



A LITTLE BOOK OF KNOWLEDGE

Exploring musical learning – practical guidance for Primary School Teachers

Introduction

This *little book of musical knowledge* aims to help you articulate the purpose and show the outcomes of music education at each stage in your primary curriculum. It briefly explores what musical learning is, how it might evolve and the building blocks of music. It offers practical guidance for primary teachers who wish to develop their own practice and revisit or gain new perspectives on how to plan, deliver and assess the impact of musical learning in their own classes and across their wider school offer.

The guidance given here comes from the premise that music is something we *do* – something we actively engage in. Whilst there are building blocks and things we might know about how music is constructed, made, communicated and engaged with, **theoretical aspects of music, including using notations, make no sense without sounds and contexts and teaching them in isolation limits their usefulness; we need to avoid developing ‘knowledge about’ music without the crucial, experiential ‘knowledge how’ and ‘knowledge of’ music.** After all, children start school with significant amounts of music already in their bones (to borrow a wonderful phrase from John Finney).

Music in their real world is not put in a special box with boundaries around it – it’s gloriously mixed in with multiple other art forms. That’s how it should be in education too. And remember, **a busy, engaged, noisy classroom is a wonderful environment to work in!**

Music – a sonic art form

It sounds really obvious, but music is about sounds. Whereas in English or geography, children have books to write and draw in, and in art they create things in 2D and 3D that are there for ever more to share and discuss, in music, our media is sound. There’s nothing left to ‘see’ afterwards but we can capture it – through audio and video recording – and this is really important and powerful. In our 21st century technological world this is not only easy but something embedded in everyday life. Try to get access to a class tablet or other mobile recording device.

It’s great to be able to share what happens in the classroom with caregivers and the school community (be careful about video permissions but audio is fine) and this is inspiring for children as it validates their work. More importantly though, capturing music and being able to play it back and use it as part of the learning process is powerful and important. It allows critical engagement with our own music and performances, capturing work-in-progress and giving us something tangible to hear, reflect upon, discuss, evaluate and develop. Recordings of children making and creating music also provide a lovely time-lapse record of their musical journeys within and across years, and it is through the ‘sound’ that musical progression becomes more evident. This doesn’t mean that we need to get individual recordings of pupils. The vast majority of music in primary schools is in groups, whole classes, with a whole year group or Key Stage. Record what’s happening, including concerts, shows and sharing assemblies. Keep it real!

Nurturing musical identities and validating experiences

Like everyone else in your school community, children have a unique and probably experience of music gathered throughout their lives. There is likely to be considerable overlap in music they have come across and learnt informally, from adverts, TV, families, churches, EYFS experiences – after all, music is everywhere. It's important to recognise and validate children's own music and their preferences. There is no 'set curriculum' for music in terms of the choices you make, so think about what is relevant in your school and community. Also, the ways in which we hear and think about music is integrally linked to our own life experiences. What may sound like a train to you might sound like a rainstorm or a dinosaur stomping through a field to someone else. This is fine – and to be expected! There's so much we can do with this though, including thinking about 'why' – a very important question that we need to keep asking that also promotes musical thinking.

You have a wonderful opportunity to encourage children to bring their own musical experiences into the classroom. Think about how you can incorporate instruments they play, and songs and music they know. It isn't about only teaching them what they know already, but building the bridges between what they know and something new or unfamiliar is really important to help them understand it. If music in school is to have validity in the eyes of the children, it needs to join together music in school and music out of school, and there are plentiful opportunities to do this.

Everyone can and should succeed in music. It's a core purpose of what we do to help everyone to feel musical.

Musical starting points

Engaging in music is an inherent, often spontaneous and frequent human activity across our lives. We only have to watch and listen to very young children singing away on swings and in the car, incorporating bits of songs they know and making up the rest, to realise that they have a very rich and ever-expanding catalogue of complete songs and musical fragments in their heads. Babies copying and changing vocal sounds in 'conversation' with others or even just revelling in the joy of making sounds on their own; crinkling paper, banging saucepans on the kitchen floor and reaching out for instruments and anything else that makes a sound within their reach to tap, pluck or scrape, making, repeating and changing sounds; these are just a few of the ways in which young children take a genuine interest in sounds, making and creating their own music throughout their day. Watch their self-initiated play and it won't be long before engagement with sound becomes a focus; notice how patterns are embodied, or a regular pulse emerges as they bang a spoon on the high-chair table or move to the music coming from the television. Increasingly, too, young children make choices using digital technologies.

We can, therefore, be sure, that most young children start school with a genuine interest in music and skills and knowledge of music on which we can develop, not as empty musical vessel. As teachers, we too, have great knowledge of music. What did you sing in the car on the way to school? How did you learn it? That we are able to do all of these things shows us that we can gain '*knowledge of*' music and '*know-how*' in many informal ways – a very important point to remember, as we consider children's 'real musical lives' in the 18 hours a day they are not in school - more on this later!

We need to remember that often there are no right and wrong answers in music. We all experience music through our different lenses and perspectives. Instead, it is important to validate the range of responses.

We also need to encourage exploration just as much, if not more, than ‘copying’ or merely ‘slightly adapting’. In much modern education, children realise that they are seeking the one ‘right answer’ – the one the teacher has in their head. We need to help them get away from this way of thinking in music and encourage them to explore, extend, sort, revise, refine, discard and choose ways of exploring musically.

So, what’s the purpose of music in the primary school?

Schools that have music running through the cultural ether are joyful places. **Music education in school, in the curriculum, every week, is a vital and compulsory part of every child’s education. It is, after all, the only place where access to music education is guaranteed to be free.** Sadly, beyond the classroom, access to formal music education is simply unaffordable for many children and families.

Put the image of a child doing something musical in your head. What are they doing? The chances are they are singing, adding actions, playing an instrument, rehearsing, recording themselves, working with friends to make up their own music, singing their heart out in assembly, taking part in the school show, or perhaps even out in the playground giving an impromptu ‘performance’ to a little group of friends, or singing a well-known song and making up some choreography together. The point is that all of these are **essentially ‘practical’ – a central purpose of music in a primary school is to embody *being musical and to get better at this over time***. In all of the examples given and those in your heads, the children are all communicating something to you, and there is intentionality here, even though the purpose and action is different in every case.

Music education should help all children to thrive and grow – it’s definitely not about judging them against each other and having one fixed image of ‘success’ in our heads. Just with any other subject, we continually adapt our teaching through careful planning and in-the-moment to support and nurture everyone.

Of course, some/many aspects of getting better at something rely on incremental development of skills, knowledge and understanding, and the time and effort to embed these, but these are developed through a practical lens and through actually ‘doing it’ and often in a haphazard, non-linear way.

What is ‘knowledge’ in music education?

“Music is a human practice, rather than a body of knowledge” – John Finney

There’s a lot of phrases around knowledge used in schools. Perhaps the most frequent phrases in current use relate to ‘knowledge organisers’, ‘essential knowledge’ and ‘knowledge rich’. Ofsted describe knowledge in music in three ways – ‘tacit’, ‘procedural’ and ‘declarative’. Rest assured, this is not new! There are many different types of knowledge; this ‘knowledge’ always been there, and music education develops them all in abundance!

Music is rich in knowledge; as children think and act musically, embodying ‘being musical’ they show they know so much about music and are able to bring this knowledge into the music they create and make. Far from being ‘empty vessels’, children arrive at school full of music knowledge from their own life experiences and continue to develop and learn through informal, as well as formal, engagement with music.

For example, when a small group of young children spontaneously sing a lullaby to a crib in the classroom, they display the knowledge of how to use their voice for this purpose, communicating and embodying their understanding about a lullaby as a song to sing a child to sleep, how to control their voice to sing quietly, how and when to breathe, how to blend their voices with each other, when to stop, how fast to sing, how to keep a steady pulse; the list of what they ‘know’ is extensive. The children were thinking, feeling and knowing music in their bones, bringing together a wealth of knowledge and coming to know new things through this musical experience.

Singing and playing instruments to make and create music are often considered as musical ‘skills’; the example above shows that detailed musical knowledge is required in order to be able to demonstrate these skills. This ‘embodied knowledge’, therefore, is incredibly knowledge rich, with the acts of making and creating music continually developing new knowledge as we continue to make sense of music and move forward in our musical learning.

If you search the internet for ‘knowledge types’, you will find many, and, ironically, an overlap between them and conflicting views about what each term means. Here’s a quick guide to terms about musical knowledge that are frequently used:

Type of musical knowledge	Knowledge Rich terminology	Definition	Examples:
Knowledge <i>of</i> music	Tacit knowledge / Prepositional knowledge	Building understanding or a relationship through direct experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some notes are longer than others • Becoming familiar with a song learnt from repeatedly hearing it • Music can make you smile and cry
Knowledge <i>how</i> in music	Procedural knowledge	How to do something (know-how)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical skills • Distinguishing between sounds • Recognising a drone
Knowledge <i>about</i> music	Declarative knowledge	Facts about music	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bach was born in 1685 • A violin has 4 strings • A clarinet is a wind instrument

“Music, from first to last, is a thing of *hearing*, and every musical fact should reach the mind through the ear.

