

Increasing music literacy without increasing marking

Dice Wood

Introduction

As music teachers, we know that music literacy is very important. Students need to be able to both read and notate music, and also write about what they hear, or what they would like to develop. Student confidence grows when they can talk about music with a fluent vocabulary, rather than constantly having to stop and search for words. In turn, this reduces student fear about writing down answers that have the potential to be wrong. Of course, when it comes to the GCSE specifications, the listening and evaluating examination makes up 40% of the overall grade, so it's something we have to teach our students to face up to and stop being worried about.

At Key Stage 3, there has been a trend in recent years to work more on practical than written skills. Although I heartily agree with the idea of sound first, I still think that writing has its place, particularly if we're aiming to make GCSE music accessible to all (and reversing the declining trend of students taking our subject).

This resource will look at ways we can increase students' vocabulary across KS3 and 4, with short, time-efficient tasks that do not create a lot of marking, and that can be linked to practical activities. Most of these activities will work regardless of the key stage, as the complexity of the language use will be the progressive factor in play.

Introducing vocabulary across the curriculum

The first step to making this truly successful is to have a clear plan of what vocabulary you want students to know by the end of KS4, looking at your GCSE specification. Make a list of all the key vocabulary and split it up into chunks – for example, MAD T SHIRT for the elements of music. The next step is to find opportunities across your KS3 and 4 curriculum where you can first introduce each term, aiming for the earlier the better, but without overloading students with large amounts at any one time.

Then look for opportunities to revisit it in other modules. The more we can revisit vocabulary in different contexts, the more likely our students will be to remember it, to be able to aurally identify it, and to feel confident in its usage. Studies show it's useful for students to nearly forget things before revisiting them to create longer-lasting memory, so don't worry if you can't always build the same vocabulary into the next area they study.

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Putting vocabulary into practice

Once you have your list of vocabulary you want to cover, it's time to see where it can fit in your module. For example, in Year 7 term 1, have a look at the repertoire you're teaching – what features are in there? You might teach students songs in different time signatures, some where they sing in unison, some where they create rounds and therefore polyphony, and so on. All of this gives a chance to introduce vocabulary to students. As they're learning the songs, just putting the words you use to describe the music on the board can be really useful (see below for an example). They can see how much they're learning by the increasing list, thereby boosting confidence, and also have a visual reference of possible answers when you ask questions.

Music words	
Unison	Scat singing
Duet	Projection
Round	Diction
Polyphonic	Tempo
A Capella	Dynamic
Pulse	
Metre	
4/4	
3/4	

Bringing the list up again the next lesson allows a chance to reintroduce vocabulary. While you're doing the register, ask students to jot down the meaning of two terms they can remember, but also to write down one word they can't remember the meaning of. A two-minute discussion can help check understanding. Other register tasks could be to ask students to match the correct definition to the word, or to pick out four mistakes made on a slide of definitions.

As you revise the songs from the previous lesson(s), complete a 'think pair share' activity about which words fit with this song – this will reactivate students' understanding. At this point, it's just about reaffirming the meaning of the vocabulary in the context with which they're already familiar.

If there are particular words they're struggling to understand, have a dive into the world of YouTube. There are some excellent videos to explain concepts such as textures, tempos and so on. The sillier they are, the more likely your students are to remember them.

With older year groups, it can be useful to create a vocabulary list for your module and put it in your workbook. The example below is from a Year 9 workbook on film music – it's there to help them not just when listening and analysing music, but also when they begin to compose too.

Melody		Articulation	Dynamics	Harmony	Instrumentation
Pitch	Leaps	Staccato	ff	Major	Orchestral
Interval	Scalic	Accent	f	Minor	Electronic (Synth etc)
Motif	Chromatic	Legato	mf	Chromatic	Modern (guitars etc)
Range	Passing note		mp		
Step	Repetition		p		
Skip	Sequence		pp	Tonality	Tempo
Imitation	Ostinato		Crescendo	Major	Slow
			Diminuendo	Minor	Walking pace
				Atonal	Fast
					Getting faster
					Getting slower

Gamifying learning

Putting the vocabulary onto a slide (example below) that can be seen on the board can be used as the basis for a game. Split the class into teams, and call one member of each team to come up at a time – they have to put their hand to the word you’re describing before their competitor. For example, ‘Everyone is singing the same notes at the same time’, or ‘We’re all singing different melodies at the same time’. Students love a bit of competition – with the simplest of rewards, such as positive conduct points, you can have teams enthusiastically calling out the answer to their team mate at the front.

