

Key Stage 3 toolkit, part two

KS3

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Introduction

In part one of this two-part Key Stage 3 toolkit ([Music Teacher, December 2022](#)) I considered a range of approaches and ideas for KS3, including curriculum and extra-curricular activities. We'll continue to look at reviewing KS3 in this second part, and I'd encourage you to look at your current curriculum and extra-curricular programme along with both parts together.

Key Stage 3 matters

Yes, Key Stage 3 really matters. You probably know that, but it's important that we don't continue with this resource without saying it explicitly. So much of what goes on in school relies on KS3 music being strong, effective and enjoyable. If students in years 7 to 9 are getting a top-quality experience in the classroom, they're much more likely to continue at GCSE. They're also more likely to get involved in the music department, throwing themselves into rehearsals and concerts. Our job as educators is to ensure that this vital three-year period is well delivered and well resourced.

A three-year Key Stage 3

I don't think I'm alone in believing that KS3 music should take place over three years. This is something that's being pushed not only by Ofsted, but also by the government through its Model Music Curriculum and national plan. Now is the time for music teachers to ensure that schools are aware of this new advice, and to make sure that KS3 does indeed take place over three years.

You may, however, find that your school insists on starting KS4 in Year 9. This can be a tough situation. There are some things you can do to ensure you're bridging the gap and moving things forward:

- 1 Book a meeting with your head teacher or senior leader to discuss the new national plan and Model Music Curriculum. Make them aware of what Ofsted thinks, and what they might be looking for. But also explain why it's better for the students that you teach.
- 2 If you're stuck on a carousel or a two-year programme, you need to plan for that. Change can take time. Don't get bogged down in the negative side of it, and plan for success. Just as you would in a three-year curriculum cycle, plan for development of knowledge and understanding, and make sure you cover what's needed. There will be no time to waste if you're only seeing students 40 to 60 times over two years, so cut out anything that isn't needed.
- 3 Speak to other music teachers who are in a similar position. This sounds obvious, but so often we don't talk to others to get advice and seek new ideas.

Ultimately, whatever situation you're in, your job is to do your best to teach the students in front of you. Give them your all, and they may still opt for GCSE and make the expected progress. It's a shame to see music marginalised through a two-year KS3, so the ultimate goal is to change that, but that might take time. Stay positive, be proactive and keep focusing on the students in the meantime.

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Managing budgets and generating income

To create a thriving KS3 programme, you'll need to ensure that you have a budget for resources, instruments and technology. Most schools have squeezed music budgets over the last few years, so here are some ways of generating money yourself for KS3.

- ▶ With the support and permission of your school, give parents/guardians the opportunity to support learning through a small donation. A subscription to a cloud-based music technology service such as Soundtrap is likely to be only £3 to £5 per student. This is something that parents may not mind contributing towards. Often other subjects such as art, DT and food tech will ask for parents to provide funds or materials. Establish the same process in music and you'll probably quickly find that you have what you need.
- ▶ Form a 'Friends of Music' group who can help you to raise money and apply for grants and sponsorships. There are likely to be groups, trusts and businesses who will contribute to the life of music in the community. What you most often need is the help and support to apply for money. Getting a group of adults together to help you is often the best way to get things done on top of a full timetable.
- ▶ Put on a KS3 concert, sell tickets and arrange a raffle. Hopefully your school will be supportive of this, and it will give you a chance to showcase the work that goes on at KS3. This concert can and should include student compositions and any other work that you complete. You could make it into a competition between classes, where, for example, you could get every class to learn a song.
- ▶ Organise a meeting with your music hub to discuss how they might be able to support you. It's also worth speaking to local businesses, charities, trusts and foundations to see if they can support you, perhaps with the help of your 'Friends of Music' group. The more partnerships you form, the more support you'll receive.

Trips and super-curriculum

Taking students to see live music should be a goal for every KS3 teacher. Trips are a vital source of inspiration for young people, and we should embed them in our planning. Trips don't need to be expensive and complex, however, and local visits are often a great option. Get in touch with your local theatres and arts centres to find out what they have on. Often they will be able to offer cheaper tickets and experiences for your students.

When planning trips, make sure that you do it well in advance. Senior leaders want to know who is out of school, and often need time to arrange absences. Putting trips into the school calendar will allow for planning and preparation.

Partnerships are key for music departments, and it can benefit you to get in touch with local arts organisations, choirs and orchestras. Partnering with professional music groups will open new doors, and students will ultimately benefit from the opportunities they can provide.

Surviving in a non-specialist classroom

There are sometimes occasions where you find yourself teaching in a non-specialist classroom. This could be due to timetabling clashes, building work or just the situation you find yourself in at your particular school. As music teachers, we don't like being shifted out of our specialist space because we use very specific things. At KS3, it can be tough when we find that we don't have the resources, space and instruments we might need.

