

Jane Werry is a Specialist Leader in Education, and Director of Music at Hayes School in Bromley. She is an A level moderator for OCR and co-author of *Being a Head of Music: A Survival Guide*.

by Jane Werry

INTRODUCTION

All the GCSE boards stipulate that one of the two submitted compositions must be composed to a brief set by the board. The good thing about this is that choosing from a range of options is almost always easier than having a free choice, and students tend to find freedom within the constraints of the brief.

There are certain similarities between the briefs set by the various boards. All have a film/TV music option, and a pop song is a possible response to briefs from all four boards. Two have a solo-plus-accompaniment, concerto-inspired option; two have a piece intended for a formal occasion; and there are also various options for using a melody, rhythm or chords as a starting point.

It's not possible to cover every brief in lots of detail here. The film music and pop song briefs are likely to be the most popular with students, so we'll investigate those in more depth in this resource. Many of the ideas here, though, can be transferred to other briefs, as they are concerned with the basics of composing melodies and harmonies, and developing ideas within a structure.

CHOOSING A BRIEF AND GETTING STUDENTS STARTED

GCSE classes vary so hugely in their make-up that it's impossible to generalise about how prescriptive the teacher should be in guiding their students' choices. It boils down to the level of support that your students will need. Will it be necessary to provide quite a tight framework for them to work within, or are they confident enough to be allowed more freedom? Are there particular briefs out of your board's four choices that will particularly suit (or not suit) their interests and abilities? Now they're in the final year of their GCSE course, you should have a pretty good idea of their likes and dislikes, and strengths and weaknesses.

Once you've decided on your answers to these questions, you'll need to plan what you need to give students in order to get them started in a positive and productive way. Some students will be raring to go, and will need little by way of prompts. However, the 'freedom with constraints' idea is a very useful one for the majority of candidates, who may feel a bit daunted by the task ahead. A choice from a menu of possibilities is easier than an entirely free rein for these students.

FEEDBACK, MONITORING OF PROGRESS, AND KEEPING THINGS GOING

There are tight restrictions on the individual guidance and feedback that you can give to students on their coursework compositions. However, you should keep a close eye on how their work is progressing, and make sure that they have a good understanding about what they need to include in order to access the highest possible marks. Here are some ideas for how to achieve this:

- Break down the assessment criteria for students, and take time to explain them in a way that students will understand. Structure and development are two areas that need particular attention here, as they are so important to achieving good marks.
- Have examples of previous good work as exemplars. These can also be used to demonstrate what structure and development actually sound like, and are worth picking apart with your class.
- Compile any great examples from wider listening into a location that students can access easily, and provide

explanations of what makes them great. An example of this is 'The Rumble' from *West Side Story* as a model for the Edexcel fight scene brief.

- Every few weeks, listen to the work in progress and make notes to present to the class next lesson. These can be quite generic, but start by making a list of whose compositions are progressing well, and whose are not. Provided you've created an atmosphere within your class that is conducive to open sharing, be upfront about presenting your notes to the class, and use school rewards and contact with home as appropriate.
- Where a composition is not progressing well, make a judgement about why this is, by talking to the student if necessary. Is it because they are genuinely stuck, or is it just laziness? These two scenarios need different solutions.
- It's very likely that a review of work in progress will present particular aspects of the pieces that need further input from the teacher. This is your opportunity to have a lesson (or part of a lesson) focusing on this particular thing, so that generic but highly relevant feedback is provided. This might be on techniques for developing a melody, ways to use harmony effectively, creating a contrasting second section, using texture – whatever is required at that particular time.

FILM AND TV BRIEFS

All four exam boards include a film/TV option. These are:

- Edexcel: music for a fight scene between two gangs, in any style and for any instruments.
- OCR: a piece of film music using one of the given stimuli, which range from musical starting points (melody, chords, rhythm) to an image and a story.
- AQA: a title theme for a new investigative crime TV series.
- Eduqas: music for a film scene set in a haunted house.

Establishing the story is extremely important, particularly for the OCR and Eduqas briefs which are extremely open. Even if doing the Edexcel brief, or using the OCR story stimulus about exploring a cave, the specifics of the story need to be decided on in advance in order for the student to have an idea about how the piece needs to be structured. Encourage students to think like a film director, and plan exactly what the audience will see. They could write this up in bullet points, or even produce a storyboard.

Once the story has some flesh on its bones, it's time to start thinking about how this translates into a piece of music. Here are some questions to ask and discuss:

- How will you set the scene (location in time and space) through the music?
- How will you introduce the characters through the music?
- How can you build up a sense of anticipation through the music?
- How can you surprise your audience?

