The organisation and assessment of composing at Key Stage 4 in English secondary schools

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This paper explores secondary school music teachers' current practice with regard to the organisation and assessment of composing at Key Stage 4. It draws on research undertaken on a nation-wide basis in England, via the use of two online surveys and face-to-face interviews. In terms of the organisation of classroom composition, the study found that the place of staff notation is currently under-theorised in terms of a developmental musical thinking tool, as opposed to what might be termed a 'storage system'. The research also found that ICT has brought composing to a wider range of participants. Considerably more time is spent on composing than other musical processes within a typical Key Stage 4 music classroom. The study found that music teachers are, in general, satisfied with the sorts of assessments which are being done at Key Stage 4. Examination Board criteria for assessing composing are universally utilised but there is a feeling that whilst these criteria are fit for purpose, they do not always reflect the effort that students have put into their work. Some styles which are 'set' by examination boards are seen as being inappropriate for some students to access.

Introduction

This paper explores secondary school music teachers' current practice with regard to the organisation and assessment of composing at Key Stage 4. It draws on research undertaken across England, via the use of two online surveys and face-to-face interviews. It was funded by the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM). The purpose of the research was to investigate how teachers organised their teaching and assessment of composition at Key Stage 4, and their views are on this. This paper presents our findings and offers some commentary on them.

The research context

The notion of 'composing' as a curricular activity suitable for all students in the secondary school has received increasing attention in academic circles in recent years. Burnard has investigated a number of aspects of the composing process, including its relationship to

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improvisation (Burnard, 2000a, 2000b), how students derive meaning from composing, and what they do whilst undertaking it (Burnard, 2002; Burnard & Younker, 2002, 2004a, 2004b). Odam (2000) and Paynter (2000) also noted that there had been issues with the teaching and learning of composing in schools. This is an area also investigated by Berkley (2001), who described problems teachers found with developing an appropriate pedagogy for the teaching of composition.

We know that a lot of composing within school classrooms happens in groups, and the group composing process has been deconstructed in terms of the stages students work through (Fautley, 1999, 2005). Social interaction plays a large part in group composing (Burland & Davidson, 2001), and this has also been investigated in terms of the ways in which students talk with each other (Miell & MacDonald, 2000; Major, 2007, 2008).More recently, what Activity Theory can tell us about group composing has also been studied (Burnard & Younker, 2008).

Assessment is a key area of interest in contemporary educational discourse. The role of formative assessment, and its place in raising standards has been well documented (Black, 1995; James, 1998; Black & Wiliam, 1998, 2006; Assessment Reform Group, 1999, 2002; Black *et al.*, 2003a, 2003b, 2004). Summative assessment too has been researched, and its role as a 'high-stakes' tool discussed (Stobart, 2001, 2008; Harlen, 2005, 2007). Formative assessment, also known as assessment for learning (AfL), has figured in a number of governmental initiatives for schools. Interestingly, it was a music lesson which was chosen as an exemplar for teachers of all subjects for training in AfL (DfES, 2002).

Formal assessment of composing happens at Key Stage 4 through the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and the British Technology Education Council (BTEC) diplomas, such as the Music Production or Music Technology qualifications. In both these sets of qualifications, assessment criteria are provided by examination boards.

The assessment of composing, particularly in the English context, has received less attention than the areas outlined above. We have some general overviews (Stephens, 2003; MacDonald *et al.*, 2006) and specific research involving teachers (Byrne & Sheridan, 2001; Byrne *et al.*, 2003). Burnard and Younker (2004b) mention assessment in their analysis of individual composing pathways. Mills (1991) investigated the musical nature of assessment, whilst from an American perspective, Brophy (2000) looked into developmental matters. From a pragmatic classroom perspective, Bray (2000, 2002) and Adams (2001) discuss ways in which teachers can utilise assessment in the classroom. Although there are, anecdotally, a number of worries over composing and its assessment (Fautley, 2008), we do not know a great deal about teachers' assessment practices within music at Key Stage 4, hence this research.

Research aims

The aim of the research reported here was to survey secondary school music teachers' current practice with regard to the organisation and assessment of composing at Key Stage 4. The research took place on a nation-wide basis in England, via the use of two online surveys and face-to-face interviews. Its purposes were to find out what teachers are actually doing, what school and external systems require them to do, and what their views were on this. In this paper we offer some commentary on this, and discuss the implications of

our findings from both an assessment perspective and with a view to the broader issues concerned.

The two main research questions were:

- What are teachers currently doing with regard to the organisation and assessment of composing?
- What else might they do?

Research methods

This research involved combining both qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Gorard & Taylor, 2004). The organisation and assessment of composing is a complex issue, and employing a mixed methodology enabled us to grapple with the issues raised. As Creswell observes, 'the problems addressed are complex, and the use of either quantitative or qualitative approaches by themselves is inadequate to address this complexity' (Creswell, 2009, p. 203). Another factor in the employment of a mixed methods approach was that we wished to combine quantitative responses with qualitative judgements, being cognisant of the notion that 'research approaches should be mixed in ways that offer the best opportunities for answering important research questions' (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 16), and that employing a mixed methodology is 'more than simply collecting and analysing both kinds of data; it also involves the use of both approaches in tandem' (Creswell, 2009, p. 4).

With these factors in mind, the research was designed to take place in three phases:

- Phase 1: Initial online survey.
- Phase 2: Follow-up online survey.
- Phase 3: Individual interviews with teachers.