Team 1	Team 2
Unison	Unison
Duet	Duet
Metre	Metre
Scat	Scat
Projection	Projection
Round	Round
Diction	Diction
Polyphonic	Polyphonic
Pulse	Pulse
Tempo	Tempo
A Capella	A Capella

A homework task can be to create three multiple-choice questions on the vocabulary learnt in recent lessons. Copy and paste these into an online game site like Kahoot (<https://kahoot.com>) and you have a useful revision resource where they can get competitive with each other on an individual level.

A great game with smaller classes, for example GCSE and A level, can be to play Last Man Standing. Get each student to come up with three questions about key vocabulary. Using a random name generator, pick one person to start. They choose one peer in the room to ask their question to. If that person cannot answer correctly they have to sit down, and the original student gets to ask another person. If three people cannot correctly answer, then the student has to explain, but then move on to asking one of their other questions. If the person questioned does get the answer right, they get to ask someone else in the room one of theirs. The game continues until one person is standing (or if you have limited time, until the timer goes off – then give everyone still standing a positive conduct point.)

Widening application

The next step is to get students to identify the same features in another piece of music they know. Introducing a mash-up for them to perform would give the opportunity for students to identify its textural features, time signatures and so on, elements that they’ve already learnt about in their current repertoire. Let them learn the piece first, but then ask questions as a break from the practical. Aim for full-class participation in this, for example using whiteboards ask students to write down the answer and hold it up, rather than gaining the answers from just one student.

To be really sure they’ve understood vocabulary, getting students to apply it to an unfamiliar piece of music is key (and of course something they have to do in an examination at KS4 and 5). At this point, using a self-marking form (such as Google Forms, see below) can allow you to get the feedback you need quickly on what students have understood and which vocabulary they need further assistance with. This can be used as a homework or plenary task in your lesson, and saves on workload from marking multiple answers.

Price Tag & Livin on a Prayer Mash Up
Thinking about the mash up we've just learnt, answer the questions below.

Not shared

When group 1 are singing Price Tag on their own what **texture** are they using? 1 point

- Polyphonic
- Round
- Unison

When group 2 add 'Livin on a Prayer' what does the **texture** change to? 1 point

