Subject Inspection of MUSIC
REPORT

Ursuline Secondary School
Thurles, County Tipperary
Roll number: 65470F

Date of inspection: 21 October 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN MUSIC

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in the Ursuline Secondary School, Thurles, conducted as part of a whole-school evaluation. 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 teachers, examined students’ work, and had discussions with the teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers’ written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and subject teachers.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Music enjoys a high profile in Ursuline Secondary School and is available to all students in all years. All students study Music for the entire year in first year after which they make their choices for Junior Certificate employing an open-choice system whereby they prioritise their preferred subject options. The optional Transition Year (TY) programme includes a music module which the students follow for the entire year, and an open-choice system operates for the Leaving Certificate. In addition, all first-year and second-year students have one period of choir per week. The number of students opting for Music remains consistently high in both junior and senior cycle. This is very positive and reflects the value and standing Music has in the school.

Timetabled provision for Music is in line with syllabus guidelines. There is an appropriate class spread of contact time throughout the week along with a sufficient number of double periods to facilitate practical work.

The commitment to extracurricular music activities in Ursuline Secondary School is extensive. Choirs have a long-standing tradition in the school and, in addition to the two timetabled choirs mentioned above, all students have the opportunity to participate in other choral activities outside of school hours. The school has two choirs, the Cecilian choir which is open to all students and the chamber choir for students from third year to sixth year. Entry to the chamber choir is by audition and it has a tradition of achieving high standards in various choral competitions around the country. Notable examples include Feis Ceoil, the Cork International Choral Festival, Lyric FM’s Carol Competition and, since its inception in 2009, the choir has reached both regional finals of the All-Island School Choir competition. Both choirs also perform at school Masses, other liturgical events and concerts and they are significant contributors to raising awareness of the school’s activities. The school also has two orchestras, junior and senior, which perform at school concerts, musical evenings, and competitions. In addition, all choirs in the school, and the two orchestras, have always entered the annual Choirs, Orchestras and Military Bands (COMB) examinations. Regret was expressed, during the inspection, at the discontinuation of the COMB examinations. A system of individual instrumental tuition in a wide range of instruments also operates in the school and currently involves over 500 students. This system enables students to
attend instrumental tuition during lunchtime and after school, and complements the curricular activity provided by the school.

The school has a long tradition of staging a wide variety of shows, musicals and operettas. A show such as *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Les Misérables*, *Guys and Dolls* and *Ragtime* usually takes place before the October mid-term break and involves both an in-school team of teachers and a significant proportion of the student cohort. The show constitutes one of the highlights of the school’s annual calendar of events and affords students the opportunity to become involved in the wide range of activities associated with these types of productions such as acting, singing, backstage work, art work, set design, and front-of-house. At the time of the evaluation, the *Sound of Music* was being produced to huge acclaim with packed houses at every performance. Both management and staff involved in this production are commended for the commitment and support needed to produce such a successful event every year.

The students’ music experiences are also continually enriched by trips to concerts and visits to the school from outside musicians and performers. The music teachers and management are complimented for the considerable investment in these musical experiences for every student in the school. Both the music teachers’ commitment to these events, and the school’s support in facilitating such activities, are applauded. This consistent participation of the whole-school community is indicative of the standing of, and the keen interest in, Music in the school and is very positive.

Ursuline Secondary School has a specialist music room which also doubles as a stage and opens out into the main atrium. This room is well resourced with good quality audio equipment, audio resources, sheet music and texts, piano, a range of instruments, whiteboard, stave board and screen. The room has lightweight furniture which can be re-arranged quite quickly and is spacious enough to allow the positioning of choir steps around two sides of the room. In the event of an overlap, lessons also take place in a nearby demonstration room with portable resources such as a piano and CD player brought in as required. Although access to the computer room is facilitated if needed, the department has no information and communication technology (ICT) in place in the music room. The introduction of music technology resources would be appropriate at this stage in order to optimise the students’ music learning experiences. Acquisition of appropriate resources for the music room, to include development of ICT, is thus recommended.

