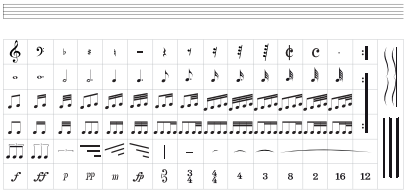
Building knowledge through the elements of music, part 1

KS4

Jane Werry

Jane Werry is a Specialist Leader in Education, and Director of Music at Hayes School in Bromley. She is a Musical Futures Champion Teacher, and co-author of the award-winning *Being a Head of Music: A Survival Guide.*



Introduction

It can be difficult to know where to start with teaching a GCSE syllabus: there are so many different parts to get to grips with. You might feel that you need to get cracking straight away with areas of study, set works, and composing. However, another way of planning the course is to start with an immersive investigation of the elements of music. By doing this, you can build up a broad and solid base of knowledge and skills that can give your students what they need – including confidence – to tackle coursework and exam content successfully.

Whatever your thoughts about the elements of music, there's no getting away from the fact that they are the lynchpin of a GCSE music listening paper. The specifications of all four principal exam boards make explicit reference to them. All of the various areas of study are viewed through the lens of the elements of music. Question types revolve around them, and the absence of a really strong grasp of elements terminology is a very common reason for poor marks.

That's not to say that an immersive introduction to GCSE music via the elements is all about drilling the knowledge. Yes, learning the concepts and terminology now is going to be extremely helpful, and retrieval practice will be crucial. But the learning can be acquired with lots of practical work that will also build skills in preparation for performing and composing coursework.

Where to start, and how to structure an elements-based first term

The first thing to do is to decide exactly what the elements are. Have you already got a 'system' for elements that has been set up at KS3? Do you already have an acronym that you use? Four of the most common acronyms are:

- **MAD T-SHIRT:** Melody; Articulation; Dynamics; Texture; Structure; Harmony; Instruments; Rhythm; Time and Tempo
- **DR SMITH:** Dynamics and Duration; Rhythm; Structure; Melody and Metre; Instrumentation; Texture, Tempo, Timbre and Tonality; Harmony
- **DR P SMITH:** Dynamics; Rhythm (including metre and tempo); Pitch; Structure; Melody; Instrumentation; Texture and Tonality; Harmony
- **DR T SMITH:** Dynamics; Rhythm (including metre and tempo); Texture; Structure; Melody; Instrumentation; Tonality; Harmony

Whichever you choose – even if you go off-piste and create your own – it makes sense to have the same system in place for KS3 so that there is continuity as you move into KS4.

It may well be that you taught simpler definitions of the elements at KS3 – pitch is high/low, texture is thick/thin, and so on – and now you need to go into more detail, introducing more terms. This is the ideal situation, as students will have a context for all the new information that is about to come their way.

Don't expect to spend an equal amount of time on each element: some are just more complex than others. Harmony and tonality need the most time to cover, and texture is also time-consuming and potentially confusing for students. However, I wouldn't advise tackling either of these first, as there are better 'ways in' that will give your students a confidence-boost before you address the trickiest elements.

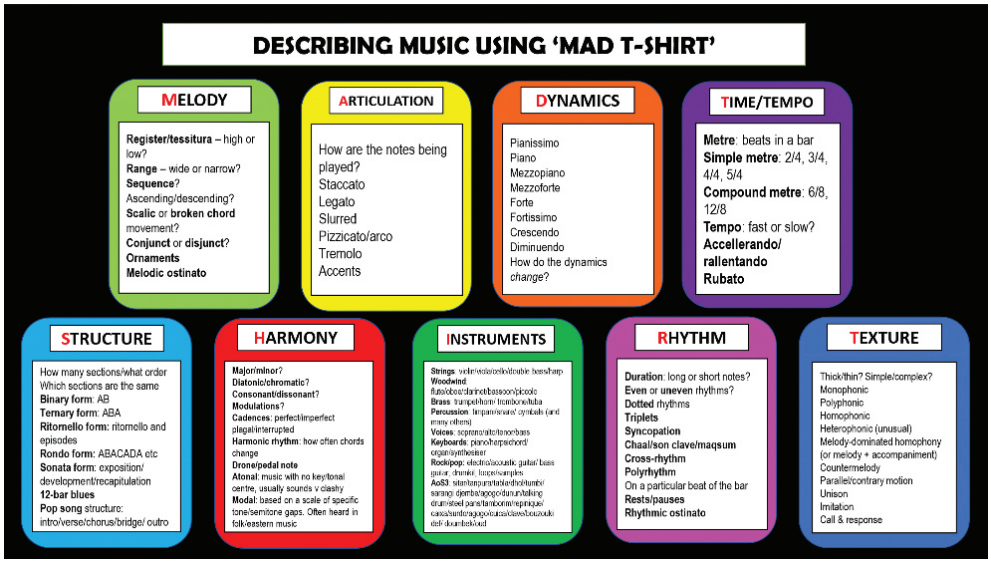
This is the first of two resources on this subject, and here we'll tackle melody, instruments (sonority), articulation and harmony. The rest will be covered in part two.

