KS5

Edexcel A level: Wider listening

by James Manwaring

James Manwaring is Director of Music for Windsor Learning Partnership, and has been teaching music for 15 years. He is a member of the MMA and ISM, and he writes his own music blog.

INTRODUCTION

A key component of the new Edexcel A level specification is wider listening. In this resource, I will consider what 'wider listening' means, and how we can approach it in our teaching.

There are some barriers that can easily be broken down, and some misconceptions that can hopefully be sorted out. Wider listening is here to stay, and when we start to embrace it, we'll see our students' love of music increase – and their results following the same path.

STARTING POINT

The first thing we need to consider is: what does the exam board mean by wider listening? First of all, look at the specification, which is a detailed document that contains all the key information that music teachers need to know.

Here is a key reference to wider listening from the specification, taken from page 54:

> Students should also study a range of pieces beyond these set works. The suggested wider listening pieces for each area of study (see *Appendix 4*) provide learners with breadth, enabling them to place their knowledge of musical elements, context and language in a wider context, and apply their knowledge and understanding to more pieces of music. The suggested wider listening will help students to relate their learning to other pieces of music, but its study is not compulsory. Teachers can identify and teach other pieces of music to support their students' learning.

There are some key words in this paragraph:

- breadth
- musical elements
- context
- language

I will focus on some of these words later, since they are key for both students and teachers.

Back to the starting point, however, and we need to make it clear why we're studying even more pieces of music. The paragraph above mentions 'suggested' wider listening, and the exam board gives a useful list of pieces – but why bother? Why are we asking students to do more listening on top of the 18 pieces they're already covering over the course of the A level? The answer is simple, but you may want your students to think about before you explain it to them.

The more pieces of music we listen to, the more we will understand how the elements of music are used, in different contexts, to create varying sounds, styles and musical languages.

Wider listening is not just another box-ticking exercise. In fact, it's the unlocking of music for our students. It's a chance for them to take something they do every day and make it relevant to their A level. Wider listening will enable students to write, listen, compose and perform to a higher level.

As teachers, we should not shy away from it ourselves, and we also need to get students excited about it, and help them to understand its relevance and importance.

THE BIG ISSUE

We seem to have an issue, however. We seem to hate wider listening, and I'm not sure why.

As music teachers, we surely all love listening to music in all its different colours and influences, and we need to convey that love to our students.

The main reason some teachers have balked at the idea of wider listening is because they've simply seen it as even more set works. But I don't believe that's the spirit of the specification, and I can't imagine Pearson expecting students to go into an exam knowing specific details about hundreds of pieces of music. Instead, it's about opening students' eyes to the world of music, and the board should be thanked for that. Not only will it directly help our students in the exam room, but it will also make them more rounded musicians. And because of that, wider listening is something we should all embrace.

> Wider listening is part of everyday life: we all do it, all the time.

Where do we start?

A great place to start with wider listening is a lesson on the music that has influenced you as a teacher the most. Construct a lesson around a playlist of songs, pieces or performances that you have loved over the years. This kind of lesson will highlight lots of key things to your students:

- It shows students that you love a wide range of music.
- It introduces students to the idea that anything contributes to their wider listening diet.
- It will generate discussion, and you can point out exactly why you are going to listen to a wide range of piece.

After this lesson, ask your students to choose three particular pieces of music that they love, then come back next lesson and present these pieces to the class. Keep it simple at first: ask them to focus on why they love the music they are discussing – what drew them to these pieces, and what sticks out for them about the music. Make sure that students start the wider listening journey in a positive way.

So far, students have seen the benefits of wider listening, understood why they are doing it and had a chance to engage with music they love and that their peers love. Once this process is complete, draw their attention to the list of pieces that the exam board gives as a **starting point** for wider listening. I emphasise the words starting point because it's crucial that students don't limit themselves.

VOCAL MUSIC

- Handel: *Messiah* – 'Surely he hath borne', 'And with his stripes', 'Hallelujah', 'Worthy is the Lamb' and 'Amen'
- Schubert: 'Erlkönig', 'An die Musik', 'Die Forelle' and 'Der Leiermann'
- Fanny Mendelssohn: 'Ihr Töne schwingt euch fröhlich' (*Lied zum Geburtstag des Vaters*)
- Ethel Smyth: Mass in D – 'Gloria'
- Wagner: *Die Walküre* – Siegmund and Sieglinde ('Wie dir Die Stirn to Wälsungen-Blut!' and orchestral postlude)
- Verdi, *Rigoletto* – Act III, Nos 11 and 12

INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC

- Haydn: Symphony No. 6 in D – movements 1 and 4
- Beethoven: String Quartet in C, Op. 59 No. 3 – movements 3 and 4
- Cécile Chaminade: Concertino for Flute and Orchestra
- Liszt: *Les préludes*
- Chopin: Ballade No. 4 in F minor, Op. 52
- Amy Beach: *Gaelic Symphony* – movement 1

MUSIC FOR FILM

- Max Steiner: *King Kong*
- Ennio Morricone: *Once Upon a Time in the West*
- John Williams: *Schindler's List*
- Debbie Wiseman: *Wilde*
- Hans Zimmer and Lisa Gerrard: *Gladiator*
- Toru Takemitsu: *Black Rain*

POPULAR MUSIC AND JAZZ

- Charles Mingus: *Blues and Roots*
- Carole King: *Tapestry*
- Jay Z: *Blueprint 3*
- Björk: *Vulnicura*
- Michael Jackson: *Thriller*
- Bix Beiderbecke: *Jazz Me Blues*

FUSIONS

- Afro Celt Sound System: *Volume 2: Release* – 'Eireann' and 'Riding the Waves'
- Villa Lobos: *Bachianas brasileiras* Nos 2 and 5
- AR Rahman: 'Jai Ho' ('You are My Destiny')
- Gloria Estefan: 'Mi tierra'
- Robert Glasper Experiment: *Black Radio* – 'Afro Blue'
- Sara Tavares: *Xinti*

NEW DIRECTIONS

- Karlheinz Stockhausen: *Gesang der Junglinge*
- Pierre Boulez: *Structures* 1a
- Peter Maxwell Davies: *Eight Songs for a Mad King* – Nos 6 to 8
- Unsuk Chin: *Alice in Wonderland* – 'The Mad Tea Party'
- Olivier Messiaen: *Des canyons aux étoiles...* – movements 8 and 10
- Tansy Davies: *Re-greening*

The list given by Pearson is very helpful, and there are some great pieces of music on it. Students should start with it, and then be encouraged to make their own list. There is so much music out there, after all, that if they all make their own wider listening list, you'll have lots of pieces to share with the class. With Apple Music, Spotify and YouTube, listening to music is now easier than ever, and we need to unlock the potential for our students.

It's also good to encourage students to hear music being performed live. This is also easier than ever, and although official department trips are always good, they can also be difficult to organise. Students can book to see concerts independently of school, and should be encouraged to do so. Also keep an eye out for local events: there are almost certainly local choirs, orchestras and bands performing very close to your school.

Wider listening does, of course, also include other works from the Anthology. Students can use their knowledge of particular set works to help them with other set works. You can easily link the way Bernard Herrmann paints musical pictures in his *Psycho* soundtrack, for instance, with the ways Vaughan Williams creates atmosphere in *On Wenlock Edge*. It's always good to get students to explore connections between the set works either at home or in a lesson, so that they can see how music over time does actually link together.

Students might also like to keep a wider listening diary, or write down examples in the margins of their Anthology. It doesn't matter how they record their listening journey, but it's important that they include a small bit of information about the wider listening piece as well as its title. How does the wider listening piece they've listened to link to a set work? Is there a musical element or feature that really stands out?

BREADTH

If we look back at that quote from the Edexcel specification, we encounter the word **breadth**. But what does that mean for our students, and how can we ensure that they achieve breadth in their wider listening? As teachers, we need to help guide our students in their listening journey – otherwise there's a danger that they will not achieve the kind of breadth required. Remember that the goal behind wider listening is to prepare students for the listening and written exam, where they'll encounter both familiar and unfamiliar music.

To help them achieve breadth, it's a good idea to consider a few things with your students:

1. What music do you listen to the most?
2. What music do you ***not*** enjoy listening to?
3. How many different styles of music can you name or list?
4. What puts you off a certain genre or style of music?

It's a good idea to work through as a class what music students enjoy and dislike, and also to work out what music students don't listen to at all. There are a couple of reasons for this.

It might be true to say that a majority of people will be put off music from many centuries ago, or music that is particularly avant-garde. However, it's also true that many people won't ever listen to music from the 1960s, or film scores, for example. Finding out what our students don't listen to will give them a starting point for their wider listening journey.

But we also need to consider music that students ***do*** like, so that they use their most favoured genre to their advantage.

It might seem obvious, but there's a big difference between simply having music on in the background and actively listening to music.