Phase 1: Initial online survey

The initial on-line survey was constructed by the researchers in collaboration with a colleague from the ABRSM. It was made available to all music teachers in England, being advertised widely in subject association information, and by direct contact with many schools via an email to the Subject Leader in Music. The initial online questionnaire was viewed by 866 people. It was started by 176 respondents, but of this number only 94 completed it (a 53.4% completion rate). Of these 94, 92% were classroom music teachers, 6% peripatetic music teachers, and 2% community musicians or workshop leaders. A good, geographical cross-section of respondents was achieved, from rural communities to inner cities.

Respondents had a wide range of personal experiences of composing. Some had little or no experience of personal composing (one simply responded 'zilch' to this question); others replied that they were 'a published composer', with a range of responses in-between.

In the Phase 1 online survey questions were asked which involved attitudinal responses, Likert scale prioritisations, pedagogical procedural questions, and free text responses. The methodological justification for this modality was that we were keen to establish an ontological perspective with regard to what was taking place with regard

to the organisation and assessment of composing, before moving on to explore reasons why this was the case in the survey phase, what Punch (2009, p. 25) refers to as 'question-method connections'. Bearing in mind the observation that 'rating scales are limited in their usefulness by to researcher by their fixity of response caused by the need to select from a given choice' (Cohen *et al.*, 2007, p. 328), we wanted to explore using semi-structured interviews as a way to explore the reasons behind answers within the surveys. Hence the Phase 3 component.

A complete list of questions contained within the Phase 1 online survey can be found in Appendix A.

Phase 2: Follow-up online survey

One question within the Phase 1 survey asked respondents whether they would be willing to undertake a more detailed follow-up survey, and those who responded positively to this question were invited by email to undertake the second, more substantial online questionnaire. This more complex follow-up questionnaire was constructed by the researchers in collaboration with a colleague from the ABRSM. It was viewed by 339 respondents, started by 34 respondents and completed by 18 (a completion rate of 55%). In our reporting of the data from the various stages of the research below we have included details as to which phase of the research the data in question arose from. Although not all respondents completed the surveys, the online survey tool used for both Phase 1 and Phase 2 (QuestionPro) allowed completed questions to be analysed, even if the survey itself was unfinished.

A complete list of the questions from the Phase 2 online survey can be found in Appendix B.

Phase 3: Individual interviews with teachers

In the Phase 2 online survey, respondents were questioned as to whether they would be prepared to be interviewed by the researchers. From their positive responses, 11 teachers were interviewed from the North-East of England, via the North-West and the Midlands, down to London and the South-East. Ten of these interviews took place on a face-to-face basis, and one was conducted by telephone. These were semi-structured interviews (Cohen *et al.*, 2007), based on a predetermined interview schedule, which was departed from for supplementary questions. All the interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. We have not edited teachers' comments from these for grammatical purposes. We have transcribed directly what they said, and used conventionally represented punctuation to aid meaning (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

A complete list of the questions used within the interview framework can be found in Appendix C.

Data analysis

Data analysis was undertaken in a number of ways. Qualitative analysis of free text responses was coded using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This was

undertaken as an iterative process, with increasingly fine-scaled unique codings arising as a result, in a developed form of axial coding, followed by coding for process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 163). We assumed items to be significant when mentioned by numbers of respondents, and repeatedly revisited the free-text responses to ensure we were capturing the importance of what was being said.

Quantitative data was analysed in a number of ways. Nominal scales of denotation were employed in order to establish categories of responses, such as composing pedagogies. Likert scales for attitudinal responses were used, and had inferences drawn from them. Ordinal scales were also employed to find how much use was made of assessment techniques. In undertaking this analysis we were mindful of Wright's assertion that 'the level of measurement is not an inherent characteristic of a particular variable, but a characteristic that we, as researchers, bestow on it based on our theories of that variable' (Wright, 2003, p. 127).

Given the dual elements within the research question on the organisation and assessment of classroom composition, the following discussion will focus on these two topics, starting with the organisation of classroom composition before moving on to consider the assessment of classroom composition. However, as will become apparent, at certain points these distinctions become blurred.

The organisation of classroom composing

At Key Stage 4, the majority of composing is done on an individual basis. Opening questions within the Phase 1 online survey revealed that a little over 60% of composing is done individually, with paired composing coming a long way behind at around 16%. This marks a major shift from students working in groups at Key Stage 3 (76%; ABRSM, 2008). To investigate this further, we asked how this changeover from group composing to individual composing is managed. Responses to this varied considerably, with some respondents starting with group work, with others launching directly into solo composing. These responses from the free-text responses within the Phase 1 online survey show the range of these variations:

> I start by doing a group composition so they get to know each other and share ideas. I then break them into their first individual composition task by getting them to compose a 8 bar chord sequence followed by writing a melody over it. I find that this short task builds their confidence in composing individually. (Phase 1 free text response)

> Paired activity at the start of the course, sharing ideas within the group, then selecting and developing material on a more individual basis. The next project might start similarly but more quickly move on to a more individualised footing. From there we can move to individual generation of ideas. Pairs and small groups can still validate and discuss each others' compositions. (Phase 1 free text response)

In the Phase 1 online survey we also asked whether teachers used published schemes of work in their teaching of composing. At KS4, 83% use their own materials. Published schemes are used by a little over 10% of teachers at KS4. During the Phase 3 interviews, over 21% of respondents said they had not been able to find any suitable published materials for either KS4.