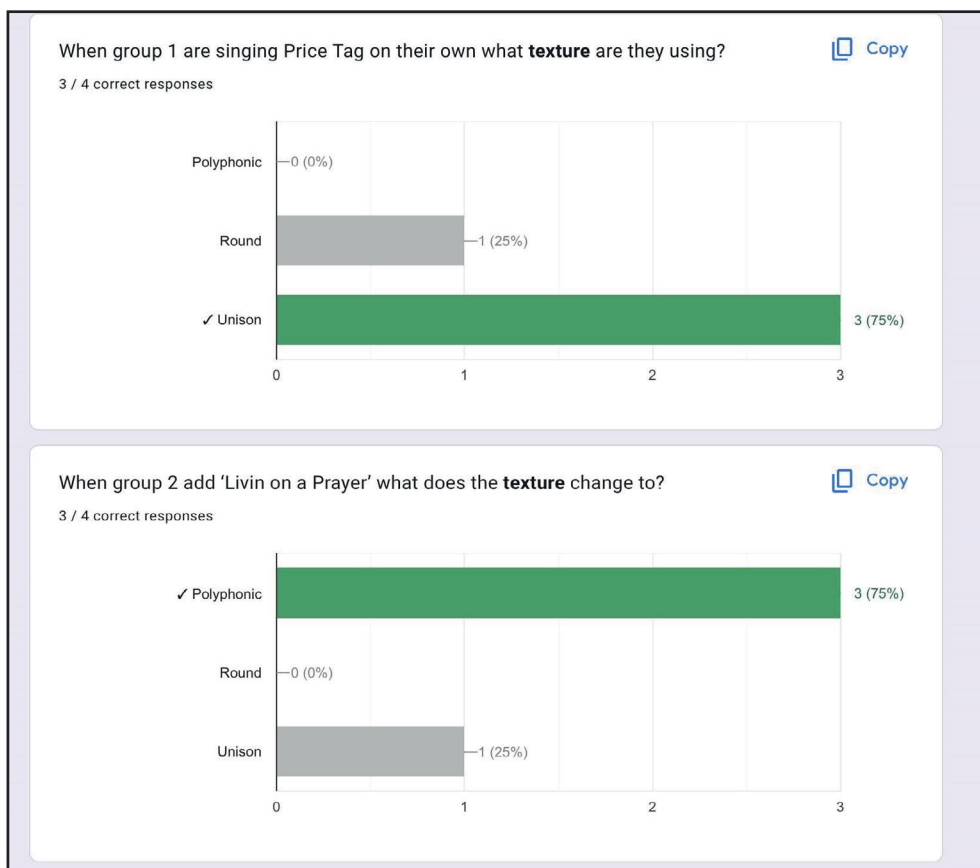
- Polyphonic
- Round
- Unison

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Google Forms

Self-marking forms also allow you to create a bank of questions that you can then transfer across into new quizzes.



Using the insights available, you can see which questions you need to go back over. With Google Forms you can do this for a whole class as above, or by individual students.

Developing writing skills

Many students are worried about writing longer paragraphs on music. A simple process of modelling and scaffolding answers can help to overcome this. One example approach is a simple drag-and-drop activity (example below).

Write a single paragraph that describes the music they've learnt in class, but leave spaces for missing words. Have a selection of answers in text boxes at the bottom. This is easy to differentiate, with early tasks having just the correct vocabulary for them to drag to the right place, and more advanced tasks having a range of vocabulary for them to select from, some of which will not be needed. The words you choose to put in can either be very different – so that it's easy for students to work out – or very similar, so that they have to really discern the difference. Seeing terms in the context of full sentences allows students to see how they could describe music beyond single-word use.

Drag and drop the correct answers into the text

In _____ Song we sing nonsense words in repetitive patterns to create _____. We start with 1 group singing in _____ with the piano, but then add other parts until we have 4 vocal lines, creating a _____ texture. Later the piano stops and we sing _____.

ostinato

a capella

unison

Scat

polyphonic

The next step can be to give sentence starters that students finish themselves, for example: 'In this extract the dynamic was... the impact of this was...'. These are easy to discuss as a class and get students to self mark. It also provides an opportunity for students to realise that not everyone interprets music the same way.

Developing answers to make critical judgements

As students become confident in using simple musical vocabulary, we also want to encourage them to make critical decisions – how do the elements of music create the mood, and is it successful? Many students tend to be more nervous about giving opinions, preferring right or wrong answers, yet it is a core skill towards those GCSE studies where making evaluative comments is worth half the marks.

As with the previous skills, it's worth building this up little and often, using lots of modelling and scaffolded tasks. Simple tasks might include playing students the choruses of two versions of the same song and asking them to vote on which one they prefer. Move students into groups with others who agreed and see if they can find some words to explain why they like that version.

Once their confidence has increased about having an opinion, you should aim to start bridging the two skills – identifying musical features and making critical judgements. In small groups, ask them to decide between two pieces of music which one they prefer in terms of fitting a particular brief. For example, play them two villain themes in a film music module, and ask which better fits a character. Ask them to jot down one or two sentences about why they prefer it.

Next, ask them to write down all the features they can hear using MAD T SHIRT as a prompt. For those not familiar, this stands for Melody, Articulation, Dynamic, Texture, Structure, Harmony, Instrumentation, Rhythm, metre and tempo, and Tonality.

This task may involve giving them a possible vocabulary list to choose from (as with the Year 9 example above), or if they're getting quite confident on identifying features, just letting them try by themselves, in which case be ready with some prompts that may assist.

Finally, get students to link those features to their decision – why did they think the piece with a loud dynamic better fitted the character, rather than the one that had a crescendo? What was it about the staccato notes that they felt better exemplified his mood?

Listening to themes A & B - which would better fit Voldemort?

	Theme A	Theme B
Which theme do you think works best?		
What features can you hear? What impact do they have?	Melody Dynamics Tempo Tonality	Melody Dynamics Tempo Tonality
Why do you think this is the better fit for Voldemort?		

This task can seem intimidating to students, but finding a way to take the sense of risk out of it can be really helpful. For example, give them whiteboard pens and allow them to work out their answers by writing on the table (you'd be amazed at how much more writing KS3 students will do if it feels like they're doing something illicit – just make sure you have some wipes to hand to get them to remove it after the task!).

