Subject Inspection of Music
REPORT

Glenstal Abbey School,
Murroe, County Limerick
Roll number: 64150F

Date of inspection: 22 March 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN MUSIC

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Glenstal Abbey School. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Music and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over one day during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and the teacher, and examined students’ work. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and the teacher’s written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and subject teacher. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Music is an integral part of life in Glenstal Abbey School, a seven-day boarding school for boys. All first-year students study Music in their first term in the school after which they choose between it and Latin for their Junior Certificate. Generally there is a fifty-fifty split between the number of students choosing each subject but this year over two-thirds of the cohort has opted for Music. Subject choices made during first year apply until the end of Transition Year (TY). This means that students who have opted for Latin do not have the opportunity to experience Music as a curricular subject in TY. This is regrettable and appears to contravene the TY philosophy of providing a broad educational experience. It is recommended that in keeping with this philosophy all students should experience Music in TY and not just those who have studied it for Junior Certificate. An open-choice system operates at senior cycle, where students prioritise their preferred subject options and a best-fit analysis is undertaken. Thus Music is timetabled against Latin and Geography in fifth year this year and against Religious Education and Applied Mathematics in sixth year. Management stated during the inspection that it is keen to undertake a review of the subject-choice procedure at junior cycle. This would be worthwhile and it is hoped that it will have a positive impact on the uptake of Music in the school.

The school runs a six-day teaching week and there is an appropriate spread of contact time throughout these six days for all class groups along with a sufficient number of double periods in all year groups to facilitate practical work.

At present approximately 43% of the student cohort is taking Music as a curricular subject. The percentage involved in other musical activities is considerably higher, attributable no doubt to the nature of the school as a seven-day boarding school. A programme of private tuition which is co-ordinated by the music teacher is offered in piano, guitar, drums, woodwind, brass, voice, fiddle and concertina and is available to all students, not just those taking Music as a subject. In keeping
with the Benedictine ethos, efforts are made to involve boys in the liturgy in many areas, one of which is participation in the school’s junior and senior choirs which are directed by one of the monks in the Abbey. These choirs collaborate and perform at liturgical services every week and share the musical duties with the monastic schola at the Conventual Mass on Sunday mornings which is attended by the whole school. Other extracurricular music activities include a show which is produced on alternate years, such as *The Buddy Holly Story* which was this year’s production, various *Battle of the Bands* nights, choir competitions and a variety of workshops and performances from visiting musicians.

Glenstal Abbey School has a specialist music room called the *Athanasium* which is spacious and bright, acoustically satisfactory and very well resourced. The room is equipped with pianos, keyboards, an organ, classroom instruments including percussion instruments, a drum kit, computers with *Sibelius* software installed, a data projector, two whiteboards, one with staves, and a good stock of books and sheet music. In addition, the walls are decorated with a variety of posters, student project work and charts, all of which contribute to a heightened awareness of the subject. Access to the computer room is also facilitated where *Finale* software is installed. There are also ample facilities on site catering for the programme of instrumental tuition and providing practice facilities for the students. This well-resourced department is indicative of the commitment both management and staff have to Music and the arts. In keeping with this commitment the ongoing development of resources should be continued and should include further expansion of information and communication technology (ICT).

The music teacher is a member of the Post-Primary Music Teachers’ Association (PPMTA) and attendance at its meetings affords the teacher the opportunity to keep abreast of all information pertaining to music education at post-primary level, to keep up to date with ongoing curricular innovation and to network with other music teachers. In addition, the teacher avails of any ongoing training courses which contribute to overall continuing professional development (CPD). This is positive and it is hoped that management will continue to support and facilitate any opportunities for CPD in music education that arise in the future, particularly the courses due to be organised by the Second Level Support Service (*www.slss.ie*), soon to be subsumed under the Professional Development Service for Teachers.

**Planning and Preparation**

A good level of planning for the development of Music exists in Glenstal Abbey School. Comprehensive programmes of work, scheduling the topics to be covered, were presented. These were relevant to the syllabus and the requirements of the examinations, and included appropriate music teaching methodologies. In all lessons observed, clear objectives were evident, there was continuity from previous lessons and appropriate resources and stimuli were utilised. In general, a good level of planning for performing was evident in the prior preparation of relevant materials such as sheet music, accompaniments, worksheets and audio resources. This indicates that short-term planning is at a satisfactory level.

It is recommended that future planning includes consideration of student learning strategies and of ways of encouraging students to reflect on their learning. Planning could also be developed to facilitate more integration of the core activities of performing, composing and listening within the classroom context. Another possible area for development would be the inclusion of a review section in the subject plan. The music teacher currently presents an annual report to the principal,
so it should be feasible to incorporate a section of this type in the plan outlining the strengths and challenges of the department and recommendations for development.

