

(GCSE) composing – some ponderings

Dr Ally Daubney
7th July 2017

Alison.daubney@googlemail.com



@AllyDaubney

Consideration for today

1. "Free choice" – how 'free is this in reality?
2. Tensions relating to developing young composers in the future, based on current position
3. Ponderings

New GCSE – Ofqual requirements

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/413199/gcse-subject-level-conditions-for-music.pdf

Compose and develop musical ideas with technical control and coherence (30%)

- (a) require each Learner to compose at least two separate pieces of music with a combined duration of at least three minutes –
 - (i) at least one of which must be in response to a brief set by the awarding organisation, and
 - (ii) at least one other of which must be composed **freely as the Learner chooses**

More Ofqual guidance

An awarding organisation must ensure that, in respect of each piece of music composed by a Learner for the Composition Assessment, the Centre which delivered that assessment provides the awarding organisation with –

- (a) a complete recording of the piece, and
- (b) a score, lead sheet or written account of the composition, which has been produced by the Learner.

"Free" choice?

"Obviously they are not 'doing' their composition this year because that's not allowed but we they have been working on their free composition to finish next year".

*"We given them choices about **what we know works** – I give them four choices but the less experienced teachers give them two."*

Teacher A – Head of Department in a school with four music teachers

"Its takes too long when they are all doing their own thing. I've tried it this year and it's impossible for me to get round and some want to write songs and others want to do loads of different things so from my perspective it isn't manageable."

Some kids had no ideas about what they wanted to compose, or even how, so I gave them some choices and they composed on the computers – some kids need, you know, starting points and a structure to follow."

Teacher B – very experienced teacher, 3 in department in total

'Quantifying' outcomes

"Yeah the problem with giving them a free choice is that it might not get enough marks. And the problem is that we don't actually know so it feels bad to let them compose something that actually sounds quite good but we can't be sure it will get the marks."

Teacher D – Head of department 10+ years teaching

*And because of this, next year we're going back to limiting it to **ground bass** or a **structured rondo on the computers** because we know from the old Edexcel GCSE that **it's easy to get good marks on these** and it is **manageable in the classroom.**"*

Teacher B – very experienced teacher, 3 in department in total

Teacher flexibility?

*"Yeah I know what you mean. We've tried it a bit but **when they're not doing things I feel I know well** I can't really guide them and in the end that'll disadvantage them when it comes to the marking, because on the things I know work I've got a really strong idea about what full marks or nearly full marks sounds like."*

Teacher C, Head of Department, 20+ years teaching

Skewing 'how' pupils compose?

"The thing is, if they do it on Logic we can get a score out of it straight away if you just put it into Sibelius. I can show you how to do it if you want. So long as they have a score it doesn't matter what it looks like."

(Teacher E – one person dept.)



Potential overlap...

"I know most of them would compose a song if I let them but I don't because what happens if that comes up in the briefs and that's what they want to choose? I know that is what they'd naturally go for. I need to steer them towards a different area of study so I give them two things they can do and they choose which one they want to work on."

The cart driving the horse?

*"Awarding organisations gave careful further consideration to adding further content to adding the process of music making, however after discussing the issue with Ofqual it was decided that **assessing the process in addition to a student's final performance and composition would create challenges around validity and reliability of assessment.**"*

Ofqual equalities report

An A-level music tech teacher said:

*"I can't seem to tap into their creative spark. I am looking for the spark so that they run with it...**maybe the National Curriculum and GCSE has evaporated the sap.** It seems difficult for these students to be playful with the sounds, even though the technology they have at their fingertips offers incredible things."*

Standards over time 1995-2005 – has anything changed?

Description of attainment for A-grade candidate in 2005

"Candidates characteristically create compositions which are structural, secure and consistent in style but are often functional and underdeveloped. Most show an ability to respond to a brief and to attempt to evaluate their own work critically."

http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8910/1/qca-07-3101_Alevel_GCSE_music_mar07.pdf

Key Stage 3 composing – an observation study (Daubney, 2004-2008)

- 19 out of 20 teachers verbally gave specific musical suggestions
- 15 out of 20 teachers played or sang suggestions for 'improvement' or 'continuation'

Some points for consideration

1. The task

- Do we 'allow' scope for creative exploration?
- How is it 'modelled'?
- What validity does it have in a pupil's world?

2. Your role in the process

- What is it currently / what could it be in the future?

3. Assessment & ownership

- Who is judging? What is it being judged against? What is the impact of this on a) the process and b) the outcome?
- How do we make 'free composing' into 'free composing'?

Fighting our corner

Who is looking out for us now **QCA has gone** in the Bonfire of the Quango's and we have **no music-specific Ofsted HMI** or anyone at Ofsted specifically looking out for music?



Should we be worried about the future for GCSE composing?

In light of one of the music teachers leaving, the subject will be taught in a series of 'drop down days' from September, where a specialist teacher visits to teach curriculum requirements.

"The intention is that we will set these sessions based on musical experience and aptitude to ensure that the curriculum meets their needs and provides the appropriate amount of challenge for all students," the statement said.

"Our intention is that we will deliver these sessions in an innovative way and we have already lined up some guest musicians to deliver some of the sessions. We will also be able to do some off site teaching in specialist facilities like music studios, theatres and concert halls."

<http://www.saffronwaldenreporter.co.uk/news/newport-school-reassures-parents-it-will-keep-music-on-its-curriculum-but-that-it-will-be-taught-differently-1-5092470>

Another enigma...progress 8 buckets

Rock School Music Practitioner has three different codes for music in relation to the routes offered:

Performance

Technology

Composition

BUT Composition route has the same code as GCSE Music so only one can 'count'. **Why?**

How we make young musicians feel about themselves is crucial

- Listen to this song – what can this 13 year old musically do?

This is composed and performed by a talented singer songwriter who feels she cannot be successful at GCSE music for numerous reasons, including:

- unrealistic reflection of musical self based on grades awarded in school and also social comparison with others
- ideas about what instruments count as valid for GCSE
- recognition that the music she composes is not in the 'mould' of that composed in the KS3 music class in her school



http://www.gilroydispatch.com/opinion/editorial-cartoon-identity-crisis/image_8c142574-2cbf-5612-af0b-337668ea09a2.html

Ponderings

What are the "ideal conditions" for nurturing composing before GCSE/KS4? What needs to happen in schools now?

What is the potential impact on composing at Key Stage 4 in (many) schools where the curriculum offer is diminishing? Will GCSE really be a viable option for 'all'?

How would a 'typical' A grade GCSE composition be described in 2017? Has anything changed since the Standards Over Time report?

(How) do we promote playfulness with sound? And how do/will examiners understand 'new' music if it is not in the mould of familiarity and in the absence of the composer's voice?

More ponderings

There is a gulf between 'real' composing and that for an examination. Is it even possible to overcome this in a 'system' led by marking and assessment? And who do pupils think GCSE is for, especially around composing?

Marking of the new GCSE / distribution of grades– will it be the 'compositions' that sort the 'wood from the trees'?

What should training / education 'look like' for in-service and pre-service teachers?

Who is 'watching out' for composing / creativity now we have no QCA and no specialist Ofsted inspector?

Changes over time in music education

2012-2016/17

- Carried out by Ally Daubney and Duncan Mackrill at the University of Sussex, collecting data from over 700 secondary schools
- <https://www.ism.org/news/changes-in-secondary-music-curriculum-provision-over-time-2012-16>
- (A copy of report about the initial tranche of analysed data is available [here](#))