Be sure to check your exam board's specification to see whether they favour the term 'sonority' or 'timbre'. Students will need to learn that they mean the same thing, and are linked very closely to instrumentation, but it will make sense to teach using whichever term your board uses in questions.

Presenting the big picture to your students

Students need to understand what they're learning and how it fits in with the GCSE as a whole. Explain that this knowledge is the backbone for everything else in the course, and that having all of this at their fingertips will enable them to understand all the set works or topics that will follow, as well as giving a foundation for composition work.

You might want to present students with a summary, so they have an overview of everything that is to come. The one below is specific to the OCR syllabus: it is mainly the 'instruments' category that may need adapting to fit with the areas of study for other boards, although specifics may need to be added for other elements as well:



It might be a good plan for students to have a printout of the summary at the front of their folders for easy reference.

When tackling each element in turn, you will need to think about whether to give the students a knowledge organiser for each one, or whether they should make their own notes. The important thing is that they should actively engage with the knowledge and concepts, so you'll need to plan lesson activities that involve a mixture of activities that challenge them appropriately and get them thinking. All GCSE classes are different, and you may be catering for a wide range of musical ability and experience. There is no one right way of doing this, so cherry pick ideas from this resource and combine with your own to create a bespoke path through the elements that will suit your class.

If you want detailed knowledge organisers for each element, you can find an excellent and detailed set here (**www.tes.com/teaching-resource/gcse-music-knowledge-organisers-12201310**).

Pitch: melody

Melody is a good place to start. It makes sense to deal with one note at a time before you think about harmony. Understanding how successful melodies are put together is essential for being able to write a good melody for a composition.

The place of notation in an exploration of the elements

The extent to which you will need to build up students' confidence with notation – and perhaps allay any fears that students might have about using it – depends not only on their prior experience of it, but also on the specification that you are following.

Those with an anthology of set work scores are clearly more notation-based than those that have areas of study with no set works. However, whichever syllabus you are following, and whatever the prior experience of your students, it's crucial that students do not have notation as their principal medium for learning about the elements. John Paynter's mantra of 'sound before symbol' is a good one to remember: approach each element from the sound first, and get students listening, singing, and playing before notation comes into play.

However, having notation in view quite frequently can help mitigate the fear factor. Once you've set up a concept aurally, think about having notation as a support for what comes next. For non-notation-based musicians, getting them to notice melodic shape, spot highest and lowest notes and so on can be done using notation as a visual scaffold.

What do we want students to learn about melody?
- Step and leap, or conjunct and disjunct, depending on your preference
- Intervals
- Degrees of the scale – at least tonic, subdominant and dominant
- Phrases
- Range and tessitura
- How to develop a melody, using sequence, inversion and extension
- Ornaments
- Melodic ostinato

This needs to be in conjunction with building an understanding about what makes a melody successful. Bear in mind the mistakes that GCSE students often make with creating melodies: often they struggle to avoid melodies that are dull and shapeless. Make sure that you emphasise all the ways in which great melodies in all styles avoid these traps.

