

# Imagine you have been asked to revise the history component of your sixth form music syllabus. What would you include, and why?

## Introduction

Studying musical history can be hugely beneficial to sixth form students and can teach a variety of core critical thinking skills and an understanding of the world around us. In this essay I will consider how learning musical history can benefit sixth form students, and how the syllabus could be rewritten to promote accessibility, variety, and relevance in the subject.

## Pedagogy of Musical History

One key consideration that should be made when approaching the pedagogy of any subject relating to history, is the great debate: should history be taught chronologically or thematically? Many variables should be considered when approaching this topic: the subject and context of the teaching (in this case musical history), the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches, whether there are other available approaches, and the students themselves.

The age of the student is a variable which affects the ability to understand historical events. The adult understanding of history relies on an awareness of the continuity of the subject; an ability to comprehend the unbroken timeline connecting past to present. This understanding of the historical timeline only begins to develop in pre-adolescence, meaning that adolescence sees the development of the concept of historical continuity and the start of historical interpretation (Maule & De Cicco, 2021). In this essay, the focus is on students in the sixth form, who are aged between sixteen and eighteen. Students of this age should have an almost fully developed adult understanding of linear past events. This means that both approaches to the pedagogy of musical history would be applicable to this age group.

With the developed concept of history as a whole, sixth form students find themselves, for the first time in their education, able to focus on any topic within the subject and place it on a historical timeline. This means that the thematic approach to teaching history (i.e. teaching the subject in the order of topics and their relevance as opposed to their chronology) could be applied to any sixth form syllabus. In a recent study carried out by Istanbul University-Cerrahpasa, social media research was used to determine teacher's views on the most effective approach to the pedagogy of history. It was discovered that teachers believed that this method encouraged the development of skills rather than knowledge, developed historical thinking techniques and was good for teaching with multiple perspectives. Despite the many advantages of the thematic approach, teachers also found that the method could lead to a disconnect between themes, that the method failed to teach the cause-

effect relationships between historical events, and that there was no failproof method to determine the content being taught in the final syllabus (Turan, 2020). This provides challenges to the specific subject of musical history, as without an understanding of one era, students have no knowledge on which to ground their understanding of the next era, and the origins of its stylistic techniques.

On the other hand, the chronological teaching method (whereby students are taught to the timeline) is easy to understand and is successful in teaching cause-effect relationships. In the case of musical history, this would prove more effective in students' understanding of how music has progressively developed throughout history. However, the chronological approach has been heavily criticised for being too broad and content heavy, according to the study, the method "teaches nothing while trying to teach everything" (Turan, 2020).

It is clear that both the chronological and thematic approaches have weaknesses which could be detrimental to the teaching of a subject such as musical history if disregarded. A new and innovative approach proposed in the *Journal of Education and Learning*, *the mixed approach*, allows for the simplified breakdown of the subject into topics, while maintaining the benefits of teaching chronologically (Turan, 2020). In the context of pedagogy of musical history for sixteen-to-eighteen-year-olds, this approach would be most effective as it allows for the study of cause-effect relationships, with targeted thematic focuses to create depth, as opposed to simply breadth of knowledge in the syllabus.

### The Relevance of the Music Syllabus

Another element to consider when creating a music history syllabus for sixth form students would be its relevance to students in the twenty-first century. The government shows obvious favour towards subjects which they deem to be "academic" and "relevant", with school standards minister Nick Gibb saying: "Pupils, whatever their background, have the right to study a core academic curriculum that provides them with the knowledge and skills for a variety of careers" (Department for Education, 2017). Music does not fall under the category of "core academic" subjects, and therefore less emphasis is placed on the subject, as it is deemed less relevant than maths, English, science and humanities such as psychology, history, geography and sociology. The linking factor between all of these "core academic" subjects, is that they are all blatantly relevant to the world today, or clearly develop skills required of a responsible adult. It is assumed that music fails to meet either of these criteria, so an obvious goal for music pedagogists writing syllabi would be to ensure that the subject is evidently relevant to students in the twenty-first century.

To achieve this in any syllabus, it is important to understand what aspects of each "core" subject are deemed relevant, so that these benefits can be transferred into a musical context and made available in the syllabus. A subject such as maths is considered relevant because it develops practical and transferable skills: "man invented mathematics to help him solve problems, [...] and to help him process information obtained from physical, social and cultural situations" (Hendrickson, 1974). Studying maths encourages students to think analytically and critically, to be able to solve problems and see patterns and structure (skills which students transfer and use in future.) An equivalent of this in music, could be the appraisal of historical music, a section included in most sixth form syllabi.

The ability to think analytically can be developed through the unpicking of music and critically considering its musical elements. By analysing, for example, whether or not a chord is an augmented sixth, or debating the exact end of the first subject in sonata form, students can develop the same transferable skills in music, as in maths. Therefore, a music history syllabus requiring students to analyse a variety of pieces, could be considered relevant under current educational standards.

In the core subject of English, similar transferable skills are developed. The ability to empathise with the writer and to understand *why* they have used a certain device, and what its intended effect was, is certainly a benefit of the English syllabus. However, this could very easily be transferred into music by simply asking students “why?” While by simply analysing the music, students can develop the critical thinking of mathematics, there is also a possibility for students to take this a step further and question *why* the composer made this creative decision. In the case of a sacred piece, it may be that choices have been made in order to avoid offending the church (such as the avoidance of an augmented fourth,) while in a Verdi opera, it may be that the dissonant harmony in an aria is intended to reflect the struggles of a certain class of society at the time. Understanding *why* decisions have been made further develops critical thinking skills, as well as empathy, both required in adult life.