The monastic community of Glenstal Abbey, who are the trustees of the school, have indicated that they wish the school to move towards a more active musical specialisation. It has been recognised that strategic planning will be necessary to ensure the success of this venture. Plans are underway to create a choir school within the contours of the existing school, dedicated to specialised music scholars. Admission to this “academy within a school” would require audition as well as the usual admissions procedures. The board has begun work on formulating a constitution for the scheme and sourcing the funding required to offer full and part bursaries. The proposal is that this new section of the school will begin in September 2012. This is a very exciting venture and is further testament to the school’s commitment to Music in all its configurations.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

In all lessons visited, a comfortable and warm atmosphere was maintained. High expectations of attainment and behaviour were set. There was a good rapport between the students and the teacher in a secure, enthusiastic and work-orientated atmosphere. Material was presented in a coherent manner and lessons were well structured and paced accordingly. The music teacher created a positive learning environment through effective organisation and management of learning activities. Students responded very well to this positive climate for learning, were encouraged to ask appropriate questions and participated with enthusiasm wherever challenging opportunities were presented.

Examples of appropriate music methodological practice were observed in all classes visited with an emphasis on the sound before symbol approach whether the lesson focussed on performing, composing or listening. Materials were well prepared and the teaching was supportive to all students. All concepts were reinforced through a constant and consistent referral to the sound of the area in question. Student engagement was high and some very good question and answering was observed with students’ contributions welcomed and affirmed and praise and encouragement given where warranted. Students reacted well to this atmosphere of inquiry, both at junior and senior cycles, and the ease in which they used expressive and technical language to analyse what they heard or had learned demonstrated that significant learning is taking place.

In lessons that had a revision or review element examples of good practice were seen. The development of skills required to undertake the dictation question in the Junior Certificate examination for example was approached in a musically-focused rather than a mechanical way as was the refinement of skills required for the melody-writing question in the Leaving Certificate. When concepts and content were reviewed, the teacher relied on clear explanations and demonstrations and students’ aural competencies were suitably developed through sight singing and aural exercises, and were appropriately checked and evaluated throughout the activities. This is good practice as it allows students to enrich their learning in musically-focussed ways.

The curricular areas of performing and listening were linked appropriately at all times. However, in some lessons, opportunities to include the integration of composing were often overlooked. In order to optimise learning, it is recommended that ways in which the methods outlined above could be expanded to include opportunities for further music-making activities integrating the three areas of performing, composing and listening in all lessons. In addition, a more
collaborative learning environment allowing constructive and productive peer-to-peer interaction and purposeful group work, where the teacher could guide students through various stages is recommended. This would ensure a more stimulating and challenging music-learning environment for all students.

The resources available in the music room, along with materials prepared by the teacher in advance, were used to good effect and contributed to the effective learning environment observed. Suitable worksheets and handouts were used to supplement textbooks and other materials, and appropriate use of the whiteboard and musical extracts were seen. Given the range of ICT available, it is recommended that more use be made of this valuable resource. Not only could it be used to produce more student-friendly resources and handouts but combined with the data projector would also reduce photocopying as a high proportion of the material could be displayed rather than distributed. Furthermore, an electronic stock of such resources would allow for a more efficient use of teacher time in the long term and could easily be adapted according to the ability and needs of the students. Such projects could be incorporated into student work also and help them to develop a sense of ownership of their own learning.

**ASSESSMENT**

In all lessons observed, students were generally confident and capable, and performed to a good standard. Some student folders and manuscripts showed evidence of good organisation and were generally neat in appearance, while others were haphazard and contained loose sheets and handouts. Careful monitoring of student materials is recommended, especially with junior classes, as valuable supplementary information and work will invariably go astray if not documented properly.

In addition to regular assessments at Christmas and summer, and the mock examinations for Junior and Leaving Certificate students in the spring, formative assessment takes place in a variety of ways. Homework, which includes written, aural and practical work, is given on a regular basis and is usually corrected in the next lesson. Leaving Certificate students receive an examination question every week to develop their examination technique and skills. Other examples include questioning in class, completion of worksheets and projects, and practical assessments. Practical elements are continually assessed and students perform in class on a regular basis. The music teacher maintains a diary for Junior Certificate students in order to track their progress in practical performances. This is very good practice. It is recommended however that the students themselves keep a similar diary which would aid them in building up a profile of their own musical competencies and allow them to take ownership for their own learning. In time this practice could be expanded to include students in all year groups. Students also experience practical assessments similar to those encountered in the certificate examinations. These methods allow for careful monitoring of a student’s progress, provide sound guidelines for performance in the certificate examinations and are indicative of the commitment of the teacher to helping all students achieve their potential in Music.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Music has a very high profile in the school, is available to all students on an optional basis with a very good uptake, and is supported by in-school management.
- Students were motivated and had a positive attitude towards Music. Observation of students’ work, both practical and written, indicates that the skills developed are appropriate and are of a good standard.
- A very well-resourced music teaching area exists in the school and is used appropriately and effectively in an integrated way to support the teaching and learning of Music.
- Students’ involvement in extracurricular musical activities impacts greatly on their musical development. The variety of activities available to the students is very good.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- It is recommended that all students should experience Music in TY.
- Future planning should include consideration of student learning strategies and of ways of encouraging students to reflect on their learning.
- All programmes and schemes of work should be working documents that are regularly reviewed.
- More integration of the core activities of performing, composing and listening within the classroom context ought to be facilitated.
- The available ICT resources should be used to generate more user-friendly handouts and worksheets.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teacher of Music and with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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