

Assessing Musical Learning and Progression

at Key Stage 3

Module 1

Introduction

Assessment of musical learning and progression is an enormous and current issue for all secondary music teachers. In numerous reports Ofsted have commented on issues surrounding assessment in curriculum music. A recent comment was that:

'elaborate whole-school assessment systems, encouraged by senior leaders, disrupted the flow and musical purposes of the lessons.' (Ofsted 2013)

In June 2013 the Department for Education announced that, as part of the reforms to the national curriculum, the system of 'levels' will be removed and will not be replaced. This allows schools and music teachers new freedoms in terms of assessment.

These five modules promote good assessment practice, which has been tried and tested by experienced music teachers. They are designed to be used by individuals or small groups of secondary music teachers. Short tasks are interspersed throughout the modules which allow teachers to reflect on their current practice and begin to develop more effective approaches to musical assessment practice at Key Stage 3.

Module 1

The aim of Module One is to allow music teachers to consider what musical learning they want to assess throughout their Key Stage 3 curriculum and to then begin to decide how this musical learning can be assessed.

DECIDING WHAT KEY STAGE 3 MUSIC TEACHERS WANT TO ASSESS AND HOW

This resource pack is based on the principle that, 'to teach *is* to assess' (Swanwick 1988: 149). In other words, assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning and embraces everything from everyday informal conversations with pupils through to formal examinations.

One of the biggest questions that a secondary music teacher has to ask is 'what do I want to assess in terms of my pupils' musical learning?'

Of course, you have to decide what your pupils are going to learn before you can assess learning.

If you are a teacher in a state maintained school you have to ensure that your pupils are taught to:

- play and perform confidently in a range of solo and ensemble contexts using their voice, playing instruments musically, fluently and with accuracy and expression
- improvise and compose, and extend and develop musical ideas by drawing on a range of musical styles, genres and traditions
- use staff and other relevant notations appropriately and accurately in a range of musical styles, genres and traditions
- identify and use the inter-related dimensions of music expressively and with increasing sophistication, including use of tonalities, different types of scales and other musical devices
- listen with increasing discrimination to a wide range of music from great composers and musicians
- develop a deepening understanding of the music that they perform and to which they listen, and its history as stated in the *Music programme of study: key stage 3 from the National Curriculum in England*. (Department for Education, 2013)

www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-music-programmes-of-study

However, this incredibly broad list of what you must teach your pupils to do allows you great freedom to decide what you want to teach in relation to:

- styles, genres and traditions
- the balance between these different types of music (e.g. you could teach mainly popular music or mainly music from around the world)
- the length of time devoted to different topics (e.g. all units of work lasting about 6 weeks or a whole academic year devoted to, say, informal learning)
- depth or breadth (e.g. your pupils may be interested in urban music and you might wish to work almost exclusively on building on pupil interests)

(In Module 2 we will explore this further when we look at different ways of mapping a curriculum.)

What you want to teach and assess at Key Stage 3 cannot be exactly the same as a teacher in another school. Firstly, Key Stage 3 in Music means totally different things in different schools. In some schools the KS3 entitlement to music for pupils may be throughout three academic years. Many schools have moved to a 'condensed' Key Stage 3 curriculum where pupils have an entitlement to music for just two academic years, allowing the teaching of KS4 courses such as GCSE and BTEC to cover three years. In some schools pupils may only have an entitlement to music as part of a carousel of subjects, often including dance and drama, meaning that pupils may only be taught music for something like three isolated terms throughout Key Stage 3.

Your pupils have particular characteristics that will not be the same as those of pupils at any other school. In Kent we have a huge range of different types of schools e.g. selective grammar schools, non-selective wide-ability schools, faith schools etc. The type of school that you are working in will define what you choose to teach and assess to a certain extent. The following is an example of one school and why a Head of Music made certain choices about what pupils in that school would benefit from learning.

CASE STUDY

School A is an all boys' selective grammar school with few pupils on free school meals. The school is well resourced with two main teaching rooms and six practice rooms, each equipped with rock band instruments. The school has twelve visiting instrumental teachers and over half of pupils have instrumental lessons in or out of school. Pupils have a one hour curriculum music lesson a week in Years 7, 8 and 9.

The Head of Department is trying to encourage more pupils to continue to learn music within the curriculum at Key Stages 4 and 5. His KS3 curriculum uses popular music as a starting point to allow pupils to build on what they know before they explore what they don't know and units of work are constructed around this principle, as well as leading on to GCSE requirements. Some of the current units of work are entitled 'Repeating basslines and riffs', '4 chord songs' and 'Fusions'.

The Head of Department has decided that all pupils will gain a range of instrumental skills on electric guitars, kit and keyboards, as well as gaining vocal confidence by the end of Key Stage 3. This teacher has decided that he wishes to teach and assess a primarily skills based curriculum, underpinned by pupils gaining understanding of musical processes and contexts, which will prepare them well for the demands of a GCSE course.

It will be an individual choice for you to decide what you want your pupils to be able to know, understand and be able to do by the end of what is defined as Key Stage 3 in your school but how can you begin to decide? You could take many different approaches. You might decide that you want your pupils to gain breadth of musical knowledge throughout Key Stage 3.

