Musical understanding: the philosophy, content and interpretation of National Curriculum music in England

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For nearly 30 years, the National Curriculum (NC) in England has been a significant influence on curriculum music (i.e. regular, classroom music lessons for all pupils across Key Stages 1-3).

Teachers have planned schemes of work referencing in detail how they will fulfil the requirements of the NC; head teachers have demanded assessments which judge pupils against the NC expectations; and commercial companies have promoted their resources by showing how they will enable teachers to deliver a music curriculum which covers every aspect of the NC.

Yet the NC has changed several times over this period: in total there have been four versions for primary schools, and five for secondary schools. Given its influence, it is important to ask whether the NC has described a consistent philosophy for curriculum music and if so, whether the changing content has always matched that philosophy. In particular, we should ask about the role of musical understanding, and its relationship to the acquisition of practical skills and theoretical concepts: how has this been described by the NC and interpreted by teachers over time?

Musical understanding is perhaps the most difficult aspect of musical learning to define, but, in the decades before the NC came into being, it was often assumed to be the most significant. Did the NC sustain this thinking and how did teachers and schools interpret its requirements?

This document is a narrative exploration of these ideas. It considers:

- how music educators thought about classroom music, immediately before NC music was prescribed as part of England’s legal educational framework
- the different versions of the NC’s music requirements, from 1992 – 2015, and how teachers have interpreted these requirements
- the guidance provided over time by different National Curriculum authorities, and by Ofsted
- the evidence for positive outcomes that result from a focus on musical understanding, and how the underlying story of this narrative can best inform future developments for classroom music within the NC
Curriculum music before the NC: determining a philosophy and a process for musical learning

Young professionals may be surprised to know that there was a time when music teachers had to decide for themselves what their philosophy of curriculum music was, what the content of their courses should be and how to resource and deliver their ideas in the classroom.

In fact, many of today’s teachers were themselves taught by teachers who had planned lessons based around the requirements of the NC – they have known nothing else.

Yet there is indeed a long and proud history of music education in this country. Building on earlier ideas around singing for all, musical appreciation and working creatively with instruments, significant developmental work had been undertaken in the decades just before the NC was created. One of the most important contributors to this pre-NC work was the York Project (officially, the Schools Council Project Music in the Secondary School Curriculum), a 10-year-long research programme started in the early 1970’s and based at the University of York under the leadership of Professor John Paynter.

This engaged with serving teachers, music services and local authorities ‘to promote widespread discussion on the subject of music’s curriculum role... it was expected that out of these discussion should be developed some guiding principles’.

It may seem invidious to draw out single threads from such a vast and reflective project. However, for the purposes of this review of the NC, it does seem relevant to draw out a particular idea which was prevalent across music education at the time, and which certainly influenced the philosophy guiding the early work on the NC for music: the underpinning importance of musical understanding. In a summary of the York Project’s ‘guiding principles’, John Paynter states:

‘The content of the ‘music lesson’ should aim to develop musical understanding in all pupils’.

There is no precise definition of what this musical understanding is, but it is clearly a significant priority, and elsewhere in these guiding principles, Paynter begins to hint at its nature:

“‘Theory” cannot by itself lead to musical understanding; it exists principally to explain what has already been experienced’.

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2 Ibid
3 Ibid
This starts to imply that musical understanding is a deeply embedded form of knowledge, arising from direct, practical experience of sound and its organisation. This is reinforced later, when Paynter states that:

‘The true rudiments of music are sensitivity to and delight in sound and its expressive qualities, and the progression we create must be within this mode of understanding and derived from musical experience itself’.

This presumption that musical understanding should be the aim of music in the classroom was later described in a similar way by d’Reen Struthers in her book *What Primary Teachers Should Know About Music for the National Curriculum*. Although published a decade later than the Paynter materials, it carries similar assumptions about the purpose of curriculum music. When talking about planning for music, she says:

‘The sequencing of activities may seem a logical way forward. But what musical understanding could be drawn from each activity?’

Later, when considering how to monitor musical progress, she says:

‘However, merely accumulating a list of songs sung, the music listened to or noting the musical games played, etc., will not give us information about how the pupils have developed their musical understanding’.

Here again, then, is the presumption that the aim of curriculum music is musical understanding, though without a clear definition of what is meant by the term. The Her Majesty’s Inspectorate (HMI) document *Music from 5 to 16*, part of the Curriculum Matters 4 series and published in 1985, similarly implies that classroom music is much more than skills, activities and theory, stating that:

‘by working directly with the raw materials for music, young people can best discover something of its nature – its vitality, its evocative power and the range of its expressive qualities’.

This sentence seems to convey two important messages: the first is that a broad awareness of music is the aim, while the second is that the best way of achieving this is through practical, creative exploration of sound (i.e. ‘by working directly with the raw materials’). We shall explore this ‘duopoly’ later, but at this point, it is simply worth noting the importance of the hierarchy being described: development of understanding is the crucial aim, while the practical activities (rightly seen in NC lessons) are simply the means to that end, not an end in themselves. Indeed, in the list of HMI’s seven ‘aims of music education’ that follow, only one refers to ‘the necessary skills and concepts while engaged in musical activity’. The others all refer to much broader and deeper ideas such as ‘develop a sensitive response to sound in general and in particular to those organised patterns of sound called music’; and ‘develop insight through music into areas of experience some of which cannot easily be verbalised’: in other words, develop musical understanding!

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4 Ibid
5 Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, and a lecturer at the Institute of Education
6 Struthers, d. *What Primary Teachers Should Know About Music for the National Curriculum (Primary Bookshelf Series)* Hodder and Staughton (1994)
7 Ibid
8 Ibid
9 Department of Education and Science (DES) *Music from 5 to 16* Her Majesty’s Stationary Office (HMSO) (1985)
At this time, there seemed to be a struggle to articulate in words exactly what this ‘musical understanding’ might be, even though it seems to have been widely assumed that it was the most important aspect of curriculum music. Where there were attempts to define it, they came from a growing awareness that music education had to demonstrate how it could develop learning, rather than merely define musical activity. More specifically, could music educators articulate the different sorts of knowledge that would lead to effective musical learning?

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, therefore, a body of work was developed, which described musical knowledge. This consistently described the importance of pupils developing knowledge of music, not knowledge about music. Music educators were consequently reinforcing the notion of ‘understanding’ as the key, because ‘knowledge of’ was seen as a deep, personal awareness of music, stemming from direct acquaintance and engagement with the sound of music itself. This was summarised in the UK Council for Music Education and Training (UKCMET) document NC Music Guidelines, which stated that:

> ‘Understanding music is more like knowing a person than knowing a fact, it is knowledge by direct acquaintance; knowledge of music rather than about music’.

Again, there is a presumption here that the primary focus should be on musical understanding, but there is also a clear message that ‘knowledge of’ is very different type of knowledge from ‘knowledge about’, or ‘propositional knowledge’ as it is sometimes known.

John Paynter had also noted this difference, in his ‘guiding principles’:

> ‘knowing about music can never be a satisfactory substitute for the living reality of musical experience’.

This distinction was further articulated by Professor Keith Swanwick, who as we shall see later played a significant role in the definitions and wording of the very first National Curriculum for music. He had described the importance of ‘musical knowledge of’ in his book A basis for music education, first published in 1979 (a decade before the NC was first introduced):

> ‘Knowing music is something like knowing a person. We cannot really believe that we know people because they happen to be around us, or because we pass them in the street or stand crushed together on a train or bus. This is no more knowing a person than to have the statistical information that someone weighs so much, is six feet tall, lives in Leeds and owns a car and a washing machine’.

This was a theme he constantly returned to: by the time of his 1994 (post-NC) book ‘Musical knowledge: intuition, analysis and music education’, he was more explicit. Criticising early drafts of the NC, he says:

> ‘Specifying ‘knowing’ as a separate process entity disconnects it from musical practice, encouraging a view of musical knowledge as merely propositional, factual – knowing about music rather than knowledge of music’.

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12 Swanwick, K. A Basis for Music Education NFER (1979)
Later still, the different natures of musical knowledge have been explored in various publications by, among others, Philpott, Spruce and Finney. However, their thrust is broadly the same, asserting that while there may be different forms of musical knowledge, the most important is ‘knowledge of’. This is a way of developing an internalised, personal ‘model’ of how music works, created through direct, practical engagement with music, and it leads directly to musical understanding. The notion of an internal ‘model’ as an essential part of educational understanding, and the need for it to be constructed through practical engagement, was picked up even later (in 2005) by the National Secondary Strategy’s generic Pedagogy and Practice materials:

‘Understanding is a primary goal of education. Understanding is best thought of as having a representation or model in the mind that corresponds to the situation or phenomenon being encountered. Engagement is about helping pupils to develop these mental models; it is through such structures that they construct understanding’.

It is no surprise, therefore, that we shall see later that the idea of understanding as a central philosophical basis for education was at the heart of the Strategy’s Key Stage (KS) 3 Music programme.

Despite all this work showing that musical understanding, or ‘knowledge of’ music, should be a fundamental aim of music education, there was still little clarity about precisely what the detailed nature of that knowledge should be. It was clearly viewed as the most important form of knowledge, and it was agreed that other forms of musical knowledge (later broadly characterised as ‘knowledge about’ – largely for theory and concepts – and ‘knowledge how to’ – largely for skills) were subservient to it. Nevertheless, there was no precise definition of what this understanding or ‘knowledge of’ might look like, covering either a single, overall definition, or a series of statements describing successive stages of progression.

