

Musical Understanding

What implications does the focus on musical understanding have for assessment?

The biggest implication is that assessment is much easier. This is for two key reasons:

1. As the focus of assessment is a form of learning which develops over a period of time (ie: 'musical understanding') rather than a task which needs to be completed in a particular lesson (ie: 'play the blues chord sequence'), the assessment can be made at any point in time – it does not need to be fixed to an 'assessment' lesson or via a final performance, when all students have to be assessed whether they are ready or not
2. Fundamentally, teachers are only assessing one thing: the stage of musical understanding that has been reached, and the extent to which new evidence from lessons is confirming an existing view about a student's understanding, or whether it is suggesting that there has been a shift in that understanding.

The full [HMS guidance document on assessment at KS3](#) does explain how a 'profile of learning' should be developed which also incorporates more traditional areas of assessment (in particular, practical music skills together with listening / thinking skills and knowledge: summarised as 'music making and thinking in context'). However, even this still makes the process of assessment very manageable: there is just one main thing to assess, and two or three other related areas.

The other benefit of the approach is that because the fundamental focus is on a form of understanding which can be developed whatever the task, or whatever the music being studied, both teachers and students always have a consistent aspect of learning to concentrate on. This means that in every unit of work, students will be able to develop and demonstrate their understanding, and teachers will always be able to assess it. This is quite different from approaches which rely on skills or knowledge as the key assessment points, since these are usually different in each unit of work.

There is one caveat, however: school SLTs and data managers will have to recognise that progress in understanding is long-term, and does not change very much from half term to half term. So instead of seeing numerical grades shifting from 3 to 4 to 5 quite quickly across a year, understanding takes longer: with each stage (patterns, devices, processes) taking *at least* a full year to be introduced, established and broadened to a point of complete security, everyone has to recognise that understanding moves slowly across time, and does not jump quickly in neat 8-week blocks!