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Dr I Shaw
Headteacher
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Dear Dr Shaw

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: music

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 23 and 25 November 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 meetings with staff, students and the Lead Officer for Tuition from Northumberland Creative and Performing Arts. Relevant documentation, including students' work, was analysed; six lessons and extra-curricular singing ensembles were observed.

The overall effectiveness of music is good.

Achievement in music

Achievement in music is good.

- Standards reached in music by students at the end of Year 9 are broadly average. However, most students use musical language appropriately, following composing instructions carefully to produce pieces that are constructed sensibly and with an awareness of musical style. Students in Key Stage 3 have opportunities to use information and communication technology (ICT), although this is hampered by the limited number of computers available. Despite this, overall progress is good considering the variable prior musical experience of students when they join Year 9.
- Students who take the GCSE music examination continue to make good progress. For the past three years, results have been above those attained

nationally. Observation of the work done by the current students indicates that these standards are likely to be maintained. Students' compositions adhere closely to examination requirements and show a good awareness of their understanding of the different musical influences from different well-known composers.

- Advanced level music and music technology are both taught in the sixth form. Many more boys than girls take these courses, as they do at GCSE. Students make better progress and attain higher results in music technology where, together with being technically proficient, they are able to add and improve pieces of music using their good knowledge of musical conventions and styles.
- More boys than girls benefit from instrumental lessons in school; however, similar proportions take part in extra-curricular activities. Some students organise their own ensembles, or lead groups. These musical activities, together with participating in concerts and overseas tours, make a good contribution to students' personal and social development.

Quality of teaching in music

The quality of teaching in music is good.

- Students are engaged well because teachers provide tasks that are, in the main, challenging for all ability groups. Students are able to use their own instruments in lessons and they engage in productive musical discussion when working in pairs or small groups. Sixth form students, especially, are expected to evaluate others' work critically so that musical decisions can be made.
- Lessons, particularly for students in Key Stages 4 and 5, are carefully structured. Different strands of music learning are linked together. Helpful information worksheets and regular opportunities in lessons for students to make their own notes support students' good progress.
- Teachers are knowledgeable and capable musicians. Using instrumental or vocal demonstrations, they model musical characteristics in lessons. Helpful feedback is provided regularly. However, a lack of audio or video recordings during lessons for Year 9 students means that they are unable to hear their work and thus make informed musical decisions so that improvements can be made.
- In ensembles, attention is paid to improving the balance between parts; in choral work, developing students' diction and vocal quality are key features in the teachers' quest to ensure the highest possible musical performance.

Quality of the curriculum in music

The quality of the curriculum in music is good.

- The initial music test, which is given to all students when they arrive in Year 9, gives staff an indication of students' previous music understanding and involvement in instrumental and enrichment activities. As a result,

teachers plan carefully to ensure that all National Curriculum requirements are covered. However, because ICT equipment is sparse, teachers are beginning to use, or plan to use, the nearby media centre, which is well resourced with appropriate computer programmes.

- Lessons are planned systematically for examination classes, with the different aspects of performing, composing and listening linked together. This, together with paying appropriate regard to the comments about students' work made by external markers, means that additional learning, beyond the basic examination syllabus, takes place. This curriculum organisation contributes well to students' good progress.
- The popular 'man choir' is helping to raise the profile of boys' singing. Other ensembles meet, despite rehearsal space being limited, and perform within school and to a wider audience where they have been successful in a number of national music events.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in music

The effectiveness of leadership and management in music is good.

- The music staff work hard for their students and strive to provide the best possible musical experiences for them, especially for those who play instruments or take part in ensembles and other music activities. Regular departmental meetings are held to check students' progress in particular; however, there are less frequent discussions with staff from feeder schools. Leaders recognise that more formal information regarding students' music learning is needed. Consequently, developing an informative music bridging unit between schools is under consideration.
- Management of the department is good and visiting staff are well included and play an important role in helping examination students to prepare their individual vocal and instrumental pieces. Senior leaders recognise that the departmental development plan gives limited regard as to how the actions and activities proposed will impact on students' progress and their involvement in music activities.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that the good practice evident in lessons is present consistently by:
 - enabling all students to take responsibility for their own learning
 - making use of video and audio recordings, especially in lessons for Year 9 students, so that they can make informed musical decisions and know how to improve their work
- improving the quality of curriculum planning in Year 9 by:
 - making sure that students' previous music learning is known thoroughly so that all can fulfil their musical capabilities

- implementing a unit of work that ensures students' progress is not impeded when they move to the high school.

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

As 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. A copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Marianne Young
Her Majesty's Inspector