Of course, from all this discussion they're actually building their repertoire of ideas of composition too, and this can be built on into some really valuable composition lessons.

Verbal table tennis is another useful game with classes for developing their critical skills, but without the written element. One student is chosen at random to start. They have to select a feature of the music they've listened to, then select someone else to say what impact it has. The aim of the game is to keep a 'volley' of answers going.

For example:

- ▶ Bob: 'I heard a loud dynamic, this had the impact of... Rosie.'
- ▶ Rosie: '... making it sound dramatic. Anne.'
- ▶ Anne: 'It had a fast tempo. This felt... James.'
- ▶ James: '... like it was rushing to somewhere. Katie.'

Keep a note of students' best scores and challenge them to beat their own volley tally – they can get really in depth about what they've heard, because they don't want to end the volley. Again, this is a great way of getting students analysing without worry in the writing tasks, and can be played without prep when you need a quick time filler.

Peer assessment

As students increase the amount they're writing, it's important to start thinking about protecting your marking load. Completing a writing exercise with Year 9 can seem like a great idea, but if a five-minute class task suddenly creates a whole year group of marking, that idea can sour very quickly. A key way to overcome this is to train your students in how to effectively peer assess. This is also an opportunity to model both successful and not-so-successful writing to students.

To start with, ask your students to listen to your chosen piece and identify a few key features, as you have with previous tasks. Discuss these answers to make sure they have a clear list of correct terms. Then give them two short written extracts to analyse (see examples below).

Darth Vader Theme

John Williams has composed the Darth Vader theme in a minor key in order to show that the character is a villain. He uses brass instrumentation to create a militaristic feel and uses a forte dynamic to make it feel imposing.

The Darth Vader theme is in the minor which means bad. He uses woodwind instrumentation to create a funny feel and uses a changing dynamic to make it sound good.

They will quickly be able to identify which of the two is better, but the art here is getting them to pull out the fact that it identifies musical features and then links them to the effects they have.

In pairs, you can then get students to write a further sentence or two that follows the same pattern, for example talking about tempo and accompaniment.

Next, give all the class an example to mark in pairs, and see if they can pick out what's good and what needs improving in it. Writing up their own improved version helps students to practise this writing skill without worrying about trying to identify the features and think of what to say.

The final step is to get them writing on their own. Still help them structure it – get them to identify key features and their effects first, before starting to write a structured paragraph.

Once they've completed their written paragraphs, move them into groups and get them to compare answers – if they had to order them from strongest downwards, what order would they put them in and why? The discussion they have on this will be really useful for you to follow: it will tell you what misconceptions they have that you might need to pick up on, and what's now securely embedded. Comparative marking allows them to see what's good in an answer, without trying to compare it to success criteria. When assessing against marking criteria, most of the discussion will be about how it fits the criterion provided. When they're using comparative marking, they focus much more on the content and quality of the writing.

To really embed this skill, it needs to be done regularly – it should be something that's part and parcel of a normal lesson, not a once-a-term exercise. But it doesn't need to be a big chunk of a lesson. Each of these component parts can be broken down. For example, when looking at a set piece in a module of study, we might identify features one week, write up a few sentences the next, and peer assess it the week after.

Final thoughts

All of these ideas can be built up from Year 7 up to Year 13, just by adapting the scaffolding/modelling. Year 7 students are capable of writing well about music, but it does take practice. It's said that a habit takes 20 repetitions for it to stick – I'd say the same for getting students to write about music. It's really important to do this little and often – use these tasks as five-minute activities during a lesson that's primarily practical-based, and not as a lesson in itself, otherwise students will probably become bored and switch off.

Finding opportunities to celebrate success in the writing side is also important. Just as we show off brilliant performances and compositions at our concerts, adding some examples of great critical writing in the school newsletter, or sending postcards home for excellent persistence in improving their writing skills will all have the impact of highlighting to students that this work is valued.

If we are to reverse the trend of GCSE and A level numbers decreasing, we need to tackle this vocabulary confidence issue and open the door to a wider range of students taking their music studies further, not being put off because 40% of the overall grade is a written exam. We need to treat the written element of the course with the same level of enthusiasm and encouragement we do the practical, helping our students to feel empowered, and able to talk confidently about what they hear and like.