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by Simon Rushby

## INTRODUCTION

This resource is intended to provide activities and ideas for students that will help them to revise effectively for the summer GCSE music exam, and it follows a resource on general strategies for making revision effective and manageable (*Music Teacher*, March 2019). The bulk of it is written so that teachers can pass it on in print or electronic form directly to students, and allow them to devise their own revision activities.

Students differ in their learning styles, of course, and need to know what kinds of activities work well for them. As a result, this resource is fairly broad, and it's important to choose carefully from the ideas within it. There is also no exam board-specific content here, for obvious reasons, though for illustrations I have sometimes picked topics, set works or marking criteria from one or two of the four main boards. It should be easy to adapt and alter ideas to suit the board you are doing.

Many students taking music GCSE this summer will perhaps be anxious about revision, especially as there may still be a lot of class-time focus on getting coursework completed. Each student will be at a different stage in this process, with varying amounts of spare time on their hands during music lessons and homework slots. Therefore, the more equipped they are to be able to find effective revision activities on their own, the better.

### What teachers can do to help students progress with revision

Here's a brief checklist of things that it would be good to devote a little lesson time to, at this stage, to ensure that revision is progressing:

- Read the previous *Music Teacher* online resource on making revision effective and manageable (March 2019), and do some of the suggested activities and discussions with the class. There is information there about how to revise, manage distractions, organise time and develop metacognition that can help students to make their revision time richly effective and positive.
- Set out a timetable of practice listening exercises, perhaps organised by Area of Study or set work, so that students have clear targets to tailor their revision towards. Ideally some timed extended answers can be planned, too.
- Consider getting students to work together in pairs or small groups so that they can encourage, motivate and test each other. Play to their strengths by appointing student 'experts' who can lead small-group sessions on Areas of Study that they are confident about.
- Encourage students to practise marking questions as well as doing them – this, of course, is critical to their understanding of how to approach the written paper.
- Ask students to keep a revision diary that you can discuss with them by way of support and guidance. This will also help them to keep their revision manageable and maintain their positive focus.

From this point on, this resource addresses students directly, so that teachers can pass it on if they wish.

# REVISION WITH PURPOSE

All revision needs to have a point to it. Think about some of the least enjoyable aspects of your revising in the past. They were probably when your revision activity was either **passive** or **lacked focus** – or a combination of both. Examples of these kinds of activities include:

- Reading your notes.
- Reading your textbook.
- Learning content – such as lists of key words.
- Listening to set works or playlists of wider listening music.

These and other similar activities have one thing in common: information is entering your mind, but you are not doing anything with it. Although listening to music, going over notes and learning relevant vocabulary are all essential parts of preparing for the GCSE music exam, it's only in the active application of these things that you will begin to prepare fully and effectively. If you get a new phone, for example, the best thing to do is switch it on immediately and start exploring it. This is a far better and quicker way of learning how your phone works than reading about how to operate it.

Make all of your revision **active**. If there is a need to go over some notes, learn some key words or listen to a piece of music, make sure you have an activity that you will do to give this task **focus**. For example:

- After reading over notes on a set work, write down from memory three characteristics of its melody, three characteristics of its harmony, and the same for rhythm, sonority, texture and structure.
- After learning a list of key words associated with one of your Areas of Study, ask a fellow student or member of your family to quiz you about it.
- After listening to one of your set works, do a practice listening question on it and then mark it yourself. Make sure you then note down where you need to improve to get better marks next time. If you can't find a practice question, or have done all the available ones, pair up with a fellow student and write listening questions for each other, along with mark schemes.
- After listening to a small selection of wider listening pieces, which all belong to the same Area of Study, draw a table that lists their similarities and differences, perhaps like this one:

