Pop, film, art music and fusions with a common thread e.g. all use functional harmony
- Musical genres that only exist live and in the moment
- Musical genres that only exist in electronic form
- Music that celebrates local places and people
- Music that is used nationally and internationally for important occasions
- Music that came into being as a result of landmark historical events
- The music of ground breakers and innovators

4. Using a specific piece of music as a starting point

Helpful when evaluating the diversity of your curriculum. This is as likely to be something you discovered by chance a week ago, as a work you have known for years and regard as an absolute must at KS3.

Deciding how to use a piece of music in a scheme of work, means looking past the surface. It's about 'getting under the hood', and teasing out the component parts.

Keep an ear out for:

- Devices and techniques used in both familiar and unfamiliar music that will develop analytical listening skills, encourage discussion, and expand musical vocabulary

- Devices and techniques that can be explored through performing, improvising, composing and arranging
- Melodic or rhythmic motifs suitable for working out by ear, that make good starting points for improvising and composing
- Bass lines, chord sequences, melodic motifs, drum patterns, and ostinati that are ripe for arranging, developing and reimagining in live and/or digital contexts
- Notation systems that support the communication and storage of ideas, both live and in a DAW/notation package
- Opportunities to both lead and respond in small ensembles
- Music that enables students to make intuitive connections between styles, genres and traditions

Here's the extract we used in the Warwick conference session, to demonstrate the process: **Bundle of Joy**



Melody

- repetition & sequence - same thing twice transp. tone exercises

Arrangement

- simple Fr. horn c-trial
- melodic bass line
- sustained string line

Harmony

- 2 chords G^A & F^A - chord extensions (do this after don't fix)
- sustained 'root' / fluidity of bass

Rhythm

- variety of note lengths in accomp - 18 → 16
- syncopation in melody - exercises in adding/removing syncopation

Giacchino 'Bundle of Joy'

gets it all said in 30 seconds!

And here's a list of starting points to illustrate the process:

- Working out initial conjunct pitches by ear, followed by the intervals in later disjunct movement (aural/visual connections)
- Discovering and make sense of 'key' (aural/visual connections)
- Working visually with an on-beat version of the melody but matching the syncopated version aurally (aural/visual connections)
- Expanding harmonic knowledge by working with extension chords – comparing dominant 7ths with major 7ths
- Recording the alternating chords in a DAW or using a loop pedal as the harmonic framework for melodic and rhythmic improvisation
- Analysing degrees of the scale – the use of the mediant, use of tonic, absence of the dominant in the melody
- Working out phrase 2 by ear, now the harmonic connections have been made (extending ideas and use of sequence)
- Refining and developing analytical listening by picking out the French horn countermelody connecting melody, countermelody, chords and bass (vertical awareness)
- Ignoring phrase 2 and using phrase 1 and the chord structure to improvise, refine, compose a second melodic phrase
- Using the given melody, countermelody, chords and bass for

rehearsing, recording, sequencing, editing, performing in an ensemble

- Discussing how the composer conveys meaning using musical devices in their use of tessitura, rhythm, tempo, dynamics, sonority, articulation, melodic shape, scale, degrees of the scale, intervals, harmony, tonality, structure, in order to demystify the whole process and equip students with the skills and knowledge to develop their musicianship.

Turning starting points into a scheme

At the conference we provided examples of two routes – illustrated below:

A sense of perspective

As the late, great George Odum used to ask, 'but what did they learn? While you're busy mapping a scheme's progression, ensuring consistency, breadth and balance, don't lose sight of who's in front of you and what you want the takeaways to be.



Mary Myatt checklist:

- Depth rather than coverage
- When you raise expectations and teach in a way that prioritises understanding, students respond
- The strongest curriculum resources do not replace professional thinking. They invite it.

Final thoughts:

Quality 'off the peg' schemes work well as a framework/starting point, but they're not the complete package. There will always be things that happen in your classroom that throw up new ideas and challenges. When a scheme isn't entirely fit for purpose, you'll want to reshape it. When materials are past their sell by date, you'll be looking to refresh them. Formative assessment is king, but summative assessments are often required by schools. When summative assessments yield poor outcomes, examine your own teaching.

And there's no need to do any of this in isolation. Talk to your Music Hub, Trust, local schools' network, and the vast community of experienced teachers that make up the MTA.