Such a definition began to emerge, though, mainly through Professor Swanwick’s publications. His publication of Music, Mind and Education in 1988 was a further important contribution to the thinking on musical knowledge and understanding. His triangular model with the key points of sound materials, expressive character and structural relationships built on other work by Ross and Bunting which had begun not only to describe possible details of musical knowledge and understanding, but also the nature of these at various stages of young people’s maturity. It also built on the famous spiral of musical development, published by Swanwick and June Tillman in the British Journal of Music Education in 1986, a seminal study of progress in pupils’ compositions. This began to lay out in some detail the progression of what might be termed musical understanding, even if this was not a term used by Swanwick and Tillman themselves in their joint research. When viewed collectively, these publications now provided a full philosophical and psychological rationale for musical understanding, together with written definitions and musical examples of what it might look and sound like at different stages of development.

We should also explore one other key issue with regard to the development of pre-NC music education philosophy. This was more to do with the processes of musical learning than the content or knowledge requirements of classroom music, but it was a crucial part of the ‘message’ being developed at that time.

Music educators were very clear about two principles:

1. While musical understanding was the aim, the way that it should be developed was through practical, creative engagement in music making: it could not be developed by silent study!

2. Even though this required lots of sound-based, musical activity in the classroom, teachers had to be very clear that education required more than simple activity: education is actually about learning, and this had to be planned for in some detail.

We can see the first principle being described by John Paynter:

‘musical experience is primarily a matter of working with sounds and of learning to control the medium’.

HMI made a similar point:

‘Music is essentially a practical subject. Those who, however modestly, actually perform and compose music are more likely to respond to it with understanding than those who do not’.

This neatly reinforces the point that musical understanding is the aim, but articulates very clearly the need to experience it practically. Indeed, the interdependence of both understanding and the practical work which leads to it was succinctly summarised by Professor Swanwick. Although this quote is taken again from his criticisms of early drafts of the NC, it shows clearly how a philosophy regarding the necessary processes of musical learning was already well established:

‘Musical knowledge is again made a travesty by being completely split off from musical action and is confined to the facts of history and ‘theory’. Composing and performing seem to have become mindless activities in which understanding is neither acquired nor demonstrated; this is obvious nonsense’.

This quote also demonstrates the clear view that musical activity per se has limited value – musical learning is the aim, and the activity is simply there to enable that learning. Again, Swanwick is very clear on this issue:

‘This model...falls into the conceptual trap...: the failure to recognise that activities and learning outcomes are on two quite different dimensions – process and product – both essential but in logically different categories; and

‘Composing and performing are essentially activities. What has been attained is surely what has been learned, the residue left with us, some change of insight or level of responsiveness, that which we take away with us when an activity has stopped’.

So over a period of some 20 years, music educators were both reaffirming the importance of musical understanding, and beginning to describe in some detail the knowledge that contributed to it, how this knowledge developed over time, and the practical processes through which it could be learnt. This meant that by the time that the NC was being proposed, there was a clear and increasingly sophisticated philosophy of music education in place. There were still some gaps to fill, but English music education had moved from a mere statement and acceptance of the importance of a ‘felt’ musical understanding, to a position of clarity in which the nature and progression of this musical understanding were becoming increasingly well-defined.

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18 Department of Education and Science (DES) *Music from 5 to 16* Her Majesty’s Stationary Office (HMSO) (1985)
20 Ibid
21 Ibid
The development of the music requirements for the first NC in England took almost two years.

The National Curriculum Music Working Group was established in July 1990, and consisted of a dozen eminent music educators from all areas of the sector, under the chairmanship of Sir John Manduell, Principal of the Royal Northern College of Music. The Group produced an Interim Report by the end of 1990; and in response to comments from both the Secretary of State and a wide range of organisations and individuals, a set of final Proposals in August 1991. These were then redrafted by the National Curriculum Council in January 1992 before a final set of revisions were made and the legal requirements were published in April 1992 for first teaching in September 1992.

During this period, the requirements underwent several significant structural changes and alterations to content. Many of these shifts were concerned with what were known as ‘Attainment Targets’, which specified ‘what is to be expected [of pupils] at the end of each key stage’\(^{22}\). Although this may seem arcane, the structuring of the expected learning reflects fundamental beliefs about the philosophy that underpins the subject’s teaching. Why were there so many and such significant changes during the development of this first NC for music?

For the purposes of this narrative, we first need to recognise that the Working Group’s Interim Report reflected quite clearly the predominant thinking of the time and its first considerations confirmed that:

\[\text{‘The main aim of music education in schools is to foster pupils’ sensitivity to, and their understanding and enjoyment of, music, through an active involvement in listening, composing and performing’}^{24}.\]

This encapsulated much of that current thinking: music should be about understanding sound and music, and that the processes of learning – while crucially practical – should merely lead to a broader understanding.

Unfortunately, the Interim Report contained no precise definition over what this ‘understanding’ really was, despite the latest work of Swanwick and others. There was, however, an acknowledgement of the latest thinking, through descriptions of the differences between broad, overarching understanding derived from ‘knowledge of’, and the contributory aspects of ‘knowledge how to’ and ‘knowledge about’. The report also promoted the existing view that all forms of musical knowledge should be acquired through practical experiences, suggesting that musical knowledge was ‘only of value in the contexts of listening, composing and performing’\(^{25}\).


\(^{23}\) Bold added here by author for emphasis

\(^{24}\) Ibid

\(^{25}\) Ibid
The Working Group’s final Proposals sustained these core ideas, retaining the ‘main aim’ from the Interim Report quoted above, and reinforcing its message where possible:

‘Of the many respondents who commented... the largest group favoured... incorporating ‘Knowing’ within each of the activities of performing, composing and listening. Their main argument was that musical knowledge and understanding is most effectively gained through these activities... one message came through strongly: that composing, because of its central importance to the development of musical understanding, should retain a clear identity’.

From these, and similar statements, a very clear rationale could be drawn: music in the classroom was about understanding, this was a form of knowledge best described at that time as ‘knowledge of’, and the processes that most effectively enabled this understanding were practical. However, some tensions remained. Although the underpinning philosophy seemed clear, the Working Group had stated from the outset of its work that the ‘Programmes of Study’ – the detailed content of the music NC – would be described in terms of performing, composing and listening. As they said in the Interim Report,

‘These three terms are now commonly used in syllabuses and schemes of work, and embodied in the GCSE National Criteria for Music (1985) which require that a music course must include listening, composing and performing... We believe that there is now, as a result of experience of teaching in this way both for GCSE and with younger age groups, a broad consensus... as to the desirability of making these activities central to music education’.

Although this focus on practical activity for the final Attainment Targets might have seemed at odds with the underpinning expectation of understanding, the final Proposals expressed the Programmes of Study in a clever way: all the requirements for performing, composing and listening, as well as theory and awareness of different musical styles, genres and traditions, were laid out in a single block. This was an important decision, implying the very definite view that all of the detailed learning taking place in music classrooms should be integrated into a holistic process, out of which would emerge the overarching understanding that was ultimately being sought.

However, despite this consistent view, both the Secretary of State (Kenneth Clarke) and the National Curriculum Council (NCC), charged with determining the final recommendations to government, wanted significant changes to be made.

26 Department of Education and Science (DES) *Music for ages 5 to 14* DES (1991)
27 Bold added here by author for emphasis
29 Department of Education and Science (DES) *Music for ages 5 to 14* DES (1991)
The January 1992 report of the Council\textsuperscript{30} made three big decisions, which were then reflected in the layout of the requirements and content:

1. There was no mention of any underpinning philosophy or ‘aim of music education’. Consequently, there was no suggestion that the practical activities for learning (performing, composing, etc.), should collectively lead to any kind of overarching understanding.

2. There was an increased emphasis on knowledge about musical history, and in particular about the music of the western classical traditions.

3. Crucially, the Programmes of Study for Performing and Composing, and for Listening and Appraising, were laid out as separate sections, alongside the individual Attainment Targets. Although there were other statements in the introductory section recommending integrated musical learning, there was a clear implication from the visual design that it was important for separate skills and knowledge to be acquired. Therefore, in order to reflect the way the document was laid out, pupils should simply be taught to sing, to play instruments, to compose, etc.

The revised structure, content and specific wording of these NCC proposals alarmed many, who feared that they could lead to dry, academic study ‘about’ music rather than creative exploration ‘of’ music. In particular, the concerns about the study of western musical history led to significant complaints which reached the national media. The story of this episode is captured very well by Professor Swanwick in his book \textit{Musical Knowledge: Intuition, analysis and music education} \textsuperscript{31}. Here, he articulates some of the key problems associated with the NCC proposals, and especially about the number and nature of the Attainment Targets. In particular, we might note these comments:

> ‘We could more reasonably specify just one attainment target, knowing and understanding music, define this properly, and then specify the major classroom activities through which these outcomes are brought about’.

Here we see a very strong echo of the earlier ‘aim’ of the Working Group: the focus should be on musical understanding, and this should be developed through practical engagement with sounds and musical processes. And as we will see later, not only does this capture the thinking of many in the music education sector of the time, it was also prophetic of the design for the NC Levels for music when they were introduced nearly a decade later.

Given this stance, there is still a question about why, even at this late stage, there was not a stronger push for a music NC, which more explicitly focussed on musical understanding (broadly speaking, ‘knowledge of’). This would in turn have enabled the necessary skills (‘knowledge how to’) and theoretical, historical, and analytical information (broadly speaking, ‘knowledge about’) to be described in a way, which showed how they should contribute to the development of that overarching understanding. Some of the answer might be revealed by Professor Swanwick, in his comments about the final proposals:

> ‘However, in a large-scale consultation exercise, most teachers and other musicians supported this formulation’ [that is, of the Attainment Targets being framed around performing, composing and appraising]\textsuperscript{32}.