	Similarities	Differences
Melody	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All three pieces have conjunct melody.</li> <li>• Pieces A and B have balanced phrasing.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Piece A has a pentatonic melody but pieces B and C have melodies in the major key.</li> <li>• Piece C has some disjunct melody.</li> </ul>
Harmony/tonality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All three are in the major key.</li> <li>• There is a lot of use of primary chords in all three pieces.</li> <li>• All three pieces have functional harmony.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is chromatic harmony in Piece C.</li> <li>• Only Piece C modulates to a key other than the dominant.</li> </ul>
Rhythm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A and B have a quick tempo.</li> <li>• There is syncopation in A and C.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• B has a slow tempo and more complex rhythms, including triplets.</li> </ul>
Sonority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• B and C are for piano only.</li> <li>• All three pieces use a narrow range of the piano.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A is for piano and singer.</li> <li>• The singer in A is a soprano.</li> </ul>
Texture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All three pieces are largely homophonic with melody and accompaniment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a passage of monophony (for unaccompanied singer) in piece A.</li> </ul>
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pieces B and C are in ternary (ABA) form.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Piece C is in verse and chorus form.</li> </ul>

Time can be an enemy in revision, as well as in the actual exam. Learning how to manage it positively is a giant step in the right direction.

Here are some tips for making the most of the time you have, and not constantly feeling that it's running out.

### TRY THE POMODORO TECHNIQUE



In the late 1980s, the Italian Francesco Cirillo developed a work plan based on short intervals, which he timed with a tomato-shaped kitchen timer (*pomodoro* is Italian for tomato). Also known as **timeboxing**, the idea is very simple:

1. Plan your revision tasks for the day and place distractions like your phone out of sight and earshot.
2. Set a timer for 25 minutes and start the first revision task.
3. When the timer goes off, put a tick on a piece of paper and take a three- to five-minute break. Check your phone, make a drink, get some air, or do whatever you want to do.
4. Set the timer for a further 25 minutes and so on.
5. When you have four ticks, reward yourself with a 15- to 30-minute break, during which time you can do something you like.
6. Repeat from stage 2.

The reason the Pomodoro Technique is so successful, despite its simplicity, is that it allows *focus* and *flow*. Getting started is the hardest bit, and the timer forces this to happen. Similarly, the low-tech approach of a ticking timer can actually help you to focus.

Francesco Cirillo has a website where you can learn more about this simple but groundbreaking technique.

### CHOOSE YOUR REVISION SOUNDS CAREFULLY

There is a lot of research on the effect – or otherwise – of playing music while working. A lot of music is distracting and as a general rule, anything with lyrics is best avoided. Instrumental music can be good (and Spotify has plenty of 'revision playlists') but choose wisely – if you're revising a certain Area of Study, perhaps it would be best to put on music associated with that Area of Study.

Better still, consider trying non-musical sounds such as birdsong, sounds of the sea, rain or white noise. Mad as it seems, these can be brilliant for helping you to 'zone in' to your work and shut out everything else. I often use the sound of rainfall as I find it both relaxing and not distracting. For more on this have a look at dedicated websites and apps such as Simply Noise or Noisli.

## MAKE YOUR ENVIRONMENT INTERESTING – AND ONE THAT ENCOURAGES YOU TO WORK

If your revision environment is stimulating and a little bit unusual, this can help motivate you to spend time there. Having things around you that help you to focus and remember will bring long-term benefits. For example:

- **Go Post-it mad.** Have coloured Post-it notes containing snappy information displayed all around your revision area, and even elsewhere in the house such as the bathroom, cupboard and wardrobe doors, and so on.
- **Get smelly!** There's research that suggests aromas can help memory and focus, so consider getting an infuser for your revision area with your favourite scent. According to one piece of research, the smell of rosemary is good!
- Make sure that **distractions** are under control in your revision environment. If you can save all distractions for your breaks, you'll get much more done in the times of focused work. There is more on this in the earlier resource on revision (*Music Teacher*, March 2019), but in basic terms, simply observe these three rules:
  - Put your phone out of sight and earshot – maybe by putting it in airplane mode.
  - If you're using a computer for work, switch off social media and email alerts.
  - Close your door and ensure others in your house know you are working – maybe by having a copy of your revision timetable displayed in the kitchen.

It's worth bearing in mind, too, that though it might seem like other family members such as parents exist purely to nag you about doing your work, and to interrogate you about how much you're doing, all they really want is reassurance that you are on top of things. Keep them 'in the loop' about what you're doing by showing them examples of your revision resources and you'll find that the home environment becomes a lot less tetchy.