The children should listen, compare, judge and then *do*; for in music the only proof that a child *knows* something is that they can *do* something.”

(From Mrs Curwen’s Pianoforte Method, 1913)

In primary music, we are most interested in ‘embodied knowledge’, i.e. ‘doing it’. In simple terms, this is the knowledge that is retained within the body and acquired through the body. It is the ‘knowledge how’ in music. From seeing and hearing what children can do when they are making and creating music, we can tell a lot about what they know and can do. Often in music it is more revealing for them to ‘show’ rather than just ‘tell’. We can also see, from the examples of the young children given earlier, that children can have a great deal of ‘knowledge of’ and ‘know-how’ in music without necessarily having the vocabulary to explain it! There is a place for knowledge ‘about’ music in developing musically; it can help us to understand, for example, the historical, cultural and social context of music that alters how we perform it. However, we need to consider doing this in ways that benefit musical development and musical learning. **Developing ‘knowledge of’ music is described by Keith Swanwick as the ‘ultimate aim’ of music education.**

What is musical learning?

Developing our own understanding of the nature of musical knowledge and how and where young people learn can help us to plan and deliver musical learning. In order to do this, we need to consider what we mean by ‘learning’ so that we can gauge the impact of the musical learning we plan and deliver. Chris Philpott¹ defines learning in the following way:

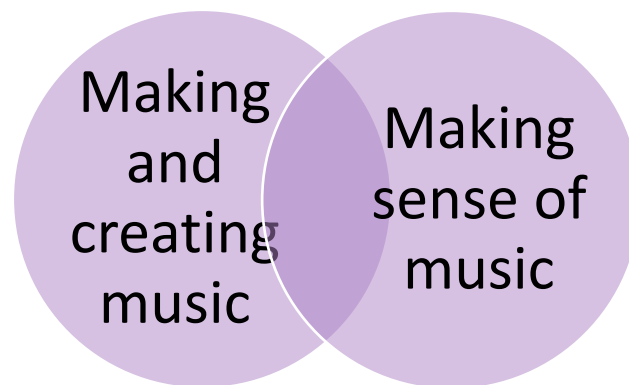
“Learning is defined as taking place when a change has occurred in behaviour, attitude or values of young people through the development of different types of musical knowledge.”

When actively engaged in musical activity we are *engaged in musical processes* - for example, making music, creating music, exploring sounds, performing, improvising, rehearsing, adapting, refining, listening and discovering music. In doing so, we build our own personal connections with music and also build our own and collective musical identities in meaningful ways. Fundamentally, being involved in this way provides us with the ‘knowledge of’ music, along with a platform and the motivation to explore and learn about ***how music works***.

The way in which we do this on a practical level in the curriculum is through, for example, using instruments and singing, and using technologies. In other words, these are the tools, and not the central cogs of the curriculum.

¹ Philpott, C. (2016) The what, how and where of musical learning and development. In C. Cooke, K.Evans, C. Philpott & G.Spruce [Eds], Learning to Teach Music in the Secondary School. Routledge.

There is ‘knowledge’ that underpins how music works, both in a technical and aesthetic (how it makes us feel) sense, but a core purpose is to help us to **make sense of music** and help us to develop our understanding of how music works in order to ‘get better at music’. In a strong, musical education, these two aspects – **making and creating music** and **making sense of music** – constantly feed off each other. It would be easy to fall into the trap of thinking we need to ‘learn the knowledge’ first but going back to the examples of the young children making and creating music, clearly this is not necessary but may sometimes be a useful scaffold to move children on in their learning.



(See also the [Cambridge Primary Curriculum](#) for more on this)

The National Curriculum for Music

The essence of the [National Curriculum for Music](#) forms the backbone of the music schemes that you may already use or refer to in school – for example, Charanga, Kapow, Music Express or Hounslow’s own scheme. It can be thought of in the following way:



(From ‘Teaching Primary Music’ by Alison Daubney, published by Sage – page 8)

As can be seen from presenting the National Curriculum for Music as a Wordle, the embodying of music is central – playing, performing, listening, composing, creating, improvising. We do this through using voices/singing, instruments and technologies, and a central ambition of the curriculum is to develop [musical understanding](#). This gives another clear indication of the practical and sonic (sound-based) nature of the subject, and also reiterates the integral relationship between ‘doing’ and ‘understanding’. Many of the other words in the diagram help us to understand how this happens, for example, through developing our aural/discrimination skills, control, accuracy, expression and fluency. Ultimately, if all of this comes together well, we can help children find their own music voice and displaying confidence and competence and thinking and acting musically at every level of their development.

Through engaging with music itself, we can learn something of the provenance of the music – e.g. where it came from and why this might be significant, the cultural context of the music, what it was written for (the purpose), what genre, style or tradition it is, what else was happening in the world at that time (musically, socially, historically, politically). This, in turn, may help us think about how or why to perform it in certain ways or develop our understanding of how we might communicate it in a way that we want to. All of this is part of the ‘knowledge’ that helps us make sense of music and consider another very important dimension – how it makes us *feel*.

Curriculum decisions

The National Curriculum provides an overarching view of the subject; it does not tell us what or how to teach. That is for us to decide, and as the curriculum designers, we are free to make the decisions we want to make for our own special and unique school communities. This is a huge strength of the National Curriculum, but can also be a little overwhelming. What should we introduce when, and why? What might children’s music sound like at different stages of their development? How do we know what the ‘progress’ we are seeking is, and perhaps more importantly, how do we know they have got there?

If using a published resource such as [Charanga](#), [Kapow](#), [Music Express](#) or The Hounslow Curriculum, the deep thinking about the order of the learning and what to introduce when is built into the curriculum framework...the challenge for you is to understand it and to be able to articulate the curriculum decisions to someone else – particularly when Ofsted come knocking at your door to do a ‘deep dive’ in music. A strong curriculum is based on a spiral model, and the models you use (Charanga etc) are designed in this way. A spiral model assumes that there is merit in revisiting ideas, experiences, concepts etc. over time, and also that progress is not always linear – we may move in either direction on a spiral. As teachers, we see and hear musical learning unfolding in the classroom and ultimately we are free to make the decisions about the speed of learning, when to move on and when to revisit something and whether to move off at a tangent. Our eyes and ears are usually the most important in this regard, particularly in music lessons! We will understand musical learning better if we can accept that musical learning is not linear. Not least, children’s social and cultural backgrounds, as well as their lived experiences to date and the access to formal music education they have had, mean that predictable, age-related stages of development vary enormously.

