

Response from the Society for Music Education in Ireland to the Junior Cycle Music Draft Curriculum Specification

The Society for Music Education in Ireland (hereafter SMEI) notes the publication of the Junior Cycle Music Draft Curriculum Specification and welcomes the opportunity to respond to the draft. Furthermore, we gratefully acknowledge the work to date carried out by the NCCA Music Development Group and appreciate the challenges involved in working to develop subject specifications for Music within the new Junior Cycle curriculum.

I. Rationale & Aim

As an organisation concerned with the music education and overall cultural enrichment of young people, we welcome the holistic thrust of the draft specification's aim:

“This music specification aims to contribute to the development of artistic awareness and understanding, self-expression, self-esteem, imagination and multicultural sensitivity, and therefore to the development of the whole person” (p. 7).

Given that music is a biologically evolved propensity of human nature (Dissanayake, 2000), it may be beneficial to further enunciate within this section, the humanistic virtues of music. A possible suggestion could include music's contribution to the pursuit of **meaning-making, well-being and identity-formation**, while serving as a pathway in **cultivating humanity**. This sentiment is aptly reflected in the existing primary school curriculum for music; “music is an art form deeply rooted in human nature. It is a discrete body of knowledge, a unique form of communication and a means by which feelings and interests are organised and expressed” (Government of Ireland, 1999, p.5). Consideration may also be given to include the terms, **enjoyment, self-knowledge and self-growth** as espoused by David Elliott and Marissa Silverman (2014). In this way, through meaningful and reflective encounters in music and across across disciplines using different media and modalities, music offers a unique pathway for students to make sense of their realities and discover an unexplored aspect of themselves, against the backdrop of their own personal history (Hubard, 2013; Greene, 1995; 2001; Nussbaum, 1997; Dewey, 2001). We welcome that students will develop the knowledge, skills and understanding necessary to produce and engage with authentic and original music, that is both theirs and the music of others.

II. Overview: Course

The SMEI has reservations regarding the potentially problematic language and philosophical implications of the proposed “strands” (p.12); **Procedural Knowledge, Innovative and Ideate, Culture and Context**, replacing the original terms **Performing, Composing and Listening & Responding**.

There is a concern that the combination of verbs and nouns not only may be difficult to decode and understand, but the language appears unrelated and disconnected to the discipline of music, compared for example, to the strands in Art (Art, Craft and Design), English (Oral Language, Reading and Writing) and Business (Personal Finance, Enterprise and Our Economy). The current nomenclature of the strands could effectively relate to many other subjects for example, history, geography, technical graphics and so on, thus their generic application seems at odds with the practice of music-making.

Furthermore, the rationale and the genesis for the three proposed interconnected “strands” deserves review. These “strands” appear more like **ideological philosophical principles** which underpin the multidimensional nature of learning and teaching music. Echoing the sentiments of David Elliott (1991) in his paper, *Music as Knowledge* (p.28), the specific term, “**procedural knowledge**” (knowing what and how, musical know-how) is considered “awkward and incomplete,” as it fails to articulate “the complex *integration* of knowings that underlie artistic musical performances” (Elliott, 1991, p. 28).

Terms such as “music literacy and skills” (p. 12) and “a vocabulary in music” ought to be fully unpacked and explicated. Whether music literacy and skills refer to the skills of musical criticism (analysis) and notation, including music theory and history and whether “vocabulary” refers to competences and/or specific language is unclear. The term “symbolic representations of sounds” is also used without clarification as to its meaning—it would appear that “symbolic representations of sound” (as presented in Learning Outcome 1.5, p. 19) differ from traditional notation (which appears to be used in Learning Outcomes 1.6 and 1.7, p. 19). Too often, music literacy is interpreted as the decoding of sounds and symbols whereas research tells us that notational skills need to be developed in conjunction with aural skills (Elliott 1995; Green 2008). Clarity in terms of the specific sequencing and progression of musical skills and knowledge needs to be addressed. In other words, what specific new musical skills and knowledge and understandings are being referred to on page 6 for example? It is encouraging to see that the JC draft curriculum values and promotes the development of life and learning skills (Hallam, 1998). It is important that aural, cognitive, technical and musicianship skills are also kept to the fore and that their importance is not overlooked; these skills are vital in the development of the whole musician. While aural skills will be developed through performing, composing and listening activities, ear-training tasks such as dictation appear to take somewhat of a backseat, with students now required to dictate melodic phrases of only two bars in length (the current JC requires students to dictate a four-bar phrase, with the first bar provided). Dictation is an area on the LC curriculum that many students find particularly difficult, mostly down to the fact that students have not had sufficient opportunity to develop this area at JC level.

