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Mrs M Symons OBE
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Dear Mrs Symons

Ofsted 2010–11 subject survey inspection programme: music

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 7 and 8 March 2011 to look at work in music.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of eight class lessons, an instrumental lesson, rehearsals of the orchestra and the Show Choir, and an assembly.

The overall effectiveness of music is satisfactory.

Achievement in music

Achievement in music is satisfactory.

- Average proportions of students opt for the GCSE music course in Key Stage 4. Standards achieved in this course are consistently above average, and students make good progress in comparison with their achievements in other subjects.
- Standards in Key Stage 3 are broadly in line with national expectations. This represents progress that is just satisfactory, given students' prior attainment and musical experience when they join the school. Achievement in Key Stage 3 is not better because of weaknesses in the breadth and depth of students' musical understanding.

- The proportions of students participating regularly in extra-curricular music activities are satisfactory, as are the numbers receiving additional instrumental lessons in school. However, there is a noticeable decline in the proportions continuing with this additional tuition after Year 7.
- The Show Choir performs in close harmony to a high standard and does much to boost the confidence of participating students and, indeed, the whole school. Recent concert tours to Europe and the United States have been very popular. The choir has performed on national television as well as at the recent Papal Mass in Birmingham and makes a significant and vibrant contribution to the school's liturgical life. The Musical Theatre productions have also received considerable acclaim.
- Students on the new A-level music course are making satisfactory progress. Sixth-form students contribute well to the school's musical life, including taking leading roles in the orchestra and Show Choir.

Quality of teaching in music

The quality of teaching in music is satisfactory.

- Lessons are always planned in detail and resources prepared professionally. While teaching is very successful in building good working relationships and students' confidence for participation in class work, in Key Stage 3 insufficient emphasis is placed on building students' musical learning or on developing their broader cultural awareness. This is a direct consequence of weaknesses in curriculum planning.
- Lessons always provide opportunities for students to engage in practical work, which they enjoy. However, too often – particularly in Key Stage 3 – these tasks are mechanistic and do not put enough emphasis on students' musical responses through the integrated development of their listening, composing, and performing skills. In the weakest instances, students are asked to complete theoretical written tasks in advance of practical work without having sufficient musical understanding of the concepts being taught. Better teaching was observed in Key Stage 4, where teaching linked a group-composing activity with listening and analysis of one of the set works effectively.
- Extra-curricular activities are led very well, benefiting from teachers' musical expertise and great enthusiasm. The time and energy given by teachers to these activities is commendable.
- Regular assessments are made of students' progress, although in Key Stage 3 these are more often concerned with individual composing, performing and listening tasks than with students' holistic musical understanding. Informal feedback constantly encourages and aims to boost students' confidence, but paradoxically this is not always helpful in improving work. Too often, high praise is given indiscriminately when the quality of students' responses does not merit that praise.

Quality of the curriculum in music

The quality of the curriculum in music is satisfactory.

- The Key Stage 3 scheme of work provides just enough coverage of different musical devices and structures, styles, genres and traditions to enable students' satisfactory progress. Limited consideration is given to how students should develop skills progressively through the key stage. Although clear objectives are laid out for students' learning, too often these are concerned with developing their personal and emotional qualities, or their factual knowledge about music, instead of being firmly focused on developing their musical understanding.
- The schemes of work for the GCSE and A-level music courses ensure that all course requirements are covered in appropriate detail.
- Information and communication technology (ICT) has been introduced successfully in Key Stage 3 and helps students of all abilities to participate and enjoy lessons. A well-appointed recording studio is usefully staffed by a music technician; students in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form have access to ICT equipment, although it could be used more effectively to help A-level students with their composing work.
- The range of extra-curricular activities is improving. In addition to the Show Choir and the Glee Club, a small orchestra has recently started. At present, no other large instrumental ensembles exist although there are opportunities for rock bands to rehearse and perform in the 'Battle of the Bands' and for individual students to use the recording and rehearsal facilities after school.
- A satisfactory range of additional instrumental tuition is provided by the local authority music service although it is surprising that there are no opportunities for additional vocal tuition, given the interest in singing shown by students through the Show Choir.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in music

The effectiveness of the leadership and management in music is satisfactory.

- Resources and accommodation are highly organised. The two main teaching rooms are well ordered and attractively presented, although there is a much greater emphasis, through displays, on the promotion of Musical Theatre performance than there is on other areas of the curriculum. Although this reflects the strengths of the department, it also reflects the less effective leadership of the curriculum, particularly in Key Stage 3, and limited understanding of how students should develop their musical skills, knowledge, and understanding to achieve higher standards.
- The knowledge of current developments in music education is satisfactory. While there is some liaison with feeder schools, not enough account is taken of issues such as the 'Wider Opportunities' and national singing initiatives.

- Notwithstanding concerns with the curriculum, a number of indicators give confidence in the school's capacity to improve music provision. Teachers are confident musicians and their leadership of extra-curricular activities is, quite rightly, regarded highly. The provision for GCSE music is secure, and new initiatives such as the A-level course and the orchestra have been introduced successfully. Senior leaders have both a realistic understanding of the music department's strengths and weaknesses, together with a determination to continue their excellent support for the department and raise standards further.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising achievement in Key Stage 3 by:
 - ensuring that, across the key stage, students deepen their understanding about a comprehensively broad range of musical traditions, styles, and genres
 - rewriting the curriculum plans to give an unequivocal focus on the musical skills, knowledge and understanding that students are expected to develop as they progress through the key stage
- improving teaching in Key Stage 3 by:
 - using written tasks and tools, including stave notation, to support rather than drive students' musical learning
 - ensuring that formal and informal assessment challenges students' responses rigorously, so that they are clear about the musical quality of their work and are able to make greater improvements
- increasing involvement in additional activities by:
 - increasing the number of students receiving instrumental lessons in school, particularly those continuing with tuition after Year 7
 - offering specialist vocal tuition, to build on the high levels of interest and high standards exhibited by the Show Choir.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop music in the school.

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. Except in the case of academies, a copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Mark Phillips
Her Majesty's Inspector