The commitment of the music teachers to continuing professional development (CPD) is good and membership of the Post-Primary Music Teachers’ Association (PPMTA) is up-to-date. The teachers rarely have the opportunity to attend the association’s annual conference as the date nearly always coincides with the opening of the school musical. The music teachers however make every effort to keep abreast of all information pertaining to music education at second level through regular contact with the Tipperary branch of the PPMTA. It would be worthwhile to join the internet discussion forum (www.ppmta.ie) which is another useful networking tool. The Professional Development Service for Teachers (formerly the Second Level Support Service), is also a useful source of information for CPD, especially at present, as a series of in-service programmes for Music is currently being organised in various education centres around the country. Details of all these programmes are available on its website (www.slss.ie). The music teachers have acknowledged that further training in ICT is required and show a willingness to participate in such training when the opportunity arises. In light of this, it is hoped that management will support and facilitate any opportunities for CPD in music education that may arise in the future particularly in the area of ICT.
PLANNING AND PREPARATION

There is a good level of planning in Ursuline Secondary School. From discussion with the teachers, it was found that much thought has been given to the accurate and effective delivery of all music courses in the school. The two music teachers work effectively as a team, planning programmes of work for the school year and organising activities for the many musical events that take place. There is regular contact and co-operation between them, in the sharing of collective facilities and resources, and in the day-to-day implementation of the syllabuses with their classes.

Good progress has been made in the development of the music department plan. The current plan contains a mission statement for the department and aims and objectives for music education in the school. It also includes organisational details, planning for students with additional educational needs, and general long-term and medium-term plans for all year groups. In the context of ongoing subject planning it is recommended that the outline curricular plans be developed into short-term schemes of work. These should outline, in an integrated manner, a more detailed breakdown of the content to be covered, the corresponding learning outcomes to be achieved, the resources and methodologies to be employed to support the teaching of topics and the revision and assessment modes to be used by teachers. Planning to include some broader aspects of musical development is also recommended with a focus on precise short-term targets and the inclusion of more active learning methodologies. Planning could also be developed to facilitate greater integration of the core activities of performing, composing and listening within the classroom context, while differentiated teaching strategies could also be developed.

It would also be worthwhile to include plans for the timetabled choir classes in subject planning. Elements which might be covered include cataloguing suitable repertoire and reasons for choosing same, the sequencing of material, documenting methodologies and outlining performing opportunities and events for all the choirs. An effective choir plan could also help deal with any contingencies, such as the cancellation of COMB as outlined above, without compromising the high standards of choral activity in the school. It may also be worthwhile to consider some new choral evaluation procedures to fill the void left by the discontinuation of COMB.

It is recommended that individual planning be expanded to include schemes reflecting a purposeful sequencing of material with suggested learning outcomes and appropriate specific music teaching methodologies. Future planning should also include a consideration of student learning strategies and of ways of encouraging students to reflect on their learning. In light of the recommendation in relation to ICT above, planning for the development of ICT resources and how they would be utilised in the classroom setting is also worth considering.

In order to ensure that effective planning is being undertaken, it would be important that the music department plan be a flexible working document open to review so that the contents remain relevant and purposeful.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

All lessons observed were presented in a coherent, warm manner with high expectations of attainment and behaviour. There was a good rapport between the students and the teachers in a secure, work-orientated atmosphere. The music teachers created a positive learning environment through effective organisation and management of learning activities.
Students responded very well to this positive climate for learning and were comfortable asking questions when they had difficulties understanding a concept. Answers were rarely given by the teachers however. Instead, students were allowed to discover these themselves through a range of activities such as singing a descending scale to work out the placement of a solfa syllable, or by being asked more probing questions which required them to listen, think and arrive at a conclusion.

The teaching observed employed some strategies to engage the students and include them in all aspects of the learning process, whether the activity involved melody writing, analysing a set work for the Leaving Certificate or working on the dictation question for the Junior Certificate examination. Students were provided with guidelines and encouragement from the teachers when the focus was on examination-type questions. They were questioned by the teachers, and interesting discussions evolved around the more theoretical aspects of Music. However, the activities in which these were used were almost exclusively teacher-led with few opportunities being provided where students were responsible for generating active participation. It is recommended that these strategies be expanded in order to minimise teacher-led activities and to encourage students towards more self-directed and autonomous learning. This could include activities such as note-making, as opposed to note-taking, and the incorporation of more higher-order questioning. Students need to be exposed to a wider range of teaching strategies to promote their own self-learning skills rather than relying on teacher instruction. A more collaborative learning environment, which would allow for more peer interaction, and lessons with fewer teacher-led activities is thus recommended.

