

Key Stage 3 toolkit, part one

KS3

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Introduction

Key Stage 3 is a crucial time for music teachers. Not only are we embedding key musical skills, but we're also preparing students for Key Stage 4 studies. This resource will look at Key Stage 3, and consider how you can shape what you offer to your students. Advice for curriculum design, extra-curricular provision and long-term planning will be covered, as well as some tips for creating a balanced, exciting and thriving department. In part one, we'll consider what Key Stage 3 might look like, and how we can start to build a curriculum and an extra-curricular programme. In part two, we'll unpack these topics further, and also look at some tried and tested projects and ideas to help you with your planning. Part two will also consider some of the aspects of the Key Stage 3 role that are crucial for both staff and student development.

A thriving Key Stage 3

What's your current vision for Key Stage 3 music? Are you looking to revitalise and re-energise what you offer? Or do you think that while what you offer is good, you still want to reorganise your curriculum and add some extra-curricular provision that's new and fresh?

With any large-scale rethinking like this, it's crucial to start with you, and where you are with your department. Context is key, and every school and teacher are different. There's no right or wrong way to do things, but there are nevertheless some approaches that might help.

The ideas presented in this resource are the product of 18 years of music teaching – I wouldn't claim that they're foolproof, but they're undeniably tried and tested. But however many years of experience you have, the landscape is always changing – and the pandemic is continuing to impact on what we do. There's also no way of knowing how things might change in the future, so we need to regularly reflect on what we do, and be prepared to make necessary changes.

Let's start by considering what a thriving Key Stage 3 might look like. What are some of the signs that music is thriving for years 7 to 9? You're free to add to the list below so that it reflects your own particular setting.

- ▶ A **curriculum** that's designed for the students you teach. This includes a clear progression pathway as well as a sense of direction through the curriculum. Lessons are well sequenced, and this sequence makes sense to any outsider who might be looking at your curriculum.
- ▶ An **extra-curricular provision** that's accessible for Key Stage 3, with bespoke offerings for students in years 7 to 9.
- ▶ A **clear pathway from Year 7 to Year 9**, with relevant assessments along the way to help guide students and teachers.
- ▶ **Resources** that help to deliver and enhance the curriculum and the extra-curricular dimension.
- ▶ **Opportunities for students** to perform music, hear music performed, and experience music in other ways (including trips and visits).
- ▶ **Classrooms** that are alive with music, well resourced and suitable for all aspects of classwork, group work and rehearsals.
- ▶ **Students** who are engaged in their lessons and not passive. They are excited to learn and play an active role in their own musical development.
- ▶ **Topics, schemes and projects** that provide access to a range of genres, concepts, styles and eras.

There are almost certainly more things that could be added to this list, but this is a good collection of signs to start with. As you work through this resource, consider your current position. The concepts above should help you think about where you currently are – and encourage ideas for how you might move your Key Stage 3 provision forward.

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Curriculum design

When it comes to designing a curriculum for Key Stage 3, there's no quick fix. Curriculum is the absolute bedrock of all we do, and we must put an appropriate amount of time into designing it. A strong curriculum at Key Stage 3 is essential for future success, and for creating students who are well rounded, confident and equipped musicians.

Your starting point should be your current provision and the topics you teach. Revisit all of your current schemes of work and start working through the points below:

- ▶ Are the topics, projects or schemes in your curriculum fit for purpose? Are they relevant, up-to-date and engaging? Do they link with current trends in music and education?
- ▶ Look at your current curriculum and ask yourself: why do I teach this topic at this point? In essence, ask yourself: why this, why now? Do your topics or projects make logical sense in terms of when they appear in the Key Stage 3 journey? Sequencing your current schemes in a new way might be all that's needed.
- ▶ How, when and why do you assess your students? Does the assessment calendar give you the information you need at the right time? Can you use the data you collect to effectively improve student outcomes?
- ▶ Do you have lessons in your current curriculum that should be removed, refreshed or resourced? Be ruthless with what you teach, asking yourself why it is that you teach something. Also consider why you are teaching a topic at a particular time. September of Year 7 might not be the best time to teach melody writing, for example, if students aren't yet confident with rhythm and note values.
- ▶ Do you have a curriculum that's topic based rather than knowledge based? If you find things like 'keyboard' or 'film music' on your curriculum, maybe ask yourself what knowledge you're trying to impart to your students.
- ▶ Does your curriculum give equal space to all the inter-related dimensions of music – listening, performing, composing and analysing?
- ▶ Are you trying to teach instrumental lessons rather than music lessons? Sometimes we have schemes of work that focus on an instrument, but with the time available at Key Stage 3 it's unrealistic to believe that we can actually teach an instrument. Your curriculum can, however, be designed in such a way that instruments can be used to teach core knowledge (see a resource on [Practical learning using instruments](#), *Music Teacher*, July 2022). For example, you can use guitars to teach students about chords and harmony without them becoming a master on the guitar.
- ▶ Is there a role for music technology in your curriculum? If the answer is no, then it's something you should consider. Students should be given access to technology in music, but it doesn't need to be used in every lesson.

At Key Stage 3, it's also valuable to ensure that your curriculum leads students in the right direction towards Key Stage 4 music. What you teach matters, and the sequence of your lessons and projects matters too. Future success with music education will often depend on the grounding that students receive at Key Stage 3.

Curriculum purpose

It's worth stopping to consider the purpose of your music curriculum, which is likely to focus on the knowledge that you impart to your students. What do you seek to achieve through your curriculum? Are your students aware of this? Spending time thinking about purpose is important, and you may even consider coming up with some words, headings or phrases to help you impart this purpose to your students. For example, you may want your curriculum to spark curiosity and creativity in your students. If so, how will you ensure that everything you teach feeds into this purpose?

Extra-curricular provision

Once you have your curriculum arranged, resourced and written, you can start to focus on the extra-curricular provision you offer. Having performing or other groups targeted at Key Stage 3 will prove useful and productive for those students involved. Your goal shouldn't always be to produce concert-worthy performances, but instead to build students' confidence and cohesion in the hope that they will then choose music for Key Stage 4. Your extra-curricular provision is important, but it will also be dependent on your context and capacity. Offer what you can – but also make sure there's a clear purpose behind all the groups.

A few points to consider for Key Stage 3 extra-curricular provision:

- ▶ Make sure you have one group, band, choir or ensemble that's specifically targeted at Key Stage 3. This could be a composition club, rock band or guitar club.
- ▶ Make sure your top Key Stage 3 students are engaged with everything you have to offer. Make them feel involved, appreciated and valued in your larger whole-school ensembles.
- ▶ Working towards a performance or concert is important, so you might consider putting on a Key Stage 3 concert that has lower stakes and a more accessible set up for students who are in years 7 to 9.
- ▶ Student leaders are vital, and I'd encourage you to use students to lead groups.
- ▶ Use extra-curricular activities to build on the instrumental learning that you use within your curriculum. You can't learn the guitar or keyboard solely in Key Stage 3 lessons, for example, but you could learn them through a lunchtime club.
- ▶ Short and small is better than nothing at all. You don't need clubs to be huge: if you only have 20 minutes at lunchtime, for example, use the time wisely, and keep the activity regular and worthwhile.

Key Stage 3 is where we can really capture the attention and imagination of students, who will then hopefully stick with music to year 13.

Ofsted ready

We want to ensure that we're ready for Ofsted, and Key Stage 3 music is very much part of that. In the space available here, it isn't possible to cover every aspect of the Ofsted framework. I'd advise you, though to read the recent Ofsted Research Review for music to give you some additional guidance:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-music

For further information, in episodes 45 and 46 of the *Teaching Notes* podcast (**www.musicteachers.org/podcast/**), former Ofsted music lead Mark Phillips discusses 'deep dives' and gives some valuable, perceptive advice for music teachers:

Ofsted will be looking for a range of things, but something you can easily focus on is the technical, constructive and expressive aspects of your curriculum:

- ▶ **Technical:** can your pupils produce sounds vocally, instrumentally or using music technology? How do you plan for this and show this in your curriculum?
- ▶ **Constructive:** does your curriculum suitably develop the understanding of elements of music and the components of composition?
- ▶ **Expressive:** do your pupils listen to a wide range of music, and are they given the freedom to be imaginative?

