Subject Inspection of MUSIC
REPORT

Rice College
Ennis, County Clare
Roll number: 61910K

Date of inspection: 23 November 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN MUSIC

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Rice College Ennis, 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 Rice College Ennis, and is available to all students in all years. All first-year students study Music for one period per week and, at the end of the year, choose four subjects from an extensive list and study these for the Junior Certificate examination. All students in the optional Transition Year (TY) programme have a double period of Music per week. This is good provision. An open-choice system operates for the Leaving Certificate, where students prioritise their preferred subject options. All students are facilitated including those who did not sit Music in the Junior Certificate, which is good practice. Such is the commitment to the provision of some form of music education for everyone that all students in fifth and sixth year have an eight-week module in Music appreciation for one double period per week. This is excellent provision.

The uptake of Music throughout the school is good with two groups in second year in the current year due to the high demand. The number of students opting for Music at Leaving Certificate level has been consistently high for the past number of years with a particularly large group of 29 students in 2008. This is very positive but should these numbers continue to increase, the creation of a second class group may be necessary in the future. Management is aware of this and is optimistic that any timetabling or resource problems will be surmountable if the situation arises. It is recommended that the ongoing monitoring of these numbers be continued by management and staff. In line with national norms, significantly more girls than boys study the subject in Rice College, with the exception of the current fifth-year group where there are twice as many boys as girls taking Music. Given the profile of Music in the school, further exploration into ways of encouraging a higher uptake by boys is recommended.

Timetabled provision for Music is in line with syllabus guidelines and there is an appropriate spread of contact time for individual class groups throughout the week. It is good that there are a sufficient number of double periods in all year groups to facilitate practical work.

In addition to the curricular aspects of the subject and examination preparation, a wide range of musical activities takes place during the school year. A variety of ensembles exists in the school
such as an Irish traditional group, a classical ensemble, a choir and a céilí band. These groups rehearse during lunchtime on Mondays and Wednesdays and perform during the many events throughout the school year such as musical evenings, carol services and school concerts. The Irish traditional groups also participate in activities during Seachtain na Gaeilge, St. Patrick’s Day and Féile na hInse. Students also participate in talent shows such as Rice College X Factor and A Class Act. Trips to concerts and musicals are also facilitated whenever feasible and, so far in the current year, students have managed to experience a performance of Fame the Musical, along with a trip to Cork for the Cork Pops Orchestra concert and to Dublin to experience a live performance of Tchaikovsky’s Romeo and Juliet (a prescribed work for the Leaving Certificate) in the National Concert Hall. The music teachers and management are complimented for the considerable investment in these musical experiences for the benefit of students.

Rice College has two class rooms which are used for music lessons. While one of these could be described as the main music room, both are suitably resourced with good quality audio equipment, audio resources, sheet music and texts, pianos, computers, data projectors, whiteboards and screens. The school has invested in a wide range of instruments for classroom use which are housed in a storage area off the main music room. These instruments are used by both teachers for their classes but, as the rooms are almost adjacent, sharing is easily facilitated. Both rooms have flexible seating which can be re-arranged quite quickly where necessary as evidenced during the evaluation. The walls in both rooms are adorned with posters, charts and students’ projects, all of which heighten an awareness of the subject. In addition, the music teachers have access to two information and communication technology (ICT) rooms where Finale Notepad software is installed on sixty computers. This investment in resource provision is indicative of the wholehearted commitment of all those involved. It is recommended that the development of resources be continued, especially in the area of ICT within the music rooms, in order to optimise the students’ music learning experiences.

The music teachers have availed of some opportunities for continuing professional development (CPD) and membership of the Post-Primary Music Teachers’ Association (PPMTA) and attendance at its annual conference are facilitated by management. The teachers are encouraged to avail of any opportunities which will allow them 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. It would be worthwhile also to join the internet discussion forum (www.ppmta.ie) which is another useful networking tool. The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) 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.pdst.ie).

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

There is evidence of very good planning for the development of Music in Rice College. Extensive work has gone into the creation of a comprehensive subject department folder for Music. This folder contains numerous documents relevant to the teaching and learning of Music and includes a list of music resources available in the department and some effective generic teaching methodologies. A comprehensive curriculum policy was presented which included programmes of work for all groups. These were relevant to the different syllabuses and the requirements of the examinations, and took into account the level and the ability of the students in question.
There is evidence of long-term curriculum planning for the integration of the three areas of performing, composing and listening, particularly at junior cycle, and clear procedures for record keeping and reporting are outlined in the planning documentation. The subject department plan also includes common written programmes of work for first year and second year, and a very interesting TY plan. Short-term plans included resources, methodologies, learning outcomes and assessment procedures for every group which is very good practice. It was also good to note that a monthly review procedure has been built into these plans.

In order to enhance the effective planning that has already been undertaken, it is recommended that a five-year development plan for the music department be instigated at this stage. It is suggested that this include planning for resources with a particular emphasis on technology, curricular plans to enhance the role of ICT in teaching and learning, and strategies to deal with the gender imbalance and prospective high numbers at Leaving Certificate Music.

