Making your music room inspiring

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Introduction

Every music department is different, in terms of staffing, rooms, resources and budgets. There is no one way to do things, and no golden ticket to success. But in this resource, we'll look at how to make sure your music classroom is an inspiring place for students – as well as an efficient place for teachers.

Decorating your classroom

Music rooms come in all shapes and sizes. We might sometimes wish we could knock walls down and restructure our spaces, but we should aim to make the most of the rooms we have.

When students walk into the music room, they should feel instantly inspired. One approach to this is to cover your walls in photos of musicians and students at work: maybe past school performances or even tours, but also picture of students composing, rehearsing, performing and simply hanging out in the department. As you look around the room, you should feel instantly inspired by everything that has gone on.

Here are some thoughts on what is needed to decorate your classroom with exciting and inspiring photos:

▶ In order to cover your walls in photos, you'll need to ensure that photos are taken at events and during lessons. Either arrange for a photographer, or use your own school device or camera.

▶ Before any event, make sure you have permission from the students to take photos. It might also be worth letting parents/guardians know that photos are going to be displayed in the department.

▶ Variety is key, so make sure that when taking photos you capture as many musicians, instruments, ensembles and situations as possible. A vibrant wall is one where there are lots of different things captured and displayed.

▶ If you have a projector or screen in your classroom, use it as a huge photo frame for events such as open evenings. Creating a PowerPoint presentation of all your photos is a powerful way of showcasing what you do, and it also means that you don't have to update the walls.

▶ Use good-quality Blu Tack or another adhersive, and warm it up before putting it on the paper. That might sound obvious, but there's an art to getting paper to stay on a wall.

▶ Rotate your images every so often so that students all get featured on the wall. If possible, however, keep the walls random so that as people look, they see a whole range of different people and activities.

▶ If you have computers in your room, then consider using photos for screensavers.

▶ Make sure you include photos of students working on their compositions. It's good to highlight the full range of activities that go on in the music room.

Having a well-decorated classroom creates a positive working environment for a practical subject like music. It's also a good way to show off all the musical activities that take place in the school to any visitors. Once you've decorated your room, invite senior leaders in to see what you've done. You could even organise a small-scale concert in the music room so that others can see your hard work and be inspired by all that goes on.

Instrument storage

Another approach to decorating your classroom is to use the walls to store and hang instruments. Having guitars and other instruments hanging in practise rooms and in the music department can really bring the place to life. Guitar and ukulele hooks are not expensive, and they're easy to attach the walls.

You should also aim to have other instruments out on show in your music room, not only hanging on the walls. It shows the students what you have on offer, and also keeps music as the main focus in the room.

Displaying key terms

As well as wanting to inspire students with photos, we also want to help build musical understanding. Having key terms displayed on your music room wall is a valuable way to do this.

But where do you start when it comes to key terms? There are so many that it's impossible to include them all. Here are some ideas to get you started.

▶ Start with the elements of music – melody, harmony, tonality, texture, structure, dynamics, tempo, instrumentation and rhythm. These are words you'll refer to regularly.
▶ Have a space on the wall where you can easily add key terms that might come up in your next topic.
▶ Ask students to select words that they feel they often forget. Maybe after a mock exam they could highlight key areas of misunderstanding.
▶ Use a plastic wallet on the wall so that you can easily slot in new words. You could have a key term for every day of the week. This way, students are always engaging with a new term, and it will work across the key stages.
▶ Make sure the key terms are big and bold, so that students can see them and read them clearly.
▶ When placing them on the wall, keep the key terms at eye height so that they are easily viewed by all the students.

Like any display, you want it to be useful. Work with your students to ensure your key terms display is useful, engaging and relevant. And ensure that you can easily change some aspect of the display in response to student progress.

Wider listening wall

A wider listening wall is a space where students themselves can share music they've been listening to. This can be an interactive and ever-changing space, responding to the set works you're covering in your curriculum.

▶ Start by selecting a genre, era, composer or style. This could be Baroque music, 1990s film music, Britpop, Romantic piano concertos, or symphonies. You can either decide this yourself, or link to the curriculum directly. You could use the current GCSE set work as your starting point.
▶ Find an area of wall space, and start with this central theme. Provide a couple of examples of wider listening, and then set a homework for students to create their own wider listening poster to add to the wall.
▶ At home, students should select a piece that links to the theme on the wall and make their own poster. This should include the name of the piece, date of composition and the composer. They need to keep it bold so that it stands out. They may like to add a QR code (see below) to their poster so that other students can look up the piece and listen for themselves.
▶ Students will then bring their wider listening poster to the next lesson and add it to the wall.
▶ The wider listening wall will need to change fairly often in order to keep students listening and learning. Aim to change it every two weeks, but keep a photo record of the wall and a log of all the pieces that students have listened to. It might be helpful to add this list to the wall so that students can look up past listening.