A good place to start is to unpick a great melody and see what makes it work. Many music teachers have their own 'pet tune' that they like to use for this – mine is Gershwin's 'I Got Rhythm'. Ella Fitzgerald's recording is in C, which makes it easy to use as a model. Firstly, play the recording and ask if any students know this melody already – if they do, point out that it was written in 1930, so for it still to be well-known nowadays is proof that it is a successful melody. If they don't, it doesn't matter: because it's so well-constructed, it's easy to learn. Put lyrics up on the board and get students singing the melody along with Ella. Once they've done this enough to have internalised it, ask them to pick it out by ear on instruments.

Questions for discussion might include:
- Which beat of the bar does the first phrase start on? (Second beat.)
- How does the second phrase 'I got music' relate to the first phrase 'I got rhythm'? (Same rhythm but with pitches in reverse order.)
- How is the third phrase 'I got my man, who could ask for anything more?' similar and different? (It starts the same as the first phrase but is extended.)
- On which degree of the scale does the third phrase end? (The tonic.)
- How do the next eight bars ('I got daisies...') relate to the first eight bars? (They're the same.)
- The next section 'Old man trouble' is different, but what is recycled? (The rhythm from the first two bars is used, but with different pitches. There is a descending sequence.)
- Where is the highest note? (In the last phrase, in the penultimate 'Who could ask for anything more?')
- What is the overall structure? (AABA)
- What is the range of the melody? (An octave and a 5th: G3 to D5.)

Learning points to draw from this include:
- A great melody doesn't need lots of ideas – this one is based on one rhythmic cell.
- A rhythmic cell needs to be interesting: here it's the syncopation that does it – especially avoiding the first beat of the bar (try singing or playing it without syncopation and see how different it is).
- Shape is important: the second phrase mirrors the first, while the third extends and develops the idea, taking it higher in pitch.
- Most of the movement is stepwise or leaps of 3rds.
- Repeating a whole chunk, with different words, is good (as long as it was effective the first time).
- Once you've heard something twice, it's good then to have something contrasting.
- Saving the highest note for near the end is an effective tactic.
- Finishing on the tonic note gives a good sense of closure.
- Finishing with a section that recalls the beginning – but is not exactly the same – is structurally effective.

Once you've covered all this information, another melody is needed for comparison. This would be a great opportunity for students to choose a melody to analyse in the same way. If they're confident, you could give them free choice. Otherwise, you could have a selection of melodies that you know they will already know to choose from. Investigate chosen melodies and then come back to see what similarities or differences they uncover. Do different styles of music have melodies with different characteristics? Not only are you training them how to analyse melodies, but you're also coming up with a checklist for effective melody composition.

It's impossible to talk about melody without talking about rhythm as well. Explain to students that there is overlap between the elements, and that they're all inextricably linked.

Consolidating the knowledge

Students need to revisit this knowledge in order to commit it to their long-term memory. Pick and mix from these ideas:

- This video (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=sIxrWu1FQaQ**) may be useful for revisiting the knowledge between lessons.
- Students might find this Quizlet (**https://quizlet.com/gb/483394302/mad-t-shirt-melody-flash-cards/?x=1jqt**) useful for revision.
- Composing melodies, starting with a short but interesting rhythmic cell and then developing it in different ways, practising constructing sequences and creating inversions.
- Identifying melodic features aurally in a range of music.
- Hunt for examples of specific melodic features in music that they listen to or play outside of lessons.

Instruments and articulation

Melody covers a lot of important knowledge, and is a good first element to cover. But it does involve some quite deep conceptual learning, with some nebulous aspects, for example what makes a good melody. Some of the other elements do not have quite the same kind of qualitative judgements to grapple with, and it can be a good idea to mix up the conceptually meaty with those that are a bit more straightforward.

The ability to identify instrumental sonorities aurally is an important part of any GCSE listening paper, but it's an area where your students may present with highly differing levels of confidence. Of course, if you've played in an orchestra for years, you'll know all the orchestral instruments, and are likely to find identifying them by their sounds quite easy. But if you don't have that experience because you're not an orchestral musician, there's quite a lot to learn.

Make the most of any opportunities you can to get actual instruments into your classroom. If you can demonstrate instruments yourself, or get other students or peripatetic staff to play and explain, then do it, as first-hand experience is always going to be the best thing. Being able to 'have a go' on a range of instruments, if possible, will be hugely memorable and enjoyable.

