

# GAMELAN IN THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

by David Ruffer, Head of Music at William Parker School, Hastings

Music, since the introduction of the National Curriculum, is one of the ten core subjects that all pupils have to study up to and including Key Stage 3.

This means that all children, from the moment they enter a reception class, to the time they embark on their GCSE courses, are expected to learn about music on a regular basis.

The National Curriculum has a Programme of Study for each Key Stage, which should build up the musical skills and experience needed to enable students to access GCSE Music. It would be simplistic, and wrong, to imagine that the only value in learning gamelan would be to tick off a notional commitment to looking at music from other cultures and from different parts of the world. As a teacher at Key Stage 3, that is 11–14 year olds (Years 7–9), I use gamelan to develop a wide variety of musical skills and to address parts of the Programme of Study.

Although I will be quoting from Key Stage 3, many of the concepts involved in gamelan are ones that form part of the Programme of Study at Key Stage 1 – Infant pupils, and Key Stage 2 – Junior pupils.

Since 1992, when our gamelan arrived from Yogyakarta, my students have had at least two blocks of teaching during the year. I can, with difficulty, get a whole class of between 25–30 pupils playing.

According to Section 1a of the Key Stage 3 Programme of Study, pupils should be given the opportunity to ‘use sounds and respond to music individually, in pairs, in groups and as a class’. Gamelan obviously fits in here.

Section 2 talks about teaching the elements of music in terms of pitch, duration, dynamics, tempo, timbre, texture and structure; and you cannot learn to play a piece on the gamelan without being aware of all of these. An obvious place for gamelan is found in Section 3d which specifies that students are expected to learn about music ‘from cultures across the world’.

However, it is when looking at the twin foci of music in the National Curriculum, the Attainment Targets of (1) ‘Performing and Composing’ and (2) ‘Listening and Appraising’ that playing gamelan seems a most relevant activity for all students. Below are the criteria for the performing part of Attainment Target 1, and you will see that much of that is covered through playing gamelan.

I often use gamelan as the starting point for a composition project that will have at its heart an exploration of the idea of structure, texture or mode.

Many of the ideas expressed in Attainment Target 2 – Listening and Appraising also have relevance to gamelan playing. Students are expected to – ‘listen to and develop understanding of, music from different times and places applying knowledge of their own work’; and also – ‘respond to, and evaluate, live performances and recorded music, including their own compositions and performances.’ Gamelan can be of great value here as well.

## ITEM 4

Pupils should be given opportunities to:

- control sounds made by the voice and a range of tuned and untuned instruments.
- perform with others, and develop awareness of audience, venue and occasion

## ITEM 5

Pupils should be taught to:

- sing a variety of music, developing control of subtle changes within all elements, and the ability to interpret the intended sound;
- sing and play by ear, from memory, and from various forms of notation, including staff notation and chord symbols;
- take part in group performances (vocal, instrumental and mixed) developing an awareness of style and a sense of ensemble;
- plan, rehearse, direct and present performances.

I cannot pretend that playing gamelan will solve all the problems of teaching music in the National Curriculum, but it can be a great help. Of more importance, many of the students comment positively on gamelan in their own reports on their activities during the course of the year.

Beyond National Curriculum, William Parker School has had a steady stream of students who have played gamelan for GCSE Performance, and written compositions for gamelan or which have been gamelan influenced. The experience has proved invaluable to many students who do not have instrumental lessons, and for whom a pass at A–C grades would have been unlikely had it not been for their gamelan playing. We have even had students play and compose using the gamelan at A-Level and we currently have one of our past students, Stephane Gray, at Oxford University, playing in Pete Smith’s group.

*William Parker school, an all-boys 11–19 comprehensive, currently houses the Hastings and Rye gamelan Alun Madu, which was bought with funds from the Hastings Consortium of Schools and a local educational trust – Magdelan and Lasher.*

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David Ruffer wrote this piece for *Sèlèh Notes* in March 1998, when he was Head of Music at William Parker School. Since then he has moved to become Director of Music at The Bournemouth School, where he has used the gamelan for Year 10 GCSE group in particular. He hopes to have performing groups ready shortly, and plans to have an evening class for the general public.

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