The core humanities are the most obviously applicable core subjects: geography, an understanding of how the world works, sociology, an understanding of society, history, an understanding of the past which we may learn from, and psychology, an understanding of humanity itself. With musical history being considered a humanity, it is important to ensure that its syllabus holds some relevance to the world in which we live. In his book *Infinite Music*, Adam Harper refers to the “non-sonic variables” of music. Things that are not a part of the music but affect how it is received. Harper uses the example of the dedication of a piece to a cause, for example, climate change deniers would be prejudiced against a piece dedicated to stopping climate change (Harper, *Music After Sounds: Non-sonic Variables*, 2010) Another example could be the performance itself. For example, at the premier of *La Traviata* at La Fenice in Venice, the role of the fragile consumptive, Violetta, was played by an unfashionably fat soprano who certainly did not fit the ideals of the audience at the time. At the opera’s revised relaunch in 1854 the young and fashionably slim Maria Spezia took on the lead role and from there, *La Traviata* progressed to be the most performed opera in history. This is a clear example of how music, society, psychology, and history can all go hand-in hand and be relevant to one another, and therefore to the world in which we live. Not all sixth-form music syllabi in the UK require students to have a contextual understanding of the works which they study. The Cambridge University Pre-U music syllabus requires students to consider “extra-musical factors”, which ensures its relevance to society and humanity (Cambridge Assessment International Education, 2019)

By creating a music history syllabus which develops key skills and an understanding of the world, the subject becomes relevant to sixth form pupils today, equipping them with the knowledge and understanding that they will require in their adult life, while also providing the natural joy of studying an arts subject. A successful music syllabus, by modern educational standards, requires students to deeply analyse, question, and contextualise a variety of prescribed works and should therefore be considered by the government as a “core academic” subject in the national curriculum (Department for Education, 2017).

## The Canon

Having established the methodology and relevance of the music history syllabus, the next step would be to consider the most significant areas of musical history, which should undoubtedly be featured in the syllabus. There is great controversy surrounding this topic as it is impossible to study in any depth, music from every style, from every period and from every race in the two years of sixth form education that is standard in the UK, and so certain genres and composers must be prioritised while others are excluded, leading to the implication that some genres and composers are superior to others.

The question of superiority in the music dates back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the term 'classical music' first appeared, stemming from the idea of 'classics' (works of art considered to be exemplary.) These 'classics' later appeared in the Western canon, a collection of works of literature, art, philosophy, and music, all considered to be most noteworthy for scholarly study. Based on this structure, a successful sixth form music history syllabus could simply select works chronologically from the Western canon for students to study. However, the canon has been widely criticised for having a minimal representation of work by women, or culturally diverse composers, with the majority of composers of the canon being white European males. Marcia Citron highlights the lack of appreciation of western female composers in her article *Gender, Professionalism, and the Musical Canon*: "Works by women are absent from the canon. One is hard-pressed to find them in concert programs and in the standard music histories and anthologies. With regard to anthologies, for example, the new edition of *The Norton Anthology of Western Music*, issued in 1988, includes only one piece by a woman, a monophonic "canço" by the Countess of D'Á, in its two-volume compendium of 163 works" (Citron, 1990).

The evident lack of diversity in the Western musical canon suggests that a music syllabus would lack breadth and wider understanding if it simply conformed to the canon. Despite criticism that it is outdated and biased, some still uphold the Western canon, claiming that it contains universal truths and timeless values which have shaped western culture throughout history. Based on these two very conflicting arguments, a compromise (as in *the Mixed approach* to teaching history) would evidently be the most effective approach to the music syllabus. The syllabus would therefore contain many of the classics of the canon as well as some wider and more diverse topics.

## Conclusion

To conclude, my syllabus for sixth form musical history would ensure both depth and breadth of knowledge, preparing students for higher education and eventually a career, whether they choose to take music with them, or not. It would include a series of topics containing case studies of pieces relevant to that subject area. The use of the mixed approach to the teaching of history would guarantee that students can cover a variety of topics in great detail, while maintaining an essential chronological understanding of musical history. The prescribed works would encourage the development of analytical skills and artistic empathy, and the requirement for a knowledge of the societal, political, psychological, spiritual, and historical context of the prescribed works within the syllabus would develop students' wider knowledge, bring relevance to the subject and equip students with core skills necessary for adult life. A balance between traditional views of music

education, and of new and innovative perspectives would ensure that students are empowered to explore a variety of themes within musical history. This syllabus has considered musical history from many perspectives to ensure that it can be understood, accessed, and enjoyed by students of all backgrounds, and that it can truly be considered relevant and therefore a “core academic” subject.

The syllabus I have proposed highlights the many ways in which music, and specifically musical history, can be beneficial to all students and should not be overlooked. With recent cuts to the subject’s funding in schools, and the difficulties faced by the industry throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, it is more important than ever to offer a music syllabus which allows students to explore and enjoy the subject, both academically and creatively.

2315 words

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