



CLASSROOM LIFE

All the right notes

James Tuck, head of music at Mayflower High School, Billericay, shares his experiences of encouraging a hands-on approach to the subject – and what it takes to break through the ‘I can’t sing’ barrier...

Before joining the staff of Mayflower High School back in 2013, I remember talking to the kids during my initial visit about their music lessons. I asked what they did, and they told me they ‘*Played on the keyboards*’. I knew that the school had a few other



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– JAMES TUCK,
HEAD OF MUSIC

instruments, so I asked if they ever got to play any of those – ‘*Not really.*’

That’s when I knew that if I was offered the job, I’d be able to make a difference. After being appointed, the SLT trusted me to do what I wanted to do over that initial year, and were prepared to back me when it came to the subject curriculum and the department’s finances. That was a big motivation for me, and a key reason for me staying at the school for as long as I have.

Lessons in humanity

Mayflower High School has around 1,600 students on roll, and is in a fairly affluent area. One challenge with that, though, has been overcoming what some parents see as the place of music within the wider curriculum, particularly from KS4 onwards.

Many parents would work in the City and often ask me, ‘*What’s the point of learning music? How’s that going to get them a job?*’ My perspective is that the study of music has a much bigger impact on pupils’ lives than that – so I’d often ask them, ‘*Do you want your children to be happy?*’ I then go on to explain how the reason for studying music is that by doing so, we get to learn what it is to be human.

When it’s your birthday, for example, others will celebrate the occasion by singing you *that* song. When people get married, there’ll usually be music at the ceremony. When Olympic athletes win a gold medal, their national anthem will typically be played during the presentation ceremony. Music is something that exists completely within us. Small children will often sing before they can talk.

Teaching musicians

The most vital stage in a young person’s musical development is KS3. In those three years, maybe for the first time in their lives, they’ll have got to spend time with a professional music specialist.

That’s why, when they walk through the door, one of the first things I’ll always say to Y7s that we don’t see them as students; we always refer to them as *musicians*.

The areas we focus on at KS3 are singing, ‘band skills’ (i.e. learning how to play an instrument as part of a larger group), and the technology of making music, with an emphasis on live performance.

We concentrate mainly on those three areas, rather than covering multiple smaller topics, as I feel that’s the best way of appreciably developing students’ strengths in music



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— especially with regards to voice, given how much boys' voices can change.

Avoiding isolation

Girls' vocal confidence can meanwhile diminish as they get older, which we try to address in Y9 by exploring rap and hip-hop, and helping our musicians appreciate the links between vocal confidence and succeeding at certain tasks in adult life, like taking part in job interviews and delivering presentations.

The 'band skills' component gives our musicians access to instruments they might not otherwise have the chance to play. Whatever they end up doing, however, we try to avoid lessons consisting of young musicians wearing headphones, sat in front of computers in their own isolated worlds. The aim is always to get them performing their pieces live.

A detention session

In practice, most Y7s will sing if asked, but not all. There was a lad in one of my Y7 singing classes earlier this year who simply refused to sing. My response was to tell

him that if he was in a maths class he'd be expected to perform calculations. In an English class, he'd be expected to read and write. So in this singing class, he was expected to sing.

I then told him that if he didn't sing, I'd have no option but to follow the school's policy and place him in detention. He still refused.

I've never seen detentions as just a means of punishment; they're about finding ways of moving forward, because otherwise, teachers and learners will end up stuck in a loop. I found out from a call home that his parents were supportive of the detention, so when the time came, I went with the student to one of the music practice rooms for a while. I began by asking him how he was, by way of conversation. I then asked if he liked football, and established that we were both Arsenal fans.

That's when I started singing one of the team's chants to a piano accompaniment, and pretty soon, he was singing it back to me.

Having sensed that he was

wary in lessons of how high he'd be required to sing, I used this impromptu 'detention session' as an opportunity to explore key changes, and after a few attempts, was able to show him where his vocal range lay. I explained that it wasn't so much that he hated singing; the issue was more around how he felt about using his voice to sing in front of others.

Underlying causes

Often, getting past that initial reluctance is about about finding some way in. There's no single way of doing that, though, since it depends on being able to build up an understanding of the individual concerned before it can work. The kickbacks you encounter when students are asked to sing won't be because they can't, but because at some point, someone has *told* them they can't, or they lack self-confidence. The underlying causes need to be picked apart.

I'm happy to say that quite a few Mayflower students have gone on to do great things in music. The nicest thing is when the musicians are leaving the class and someone simply says 'thank you'. Recently, one boy who was usually fairly quiet came up and said, 'Can I just shake your hand? I absolutely loved that.' Just a genuinely lovely moment.

TECH TIPS

► Don't scrimp

When equipping a music department, 'buy good, buy once'. Cutting corners can entail spending extra on fixing equipment later on, or prove to be a poor, off-putting experience for the musicians who'll be using it.

► Prioritise portability

Imagine a talented saxophonist is sat before a desktop computer with a MIDI keyboard in front. How will they make music with a saxophone they can play, but a MIDI keyboard they might not know how to use? Where possible, use laptops in class – that way, our saxophonist can take a laptop into a rehearsal room with a mic and interface and get going immediately.

► Get hands-on

The 'tech suite' approach can look impressive, but you should avoid any implied sense of 'Don't touch this, don't move this', as that ignores a hugely important aspect of how music technology is learnt in practice – *by doing*. Entrust students with responsibility over the equipment they're using, and they'll repay it in kind.