It is our understanding that at the most basic level, we learn music practically, through direct engagement with music, through a combination of acquisitional, propositional/declarative knowledge *and* procedural knowledge - cognitively and emotionally. Students learn how to critically reflect and evaluate what one is doing as reflective musicians, to construct knowledge

to critique, evaluate and improve. It is suggested therefore that these salient points are addressed in the first paragraph in page 13 by reviewing this section to include the following points;

“The development of procedural knowledge involves learning music in and through direct and active engagement with music through listening and responding, composing and performing. In order to develop a vocabulary in music, students need to develop a range of musical skills, knowledge and understanding through

- exploring and responding to expressive qualities in music,
- imagining and creating musical motifs and soundscapes.
- interpreting and performing their own music and that of others.

Through these processes, students develop vocabulary in music by learning and using symbols to explore and represent sound through music-making and music-creating.”

As a general note, the absence of the verb “perform” within the procedural knowledge section (p.19) and in appendix A (p.33) raises several questions. The SMEI also proposes a review of this term specifically, while exploring terms like **experiential (musical) knowledge** and/or **“Musicianship” (and listenership)** - the latter advocated by Elliott, (2014) as key to achieving the values and aim of education.

III. Continuity of Language between Primary School to Senior Cycle

Acknowledging the strands at both primary and senior level are referred to as **Performing, Composing and Listening & Responding**, it is difficult to see and understand how the rationale and aims of the proposed specification “are very much aligned” with the primary school curriculum (p. 17) and linked with the syllabus for music at senior cycle. As noted previously, replacing these terms with **Procedural Knowledge, Innovative and Ideate, Culture and Context**, is potentially problematic. Punctuating the issue of language inconsistency, the newly proposed three “elements,” **Creating & exploring, Participating and music-making, Appraising and responding (first paragraph, p.14)** when referring to the “outcomes of each strand” (p. 14) is also potentially cumbersome, considering the term “element” is traditionally associated with ingredients/elements of music i.e pulse/duration/tempo/pitch/dynamics/structure/timbre etc. within the primary school curriculum. Indeed, it would appear that the elements are in fact, strands of engagement with music. We would suggest therefore that the elements as currently iterated above become the strands.

IV. Assessment and Reporting

The SMEI welcomes the tenets undergirding of this section, in that the assessment strategies will be co-constructed between the student and the teacher. However, the assessment procedures need to be explicated in detail. There is a primary concern regarding the alignment of learning outcomes and assessment and whether the breadth of the learning outcomes espoused in the draft rubrics can be meaningfully assessed within a one-hour written paper, or indeed if a written paper is a suitable and effective way of assessing the outcomes, many of which are practical-

based and interactive. Furthermore, given the practical and the written examination accounts for 30% and 70% respectively, as currently drafted, the proportion of the two classroom based assessments; the classroom-based composition portfolio (end of second year) and the programme note (3rd year) is very unclear.

The multiple ways in which students can engage with composing in the draft specification is to be welcomed, however the current proposal of classroom-based assessment of composing (and not embedded within the examination) with could deem this activity tokenistic at best. A suggestion is to mandate that one of the performance pieces for the practical examination be an original composition thereby ensuring that all students engage in the practical process of composing whether individually or as a group and that this is then assessed in the practical examination.

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