Using modes and chords to get started and set the scene

Using modes is an excellent way to give instant flavour to a piece. Simply by operating within a particular scale, students not only have comfortably finite parameters for their composing, but they can also make simple choices about which mode fits their theme or their preferences. Just by having a finite set of pitches to use and some characteristic chord progressions to try, students are put in the position of trying out a few options to discover their favourites, rather than feeling the 'blank page syndrome' of not knowing where to start.

For the Edexcel brief with the fight scene between two gangs, two different modes could be used to represent the opposing sides.

Here are some ideas for which modes have particular characteristics, including some chord progressions to try and examples to listen to:

Mode	Notes (starting on C)	Characteristics	Try these chords	Examples
Lydian	C D E F sharp G A B	Very bright-sounding: the raised 4th is pleasantly surprising. Can have a quirky or futuristic effect.	I-II (C major to D major)	<i>The Simpsons</i> theme; <i>Back to the Future</i> main theme.
Mixolydian	C D E F G A B flat	Major, cheesy, jazzy, heroic	I-IV-bVII (C major, F major, B flat major)	Theme from the original <i>Star Trek</i> .
Dorian	C D E flat F G A B flat	Minor, with distinctive sharpened 6th. Feels folkly or funky.	i-IV (C minor, F major)	The Doors, 'Riders on the Storm'.
Phrygian	C D flat E flat F G A flat B flat	Minor, with flattened second. Good for historical or mythological settings.	i-bII (C minor, D flat major)	<i>Fellowship of the Ring</i> , Prologue.
Phrygian dominant	C D flat E F G A flat B flat	The augmented 2nd between the second and third degrees lends it a Middle Eastern or flamenco feel.	I-bII (C major, D flat major)	'Misirlou' (used in <i>Pulp Fiction</i> soundtrack), or a more traditional version.
Octotonic	C D flat E flat E F sharp G A B flat	Alternating tones and semitones. Great for action scenes.	Diminished 7th chords going up and down the scale: C ^o , Db ^o , Eb ^o and so on. Alternatively, minor chords moving up a minor 3rd each time: Cm, Ebm, F#m, Am.	Alan Silvestri's score to <i>Predator</i> , 'Billy' cue; John Williams, 'Ark' theme from Indiana Jones movies.

This video is an excellent ten-minute summary of how chord progressions can be used to write film music. Here is a summary of the progressions it describes.

Key:

M = major triad

m = minor triad

6 = the number of semitones between the two chords.

So, M2M indicates two major chords a major second apart. M4m indicates a major chord followed by a minor chord a major 3rd higher.

- M2M: protagonistism (a hero)
- M6M: outer space
- M8M: fantasy
- M4m: sadness, loss
- M5m: romantic, Middle Eastern
- m5M: wonder (also M7m)
- m2M: mystery or dark comedy
- m11M: dramatic sound popular in recent films
- m6m: antagonism (a baddie), danger
- m8m: antagonism, evil

Once some chords have been chosen, it is usually necessary to take action to prevent students from using them in block triads, in semibreves or crotchets. Talk about how to spread the notes of a chord so that they do not sound muddy. If block chords are what they want, avoid having notes close together in a bass register (it muddies the texture) and have the root at the top:



This voicing, and variants of it, works well on piano and with string sounds.

Once voicing is sorted, get students to consider rhythm and figuration carefully, taking into account what effect they want to create. If chords are to be block chords, put them into an interesting rhythm. Here is an example taken from John Williams' *Jurassic Park* theme, which suits its heroic, urgent trumpet melody beautifully:



Arranging the chord notes into a pattern can help add interest, prevent a soggy texture, and create a sense of movement. This might have a running or flowing feel:



or



Harmonic pace will be considered later in this resource, but it's an important factor in film scores too. Another chord idea worth experimenting with is a pedal note: keeping a static bass note underneath changing chords.

Writing themes

When writing melodies of any sort, any starting point is better than no starting point at all. Speech rhythms can be as good a place to start as any.

Let's say you're doing the OCR film brief and using the scenario about exploring a cave as your stimulus, and you want to write a theme to represent the cave itself. Put on a spooky voice and say something about the cave. You might come up with this;

A cave! A cave! A mys-ter - i-ous cave!

The rhythm for 'a cave' lends itself to a distinctive interval. You might try out various intervals before settling on, say, a rising 6th:

A cave! A cave! A mys-ter - i-ous cave!

We want to present the idea of our hero going into the cave. We might already have chosen the M2M chord sequence mentioned above. So we could extend our initial melodic idea using notes from the chords, with a few passing-notes as necessary:

A cave! A cave! A mys-ter - i-ous cave!

