

## Musical Understanding

### Does this approach sit well with 'mastery learning'?

Many schools are now developing approaches to curriculum design and delivery which reflect a 'mastery learning' approach. While there are many definitions of 'mastery', it seems that there are some key principles which appear consistently:

1. **All** students must be able to achieve **all** of the core learning that has been planned for them. This is fundamentally different from older approaches which required different types of learning or levels of learning for different groups of students.
2. There must be intervention for any students who do not initially grasp the core learning: they need catch-up or opportunities to re-visit the 'missed learning' so that they are all at the same point of learning as their peers.
3. Students must be able to apply new learning in different contexts: so rather than one-off acquisition of learning, fundamental learning is repeated again and again in different ways, ideally requiring more creative and challenging thinking the more it is experienced.
4. Differentiation is no longer about depth but about breadth: so rather than 'hot housing' students through advanced skills, teachers provide a breadth of learning to ensure that all learning is firmly embedded and secure in a variety of contexts – the wider the range of contexts in which the learning can be demonstrated, the better.

With traditional approaches to KS3 planning, and given the limited amount of time given over to music in most secondary schools, these principles are virtually impossible to achieve:

1. With a focus on skills (ie keyboard playing) and knowledge (ie notation and musical elements / dimensions), it is impossible to ensure that all students achieve all of the learning. For instance, can we realistically expect **all** students to achieve specific practical skills (ie playing a given sequence of chords on the guitar)? Or to be able to read fluently a notated score? Or fully grasp how syncopation works on a theoretical level? Teachers who are challenged to define what practical skills **all** students can achieve across a year quickly realise that the expectations have to be set far too low to make the overall learning and musical experiences worthwhile.
2. With traditional curriculum maps, there is rarely any direct opportunity to 'catch up': if a student finds that by the end of the unit, they still do not really understand how a raga is constructed, or how this is different from other modes / scales experienced (ie a blues scale), they simply will not be able to re-do the work so that they can 'catch up' this bit of learning.
3. Given the normal sequence of units in KS3 curriculum maps, students rarely get the opportunity to apply their most recent learning in the next unit. So a Gospel unit might have a focus on part singing . . . but the next unit is Samba, and the one after that is Film music: how are the students supposed to secure their learning about part singing once they move on to Samba and Film units, which are likely to focus firstly on rhythms and ensemble percussion playing, and then on chords, leitmotifs, textures, etc.
4. Differentiation is usually currently based on skills: 'if you find this part too easy, here is another, harder one'. This is fundamentally about depth of differentiation, not breadth.

So the four basic principles of mastery learning cannot be delivered by the traditional approach to KS3 music planning: students might master tasks, but are unlikely to master long-term learning.

By contrast, a focus in musical understanding meets each of the key requirements:

1. Students can acquire and demonstrate musical understanding through a variety of ways – practically, creatively, through written work, making scores of different kinds, etc. This means that **all** students can achieve what is required, whatever their level of skills or knowledge of musical theory.
2. Since there will always be at least two or three units on each stage of progression through musical understanding, students can re-visit and ‘catch up’ their learning over time: if every unit across Year 8 has a focus on understanding ‘devices’, students will be reinforcing their learning over quite a while!
3. Equally, their learning once grasped can then be applied in new contexts: if they have understood the devices of Gospel, they can move on to understand in the same way the devices of Samba and Film music. Clearly the specific devices will be different in each unit, but the focus of the students’ learning is on the principle of the fact that all music has unique combinations of devices – and by experiencing this several times over, students are able to apply their learning in many contexts.
4. Differentiation in terms of breadth is also easy to plan for if the focus is musical understanding: if one group of students understand the devices of gamelan very clearly, they can be ‘stretched’ by being asked to arrange their music for a documentary on Indonesian wildlife. This requires an understanding of documentary music, and how to be creative with existing material – so the fundamental learning (‘devices’) is still the same, but it is being stretched into wider contexts.