If a student adores listening to orchestral film music, for instance, they can use this passion to develop various different skills without even having to depart from their favoured genre:

- If they're listening to film scores every day, they can practise the art of breadth in their listening by widening the styles of scores they listen to.
- They're already listening to this music, so make sure they use it to their advantage by training themselves to listen out for specific things – we will touch on this later.
- Their preferred music is orchestral film music, so that's likely to be the route they'll take for their composition. Teach your students how to listen out for ideas and get inspiration from the music they listen to.

If students have music that they already love to listen to, they can learn to pair it with their A level wider listening. Anything counts as wider listening: the exam board don't restrict it to any specific genre. And since the Edexcel Anthology itself covers a wide range of styles and genres, most music that students listen to already will somehow link back to it. Alternatively, look at the charts on iTunes or another service and see how music being released today also links back to the Anthology.

Listening to music they like is one thing, but students also need to be led on a journey that covers music they may not usually listen to. Here are some ideas for music that they might like to explore:

- Gregorian chant
- Madrigal
- Fugue
- Ayre
- Ragtime
- Punk
- Video/computer game music
- Bluegrass
- Tone poem
- Musique concrète

This list could go on and on, and you may like to expand it, or ask your students to do the same thing.

Another approach is simply to ask students to study a particular composer in detail, and look at a selection of their most popular works. The key thing here is to encourage students to look beyond the obvious, and instead to consider lesser-known composers. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Dmitry Kabalevsky
- Erich Wolfgang Korngold
- Anne Dudley
- Étienne Nicolas Méhul
- Albert Dietrich
- Alissa Firsova
- Craig Armstrong
- Hildegard von Bingen
- Cécile Chaminade
- Raghunath Seth

'Come to the edge,' he said.
'We can't, we're afraid!' they responded.
'Come to the edge,' he said.
'We can't, we will fall!' they responded.
'Come to the edge,' he said.
And so they came.
And he pushed them.
And they flew.

Guillaume Apollinaire

Our job with students is often to help them on their own journeys, and give them a nudge in the right direction. Sometimes they might need a gentle push to undertake wider listening.

MUSICAL ELEMENTS

I mentioned earlier that we need to train students in the difference between simply having music on in the background, and actively listening to and studying music.

If we look back at the quote from the specification, we come to two of the most familiar words in music education – **musical elements**. As the specification states, wider listening is all about students taking their current knowledge of the elements and placing them in a wider context. When we look at the elements displayed by different pieces of music, we gain insights into how that music was created, moulded and given its unique sound.

Edexcel indicates in the specification that it will use the following terms for musical elements:

1. Melody
2. Harmony
3. Tonality
4. Texture
5. Form and structure
6. Sonority
7. Dynamics
8. Tempo, metre and rhythm

Students should therefore start to listen out for each of these elements in their wider listening. A good approach might be to keep a diary.

Hopefully by now they are used to keeping a music diary from GCSE, and there are ready-made diaries they can find online. The more of a habit they can get into, the better the whole process will be. They need to start to link musical elements to particular pieces, and then go on to think about context and language. General listening is still good, but focused listening will help students build up an excellent degree of musical understanding – one of the benefits of wider listening.

CONTEXT

Context is a crucial part of understanding music, and wider listening can help build up knowledge of musical contexts very quickly.

Music throughout history has changed and evolved, but the question is: why? How did composers employ the elements of music in, for example, the Classical period as compared to the Renaissance? Students will only truly discover these differences when they listen out for the musical elements and start to build up a picture of what was taking place at the time.

There are, of course, two ways to consider context:

1. What was happening at the time in the world of music? For example, changes in demand, taste, the availability of instruments and ease of transferring music.
2. What was happening at the time historically? Were there any major events or social-political changes taking place?

There's a great shortcut for helping with this process. First, find out what year a piece of music was composed. Then visit Wikipedia and simply type in that year as a search. You will get a good overview of major events for that year.

You can do the same with composers, and I encourage my students to look at who else was composing in a particular year. If you type in 'Composers from 1811', for example, Wikipedia will do the hard work. It's also useful to consider how music has changed as society and technology have developed: consider, for instance, how musical instruments have changed and developed over time.

LANGUAGE

Language is a great way to think about music, but it can also be confusing. On page 58 of the specification, you can read the following about the three areas students are expected to have knowledge of:

- Reading and writing staff notation, including rhythmic notation in compound and irregular time and all key signatures.
- Chords and associated chord symbols including standard harmonic progressions, for example chord inversions, dominant 7th chords and extended chords, for example secondary 7ths and 9ths.
- Musical vocabulary and terminology related to the Areas of Study including recognition and use of appropriate musical vocabulary and terminology, for example glissando, repetition and conjunct, and recognition and use of sophisticated terminology, for example portamento, and ascending minor scale.