Perhaps, to represent the stillness of the inside of the cave, we might keep a pedal C going through this passage:

A cave! A cave! A mys-ter - i-ous cave!

If this sounds familiar, it is the very chord progression that John Williams uses for Yoda's Theme in *The Empire Strikes Back*. Notice how the rising 6th at the end of the first bar becomes a 7th in bar 3 and a 10th in bar 6:

A cave! A cave! A mys-ter - i-ous cave!

This is a good example of how to take a small idea and make it go somewhere, which is something that most students need help with, as they have a tendency to write very static melodies with no sense of direction.

Williams has a two-bar idea. The rhythms are not particularly interesting, but the rising 6th at the end of the first bar, together with the Lydian twist of the F sharp, prevents the melody from being boring. In bars 3-4, he repeats the initial idea, filling in the interval between the G and the C with an extra note, and expanding the interval at the end of the bar. In bar 4 we land on a different note of the D major chord. In bars 5 and 6 we

focus on the first bar of the pattern, using it in a rising sequence, with the biggest leap and the highest pitches, together with a perfect cadence, at the end. Simple, but like all of Williams' film scores, hugely effective.

Development of the themes will be an important factor in providing the piece with some cohesion, as well as gaining marks. Some ideas for developing themes are as follows:

- Change the theme from major to minor to reflect what is happening in the story.
- Take a small section of the theme and make it into a sequence.
- Take a small section of the theme and repeat it to make an ostinato. This can continue underneath another idea.
- If there is a distinctive rhythm in the theme, make this into a rhythmic ostinato played by a percussion sound, or perhaps as a pedal note.
- Change the intervals in the theme: make them smaller or larger depending on the story.
- Use rhythmic augmentation or diminution: make all of the notes twice as long, or half as long.

INSTRUMENTATION AND ORCHESTRATION

Particularly if students are using a sequencing program to produce their film music, you will need to provide some guidance about how to use instruments effectively. Here are some top tips to start off with:

- Avoid having too many low-pitched instruments – aim to have a spread of pitch.
- Lighten the bass, and add a percussive sound, by using pizzicato cellos.
- A high pedal note, perhaps on violins, and even unaccompanied, works very well to create suspense.
- If using harp, stagger the start points of the notes in chords slightly to create a spread effect.
- Woodwind instruments work well as solos over chords on strings or piano: do not have anything else in the same pitch area as the solo, in order to let it shine through.
- Tremolo string sounds are worth investigating, but use sparingly, as there can definitely be too much.

A film composition checklist

Give students a checklist of things they need to work through as they compose their piece. This can help to assuage the 'I don't know what to do next' syndrome, especially if you provide support in the form of links to explanations, examples or helpful videos.

1. Plan the story accurately. Where is the setting (time and place)? Who are the main characters? What exactly happens? Which characters/things are important enough to need a musical theme of their own?
2. Choose a mode or a set of chords for each part of the story or character.
3. Decide how the chords are to be played – instrument choice, voicing and rhythm.
4. Create themes to go over chords: use word-rhythms as a starting point, and perhaps use a distinctive interval. Don't forget that rests are just as important as notes!
5. Develop your themes by changing intervals/harmonies, use augmentation/diminution, or take a small chunk from a theme and turn it into a sequence/melodic ostinato/rhythmic ostinato.
6. Pay close attention to orchestration – have a good spread of pitches, and vary the texture. Don't be afraid to have just one instrument playing some of the time!

POPULAR SONG BRIEFS

Three of the exam boards include popular song option. These are:

- Edexcel: a song in verse/chorus form, using any text, in any musical style.
- OCR: a pop song in any style.
- Eduqas: a piece of music to be performed by a student group in a youth pop festival.

AQA have a brief for 'a piece of music suitable for a promotional campaign for a series of outdoor concerts', which could also be interpreted as a pop song.

The tic-tac-toe idea comes from the Little Kids Rock website. This has a mind-boggling array of free, high-quality rock and pop resources, and is well worth investigating.

Start with chords

Chords are a great place to start with composing a pop song. But which chords? As before, the key here is to set students up with some 'freedom with constraints': a range of options to choose from, rather than a completely free choice. If students are happy to come up with their own chord progression, then that's fine – but for anyone who needs it, provide some sort of framework.

A really good way to do this is using a tic-tac-toe board. Here's an example:

IA 1 bar	ii 2 bars	iii 1 bar
IV 2 bars	V 1 bar	vi 1 bar
vi 1 bar	I 1 bar	IV 2 bars

The idea here is to go in any direction: up/down/left/right/diagonal, to make four-bar chord progressions. If bottom-left to top-right is chosen, just choose which chord to repeat or play for two bars.