**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 teachers in a secure, enthusiastic and work-oriented atmosphere. Through the effective organisation and management of learning activities a positive learning environment ensued. Students responded very well to this positive climate for learning and participated with enthusiasm wherever challenging opportunities were presented. There was a good level of student engagement in lessons observed, and students’ contributions to class discussions were valued, with praise used effectively to acknowledge their efforts.

A range of appropriate music methodological practice was observed in all classes visited, whether the lesson focused on listening activities, introducing new material or performing. Materials were well prepared and the teaching was supportive to all students. The material chosen in all classes was pitched at the level of the students and the pace of learning was commensurate with their ability. Good teaching was characterised by engaging and motivating the wide range of abilities of the students through well-structured and varied activities. Good learning was seen through listening and analysis, skill development, progressive refinement in all activities and a thorough consolidation and reinforcement of previously learnt material.

Information was presented with a good degree of clarity and skilful teacher explanation. Effective questioning to named students was employed to evaluate students’ prior learning and to reinforce recently learnt subject matter. It was also successfully used to aid the introduction and subsequent broadening of new material with interesting snippets of information provided by the teachers, where appropriate. The teachers also capitalised on the rich tradition of Irish music in the locality and the students’ interest was stimulated and maintained through well-chosen references to performers such as Martin Hayes, Lúnasa and the Kilfenora Céilí Band, and events such as the Willie Clancy Summer School in Miltown Malbay and the Feakle International Traditional Music Festival.

All lessons observed had an aural focus and most included performing opportunities, which is good practice. In lessons that included performing, total student participation enhanced the quality of these performances. Relevant rote learning and good rehearsal technique, where awkward passages were isolated and worked on, were some of the other activities seen. Whole-class performances of the music provided convincing evidence that whilst some were challenged, most students were capable of maintaining their own part in group music-making. This focus on
building the role of Music as a living subject and giving students the opportunity to take part in
and enjoy practical music-making is entirely appropriate.

The resources available in the music room, along with materials prepared by the teachers 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, musical extracts and video clips and computer and data
projector were seen. There were good starter activities, which were usually concerned with
eliciting information from the students through brainstorming, and good questioning and
answering was observed with student contributions welcomed and affirmed. Although the
teachers relied mainly on teacher-led activities, there were still opportunities to include student
input and active involvement by the students was encouraged. An example of pair work was
observed where students worked together on a worksheet to consolidate material introduced in the
lesson. Another example, in which a student’s explanation of and subsequent demonstration on
the uilleann pipes, did much to enhance the learning situation and engage the students in a
meaningful way. It is recommended that these strategies be expanded in order to optimise
learning and to encourage students towards more self-directed and autonomous learning. Further
development of the existing collaborative learning environment allowing constructive and
productive peer-to-peer interaction and purposeful group work, where the teachers could guide
students through various stages would ensure a more stimulating and challenging music-learning
environment for all students.

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 coursework notes, words of songs, sheet music
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 consistently marked. Other examples include questioning in class, completion of
worksheets and projects, and regular end-of-topic assessments. It is good to note that students
frequently receive comments and words of encouragement and guidance on their assessments.
This good practice is encouraged further as regular constructive feedback enhances learning by
informing students about their own individual progress. It would be timely to organise assessment
strategies which would help develop students as independent learners. This could help build up an
awareness of individual students’ musical competencies balanced in terms of examination
requirements and overall musical development.

Practical elements are continually assessed both within and outside class where necessary.
Students also experience practical assessments similar to those encountered in the certificate
examinations. Leaving Certificate students experience a mock practical examination facilitated by
an external examiner experienced in such assessment work. This is very positive as these methods
allow for careful monitoring of a student’s progress, provide realistic feedback for performance in
the certificate examinations, and are indicative of the commitment of the teachers to helping all
students achieve their potential in Music.
The school has an open communication policy for 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 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 by appointment if they have concerns about their son’s or daughter’s progress.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Music has a good profile in the school, is available to all students on an optional basis and is supported by in-school management.
- Collaborative planning and preparation, good standards of teaching and learning, and a well-resourced music teaching area were significant aspects observed during the evaluation.
- 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.
- Students’ involvement in extracurricular musical activities impacts greatly on their musical development. The variety of activities available to the students, the teachers’ commitment to all these activities and the school’s support in facilitating these experiences are noteworthy strengths in Rice College.

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

- Further exploration into ways of encouraging a higher uptake by boys is recommended.
- The music department should develop a five-year developmental plan which includes a focus on planning for resources and on curricular plans to enhance the role of ICT in teaching and learning as well as strategies to improve gender balance and to provide for prospective high numbers at Leaving Certificate level.
- Development of the existing collaborative learning environment which would allow for more peer-peer interaction and encourage students towards more self-directed and autonomous learning is recommended in all lessons.

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.

Published January 2012