Music Progression Map – By Year

		Developing a sense of pulse and rhythm		Adding melody to pulse and rhythm		Developing as a musician	
		Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6
Building Blocks	Pulse	Keep a steady pulse in a group and be able to pick out two different tempos in music. NC1.3/1.4	Keep a steady pulse alone and with others with a musical accompaniment. Demonstrate at least 2 different time signatures (3/4 & 4/4) NC1.3/1.4	Keep a steady pulse alone and with others, without musical accompaniment; demonstrate 2/4, 3/4 and 4/4, using at least 3 different tempos. NC2.1/2.3	Keep a steady pulse on an instrument in 2/3, 3/4, and 4/4, using different tempi, with other pupils accompanying with an ostinato NC2.1/2.3	Perform at least 3 contrasting tempi, regularly and accurately, on a tuned instrument. NC2.1	Follow directions to change tempo accurately, playing alone and with others. NC2.1/2.3
	Rhythm	Repeat short basic rhythms and perform simple rhythmic ostinatos. NC1.2/1.4	Repeat longer basic rhythms (2 bars or more); perform from notation (using crotchets, quavers and minims) NC1.2/2.1/2.3	Perform longer rhythms (more than 2 bars), using crotchets, quavers, minims and their rests. NC2.1/2.4	Perform pieces with at least 2 simultaneous rhythms; recognise and clap back rhythms using single quaver rests. NC2.1/2.3	Perform pieces using off-beat and dotted rhythms and single quaver rests. NC2.1	Perform pieces which use off-beat and syncopated rhythms in 3 different time signatures and tempi. NC2.1
	Melody (and notation)	Sing back short melodies that use 2 – 3 pitched notes, and develop an understanding of pattern work in music using rhythmic grids. NC1.1/1.2/1.4	Sing back short melodies using at least 3 pitched notes. Perform from musical notation including crotchets and minims. NC1.1/1.2/1.4	Perform and compose, using at least 3 pitched notes and simple rhythms (crotchets, quavers, minims and rests). NC2.1/2.2/2.3/2.4	Perform and compose using 5 pitched notes or 4 chords. NC2.1/2.2/2.3/2.4	Perform and compose using 5 – 8 pitched notes. Capture the work in different formats so it can be recreated. NC2.1/2.2/2.3/2.4	Perform and compose using 8 pitched notes. Capture the work in different formats, including staff notation so it can be recreated. NC2.4
Strands of Learning	Active Listening	Identify musical features in a range of high-quality, live and recorded music; replicate basic rhythms. NC1.3/1.4	Identify changing elements (e.g. music gets faster/louder); replicate these differences in a simple performance. NC1.3/1.4	Identify and describe musical features in music from different traditions. Sing or play back simple melodies from the music. NC2.3/2.5/2.6	Compare music from different traditions. Performs music heard aurally that contains 2 parts at the same time. NC2.1/2.3/2.5/2.6	Whilst listening, identify and perform syncopated/off-beat rhythms. Explain why the music uses those rhythms. NC2.2/2.5/2.6	Describe key features in music including: tempo, metre, instrumentation, melody. Understand features of at least 4 different types/genres of music. NC2.1/2.3/2.5/2.6
	Composing and Improvising	Improvise simple rhythms based on given stimuli (e.g. rhythm grids). NC1.4	Repeat longer basic rhythms (2 bars or more) and add imitations and variations of those rhythms. NC1.4	Create basic 3 note tunes and simple rhythms using crotchets, quavers, minims and their rests. NC2.2	Improvise and compose tunes using 5 notes. Create more developed rhythmic patterns (4 bars). NC2.2	Create 4 bar melodies including some off-beat rhythms. Use different tempi and time signatures. NC2.2/2.5/2.6	Improvise and compose longer pieces using up to 8 notes with a variety of rhythms, tempi and time signatures. NC2.2/2.5/2.6
	Performing	Play simple rhythms of untuned percussion instruments and using body percussion. NC1.2	Play longer phrases on untuned percussion instruments and body percussion. NC1.2	Use tuned percussion, melodic instruments and voices to perform melodies and simple rhythms (3 + notes). NC2.1	Perform melodies with 5 notes (or 4 chords) with more complex rhythms on tuned instruments. NC2.1	Perform 5-8 note melodies or developed chord progressions (2+ chords per bar). NC2.1	Perform with confidence and accuracy alone or as part of a group. NC2.1/2.4
	Singing	Sing simple songs in unison, both with and without accompaniment or backing tracks. NC1.1	Sing simple songs in rounds. NC1.1	Sing songs accompanied by ostinatos from the group. NC2.1	Sing pieces in two parts. NC2.1	Sing pieces with a range of at least 8 notes in at least 2 parts. NC2.1	Sing musically, responding to performance directions, e.g. phrasing. Sing more extended harmonic parts. NC2.1/2.4

Music Progression Map – By Area

Building Blocks					Strands of Learning			
		Pulse	Rhythm	Melody (and notation)	Active Listening	Composing & Improvising	Performing	Singing
Developing a sense of pulse and rhythm	Year 1	Keep a steady pulse in a group and be able to pick out two different tempos in music. NC1.3/1.4	Repeat short basic rhythms and perform simple rhythmic ostinatos. NC1.2/1.4	Sing back short melodies that use 2 – 3 pitched notes, and develop an understanding of pattern work in music using rhythmic grids. NC1.1/1.2/1.4	Identify musical features in a range of high-quality, live and recorded music: replicate basic rhythms. NC1.3/1.4	Improvise simple rhythms based on given stimuli (e.g. rhythm grids). NC1.4	Play simple rhythms of untuned percussion instruments and using body percussion. NC1.2	Sing simple songs in unison, both with and without accompaniment or backing tracks. NC1.1
	Year 2	Keep a steady pulse alone and with others with a musical accompaniment. Demonstrate at least 2 different time signatures (3/4 & 4/4) NC1.3/1.4	Repeat longer basic rhythms (2 bars or more): perform from notation (using crotchets, quavers and minims) NC1.2/2.1/2.3	Sing back short melodies using at least 3 pitched notes. Perform from musical notation including crotchets and minims. NC1.1/1.2/1.4	Identify changing elements (e.g. music gets faster/louder): replicate these differences in a simple performance. NC1.3/1.4	Repeat longer basic rhythms (2 bars or more) and add imitations and variations of those rhythms. NC1.4	Play longer phrases on untuned percussion instruments and body percussion. NC1.2	Sing simple songs in rounds. NC1.1
Adding melody to pulse and rhythm	Year 3	Keep a steady pulse alone and with others, without musical accompaniment; demonstrate 2/4, 3/4 and 4/4, using at least 3 different tempos. NC2.1/2.3	Perform longer rhythms (more than 2 bars), using crotchets, quavers, minims and their rests. NC2.1/2.4	Perform and compose, using at least 3 pitched notes and simple rhythms (crotchets, quavers, minims and rests). NC2.1/2.2/2.3/2.4	Identify and describe musical features in music from different traditions. Sing or play back simple melodies from the music. NC2.3/2.5/2.6	Create basic 3 note tunes and simple rhythms using crotchets, quavers, minims and their rests. NC2.2	Use tuned percussion, melodic instruments and voices to perform melodies and simple rhythms (3 + notes). NC2.1	Sing songs accompanied by ostinatos from the group. NC2.1
	Year 4	Keep a steady pulse on an instrument in 2/3, 3/4, and 4/4, using different tempi, with other pupils accompanying with an ostinato NC2.1/2.3	Perform pieces with at least 2 simultaneous rhythms; recognise and clap back rhythms using single quaver rests. NC2.1/2.3	Perform and compose using 5 pitched notes or 4 chords. NC2.1/2.2/2.3/2.4	Compare music from different traditions. Performs music heard aurally that contains 2 parts at the same time. NC2.1/2.3/2.5/2.6	Improvise and compose tunes using 5 notes. Create more developed rhythmic patterns (4 bars). NC2.2	Perform melodies with 5 notes (or 4 chords) with more complex rhythms on tuned instruments. NC2.1	Sing pieces in two parts. NC2.1
Developing as a Musician	Year 5	Perform at least 3 contrasting tempi, regularly and accurately, on a tuned instrument. NC2.1	Perform pieces using off-beat and dotted rhythms and single quaver rests. NC2.1	Perform and compose using 5 – 8 pitched notes. Capture the work in different formats so it can be recreated. NC2.1/2.2/2.3/2.4	Whilst listening, identify and perform syncopated/off-beat rhythms. Explain why the music uses those rhythms. NC2.2/2.5/2.6	Create 4 bar melodies including some off-beat rhythms. Use different tempi and time signatures. NC2.2/2.5/2.6	Perform 5-8 note melodies or developed chord progressions (2+ chords per bar). NC2.1	Sing pieces with a range of at least 8 notes in at least 2 parts. NC2.1
	Year 6	Follow directions to change tempo accurately, playing alone and with others. NC2.1/2.3	Perform pieces which use off-beat and syncopated rhythms in 3 different time signatures and tempi. NC2.1	Perform and compose using 8 pitched notes. Capture the work in different formats, including staff notation so it can be recreated. NC2.4	Describe key features in music including: tempo, metre, instrumentation, melody. Understand features of at least 4 different types/genres of music. NC2.1/2.3/2.5/2.6	Improvise and compose longer pieces using up to 8 notes with a variety of rhythms, tempi and time signatures. NC2.2/2.5/2.6	Perform with confidence and accuracy alone or as part of a group. NC2.1/2.4	Sing musically, responding to performance directions, e.g. phrasing. Sing more extended harmonic parts. NC2.1/2.4

Key Building blocks of music - sometimes called the elements / dimensions of music

In the simplest terms, music is constructed of sounds and silence (the silences in music are often referred to as 'rests'). There are multiple 'building blocks' in music, many of which are the 'elements of music'. Dealing with these in isolation is a fairly meaningless exercise, but they are important to help understand how music is constructed and adapted.