There are, however, a range of things you can do if you find yourself teaching in a non-specialist room:

- 1** No matter where you are in a school, you can always listen to music. Listening activities need to be the bedrock of our music teaching, and so much can stem from well-planned and appropriately sequenced listening. If you know you're going to be out of a music room, make sure you have a portable speaker (unless speakers are available in the room you've been put in, of course). Carrying a speaker with you, or an aux cable, will ensure that your lessons are still musical. If you can envisage this situation then make sure that your school provide you with a good quality speaker. There are many portable speakers available, of course, but I'd recommend the Behringer MPA200BT all-in-one portable speaker as a good example of a high-quality Bluetooth speaker that you can take everywhere, one that has a good battery life and is also loud enough for any outdoor busking gigs you might have.
- 2** Make sure you have access to YouTube and a music streaming service. The last thing you want to be worrying about if you're stuck in a science lab is having to bring CDs to a lesson. Online music streaming is something all music teachers should have access to, so speak to your network manager if that's an issue.
- 3** When it comes to instruments, think portable and make sure you can get a 'really useful box' to fit them all in. Ukuleles, glockenspiels and sound shapes are great instruments, and fairly portable too. Try and arrange with the class to collect things before a lesson, or find some cupboard space. You can teach a lot using ukuleles – harmony, structure, chords, keys and singing – and glockenspiels in cases are also useful for composition and work on melody.
- 4** Writing about music is a key component of all GCSE and A level music courses. Students need to be able to identify key features, link them to genre/style, and come to conclusions about the music. Comparing one piece to another and spotting what makes something typical of a style are skills that every music student should develop. It's therefore possible to make written work more of a focus when in a non-specialist classroom. If you find yourself in a science lab or an English classroom, make sure you're using the time to get your students writing about music.

Working with parents and guardians

KS3 is an important period for building relationships with parents and guardians. As we see students develop as musicians, we want to ensure that those at home know the potential musical pathway for that student. When we identify musically gifted students, we want to make sure that they go on to study music at GCSE. The earlier we can spot them, the sooner we can get them on that pathway. But we also need to make sure we have the parents or guardians on board.

One possible strategy is to organise a brief evening meeting with gifted students' parents to discuss exactly what you do in KS3 music. Some schools do this for English, maths and science, so why not music? Here are some of the things you might cover in that evening:

- ▶ How to develop as an instrumental player and/or singer, and what are the key things that students need to do to move their skills forward. This will include regular practice, attendance at extra-curricular activities, visits to hear live music, and a keen interest in listening to music.
- ▶ Discuss music theory and how students can develop their music literacy skills. Both students and parents often worry about theory and reading music, so it's something you ought cover on that evening: suggest books, websites and other resources to help parents navigate this sometimes tricky area.
- ▶ The students you've identified as gifted are ones you want to go on to study music at KS4. It's important, therefore, to discuss composition and how students can be encouraged to make music at home.

You may also like to invite current KS4 students to the evening meeting, so that they can chat to the younger students about what to expect. You could show some work, present some performances, and play some compositions. The message should be that music is alive and kicking, and that they can use KS3 to develop their skills. Starting them on the pathway to GCSE in Year 7 will mean that when they choose their options, they're in no doubt that music is for them. And getting parents/guardians on board early will really help this process – and hopefully boost the numbers of students opting for music.

Stretch and challenge

Identifying more able students in music is only part of the process. The next step is to ensure that those students are stretched and challenged.

One issue we can face in the music classroom is that some students are much more advanced than others, simply because they've had several years of instrumental lessons. We have a duty to ensure that all learners make progress, and so should identify gifted students early in the first term of the year. Short quizzes, performances and listening assessments can help with this. (It's also a valuable exercise to undertake a short questionnaire to find out more about all of the students in front of you.)

It's important at KS3 to ensure that more advanced students are stretched and challenged. There are several ways of approaching stretch and challenge:

- 1 During lessons, more able students should be given specific work that stretches them. That doesn't mean teaching them something completely different, but it does mean giving them extra parameters. For example, when completing a composition based around rhythm and metre, more able students could be challenged to use more complex time signatures, and even to consider how they can move from one metre to another. More able students should also be able to incorporate more complex harmonies into their compositions, for example 7th and extended chords, or maybe even a diminished or augmented chord. While the rest of the class might be learning root-position chords, more able students could start to explore inversions and harmonic rhythm.
- 2 More able students can also be given opportunities to lead groups and ensembles, maybe a sectional rehearsal for your school orchestra or choir. This will help them develop their skills and push them to lead and teach others.
- 3 You should consider using more able students to help teach sections of a lesson, or to support other learners. If they already understand a topic, they can test their knowledge by trying to teach it to others: being able to teach something to someone else confirms that you do fully understand it yourself. These activities will also give students a chance to present and learn valuable skills in public speaking and teaching.
- 4 Where more able students are keen performers, ask them to use their instrumental and vocal skills within your lessons. Where appropriate, you can also give them a chance to play their instrument in a practice room, particularly if they have an exam to prepare for.
- 5 More able KS3 students may benefit from a separate extra-curricular club where you could start to teach them some of the GCSE syllabus. This doesn't need to be every week – it could just be once or twice a term. But it's a valuable opportunity to build their confidence, and show them that their current skills and abilities will stand them in good stead for GCSE music.