\textsuperscript{30} National Curriculum Council (NCC) \textit{National Curriculum Council Consultation Report: Music} NCC (1992)

\textsuperscript{31} Swanwick, K. \textit{Musical Knowledge: Intuition, analysis and music education} Routledge (1994)

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid
As the Working Group had noted, the introduction of the GCSE criteria around similar headings was already having a significant impact on thinking about curriculum music. At this late stage of the proceedings, others may also have thought there was little chance of persuading the Secretary of State that a completely new structure was both appropriate and capable of gaining approval from across the whole sector.

Nevertheless, Swanwick was able to make a significant contribution to the shape of the final NC requirements[^33], in two particular areas:

1. **The titles and wording of the Attainment Targets were rephrased.** ‘Understanding’ was added to the title of the first Attainment Target, so that it became ‘The development of the ability to perform and compose music with understanding’[^34]. At the same time, the second Attainment Target was renamed as ‘Listening and Appraising’. It was also reworded so that instead of having a primary focus on musical history and theory, it described a more inclusive requirement to focus mainly on listening and appraising music.

2. **There was a clear suggestion that there should be a 2:1 balance in favour of the practical elements, reinforcing the idea that musical learning best happens through direct, creative engagement with music making.** In truth, this was not part of the requirements for learning, but did appear in the guidance on assessment[^35], which was published alongside the teaching requirements.

[^34]: Italic added here by author for emphasis
From this flawed but ‘acceptable’ position in 1992, however, the NC for music underwent several changes as major revisions to the requirements for all subjects were made. While each of the revisions were instigated because there was a national view that the complete NC needed updating (and the music requirements had to meet these new expectations for all subjects), a discernible pattern of changes to the music requirements emerges.

Fundamentally, this resulted in a growing emphasis on musical understanding being explicitly written into the requirements. For example, the 1995 version included this statement (as the first musical requirement, in a separate box):

‘Pupils’ understanding and enjoyment of music should be developed through activities that bring together requirements from both Performing and Composing and Listening and Appraising wherever possible’.

Moreover, this statement appeared identically at the head of each Key Stage, so there should have been no doubt that it was an essential requirement. Despite the quirky requirement that all pupils should be legally required to enjoy their music, it did at least ensure that this overarching aim (which had been removed from the first NC) was restored. It also reinforced the idea that this understanding was to be developed through practical activities, thereby confirming their relative importance and roles.

Similarly, in the next revision of 1999 the opening ‘importance of music’ statement for music said:

‘Music is a powerful, unique form of communication that can change the way pupils feel, think and act. It brings together intellect and feeling and enables personal expression, reflections and emotional development. As an integral part of culture, past and present, it helps pupils understand themselves and relate to others, forging important links between the home, schools and the wider world. The teaching of music develops pupils’ ability to listen and appreciate a wide variety of music and to make judgements about musical quality. It encourages active involvement in different forms of amateur music making, both individual and communal, develop a sense of group identity and togetherness. It also increases self-discipline and creativity, aesthetic sensitivity and fulfilment’.

Although this appeared on a separate, introductory page (and was therefore often missed, or at least given scant regard, by many teachers), it is hard not to notice that this could be seen as a very broad definition of ‘musical understanding’ – that ‘main aim’ which Paynter had described some twenty years beforehand. It is also noticeable that it fails to mention anything about specific practical skills, or theory, or notation.

36 Department for Education (DfE) Music in the National Curriculum Her Majesty’s Stationary Office (HMSO) Publication Centre (1995)
37 Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) The National Curriculum for England: music DfEE and QCA publication (1999)
The 1999 version of the NC contained similar messages within its specific content, which incorporated the following updates:

1. The detailed areas of learning now had subtly altered titles. Rather than being called simply by their generic skill terms (i.e. ‘performing’) we now had ‘controlling sounds’, ‘creating and developing musical ideas’, etc. It is true that these were then summarised by the more familiar terms (i.e. ‘composing skills’, etc.), but these new forms of wording indicated that the NC should be about developing learning through the development of skills – not simply the acquisition of skills themselves.

2. The detailed requirements for learning about ‘musical elements’ were relegated to ‘guidance notes’. This was an attempt to realign classroom practice so that, for instance, musical lessons were not merely about the separate exploration of ‘pitch’, ‘timbre’ or ‘structure’. We will see more about the reasons for this change when we look at the guidance for the NC from national bodies, but it was clearly designed to move learning away from a fragmented, theoretical basis. The hope was that an approach based on understanding music more holistically would emerge.

3. There were new and explicit ideas within the ‘listening and applying knowledge and understanding’ requirements. These required pupils to explore not only what music consists of, but also how and why different contexts and purposes change the way music sounds. This was critical in conveying a stronger message that musical learning should be about understanding music, rather than simply developing skills or acquiring knowledge about music. Moreover, the wording of this aspect of the curriculum (through the use of the phrase ‘applying knowledge and understanding’) meant that there was a clear expectation that this form of learning should be developed through practical, creative engagement.

4. The focus on understanding was reinforced strongly by the new NC Levels\(^\text{38}\), which were created for music as part of this revision of the NC. The thinking that had led to the wording of these Levels was rather hidden from view, but the Levels were unequivocally about musical understanding. We shall again explore this later when reviewing the guidance from national bodies; but there are two essential points to note here about the wording and structure of the Levels, and also one other point to be made about the relationship of the Levels related to national research on musical understanding:

a) The first sentence of each Level is essential to the meaning and definition of that standard, and it is always about musical understanding. As later stated by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in their music update of 2001\(^\text{39}\):

> 'each level of attainment begins with the understanding that should be shown through different responses. It is not the intention that teachers assess performing, composing and appraising and then come to a balanced judgement. Instead it is hoped that they will look for the degree of understanding shown then work to help the pupils demonstrate this across all activities'.

\(^{38}\) Ibid

\(^{39}\) Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) music update QCA publication (2001)
b) The Levels were written in a single paragraph. They were never intended to be split up into separate statements for performing, composing and listening, since this completely contradicted their design. Instead, the Levels were created as a single sentence explaining the overarching understanding, followed by a series of continuous statements that explained what this understanding might look like when pupils were undertaking integrated practical activities. The same 2001 QCA advice said:

‘The one attainment target is not simply an overall framework into which are placed the three discrete activities of performing, composing and appraising. The single target is focused on the heart of the music curriculum i.e. the musical understanding, which can be developed and demonstrated through all activities’.

c) The progression described by the first sentences clearly drew upon the progression described in the Swanwick and Tillman research investigating children’s composing. While the wording was different, and perhaps lacked the academic rigour that others were developing at this time, the connection back to this research was significant: it linked the Levels all the way back to the work of the York Project, and to the journey that music teachers, advisers and academics had been on while developing their core thinking around musical understanding.

The 2008 NC revisions (which only applied to KS3 pupils) went even further. In this version of the NC, the ‘Importance of music’ statement was retained and made more prominent, in line with the need to reflect the wider revisions for all subjects. However, it still steadfastly omitted any mention of developing specific skills or ‘knowledge about’, emphasising instead how understanding music reinforces personal development and awareness. Furthermore, there were no titles for key areas of learning in the detailed requirements, which referred to the activities of performing, composing and listening. Instead, there were Key Concepts including: Integration of practice, Cultural understanding, Critical understanding, Creativity and Communication. The key processes did refer to the more usual headings of performing, composing and listening, etc., but placed a very important and clear rider alongside them:

‘These should be seen as interrelated skills and processes that enable the development and demonstration of musicianship and musical understanding’.

The most recent (2013) version of the NC for music (for both primary and secondary pupils) is therefore a clear departure from this increasingly explicit focus on musical understanding, which had developed from 1992 to 2008. There is instead a strong focus on skills and the history of classical music (the latter being a throw-back to the NCC proposals of 1992), and ‘musical understanding’ is not present in any clear way. Understanding is written through the document, but it seems to have different meanings, which merely causes confusion.

41 Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) Music Programme of study: Key Stage 3 QCA publication (2007)
42 Department for Education (DfE) National Curriculum in England: music programmes of study DfE publication (2013)
At KS3, for instance, pupils are expected to:

- understand and explore how music is created, produced and communicated
- understand musical structures
- understand a wide range of musical contexts and styles
- develop a deepening understanding of the music that they perform and to which they listen, and its history

These are all different forms of understanding, and do not seem to relate to the musical understanding which was supposed to have been at the heart of classroom music for the previous forty years. A ‘wordle’ from the Primary Music Toolkit suggests that understanding is significant (see below: ‘understand’ is the largest single word), but this confusion about what the understanding refers to makes it difficult to justify any kind of continuity. In summary, the NC had a slightly shaky start: although the initial Proposals fitted well with the broad consensus of the time, the first published version of the NC made some significant alterations to these Proposals. The changes undermined both the importance of focussing on musical understanding and the notion that practical skills and knowledge about music should be seen as subsidiary learning. Thereafter, successive revisions to the NC for music (at least, up until the anomalous 2013 version) made strenuous and increasingly explicit efforts both to re-instate the importance of musical understanding and to indicate that developing skills and acquiring theoretical concepts were a means to an end – not an end in themselves.

Redesigned from ‘wordle’ in the Primary Music Toolkit

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43 Daubney, A. Primary Music Toolkit ISM Trust (2019) ismtrust.org/resources/primary-toolkit
44 Department of Education and Science (DES) Music for ages 5 to 14 DES (1991)
46 Daubney, A. Primary Music Toolkit ISM Trust (2019) ismtrust.org/resources/primary-toolkit
National guidance on NC requirements and expectations

Two key national bodies (the National Curriculum Authority and Ofsted) have consistently provided guidance to teachers and schools on the planning, teaching and assessment of curriculum music within the NC.

Both have been at arms-length from the governments’ own education departments, but their messages seem to have chimed with the growing focus on, and more explicit definitions of, musical understanding.