To investigate the organisation of classroom composition at Key Stage 4 further, we postulated six starting points which, we believed, represented a full range of compositional stimuli (as we have observed it in classroom composing at Key Stage 4 through our wider work in initial teacher education). These were:

1. You provide the students with a musical 'technical term (or terms)' or starting point (e.g. ostinato, accelerando) and ask them to compose evidencing the use of it/them.
2. You provide the students with a musical stimulus (e.g. a rhythm, melody or chord sequence) and ask them to compose evidencing the use of it/them.
3. You provide students with a musical framework (e.g. ternary form, rondo, theme and variations) and ask them to compose using it.
4. You provide a non-musical starting point or stimulus (e.g. a picture, story, poem or film) and ask them to compose with it.
5. You provide a personal stimulus, issue or challenge (e.g. their beliefs, thoughts, peers, fashions, tastes, lives, environments) and ask them to compose around or about it.
6. You ask the students to compose anything they wish.

Within the Phase 1 online survey, we asked whether teachers had used these starting points, and offered a six-point Likert scale for responses:

1. I used to do this but don't any more.
2. I've never done this.
3. I've not done this but plan to.
4. I do this occasionally.
5. I do this quite often.
6. I do this very often.

We also asked a question concerning the perceived efficacy of these starting points.

Figure 1 shows the data table upon which the following discussions are based. For normalisation purposes, all figures are expressed as percentages.

Of the stimulus types, musical ones tended to be the preferred *modus operandi* for composing, with those being directly musical, or using musical frameworks being the most popular (Fig. 2).

However, when we look at the phase specificity of responses we notice that there are some that are deemed more suitable for specific age phases (Fig. 3).

Non-musical starting points were only used by 4% of respondents at KS4. The most popular starting point was the musical framework (66%). However, frequency of use is not of itself sufficient to consider, and so we turn now to teachers' impressions of the efficacy of different composing starting points.

As Figure 1 shows, the most effective compositional starting point was considered to be the musical framework, with 45% saying it was very effective, and a further 49% believing it to be quite effective. Linked to this approach is the use of musical technical terms as a starting point, which scored highest in the 'quite effective' category (63%). Here, teachers seem to find comfort in traditional approaches to composition. Perhaps these relate to how they were taught themselves, or what they perceive to be the 'correct' approach?

The most ineffective compositional starting point was generally considered to be the 'anything they wish' category, with 64% of respondents identifying it as such; this was

followed by the 'personal stimulus', and then there is quite a large gap to the remaining four. Altogether the 'anything they wish' category scored lowest for efficacy, there was still a significant minority of teachers (9%) who found this a very effective starting point.

The issue of staff notation, and if/when/how it should be taught can be a contentious issue for some music teachers. Several references to musical notation came up in the free text responses to the Phase 1 and 2 online surveys. For this reason, during our interviews with teachers (Phase 3) we asked if they believed that notation was important for composing. Most believed that it was:

> *Interviewer:* Do you think the GCSE values the skills of using musical notation enough?
>
> *Teacher:* Yes, they should read music to be able to tick the GCSE box.
>
> *Interviewer:* And should it be used as part of the composition work?
>
> *Teacher:* Yes. And that overspills to their performance, and their listening. I don't know how one would do it without, I'm sure one does. There are many students who take GCSE who do not read music, and we've had kids who, you know a few guitarists particularly and drummers, that are close to the bone there. But, we do extra theory classes and get them on that, you know, treadmill as soon as we possibly can. It opens up a world for them, otherwise they're very inhibited and very limited if they can't read music.

This teacher raises the issue of musicians such as drummers and guitarists, for whom staff notation is not a normal part of their work. One teacher, who works in an inner-city, took a different view:

> My kids, they never work in notation, we do have it for performing, for reading and stuff like that, but for composing . . . no. Most of the music they compose isn't written. (In interview)

Lying in-between these extremes are a range of views, one of which is represented by this teacher:

> No it's not. It's a helpful tool for some students. Some students have got a very good, a very good ear and a very good memory, and don't need to write ideas down. Others do need, you know they've got twenty-five lessons before the next music lesson, they do need a reminder. But how music is notated I think is probably less important. (In interview)

This is where staff notation is seen as useful, but not essential, to composing. Another teacher unpicked this a little further, and distinguished between notation as an *aide memoire*, and of staff notation being used more deliberately:

> It's important for recording your thoughts, isn't it? It's important for having something to come back to and its importance for mediating your composition ideas. (In interview)

A final part of our initial Phase 1 online survey raised the issue of ICT as a compositional tool. Here a very clear picture emerged, with ICT being used 'a lot' at KS4 (Fig. 4).

What is interesting here are the 'seldom' and 'never' responses, indicating that a small but significant number of students never get the opportunities afforded by ICT in

their composing. The range of technologies being used within teaching at this Key Stage has an obvious effect on the types of compositional activities that students can undertake. Recent research conducted for Roland UK (Savage, 2009) showed that many teachers made extensive use of music notation software such as Sibelius and Finale at this Key Stage. This confirms our analysis of the conservative nature of many teachers' view about composing as an activity. It also helps to explain why many teachers reported a significant increase in the use of ICT at Key Stage 4 from Key Stage 3 (71% from 33%; see ABRSM, 2008).