M	Melody	The 'tune'	e.g. Movement, step, skip, leaps, jumps, scale, mode, interval, pitch, range, chromatic, ornamentation
A	Articulation	How a note or music is being played	e.g. Staccato, accented, legato, plucked, bowed, strummed, picked, slurred.
D	Dynamics	Volume <u>ff,f,mf,mp,p,pp</u>	e.g. fortissimo (v. loud) Forte (loud) , piano (quiet), pianissimo (v. quiet), Crescendo (gradually louder), Diminuendo (gradually quieter)
T	Texture and Timbre	How layers are combined The quality of the sound	e.g. Monophonic (one voice) Homophonic (multiple voices moving at the same time) Polyphonic (multiple interweaving layers) E.g. Rattling, tingling, bright, warm, muted
S	Structure and Form	The ordering of sections of music	e.g. binary form, rondo, ternary form, verse and chorus, introduction,
H	Harmony	The chordal structure of the music	e.g. triads, inversions, chords, arpeggios, cadences, primary chords,
I	Instrumentation	Instruments used	e.g. Voices, strings, woodwind, brass, percussion, keyboard instruments, technologies and effects such as sampling/looping
R	Rhythm	Note and rest lengths	e.g. semibreve, minim, crotchet, quaver, semiquaver, ties, triplets)
T	Tempo /Time	Speed and metre	e.g. Time signatures (how many beats in a bar) e.g. Speed (largo – slowly and broadly; presto – very fast), accelerando (gradually speeding up)

Here is a link to a '[knowledge organiser](#)' built around the elements / inter-related dimensions of music that provides definitions and explanations for this technical language.

All of the dimensions of music are 'experienced' as we engage in music. We can help children to be aware of them and to play around with them in the music they learn and the music they create.

Throughout Key Stage 1, regular playing, singing, chanting and moving to music, as well as finding multiple ways for them to play with sounds, helps children to develop their physical and dextrous skills as well as helping to develop their aural awareness. It builds upon their experiences in EYFS. This continues to develop at Key Stage 2 as they become more experienced as makers and creators of music.

These elements are, in effect, some of the most important building blocks of music (along with the 'aesthetic' dimension of music – how it makes you feel). Primary music makes much of these – as does 'real' music – but not in isolation, as music is a combination of all of these.

Developing your confidence to talk about your music curriculum choices, approaches and outcomes

These next sections consider some aspects of musical learning which may help to develop your understanding and confidence to talk about the curriculum choices you have made (intent), how these are introduced and developed in the music curriculum (implementation) and the outcomes you see (impact). It is not meant to be exhaustive, but signposts ways for you to explore topics further should you wish.

It is organised into singing/vocal development and instruments. This is for ease of reference and not because the two should be separate within the curriculum. There is much scope for development in similar ways using technologies too.

Whether singing, playing, composing, improvising, listening to and talking about music or reflecting on our own or others' music, we need to **encourage children to think musically**, and the more ways we do this, the better.

For example, to **internalise a pulse**, we could march, wave scarves, tap our knees as we sing, play a drone on 2 notes on a tuned percussion instrument, encourage children to sing songs in their head and only sing out loud when we show 'green' instead of 'red' traffic lights, we could encourage the whole class ensemble to take a 4-beat rest at the end of a piece and then place the final, loud note together, or to not sing certain words and just do the actions in '*Tony Chestnut*' or '*Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes*'. We could do hundreds of other things too. Fundamentally though, we are helping them to gain the important *knowledge of* a steady pulse and internalising a beat. We don't need to 'do a test' on this to check their knowledge. We just need to be aware, in the moment, of what is going on, see it and hear it.

The difference between a **pulse** and a **rhythm** is that the pulse is a steady beat, like a heartbeat, whereas a rhythm includes sounds of different note lengths. When we talk about '**internalising a pulse**' or '**beat**' we mean the skill of maintaining the steady beat even when the beat cannot be heard – e.g. not getting faster, and joining back in at the right place after a few bars 'singing in your head'. Internalising the pulse is a really important skill in music.

SINGING AND VOCAL DEVELOPMENT

Singing underpins musical learning and is key to aural development and instrumental learning. It is also something that we almost all do very often indeed! Go out into the playground, walk around and listen. You will probably hear singing, whistling, humming, rapping, chanting, beat boxing and other vocalising in other ways and in many languages coming from multiple sources and delivering you a smorgasbord of vocal sounds! Throughout our daily lives we use our voices in so many different ways and for many different purposes – and this is the case in musical learning too.

Singing also helps with language acquisition, social skills and communication. Here's a free resource from Sue Nicholls called [Singing Circles](#) which is aimed at children in EYFS. There's also detailed guidance in [Music Development Matters](#) about vocal development in the first 5 years of a child's life.

The bottom line is this – we need to spread and embed the attitude that everyone can sing. If we want to develop a strong singing culture in a school, it starts with you, and with the rest of the staff, and with the children, *actually doing it*. Sing some songs you all know, regularly. Be silly with the songs, add actions, change voices, have fun, smile and laugh. Do it together. Include everyone. In a school culture where only some people sing and others stand silently on the side with their arms folded, it sends the wrong message. Starting from a position of everyone being part of something is a huge help. Bringing in some songs chosen by the children can help them see the relationship between singing in and out of school and that we value them as people and not just as pupils; authenticity is important!

Singing enhances the whole curriculum, not just in music lessons and assemblies! Think about the possibilities of singing songs for different purposes – learning phonics, remembering the order of the planets, consolidating ‘knowledge’ about the Romans, Vikings and the wives of King Henry VIII. It can enhance every area of the school day, even singing to get the attention back to you in the classroom. This isn’t the same as ‘musical learning’ as the purpose is different and the focus may not be on developing musical learning, but it is important nevertheless.

Some of the adults in your school may have had bad experiences of singing when at school and this may negatively impact how they feel about themselves as musical beings. You can help change how they see themselves if you nurture a fun, enjoyable and collaborative singing culture across the school. How about organising a staff song at the end of term? The children will love it and some of the less confident staff will gain vital ‘knowledge of’ singing that will hopefully give them ideas for how to do this in their own classroom a little more. Being an ‘armchair expert’ in singing, knowing a considerable amount about how it works in theory, is a poor substitute for actually singing and a lot less fun!

A combination of being playful with the voice on frequent occasions, as well as encouraging vocal pitch matching (‘sing the same note that I am singing or playing’) can help to create a can-do environment where everyone enjoys ‘having a go’, and without the constant pressure of ‘singing correctly’ but at the same time develops their ‘knowledge of’ singing through actually doing it, purposefully and often. Some children can pitch match (reproduce a pitch accurately) better than others – they have more experience of this. It’s something you can practice. But most people are not ‘tone deaf’. Indeed, large-scale research by Professor Welch shows [that virtually all girls can sing in tune by the age of 11 and almost all boys](#). Sometimes their focus on the lyrics can mean that they aren’t specifically focusing on the melodic qualities of singing, leading us (and them?) to wrongly conclude they are less competent singers.

Many practical ideas about how to teach a song are available in the free [Primary Music Toolkit](#). Even in singing assemblies, work on the quality and accuracy of singing. Try to avoid just singing through from the beginning to the end and moving onto the next song. Repeat tricky phrases, or ones where the words, rhythm or melody aren’t quite right. There are lots of ways to repeat material (which is a useful strategy for musical learning) whilst making it fun. Sing in different voices, sing at different volumes, add in different drama scenarios (e.g. ‘sing as if you are angry with the seagulls’ / ‘sing as if you want to get your baby sister to

sleep') - these are also great ways of exploring the **emotional intent** of the song and bringing this into a performance!

Schemes such as [Sing Up](#) and [Out of the Ark](#) have a wide range of material suitable across the Key Stages. [Friday Afternoons](#) has some great free materials for KS2 singing (and composing). There is also a free [webinar on teaching primary singing](#) based on the ISM Primary Toolkit and led by SingUp.

Some other things to consider:

Counting in

Counting in at the speed of the music is important as it sets the pulse. If singing, count in singing the starting note so that everyone starts on the same note, rather than choosing their own!

How many beats we count in depends on the number of beats in a bar. If there are 4 beats in a bar, we count 1-2-3-4. If there are 3 beats in a bar, we count 1-2-3 (Note that it is not a 'countdown' and not randomly 1-2-3-'go', which is often what we hear children do when counting in!) It's crucial to model counting in consistently and well.

Not all songs or musical phrases start on the first beat of the bar. The beats before the first beat of the bar are called the 'anacrusis'. Songs with an anacrusis are counted in differently. For example, 'Happy Birthday' has 3 beats in a bar. However, it starts on the third beat of the bar so we count 1-2.

Vocal range

Our voices change and develop over time. In the case of young children, the vocal range is both higher and smaller than older children and adults. It's important we sing/model at the pitch children can imitate at and find comfortable. (Note that much pop music is in a key or pitch range that children find difficult). Children usually sing best in the middle of their pitch range. Choose repertoire and activities that allow them to sing well – it builds their confidence as well as their skills.

Some approximate pitch ranges:

Ages 3-5 D above middle C to B (a range of a 6th)

Ages 5-7 Middle C to D (a range of a 9th)

Ages 7-11 A below middle C to E (a range of an 11th)

Be aware that children's voices are usually at a higher pitch than an adult's voice, so we may feel like we are singing very high when we model songs or sing together. It is vital that we sing 'at pitch', though. Find starting notes with a musical instrument to help you sing at an appropriate pitch. Not all songs start on the lowest note so check out their pitch range before you start teaching the song.