National Curriculum Authority (known in various forms as NCC, SCAA\textsuperscript{47}, QCA, QCDA\textsuperscript{48})

The first guidance\textsuperscript{49} for the NC was published alongside the initial legal requirements, and was presented by the NCC. Given the Council’s changes to the Proposals\textsuperscript{50} of the Working Group, it is no surprise to find that the guidance reinforces very clearly the separateness of the Attainment Targets, and isolated strands of skills and knowledge. It is true that ‘an integrated approach to the teaching of the two ATs’ is referenced in the text. However, the detailed requirements (the ‘Programmes of Study’) show separate planning and progression tables covering each strand and sub-strand for performing, composing, listening and appraising. This reinforces the perception that these separate areas could or even should be a separate focus for planning and teaching purposes. It is also quite a departure from the Working Group’s Proposals,\textsuperscript{51} which laid out the requirements as a single, homogenous block. If not surprising, the NCC’s materials were unfortunate, and one can almost see the guidance of the next 20 years trying to reverse the damage this did. Many schools and teachers did indeed plan a curriculum for music that attempted to teach separate aspects of music, rather than a broader, holistic approach for musical understanding. Consequently, they needed lots of guidance showing how the NC requirements might be interpreted differently.

By 1996 (and therefore after the first revision of the NC in 1995), guidance was being published by a new version of the National Curriculum Authority: SCAA. Its ‘Optional Tests and Tasks’ were a set of six units of work for KS3 through which assessments of pupil standards could be made, and the Teacher’s Handbook\textsuperscript{52} sets out ‘What will be tested in the unit’. Interestingly, each of the statements start with the phrase ‘understanding of…’. Furthermore, most of these ‘understandings’ are quite broad – of ‘musical conventions used in music across time’; or ‘understanding of musical conventions used across

\textsuperscript{47} Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority
\textsuperscript{48} Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency
\textsuperscript{49} National Curriculum Council (NCC) \textit{Music Non-statutory Guidance} NCC publication (1992)
\textsuperscript{50} Department of Education and Science (DES) \textit{Music for ages 5 to 14} DES (1991)
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid
\textsuperscript{52} Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) \textit{Key Stage 3 Optional Tests and Tasks, Music Teacher’s Handbook} SCAA Publication (1996)
cultures’; or ‘understanding of how changes in character and mood are created’. There is precious little sense here of ‘how to sing a song in three parts’; or ‘how to improvise a blues chorus’; or ‘how to identify scale patterns’. While some of these sorts of details do appear in the later planning charts, they are clearly not seen as the most important issue.

Across the next year, SCAA also collaborated with Classic FM to publish a series of ‘Masterclass’ units of work, based around specific and largely western classical genres: the concerto, chamber music, programme music, etc. Again, it is interesting to see how the ‘intended outcomes’ nearly all start with a phrase, which states that ‘all pupils should have some understanding of...’. There is therefore a growing sense that understanding should actually be a key part of musical learning, both from SCAA’s own materials and their collaborative guidance with Classic FM.

Yet at the same time, the publications’ detailed suggestions seem to revert to NCC-style advice, with the Planning Grids focusing heavily and explicitly on separate skills. The chamber music grid, for example, says that the main focus for learning is to ‘take part in group performances developing a sense of ensemble’; and ‘improvise within a harmonic framework’, etc. This was typical of the dichotomy that existed across the developing NC guidance: the philosophy espoused a greater focus on musical understanding, and yet the detailed requirements required explicit and separate focus on the development of practical skills and theoretical knowledge.

SCAA’s explicit guidance on assessment started with the 1996 *Exemplifications of Standards* for KS3 music. Again, there is a clear attempt to remind teachers of the importance of ‘musical understanding’, but with details that follow focussing instead on skills and knowledge. Thus, in its initial model of how musical learning should be integrated, three of the four boxes in its cycle of learning focus on understanding:

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53 Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) *Consistency in Teacher Assessment Exemplification of Standards Music Key Stage 3* SCAA Publication (1996)

54 Ibid
What follows, however, largely describes the specific, practical strands of the NC. Although boxes at the bottom of each page highlight the importance of linking these with aspects of listening and appraising, it highlights again the tension that existed between the hoped-for focus on understanding, and the reality of the structure around musical activities set out by the early NC requirements.

Not surprisingly, we can see the same again in the SCAA Expectations in Music for Key Stages 1 and 2. Advice on ‘Reaching expectations’ suggested that

‘Rather than attempting to teach, and assess, the broad activities of performing, composing, listening and appraising, it is more appropriate to focus each time on a small number of specific skills, and on particular knowledge and understanding’.

To some extent, this rightly emphasised the importance of learning rather than mere musical activity, but its additional promotion of ‘understanding’ as the aim of the learning comes through here:

‘It is much easier for teachers to assess and develop an understanding of specific structures ... than to attempt to teach and assess the activity of composing’.

During 1996 and 1997, SCAA ran a research project on the nature of musical knowledge, and its integration with practical work. This attempted to address concerns that, despite this guidance, too many music lessons were being taught on isolated, fragmented skills, or on knowledge of individual musical elements. However, the work was never published – partly because another revision of the NC provided the opportunity to re-establish the original intentions of the original NC Working Group and leading music educators of the time.

As a result of the revised requirements for this 1999 curriculum, fresh guidance was required both for the new curriculum and for the new Levels in music (there had been Levels in other subjects before, used to identify in some detail the progress of learning across yearly or two-yearly intervals: these were therefore different from the previous End of Key Stage Statements and Descriptions for music, which had only described standards for the end of each full Key Stage).

QCA, as the National Curriculum Authority was now called, took this opportunity to update guidance on the curriculum and planned learning by publishing new, optional schemes of work. These were for both Key Stages 1 and 2, and for Key Stage 3 and show very clearly a renewed focus on musical understanding. The ‘Aims and purposes’ for music, as outlined within the Music Teacher’s guide for Key Stages 1 and 2, start with this statement:

‘By engaging children in making and responding to music, music teaching offers opportunities for them to: develop their understanding and appreciation of a wide range of different kinds of music, developing and extending their own interests and increasing their ability to make judgements of musical quality’.

Further aims do talk about acquiring knowledge, skills and understanding; and attitudes and attributes that can support learning in other subject areas (including what are often sometimes called ‘soft skills’ – creativity, intuition, perseverance, etc.). However, this focus on understanding in the first line, and the absence of references to specific practical

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55 Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) Expectations in music at Key Stages 1 and 2 SCAA publication (1997)
56 Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) Music Teacher’s guide: A scheme of work for Key Stages 1 and 2 QCA publication (2000)
musical skills, give a very clear signal about what is, and what is not, considered to be important.

Moreover, there was clear guidance in the KS1 and KS2 handbook that simply engaging with music making itself was not enough. Rather, it was suggested that there should be a real emphasis on achieving musical quality:

‘Just as it is possible to speak without meaning or sense, it is possible to sing or play an instrument in a way that is not musical. The fundamental aim of music education is to help children appreciate and achieve musical quality’.

In other words, QCA is saying that progression in learning is not just about increasing the technical challenge of instrumental parts, or requiring knowledge of more sophisticated notation.

Instead, QCA is saying that it requires understanding, and real musical insights need to be demonstrated at higher level musical outcomes.

The schemes of work also referenced the new Levels when describing progression and assessment of musical learning – thereby introducing the second area of new guidance for this revision of the NC. A key part of the new message from QCA was to emphasise the overarching importance of the first sentence of the Levels. This was an important principle, and it was reinforced by the clever design lay-out of the Levels within the KS3 Teacher’s guide. This described what pupils should demonstrate for each standard by highlighting the first sentence of each Level in its own row, and then stating that ‘For example, they...’ following this with examples of practical and appraising skills:

### Appendix 4: progression in music

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL 3: pupils recognise and explore the ways in which sounds can be combined and used expressively</th>
<th>LEVEL 4: pupils identify and explore the relationship between sounds and how music reflects different intentions</th>
<th>LEVEL 5: pupils identify and explore musical devices and how music reflects time and place</th>
<th>LEVEL 6: pupils explore the different processes and contexts of selected musical genres and styles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>For example they:</strong></td>
<td><strong>For example they:</strong></td>
<td><strong>For example they:</strong></td>
<td><strong>For example they:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• sing in tune with expression</td>
<td>• perform by ear and from simple notations</td>
<td>• perform significant parts from memory and from notations with awareness of their contribution such as leading others, taking a solo part and/or providing rhythmic support</td>
<td>• select and make expressive use of tempo dynamics, phrasing and timbre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• perform rhythmically simple parts that use a limited range of notes</td>
<td>• maintain their own part with awareness of how the different parts fit together and the need to achieve an overall effect</td>
<td>• Make subtle adjustments to fit their own part within a group performance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Redesigned from the KS3 Teacher’s guide

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57 Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE)  
Music Teacher’s guide: A scheme of work for Key Stage 3 QCA publication (2000)  
58 Ibid
Further examples of the thinking that lay behind the new Levels could be found in the assessment-specific guidance on the ‘NC in Action’ web site and CD ROM, ‘Music Update’ disseminated by QCA, and QCA monitoring reports.

The NC in Action materials\textsuperscript{59} clarified the structure of the Levels in music:

‘Each level in music begins with an overarching statement, which identifies the key characteristic of attainment at that level. The information here illustrates how this expectation is demonstrated through integrated performing, composing and appraising activities. Progression also occurs within each level in terms of pupils’ increasing confidence, independence and ownership’.

In other words: the first sentence describes the understanding, and the rest describes how that is developed and demonstrated through practical activity. Its glossary of terms provided explanations of progression that were captured by these key first sentences: how sounds can be made and changed, the relationship between sounds, musical devices etc. These explanations match very closely to the 1986 Swanwick and Tillman\textsuperscript{60} spiral progression through materials, expression and form, even though the link was not made explicit.

