



Department  
for Education

# Music

**GCE AS and A level subject content**

**January 2015**

# Contents

The content for Music AS and A levels	3
Introduction	3
Aims and Objectives	4
Subject content	4
Areas of Study	8

# The content for music AS and A levels

## Introduction

1. AS and A level subject content sets out the knowledge, understanding and skills common to all AS and A level specifications in a given subject.
2. Together with the assessment objectives it provides the framework within which the awarding organisations create the detail of their specifications, so ensuring progression from GCSE and the possibilities for development into HE.
3. AS and A Level music specifications must support students in forming personal and meaningful relationships with music through the development of musical knowledge, understanding and skills including performing, composing and appraising. They must encourage students to engage critically and creatively with a wide range of music and musical contexts, develop an understanding of the place of music in different cultures and contexts, and reflect on how music is used in the expression of personal and collective identities.
4. The specifications must also allow students to develop particular strengths and interests, encourage lifelong learning and provide access to higher education and university degree courses in music and music-related subjects as well as music-related and other careers.

## Aims and Objectives

5. AS and A level specifications in music must offer a broad and coherent course of study which encourages students to:

- engage actively in the process of music study
- develop performing skills to demonstrate an understanding of musical elements, style, sense of continuity, interpretation and expression
- develop composing skills to demonstrate the manipulation of musical ideas and the use of musical devices and conventions
- recognise the interdependence of musical knowledge, understanding and skills, and make links between the integrated activities of performing, composing and appraising underpinned by attentive listening
- broaden musical experience and interests, develop imagination and foster creativity
- develop and extend the knowledge, understanding and skills needed to communicate effectively as musicians
- develop knowledge and understanding of a variety of instruments and styles, and of relevant approaches to both performing and composing
- develop awareness of music technologies and their use in the creation and presentation of music
- appraise contrasting genres, styles and traditions of music, and develop understanding of musical contexts and a coherent awareness of musical chronology
- develop as effective, independent learners and as critical and reflective thinkers with enquiring minds
- reflect critically and make personal judgements on their own and others' music
- engage with, and extend appreciation of, the diverse heritage of music in order to promote personal, social, intellectual and cultural development

## Subject content

6. AS and A Level specifications in music must build on the knowledge, understanding and skills established at Key Stage 4 and in GCSE qualifications.

7. AS and A Level specifications in music must require students to develop an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the musical elements, musical contexts and musical language listed below, and allow students to apply these, where appropriate, to their own work when performing and composing.

## Musical elements and their interdependence

- organisation of pitch (melodically and harmonically) including:
  - harmonic change, cadences e.g. interrupted , and melodic and harmonic devices at AS
  - additionally complex chord progressions e.g. the use of secondary dominant, and melodic devices e.g. augmentation at A level
- tonality including:
  - how keys are related to each other e.g. circle of fifths at AS
  - additionally complex and remote key relationships e.g. enharmonic at A Level
- structure; organisation of musical material including:
  - complex structures e.g. sonata form at AS
  - additionally increasingly complex structures e.g. fugue and through-composed music at A Level
- sonority including:
  - combinations of vocal timbres and instrumental techniques e.g. con sordino at AS
  - additionally further combinations of vocal timbres and instrumental techniques e.g. sul ponticello at A level
- texture including:
  - complex combinations of musical lines (parts) e.g. homophony and polyphony at AS
  - additionally more complex applications of these e.g. fugue at A level
- tempo, metre and rhythm; how music is organised in time including:
  - metrical and rhythmic devices e.g. changing metres and syncopation at AS
  - additionally complex metrical and rhythmic devices e.g. additive rhythm and polyrhythms at A level
- dynamics; use of dynamics including:
  - expressive devices e.g. contrast and extended ranges at AS
  - additionally refined control of dynamics and extreme ranges at A level

## Musical contexts

- the effect of purpose and intention (e.g. of the composer, performer, commissioner) on how music is created, developed and performed in different historical, social and cultural contexts
- the effect of audience, time and place (e.g. venue, occasion) on how music is created, developed and performed in different historical, social and cultural contexts
- how music from different historical, social and cultural contexts has changed over time