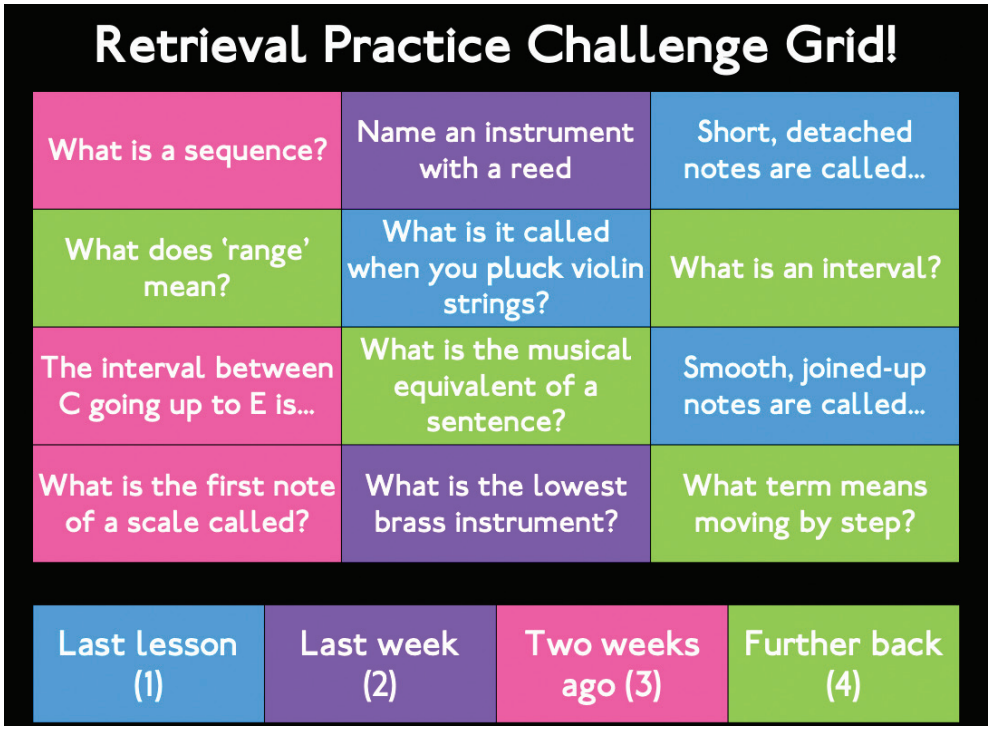
Otherwise, plunder YouTube so that students can see the instruments as well as hear them. There are plenty of 'instruments of the orchestra' introduction videos (such as this one – **www.youtube.com/watch?v=tA6NxJcDAiw&t=1s**) if you need to start from scratch, including detailed videos on each instrument in the Philharmonia Orchestra's excellent series (**www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLqR22EoucCyccs5J639SCefaM7mD9dMSz**).

There then needs to be frequent practice of identifying instrumental sounds by ear. This can be an excellent 'do now' activity at the start of a lesson. The Music Assessment Videos channel on YouTube (**www.youtube.com/channel/UCY9PyV6y5k57GdiA_MC5ltA/videos**) is highly recommended as a huge time-saver here. There are great tests involving distinguishing between two or three instruments, such as clarinet/oboe (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=jFBNUs9L4yk&t=4s**) or violin/viola/cello (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=EE_oOhfIRDI&t=1s**).

Articulation – how notes are played – is a logical add-on to instruments that can be covered quite quickly. Ultimately, this is quite simple knowledge that involves knowing the terminology and what the techniques sound like. Again, seeing and hearing the techniques 'in the flesh' is the best way to cover this, although a video such as this one (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rn5WJJfsX8&t=1s**) might be a useful intro or recap. Students might also find this Quizlet (**https://quizlet.com/gb/483398859/mad-t-shirt-articulation-flash-cards/**) useful for consolidation of the terms.

Retrieval practice

As you work through the elements, it's important to revisit knowledge from previous lessons in order to embed it in students' long-term memory. Retrieval grids such as this one can be a great way to structure this:



The numbers in brackets are points, the challenge being to accumulate as many points as possible within a set time. A template for grids such as these can be found here (**www.retrievalpractice.org/strategies/2018/9/28/retrieval-grids**). These can be a great lesson starter, especially if students tend to arrive in dribs and drabs. You could then move on to a listening exercise once everyone has arrived.