## BE MINDFUL

Mindfulness, meditation and other ways to 'pause' the world and focus on your mind can be really useful for managing your well-being and getting you positive about your preparation.

Talk to your teachers about what mindfulness-related opportunities are available in your school – many schools now operate programmes of this kind. There are also lots of apps – such as *The Mindfulness App*, *Headspace* and *Calm* – that teach you basic mindfulness and meditation techniques to help you regain 'ownership' of your mind and focus on the important things.

## GET VISUAL, AUDITORY AND KINAESTHETIC

These well-known learning styles can be mixed and matched depending on what works best for you. Make sure you find revision activities that appeal to your preferred ways of learning, such as:

- Making **visual aids** like mind maps and posters.
- Use **colours** and coloured overlays to make text more interesting and easier to focus on (but don't waste time with unnecessary colouring!).
- **Record yourself** reading your notes and listen back to the recordings.
- **Teach** someone about a topic – a fellow student, members of your family or even your pet hamster – using visual aids like a Powerpoint or poster.
- Make **poems or songs** about a topic. You could even sing facts about a set work to the tune of the set work...
- Use **mnemonics, metaphors** or little **pictures** to help you remember facts.

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## EYES ON THE PRIZE

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While you revise, it's essential to know clearly what you need to do in order to get the best grade you can. It's rarely a good idea to jump into a car and drive without first working out your route and knowing your destination, so avoid directionless revision at all times.

By picking out common words and phrases from the various boards' GCSE specifications, it's easy to build a picture of what you need to show when it comes to the written exam. A good place to start is the **Assessment Objectives** that all boards use to underpin their marking criteria. For the written exam, there are two assessment objectives that apply, which are:

- **AO3: Demonstrate and apply musical knowledge.**
- **AO4: Use appraising skills to make evaluative and critical judgements about music.**

Your written paper will be split between each of these assessment objectives, so it's important that you know what they mean, and what exactly the examiner will want to see in your answers. Study mark schemes and identify the things that keep cropping up, which generally can be summarised like this:

- **Demonstrate accurate knowledge of a wide range of musical elements.**
- **Demonstrate accurate knowledge of a wide range of musical contexts.**
- **Demonstrate accurate knowledge of a wide range of musical language.**
- **Evaluate music to make convincing judgements using musical terminology accurately.**

'Demonstrate accurate knowledge' means 'clearly show that you know what you are talking about'. But simply **having** this knowledge is only part of the equation. Of course it's important to learn the facts and vocabulary associated with each of your Areas of Study, but you also need to practise **applying** this knowledge in the right way, and targeting the right areas to gain marks.

This is best done by doing practice questions **and marking them yourself**, taking note from the mark scheme where you missed a mark and working out how you can express your answer better next time. When you learn to drive, the physical bits of driving – steering, braking, changing gear and so on – are picked up quite quickly, and the hardest bit is learning how to apply these to the specific journey you're taking. In other words, it's not just about **knowing** it, it's also about knowing **which bit of knowledge to use**.

In the written exam there will be various types of question:

- **'Remember something'**: these will be questions with short answers that simply require you to recall a piece of knowledge, perhaps through multiple choice or by writing a short answer.
- **'Identify something'**: these questions will require a little bit of detective work. For example, you might be asked to identify an aspect of melody in an extract of music – familiar or otherwise – from an Area of Study.
- **'Compare something'**: these types of question typically get you to compare two bits from the same piece, two different pieces or perhaps relate an extract in the exam to another piece that you know (known as 'relating to wider listening').

These first three types of question mainly fall into the AO3 category – remembering elements (like conjunct melody or syncopated rhythm), context (like which musical period something was written in, or what genre of rock a piece belongs to) and language (like remembering words such as 'tonic pedal' or 'riff').

- **'Evaluate something'**: this is similar in some ways to the 'compare' question, in that you need to show that you can relate a musical extract to all the relevant things that you know.
- **'Analyse something'**: often an unfamiliar extract of music will crop up and you have to apply your skills to picking out different characteristics and features for yourself.

