

## Dominant or Diminished Sevenths?

*Mark Phillips reflects on how we assess Year 7 pupils' prior musical knowledge, and whether false assumptions could set the wrong direction for an entire key stage.*

Over the past 25 years, a lot of money has been spent nationally on whole-class ensemble teaching in key stage 2. Ofsted has recently stated that adequate time for music is provided in nearly all primary schools and that singing is a particular strength. Wherever I travel, I see pupils of all ages carrying musical instruments, singing socially or listening to music.

I certainly wouldn't say that primary school music education in this country is perfect. Despite the funding and activity, there are still inconsistencies in the quality and effectiveness of teaching. But is it really true, as some secondary schools claim, that pupils join Year 7 with 'very little', 'poor', or even 'no' musical knowledge? Is it correct that, reportedly, some pupils 'don't like' or are 'not interested' in music?

What causes secondary schools to say these things?

### Starting from scratch?

I've seen many secondary schemes of work that open with units called 'Elements of Music' and 'Introduction to Notation' – on the premise that we need to 'start from scratch' in Year 7. But surely, aren't the 'elements' introduced in key stage 1? Isn't notation a national curriculum requirement from Year 3 onwards? If we're really saying that 11-year-olds need telling that 'pitch is whether music is high or low', that 'tempo is whether music is fast or slow', or that 'this is called a crotchet and that is called a treble clef', what's been going on between Reception and Year 6?

I've been giving this a lot of thought. I've visited Year 7 lessons in a range of schools and academies. And a key question has emerged.

*When we assess new Year 7 pupils' 'baseline' 'musical' knowledge, are we looking at the right type of knowledge?*

### Are we assessing the right type of knowledge?

There are different types of knowledge – including verbal-declarative knowledge (factual, conceptual, or theoretical knowledge articulated in words), procedural knowledge (practical or performative knowledge, sometimes referred to as disciplinary knowledge) and tacit knowledge (knowledge gained through experience, sometimes unconsciously). In music education, there is knowledge **about** music (facts and theory that we can declare verbally, such as 'I know that Beethoven composed nine symphonies') and knowledge **of** music ('I know Samba rhythms through playing in a Samba band'). Knowledge about music is important and can be interesting. But becoming a musician – performer, composer, or listener – is impossible without knowledge of the music itself. Knowledge **of** music is the end goal for a musical education.

I wonder if, when secondary teachers say that pupils come from primary schools with little or no musical knowledge, they could be basing that view on pupils' verbal-declarative knowledge

**about** music. By which, pupils' prior knowledge is judged as 'poor' because they may not be able to recall, in theory, how many crotchets a semibreve is worth, correctly name instruments of the orchestra, or recognise time and key signatures.

Should we be surprised? Moving to secondary school is a significant milestone, sometimes exciting and sometimes traumatic. Year 6 is a busy year with important English and maths tests. Pupils may well have forgotten some factual, theoretical music information – especially if it has not been taught to them in a way that ingrains sound with symbol.

However, this is not the same as saying that Year 7 pupils arrive with little or no musical knowledge. By the time they are 11-, nearly 12-years-old, all will have musical memory. It might have been gained procedurally, or it may have been gained tacitly. All will have sung formally and/or informally. All will have listened to music, consciously and unconsciously. Some will have technical, procedural knowledge of playing instruments, with or without notations. Yes, some more than others. Yes, in a range of different styles with different provenances. And, yes, music teaching in some primary schools may have been variable and not as effective as we would want. But pupils will all have some knowledge **of** music in their ears and inner voices.

Because pupils may not be able to declare it verbally doesn't mean they have no musical knowledge or that they don't 'like' music. It's just that we may not be looking for the right kind of musical knowledge in the right places.

### **An easier but less musically inclusive approach?**

In many ways, teaching and testing verbal-declarative knowledge is an easy option. You can give a mark out of ten based on factual knowledge. This fits in very well with the current focus on retrieval practice, such as silent 'do now' tasks at the start of a lesson. It helps when completing an assessment spreadsheet if you are required to give a numerical grade.

Although verbal-written activities are central to teaching and assessment in some subjects, music is not one of them. And yet, so many secondary schemes of work start with written workbooks; pupils 'learn' to 'play' simple tunes in C major on the keyboard by 'reading' notation direct from the booklets. I've heard them – they may learn to decode the pitches one-by-one, but rhythmic fluency (for example) is lacking. Musicality doesn't come into it.

And there's another sort of verbal-declarative knowledge that some secondary schools elicit from newly arrived Year 7 pupils. In the first lesson, pupils may be asked to complete a questionnaire asking them to state their favourite music, any instruments they play, any grades they have reached, and whether they played in any orchestras or choirs at primary school.

What message does all this give?

### **Setting the wrong tone from day one**

Starting Year 7 with an emphasis on the verbal-declarative and symbol before sound gives a signal that *'this is what music education in this school is all about. It's about learning factual knowledge and verbal vocabulary, first and foremost. We learn music by talking and writing about it, rather than experiencing it'*.

By asking pupils to introduce themselves musically by writing down the instruments they can play with the graded exams they've taken, the music they like or have listened to, or if they've been in the primary school choir, we could be giving an unconscious message to those who don't have instrumental lessons or who have had a different musical experience – for example, playing in a community dhol drum ensemble or creating songs with friends.

Before key stage 3 has had a chance to get going, the die is cast.

We know that's not how it should be. We want our pupils to be 'musicking'. We want music to be an inclusive subject. So, what's the alternative?

