

## **Inspire Event - Preparing all pupils for KS4**

### **Keith Evans' provocation: Does Music at KS3 prepare students for GCSE and other pathways at KS4?**

This evening's Inspire Event has at its heart the problem we have as music teachers in that over 90% of students consistently choose **not** to pursue music in the curriculum beyond KS3. Of course you may be lucky in your school in having perhaps 15-20% of the year group doing exam courses in music at KS4, but if you have got over 15%, someone somewhere else must have a very small exam class (or none at all)! But the fact remains that take up for music at KS4 has remained stubbornly at around 8% for many years.

We could rehearse some of the possible 'reasons' – for example, the perceived value of certain subjects, parental aspirations, school systems working against the subject, 'school music' being seen at odds with 'real music', a KS3 curriculum that fails to give students the necessary skills, uninspiring teaching etc

Some of these are issues over which you probably feel teachers have little influence (i.e. pressures from society), but others (the later ones I mentioned) are definitely things we can choose to do or not do something about. Although at times it might feel otherwise, teachers are not totally powerless, conditioned unquestionably to respond to the latest diktat from the DfE or SLT. They can exploit opportunities, question and challenge, and review and reflect on current practice. Indeed, the underpinning philosophy of TTM is that teachers can be the *agents of change* when they are empowered by professional development and shared solutions.

The recent consultation over revisions to GCSE Music has highlighted again the challenges of curriculum continuity in the secondary school and I for one have started to wonder whether a more rigorous and conservative GCSE could ever align with what we seem to be aspiring to at KS3. I fear we have got the cart before the horse. I cannot see that the revised GCSE is likely to

change the disappointing numbers opting for Music, and the young musicians who have been inspired by their experience of KS3 music will have little option but to pursue their musical interests outside the curriculum (and outside the school?). Personally, I would have preferred to have reconfigured GCSE to build on best practice at KS3, so that it aspires to be a qualification validating the achievement of the majority rather than being what looks like becoming a niche qualification for an increasing minority. But that also requires KS3 music to be a worthwhile, progressive experience and Ofsted evidence for some time would suggest that this is far from universally the case.

Some of the issues concerning KS3 to KS4 continuity are reflected in the work of Alex Lamont and Karl Maton who have looked into the low uptake for GCSE music during the past decade. Using a sociology of educational knowledge analysis they point to a significant code shift between KS3 and GCSE. In contrast to KS3, GCSE has an elite code where achievement depends on both possessing specialist knowledge and being the right kind of knower. Crucially, they say students are aware of this code shift when considering their options for KS4. Therefore, unless we can reconcile approaches either side of the KS3-KS4 divide, things are unlikely to get better.

Interestingly, although music teachers would probably not express it in these terms, this shift to an elite code is probably not as marked for students going on to BTEC courses at KS4. Those of you familiar with BTEC will know that the attractiveness of this qualification owes a great deal to its flexibility and lack of specified content. A BTEC programme can be tailored to local need and aligned to the approach you have taken throughout KS3. A couple of years ago I contributed a chapter to a book *Debates in Music Teaching* called '14-19: Choices, challenges and opportunities' and used the music department at Forest Hill School where they were offering BTEC in Years 10 and 11 as a case study. What was patently clear was that students in Year 10 that I interviewed and quoted saw their course as a continuation

of the music education they started in Year 7 and they were unable to conceive that anyone who had had the same KS3 experience would not be able to succeed at BTEC Music. For them, music throughout school was student-centred experiential learning. It was about developing their potential as musicians whatever their starting point, and firmly directed towards promoting creativity and self-expression. This probably characterises music in the KS3 curriculum at most schools too, but I get the feeling that things suddenly shift to the formal transmission of knowledge (knowledge that the teacher conveys as intrinsically worthwhile because it is part of the exam board specification) and a greater emphasis on elite culture and cultural heritage as soon as you start the option choices.

It is at this point that I turn enviously to colleagues who teach Art. In most schools they have a far greater percentage of students opting for GCSE than in music, so what is it that they do so successfully at KS3 that makes their students see GCSE as a viable option for KS4? Does the shift to an elite code at GCSE not exist in Art? Do art teachers adopt the same pedagogical approach throughout secondary school (which is not necessarily the case in music)? One interesting observation is that you never hear art teachers saying that a certain student cannot opt for GCSE because s/he doesn't have private drawing classes or pottery sessions outside the curriculum! In a nutshell, I wonder whether art teachers are more successful at developing the requisite skills for all students to believe they are 'artists' by the end of KS3.

For us, performing is a core skill and there is no doubt that this is a key component of music lessons at KS3, particularly performing as a means of developing creative ideas. Thankfully, this is one way in which we seek to make music the dominant language. However, is one of the problems we have in preparing all students for music at KS4 that we are failing to systematically develop their performing. What proportion of curriculum time do most schools invest in developing technique or instrument specific skills? And yet, the public perception of a musician is generally a 'performing

musician', not a musicologist and rarely even a composer! Throughout my career I have been a firm believer that you can develop musicianship in the classroom through the integration of performing, composing, and listening and that you **don't** need to achieve a certain mastery on an instrument before you are properly learning music, but I do question whether spending the majority of time with students working in pairs, one-handed, at keyboards is going to result in the desired fluency in performing!