Finally, we wanted to know what single aspect of composing, performing, or listening took place most frequently in classrooms. Our Phase 1 online survey showed that at KS4 an overwhelming majority (66%) reported that composing was the most common activity. In the Phase 2 follow-up survey we asked about the reasons for this. 17% of teachers at Key Stage 4 reported that they left the performing aspect to individual instrumental music teachers. There was also a feeling that at Key Stage 4 composing and listening needed the most teacher input. As one respondent put it in their free text response within the Phase 2 online survey:

> Performance is something students can work on the easiest in their own time and with help from [instrumental] lessons. (Phase 2 free text response)

Most teachers at Key Stage 4, it seems, separate out the various musical processes and teach them in isolation from each other.

The assessment of classroom composing

At Key Stage 4, the assessment criteria published by the examination boards form the backbone of what teachers do with regards to assessment of composing. In the Phase 1 online survey we asked teachers how easy they found it to mark their students' composition work in accordance with the examination board criteria. Eighty-six per cent of teachers responded that they either agreed or strongly agreed that it was easy to mark in this way However, finding the criteria straightforward is of little utility if the results are at odds with teachers' impressions of how well (or otherwise) students are doing in schools. So, we asked whether teachers felt that the criteria are appropriate and whether they felt that the marks fairly represent each student's attainment in composition. Here again there was a feeling that this was the case, with a fairly close mapping to the satisfaction results of the previous question.

The Phase 2 online survey statement, 'I feel that the criteria give marks that fairly represent the effort put in by the student, and progress made over the course' caused a higher level of disagreement. Here 42% of respondents disagreed with the statement in the question. Free text responses within the Phase 1 online survey, and a supplementary question in the Phase 2 online survey, explored this issue further. Respondents felt that the following ideas could make their use of the criteria fairer to the work their students had put into their compositions. This was confirmed in the Phase 3 interviews:

> The criteria as it stands is very vague, though it mentions areas of composition marks are awarded overall and this can make it difficult if a student does some things well and others very poorly. (Female teacher, in interview)

Take individual creativity into account, especially with terminal task. One of our students was penalised and accused of composing their terminal task piece before entering the exam room, despite clearly using one of the provided stimuli. The student was a very good composer and the exam board did not believe that the student had composed the piece within the allotted time. (Male teacher, in interview)

Provide criteria that are appropriate to the style or genre of the music – one criteria does not effectively fit all styles of music. (Male teacher, in interview)

Sometimes it may be easier to gain good marks by giving the examiners what they want rather than rewarding sheer creativity. (Female teacher, in interview)

I do seem to spend time trying to find areas of study to fit some compositions in or manipulating the children's work to fit into the criteria. (Female teacher, in interview)

This range of responses from five different teachers seems to provide a general unease, not so much with the ways in which student work is assessed, but with there being a perceived mismatch between the grades students receive and the grades teachers feel they should get. We know that teachers will want to do the best they can for their students, but even so, this does seem to give a cause for concern. Teachers recognise that some form of marking criteria are needed, nonetheless there does seem to be a case for a system which allows for a little more personalisation to the needs of the students.

Whilst 'teaching to the test' is probably unavoidable to some extent, within the Phase 2 online survey we asked teachers to explore to the statement, 'What I teach, in composition, is heavily influenced by the criteria I know the students' compositions will eventually be subject to'. Only 24% of teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. We then asked whether teachers used the exam board's criteria for their own assessment purposes. Here, 78% of teachers said they did. Despite this broad agreement with the issue of criteria, we wanted to know if teachers felt that they were appropriate, so we asked if teachers felt they were too vague. Sixty-seven per cent of teachers did not think so, but a sizeable minority of teacher (33%) felt that this was the case. Anecdotally we hear of teachers ignoring the criteria, and awarding the mark they feel the student deserves, and so we asked if this was the case. Ninety-four per cent of teachers said it was not, leaving about 6% of teachers for whom this is the case.

We also asked teachers to respond to a series of statements, one of which was, 'I have a good idea of what mark/grade the composition should get before I come to apply the criteria specifically, and I try to ensure the criteria-based marking reflects my initial impression'. Interestingly, nearly 18% of teachers said they did this, so there do seem to be some liberal interpretations of the examination board criteria. In fact, a number of our interviews in Phase 3 confirmed our suspicion here. We should not be too critical of this approach. It seems well suited to the nature of musical appreciation and, providing that clear justifications according to examination criteria are provided, teachers, as professionals, should not be surprised if their initial judgements are confirmed by these frameworks.

Another issue addressed in the Phase 3 interviews that followed the two online surveys related to criterion referencing. Specifically, we asked, 'Do you think GCSE music forces students into a straitjacket of pre-selected criteria?' Most agreed, but for different reasons:

> Well yes it does, yes it obviously does because you know what the elements of particular styles are, they are only allowed to compose in certain styles. Occasionally, somebody will come up with something which is wild and imaginative and doesn't really quite fit into an area of study. So you end up with shoehorning it into something, or you say well if you were just to add such and such, or change a few things here and there, then it would be more like, this or that. . . . And therefore it would get you more marks. Like in the driving test where you proverbially reset the mirror, so that you have to squint to look in it so the driving instructor knows you've looked in it. So you make your composition, overtly structurally interesting, in order to prove that you can use structure and gain the marks. (Male teacher, in interview)

An interesting issue is identified here. If the composition is 'wild and imaginative' then this teacher felt that they have to 'shoehorn' the results into extant categories in order to maximise the student's mark-gaining potential. The second part of the response talks about over-emphasising things for the sake of examination marks. This could be problematic in musical terms.

