



# Getting Ready for...

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## **KS4 (GCSE) Music**

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Regardless of which exam board you are studying towards at GCSE-level Music, you will be assessed in three areas: **performing**, **composing** and **listening**. The different boards have various ways of referring to these skills, but they are effectively the same.

Here are some specific activities and approaches you could try to ensure you are fully prepared in all three areas for the move to GCSE Music.

## Composition

Composing your own music is an essential part of all GCSE Music courses. Your school will have their own ways of completing the required composition coursework; this may be using a notation program like Sibelius, a DAW like Cubase or GarageBand or perhaps even on paper.

The following tasks are designed to allow you to develop skills which you'll be able to apply regardless of the method your school uses.

### 1. Those magic changes

The heart of most good GCSE compositions is a solid chord sequence. At GCSE you will mostly be using triad chords (three note chords). On a piano these are constructed in a 'play a note - miss a note - play a note - miss a note - play a note' pattern e.g. C, E, G.

- Choose a scale you're familiar with (C major, the white notes of the piano from C-C, is a good place to start) and try out the different chords you can get with the notes given.
- Try to see if you can come up with a 4 bar chord sequence which can repeat several times. You could try playing it on your instrument or use a music production program like GarageBand.
- Which chords work well together? Which do you think you should avoid? Make notes; they'll be useful when it comes to writing your first full composition.

### 2. You hum it and I'll play it

Possibly even more important than an interesting chord sequence is the ability to put together an engaging melody. A very common mistake for GCSE composers is to write melodies which don't contain enough repetition.

- Listen to some of your favourite pieces of music and focus on the main melody. Chances are it's highly repetitive though it's also likely to contain subtle tricks to keep the audience's attention. As composers, we must walk a tightrope between our melodies being too boring and too complex - too repetitive and the audience find it dull, not repetitive enough and the audience don't know



what to expect.

- Try writing a one bar, four beat melody and record it somehow. This could be via a piece of music tech software or even just singing into your phone.
- Now try to repeat the melody with very small changes. It's these tiny changes that allow you to make the most of a good melodic idea.

Things you can try:

- Changing just the last note
- Changing just the first note
- Moving the whole tune up or down one note i.e. if the tune starts on a C, now start on D
- Playing your whole tune backwards

### **3. And the band begins to play...**

A common mistake for a fledgling GCSE composer is to write for groups of instruments which don't offer sufficient breadth of sound or are just plain bizarre!

- Research some common instrumental groupings for a variety of different styles and eras of music. Which instrument plays the tune? Which takes the bass line? Is there a rhythmic instrument? Where are the chords [are they played by one instrument or across several]?

## **Performance**

Alongside performance you will have to perform some music as part of your course. Dependent on your course and your school, you may have the opportunity to perform using music tech or as a DJ as well as the more common options of performing on an instrument or singing. Regardless of which route you take you will need to make sure you get into a regular practice routine to be able to perform your best come the end of the course.

### **1. Like a broken record**

Everyone hates hearing a recording of their speaking voice and it's often the same for musicians. However, as painful as it can be, any effective practicing on an instrument should include recording and reviewing yourself. You don't need to have an expensive recording set-up, a phone voice memo is usually more than enough.

- Try to get into the habit of recording yourself regularly and taking time to go over the recordings. Listen closely to any sections you struggle with and make notes of things to work on in your next practice session.



## 2. An eye for details

Clearly you need to be able to perform on your instrument with the right notes in the right places. However, the thing that will separate performances which achieve middle band marks and those higher up is the small details. Where you place your breathing, holding notes for their full length, using the correct fingering to allow you to move around your instrument fluidly - each instrument will present its own set of challenges.

- The best way to prepare for these (aside from recording and reviewing your practice) is dedicating serious time to the technical exercises specific to your instrument. Scales, arpeggios, rudiments, breathing exercises - without them you may be able to complete some pieces to a decent standard at the moment but your Year 11 self will thank you if you dedicate regular practice time to them now.

## 3. Get with the program

Lots of people get a little obsessed with the grade level of the pieces needed for GCSE music at the beginning of the course.

While for most exam boards it is true that you will struggle to achieve full marks without playing a piece of around grade 4 standard, it is always better to play a simpler piece really well than a more complex piece poorly.

It is also worth remembering that performance pieces do not necessarily need to be drawn from a graded syllabus to qualify as the acceptable standard.

- The very beginning of the course is a little early to have your performance program completely planned out, but now would be a good time to start talking to your music teacher about pieces they might recommend you work towards. Are there any specific techniques they feel you should work on?
- If you are self-taught, it is worth looking at the mammoth [Edexcel Difficulty Levels Booklet](#) (regardless of which exam board you will be working towards). This huge document provides examples of pieces for a wide range of instruments which have been graded for difficulty. This will give you a good selection of pieces you could try out to give you an idea of the standard you need to be working towards.





# Listening

This is the skill which sees the most variation across the various different exam boards. Each board has specific areas of music and pieces they will want you to study. However, the language used to describe the pieces you'll hear will be broadly similar across most boards and it can give you a great head start if you're able to get a good working knowledge of the required vocabulary.

## 1. Spreading your wings

We all have areas of expertise within music and we all have areas we're less familiar with.

- Choose a style of music you've had little experience of and listen to a playlist on YouTube/Spotify. Ideally this should be drawn from the styles of music covered within your exam board, but at this stage any broader experience will be useful.
- Research and identify different instruments used.

## 2. This is an art attack!

Investigate the following terms and produce a diagram or model to demonstrate the differences:

- Monophonic
- Polyphonic
- Homophonic

## 3. Learning the lingo

Research definitions for each of the terms contained within the DR SMITH mnemonic:

- Dynamics
- Rhythm
- Structure
- Melody
- Instrumentation
- Texture
- Harmony

Push yourself further by researching key words related to each term within the mnemonic. You could even aim to compile a library of musical examples for each key word.