

GCSE: performance

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Introduction

For some young people taking GCSE music, performing is their motivation; their whole *raison d'être*. For others, it will be the most daunting prospect on the horizon. Some of them will be talented, experienced and knowledgeable musicians, already well on the road to becoming fine performers. Others will have a much lower skills base, which can be built upon but might realistically plateau at a modest GCSE level.

We very often have a GCSE set that includes extremes of performing ability, along with everything else in between, and it's our job to create an environment in which all can achieve their potential.

Organisation

Prior preparation and planning prevent poor performance – the six 'p's.

Do you remember what you were like aged 14? I remember being enthusiastic but slapdash; willing but unreliable. It is impractical to expect our new GCSE intake to be any more organised than last year's – or indeed than many of us were. I count myself lucky that I was an O-level baby, and as such followed a far more structured syllabus than the current specifications allow for.

When preparing students for the demands of GCSE, we must ensure that we ourselves are prepared. We may need to take a day or two just before term starts to get ourselves organised, because if we're not, the kids won't be. In particular, we must make certain that we know the exam board's specification inside-out, and that we have recently been on the required standardisation courses. We should put the board's deadlines onto our calendars and in our diaries, and we should know our own deadlines and other important dates – school exams, mocks, internal deadlines and so on.

A different approach to assist the deadline-setting process is to get the students to help us plan them. This is a matter for individual departments, but I know of one colleague who does this with the performing and composing elements of GCSE, arguing that if the students have ownership of deadlines, they are more likely to be committed to meeting them. The teacher in this case also told me that, partly due to carefully phrased suggestion on her part, the deadlines usually end up being roughly what she would have decided anyway.

Create early opportunities

The leap from key stage 3 to GCSE

When preparing pupils for GCSE it is vital to recognise initially that they are not all in fact experienced performers. They will be eventually, but sitting in the same room as our grade 5 musicians are those with very little experience; those who may have spent the bulk of key stage 3 cautiously observing us from afar as we stroll around the classroom with our mark books, and being absent on formal assessment days.

We must ensure that we encourage all students to perform, but also to respect one another's different abilities and achievements.

Exploit their enthusiasm

For many students, performing is the reason why they opt to take music at GCSE. True, some of them are motivated by other factors: because they dislike us less than some of our colleagues, perhaps; or because their best friend opted for it; or because they really wanted to do drama, but that was full so the careers officer suggested music. But for a proportion of them it's likely that the prospect of playing or singing inspired them to scribble our subject on the GCSE options form, even though this component accounts for a mere 33 per cent of the exam.

However, by the Christmas of Year 10 the kids might be left wondering when the performance work will start. Many of us are guilty of spending all of our class time on composing and listening tasks, then ringing up the peris the week before the exam and asking what piece their pupil will be playing on his trumpet. 'Oh, I didn't realise he was doing GCSE,' comes the worrying reply. 'I'll come back to our relationship with peris later, but back to the question: why do we spend all of the lesson time on the bits that the kids hate or find difficult? Furthermore, our GCSE course should be self-contained: colleagues in the geography and history departments don't get away with delivering just two-thirds of the specification.

We must harness this initial enthusiasm to perform that many students display. Create practical opportunities for them. They must know that we expect them to perform regularly. The later we leave it, the more uncomfortable it will be for them to play or sing in front of the others. Get them performing as early as possible – perhaps by the second lesson – and they won't see it as anything other than completely normal.

How much lesson time should we spend on performing? If it's worth a third of the GCSE, should we spend a third of the time on it? Well the answer to this will obviously depend on individual circumstances: how many of the kids are having discrete lessons, the size of the