Harmony and tonality

This is probably the most meaty of all the elements, and will require quite a bit of time, practice and confidence-building.

What do we want students to learn?

- The difference between harmony and tonality
- Consonance and dissonance
- Major, minor, pentatonic, and any other scales and modes required for your course
- Major and minor chords, including how they're constructed
- Chord inversions
- Tonic and dominant, and Roman numerals for chords
- Cadences, including aural identification
- The cycle of 5ths
- Key signatures according to your specification (probably up to four sharps and flats)
- Harmonic rhythm
- Pedal notes

This is all linked inextricably to composition skills, and covering this knowledge needs to involve a lot of practical work in conjunction with listening and theory. What you plan for your students needs to build on whatever they've done at KS3, as you may well have laid some great foundations. Students may already be very used to working with chords, and consequently have a good knowledge base on which to draw.

Here are some ideas for lesson activities, starting with the simplest and working up to the most complex. Choose whichever are suitable for your class.

1. Choose a pop song with three or four chords in a repeating pattern. Perform this as a class in whatever way works for you, making sure that everyone plays the chords in some way, even if keyboard, guitar or ukulele is not their usual activity – it's important that everyone engages actively with the harmony. After performing it, pick apart the chords used. How often do they change? Which one feels like 'home' – can we identify the key from the chords used? Can we assign Roman numerals to the chords within the key? How are the chords played in the song – is there a distinctive rhythm, or are they played in a broken chord pattern? What happens if we change the pattern? What happens if we change one of the chords? Can we make all the major chords minor and the minor chords major?
2. Choose a song that's slightly more harmonically complex – perhaps the chords are different in the chorus. Perform the song and compare it with the first one. What's different?
3. Practise constructing major and minor triads on a keyboard, and inverting the chords.
4. Invent four-bar chord progressions. You could use a tic-tac-toe grid as a starting point:

C	Dm	Em
F	G	Am
Am	C	F

   Here, you can go in any direction – left, right, up, down and diagonally – and decide on your harmonic rhythm to fill four bars. Using a template like this provides scaffolding for those who need it (more confident students might go 'off-piste' with their chord choices). Plan for creating basslines to go with the chords, perhaps using inversions and even passing notes to create descending or ascending patterns. If a student asks if they can change or add a chord, always say yes: this is all about experimentation, and any 'gut feelings' students have about harmony should be listened to. Get students to compare what they come up with, and talk about the processes they went through.
5. Practise working out and playing perfect and imperfect cadences in a range of keys.
6. Play a cycle of 5ths. This video (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=VfrD6IOTgKY**) is a helpful introduction. Try going round clockwise and anti-clockwise, and feel the difference. Make the link between anti-clockwise movement and a V-I cadence. Investigate music that makes use of cycles of 5ths, such as 'Take Five' (middle eight), 'I Will Survive' or 'Fly Me to the Moon'. If possible, play/sing them, and notice how the melody is often constructed with a descending sequence.
7. Compose a descending sequence over a cycle of 5ths.

Teaching students to identify cadences aurally can be quite tricky. At the basic level, they need to know what the cadences are called, and how they work. Playing them helps a lot. It can be useful to point out the following points:

1. There are different ways of working out a cadence by ear. You can listen for the bass notes and work out the chords systematically, or you can go for a more 'gut feeling' approach, listening for the distinctive sound of each type of cadence. The American names for the cadences (open, closed, amen and deceptive), can be useful here, although students will need to know the British names for their listening exam.
2. 90% of cadences are perfect or imperfect. So if you have to guess, think about whether it sounds finished or not, and go for perfect if it does, and imperfect if it doesn't.

You could find your own examples of cadences in music for students to identify. However, if you want a cadence test in a hurry, there are plenty on YouTube, such as this one (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mG4KHp-Wvg**). General consolidation of harmony and tonality can be found here (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=HON3Yo5Skc8**), while a Quizlet for revising all the terminology is here (**https://quizlet.com/_7ztby5?x=1jqt&i=1vb41c**).