However, voices develop and change at different rates. [Martin Ashley's extensive work on boys' singing](#) provides considerable detail on this. We need to be mindful of voices developing and changing over time.

Complexity of lyrics

Lyrics of songs are really important to communicate the message and meaning! Both the content ('are they suitable for the age range?') and the complexity of the words are crucial factors in deciding whether repertoire is suitable for a particular class or group. Songs with a lot of repetition (e.g. a chorus) are particularly good for younger children, as they get to sing the words over and over again. We are able to pronounce words more clearly as we become more adept at speaking, and the same is the case in singing. Work specifically on the pronunciation to make it clear and not garbled. There are lots of warm up exercises, including tongue twisters, that children love and can work their jaws hard, improving their awareness of the importance of pronunciation as well as their skills.

Speed and rhythm

As children become more experienced vocalists, they are usually able to sing songs well with more complex rhythms and where the speed is both faster and changing more frequently. Children will inherently know songs with a range of rhythms, rhythmic challenges and in a range of different time signatures, so we can be quite broad in what we choose. Be sure to sing at an appropriate speed for the music and work on correcting rhythms where you and the pupils hear inaccuracies. Moving to music helps to 'feel' the pulse.

Melodic contours (shape)

How the melody moves is another aspect that you need to consider. It is easier to sing melodies that move by step (i.e. moving up or down a note at a time) or only have small 'intervals' than those that have bigger leaps. Think about the melodic 'shape' when choosing repertoire. For the youngest children, choose repetitive songs with simple and memorable melodies. As they become more experienced singers, add in songs which move by step and with more regular small melodic leaps (e.g. C-E-G), before extending the range of the leaps in more advanced repertoire.

Some children take longer than others to develop their accuracy in pitch matching but almost all can usually follow the approximate contour of the music. Do not worry about this. Keep singing, frequently and in an appropriate pitch range. It's good to do fun exercises sliding up and down to find a particular pitch to help develop children's inner ear.

Exploring and recognising intervals in the melody

Intervals in music are the gaps between notes. It is usually easier to sing notes that are near each other (i.e. moving by step or small leaps), rather than ones that are further away. This is something that develops over time and can be an aspect that makes repertoire choices more challenging. Encourage children to hit notes cleanly, rather than scooping up or down to them (unless this is stylistically appropriate and what you are looking for).

A popular vocal warm up involves [singing numbers of the notes of the scale](#). This is detailed below. Not only is this good for 'warming up' voices, it is also a very versatile and useful way to understand the notes of the scale and melodic intervals. Start on middle C or D to keep this in a good pitch range for most KS2 children.

Once your class are familiar with the exercise, you can start exploring intervals a little more.

1 – this is ‘root note’ – the home note.

Examples:

Sing note 1, then choose another number (e.g. 5) and sing in your head until you get to it, before singing it out loud. This is a 5th (*Twinkle, Twinkle* has a 5th interval jump between the first two words ‘Twinkle, Twinkle’)

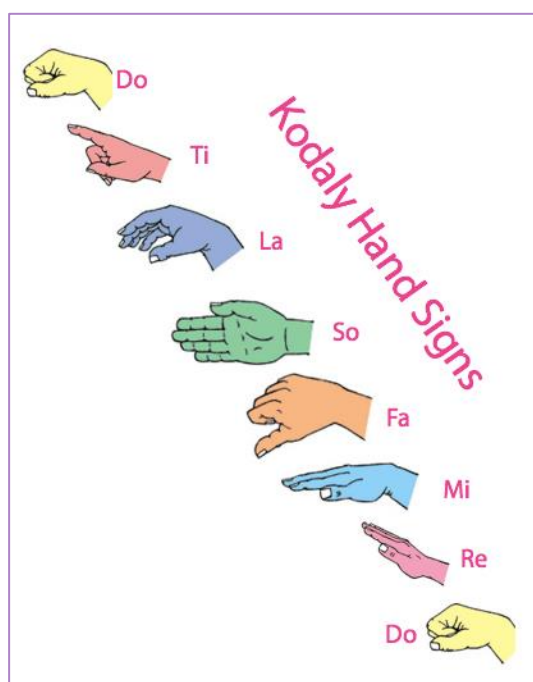
Sing note 1 and then the 6th note of the scale. This is a 6th. (Think of the first 2 notes of ‘*My Bonny Lies Over the Ocean*’).

A jump of 8 notes from middle C to the next C is called an ‘octave’. (Think of the first 2 notes of ‘*Somewhere over the Rainbow*’).

You can make up games based on these that are a lot of fun and help develop aural awareness and pitch relationships. These also transfer well onto tuned percussion instruments.

In Reception and Key Stage 1, playing games regularly and singing songs with limited intervals (G to E – the sound of a door bell, G, E and A – sounds like children mocking ‘nah nah nah nah’) and those on the first 5 notes of the scale (C to G) can help secure singing pitch. These games could easily be spread over the day or even linked to classroom routines. **This need to be alongside regular, wider singing repertoire. Remember that children come to school with thousands of songs and musical fragments in their heads that are not limited to a narrow pitch range and will be more motivated to sing and enjoy whole songs from a wide range of sources and traditions.**

The Kodaly approach, which uses hand signs, is used in some schools. It is also incorporated within many of the local whole class instrumental programmes in Hounslow.



The names refer to the degrees of the scale. 'Do' is movable to be the root note of any key. In the key of C major, here's what this looks like:

Note name	Kodaly name	Degree of the scale
C	Do	1
D	Re	2
E	Mi	3
F	Fa	4
G	So	5
A	La	6
B	Ti	7
C	Do	8

Breathing

In order to improve the quality of singing, over time, encourage children to breathe at the appropriate time. [The singing warm ups in the Primary Toolkit](#), created by SingUp, will help you to understand the use of the diaphragm in singing, and this is something children should become increasingly aware of too. A breath will need to be taken just before the note is supposed to sound - it sounds really obvious but if we want to sing a note on the first beat of the bar then we will most likely breathe on the beat before.

Timbre

Timbre is about the tone quality or 'colour' of the sound. Think about unique voices you recognise from famous singers. Describe them – perhaps you would say some sound gritty, bluesy, jazzy.

We can sing in different voices and produce vocal sounds in different ways. If you try to sing a song with the voice of a witch or a giant, the quality of the sound is different. This is often explored in warm ups such as 'Boom, Chick a Boom' but exploring timbre is equally relevant when singing repertoire. Just like exploring sounds on instruments, it is beneficial to explore how our voice production can be changed for different purposes and effects and we get to know about this over time the more we do it.

Articulation

Think about the articulation you want and practice this. Do you want the singing to be very legato (smooth) or are there sections that you want to be more punchy / short (staccato)? How long will the sustained notes be held for? Can everyone place the consonants at the end of the word at the same time after the count of, for example, 4 beats, so that you all finish the phrases together? Work on this so that you add this detail to the singing.

Dynamic control and variation

Dynamic control and variation relate to how loud and quiet our voices are. Dynamic variation is another way in which variety and contrast is brought to singing.

As with playing musical instruments, learning to write and play football, children gain more control over their voices as they grow more experienced. This is the same for speaking, chanting, singing and using our voices in a variety of ways. We can get children to purposely explore their voices and to gain more control by, for example, encouraging them to whisper,

talk and sing quietly and louder, sometimes going directly between different dynamics and also through getting gradually quieter ('diminuendo' or 'decrescendo' – they mean the same thing) and gradually louder ('crescendo'). Play games, add dynamic variety to all singing and have fun! You can easily bring flash cards into this that have the symbols and words on. Children will be very used to using their voices in different, intentional ways in the rest of their lives and you could have a lot of fun exploring this aspect of their singing using different dramatic situations. It is another way of encouraging children to engage their faces and bodies when singing to communicate feelings and meanings through song.

Unison, Rounds, partners songs, Harmony

Unison – in EYFS and KS1, songs will likely be sung in unison. This means everyone singing the same thing at the same time. Singing in unison will probably continue through KS2 but more complexity should start to be added. However, when we are singing, encourage pupils to listen to themselves and each other and be aware of the blend of the voices.

As a stepping stone to Rounds and harmony singing, introduce a rhythmic or melodic 'ostinato' - short, repeated pattern of some lyrics from the song, a rhythm or a melodic phrase that one group sings over and over again so that they get used to the sound of multiple things happening at once.