You may wish to make this simpler for students by presenting them with chord names rather than Roman numerals. The key of C is suitable for keyboard players or those using a sequencing program:

C 1 bar	Dm 2 bars	Em 1 bar
F 2 bars	G 1 bar	Am 1 bar
Am 1 bar	C 1 bar	F 2 bars

The great thing about having some video tutorials handy is that you can direct students towards the ones that might be useful for them, as necessary – it's a good way of providing individual feedback for students, that is time-efficient and allows easy repetition should this be required.

The key of G may be more conducive for guitarists:

G 1 bar	Am 2 bars	Bm 1 bar
C 2 bars	D 1 bar	Em 1 bar
Em 1 bar	G 1 bar	C 2 bars

Once a favourite chord progression has been chosen, get students to decide on a strumming/comping pattern for the chords. This could be anything – a fingerpicking/broken chord pattern, an interesting rhythm – anything but block root-position triads in crotchets! If keyboard students have no idea where to start with this, point them towards this helpful video. For those who are moving on to the next level, this video has good guidance on making piano chords sound more fancy. For guitarists, a basic intro to strumming patterns can be found here.

Getting going with lyrics

There are many ways into writing lyrics. One of the quickest is to proceed as follows:

- Decide on a **title** first. Look around for inspiration: book titles, newspaper headlines, adverts ('because you're worth it'), even labels ('handle with care') can help here. If this is not enough to start students off, give them a list to choose from. Here are a few for starters:
 - Walking Home
 - Too Late Again
 - No Next Time
 - Power Up
 - A Thousand Times
 - Change (Can Be a Good Thing)
 - Too Far Gone
 - Will You Ever?
 - Thunder in the Rain
 - Tunnel Vision
 - Rocky Ground
- Come up with some rhyming pairs of words that relate to the title. Once these are in place, students can begin to write some lines of lyrics, and try singing these over their chords. These videos might be useful reference for students who find this hard: [start with a rhyme](#) and [one rhyme, many melodies](#).
- Decide on a structure for the lyrics. Here are some ideas:
 - **Verse 1:** This is the problem.
 - **Chorus:** This is how I feel about it.
 - **Verse 2:** This is what I tried to do about it.
 - **Chorus:** This is how I feel about it.
 - **Bridge:** What I hope will happen is this.
 - **Chorus:** This is how I feel about it.

 - **Verse 1:** I took a chance.
 - **Chorus:** Now my life has changed.
 - **Verse 2:** I risked everything for happiness.
 - **Chorus:** Now my life has changed.
 - **Bridge:** It was worth it.
 - **Chorus:** Now my life has changed.

 - **Verse 1:** A list of things that I have/that I feel/that I have done.
 - **Chorus:** The situation I am in now: the punchline (title?).
 - **Verse 2:** Another list.
 - **Chorus:** The situation I am in now: the punchline (title?).
 - **Bridge:** How I feel about the situation.
 - **Chorus:** The situation I am in now: the punchline (title?).

The chorus

Before we go much further, some thought needs to be given to how the chorus might vary from the verse. It's true that many modern pop songs have one chord progression that remains unchanged throughout. However, this is not necessarily a good model for a coursework composition, where marks will be gained for development of ideas.

It would be perfectly possible, of course, simply to devise a second chord progression for the chorus, either using the tic-tac-toe board or otherwise, but it could be argued that it would be advantageous to do something with the chord sequence from the verse, in order to demonstrate some mark-gaining mastery of harmonic development. Ideas for such development include:

- Doubling or halving the harmonic pace.
- Changing the order of the chords (perhaps reversing them).
- Changing the strumming/comping pattern.
- Adding 7ths to one or some of the chords: experiment with major and minor 7ths.

If students are required to write a commentary on their composition, it's well worth them knowing which mode they are implying when they develop their harmony: they can write something along the lines of 'I decided to give my chorus a Dorian twist by changing the C major chord to C minor.'

Another really interesting idea is to play around with some **modal interchange**. Put simply, this involves borrowing chords from the other modes (Dorian, Mixolydian etc) that start on the same tonic. Students could simply try making the major chords minor and the minor chords major, or you could give them some more specific things to try:

Chord in original progression (example in C major)	Try this substitution	Mode hinted at
I (C)	i (C minor)	Dorian
ii (Dm)	II (D major)	Lydian
	bII (D flat major)	Phrygian
iii (Em)	bIII (E flat major)	Phrygian
IV (F)	iv (F minor)	Phrygian
V (G)	v (G minor)	Lydian
vi (Am)	bVI (A flat major)	Phrygian

Writing melodies to go with chords

The 'improvise some vocal lines over your chords' approach described above works well for some students – usually those with a bit of confidence who don't mind trying things out that might sound wrong. However, some students need the reassurance of a more scientific approach. This is where Hookpad is brilliant.