Could we not get the information about prior instrumental tuition and participation in orchestras and choirs from the primary schools and the music hub, as a background administration task?

Rather than starting Year 7 class lessons with a verbal introduction to music or verbal testing, wouldn't it make more sense to think instead about introducing everyone through a common musical activity?

Rather than talk about 'restarting', should we talk instead about 'reigniting'?

### **Imagine - starting Year 7 with awe and Wonder**

To be clear – what is imagined here is not prescriptive. The precise method may not work for everyone. This is more about an approach, a way of working that puts knowledge **of** music front and centre. As with all methods, it's only as good as the teacher leading it. But consider how this teacher introduces herself and takes stock of her new Year 7 class.

#### ***They can feel it all over, people\****

*It's the first lesson with a new Year 7 class. The teacher welcomes the pupils, sits them in a large circle around the music room, introduces herself and takes the register. Then, without any fuss, formality, or verbal introduction to the music, she stands the class up and leads them in counting four beats in a bar together, in unison. Hand claps are added on beats two and four. The teacher models the opening riff, with scat-sung lyrics. She speaks it in rhythm first, and then sings it at pitch. (The teacher doesn't say, 'now we're going to sing it' – she just sings it, as naturally as she would give a spoken instruction). She calls and the pupils respond, repeatedly until they've got it.*

Do-do-do-dah,

Do-do-doobidy-doobidy dah,

Do-do-dooby-doobidy-daa-dah.

*Together, teacher and pupils learn the lines separately and then add them together, to form the complete riff. In conversation, but not laboured or stalling the musical activity, the teacher explains how the second line is an extension of the first line, and the third line an extension of the second line. Pupils are told how each line is based on an ascending broken chord. As they clap and sing, the teacher slips in the terms 'off-beat' and 'syncopated'.*

*The pupils are hearing and feeling the arpeggios, the syncopations, the line extensions. They may not be memorising the terms yet, but the music is becoming embedded in their ears and memories.*

*Then the teacher plays them Stevie Wonder's recording of the song. Pupils follow the lyrics. The teacher joins in singing after the first chorus – and when the chorus comes back, some of the pupils join in too.*

*The teacher doesn't say 'now we're going to sing' – she just models, encourages non-verbally, with the occasional 'come on!' Not all pupils sing out loud, but the teacher understands that they may be voicing the music internally and assimilating the music. The teacher doesn't block that with lots of words.*

*Throughout this first lesson, the teacher is watching and listening. She notices that all pupils have an accurate sense of beat and rhythm. Some are more confident and exuberant, initially at least. Some seem reluctant to join in with the riff. More, though, are quickly singing with enthusiasm and seem to enjoy the scat lyrics. Two pupils play 'air drums', a few more finger-drum on the backs of chairs, one plays 'air guitar' and more start moving, rhythmically, as they get to know the song. One pupil says, 'these are like the arpeggios I learnt for my violin exam, Miss'.*

### **Assessment is about the teacher listening and responding, much more than giving a grade.**

Where would we go next? We would need to read the room. Assessment is a teacher behaviour – listening, assessing, praising, suggesting, and correcting, 24/7. So, the teacher might identify the need to do some more work on the quality of the class's singing. If some pupils are struggling with intonation and pitch shapes or rhythmic fluency, the teacher would model and repeat, rehearsing in small steps. The pupils might move on to learning the riff on keyboards – perhaps only the first bar, and probably in C major rather than the recorded B major. Keeping the task short and confined might be helpful at this early stage. Some may play more, and notation may be provided. The teacher might suggest that anyone who plays an instrument might like to bring it in next week so that they can play along. The teacher can offer to provide a notated part but will need to know so that this can be prepared. The point is that assessment is live and responsive, shaping what happens next. It's assessment for learning, but it's also assessment for teaching.

Is there need for a verbal worksheet with facts and theory about this music at this stage? Pupils may be more interested and may remember more once they know the music itself. And as for the next lesson's 'retrieval' activity – well, wouldn't it make sense to start by singing the song, retrieving pupils' procedural musical memory, rather than their verbal-declarative memory?

Of course - we will need to get all pupils using notations; they will need to build a wide repertoire of music and musical terminology. And, of course, they will need to become increasingly more sophisticated in their performances and compositions. But we've got three years to do that. Deep musical learning is a long game.

### **Be creative, be brave.**

From the very start, lead and direct your pupils musically. Draw on your knowledge **of** musical repertoire. Draw out their inner musicality, Use your ears and eyes. Assess your pupils'

responses; see and hear the musical knowledge that they show in that first lesson. Don't make their verbal-written responses the first thing you judge them on in the music classroom or, indeed, the first thing they judge your music curriculum by. Let them know that music is different. Music is a curriculum subject like no other.

See where your pupils' knowledge of music takes you. Use **this** as your baseline for what they can achieve musically in Year 7 and throughout key stage 3. Set up expectations that the weekly hour of music is a time when pupils will spend the vast majority of the time engaging with musical sound, building their knowledge **of** music through active performing, listening, and composing. When you talk, talk about the actual musical sound and use music, not words, to model.

And make sure that the expectations you set for your pupils are the expectations you set for yourself, too. You may even revise your whole key stage 3 curriculum and teaching approach when you realise how much knowledge of music Year 7 pupils bring with them, and how much musical potential they have!

*\*Stevie Wonder: 'Sir Duke' from 'Songs in the Key of Life' (1976)*

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