Students are expected to be able to apply their knowledge of these areas to their wider listening. But some of the three points above can be tricky when we're listening to music that we've maybe stumbled across or discovered as part of an exploration of wider listening. Without a score, it can be difficult to name or fully describe a chord, for example. But students can still approach their listening with a clear awareness of the fact that music is a language. If we can listen out for key components of this language, we will be able to understand the music more fully.

It's clear that students need to be able to hear a musical feature, define or name it, and then link it to context. Of course, it's a good idea, where possible, to get a score of the music being considered. IMSLP is a fantastic resource for students and teachers, and there's a huge number of scores available on the site. Another approach is to look through any old anthologies from legacy specifications that you might still have.

As well as listening to other music, it's also good for students to encounter other music in score form. The Anthology obviously can't include everything – there isn't a classical string quartet in it, for example. Students will therefore benefit greatly from seeing other music on the page. Doing this will help students not only with the exam, but also with their compositions.

The language of music can be a hard area for students to consider, and it might help them to think in terms of a line of argument (which links neatly to the essay question marking criteria, where students are asked to construct a controlled argument in their essay).

Take, for example, the Berlioz *Symphonie fantastique* set work. In it, the composer focuses on telling stories using an *idée fixe*, also moving away from the structural constraints of the Classical period. It's an example of programme music, and Berlioz is attempting to tell stories, paint pictures and let his imagination run wild. The line of argument a student might employ, therefore, is that Berlioz is using a musical language that tells stories, and they might choose salient points linked to the elements in the essay question to show how he achieves this. Wider listening examples can also be gathered to demonstrate where other composers have told stories with their music, or taken a programmatic approach.

THE ESSAY QUESTIONS

In the component 3 appraising exam, students will face a question that follows this format:

> Discuss Cage's use of rhythm, structure and sonority in Three Dances for Two Prepared Pianos: No. 1. Relate your discussion to other relevant works. These may include set works, wider listening or other music.

Let's focus on how we can use wider listening in these questions so that students can prepare for them.

First of all, look at the mark scheme for this paper, and pay special attention to the references to wider listening in the marking criteria:

- Level 1: 1-6 marks – little attempt to link to other relevant works.
- Level 2: 7-12 marks – attempts are made to refer to other works, with some errors/inconsistency.
- Level 3: 13-18 marks – relevant works are used to illustrate basic points.
- Level 4: 19-24 marks – relevant works are used to justify points.
- Level 5: 25-30 marks – relevant works are used to justify salient points.

It's clear that if students do not refer to relevant wider listening works, they will fall into Level 1. In the top band, however, students are using relevant works to justify salient points. By salient, the specification simply means most noticeable or important. So we need to teach our students to pick out the most noticeable musical points, and then justify them with examples from wider listening.

In our Cage example, if a student therefore points out that Cage uses an exciting approach to sonority and timbre by preparing a piano, they will need to think of a wider listening example that can help to justify this approach, and help explain the musical language that Cage has used.

We won't go into more detail on this particular example question, but it demonstrates the importance of wider listening, and of making sure that students use examples to justify salient points.

They must also avoid simply mentioning a random piece they've listened to. One way to achieving that is to help them with their examples. I suggest to students that they listen to:

- another piece by the same composer.
- another piece from the same or a similar genre.
- a piece that was written at the same time or in the same year.

This approach may just help them pick relevant examples of wider listening. That said, students might equally find an example of a composer using a similar musical language even if the piece is from a different genre or period of time.

To summarise, let's look back to the key areas of wider listening:

1. Students should look at the three elements that are referred to in the listening question.
2. They should then look for one or two salient points for each of these elements.
3. They then need to link these points to an over-arching line of argument that runs through the essay, which is likely to link to the context and musical language.
4. Finally, they need an example of wider listening to justify this salient point and show how another composer or another musical work has used the element in the same way, or created a similar musical language.

CONCLUSION

Wider listening is here to stay, and as a result of it, students will get to listen to a huge amount of music during their A level course. Starting early at GCSE is a great way of making listening a habit, and showing students the true benefits. As teachers, we also need to listen to as much music as we can ourselves, as well as being able to share ideas and examples with our students along the way.

Wider listening isn't just about the essay and the exam, however: it links to composing and performing, too. When students are composing, we can point them in the direction of pieces that will inspire them and give them ideas for their own works. When students are performing, we can suggest similar pieces that will give them performance and interpretation ideas. If we get it right, wider listening offers a fantastic opportunity, and it can open up the world of music to ourselves and to our students.