You might think that it is important for pupils to gain a balance of:

- knowledge about music – factual knowledge
- know how – skills (i.e. technical, aural, perceptual etc.)
- knowledge 'of' music – building an understanding relationship with music as defined by Chris Philpott (Philpott, 2007). Is this always possible if you only see your pupils on a carousel basis for one term in each academic year and for just one 50 minute lesson a week?

You might decide that you actually wish your pupils to gain musical skills as a prerequisite for any other musical learning. This opinion has been expressed for decades. In 1987 Peter Fletcher argued against Keith Swanwick's philosophy that 'composition and performance can *precede* skill' stating that 'this has the effect of down-grading skill' (Fletcher, 1987). You might agree with Fletcher's opinion that pupils need to gain skills before they can be creative. If so, what you teach your pupils and what you assess will reflect this.

You may think that respecting your pupils' own musical tastes, interests and skills is paramount and this might mean you having to develop musical knowledge and understanding which is 'local' and individual. For example, if your pupils spend a great deal of time listening to and creating a particular style of urban music you might capitalise on this and use their music as the focus for musical learning at Key Stage 3.

TASK 1

Ignore your current whole school or departmental curriculum.

If you had complete freedom to create a new Key Stage 3 curriculum what would you want your pupils to know, understand and be able to do by the end of Key Stage 3?

Be realistic in terms of the curriculum time that you have available, your resources etc. Devise big statements rather than thinking about separate units of work or particular styles, genres and traditions.

E.g. By the end of Key Stage 3 I want my pupils to be secure singers who can maintain a vocal part within an ensemble with good intonation and can sing short solos.

By the end of Key Stage 3.....

What you want your pupils to know, understand and be able to do by the end of Key Stage 3 could be seen as the final milestone at this key stage but will also encompass what you wish your pupils to achieve in order to be able to follow a music course at Key Stage 4 (as in the case study). Work backwards from this milestone to establish milestones throughout Key Stage 3. These milestones could link to major reporting points e.g. at the end of each academic year.

In order for pupils to be able to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding the milestones have to be different from one another and be progressive. These are examples of milestones relating to singing:

A singer who:

- can use their voice in an ensemble with rhythmic accuracy and some sense of pitch
- can maintain a vocal part within an ensemble with rhythmic accuracy and reasonable intonation
- can maintain a vocal part within an ensemble with secure intonation and can sing short solos

These milestones can be made clear to pupils as expectations at the points you decide e.g. the end of each academic year. Of course, different pupils may be working towards reaching different milestones at different points in Key Stage 3.

TASK 2

Plan milestones for your pupils:

| Emerging | Developing | Secure |
|---|---|---|
| Can use their voice in an ensemble with rhythmic accuracy and some sense of pitch | Can maintain a vocal part within an ensemble with rhythmic accuracy and reasonable intonation | Can maintain a vocal part within an ensemble with secure intonation and can sing short solos |
| Can play several guitar chords | Can play several guitar chords and swap between them with some fluency | Can play several guitar chords, swap between them with fluency and coordinate them with other parts |
| Can articulate some factual knowledge about the music that he / she has performed | Can articulate some understanding of the context of the music that he / she has performed | Can articulate some understanding of the context of the music that he / she has performed and relate this to other music and contexts |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

In order to avoid over-atomising what can be described as 'interrelated skills' it is important to devise statements that are clear but broad. Remember that the statements should be milestones that are relevant to your pupils and these may be different to expectations of pupils in another school and context.

Having decided on the milestones as your expectations for your pupils these can be made evident to pupils at appropriate times. For instance, if your pupils are making their own arrangement of a reggae classic on rock instruments and concurrently learning about the context of reggae then you might choose to focus on a milestone about critical and contextual understanding plus a milestone that relates to the instrument that they are playing in the arrangement.

You then need to decide how you and your pupils can assess and then report against the milestones. This could be done in many different ways but needs to be straightforward and understandable to pupils, parents and carers, senior leaders and external agencies (e.g. OfSTED).

CASE STUDY

An example of a reporting system used termly:

| | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Student: | Form: |
| Milestone: | Current achievement: |
| Milestone 1 Singing | Emerging |
| Milestone 2 Guitar Skills | Developing |
| etc | |

| Emerging | Developing | Secure |
|---|---|---|
| Can use their voice in an ensemble with rhythmic accuracy and some sense of pitch | Can maintain a vocal part within an ensemble with rhythmic accuracy and reasonable intonation | Can maintain a vocal part within an ensemble with secure intonation and can sing short solos |
| Can play several guitar chords | Can play several guitar chords and swap between them with some fluency | Can play several guitar chords, swap between them with fluency and coordinate them with other parts |
| etc | | |

TASK 3

Having established your proposed milestones in Task 2, devise your own simple system for reporting against these milestones. This system could feed into your whole school assessment systems and we will revisit this in Module 4.

Adopting a milestone approach means that you can focus on assessing what you think is important musical learning for your pupils. Music teachers have grumbled for well over a decade that they have been forced to try and assess a rather tenuous and huge range of knowledge, skills and understanding in the National Curriculum Attainment Target and the associated levels.

Music teachers have now been given some autonomy over what and how they assess since the Department for Education has clearly stated:

'As part of our reforms to the national curriculum, the current system of 'levels' used to report children's attainment and progress will be removed. It will not be replaced.'

Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, 13th June 2013

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