The screenshot shows the Hookpad interface with the following details:

- Top Bar:** HOOKPAD Untitled* (NEW OPEN...)
- Controls:** Play (sb), Mix (m), Loop, Record, Time Sig. (4/4), Key (C Major), Tempo (128 BPM), Stable, Inst., Settings, Save (s), Export.
- Chord Palette:** Add a chord in C Major. Options include I (1), ii (2), iii (3), IV (4), V (5), vi (6), vii° (7), and magic (8). It also shows inversion (Inv (i)), Type (e), Emb (e), and Sec (n) options.
- Piano Roll:** A grid showing notes for chords C, dm, and em across 8 measures. The notes are color-coded to match the chords.

The free, web-based program allows you to choose a key (or mode) and create chord sequences. Above you can see how the C/Dm/Dm/Em progression looks. By clicking on 'stable' I can see the notes of the chords – these are 'safe' notes for creating a melody.

This close-up shows the piano roll and chord palette for the progression C-C-C-C-dm-dm-dm-dm-dm-dm-dm-dm-em-em-em-em. The piano roll highlights the notes for each chord: C (C4, E4, G4), dm (D4, F4, A4), and em (E4, G4, B4). The chord palette below shows the selected chords in Roman numerals and letter notation.

I can then create a melody on the screen using mostly these notes, and perhaps some of the notes in between.



You can easily repeat sections, and change the sounds to give some instant style (for example, adding a drum beat). It's also possible to add lyrics and additional layers of melody. See this video for a really good basic five-minute introduction that will give students enough information to get going. You can experiment with modal interchange simply by selecting a different mode on the 'key' button. The whole thing can be saved to work on next time (you have to create an account, but this is free) and can be exported as a MIDI file at any point to transfer into a scorewriting or sequencing program.

TEXTURE, THE MIDDLE EIGHT, AND MODULATIONS

Give some thought to texture in the song. This is especially easy if using a scorewriting or sequencing program to compose. Even if it's a song that will be performed live by the student singing and accompanying themselves on keyboard or guitar, the golden rule is not to give everything straight away. Keep the texture in the introduction relatively simple and sparse, and continue the intro texture under the first verse. Add some interest with extra layers or a busier strumming/comping pattern in the chorus, and then think carefully about how verse two can be slightly different from verse one. This is another aspect of development that can be credited when marking the songs.

Some songs have neither a middle eight nor a key change. This is fine, but a coursework song will be richer for their inclusion, for any students who are able to accomplish this.

The function of a middle eight is to provide variety at a point in the song where we have probably heard two (or three) verses and two choruses. Some completely new chords are called for at this point, and now is the time to do something adventurous. Students could experiment with some modal interchange at this point, particularly if they have not yet done so, or could insert a cycle of 5ths. Alternatively, start with a descending or ascending bassline, and find chords that fit with it (avoid making all of them root position chords: this will sound clunky and inelegant – experiment with every chord that has the bass note in it).

The middle eight may well contain the **money note**. This is the climactic note of the song, and is likely to be the highest in pitch. Students should think carefully about when this should come, and what word will go with it.

After the middle eight, a triumphant return the chorus is required. To give this more emphasis, change the key. Go up a semitone or a tone, or – for the bold – a 3rd. For a truly dramatic twist, prolong the last chord of the middle eight for an extra bar (making it a middle nine!), leaving the chord hanging, or inserting a rest before the return of the chorus in the new key.

A trick for the very end of the song is to leave the last line unaccompanied. This provides a good ending that emphasises the lyrics.

A songwriting checklist

1. Intro: with chord sequence, interesting/stylish strumming or comping pattern.
2. Verse 1: melody over the same pattern.
3. Chorus: development of chords through texture, plus one or more of the following: change of harmonic pace, changing the order of the chords, modal interchange, added 7ths.
4. Verse 2: a different texture from verse 1: added layers/change of strumming or comping pattern.
5. Chorus 2: consider adding extra layer, but can be the same as chorus 1.
6. Middle 8: a new chord sequence: consider a cycle of 5ths, or an ascending/descending bassline. Prolong the last chord to create anticipation? Include 'money note' in melody.
7. Chorus 3: perhaps in a new key. Up one or two semitones, or even three or four. Last line – no accompaniment.