For this next teacher, working in a multi-ethnic inner-city school, the subject matter itself could be seen as alienating for the students:

> Yes, definitely. And it's got much worse; the new syllabus is rubbish, that's another reason why I've changed to BTEC. . . . If you could compose three pieces of classical music, and one heavy-metal song, you got credit for that. But now, all of a sudden they're saying, you've got to do this and you've got to do that. You've got to do a waltz. My kids go 'Why have I got to waltz? I don't want to do a waltz.' And I don't know why they've got to waltz either. (Female teacher, in interview)

As this teacher observes, waltzes have little relevance to the street-lives of his students so they resent having to 'do' them.

For this next teacher, the influence of the criteria is an issue in quite a different way:

> Yes, although I don't know that teachers use the composition criteria quite as explicitly as they might do at Key Stage 3, for GCSE, because it's so broad and difficult to assess against, I don't think that they actually know what they're doing. In some ways there's a benefit to that because they're working, you know, they're working in a particular area of study, and they don't necessarily know where they're going with it because the criteria are so broad, and actually I do think that there are possible benefits to that because they may be more creative than some of the Key Stage 3 criteria that I've seen, which tend to be quite specific. (Female teacher, in interview)

For this teacher, the broadness, which other teachers saw as lacking, is both an opportunity, in that it allows the students some freedom, and a problem, in that this makes it difficult for the teacher to assess.

For a number of teachers, the styles and genres that students might want to compose in was a problem, in a similar way that the teacher above observed. However, this next teacher felt that this was a potential, rather than a real, issue:

> To a certain degree, I think on the current GCSE, possibly yes and I think if you think about the content of it, you know you have to study the set styles, and it sort of disregards lots of other styles that students might want to study, and also what teachers might want to teach and what might be current. But looking at the latest spec for OCR,

it does seem to be a little bit more in favour of the student now. (Male teacher, in interview)

However, these responses should be contrasted with the replies of some teachers who were far more positive about the criterion referencing used by the exam boards:

I think the criteria reflect what producing a piece of music is. You can't produce a good piece of music without a structure. You can't write a good piece of music if you can't handle the resources effectively, and I think, especially Edexcel the criteria are very appropriate. (Male teacher, in interview)

But the remarks of the teacher above need to be offset against their refreshingly honest assertion that some teachers subvert the assessment criteria by writing assignment briefs after the event, in other words the students compose, and then the teacher decides how the resultant music can be best considered to fit what is required:

Interviewer: So you wouldn't be one of these teachers that kind of, looks at what the children have produced in relationship to a particular piece of work, in full knowledge of what the criteria, of the exam specify, kind of go back to them and say, if you add some dynamics into your work, you'll access this range of marks or . . .

Teacher (female): Yes. But that would be much later on, from Christmas in Year 11 when you're coming up to the end. I don't think it would be worthwhile doing at the beginning. You do get students who ask how can I get more marks.

Interviewer: So you might say, in summary for this question, it might be that as you move towards the summative assessment that the sort of portfolio of compositions they're submitting for the examination, that the criteria which the exam board has set up become more influential?

Teacher: Yes. I do.

Interviewer: You're saying that actually students are aware, become aware of those criteria?

Teacher: Probably not on their own but I'll have done a semi-formal marking of work they've done.

Interviewer: Does it become a sort of a game in the students' minds? They've completed the bit of work but they've got to kind of do this because it's how they'll get extra marks?

Teacher: No, the only game is doing the brief. And that's going anyway. So we're very naughty and like most other people we tend to write the briefs in retrospect, which I know you're not supposed to do.

This has an effect on the way in which assessment criteria are considered, as it means that this teacher, and probably many others, are giving the students some free-rein in composing, and then deciding post-hoc which criteria will afford the most marks for their students' work.

We asked the interviewees in Phase 3 how they would feel about being able to choose which assessment criteria to apply, by, for example choosing from a list. At least one examination board, Edexcel, already facilitates this to a limited extent.

> We can choose the best ones that fit anyway. Would that work for the given criteria if we choose them, don't know! I honestly don't know. Maybe! (Male teacher, in interview)

For this teacher, there is a possibility that this might be helpful. For others there are lines to be drawn between composing, and composing for an examination. This next teacher felt that examination composing is a specific activity:

> On the other hand you might say well, shouldn't you be setting out what your criteria are to start with, essentially GCSE is going to be a, jumping through hoops operation isn't it? You're not going to come up with something which is really creative and mould breaking, because if you did you'd say that's a great piece, but now you need to do your GCSE composition because that wasn't going to get you the marks. (Female teacher, in interview)

One teacher observed that the removal of free-choice composing had more to do with internal standards at the examination boards than with allowing students the possibility of choosing what to do:

> I don't know why they change a system. Presumably they changed it because it wasn't, they wanted more consistency amongst moderators, I don't know. I think students would certainly be happy with the free choice, it may well encourage more students to take GCSE music rather than being put off it by the fact they've got to compose in a certain style. (Male teacher, in interview)

This is an interesting viewpoint, as this teacher clearly feels that the restrictive nature of GCSE composing acts as a disincentive to students taking the subject as an option at KS4.

Being required to compose in certain styles has been an *idée fixe* among many of the interviewees, and the free text responses within the Phase 1 and 2 surveys also bore this out. Urban and popular styles are felt to be hardest hit by this, and this dissatisfaction could lead to a move away from GCSE music, and towards the relative freedoms offered by BTEC, creative/media diplomas, and other examinations. It is certainly an issue which some longer-serving teachers feel has changed for the worse from the early days of GCSE.