Rounds – When pupils are confident singing simple songs in unison, you can introduce rounds. Spread the groups around the room so that they are a little separated from the groups singing other parts. This is usually around year 3, although might be slightly earlier or later, depending upon the experience of the children. In a round, pupils are split into groups singing the same song but starting at different times (e.g. group 2 starts when group 1 has got to the end of the first 4 bars). Examples include "Row, Row, Row, your Boat", "London's Burning" and "I Like the Flowers". As pupils gain more experience and confidence, you can make the groups smaller, add more layers to the round (e.g. 4 groups instead of 2), bring the groups closer together and also encourage the pupils to walk around the room singing their own part. Also, rounds can be based on mash-ups of pop songs, body percussion, beat boxing – keep pupils interested in upper Key Stage 2 by frequently bringing in new material and musical challenges.

Partner songs – this is a bit like in a mash-up where different songs are sung at the same time. This works because they work on the same harmonic structure. Here's some examples:

I Wanna Sing / Oh When the Saints

A Pizza Hut / Michael Finnigan / This Old Man

As with singing in rounds, encourage pupils to listen to the sound of the groups and the ways the voices blend together. Is the balance good? Is the timing and sense of ensemble good? How can they bring more variety to the singing?

Harmony

Songs in rounds and singing partners songs help children to experience singing in harmony. To move this on further, one line of a song sings 'responses' to a call based on one note within a chord (i.e. the chord separated into 3 groups). Another way to develop simple

harmony singing is also to use a song like 'Happy' (Pharrell Williams) as the chorus has overlapping lines and one group holding on long sustained notes whilst another group sings a different part is a great way into singing and hearing harmony.

When your pupils are ready, explore repertoire with harmony at the ends of phrases and then more extensively with, for example, a different melody (counter melody) sung at the same time as the original melody.

Stylistic development

Over time, children's singing becomes more stylistic. In Key Stage 2, they will probably be exploring some repertoire that has, for example, a blues or jazz influence. The pop music they probably listen to has stylistic nuances that they will intuitively copy over time, and perhaps even different accents.

Rhythmically chanting in EYFS and KS1 lays the foundations to rapping and beatboxing in Key Stage 2 (check the meaning of lyrics carefully when choosing repertoire!), where there are more rhythmic and timing challenges

Repertoire

Choose songs with the musical challenges you are looking for (e.g. dotted rhythms, incorporating rests, having a steady beat, syncopation, sustained (long) notes); the choice of songs should be for the musical learning and not just for the class topic of the Romans! Thinking about the musical learning needs to come first. With any song you can focus on different aspects of articulation, breathing, etc. and endeavour to improve the fluency, accuracy and quality of sound.

Key final points on singing:

When choosing a song and the learning activities, think '**what do I musically want to get out of this song and the experience of learning it?**'. This makes you think of the musical learning first. For example, is it to develop their accuracy on vocal leaps, or to develop their aural skills when singing as an ensemble (i.e. together), is it to develop their experience of singing simple rounds?

Remember, too that **encouraging children's own creative ideas – through improvising, doodling and composing with their voices** is an integral part of the curriculum. This does not need to be separate from singing other people's songs, and many of the learning activities in the various schemes that you use offer possibilities to incorporate aspects of vocal exploration throughout, as do the ideas above.

Finally, in real life, singing does not exist in a special box. It belongs with **movement** (everything from waving scarves, swaying in time, and adding actions, to body percussion and full-blown choreography!), **improvisation and vocal exploration and with playing instruments**, so have fun with your classes bringing everything together, and not just in music lessons! Sing your way through the day. Introduce clearing up songs, have karaoke in golden time. Sing songs the class choose as you walk to PE. Integrating music into the day and giving ownership over some of the creative and repertoire choices brings authenticity and a sense of ensemble to the music class and across the school.

More on singing and vocal development

Article on [Singing and Vocal Development by Graham Welch](#)

[Primary Music Toolkit - Singing](#)

[The Singing School Handbook](#)

[The Voices Foundation](#)

INSTRUMENTS

As with singing, using instruments as part of the curriculum encourages children to increasingly develop specific instrumental skills alongside knowledge of ‘how music works’ that is transferable to different musical contexts and situations.

At all stages of learning, there should be a focus on **musical fluency** – communicating a sense of musical flow whether playing on one note or playing a complex piece. Think of it as ‘doing something well’ – for a KS1 class this might be playing a simple ensemble piece with a drone and a melody on tuned percussion, whilst in year 6 it might be collaboratively creating and performing a short ensemble piece for the purpose of opening the school fayre, using a range of instruments and voices or using music technology to create a soundtrack to accompany a 30-second animation.

In primary music, as a bare minimum in KS1, there is a need for pupils to regularly make music and create their own music using **tuned and non-tuned percussion instruments**, as detailed in the National Curriculum. Percussion instruments are those that make a sound when hit, shaken or scraped.

Basic percussion instruments ([For pictures of percussion instruments see here:](#))

- **Tuned percussion instruments** examples - chime bar, xylophone, glockenspiel, tuned hand bells, boomwhacker.

**a range of beaters are required for percussion instruments; different beaters make different sounds and you could explore the different timbres and sounds with children. Exploration builds up their aural sound bank.*

- **Untuned/non-tuned percussion instruments** Examples - claves, tambourine (with and without skin), tambour, guiro, triangle, drum (many kinds including tom tom, djembe and bongo), wood block, two tone wood block, agogo, maracas, castanets, cowbell, jingle bells, assorted shakers (including egg shakers), rain stick, drumsticks, castanet, gongs, rattles (samba and bucket drumming schemes are in place from Hounslow Music).

**Don't forget about other ways to make sounds and even use them as instruments – buckets, bottles, saucepans, body percussion – and most things in your classroom and school environment!*

Other instruments should be available for use in your music curriculum too, so that all children have experiences of playing and learning harmony, melody and beat instruments,

particularly in KS2. Examples include ukulele, recorders, keyboard or guitar and also there are multiple ways in which music technologies encourage the making and creating of music, opening up new musical possibilities in exciting and authentic ways across the primary age range.

All schools in Hounslow have access to a whole range of whole class ensemble (WCET) tuition programmes, which complement and enhance the music across a school's curriculum and enrichment offer. Like music in the curriculum, these programmes teach music holistically and bring together many ways of developing musically, with the instrument and singing at the core. Instruments taught as part of the Whole Class Ensemble Tuition schemes provided by Hounslow Music, include violin, viola, clarinet, tenor horn, trumpet, trombone, ukulele, boomwhackers, bamboo tamboo, xylophone, djembe.

As with singing, musical learning should be structured so that pupils increasingly gain experience of making and creating music using instruments, and recognise how the skills created lead to greater independence and autonomy, opening up musical possibilities. As they move through this school, their knowledge of, how and about how music works is incrementally developed; by the time they are in upper Key Stage 2, the units of work in many published schemes encourage increasing integration of singing and different instruments to work together in many different types of ensembles, with many different musical parts and roles.

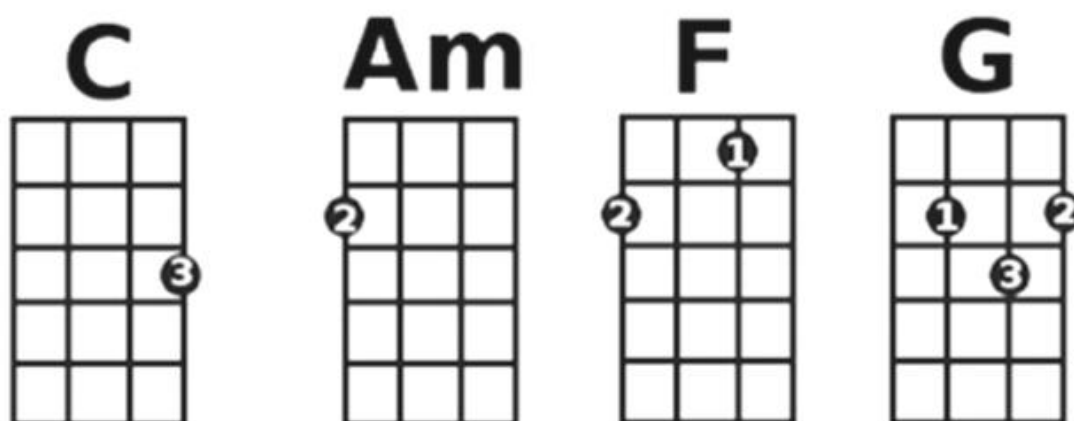
Ukulele

The ukulele is an instrument that needs to be tuned. [Use this link to tune the instrument](#) using standard tuning (G C E A). The "G" string is the string nearest the ceiling when you are holding the instrument like a guitar and strumming with your right hand. Over time, it is good to teach pupils – with care – to tune their instruments and also helps develop their pitch matching skills.