Interestingly, the government’s publication of the NC documentation itself did not lay out the Levels in a way that made clear the importance of this first sentence and its focus on musical understanding. QCA therefore produced their own, single-page print-out of the Levels, as shown on the following page, which actually contained two key features:

1. The chart describes each Level primarily in terms of the first sentence, which is described as the ‘Key learning’. In the following column it shows how this Key learning is ‘Demonstrated when pupils . . .’ following this with a range of practical, listening and evaluation skills. This forcibly reminds teachers that the understanding of the first sentence is the key to progression, with the practical skills the means to an end.

2. All the skills through which ‘Key learning’ is ‘Demonstrated’ are in one block. In other words, there are no separate sections for performing, composing, listening, etc. Instead they are seen as an integrated bank of statements, like the final Proposals\textsuperscript{61} of the NC Working Group.

\textsuperscript{59} These materials only ever appeared online
\textsuperscript{60} Swanwick, K. and Tillman, J. \textit{The sequence of musical development: a study of children’s compositions} British Journal of Music Education (1986)
\textsuperscript{61} Department of Education and Science (DES) \textit{Music for ages 5 to 14} DES (1991)
## Levels of attainment in music

The *music update* of spring 2001 reinforced this thinking very clearly, with three paragraphs that are worth repeating in full here:

> ‘Attainment, and progression, in music are now described under one attainment target. This change is significant as the one attainment target is not simply an overall framework into which are placed the three discrete activities of performing and appraising. The single target is focused on the heart of the music curriculum i.e. the musical understanding which can be developed and demonstrated through all activities.’

This focus is shown most directly in the way that each level of attainment begins with the understanding that should be shown through different responses. It is not the intention that teachers assess performing, composing and appraising and then come to a balanced judgement. Instead it is hoped that they will look for the degree of understanding shown and then work to help the pupil demonstrate this across all activities.

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### Levels of attainment in music

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Key learning</th>
<th>Demonstrated when pupils:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pupils recognise and explore...</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1 | how sounds can be made and changed | • use their voices in different ways such as speaking, singing and chanting  
• perform with awareness of others  
• repeat short rhythmic and melodic patterns  
• create and choose sounds in response to given starting points  
• respond to different moods in music  
• recognise well-defined changes in sound  
• identify simple repeated patterns and take account of musical instruments |
| 2 | and how sounds can be organised | • sing with a sense of the shape of the melody  
• perform simple patterns and accompaniments keeping to a steady pulse  
• choose carefully and order sounds within simple structures such as beginning, middle, end, and in response to giving starting points  
• represent sounds with symbols  
• recognise how the musical elements can be used to create different moods and effects  
• improve their own work |
| 3 | and how sounds can be combined and used expressively | • sing in tune with expression  
• performs rhythmically simple parts that use a limited range of notes  
• improvise repeated patterns  
• combine several layers of sound with awareness of the combined effect  
• recognise how the different musical elements are combined and used expressively  
• make improvements to their own work, commenting on the intended effect |

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Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) *music update* QCA publication (2001)
Therefore, a pupil could demonstrate a level three, for example, by showing the relevant understanding in just one or two activities. However, the overall judgement of the level of that pupil would be of best fit and would take into account the extent to which the understanding was being demonstrated across a range of activities.

Later in the same article, QCA says:

‘It would be interesting to find out the extent to which teachers are trying to make all pupils into performers, composers and critics rather than seeking to increase the musical understanding which underpins all music experiences’.

Finally, with specific reference to the construction of the Levels, it says:

‘It would be very helpful, therefore, if a level description was seen as a whole, with the first overarching sentence exemplified by the following sentences, rather than cutting the levels into three separate blocks and moving the first sentence into the third group as this completely destroys the way that the levels have been developed’.

This was, of course, quite common practice in schools at the time – it led to all sorts of problems through the life of the Levels, with pupils being assessed as being ‘Level 4 performing, Level 5 composing and Level 3 listening’ – despite the fact that there never had been such a thing as Level 5 composing!

As the article summarises:

‘There is a need to place the emphasis on musical understanding developed and demonstrated through integrated activities, as exemplified in the QCA and DfEE schemes of work. . . You will recognise . . . that the changes highlight an evolution of the music curriculum from placing an emphasis on the three discrete activities of performing, composing and appraising to the understanding which underpins all activities’.

Taken together, this could not have been more explicit: the aim of the 1999 NC was now firmly described as ‘musical understanding’, and this was expected to be the key focus for both planned learning, and assessment of pupils’ standards.

Despite all this, the practice in schools largely remained wedded to their earlier practice of focusing on separate skills and activities, rather than on holistic understanding. QCA’s own monitoring report of 2001 stated:

‘Very few teachers, observed during the monitoring work, used the levels as intended. The way the levels are presented in the Order does not indicate the difference between the first overarching statement and the subsequent illustrative examples sufficiently. Whilst this principle is stated clearly, teachers are largely unaware of this related, and essential, text. This principle has also been missed by some of those providing INSET where at least one LEA cut the levels up into three parts and placed the first overarching statement within the third subset’.

So, despite the best efforts of QCA to explain the requirements of the new NC and its Levels, musical understanding did not become a key focus of musical learning in many classrooms. Regrettably, the practice in schools remained some way behind the philosophy and intention of the NC.

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63 Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) Monitoring the Implementation of Music in the National Curriculum QCA publication (2001)
Partly to address this, and partly to sustain the momentum of the newly-launched Music Manifesto, the National Secondary Strategy created a music-specific strand of its support for schools and teachers. This ran as an 18-month pilot, followed in 2006 and 2008 by the national dissemination of a DVD-based, and then web-based, professional development programme.

The final, published materials provided a series of six self-study units for teachers to work through. Although teachers could use an audit of practice to plan their own route through the materials, there was a strong recommendation to start with Unit 1: Structuring learning for musical understanding. This immediately indicated that the whole programme was based on the belief that the primary function of KS3 musical learning was to develop musical understanding. As the introduction to Unit 1 stated:

‘This unit aims to help teachers review and refine their practice in structuring learning so that there is an explicit focus on musical understanding’.

It confirmed that this philosophy drew upon both the current NC requirements for music, and the QCA guidance:

‘The National Curriculum (2000) Orders, and the supporting advice provided by QCA, outline that the fundamental aim of music at Key Stage 3 is developing pupils’ musical understanding’.

Critically, however, it did two new things:

1. It provided a definition of this musical understanding, describing it as:
   ‘the outcome of combining two areas of learning: 
   a) knowing about musical conventions, processes and procedures; 
   b) exploring a range of diverse musical styles, genres and traditions through practical music making’.

After providing further detail on what this means, it also offered a visual model of the definition. This included not only these two areas of learning, but also indicated the specific skills, knowledge and context that would contribute to their development, and the interdependence of all aspects of the learning as shown by the diagram:

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64 The pilot ran for 18 months and was then turned into a full national programme, disseminated with full resources in 2006 and 2008
66 Ibid
It took the progression of the NC Levels’ first sentences, and developed it further to produce a progressive sequence of learning for musical understanding. This offered six stages of progression, including statements defining both the ‘objectives for understanding’ (the purpose of the learning) and the ‘outcomes of understanding’ (what the learning would sound and look like). Taken together, the headings, objectives and outcomes for each stage of understanding provided real clarity on what musical understanding meant. Earlier musical educators had presumed and articulated its importance and something of its character; the work of Swanwick and Tillman, and the NC (especially through the Levels), had then started to indicate something of its character and sequence of development. The Strategy’s work was new, though, with musical understanding now formally defined as a distinct area of learning, and with its progression laid out for all to use.

The Strategy was also very clear that while musical understanding was the aim, the process of developing understanding should be through practical engagement in music making activities. This again built on earlier thinking, reinforcing the notion that pupils best learn through creative, practical lessons. At the same time, it also explored the breadth of musical understanding that can and should be developed. It was suggested that this could best be achieved by the exploration of a broad range of styles, genres and traditions, to stretch and expand understanding.

Shortly after the appearance of the Secondary Strategy programme, the renamed QCDA produced two new resources which reinforced the latest thinking on musical understanding and its importance to curriculum music. Both were connected with assessment:

1. The Exemplification of Standards project, which provided web-based examples of student work. When taken together and heard alongside the written commentaries of experts, these examples offered clarity as to what was meant by the standards described in each Level.

2. The Assessing Pupil Progress (APP) project, which offered detailed guidance on the processes of assessment. It referenced the explanations of the Exemplification of Standards project and also provided an updated chart of progression statements for understanding, building on and further refining the Strategy definitions.

The Exemplification of Standards project was published on line in 2010; the APP project was about to be launched when there was a change of government, and was officially withdrawn. However, the materials were widely disseminated, partly through the web site of the National Association of Music Educators, and partly through a series of CPD courses.

This was important, as these two projects provided the final piece of the jigsaw: the 2008 NC described what should be taught; the Secondary Strategy explained how it might be taught; and these latest projects described how the learning might be assessed.

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67 Department for Education and Skills (DfES) Foundation subjects: KS3 music, Unit 1: Structuring learning for musical understanding
DfES Publications (2006)

68 Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) Music Programme of study: Key Stage 3 QCA publication (2007)
They were all inter-linked, and there was a real consistency of message that could not be missed, created by their constant cross-referencing to the NC and its Levels:

- the aim of curriculum music was clearly expected to be musical understanding. This could be seen in the statements in the NC documentation, the guidance from QCA, the Strategy’s focus on it, and now the handbook for APP stating that ‘understanding the nature of music’ was ‘the central focus of work’. The same handbook also stated that understanding was to have ‘the strongest influence on overall judgements about progress in musical learning’. To reinforce this guidance, it described two students with different profiles of musical expertise, confirming that the student with greater understanding should be assessed more positively than the one with greater practical skills

- musical understanding was now precisely defined as a unique aspect of musical learning, and progression through it was now described both in words and through musical examples

- practical music making processes were expected to be the way by which pupils developed and demonstrated their understanding. However, the skills and knowledge involved in these processes were clearly seen as means to an end, and not as an end in themselves

In summary, therefore, the national guidance for the NC, as provided by national agencies charged with providing support to teachers, developed in much the same way as both the underlying research and the NC requirements themselves. After an initial launch which made some assumptions about musical understanding but did not make them explicit, the guidance developed through a series of refinements until there was a very clear and explicit expectation about musical understanding being the heart of the music curriculum. Alongside this there emerged a precise definition of understanding as a specific area of musical learning, with progression in this learning both mapped out and exemplified in words and practical musical outcomes.