These last two types of question mainly fall into the AO4 category, and this can be where your 'top grade' marks can be found lurking. So once again, practising doing these questions is an extremely valuable use of your revision time.

Only two of the five 'command words' listed above concern the process of simply **recalling** knowledge, yet there is a danger that the majority of your revision will be devoted to memorising facts. In fact, at least 60% of your revision time needs to be spent honing your **skills** for the questions that ask you to compare, evaluate or analyse. Being good at these application skills is the key to those higher marks.

# PREPARING FOR SHORT-ANSWER OR LISTENING QUESTIONS

A lot of the 'fact-learning' side of revision will be in preparation for the short-answer questions that typically test your listening skills. If your board's specification has named set works, there will be a certain amount of straightforward preparation to do around the recall of key words and characteristics to do with the music and the context of each work. This revision work could also be very relevant for any extended-answer questions that are going to come up in your exam, because it will give you the right foundations of knowledge to be able to make the evaluations and critical judgements that gain those AO4 marks.

Structure your preparation for listening questions something like this, so that you can be sure you've covered all bases for each of your Areas of Study and associated music, whether it's set by the board or chosen by yourself and your teacher.

## Context

Have a visual reminder – a mind map or timeline, perhaps – of the whole Area of Study, so that you know where each piece of music or each characteristic fits in. Get an idea of the social or historical background so that you can relate the music to it – for example, if you're looking at Indian music, make sure you know a little bit about the cultural background to help you understand why the music is like it is.

Contextual facts like dates are partly important, but it's worth looking at specimen material and past papers to find out just how specific you need to be. Often, it's enough to know a decade or musical period that a composition belongs to rather than a specific date. Knowing that most of Beethoven's music was written *after* Mozart died, for example, is more useful than knowing the actual dates of either of these two composers.

## Musical characteristics

Although it can be helpful to know lots of detail about the musical characteristics of each piece of music you've studied, in reality, this is an extremely tall order. There will be plenty of little 'clues' in the exam itself that, if you've prepared effectively, will help to point you in the direction of the correct answers without necessarily having learnt every single fact about the music. Learn how to find these clues – particularly in any music that's played to you, or for which you have been given some kind of score – so that you can home in on them.

One way of doing this is to learn the important words associated with each element. For example, if you're thinking about **melody**, you might learn words such as:

- conjunct (stepwise) or disjunct (contains leaps).
- ascending (rising) or descending (falling).
- major, minor, modal, pentatonic or chromatic.
- equal or unequal phrase lengths (regular or irregular).
- sequence.

Having learnt these types of melodic feature, a really useful revision activity would be to listen to four or five short extracts of music from different Areas of Study and practise writing down what the key features of their melodies are. Then you can check what you've written against your notes or textbook. This kind of activity is exactly what is meant by **practising a skill** rather than passively learning facts.

Do the same for all the other elements: harmony and tonality, rhythm, texture, sonority (which includes learning about instruments and how to identify them) and structure.

## 'Pure' listening skills

There are always some questions that require you to *hear* something and relate it to what you know. While it's hard to prepare for these, it's certainly possible to practise the skills you need. Practice listening tests in books

or online are available, and your teacher will be able to point you in the right direction for them. If you run out of GCSE-specific resources, there are many other places to find opportunities to do general listening practice – for example:

- The practical exam boards – ABRSM, Trinity Guildhall and so on – have produced a lot of resources to support students in preparing for their aural exams. The *aural trainer* apps from ABRSM are an example of these. There are questions in these apps – such as the ones about ‘style and period’ for Grade 5 ABRSM exams – that will help you hone your GCSE listening.
- There are many websites and apps designed to help you improve your aural. These include Auralbook, Musical U, Teoría and musictheory.net, all of which have exercises for you to try.

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## PREPARING FOR EXTENDED-ANSWER QUESTIONS

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Potentially the most challenging part of the GCSE music written exam, and the part where marks can easily be missed, is the extended-answer question. All the boards include extended-answer questions in their exams, sometimes about music you’ve studied, sometimes about unfamiliar music and sometimes asking you to compare unfamiliar and familiar music (as with Edexcel).