The wider listening wall approach is designed to not only create a display, but also to get students listening. Encourage them to stick closely to the given genre, but also encourage them to explore new music. The posters don't need to be too complicated: they're mainly there to give key information about the piece. Over time, students will listen to more music and you will gather a bank of photo evidence cataloguing everything that they've listened to.

Displaying student work

Displaying work on walls is a valuable way to inspire other students. Selecting this work is important: you want to make sure that it teaches other students something. A really good display might showcase a composition score, with a guide to the piece. Another good display might be a wider listening wall, as we've discussed above.

Here are some top tips for displays that involve student work:

1 Make displays interactive by providing links to the music. A link could be a standard web address, but a more modern approach might be to use a QR code (see below). If students take the time to read about a composition, they might like to listen to it.

2 If you can, make sure that you change work regularly so that students revisit the display to learn more. Using a plastic wallet to slot in work is a good way of allowing for easy rotation.

3 Keep things big and bold so that they stand out. We want our displays to be informative and inspiring to other students.
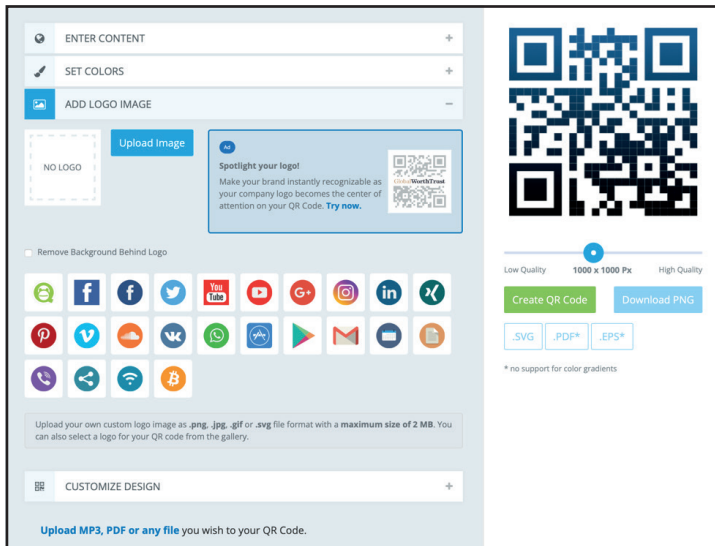
Making a QR Code

We've already mentioned a couple of places where a visible QR code might make a useful addition to your classroom. A QR (or Quick Response) code is a little bit like a barcode. It can be scanned on a mobile device, and will then take you to whatever the code is linked to – maybe a website, a YouTube video or a photo. QR codes are being used more and more, and you will probably spot them on products, shop windows and posters.

Displaying QR codes can be a useful thing to do, but how do you make them in the first place?

One website that can generate QR codes for free is QR Code Monkey (**www.qrcode-monkey. com**). A paid version will offer you more control and access to statistics, but the free version allows you to put in a web address and then generate the code.
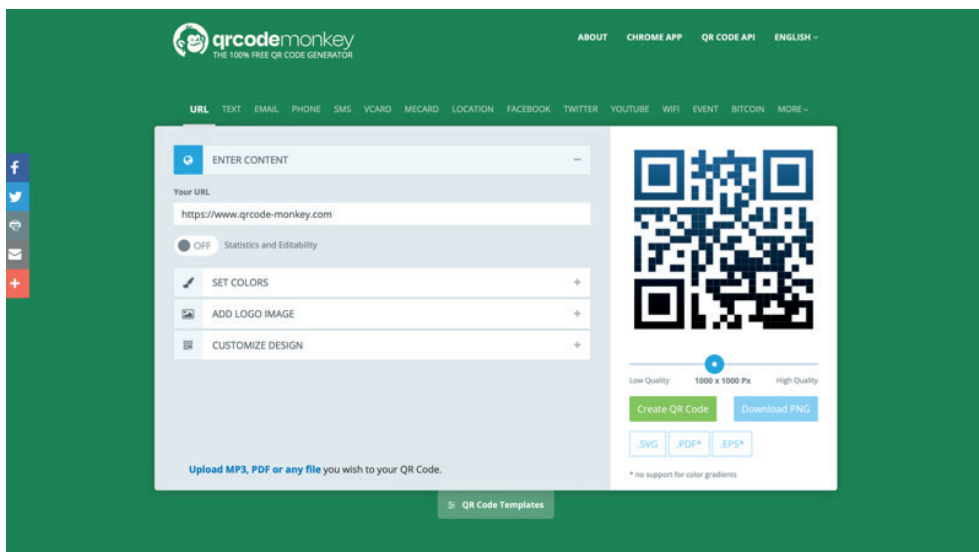
Simply enter the URL you want to link to, go through some settings for colour and images, and then click on 'Create QR Code'. Once the code has been created, click on 'Download PNG' and you'll have a copy of your code to use on your displays. You can also use a range of logos that are on the website to help make your QR code stand out:

Accessing a QR code is now easier than ever. Students can either use a QR code scanner app, or simply open the camera on their smartphone: most smartphones now have a facility whereby you use your camera to scan the code, and then the link will open.