Regrettably, however, it seems that most teachers’ and schools’ interpretations of the music NC requirements were not the same. The increasingly strong and unambiguous statements from the various curriculum agencies would not have been needed had classroom practice already matched what was intended. Instead, it seems that these statements had to be made to counter classroom practice that was still rooted in the idea that the priority for classroom music was developing isolated practical skills and knowledge of separate musical elements.

Ofsted

If this is an accurate summary of how the NC requirements were being interpreted in classrooms, and how national agencies were trying to re-focus attention on a different approach, what was the view of Ofsted – the national agency charged with reporting on the quality of teaching and pupil outcomes, including in music?

In the early days of the NC, all school inspections included a specific review of music. Annual reports from Ofsted provided commentaries on what inspectors found, alongside charts of data showing the percentages of judgements made. Changes to the inspection system mean that such levels of data and feedback on music are no longer possible, because the inspectors’ time in schools has been severely reduced, and now focuses much more on ‘core’ subjects and whole-school issues like safeguarding. Instead, we have had triennial reports which have summarised and reported on the outcomes of music themed inspections. These were carried out by specialist music inspectors who visited schools and just inspected music provision. Spinning out of these reports, the last of which was in 2012, a number of guidance resources have been published, both for inspectors themselves and for schools – all part of a very helpful dialogue between Ofsted and the profession on the key issues facing music education.
It is important to recognise that all inspection reports (including those for music) are required to follow a particular format. They also have to report on specific issues, which are determined by whatever version of the schools’ inspection framework is current. We can therefore see that Ofsted has had to report on issues such as the percentages of teaching judgements and pupil outcomes reaching given standards; or on whole school issues such as assessment practice; or on planning for, and the nature of, progress. These reporting priorities were determined by whatever the schedule of inspection at the time required.

However, it is still possible to see a similar pattern of development to Ofsted’s reports and guidance on music as we have seen elsewhere. In the early days, there was quite a strong emphasis on encouraging a greater focus on musical quality. The message was therefore about breadth of musical learning and a focus on more than mere technical accomplishment – how well were pupils learning music, rather than what pupils were learning in music. This chimed with the broader music education thinking of the time: music needed to be practical, but the music making needed to promote a wider, creative, and intrinsically musical understanding. This understanding was not defined as a single aspect of learning, but was clearly regarded as a key aim.

This can be seen in various reports, papers and conference materials produced during the 1990s, many of which highlighted things like ‘imagination’, ‘aural acuity’, ‘ability to select and apply techniques which are fit for purpose’, ‘produce compositions and performances of high musical quality’. It is true that there are specific references for the need to ensure appropriate challenge and technical competence, but it is very noticeable that the broader, more aesthetic issues are given such prominence.

Significantly, there are no lists of specific practical skills or aspects of theoretical and historical knowledge which pupils should acquire.

However, by the time of the triennial report of 2009, Making more of music\(^{69}\), it is possible to see a much more explicit focus on the term musical understanding. For instance, in criticising the overall quality of work at KS3, the report states:

‘The work tended to focus on developing the students’ technical competence without enough consideration of the quality of their musical response and the depth of musical understanding’; and

‘students were not given enough opportunities to deepen their understanding of music’.

Where musical learning was good, the understanding that had been developed was praised:

‘The best work ensured musical depth and quality. The following example also illustrates the effective use of the principles of the Key Stage 3 Strategy for music, such as the way the class was helped to perform with musical understanding, giving appropriate emphasis to the laid-back feel of the music that reflected the mood and feelings of the composer and the culture in which it was created’.

After several similar examples, the report used its summary section to state that:

‘Musical intelligence [is] the distinctive contribution of music to pupils’ education. Musical intelligence is engaged through involvement in musical experiences and enables the development of musical understanding’.\(^{71}\)
And later said that, despite this,

‘Teachers rarely helped pupils to enhance their understanding of the nature of music and apply this in all their music making. Understanding the nature of music underpins the National Curriculum levels, but the teachers in the survey often missed this’.  

In their primary and secondary schools guidance booklets, which were published shortly after the main report, similar messages were conveyed. The booklet ‘Improving the quality of music teaching in secondary schools’ contained a two page table with eight characteristics of music teaching which, when combined and delivered well, were likely to lead to outstanding teaching. Of these, one was explicitly ‘Increase depth of musical understanding’; and none of the others made any reference to the development of practical skills or knowledge of theory.

Later, there are case studies of practice at various standards of provision, and of the four provided to show examples of good or better work, two include the impact on musical understanding as part of the overall summary. For instance, example six states:

‘There was constant emphasis on increasing students’ musical understanding’.

The next triennial report Wider still, and wider, published in 2012, went even further in promoting musical understanding as the focus of learning. In several places, there are references to the importance of pupils engaging in sound-based exploration of music and developing skills. However, it is clearly emphasised that the purpose of these processes is to develop musical understanding.

In the first part of the report, which describes the range of judgements that were made, there is no precise definition of what this understanding should be. However, it is obvious that judgements of practice are being made in the light of whether or not musical understanding is being promoted. For instance, the very start of the report suggests that ‘good musical progression’ can be secured by:

‘Giving sufficient and regular curriculum time for the thorough and progressive development of pupils’ aural awareness and musical understanding’; and

‘Providing robust curriculum plans that identify the landmarks of musical understanding pupils are expected to achieve, in addition to the range of musical styles and traditions that they are to experience’.

Under the section for primary schools, the report states that:

‘Where provision was most effective, schools ensured that good progress in singing was underpinned by regular, ongoing vocal work in the classroom as well as in assemblies. There was a constant emphasis on improving overall musical understanding through vocal work of increasing quality’.

This neatly captures the twin themes: music must be practical, but the activity must be designed to deliver musical understanding. In terms of process, the focus on sound-based work (rather than talking and writing about music) is clear in this next quote on teaching – but it equally presumes that the aim of the process is ultimately to deliver.

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72 Ibid
73 Ofsted Making more of music: Improving the quality of music teaching (Ofsted, 2009)
74 Ofsted Music in schools: wider still, and wider (Ofsted, 2012)
75 Ibid
musical understanding:

‘Pupils’ musical understanding was developed most effectively in lessons where musical sound was the dominant language for teaching and learning’.76

Where curriculum planning was weaker, there is a clear message that the reason was often the lack of consideration for musical understanding:

‘Commonly, schools’ curriculum programmes had not given enough consideration to how pupils’ musical understanding should develop over time’.77

The most effective provision, by contrast, was seen when a school’s:

‘vision was not simply a detailed catalogue of musical activities; the best examples demonstrated the ‘big picture’ of how regular classroom work, complemented by additional experiences, would progressively build the musical understanding of all pupils’.78

In the second, advisory part of the document, the recommendations finally include some clarity on the exact nature of the musical understanding being sought, and its progression. This is related very closely to the definitions in the first sentences of the Level descriptors:

‘Another, simpler, model of effective planning for musical progression across phases started with the ‘big idea’ in each National Curriculum attainment level statement. This approach enabled teachers to understand very clearly how pupils’ musical understanding might develop over time’.79

This was then followed by the below chart, which mapped the progression of this understanding:

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76 Ibid
77 Ibid
78 Ibid
79 Ibid
80 Ibid

Redesigned from wider still, and wider80
So throughout this Ofsted report, there is a clear sense that musical understanding is the essential characteristic of effective musical provision. It is enabled by a constant focus on and exploration of musical sound, and an insistence on musical quality informed by the application of wider knowledge regarding context and purpose of music making.

These ideas were also prominent in the Professional development materials that were published later that year. These were primarily intended for school leaders, to ensure that they knew what made for effective classroom practice in music. Two observations will suffice to show the emphasis on musical understanding, starting with the first of the document’s ‘Key principles’. This describes planning, and states that:

‘Effective planning of musical learning intentions identifies how musical activities will result in improvements to the quality of pupils’ musical responses and musical understanding’.  

The bold type for each mention of ‘music’ is designed to reinforce the importance of working through sound, but it is obvious that Ofsted does not believe that this process of musical learning is the primary focus. Rather, it expects that the intended outcome of this planned learning should be to improve pupils’ understanding.

If this is the starting point, the end point is just as clear. The summary of how to evaluate teaching and musical outcomes starts with this question:

‘Whatever the pedagogic styles or strategies employed, there is one overriding consideration: How effectively does musical teaching improve the breadth, depth and quality of musical understanding and response for all pupils?’

So from start to finish, Ofsted was by now being absolutely explicit: musical understanding is the key to effective music teaching and learning!

At around the same time, Ofsted’s own guidance to inspectors was developed to include ‘Generic grade descriptors and supplementary subject – specific guidance’. These were intended to offer inspectors guidance on how to make judgements during inspections, and spelled out the characteristics of acceptable, strong and outstanding provision in music.

As usual, the guidance had to fit with the existing inspection schedule, but the following comments on Outstanding or Good characteristics in various places serve to make the point.