There are many approaches to teaching instruments – in terms of the ukulele you could start with the chords or the melody. Either is fine. Whichever approach you use, the learning needs to be purposeful and motivating for pupils and you will know them best. If teaching chords first, relate these to songs so that children experience accompanying real songs. If teaching the melody, sing the songs first so that they have internalised the melody, making it easier to 'find' and play as they know what sounds they are trying to produce.

On the ukulele, if we strum the strings, we produce a *chord* (2 or more notes sounded together).

The most frequently used chords for beginner ukulele players are as follows:



These charts serve multiple purposes. In a score (a written record of music), these charts show you where each chord is placed in the music so that you know when to change chord. This kind of notation is called tablature (or 'tab' for short). It shows the name of the chord and gives a diagram showing where to put the fingers on the frets/strings of a ukulele.

The charts show the four strings on the ukulele running vertically. The line on the left depicts the strings nearest your face when you are playing; the line on the right is the string nearest the floor. The horizontal lines are the frets – the 'boxes' formed along the neck/fingerboard of the instrument. Your three middle fingers are numbered: the index finger is 1, the middle finger is 2 and the finger next to your little finger is 3.

The chord of C is formed by putting the third finger on the string nearest the ground in the third fret (box) from the left (i.e. the end furthest away from you and next to the tuning pegs). If your ukulele is in tune and you now strum, you should make the chord of C major.

What might progress over time?

- How and where to strum the instrument
- Strumming evenly, strumming in time
- Playing one chord
- Changing between chords, taking a break between changes (e.g. 4 beats)
- Changing between chords more fluently
- Developing the tone quality (e.g. by placing fingers firmly on the frets without touching other strings)
- More complex strumming patterns
- More frequent chord changes
- A larger range of chords
- Developing picking techniques
- Playing one string at a time
- Placing fingers on frets to find notes
- Playing a simple melody fluently on a limited number of notes
- Using more notes and strings to play melodies
- Making up melodies
- Different rhythmic patterns in melodies

- Different timing and key signature
- Altering the speed

The list goes on and on, but you need to decide what the next step in the learning is, and this is not a linear process when learning any instrument. It will also be developed at different rates for different learners, meaning that you need to continually be aware of when and how to support and challenge learners so that all are able to make progress and maintain motivation to play and learn.

Developing instrumental skills across primary music

There are a multitude of ways to encourage children to play and explore instruments. Look around an EYFS setting – you will see that they are already curious about sounds and will need no encouragement!

As with singing, it is important to think about encouraging children to develop their dextrous skills and gain more control over instruments as they gain more experience. Clear modelling and demonstrating are really important, as is repetition and time to develop and work things out.

It is important to remember that whilst some of the skills developed through playing instruments are ‘instrument specific’ (e.g. how to strum on a ukulele and where to put your fingers on the frets, or how to blow and tongue on the recorder), working musically – through making and creating music and making sense of music – underpins all musical learning and are transferable from one musical context to another. For example, when making siren noises with the voice, we showed our *knowledge of* pitch variation and musical shapes. When we create a 4-beat repeating rhythmic pattern (ostinato) on tambourine, we could apply the same knowledge of sounds going up and down to a few notes on a recorder or glockenspiel. A little trick for helping children to learn, remember and master rhythms is to add words – each syllable is a note!

Another example relates to *structure*. Structure relates to the sections of music. Children are likely to know that in many songs there is a section that keeps coming back – the *chorus*. In their own, and other, music they both play and listen to, they may notice the repeated sections. You could create a class ‘rondo’ – playing/ singing a short, learnt melody together, interspersed by their own improvisations. In this case, the letter A is the part everyone knows and each new letter is a different improvised section. The structure would look like this:

A B A C A D A E A F A G A etc.

The playing of instruments and our own voices are some of the key ways to help us develop our understanding / *knowledge of how music works*. The basic ideas in the vocal section earlier in this booklet for exploring aspects such as pitch and dynamics can easily be done on instruments too; likewise, ideas for playing and learning instruments are fundamentally linked to the building blocks of all music and are transferable.

It is often easier to develop instrumental skills when there is a piece of music to 'hang' the learning on. For example, think about using backing tracks, songs you can sing together, songs they know already. Atomistic teaching about elements of music doesn't work well because there is no reality in it. The curriculum schemes you probably use are more holistic and based on real musical situations and examples because they relate to actual music – whether making, creating, listening or talking about music.

Whatever instruments the class play, there are many opportunities for children to engage musically in class ensembles, playing different instruments and singing. Ensemble playing is highly motivating and the musical challenges associated in being part of an ensemble help to further develop aural awareness too. The music the ensemble play doesn't need to be 'recreating' someone else's music – it could even be based on something simple but with plentiful opportunities to explore and add in their own ideas.

Right and wrong ways to hold beaters and play instruments?

Clearly, there are instrumental techniques we want to encourage when the time is right, such as [how to hold beaters](#) (sometimes called the 'mallet') when using a xylophone (wooden notes) or glockenspiel (metal notes). This allows the beater to 'bounce' and create a bright and sustained (long) sound. But this doesn't need to come 'first' in the case of percussion. We are sometimes too quick to rush in and 'correct' children though. And with all percussion instruments, there are actually a multitude of ways to make a sound and all have a purpose.

The lower notes on tuned percussion instruments go on the left, so that it is like a piano, and the pitch rises as you move to the right. You should see the notes of the alphabet in the right order! It's important that we encourage children to play tuned percussion instruments the right way up, just as it's important that they put the left hand, not the right hand, at the top of a recorder.

Exploration of sounds

Exploration of sounds and possibilities is good and should be encouraged. This is how we build up an internal sound bank. Make opportunities for children to explore the sound potential of instruments. Watch children in EYFS find joy in spontaneously exploring, changing, combining and extending sounds in their environment; we need to keep encouraging this through primary school because this is important to how music works.

For example, in a Key Stage 1 class, pass round a tambourine or a guiro and see if everyone can play it in a different way. They need to get their hands on instruments to explore them properly and anyway this is far more motivating than watching others do it for you whilst you just listen! We, as teachers, have hopefully held or shaken a tambourine or moved our hand to strike it (or even moved it towards our hand), or listened to the sound of the jingles as they rotate, but they probably haven't. Ask the class to close their eyes and guess how a sound was made. Sort instruments into things you tap, scrape, shake – put some hula hoops out on the floor and let them sort them out. They may even realise that there is an overlap – and here you have simple venn diagrams as you bring them together!

The power of talk

Keith Swanwick's mantra 'to teach is to assess' is embedded through strong music education. What he means by this is that everything we do as teachers is constantly assessing. Think of it as having a radar on your head, always scanning, noticing and thinking about what you see and what you – and they – could do next to move learning on. Formative, developmental assessment is a crucial part of our armoury. We need to encourage talk for many purposes and also become adept at listening in and knowing how and when to interact, both musically and with good questioning. Remember too that children have ideas in their heads that they can't yet play. Particularly in composing tasks, we need to understand and validate their ideas, not just what they can play. Talk is important in so many other ways too - a few minutes planning time at the start of tasks can pay dividends when children get their hands on the instruments.

Children's musical exploration

Creating music is something children do naturally, often spontaneously. We need to keep encouraging this playfulness, opening up possibilities whether using the voice, instruments or technologies. It is important that we, as teachers, model these creative behaviours ourselves if we want to give children the confidence to make up their own music. A chapter in the primary toolkit shares some ways into [doodling, improvising and composing](#). It shares ideas that both open up and direct thinking and exploration, both of which are important.

Composer and sound designers make creative choices, as do all others when making and creating music. It is fundamental to what they do, and yet in educational contexts, some children find this difficult, so part of our role as teachers is to help children to be confident to make musical choices.

Many children find the idea of 'composing' hard to grasp and aren't sure what they are being asked to do. If you ask a child what a composer is, they will often have an image of someone old, stuck behind a piano or waving their arms around frantically (confusing a conductor and a composer) and being surrounded by written music. If this is the image in their heads, no wonder they are confused.

The primary toolkit talks about 'doodling' – playing with sound as you would with colours, images and words in art and English lessons. Improvising may look spontaneous and plucked from the air but is usually based on something - fragments of songs or melodies, repeating patterns, musical shapes etc. It is a very common way into composing and generating ideas that are then further developed. Think of it as an artist would – gathering a 'sketchbook' of ideas for use sometime later. Since these are sound-based, though, you need to think about capturing these somehow, perhaps through audio recording.

The development of doodling, improvising and composing over time

These are the kinds of things you will observe, hear and be able to nurture over time, helping children to develop 'composerly thinking'.