All boards are looking for evidence of your ability to find features in the music and make evaluative and critical judgements about them – in other words, they test your skills in the context of AO4. Often you will be asked to relate the features that you find to the *effect* that they have, and give examples from other music that does a similar thing.

A good approach that you can practise in your revision time is the fairly well-known PEEL approach. You may have come across this in English lessons when looking at writing essays about – for example – literary works. PEEL stands for Point, Example, Explanation, Link, but we can adapt it slightly to ensure that it is completely relevant for extended-answer questions in the music written paper.

**P** still stands for **point**. Once you have deconstructed and decoded the question, and feel confident and clear that you know what’s required of you, the first thing to do is find the features and characteristics that are going to form the backbone of your answer. Again, use the ‘elements’ approach by asking yourself what features of melody you can find (for example, it rises or it is chromatic), and the same for harmony/tonality, rhythm, texture, sonority and – possibly – structure. As you go through the music finding these, make sure they’re all relevant to the question – some questions, for example, may only ask you to write about one or two elements.

The first **E** can now stand for **evidence**. This comprises two things. First, you need to give a location of the feature you’re talking about, if you can. If you’re purely listening and there is no score, this might simply be ‘at the beginning’, but some questions will be accompanied by reduced ‘skeleton’ scores that allow you to give bar numbers. If you are writing about a familiar work, you can say things like ‘in the second verse’ or ‘in the coda’.

The second part of **evidence** is explaining clearly what your point means. This may not be necessary – for example, if you’re stating that the melody is rising, that’s pretty clear without further explanation. Still, it’s good to check that the point you’ve made is clear and easy to understand. If it’s not, think of other ways to express it.

The second **E** of PEEL can now stand for **effect**. This is one crucial aspect of gaining AO4 marks – explaining what effect your chosen feature has on the music, and its impact on the listener. For example, the rising melody that you have discovered at the beginning of the extract might be important in creating a sense of wonder and awe. Be guided by the question here – a lot of the time the effect (eg sadness, drama or climbing a mountain) will be specified in the wording of the question.

Finally, the **L** still stands for **link**. Where you can, double check that you are linking your points to the question and staying relevant. If the question asks for it, give examples of other music you know that does the same thing (this is more of an issue at A level, but there are opportunities at GCSE to demonstrate your wider musical knowledge). Above all, ensure that your answer is **evaluative**.



Here's an example – just a portion of an answer – of how PEEL can work when answering an extended-answer question. Let's assume that the question is: **Show how the composer creates a sense of excitement in this extract.**

At the very start of the piece, a solo flute plays a fast-moving, rising melody that is very virtuosic.

This excellent first sentence makes four points about the opening melody – it is fast-moving; it rises; it is virtuosic; and it is played by a solo flute. The second E of PEEL has also been taken care of – a location for this melody has been given. But there are no AO4 marks to be gained yet.

The rising nature of this melody creates an instant sense of wonder, and its speed, with semiquaver rhythms, cannot fail to excite the listener.

Now we've nailed the AO4 part! The effect of the melody has been clearly evaluated and linked to the question. This pretend answer might continue like this:

Next, there is a loud, fanfare-like section for brass instruments, using dotted notes. These attract the attention of the listener and give a clear indication that something exciting is going to happen.

Following this kind of approach for extended-answer questions can be extremely successful in the right context, and if you use the elements to structure your answer, it can make it easier to write.

Always keep in mind the way in which your chosen board's examiners will be marking extended-answer questions. They will mostly be using a **level-based** mark scheme, with **descriptors** guiding them to the right level for your answer. Look at the top two or three levels and work out what it is that gets you up a level. Usually the clues are in the adjectives used to describe the skills, for example:

**7-8 marks:** Answers make valid points with some linked to the effect on the music

**9-10 marks:** Answers make detailed points with most linked to the effect on the music.

These descriptors leave no uncertainty as to how you need to improve your answer to get into the 9-10 category.