For example under Achievement, the guidance states that:

- pupils’ musical understanding is underpinned by...; and
- pupils demonstrate their outstanding musical understanding through...; and
- pupils enjoy their musical experiences and make good progress in their musical understanding... as a result of...

In all these cases musical understanding is shown to be the aim and the rest merely demonstrates how that can be achieved.

Under Teaching, there is similar guidance:

‘Assessment is outstanding because it focuses relentlessly on developing formatively the quality and depth of pupils’ musical understanding’.  

81 Ofsted Music in schools: promoting good practice (Ofsted, 2012)
82 Ibid
83 Ibid
84 Ofsted Music survey visits: Generic grade descriptors (Ofsted, 2013)
This is quite different from a relentless focus on how to play the keyboard, how to compose a question and answer phrase or how to describe the element of pitch. Tellingly, there is also a description of the weak assessment which reinforces the same point. In the section on teaching that Requires Improvement, it states that:

‘work is marked and records are kept, although the focus tends to be on increasing musical technical difficulty, rather than the quality of the musical response and understanding shown’.

Therefore over a long period of time Ofsted’s judgements and guidance reflected the work of other experts in music education. Musical understanding was always understood to be the focus of musical learning and gradually the emphasis became both more explicit and well-defined. This included a reinforcement of the progression in musical understanding that was defined in the NC Levels and which had itself been further refined by the National Strategy and QCDA in its assessment guidance.

Despite all this guidance, it seems that schools’ and teachers’ interpretation of the NC requirements either consistently missed the importance of musical understanding or did not see how it might be implemented in the classroom. Indeed, there is very little evidence that schools proactively plan for musical understanding. It is rare to find curriculum planning that has musical understanding as its main focus, and extremely common to find schemes that focus on the elements of music, the skills of playing and composing, or simply on styles, genres and traditions of music.

This applies equally to commercially available materials. While many published resources have provided great benefit to classroom teachers, it is typical that the most recent versions of two well-known sets of commercial resources for music simply do not address the idea of musical understanding as an explicit and identifiable area of learning – far less make it the focus of learning and progression. Instead, they focus on the elements of music and skill progression: important, but missing the point.

Music Education Hubs have similarly fallen into the same trap. QCA’s 2001 monitoring report stated that one Local Education Authority (LEA) had ‘cut the levels up into three parts and placed the first overarching statement within the third subset’ as part of their training. Sadly, this is still happening: at a national conference in 2017, the curriculum leader of a large Music Education Hub stated that the Hub had recently helped teachers by cutting up the NC Levels into separate strands of performing, composing and listening, so that they could see the progression.

If the quality of musical learning was uniformly excellent in all our schools, this would, perhaps, not matter; regrettably, however, this is not the case. Ofsted’s statistical data on its observations show that large amounts of musical teaching and learning are perhaps not as good as they could be. By looking at the early days of Ofsted’s reporting (when it provided very clear and comparable data through percentages of judgements made against teaching, standards, etc.) we can see that many judgements would now be made in the categories of ‘Requires Improvement’ or ‘Inadequate’. Nor is this getting any better – by the time of the latest triennial report, achievement by primary pupils in music was only ‘Good or better’ in one-third of schools, with two-thirds of teaching being either in what is now called the ‘Requires Improvement’ category, or worse. In secondary, it was no better: achievement was below the ‘Good or better’ benchmark in over 50% of schools, and teaching was in the category now called ‘Requires Improvement’, or was Inadequate, in nearly 60% of judgements made. While due caution should always be exercised when studying this kind of data, the figures do not seem to paint a wholly positive picture.
Ofsted is also clear about the reasons for this state of affairs. They reference in their judgements an over-reliance on talking or writing about music; too much activity and not enough learning; and too much effort based on technical competence rather than development of true musical understanding:

‘the activities themselves were often unmusical – for example, completing a worksheet, drawing pictures, and talking or writing about musicians’.

‘Most schools were able to show the different activities or topics that would be covered in each year and key stage, but far fewer were able to articulate a clear rationale for the overall organisation or order of those projects to show how pupils should progress musically’.

‘The work tended to focus on developing the students’ technical competence without enough consideration of the quality of their musical response and the depth of musical understanding’.

None of this has been helped by some important national music initiatives apparently reinforcing the society-wide idea that skills in music are the key. The general public’s view of music seems to reduce the subject to two or three things: many are the times that music teachers, when revealing that they are involved in music, get told that ‘I’m not musical – I can’t sing, play the piano or read music’. This sense has only been reinforced by initiatives like Musical Futures (which, though this clearly was not the intention, led many to believe that secondary music should be primarily about playing instruments used in rock music); the Music Manifesto (which explicitly set out the aim to ensure that all pupils should have the opportunity to learn a musical instrument); and the National Plan for Music Education (which, although it included many useful and salient points about classroom music, was perceived to be mainly about providing first access to instrumental learning, and providing large-scale music making events).

Ofsted’s guidance also describes how poor music provision too often focuses on developing pupils’ ‘knowledge about’ music (theory and facts) rather than developing pupils’ understanding of music:

‘There is...too much reliance on non-musical activities (such as written worksheets or internet research) that does not develop pupils’ musical understanding’.

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85 Ofsted Music in schools: wider still, and wider (Ofsted, 2012)
86 Ibid
87 Ofsted Making more of music (Ofsted, 2009)
88 Ofsted Music survey visits: Generic grade descriptors (Ofsted, 2014)
89 A not-for-profit organisation, which began in the UK as a Paul Hamlyn Foundation Special Initiative. It supports teachers with teaching music in a way that helps to engage students. It offers training and consultancy.
90 Department for Education and Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) The Importance of Music: A National Plan for Music Education A DfE and DCMS publication (2011)
Evidence for positive outcomes deriving from learning based around musical understanding

Where, then is the evidence for positive work in classroom music? Where it happens, does it have a different interpretation of the NC, perhaps more closely aligned to its original and developed intentions?

The clearest large-scale attempt to shift music teachers’ practice to a way of working that was closely aligned with the NC’s focus on musical understanding was the Secondary Strategy project. As we have seen, this explicitly encouraged teachers to make musical understanding the focus of their work, and provided clear definitions of what that understanding was, and how it progressed over time.

The pilot stage of the project was heavily monitored, and showed clear and positive impacts on teacher practice and both student engagement and outcomes. Ofsted’s view was that:

‘The strongest signs of improvement in the depth of thinking and increasing challenge for students were seen in the teachers who were directly involved in supporting the dissemination of the Key Stage 3 Strategy for music’\(^\text{91}\) and

‘All the work developed through the pilot showed a higher quality of teaching and learning than other comparable lessons’\(^\text{92}\).

The pilot’s own final report\(^\text{93}\) included data from student questionnaires taken at the start and end of the project, and interviews with leading music consultants involved in the project. All this data showed significant and positive changes: the project had a significant impact on the quality of learning across 60% of participating schools; standards had improved significantly in 50% of schools; and student engagement improved significantly in 65% of schools. The tracked NC Levels showed that teachers involved in the project were reporting around one year’s additional progress, an outcome which was repeated in a curriculum development project in one Local Authority (LA) some 10 years later. The pupils also reported that they valued the subject more, felt they had learnt more, and had made more progress.

More broadly, the pilot’s own final report described positive changes to classroom outcomes, which were characterised by broad improvements in these areas:

- pupils in pilot classes show higher standards of work than their peers in non-pilot classes undertaking equivalent work. While the standards of the highest-attaining pupils have

\(^{91}\) Ofsted *Making more of music: Improving the quality of music teaching* (Ofsted, 2009)


\(^{93}\) Rogers, K. *KS3 Music pilot* written in 2006, unpublished
improved, the improvement to the work of lower-attaining pupils is especially marked

- there is a clear improvement in pupils’ overall musical understanding. Pupils also learn musical knowledge and skills more quickly, and retain that learning for longer. As a consequence of the emphasis on process throughout the pilot, pupils are able to think more independently and take control of their own learning. This leads to a greater depth of learning over time
- the level of pupil engagement has seen a significant improvement

Teachers could recognise both a significant shift in their practice and the how this had led to major improvements. One teacher said: ‘We have undergone a fundamental shift in mind set: from planning for skills as the focus of learning to planning for understanding as the focus of learning’. As a consequence, teachers across the pilot phase consistently reported that:

- there were fewer ‘failures’ in practical work where pupils were unable to complete tasks appropriately. This was important in raising the standards of low attaining pupils
- pupils acquired learning more quickly and sustained that learning for longer. Their practical skills were therefore more secure and their knowledge of theory could be applied more consistently to practical work
- pupils enjoyed their lessons more and were more engaged in learning during lessons: they stayed on task for longer and there were fewer instances of unsatisfactory behaviour and low level disruption
- pupils were more likely to pursue and develop the learning outside the classroom, researching music more effectively and bringing in to the classroom their own examples of the music being studied

Although it has been hard to track this level of detailed feedback across the years since the Strategy’s launch, there has been consistent feedback from teachers who have adopted this interpretation of the NC. In a variety of different locations, in different schools and with teachers at all stages of their careers, these messages have been consistently reported by teachers who have placed musical understanding at the heart of their work with pupils:

- learning is much stronger: progress is faster and more secure, including practical skills and theory – which are retained more effectively (both from week to week within projects; and across longer periods of time across schemes of work)
- attainment is therefore better: with secure, effective progress in learning, the musical outcomes are also better – teachers often report that practical outcomes are ‘more musical’
- the impact is especially strong on lower attaining students: rather than fail completely, their practical work is simple but effective and demonstrates that key points of learning have been developed
- engagement is much better, both within lesson, and across the department – many teachers report that they are inundated at break times with students wanting to practice what they have been doing, and also that many more students ask to join school ensembles
- lessons are enjoyed more – by both students and teachers! There are often reports that both students and teachers want to carry on with projects beyond their official end date (because they are enjoying them so much), rather than being bored and just waiting to get off the project and on to the next one
- personalised learning for students is much stronger: many students find it much easier to bring into class lesson their informal learning from outside school, and outcomes are much more diverse: rather than a uniformity of practical outcome, the final performances reflect the diversity of student interests
Three examples can provide specific instances of these generic findings:

1. Teachers involved with the QCDA ‘Exemplification of standards’ project were able to provide strong examples of students working at both Levels 7 and 8. The teachers had to re-shape their curriculum focus to enable a proper focus on musical understanding and were able to facilitate their students working to the highest standards. These standards were independently verified to be genuinely about musical understanding rather than about playing instruments at technically demanding levels. Making this shift within one year is quite a challenge, and yet the outcomes were amply demonstrated across the students’ work.