As children gain more musical experience, their own music changes. From initially being fascinated with making and changing sounds, young start to increasingly combine and change sounds. Often these are the extremes, e.g. loud and soft, fast and slow, without so

much nuance and control of the sounds in between. Young children tend to work very much 'in the moment' and their music can often sound rambling and chaotic, although from their perspective, it will often have a purpose that they will enthusiastically share with you!

Increasingly through Key Stages 1 and 2, as children gain more experience, their music often has more expression start to include more rhythmic and melodic patterns, working these into music that has more organised structures over time. Often children's compositions and improvisations manipulate the building blocks of music, for example, tempo (speed) and volume (dynamics). They become more able to repeat, revise, develop and extend musical ideas, taking some and discarding others. As they gain more experience and control of a range of instruments and voices, the know-how they gain will be increasingly incorporated into their own musical creations. The way they talk about their music also becomes more insightful and as children gain more experience, they also increasingly justify their musical decisions, rather than just explaining what they did.

A stimulus can come from anywhere – an image, sound, conversation, colour, movement, story, and even music itself. There are many great published resources to provide ideas within the schemes used in schools. Sometimes we want them to work in very structured ways, for example, using rhythm grids and notation grids, or to use melodic fragments from a particular piece of music. A blank canvas can be daunting for an artist, and the same is the case with music. Scaffolds, ideas and starting points can be useful but be aware that these can also be limiting. It depends on the musical learning we are seeking as to how we go about setting up activities, but improvising and composing regularly and for a variety of purposes is beneficial.

Exploration shouldn't be limited to 'making up their own music'. Playfulness is crucial across all musical development – be playful and encourage children to be playful with songs and pieces you learn together too. Play around with sections, encourage them to make suggestions about how to present or change things and try out all the different possibilities. You could even set a few musical challenges during the day when bringing the class back together after a tricky breaktime. Give different groups a musical 'seed' – a rhythm, a silly vocal sound, the rustling of paper. Set a challenge to see what they can do with it in 60 seconds – set a time and watch the sense of urgency! 'Making' and 'creating' music are integrally linked. Put your own class and individual 'flair' on the music you make and create together too!

Building up musical arrangements

It's important to have a song learnt well already, as it helps children to be able to sing the song in their heads or out loud and be familiar with it. Great arrangements can be a combination of learnt material and things the children make up for themselves. As 'composers' there are still many choices for them to make individually and collectively – for example, how will it start? How will the sections be organised? What dynamic variation is required? How will it end? Starting and stopping together are important to focus on across musical learning and encourage children to listen well, watch and recognise their role in an ensemble (group).

Keep a steady beat, maybe tap just at the start of each bar or on every beat, tapping on your head, your shoulders, your knees, or playing the instrument in front of you – move onto only on the first beat of the bar. Take this onto tuned percussion – play a drone (think of bagpipes – long sustained notes) to a suitable song that your class have learnt. Play the C and the G at the same time – using two instead of one.

You could ask them to work out the melody shape for a specific phrase and then see if they can play it. Does it go up or down? Does it move by step (introduce stepwise movement first)? What note does it start on? Sing it. Ask them to show the direction of movement with their hands. Find the first note. Work out the melody. Check it with the person next to you. Add your own musical fragment. Loop it. Teach it to someone else. Learn theirs and combine them. Suggest a way for everyone to finish. Choose the class's favourite ending and practice it together. How loud will it be? The possibilities are endless.

Explore sounds to find, for example, long sounds, short sounds, loud sounds, the quietest sound you can make, the most unusual sound. Loop four sounds together so that you play them one after another. Keep repeating them to create a repeating musical phrase (ostinato). Add them to someone else's, making a longer sequence.

Chant a phrase from a song your class is singing. Play this as a rhythm on knees, tapping the floor, on a tuned or un-tuned instrument. Keep playing this whilst you sing the song. You are helping them to build layers of music, internalise the pulse, find their own rhythms, explore sounds.

In Key Stage 2 you might introduce 'pentatonic scales'. Using the 5-note ('penta') C major pentatonic scale of C, D, E, G and A there are numerous units of work within the schemes you use. When doing this, it is easier for some to remove F and B bars from tuned percussion instruments – it leaves patterns of 2 and 3 notes, just like the black notes on a piano (which is also a pentatonic scale). You might also use the A minor pentatonic (it uses the same notes but 'A' is the root/home note so that scale is played up or down from here).

From having regular experiences of singing and playing instruments, children will already *know of* so much – including for example, keeping in time, listening to others, how major scales work, have explored lots about structures of music and using patterns, dynamic variation, starting and stopping with silence, ensemble skills and the importance of listening to each other. A wonderful thing about the pentatonic scale is that it has limitless possibilities to adding parts together that all sound ok. Using a song based on a pentatonic melody, you could ask them to sing and play a drone of C and G, make up their own 4-beat or 8-beat pattern, play them at the same time, choose when to come in and out, have an instrumental 'break' so that one or two players improvise a melody on their instruments whilst everyone else plays the drone or their pattern quietly; just like being in the orchestra with a soloist, we need to hear the soloist so everyone else needs to be aware of the dynamics!

Musical Notations...“Train the ear before the eye”²

We can all function musically and extremely well without the need to read and write music. Put any song you know in your head and sing or hum it out loud – the chances are you didn’t need musical notation to learn this! Notations are mentioned in the KS2 National Curriculum and may be introduced as appropriate in KS1.

The role of notations in primary music – as in all musical learning – is to *enhance and support* musical learning where appropriate. If we slavishly limit children to notation, we will not see what they are capable of and will stifle their development, as their huge experience of music will lie well beyond their ability to use notations.

However, *notations* (note the plural) have a place in musical learning in certain situations. Notations are many kinds of visual representation – they provide a ‘map’ or ‘visual record’ of heard or imagined musical sounds. This serves two key purposes – to scribe/capture the ideas in some way and to provide visual instructions for performance of music. One of the most important things for children to **recognise is that there is a relationship between a sound and a symbol. Without this, notations lack purpose.**

For example, the map (or ‘score’) could be a list of the order of the sections of music, coloured Smarties to show the structure, coins, coloured counters and string to show the shape, invented notations on small bits of paper, a simple graphic representation of pre-recorded loops on a computer programme – all of these are notations, just as chord symbols, tablature (tab) and the standard Western notations are.

Standard Western notation has two main aspects – a rhythmic aspect and a pitch aspect. It is written on a 5-line staff and has a clef, time signature and key signature. Some published schemes teach rhythmic notation first, and approaches such as Kodaly add vocal sounds to the notes. This can be useful. In terms of pitch, it is important to recognise that the vertical dimension of music is important, whether in standard notation or, often graphic scores. The higher up the page the note is located, the higher the pitch. There are many published resources available to help you to develop your own use and understanding of notations.

Children’s invented notations can be important and useful. They provide a window into their thought processes, and coupled with talking about ‘their own music’ can give us an insight into the ideas they have. We can encourage children to write down music in any way they want, or give them more structure. Writing down music needs to have a purpose – perhaps give the ‘score’ to another group to play.

And finally...

A key ambition of music education is that we encourage all children – and adults - to *feel musical*. This is, perhaps, the biggest indicator of success in any music lesson and over their time in primary school.

² This [knowledge organiser](#) is one of many free resources online that gives a clear explanation of a range of theoretical aspects of music, including notations, keys, chords and definitions of technical terms that you may feel you would benefit from familiarising yourself with.

Hopefully all children will leave primary school loving music, being happily and enthusiastically actively engaged in music and able to make and create music well using their voices, instruments and technologies. We can support them to have stickability and a willingness to work at things, to think and talk about music with real interest, thought and insight, valuing their own and others' contribution to music and reflecting on it with a musical head on, being open-minded and curious about things they may not have come across before.

It is our job to help them continually develop and nourish their 'musical knowledge' in so many different ways, and to keep finding new ways and opportunities to '*know music in their bones*'. If, throughout and at the end of primary school, all children are ready and excited for their musical lives in secondary school and their musical present and futures beyond school, then we have done our job well.

Have fun, explore, be brave, make some noise and weave the magic of musical learning through your school!

About this resource

This resource was commissioned by Hounslow Music for the Hounslow Primary Music Conference, which took place at the Watermans Arts Centre on 19th October 2022.

About the author

Dr Alison Daubney is a qualified and experienced teacher, researcher, mentor and teacher educator based in Sussex. She has taught music to all ages and stages from pre-school to postgraduate, in primary, secondary, special schools and universities in the UK and beyond. She started her music teaching career working as an instrumental teacher. Alison is the author of multiple books, articles, research reports and resources, including the award-winning ISM [*Primary Music Toolkit*](#) and *Teaching Primary Music*, published by Sage. Many of her materials, including those to help primary teachers develop their [understanding of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment across primary music](#), are freely available online. Alison is the current co-editor of the British Journal of Music Education.