## Musical language

- reading and writing staff notation including:
  - rhythmic notation in compound time and key signatures to 5 sharps & 5 flats at AS
  - additionally all key signatures and irregular time signatures at A level
- chords and associated chord symbols including:
  - standard harmonic progressions e.g. chord inversions and dominant 7th chords at AS
  - additionally extended chords e.g. secondary 7ths and 9ths at A level
- musical vocabulary and terminology related to the Areas of Study including:
  - recognition and use of appropriate musical vocabulary and terminology e.g. glissando, repetition and conjunct at AS
  - additionally recognition and use of sophisticated terminology e.g. portamento, and ascending minor scale at A level

8. AS and A level specifications in music must require students to demonstrate the ability to:

## Perform

- make use of musical elements, techniques and resources to interpret and communicate musical ideas with technical and expressive control and an understanding of style and context. This must be achieved by one or more of the following means: playing or singing solo or in ensemble, improvising, or realising music using music technology
- perform music with control and continuity using appropriate tempi, showing critical understanding of the music chosen

## Compose

- make use of musical elements, techniques and resources to create and develop musical ideas with technical control and expressive understanding, either freely as the composer chooses, or by responding to a brief or commission supplied by others
- compose music that develops musical ideas and shows understanding of musical devices and conventions in relation to the chosen genre, style and tradition

## Appraise

- analyse and evaluate music in aural and written form, using knowledge and understanding of musical elements, musical contexts and musical language to make critical judgements about:
  - repertoire within the Areas of Study
  - musical interpretations (e.g. how a performer plays a piece of music, how a composer responds to a brief or a starting point, or demonstration of stylistic understanding)
  - others' work including unfamiliar music (i.e. individual pieces of music that have not been stipulated within the specification)
- formulate critical judgements, which will be achieved by attentive listening (rather than just hearing) and aural perception, and could also be achieved by informed discussion (in writing and/or through speech), analysis, evaluation, contextualisation and reflection
- comment on music heard, showing understanding through the genres, styles and traditions studied

9. In addition, A level specifications in music must require students to demonstrate the ability to:

## Perform

- perform fluently showing critical understanding of the overall shape, direction and style of the music chosen

## Compose

- compose music that is musically convincing and shows a sophisticated use of musical elements in combination
- compose music that makes creative use of musical ideas and shows understanding of musical devices and conventions in relation to the chosen genre, style and tradition

## Appraise

- comment in detail on music heard, showing critical understanding across the genres, styles and traditions studied
  - use acute aural perception and discrimination skills
  - use appropriate technical musical vocabulary to communicate sophisticated judgements
  - show understanding of the complex interdependencies between musical elements
  - show understanding of the sophisticated connections between music and its context
10. AS and A level specifications in music must require students to apply practically, knowledge and understanding of:
- specialist musical vocabulary and notation appropriate to the context
  - the relationship between compositional devices and techniques, musical elements including harmonic progressions, tonal relationships and musical structures appropriate to the context

## Areas of Study

11. Areas of Study must provide an appropriate focus for students to demonstrate in-depth knowledge, understanding and skills. They must encompass repertoire that allows the musical elements, musical contexts and musical language to be taught in context and allow opportunities for students to demonstrate contextual understanding through their performing and composing.
12. An area of study might be, for example, a genre, style, musical device, idiom, musical process, period of time, cultural tradition or contextual influence.
13. Music specifications must require students to demonstrate knowledge, understanding and skills from paragraph 7 through an in-depth study of a minimum of two Areas of Study at AS level and a minimum of three Areas of Study at A level.
- At least one Area of Study at both AS and A level must be drawn from music composed in the Western Classical Tradition<sup>1</sup> with all or the majority being composed between 1650 and 1910
  - At least one other Area of Study at both AS and A level must not be drawn from the Western Classical Tradition

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this subject content document “Western Classical Tradition” is defined as art Music of (or growing out of) the European tradition, normally notated, and normally intended for public performance



14. AS and A level Music specifications must offer a minimum choice of four Areas of Study and require students to place music studied within a wider context and chronology.



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Reference: DFE-00695-2014



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