

Edexcel AoS1: an active learning approach to Bach

KS4

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Introduction

Edexcel GCSE music requires students to study eight set works, the first of which is the third movement of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 5. This resource will look at some different strategies for teaching this set work, based around active learning concepts, focusing on what we can do as teachers to bring a set work to life in our classroom. It will also include practical ideas for teaching, and project ideas that consider listening, composing, performing and appraising. We won't be analysing the set work in detail, or going through the elements of music, but instead, we'll look at different ways of passing on knowledge and understanding to students.

The first concepts to consider are the ideas of active and generative learning.

Active and generative learning

Active learning is a process that places the student at the centre, focusing not on what they learn, but how they learn. It's all about engagement through different activities, which we'll be considering below in the context of the Bach set work. As teachers using active learning, we're placing a greater degree of responsibility on our students, more so than in passive, teacher-led lessons. The teacher instead takes on a leadership role, guiding students through a topic, helping them to focus on the correct information, but also leaving them to play an active role in their own learning. It's important that active learning is seen as the process by which students themselves solve problems and make discoveries. This is different to the teacher drawing out the knowledge through questioning or classroom tasks.

This is closely linked to the concept of generative learning, which also shifts responsibility to the students.

Generative learning considers the learning experience from the point of view not of the teacher, but of the learner. It asks what they should do with the instruction that they have been given to ensure that they are able to truly make sense of it. *Generative Learning in Action*, by Zoe and Mark Enser

Learning should be an active process, and this resource will use the Bach set work as a basis for exploring how learning can be made active in the music classroom. At the heart of this resource is a desire to ensure that students are given the chance to fully consider, digest and explore the set works they are given. The strategies included here can also be applied to other areas of their music studies.

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Effective instruction

Before generative learning can take place, there needs to be some effective instruction. This is our job as the class teacher – to teach certain material to our students. For the Bach set work, there are a few key things that we will need students to be aware of before we can leave them to the generative learning pathway:

- ▶ Key musical features of the piece.
- ▶ Historical, social and cultural background to the piece.
- ▶ Features that are typical of the Baroque instrumental style and typical of Bach as a composer.

We can draw on a range of techniques: effective instruction could involve playing games that allow students to explore key terms, for example.

Bach Pictionary

A classroom version of the popular game Pictionary is a fun way to bring elements of music to life. Here are some ideas to get you started. You may like to model this to students and get them guessing, or call up students to draw something on the board themselves.

- ▶ Draw a **harpisichord**, focusing mainly on the plucking action compared to keyboard hammer action.
- ▶ Draw **fugal style** – here you might draw a shape or pattern that you then repeat a little higher.
- ▶ Draw a **conjunct melody**.
- ▶ Draw **polyphony**.
- ▶ Draw a picture that represents a **suspension**.
- ▶ Draw **tonic, dominant** and **relative minor**.

Acting out Bach

Use the whole class to act out the Bach piece, or to form a tableau that represents the piece. This is best approached by going over the key features and breaking them down into the ternary form sections. Some of the class will represent what happens in section A (D major, fugal style and harpsichord scalic runs). The rest of the class can then represent section B (relative minor, fragments of the main theme and a perfect cadence).

Representing the piece physically is enjoyable, and it will get students thinking about the features in a fun and engaging way.

Active listening

Active listening is the process whereby students take an active role in their listening (see *Music Teacher*, August 2019, for a resource devoted to active listening). It is a step beyond simply listening to a piece of music passively, for example having it playing in the background while you do other activities. Instead, it's a deliberate process that focuses on specific things. It involves, for example, students listening out for specific features, instruments or elements. Students might use a score to help them follow the music. As they listen, they might look up key terms to ensure they understand what they're hearing. Passive listening, maybe on the walk home from school, is still a valid exercise, but active listening encourages the development of knowledge, and serves as good preparation for the listening exam.

Having a score to follow, notes as guidance and maybe a music dictionary open are all part of the active listening process. It may also be useful to ask students to keep a listening diary, with space to note down specific features that they hear.

Teachers can encourage students to listen actively by modelling this activity in class. Provide students with a listening diary or worksheet, and show them how you go about actively listening. Tell them, for example, that you're going to focus on listening to the piece's melody, and describe what you hear as you go.

It's very useful for both staff and students to have access to a music streaming service or YouTube to aid with wider listening and active listening, both in and out of the classroom. This is something that students can be made aware of at the start of their course, and there are several affordable options – Apple Music, Spotify, Amazon Music and YouTube, for example. Focus on Sound Pro (see *Music Teacher*, November 2021) is also a useful resource in the active listening process, since it provides a dictionary of sound that can be used alongside listening.

Here are some elements of the Bach set work that you could encourage students to explore using active listening:

- ▶ The virtuoso nature of the harpsichord part.
- ▶ Scalic runs on the harpsichord.
- ▶ The change from D major to B minor.
- ▶ The use of imitation – you could extend this to two- and four-part counterpoint.
- ▶ Suspensions, sequences and 7ths – a good set of things to listen for to challenge students.
- ▶ Provide students with another Bach Brandenburg concerto and ask them to listen out for specific elements that they know from the third movement of Brandenburg Concerto No. 5. They might be able to spot another concerto that has fugal entries or a virtuosic harpsichord part, for example.