As mentioned above, sequencing of lessons is also an important focus of any Ofsted inspection. Are you avoiding cognitive overload and ensuring that the steps you take are small enough? Do your pupils understand the progression from one topic to the next, and does your assessment identify progress?

Key Stage 3 music and SEND

It's important to consider all the students you teach, and every student is different. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach in a thriving Key Stage 3 curriculum. Your job is to make sure that your curriculum is suitable for all learners, with necessary support in place.

There's a simple question that you can ask yourself:

How do you ensure those pupils who find it most difficult to learn music are given the best chance to learn?

If we fully embrace this question, we'll start to look at our schemes of work and lessons in a very different light. We want to give students the best chance to learn, which can be linked not only to schemes, but also to resources and sequencing. When we have everything in place – the resources, scaffolds and projects that work best for them – then students are given the best chance to learn. We also need to be aware of students' prior knowledge, and be prepared to break things down into manageable chunks.

It's true to say that some pupils who may struggle in other subjects can thrive in music. Our subject is unique in this respect – but it can also work in reverse: a student who's thriving in subjects across the school may struggle in music.

Rooms and resources

Every music room is different, and we all have very different budgets, resources and requirements. But whatever the setting, the key factor is that when students come into your music room, they need to want to learn. Whatever you can do to inspire them – putting instruments on walls, photos on display and resources ready for them to use, for example – is worth doing. Spending time on your classroom is well worth the time and effort it involves, and I'd encourage you to make the room your own.

If you find yourself in a non-specialist room, however, work out what you need to turn it into a music room. You will almost certainly need a good-quality speaker to play music, and you may also want to make sure that you have ICT facilities to show work on the board. Another option for non-specialist rooms are instruments that are portable and suitable for your curriculum: glockenspiels, guitars and ukuleles can be useful in this situation.

Homework and assessment

Homework should be part of your curriculum, but it should always have meaning and purpose. There's no point in asking students to complete work that has no clear goal: they're likely to switch off, and you won't reap the rewards in the classroom.

Homework at Key Stage 3 should therefore feed into everything that goes on in the classroom. This is sometimes referred to as 'flipped learning': we're effectively training our students to prepare for lessons through their homework.

Cloud-based technology is something that can really help with both homework and assessment. We now have the ability to set work using software such as Focus on Sound Pro and Microsoft Forms. Homework set in the cloud will often be engaging for students, and useful for you in that it can be self-marking. Focus on Sound Pro (www.focusonsound.com), for example (covered in its own *Music Teacher* resource, [November 2021](#)) is a tool for not only learning but also assessment. It has a huge library of resources, as well as lessons and questions attached. As a teacher, you can also create your own questions, which you can set up to be self-marking.

Soundtrap (www.soundtrap.com, covered in its own *Music Teacher* resource, [July 2021](#)) is another piece of cloud-based software, and will allow you to set your students composition homework. In addition, there's a wide range of free websites where students can create music and share it with you. Although this kind of homework usually has a strong appeal for students, it does also rely on them having access to technology at home.

Listening-based homework is also an excellent option, and can be carried out through YouTube: if you're teaching a topic in the following lesson, for example, students can prepare by listening in advance. You may even want to attach some questions using an online form, but listening is still a valuable activity in itself.

Key Stage 4 options evening

Options evening is one of the most important moments in the Key Stage 3 calendar. It's where students will come to find out exactly what's on offer at Key Stage 4, and why they should choose music. If we want our Year 10 classes full and thriving, we need Key Stage 3 students to opt for music. It's a marketing exercise above all else – and one that we need to prepare for carefully in advance.