There is a long-standing dichotomy in music education as to whether the *process* of composing is assessed, or whether assessment is that of the *product* which results. We asked our interviewees during Phase 3 whether there was an issue for them between assessment of process and assessment of product. For most teachers, the assessment was firmly entrenched in the product, and they had no wish to change this:

> *Teacher (female):* No, we assess the outcome, it is purely outcome, you've got to, we make a CD, and listen to it, mark the CD. The process is completely divorced from it.

> *Interviewer:* Would you like to be able to do that? Some boards for drama and art have marks available for process.

> *Teacher:* No I don't. Getting them to produce an outcome which they're pleased with, and that sounds great is better. . . . I think it's wishy-washy, well you put a lot of effort in or, you've demonstrated over time that you've made this better, I just think that sounds a bit wishy-washy to be honest.

This notion, of process being 'wishy-washy' in assessment terms, was linked by some to a potential increase in workload for both teacher and student:

> No, not really. They'd have to do a lot more writing and be much more organised. A proper compositional diary which I have to confess we don't do. (Male teacher, in interview)

It could also be seen as work which did not add much to the final grade:

> Yeah, I'm not quite sure really. The only way I suppose is to have a progression of the compositions you've been working on from the start, and how they progress as they go along. . . . I don't know if it would just create more work that's not really needed I suppose. (Male teacher, in interview)

However, there is a pragmatic response, which one teacher recognised, that although process matters, it is product which is easiest to assess.

> I think that the thing that we ought to be trying to teach at any of these Key Stages is composing. And what we end up measuring is composition. So yes you end up measuring product, whereas the interesting thing is process. But that's partly because product is easier to measure and you measure the thing that can be more easily measured. (Male teacher, in interview)

This is an interesting response, in that outcome is measured because it is easier so to do. This has strong links with the observation that 'we started out with the aim of making the important measurable, and ended up making only the measurable important' (Wiliam, 2000, p. 118).

But returning to process, assessment within the BTEC specification seemed to be treated by some teachers in a different way:

> BTEC is slightly different. They can do undeveloped pieces as well as a final piece, but the process, that is vital, and thinking about process helps them get a better final product. It's a bit of a strange way of working for me because I've never really done that. (Male teacher, in interview)

Some subjects, such as Drama and Art, do allow for materials related to the creative process to be included in a portfolio of evidence that is submitted for final examination, but apart from one female teacher who observed that, "I think that's such a shame because people don't necessarily get credit for how they've approached it initially" there seemed little enthusiasm for the process (rather than the product) of composing to be assessed formally at GCSE level.

Conclusion

This research has generated a number of interesting results. At Key Stage 4, considerably more time is spent on composing than other musical processes. The integrated model of music teaching and learning that should underpin music teaching at Key Stage 3 (DCSF, 2008) seems to be lost at this Key Stage. In terms of the organisation of classroom composition and the use of particular musical 'tools' within this, the use of staff notation is currently under-theorised in terms of a developmental musical thinking tool, as opposed to

what might be termed a 'storage system'. Whilst it occupies a central role in the Western Classical canon, this is clearly not the case for other styles and genres of music, or for most of what is called 'World Music'. The changing role of ICT has brought composing to a wider range of students than has hitherto been the case. Instrumental proficiency is no longer a sufficient precondition for compositional success.

In terms of the assessment of composition, it seems that music teachers are, in general, satisfied with the sorts of assessments which are being done at Key Stage 4. As a companion paper to this paper shows, this is significantly different to the situation at Key Stage 3 (ABRSM, 2008; Fautley & Savage, 2011). Criteria set by the examination boards for the assessment of composing are universally utilised. There is a feeling that examination board criteria, whilst fit for purpose, do not always reflect the effort that students have put into their work. Some styles which are 'set' by examination boards are seen as being inappropriate for some students to access. Assessment of composing almost invariably entails assessment of the compositional product. There was no wish of teachers to change this. The additional flexibility offered by BTEC examinations has been welcomed by a number of teachers. In our research, these tended to be from teachers in urban environments.

Teachers want to do the best for their students, and they want to know how to improve their learning. There was a general sense of confidence with assessment systems and teachers felt they understood them. There was some concern about using these to show all aspects of a student's learning, but, in general terms, teachers felt here that systems were working to the advantage of their learners.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix A: Phase 1 Survey Questions

1. How do pupils normally work when you teach composing at Key Stage 3:

    a. In small groups (approx. 3–6) operating within the class.
    b. In the class as a whole.
    c. As individuals.
    d. As pairs.

2. How do pupils normally work when you teach composing at Key Stage:

    a. In small groups (approx. 3–6) operating within the class.
    b. In the class as a whole.
    c. As individuals.
    d. As pairs.

3. What materials do you mainly use when you teach composing at KS3:

    a.   Published music scheme (specify which).
    b.   Your own materials.
    c.   Local Authority, or group of schools Unit of Work.

4.   What materials do you mainly use when you teach composing at KS4:

    a.   Published music scheme (specify which).
    b.   Your own materials.
    c.   Local Authority, or group of schools Unit of Work.