Wider listening

Wider listening is a crucial part of students' learning process. Here are a few pieces that you might want to encourage them to listen to in connection with Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 – but you might equally want to ask them to create their own listening diary.

- ▶ **Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 1:** composed around 1713, this piece shows where the Brandenburg Concertos journey started for Bach. What similarities are there between No. 1 and No. 5?
- ▶ **Locatelli's 12 Concerti grossi Op. 1:** this set of concertos was composed in 1721, around the time of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 5. These are, however, by an Italian composer, so there's room for some comparison of style and approach. Locatelli's Concerto grosso No. 9 is in D major, the same key as Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 5: are there any other similarities (or differences) between the two concertos?
- ▶ **Handel's Keyboard Sonatina in G minor, HWV 583:** this solo harpsichord work was also composed in 1721. Listening to a piece for harpsichord without orchestra will allow students to understand a little more about the instrument, and to hear the distinct way that the notes are created by plucking the strings. It will also help them to experience the ornaments that were typical of this period.

Composition

Composition is another method of bringing the Bach set work to life for students. Rather than focusing on creating a large-scale composition, students can be asked to complete tasks that will help them explore particular aspects of the set work.

Here are some ways in which this composition can be explored using composition.

Fugal entries

Take the opening bars of the third movement of the Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 and see what difference it would make if the flute entry wasn't raised up a 4th but instead raised by another interval. A task like this allows students to explore what makes the fugal entries 'work'. Why is it that the flute enters higher in pitch, and at that particular pitch? More advanced students may like to compose their own original melody, and then transform it into the beginning of a fugue using a similar technique to Bach. They'll be able to see if they can make a similar opening to Bach's, evaluating the process as they go.



Harpsichord virtuoso

Ask students to compose a short piece for harpsichord that uses scalic runs as its basis. The Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 has several virtuosic scalic runs, and it would be good to consider how and why Bach created these virtuosic patterns. How is it, for example, that the fast-moving semiquaver harpsichord line fits perfectly with the melodies above it?

Bach remix

The third movement of the Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 is in ternary form (ABA). This is a simple musical structure, but it's nonetheless important that students understand how it works, and how it links with Bach's use of tonality. Using a generative and active learning approach, ask students to create their own piece of music in ternary form. It is advisable to put some constraints on this project – you may like to give students a brief along the following lines:

- ▶ The piece should be in D major, with a middle section in B minor. (This will ensure that students understand the harmony within that key. It will also give them a chance to work with the relative minor of the key.)
- ▶ Your ternary form must contain a contrasting middle section that's different to the A section. This will provide some variety in the music.
- ▶ Choose instruments that are similar to the ones used by Bach. Alternatively, choose modern versions of these instruments, for example an electric guitar. But make sure you think about why you have chosen these modern instruments.

There are several ways of approaching a project like this: students could simply use loops within Garageband or Cubase, for example. You might want to prepare some MIDI files for your students, which they can then use to create their own remix of the Concerto in a DAW. Giving them pre-prepared files will allow them to focus on the remixing and arrangement rather than inputting the notes. This is a technique that was explored in the context of Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D minor as part of the BBC's Ten Pieces resources (www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/229bLqF7XBz9wWMcZHQKcBf/toccata-and-fugue-in-d-minor-by-johann-sebastian-bach).

Appraising

Appraising is a crucial component of the music GCSE, and students are required to appraise each set work in turn. Appraisal is the process of picking apart a piece to see what key musical features go in to making it – in other words, discovering what the composer did during the creative process.

For example, students will immediately notice that this piece uses a harpsichord. This is just the starting point for more discovery, however: the harpsichord is a typical Baroque instrument that has the unique sound of being plucked, which leads to some dynamic constraints because the harpsichord does not have the same range of dynamics as a modern piano with hammers.

Here are suggestions for some of the key features within the third movement of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 that you might like to focus on, followed by some different approaches to using these features for pieces of work or projects:

- 1 Concerto grosso with virtuosic harpsichord
 - 2 Ternary structure (ABA)
 - 3 Polyphonic/contrapuntal texture
 - 4 Conjunct melodies and diatonic harmony
 - 5 Duple time and use of triplets and dotted rhythms
 - 6 Tonic, dominant and relative minor in D major are all used
- ▶ Create a poster containing the music's key features. This should be an enjoyable task since students can use pictures, diagrams and extracts to bring the poster to life. Using pictures or diagrams alongside text can also help students to understand a set work in a process known as dual coding.
 - ▶ Compare and contrast the set work with another piece of the students' own choice. This will help to prepare students for the final question in the exam. The other piece could be one of the wider listening suggestions listed above.
 - ▶ Is this piece the most important piece ever composed? Why might it be, and why might it not? This might sound like quite an extreme angle, but discussing the music like this will encourage students to think about the features and quality of the music.