Student resources

Although the world is moving ever more quickly towards digital material, there's still a place for physical copies of books and other resources. Students need to be able to learn from a range of different places, so why not create a space in your classroom for a small library? You may well have lots of books in your cupboards, and they're often packed full of great material. Students should be encouraged to get away from their screens from time to time and research using other methods. Not only is this good for their study methods, but it also adds a nice space to your classroom.

Having books on display also prompts and reminds students to do some reading. Learning through reading is an important skill, and a slightly more scholarly approach to studying music. It's likely that some students will appreciate the chance to read, and may even enjoy you sharing with them books that you have read. Your library can develop over time and become an important feature of your department.

Only chairs allowed

My classroom has no desks – only chairs and computer workstations. I got rid of the tables a long time ago, and I want to suggest some of the benefits, as well as the ways I've overcome the downsides. You should consider your own situation, of course, but it's crucial to think about the set-up of your own classroom.

1 Removing the tables allows more space, and makes it easier for extra-curricular rehearsals to take place. A breaktime choir, for example, can quickly meet in the music room without the need to move desks.

2 Having only chairs means it's easier to undertake whole-class ensemble work. When 30 students all have an acoustic guitar along with tables, it can be a bit of a squeeze.

3 No tables means that students can themselves spread out, allowing you to interact with them more. You'll probably find that you can see their faces more clearly, and that they engage with their work in a completely different way. Moving around the classroom and helping students with their practical work will lead to closer student/teacher engagement.

4 When you only have chairs, you can quickly and easily put students in groups. This allows them to get down to the practical work quickly, and you can often keep a greater number of groups in the music room itself.

5 Groupwork works well in a room with no tables because students can gather round books and paper, and view things from different perspectives. For GCSE lessons, for example, I often give students a large printout of some music for them to gather round and look at. Learning in different ways is important in terms of building knowledge and understanding.

6 Singing is much easier when you can quickly move students into a choir format. You also have more space for warm-ups, and for forming small groups to work on a section of a song, for example.

There are some drawbacks, however. Writing on laps isn't easy, for example – and although writing does not often form a key part of a music lesson, sometimes it's important. Using single 'exam desks' is a useful option, certainly for GCSE and A level groups, and they're easy to store and stack, and can be quickly put out and arranged in the music room. Where you do need students to complete written work, consider if it can be done digitally, or completed at home. A 'flipped learning' approach allows the written work to take place at home, so that students can come to the lesson ready to do something practical.

Another issue can be behaviour management. When students are behind desks, they are sometimes easier to manage. It's the norm for students to file into a classroom, stand behind desks and sit in rows. You should therefore consider other strategies to manage the students:

1 You can still use a seating plan, but it might be in rows of chairs, a circle or a semicircle.

2 Make sure you have a clear routine upon entering the classroom. Depending on your plan, you may want students to sit in groups, rows or a semicircle – or even not to sit down at all.

3 Consider putting small pieces of tape on the floor to show where chairs should go. This can avoid chaos at the start of the lesson as students put their chairs in place.

4 Take a photo of the different chair layouts and display it on the wall. This will allow students to quickly configure the room.

5 Share your reasoning with the students so that they can buy into the benefits of no tables and focus on their learning.

It's worth seeing if this strategy might work in your space, but it will also depend on your curriculum and how you interact with exercise books and written work. You might also like to think about your teacher's desk, and whether you really need one in your classroom. We often position everything in the classroom around our own desk, but how often do we actually sit down in a music lesson? Try moving things around, or get rid of the desk at the front altogether.

Working in a non-specialist classroom

You may find that your music department extends into a classroom that isn't a specialist music space. It is important to prepare for this, and to ensure that it can be just as inspiring a space as your main room. There are some important practical things to consider:

1 You're likely to need a portable speaker, unless the other classroom already has speakers. No music lesson will be without audio, so prepare yourself with a nice speaker that isn't too heavy to carry around. If you're going to be in that room permanently, try and negotiate a good sound system.

2 A lightweight portable keyboard is always useful if you're in a non-specialist space. Make sure you have one that's suitable for the level you are teaching, and ideally find a space where you can leave the keyboard ready for the next lesson.

3 Having a box with everything you need ready in it can be really helpful. If you're rushing from your music room to another classroom, you might like to take a box with: board pen, rubber, paper, pens, music textbook, etc.

Conclusion

Our music classrooms are special to us, and it's important that we get them right. We spend a lot of time in them, and therefore we need to be comfortable and happy as teachers. But we also want them to inspire our students – and, of course, to facilitate learning. Having inspiring displays and lots of photos on the wall, as well as reconsidering your classroom layout, might be just the thing that your space needs.