Here are some top tips for a successful options evening:

- 1** Fill your music room with life: sounds, students, compositions and performances. If you're allowed to invite current music students in for options evening, they can be a powerful marketing tool for you.
- 2** If there's a gathering in a central space before you meet parents individually, make sure you have some students performing. This puts music front and centre of the school's activities, and gets students excited about the future. You might also consider including composition work from current students.
- 3** Make sure that you don't put potential students off with eligibility criteria that might not be relevant, fair or sensible. Having Grade 5 on an instrument is not necessary, and neither is the ability to read music. Every student is different: show students what's possible, and then deal with them on a case-by-case basis. They should leave your room knowing that music is a possible option for them.
- 4** Avoid too much chat about the specific ins and outs of the course or the specification – focus instead on the possibilities that the course opens up, and the topics you'll be covering. Tell them about the range of experiences they'll have, from performing to composing, listening to analysing. Give them a clear idea of the enjoyable nature of studying a practical subject. Leave the nitty-gritty for the options booklet, and focus on the positive sell.
- 5** Speak from the heart to the parents and students. Remember, the parents in front of you may well not have had the best musical experiences themselves when at school, so you should aim to get them onside and excited as well. You don't always need a fancy PowerPoint presentation, but you'll often benefit from a clear vision and a sense of passion for your subject.
- 6** Make sure you note down every student you see, so that you can follow things up later. They should be booking meetings with you, and you need to make sure that they're suitable and prepared for Key Stage 4 – something you can do once the evening is over.

Options evening will be different for everyone, but remember that it's an event that you should give full attention to. Don't overlook the power of options evening to encourage students to decide to study music at Key Stage 4. It's often the case that students are actually looking for an option, and we can take the opportunity to provide them with one. Once they've decided on music, you can use the rest of Year 9 to get them ready. You might even consider establishing a Key Stage 4 preparation club as part of your extra-curricular provision, to help with the months leading up to Year 10 music.

Transition to Key Stage 4

The transition to Key Stage 4 is often tough on students, but there are ways to make things smoother. There's an inevitable jump up to KS4, and a change in the material and approaches, but we can make the jump smaller and more manageable by preparing students in the later stages of Key Stage 3.

Depending on the course, exam board and pathway, Key Stage 4 music will have different criteria and pathways. Once students have decided on music, you can start to guide them towards preparing for these pathways. Here are a few ways to help with the transition to Key Stage 4:

- 7** Start a bespoke extra-curricular club for Year 9 students who are opting for music at Key Stage 4. Use this group to get them acquainted with how the course will run and what they'll be required to do.
- 8** Use existing extra-curricular groups to prepare students for Key Stage 4-level performances, composition and group work. The more you talk about music in Year 10, the more prepared they will be. They can also start to think about their musicianship at a much deeper level, which will put them more at ease as they make the transition.
- 9** Use existing music students to help guide, lead and inspire your Key Stage 3 options group. They might even help you lead your extra-curricular Key Stage 4 club.
- 10** Your summer term lessons are still important, and you should make sure you keep your Key Stage 3 programme engaging and purposeful during this term. Those who have opted for music could be given extension work, or you may want to change your seating plan so that you can keep an eye on them.
- 11** Arrange a meeting with students and parents/guardians to discuss Key Stage 4. This could take place in the summer term so that they can start preparing. You can recommend summer reading, listening and composition work. More importantly, you can also answer questions and help build their confidence.

Conclusion

The aim of this resource has been to provide an overview of what Key Stage 3 music could look like in your school. Every school is different, and that includes resources available, staffing and students. However, there's a range of ideas and approaches included here that will hopefully give you food for thought and help you strengthen your current provision. Strengthening Key Stage 3 music means that we'll stand a better chance of getting students to opt for music at Key Stage 4 –something we all want. But we also want to send our students into Key Stage 4 with a good grounding of musical knowledge and understanding and a passion for the subject that will stay with them for life.