Summarising

A particularly good approach to appraising is to ask students to summarise a piece of music, which involves picking out the most salient points.

Students who can effectively summarise a piece of music are more likely to understand its key elements. A good summary will show their understanding through the inclusion of key terms and the most important points related to the piece. Whenever they're appraising a piece of music, it is good for students to stop and ensure that they can summarise what they've learnt so far.

The Bach set work could be summarised from several different angles:

- ▶ A summary of the key features.
- ▶ A summary of what makes it typical of the Baroque period.
- ▶ A summary of one element that is utilised to great effect – for example, texture.

Encourage students to summarise the each set work, key term or salient point, either as a written or a verbal summary. Asking them to work in pairs would make be a useful step towards generative learning.

Teaching

Why not try handing over the teaching to a group of students? Allow them time to prepare, then let them take a section of the lesson themselves. Planning for teaching in this way will allow them to assess what they do and don't understand about the set work, and it's also another excellent example of generative learning in action.

- ▶ Split the class into groups, then give each group a different area of the set work to focus on: maybe one of the elements of music, or the Baroque period, or the specific context for this piece.
- ▶ For homework, ask students to make a PowerPoint presentation as if they were a teacher. Encourage them to use audio, pictures and text in it. You can pick the best ones and ask the students involved to teach a section of your lesson.
- ▶ Alternatively, ask Year 11 to teach Year 10. This gives the Year 11 students a chance to share their presentation with the lower year group. This can be a very effective idea, but it obviously requires much more organisation.

Asking big questions

In her book *Five Formative Assessment Strategies in Action*, Kate Jones advocates the use of big questions. These are specific enquiries that can act as the spark to start off a lesson, encouraging students to explore rather than simply listen. Jones suggests that these big questions need to be clear, specific and desirably difficult.

Big questions are best generated by involving your students, although you might need to kick start the process yourself.

Big questions for the Bach set work might be:

- 1 What makes this piece typical of the Baroque style?
- 2 What one feature of this piece makes it successful?
- 3 If Bach were alive and composing this piece today, what might he have changed?
- 4 Is the structure clear, and if so why?
- 5 Why is this piece significant? If this were the only surviving piece by Bach, what would it show us?
- 6 Is there one feature that, if removed, would completely change the piece?

Performing

Performing is a valuable way of actively learning about the third movement of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 5. There are many ways to approach performing, of course, and which one you choose will depend on the instrumentalists you have in your GCSE class.

The Bach set work particularly lends itself to performance if you break it down into clear sections. Performing small sections is often simpler than trying to play the whole piece, and breaking a larger piece down also helps to chunk the knowledge into manageable pieces for students. Bach's initial melody, for example, could be performed in unison or in two parts – the violin entry followed by the flute. Here are some different ways that the work's opening theme can then be explored using performance.

Melody madness

Take the main opening melody and use variations to explore it. Some will work and sound convincing, while others may not work as well: students can thereby explore what makes a melody successful.

Here are some versions of the opening melody to try. Can your students spot the changes that have been made, and determine what makes them successful or unsuccessful?

Here, the main melody has been turned backwards, making a retrograde version of the original. Can students spot that it is now backwards, and does it sound convincing like this?

This is an inverted version of the original melody, but can students spot that the melody is now moving in a different direction?

This is another retrograde, but this time the rhythms have been turned backwards but the pitches have stayed in their original places.

This melody has the same rhythms, but the pitches have been reversed in order.

This is a minor-mode version of the main melody. But does it work as well with a minor tonality?

Finally, the pitches have been randomly shifted around, but the rhythm has remained the same. Is the rhythm enough to maintain the character of the piece?

To take these melodic explorations further, consider the different ornaments that could be added to the melody, allowing students to explore Baroque ornamentation.

Podcasting

A podcast is an audio episode or broadcast similar to a radio show or programme. If Bach were alive today, he would probably appear on a Classic FM or BBC Radio 3 podcast discussing his latest cantata. Students can be active in their learning by creating their own podcast about this set work.

Here are some potential ideas for kickstarting a podcasting project for the Bach set work:

- ▶ Interview the composer: if Bach were alive today, what questions would you ask him about the set work?
- ▶ Desert Island Discs: what pieces might Bach take to a desert island? What significance do these pieces have for the study of this set work?
- ▶ What extracts of the piece would you include in a podcast guide to the piece? What are the most important musical moments of the third movement of the Brandenburg Concerto No. 5?
- ▶ Interview a key term or idea. If texture were a person, what would it say about its role in this piece? If an instrument could talk about what it does in this piece, what would it say?

Using Soundtrap for podcasting

You might like to consider using Soundtrap (see *Music Teacher*, July 2021) for your podcasts. Soundtrap is a cloud-based digital audio workstation that has a podcast facility built in, allowing you to create a podcast from scratch. It also allows students to collaborate remotely on a group podcast project, and they can import audio examples of the set work and add them to the podcast.