Whilst acknowledging that some examples of the ‘sound before symbol’ approach were seen during the evaluation, it is recommended that it be expanded to allow students experience a more meaningful exploration of all the parameters of music. This would also open up opportunities for further music-making activities encompassing the three areas of performing, composing and listening and form links with all aspects of the course in a more musically-focused rather than cognitive-centred way. It could also help to energise what traditionally are looked upon as ‘skill and drill’ activities such as the dictation question in the Junior Certificate for example.

Furthermore, although the listening element of the syllabus is very well addressed, it is recommended that more integration of the three elements should be developed to ensure a better balance between performing, listening and composing. In this way more opportunities for creative expression and experimentation from the students would evolve and there should follow a more favourable balance between students’ musical development and their preparation for the examinations.

In the main, resources such as the whiteboard, sound system and piano were used appropriately to support the teaching and learning of music. It is recommended however that ways in which an overhead projector, or other suitable projection device, could be used effectively in a music-teaching setting be explored as it would greatly enhance the learning situation. Not only would it minimise the writing up of complicated questions on the whiteboard and reduce photocopying, but it could also be used to produce more student-friendly resources and handouts. Such projects could be incorporated into student work also, thus helping them to develop a sense of ownership of their own learning. This could also enhance student engagement and allow for more appropriate student posture when performing on instruments or singing for example, as the required visual stimuli could be displayed in a more effective way. In light of the recommendation to acquire some ICT resources, some consideration should be given to exploring other ways in which suitable software could be utilised within the classroom setting. The effective
use of these resources would greatly enhance student learning and would allow for a more efficient use of teacher time in the long term.

**ASSESSMENT**

In all lessons observed, students were generally confident and capable, and performed to a good standard. Students’ folders, copybooks and manuscripts showed evidence of good organisation, were generally neat in appearance, and contained detailed information sheets, coursework, and worksheets.

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 complements and consolidates the activities undertaken during lessons. Other examples of formative assessment include questioning in class, completion of worksheets and projects, and practical assessments. It is good to note that students frequently receive comments and words of encouragement on their assessments. This good practice is encouraged further as regular constructive feedback enhances learning by informing students about their own individual progress. Practical elements are continually assessed and 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 teachers to helping all students achieve their potential in Music. In this context, and in keeping with the recommendations in planning and preparation above, it would be timely to introduce assessment strategies which would help develop students as independent learners. This could help build an awareness of individual students’ musical competencies balanced in terms of examination requirements and overall musical development.

School policy promotes open communication with parents and, in addition to reports issued after formal examinations at Christmas, spring and summer, regular parent-teacher meetings take place for all class groups. These meetings also provide a forum for parents to discuss any concerns or difficulties students may be having. There is also a willingness on the part of staff to meet parents at any stage if they have concerns about their daughter’s progress.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- **Music** has a high profile in the school, is available to all students on an optional basis and is well supported by in-school management.
- **Good standards of teaching and learning**, a positive attitude towards Music and a warm classroom atmosphere were significant aspects of the lessons seen during the visit.
- **A well-resourced music teaching area** exists in the school, and is used appropriately to support the teaching and learning of Music.
- **Student involvement in extracurricular musical activities** impacts positively on their musical development. The wide-ranging activities available to the students enrich and complement curricular music in the school.
As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- Resources in the music room should be expanded to allow for the development of ICT.
- Planning should include consideration of student learning strategies and the inclusion of more active learning methodologies.
- All programmes and schemes of work should be working documents that are regularly reviewed.
- In order to minimise teacher-led activities, and to encourage students towards more self-directed and autonomous learning, students should be exposed to a wide range of strategies which promote a collaborative learning environment.
- Class work should allow for greater integration of the core activities of performing, composing and listening.
- An exploration of the many ways in which an overhead projector or other suitable projection devices can be used to great effect in music lessons should be undertaken.
- The monitoring of students’ musical competencies ought to be formalised with a view to establishing individual developmental profiles.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers 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.