



Developing Composition Throughout KS3 to Improve GCSE Outcomes

Headline Details

Improving composition marks at GCSE level.

GCSE uptake and grades had been good historically but the highest level marks were very difficult to access for our students. Listening paper and performance marks were in line with or better than similar schools. We decided to look at our KS3 curriculum to see how we could embed these skills to enable more students to improve their composition and access the highest marks.

This project was delivered to the whole school across Key Stage 3, involving students from Years 7, 8 and 9. All students within these year groups participated as part of the regular music curriculum, ensuring broad and inclusive engagement regardless of prior musical experience. Leadership for the project was provided by Vicky Chamberlain, Subject Leader, who oversaw its implementation and ongoing development.

Running over a three-year period, the initiative was supported through a Soundtrap subscription at an approximate cost of £1,700 per annum. We have since adapted our schemes of work to be applicable to other DAWs such as YuStudio (Charanga). This long-term approach allowed the school to embed digital music-making sustainably across KS3, supporting creative learning, collaboration and progression over time while providing consistent access to industry-standard music technology for all pupils.



Activity

The KS3 music curriculum has been reviewed and refined to place a stronger emphasis on developing students' compositional skills and confidence. The curriculum now ensures that students complete at least one extended composition project in each year of KS3, supported by a range of smaller, structured composition tasks. These shorter activities allow students to practise specific techniques and build confidence before applying their learning to larger-scale work.

To improve accessibility and engagement, the department replaced Cubase with Soundtrap as the primary composition software. Soundtrap's intuitive, cloud-based platform enables students to focus on musical creativity rather than technical challenges and allows composition work to be continued beyond the classroom, supporting independent practice and refinement. We have also now begun to incorporate the YuStudio DAW into KS3 composition lessons.

Compositional learning across KS3 is carefully sequenced to ensure clear progression in skills and independence. In Year 7, students complete an ostinato-based composition, focusing on rhythm, repetition, layering and development to establish a secure foundation in structuring musical ideas. In Year 8, students explore functional harmony through the study of a popular song. This knowledge is then developed by looking at extended chords in Jazz and Blues music.

In Year 9, students complete a film music composition project, exploring how harmony, texture and the use of consonance and dissonance can be used to create mood and atmosphere. This unit develops students' expressive decision-making and understanding of music in context.

This knowledge from KS3 is then applied in their final task: composition to a chosen brief; selecting from four options that reflect GCSE-style requirements. This project encourages greater independence and creativity, requiring students to interpret a brief, plan and develop ideas, and refine their work. The task provides effective preparation for KS4 and supports informed progression to GCSE Music.



Impact on Participants and Staff

The quality of compositions improved with the first cohort to start this as year 8 students in September 2019 completing GCSEs in 2022. Three students from the GCSE cohort gained a grade 9 for composition which bought their grade out at a 9 overall. Since then, we have had students in each cohort attaining the highest levels in composition.

Composition “briefs” were also changed for the free composition component at GCSE to allow students more freedom to create which has also resulted in higher quality and less formulaic work.

Staff are now considerably more confident in delivering composition across all Key Stages and are able to tailor feedback more purposefully.

“I believe our KS3 curriculum effectively prepares students for composition at GCSE level by first introducing the components of a composition e.g. ostinati and then encouraging students to explore the nuanced effects that can be created using the elements of music.

By year 9, students have performed and created music in a variety of genres and are composing music to create an intended musical effect when studying film music and composing music to a brief as they would for the GCSE course.”

- Ms Botha, Teacher of Music

Learning

Schemes of work are continually refined to improve teaching across all elements so this work is ongoing. Many of our more able students are now producing high quality and creative work. We are looking this year at how to ensure less able students can fully access this component as well as embedding knowledge of elements of music within composition. We have recently transitioned to a 2 year KS4 so are reviewing schemes of work again to ensure that all student are confident composers at KS3 and can identify areas for development in their work.

At The Gilberd School, we believe that all students should access a wide range of high-quality practical music making, regardless of their experience.