5.   In the paragraphs below some possible scenarios for teaching composing at Key Stages 3 and 4 are described. Please use the boxes to comment on whether you recognise and use these, and if so with which cohort of pupils:

    a.   You provide the pupils with a musical 'technical term (or terms)' stimulus, or starting point (e.g. ostinato, accelerando) and ask them to compose evidencing the use of it/them.
    b.   You provide pupils with a musical framework (e.g. ternary form, rondo, theme and variations), and ask them to compose using it.
    c.   You provide a non-musical starting point or stimulus (e.g. a picture, story, or poem), and ask them to compose using it.
    d.   You ask the pupils to compose anything they wish.
    e.   Are there any other ways of teaching composing you employ? If so, what are they?

6.   To what extent do you use ICT in composing . . . at KS3 . . . at KS4 . . .
    (*Likert Scales*) A lot – Sometimes – Seldom – Never).

7.   How do you assess composing?

    a.   At Key Stage 3?
    b.   At Key Stage 4?

8.   Thinking about the National Curriculum levels, how do you use these to make judgements about your pupils? Do you use them:

    a.   To give each piece of work a level.
    b.   To give a level to each child at least once a term.
    c.   To give a level to each child at least once a year.
    d.   To only give a level at the end of a Key Stage.

9.   Thinking about your answer to the last question, did you answer the way you did because the school expect you to provide levels?

    a.   Yes, I have to provide levels this frequently.
    b.   Partially, and also because I want to keep track of pupils.
    c.   No, I do it like this because I want to.
    d.   I don't have to provide levels except at the end of a Key Stage.

10. Do you find the National Curriculum levels helpful? Yes/No

    Please comment upon your answer.

11. If you had to say which activity took place most frequently in your classes as a basis for work in music at KS3 . . . and KS4, would it be:

    a. Composing.
    b. Performing.
    c. Listening and Appraising.

12. What is your own background and experience as a composer?

Appendix B: Phase 2 Online Survey Questions

1. When teaching composing at KS3, the majority of respondents observed that this activity took place either in small groups, or in pairs. If this is the case for you, can you say why this is? (*tick all that apply*)

    a. Easier to organise.
    b. Makes best use of time.
    c. Only have limited instruments available.
    d. Because pupils work better together.
    e. Means I can get round groups of pupils in one lesson, whereas I might not get round all the individuals.
    f. Other (free text response).
    g. Does not apply to me.

2. When teaching composing at KS4, the majority of respondents observed that this activity took place individually. If this is the case for you, can you say how you manage the changeover from group/paired work to individual composing? (*free text response*).

3. Many respondents said they use their own materials for teaching KS3. If this applies to you can you say why this is? (*tick all that apply*).

    a. Not found any published materials suitable.
    b. Would rather spend budget on other things.
    c. Wish to personalise to suit my own pupils.
    d. Other (free text response).

4. Many respondents said they use their own materials for teaching GCSE. If this applies to you can you say why this is? (*tick all that apply*).

    a. Not found any published materials suitable.
    b. Published materials don't suit the board/syllabus I teach.
    c. Would rather spend budget on other things.
    d. Wish to personalise to suit my own pupils.
    e. Other (*free text response*).

5. Have you planned your composing teaching at KS3 to be sequential, in that you start the pupils with a few skills/concepts, and then get harder; or do you have a series of themes or starting points which in themselves show progression; or do you increase complexity in some other way? (*free text response*).

6. If so, are you able to say what are the key compositional concepts/skills that you teach ….

    a. At KS3 (*free text response*).
    b. At KS4 (*free text response*).

7. Are you able to describe how you order these skills

    a. At KS3 (*free text response*).
    b. At KS4 (*free text response*)

8. More teachers said they use ICT in teaching composing at KS3 than KS4. Drawing on your own experiences, would you care to speculate on why this might be the case? (*free text response*).

9. In the previous survey, we described a series of scenarios/stimulae for teaching composition and asked you to react to each. These were:

    a. Using a term like 'ostinato' as a starting point.
    b. Using a musical stimulus, e.g. a rhythm or melody.
    c. Composing within a particular framework or structure.
    d. Using a non-musical stimulus as inspiration.
    e. Taking a personal issue as inspiration.
    f. Free composing.

We didn't give the option for you to describe any other methods you use! Please use the space below to describe any methods, other than those above, that you use (e.g. group improvisation; remixing with sequencers) and indicate how successful or unsuccessful they tend to be.

10. We hear a lot about formative and summative assessment these days, how do these two types of assessment feature in teaching and learning in your music lessons? (*free text response*).

11. From previous responses, it seems that at KS3 the time given over to practical music making activities is split more-or-less equally between composing and performing. However, at GCSE very little time is given over to performing, with most time being taken up with composing, and listening taking up most of the rest. Is this because: (*tick one/all that apply?*).

    a. At GCSE they have instrumental lessons, so I let the instrumental teachers deal with this.
    b. They perform anyway, I need to concentrate on composing and listening.
    c. There isn't time for everything, composing and listening is where they need most teaching.
    d. Given that this is true, there is perhaps more potential to incorporate performance into composition.
    e. Other (free text response).

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12. Some music teachers have to teach music as a 'twilight', or un-timetabled class. Is this the case for you? (Yes/No/Both timetabled and Twilight).

13. Thinking about KS3 and the National Curriculum levels, many music teachers use these and share them with their pupils during the course of KS3. If you do this, do you find it helpful, and if so, how? (*free text response*).

14. Still thinking about KS3 and the National Curriculum levels, the QCA guidance says 'Please note, level descriptions are not designed to be used to 'level' individual pieces of work', yet from the earlier responses it seems many music teachers do this. Would you care to speculate on why this might be? (*free text response*).