2. In a recent LA project exploring curriculum development to facilitate stronger assessment practice, all the teachers reported that through a renewed focus on musical understanding, students were making faster and more secure progress. Some were also seeing this improved progress leading to stronger attainment: one teacher in particular reported that by the end of the Easter term the Year 7 students had more securely attained standards of work that had in the previous year only been reached by the end of the summer term.

3. In the same project, a different teacher reported that student engagement was much stronger, revealed by many more students coming in after school to practise what they had done during lessons. This was to such an extent that the teacher was struggling to cope with the numbers involved, and the commitment it required of them as a teacher when they would normally be on their own, planning for the next day’s teaching.

The teachers involved in comments two and three also reported an immediate knock-on effect with KS4 take-up. In one of the schools, 25% of the cohort opted for music, while in the other it was 20%. Both of these figures were much higher than in previous years.
The evidence is clear: there have been consistent findings about a positive impact when teachers and schools have embraced the original NC intentions around musical understanding.

However, the reality is that an entirely different approach became the ‘orthodoxy’ in the vast majority of schools across the country. Rather than focusing on the NC’s broad principle of musical understanding, schools and teachers instead made the practical activities of the NC’s performing, composing and listening or appraising requirements the focus of their work.

As has been seen, particularly in the judgements of Ofsted, this has not been a consistently successful interpretation of the NC. It has also ignored the increasingly strong and explicit suggestions from higher education, national agencies and Ofsted; all of which tried to encourage greater focus on musical understanding. Superficially, the focus on practical activities (rather than on deep learning and broad understanding) has led many teachers to believe that their pupils are ‘enjoying’ music. To some extent, this is true, but in reality, students quickly get bored by this approach. A recent piece of LA research involving student interviews has shown that even in the ‘best’ music departments, students often find that classroom music, while initially ‘fun’, actually leads nowhere. Many reported being bored by what one student (who was by now studying music technology in KS4) memorably called ‘the same old, same old: just playing tunes on keyboards’; by the lack of creativity to make their own music; or in finding that, as a reasonably accomplished instrumentalist already, the ‘harder’ parts at KS3 were still far too easy for them to feel any sense of challenge.

It might be reasonable to ask why this misguided interpretation of the NC’s music requirements came about. Ultimately, it seems to have developed like this, starting well before the NC was even seriously considered:

During the 1960s and 1970s, there was a strong push to move away from the earlier focus on a relatively passive appreciation of music towards a more direct engagement for students in the creative exploration of sound and how music works. This emphasised the process of musical learning as much as anything else and ensured that music making became a core part of music education in the classroom.

At the same time, those advocating for such a change recognised very clearly that this practical process was simply a means to an end and that the ultimate aim was always a deep, personal, musical understanding for all pupils. In truth, this musical understanding was not well-defined at first, but it was clearly acknowledged as the purpose of classroom music. As John Paynter said: ‘The content of the ‘music lesson’ should aim to develop musical understanding in all pupils’.


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developing artistic imagination and engaging with the qualitative aspects of musical learning.

During the 1980s, music educators developed a stronger sense of what this ‘understanding’ might be. Their emerging definition was based partly around greater clarity regarding the most relevant forms of musical knowledge (i.e. the importance that music teachers needed to place on ‘knowledge of’ rather than ‘knowledge about’), and partly around the potential progression in this understanding (i.e. as expressed by the ‘Swanwick and Tillman spiral’).

The Working Group for the first NC sustained this thinking in their Proposals: they made clear statements about the importance of understanding, and how practical work should be seen as the mechanism by which that understanding could best be developed:

‘The main aim of music education in schools is to foster pupils’ sensitivity to, and their understanding and enjoyment of, music, through an active involvement in listening, composing and performing’.

They also published their detailed requirements (covering performing, singing, composing, listening, etc.) as a single block of text. This indicated quite clearly that the intention was for pupils to experience music holistically, with teachers preparing a range of integrated, practical activities that would appropriately lead to the intended understanding. In other words, musical understanding was the aim, and this was to be explored through a process of creative, holistic exploration of musical ideas.

Unfortunately, the intervention of the Secretary of State led the NCC to create two key changes. Although some of the national furore over their initial ideas led to some subtle and appropriate alterations, there were still two fundamental problems with the first NC for music:

a) there was no statement of aim regarding musical understanding. This ran completely counter to the contemporary research and thinking of many experts, but the reality is that this initial NC for music had no reference to understanding, aesthetics or artistic exploration as the aim of the learning.

b) the detailed requirements were broken up into clearly defined subsections, each with progressive statements of attainment. Essentially, this meant that there were separate strands for performing, for composing, for listening (i.e. the musical elements) and appraising. This managed to do two things: it amplified the absence of any reference to musical understanding by simply listing practical activities and skills; and implied from its very structure and lay-out that planning for musical learning might be broken up into separate components too – despite the messages elsewhere that there should be integrated learning.

An additional factor that enabled this thinking to be accepted was that the new GCSE exams (introduced in the mid-1980s) had already suggested a structure for musical learning based on performing, composing and listening. This had been widely welcomed, as a good move away from the theoretical, essay-based study of history and technical exercises of O level and it certainly opened

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96 Department of Education and Science (DES) *Music for ages 5 to 14* DES (1991)
the study of music at KS4 to many more students. It was therefore already part of the music teaching psyche: music must be practical and it should include performing, composing and listening. When the Working Group suggested a very similar Attainment Target structure for NC music, it is perhaps not surprising that teachers would welcome it, since it endorsed a practical approach to the subject that they were already comfortable with.

The problem with all of this was that the fundamental importance of understanding was missed, along with the idea that practical activity was to be seen as the means to develop this understanding. Moreover, the absence of a broader aim meant that a focus on holistic study of ‘music’ was lost. Instead, schools and teachers interpreted the aim of the first NC as being about practical activity, and worse still, separate, atomised aspects of activity. This led to the creation of many schemes of work that were structured around ‘performing’ lessons, ‘composing’ lessons, or ‘the elements of music’ lessons. Such an approach ran completely counter to the original ideas of the first NC’s Working Group, but was understandable given the structure and look of the legal requirements finally published in 1992.

For many music teachers, therefore, the ‘orthodoxy’ of classroom music has traditionally been this: make sure that music lessons are based around practical activities, address the separate musical elements in turn and all will be fine. Indeed, ever since 1992, there has been a belief that this approach would enable the NC requirements to be covered appropriately. Such an interpretation was never going to be completely successful, however, since it failed to address the central principle of musical understanding. As a consequence, we have seen successive iterations of the NC itself, continuing advice from government agencies (including Ofsted), and national guidance (including the Secondary Strategy programme, and the Exemplification of Standards resources) all trying to re-establish a broader interpretation of the NC. Regrettably, however, the early orthodoxy and core interpretation had taken hold and despite continuing feedback from Ofsted about problems with this sort of practice, it has not been possible to shift the thinking on a national basis. This is also despite the evidence from alternative approaches that there are different and more effective interpretations of the NC. These focus on musical understanding as the aim of classroom music and can lead to far better outcomes.

In conclusion, it is time for a concerted effort to create change: we need to re-focus on musical understanding as the best way to interpret the NC. There has been sufficient research, guidance and explicit development of what musical understanding is (and how it develops progressively over time) for there to be no doubt that it can be the proper basis for classroom music. There is also sufficient clarity that this understanding must be developed through creative, exploratory music making to ensure that no-one can possibly imagine that we have to return to some kind of passive musical appreciation lessons. But unless we make this change, we shall continue to have teachers complain: as one teacher observed halfway through the Secondary Strategy programme:

‘I think I’ve short-changed my pupils for the past 25 years’.

Better, surely, to follow the path of another teacher who transformed their practice to focus on musical understanding and said that, as a consequence:

‘My practice is inspired’.
The Incorporated Society of Musicians (ISM) is the UK’s professional body for musicians and a nationally recognised subject association for music. Founded in 1882, we are dedicated to promoting the importance of music, defending the rights of those working in the music profession and protecting music education.

We support almost 10,000 members working in all areas of music from classroom music teachers, peripatetic instrumental and singing teachers, and private music teachers to performers, composers and administrators. We are a financially independent not-for-profit organisation with no political affiliation.

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Kevin Rogers

Kevin Rogers has wide experience of music education in England. Having taught secondary music (including as an 11-18 comprehensive head of music) he moved into advisory support, providing CPD for all aspects of music education and all age ranges. He was County Inspector with Hampshire County Council’s Music Service from 1999 – 2018. During this time, he was seconded to the Secondary National Strategy to lead on its KS3 music programme, and the subsequent development of the Strategy’s KS3 music web site. He also worked with QCDA on two national assessment projects involving music at KS3.

Although most of his work therefore focussed on class teaching in schools, Kevin also supported instrumental / vocal teachers in projects exploring progression, transition and the nature of musical learning in small group tuition. Though now officially retired, he continues to influence and campaign for music education in conjunction with the ISM.