A well-sequenced curriculum

In [part one](#) of this toolkit, we looked at curriculum design and how we create our KS3 curriculum. A key aspect of curriculum design is the sequencing of lessons. What order do we teach things and why? KS3 provides a chance for students to develop the key musical skills needed for GCSE and beyond, but we must make sure that we create a well-sequenced curriculum. But what does that mean in practice?

Sequencing a curriculum is about more than just choosing the order of topics and lessons. It's about how we move from topic to topic, while also allowing time to revisit and revise past learning. We should aim to avoid cognitive overload for our students, so we need to ensure that, before we move on, they understand the learning that has just taken place.

When we move from one topic to the next, we want to ensure that we are gradually building knowledge. If we teach melody without an understanding of rhythm, for example, then students are likely to struggle. However, a good understanding of note values and time signatures will provide the basis for an understanding of pitch and melody.

A valuable approach is to take your current curriculum and make sure that it's well sequenced. Are there times when you feel you might be covering too much too quickly? Do you allow space for recall and retrieval – are students able to stop and process what they've learnt? We must allow plenty of time for students to return to and consolidate their short-term learning before moving on to the next topic.

Knowledge and KS3

The Ofsted Research Review (July 2021) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-music/research-review-series-music>) considers the classes of knowledge that students should acquire as they move through the music curriculum. The research review states:

To become successful musicians, pupils must use both their conscious and unconscious minds, with the latter being developed by learning and experience.

The review goes on to describe the three classes of knowledge – tacit, procedural and declarative. These three areas help to explain how students gain knowledge: both consciously and unconsciously.

- ▶ **Tacit:** this is the knowledge that students gain through experiences. Our curriculum must allow space for students to learn by doing. This type of knowledge can be gained without students always understanding why. For example, they may be able to identify that a piece of music sounds cinematic because they've experienced a lot of music in a cinematic setting. Tacit knowledge is crucial because we can use it to add on new knowledge, and start to build a fuller understanding in our students. Tacit knowledge can most easily be acquired through listening.
- ▶ **Procedural:** this type of knowledge is very much at the heart of performing and composing. How to play an instrument or create music using technology is all down to procedural knowledge. One potential problem with gaining this type of knowledge is cognitive overload. If we're trying to teach our students too much procedural knowledge in one go, they're likely to struggle. It's important to break things down and identify the students who need more support. Some students will be more fluent with an instrument or a compositional process, and we need to make sure we stretch and challenge them in the classroom (see above). Others, however, will need this type of knowledge to be suitably chunked and scaffolded so that they do not experience cognitive overload. Little and often is an approach that works well for procedural knowledge. However, it's sometimes beneficial for students to experience some degree of cognitive load or 'desirable difficulties' for them to gain determination.
- ▶ **Declarative:** this type of knowledge covers facts and information stored in the long-term memory. It underpins more advanced thinking, and students will use it for more complex tasks. We want students to have knowledge of musical eras, cultures, notation and keys, for example. Declarative knowledge can best be gained through retrieval practice, where topics are regularly revisited to help students build understanding.

Final term of Key Stage 3

The final term of KS3 can be both wonderful, and quite tricky. Students will now be in Year 9, and they will have chosen their options. Chances are that about 90% of the cohort will not have opted to study music, and may therefore switch off somewhat in lessons. However, the other 10% will have chosen music, and therefore need to keep going, stay inspired and make progress. We should aim to ensure that all of our KS3 classes are engaged in the summer, making progress and enjoying what for many will be their final school music lessons. The best advice is to save some of your best lessons until last. Make sure you plan for those summer months post-options. We should aim for students to have fond memories of music, and to leave with the knowledge that music can continue to impact on their lives even if they don't study it in the classroom.

Conclusion

KS3 music should be a thriving area within your department. But with low budgets and other challenges, it can be tough. Careful planning, suitable topics and a well-sequenced curriculum will help get your KS3 programme thriving and effective. Consider what you're teaching, when you teach it and how you're imparting knowledge to your students. Focus on the music they're learning, and flood your lessons with listening. Keep smiling, stay positive and always keep in mind what your students will get from your music lessons. Do your best to raise funds, resource your department and keep your students on a pathway towards GCSE. Remove the barriers that often get in the way of student progress, and enjoy watching them flourish.