15. Turning now to GCSE composing assessment, many music teachers did not feel that the marking criteria give a fair representation of the student's effort. Would you care to speculate on why this might be the case? (*free text response*).

16. Still thinking about GCSE composing assessment, do you feel that you have to steer your pupils composing in a certain way/style/format in order to maximise their mark potential? If so, what, and how? (*free text response*).

17. When you're assessing GCSE compositions for awarding body submission, which of the following statements would you say apply to you? (*tick all that apply*).

    a. I have a good idea of what mark/grade the composition should get before I come to apply the criteria specifically and I try to ensure the criteria-based marking reflects my initial impression

    b. I rank order all of my cohort's compositions – strongest to weakest – and then mark to the criteria, ensuring that the marks and grade boundaries reflect fairly the complete spread

    c. I rank each composition very much individually, without reference to other compositions from the cohort

    d. I make frequent reference to the awarding body's exemplar compositions/marks

    e. I consult with teacher colleagues on compositions' marks/grades

    f. Please describe any other specific circumstances/processes . . .

18. If you have pupils who perform or compose in what might be called contemporary popular genres, or with music technologies, do you feel the GCSE assessment criteria, or GCSE examiners, allow for this to be on a level playing field with other styles of music? (*free text response*).

19. On similar lines, how easy/difficult do you find assessing compositions of diverse styles and scopes against the same mark/criteria scheme? (*free text response*).

Appendix C: Phase 3 Interview Questions

1. Many respondents said they produced their own materials for teaching composing at KS3 as they either couldn't find suitable ones for purchase, or they preferred to personalise – is this your experience?

    a. If so can you give an example of how you have produced some personalised resources for KS3?

    b. In your experience, is the same thing true at KS4?

2. To what extent is composition at Key Stage 3 and 4 really about personal expression?

   a. Is there any sense of development in this area between the Key Stages?
   b. Does GCSE music force pupils into a straitjacket of pre-selected criteria?

      i. Is this different at KS3?

3. How do you go about managing the change from group composing at KS3, to individual composing at KS4?

   a. Do you have any strategies or approaches for individual composing work at KS3?
   b. How do you manage the process of developing pupils' skills, understanding, etc so that they are confident individual composers by the end of KS4?

4. What are the composing skills that you are seeking to develop?

   a. Is the musical context important for the development of these skills?
   b. Could you differentiate between different types of context (programmatic or abstract) for their development?

5. In their responses many teachers identified their own models of progression for teaching and learning composing. Are you able to articulate what you have done, and how you have this?

   a. Are you able to provide any examples of this?
   b. If you have broken these down into a series of separate elements, how have you done this?

      i. Are there any consequences of doing this?

6. Does challenge in composing increase during the course of each key stage?

   a. If so, how?

7. Do you think the skills required to be an effective composer are always based on a clear developmental structure of musical concepts (in other words, are there some things that you *have* to know, or be able to do, in order to be an effective composer)?

   NC levels of attainment

8. Are you able to use these to show development, particularly in composing, between years 7–9, and then 9–11?
9. Have you rewritten the NC levels into pupil-speak?

   a. For a particular project/s.
   b. Generally

      i. If so, do you have examples you could share with us?

10. If there is an overtly bureaucratic system of assessment at a whole school level, are you able to mediate/mitigate this?

11. How do you own views or beliefs about assessment in music education relate to this?

    a. How do subject centred practices relate to/compare with/situate within the wider school policy?

12. Some commentators have observed that as a result of government or school initiatives, many teachers have become confused by the purposes of assessment. Are you able to articulate briefly what, for you, the main differences between formative and summative assessment are?

GCSE composition assessment

13. During KS4 many respondents observed that they felt performing was the least important topic to engage with, as either it was dealt with by others (e.g. Peri's) or the pupils would be performing anyway. Is this your experience?

    a. What strategies have you developed to unify the composing – performing – listening processes?

14. Still at KS4, what do you think about the possibility of rank ordering compositions based on the paragraph of information that you have received?

15. Teachers liked the idea of having assessment criteria and said they would be uncomfortable without this. Why do you think this is?

16. At the moment, the composition criteria are prescribed by the exam boards. What would happen if you were allowed to select a few criteria (perhaps from a list) and then apply them to each individual composition?

    a. Certain musical styles, genres and traditions prioritise musical features so this system might be more inherently musical?

17. Is there an issue for you between assessment of process – composing, and assessment of product – composition?

    a. Does your GCSE board do this?

        i. If so how?

    b. Would you like this (i.e. marks available for the process of composing ('making'), rather like they are in some boards for Drama and Art?

18. Do you feel GCSE composing is about passing an exam or about developing musical skills?

19. Does the current system really encourage or develop the core value of the activity of composing?

20. Some respondents felt there were issues associated with different musical styles, with some contemporary genres being discriminate against. Is this your experience?

    a. Can you give examples of prejudice from the moderating process in respect of musical styles? (Where some (e.g. contemporary) musical styles often do worse?)

21. Some respondents found it problematic to make comparative judgements across a range of musical styles for assessment purposes. Is this the case for you?

22. What role does music notation play in a composition process?

    i. At KS3?
    ii. At KS4?
    iii. Do you value this?
    iv. Do you teach for it?
    v. Do you think the GCSE board values it?

    b. What is the role of music notation in the composition *process* rather than as a formalised, final product?