The way forward is not then to give up on performing, but to find ways of making it better. I totally disagree with the letter in the TES a couple of weeks ago, that was advocating introducing a GCSE in the **history** of music on the basis that it was unsustainable to provide the one to one tuition that would allow all students to reach the required standard in performing. In my experience, it is performing as oppose to talking about music, that most students enjoy. By 'doing' music, they come to a greater understanding of music.

Therefore, I envy the schools that have taken a new approach to music in the KS3 curriculum in recent years and, perhaps with the luxury of two lessons per week – have one lesson with each student on an instrument for whole class band / ensemble and the other a more 'conventional' lesson. Can we not incorporate the self-taught guitarists, the novice instrumentalists, and the privileged instrumental learners in the same ensemble in order to give everyone a sense that they are a performing musician? In any case, is it not time that more secondary music departments started to recognise and consciously build on the investment in whole-class instrumental ensemble work in primary schools?

Despite mentioning 'the luxury of two lessons per week', I am not aware of any research evidence suggesting more time spent on music at KS3 leads to better take up at KS4. However, this is not to say I see much hope if you teach your KS3 classes on a carousel basis – here for 6 weeks, gone for 6 weeks.

My concern is the amount of lesson time wasted in a single weekly session lasting typically 50-60 mins. It goes something like this:

- Class arrive. Learning objectives on board
- Teacher takes register
- Teacher hands back books having given feedback on previous written work
- Initial questioning to check understanding of learning from previous lesson
- A student is invited to read out the lesson objectives, then teacher explains what they mean
- Teacher explains task for today's lesson
- Students are then presented with success criteria – variously expressed as long statements against sub levels, or statements under headings *Aim, Aim Higher, Aim Highest* etc
- Teacher then questions class to check understanding of today's task.
- Students are required to write specific targets for today's lesson in their books
- **Students finally go off to work in groups / pairs – perhaps 10 mins!**
- Plenary - only time for one group to perform work in progress
- Superficial peer assessment e.g. WWW EBI
- DIT / DIRT time
- Students are required to write further targets in their books for next time

There are 14 events here, only **one** of which involved all the class making music. It is a classic case of talking about music rather than doing music. Crucially, since students show their musical understanding through their musical 'doing', it is largely wasted time!

The increased interest and debate about assessment in music highlights some other pertinent issues regarding preparing all students for KS4 – and in particular, the extent to which schemes of work for KS3 that flit around to a different style, tradition or genre every six weeks are really assembled with any notion of progression in mind. Can teachers be really sure their students are introduced to concepts of harmony, structure, texture etc in any incremental and logical way as they cross back and forth from rock ‘n’ roll to gamelan to music for film? What is the logic behind a unit of work on the blues in Year 8 and another on minimalism in Year 9? In fact, I wonder at times whether the level of challenge at KS3 peaks in Year 8 and Year 9 is largely filled with areas of study that the students will find interesting but not too demanding “because they will have made their option choices”. There is no reason why you shouldn’t go for depth rather than breadth and have longer units of work in order to consolidate skills and understanding before moving on. But in order to get students in with a fighting chance of continuing with music in the curriculum at KS4, it is worth identifying some milestones of musical competence against which you can plan and map your KS3 curriculum.

John Paynter identified back in 1982 that “examinations ... **create** educational processes” and he went on to say that “this influences curriculum design, content and teaching method”. Perhaps the present disjoint between KS3 and KS4 reflects the extent to which our whole approach at KS4 is unduly but understandably influenced by the structure and content of the qualification? And, as we have seen, this stands uneasily against the best inclusive practice at KS3. But I would caution against trying to improve matters by drawing down content and teaching methods from KS4 to KS3. I well remember asking a teacher some years ago why she had chosen to teach gamelan in Year 8 and the sole response was “because it is on the GCSE specification”. To me that was a justification for **not** doing gamelan. If she wanted to prepare them for the hypnotic, repetitive sound world of gamelan later, why not focus on other

kinds of cyclic music – minimalism, or west African drumming at that point? In any case, the best teaching at KS3 is far more imaginative than what I typically see at KS4. I would advocate trying to adopt more creative, student-centred approaches at KS4 than the other way round.

So, in conclusion, I am not sure I have added much to the debate. I have highlighted some issues and hinted at various causes but, as I implied at the outset, there are successful teachers for whom this is not much of a problem. The proposals for the new GCSE in Music do worry me but, as the focus of TTM is KS3, my inclination continues to be to try to improve the quality and consistency of music lessons in the lower secondary school in the belief that the enthusiastic and competent musicians we nurture there will find their own pathways at KS4. It does matter that there are worthwhile outcomes from music in the curriculum at KS3 and that this is not just 3 years 'entertainment'. But whether the indicator of success is the number of students going on to take GCSE Music is questionable. Other qualifications do exist and will continue to be developed if the GCSE is not fit for purpose, but the ultimate indicator of success is the extent to which the KS3 music experience stimulates a lifetime's engagement in music.