



Music Background Paper: Consultation Report

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1. Introduction

In total there were 142 responses to the online consultation, and these were supported by five written submissions (See Appendix for list of organisations). Sixty seven percent of those who responded to the online consultation were music teachers, while twenty one percent of responses came from the third level sector. The remaining twelve percent were made up of primary school teachers, principals and deputy principals, teacher educators and parents.

The following report is based on an analysis of the views on the background paper expressed in the online survey and in the written submissions.

The consultation focused on the following areas:

- Experiences of the Junior Certificate syllabus and examination
- Opportunities and challenges vis-a-vis recent arts initiatives
- Implications from recent national and international research in music education
- Options for course structure and content
- Assessment in junior cycle music

2. Feedback themes

Following an analysis of the online survey and the views expressed in the written submissions, the data was coded and the following themes emerged:

- Experiences of the Junior Certificate
 - Course structure and focus
 - Assessment
- Transition from Primary to Post-Primary
- National developments in the Arts
- Opportunities with new specification
- Challenges with new specification

These five themes will be explored further in the following sections, and selected quotations from respondents are used, where appropriate, to illustrate and clarify the views being expressed.

2.1 Experiences of the Junior Certificate (Overview)

The Junior Certificate syllabus is divided into three strands: *Composing, Performing and Listening*. When asked on the representation of these across the syllabus, seventy percent of respondents said that these strands were not equally represented. Eighty two percent of respondents were of the view that the composition strand of the course does not offer opportunities for the development of creativity and imagination.

Respondents strongly expressed (81%) that the syllabus is limited in the flexibility offered to teachers and students in determining subject content. This supports the research quoted in the background paper that described the course as being very prescriptive and exam focused, with little scope offered to stray from the set and prescribed content.

Regarding the experience of music in the classroom, there was support for the experiences that the prescribed songs and works offer students, with broad agreement that this element allows the

students explore the language and literacy associated with music. However, seventy percent were of the opinion that this strand does not allow for the development of personal expression and opinion (a fact alluded to by students in the student voice consultation as part of the background paper).

Aligned with this, when asked about the opportunities offered to students to experience real life music activities, there was overwhelming agreement (85%) that this is currently lacking in the school experience of students.

The views expressed in this overview were expanded on in the subsequent sections of the survey. The survey next asked for more detailed opinions on the course structure and content and the current assessment system.

2.1.1 Course structure and focus

The survey asked respondents to offer their views on the structure of the Junior Certificate course and provided an opportunity for respondents to suggest possible alternative approaches. A sample of comments show a support for the idea of maintaining the core strands of composing, performing and listening, but approaching them in a more integrated manner. The current tripartite model

...segregates music making into separate categories which is not how real world music making happens (Third level lecturer, online survey).

I think that the 3 strands are important and should remain, but I feel that other strands like ethno music, technology, music and visuality (sic.) could also be other options for new strands (Third level student, online survey).

It is a noble structure, that falls short especially in the area of composition (Music teacher, online survey).

The format works well but on delivery falls short under a tsunami of obligatory material that needs to be learnt off for the exam (Music teacher, online survey).

The views on the listening strand were varied. As stated above, there was support for the experiences that the prescribed songs and works offered students, however:

The listening is difficult for students as it is very broad and some areas are extremely outdated and irrelevant to the experience of contemporary students (Music teacher, online Survey).

Students were very favourably disposed to the types of listening activities they engaged with in the classroom, and were supportive in maintaining a culture where they are exposed to as wide a variety of music styles as possible. However, they along with some online responses, were in favour of

updating the prescribed list as some of the material is ‘unattractive and boring to a young teenager’ (Music teacher, online survey).

These comments reflect the general views that the three strands are seen as central to a complete and holistic music education, but the way they are expressed through the syllabus accentuates their separateness. This also links to the assessment procedures that are currently in operation.

2.1.2 Assessment:

There were many comments reflecting concerns around the over-emphasis on the terminal examination within the Junior Certificate and the influence this has on teaching and learning in the classroom. The strongest sentiment was a concern for the amount of rote learning, and a large support for the performance strand, which is an area that many respondents wanted to see have a greater share of the exam marks.

Too much rote learning here, performing should be awarded 35% of the marks and the students should be able to select a composing/listening elective as is the case with the current LC (Music teacher, online survey).

Teaching and learning for assessment is hard wired into the system (and society at large if newspaper supplements and radio programmes are taken into account) and this will be arduous to change (Third level student, online survey).

The current course does not allow for any space for self-directed learning within musical experiences which they themselves chose. Most students are completely disengaged from the genres we study and from the forms of assessment which they must complete (Music teacher, online survey).

Conversations with students also showed a support for an increase in the allocation of marks to the performance strand. They largely agreed that this was their favourite part of the course, and that even though it is ‘very nerve wracking’, it is less stressful than the written exam and more enjoyable. Many students also expressed how enjoyable they found the experience of performing as part of a group, and having the support of the teacher in the practical examination.

The nature of assessment that is undertaken by the students with regard to composition generated many responses. The comments centred primarily on the formulaic nature of the composition assessment and the lack of space for individuality and creativity. (Some approaches for remediating these concerns are addressed later in this report).

Composing is more of a formulaic process. The (free) composition option is chosen by relatively little as the 'risk' is too high (Music teacher, online survey).

Composing seems to lack creativity with formulaic patterns learned by rote to pass examinations instead of developing a creative knowledge and spirit (Music teacher, online survey).

These opinions were echoed by students, who reported that they often learnt a formula for the exam, that the preparation for the examination was more akin to a maths problem than a music problem; but for some this was seen as positive as they knew that if they kept to this structure, they would get the question right.

The background paper highlighted research which showed that students come to post-primary school with a variety of formal and informal music experiences. This variety in music experiences means that students come with different levels of musical knowledge and understanding on entry to post-primary education. This theme is explored in the next section.

2.2 Transition from Primary to Post Primary

The consultation sought views on the challenges faced when students are coming to music classes with a wide variety of experiences that they have gained through the music curriculum at primary level, private music tuition, and their informal learning experiences. What was interesting about this section of the survey, was the way that some respondents saw this as a challenge while others saw this as an opportunity.

Getting a wide variety can help create a very rich environment of how students learn music (Music teacher, online survey).

I see it as less of a challenge and more of an opportunity. It is a chance to illustrate the teacher as learner, the student as teacher (Music teacher, online survey).

I don't feel there is a challenge. There is a shared world created in the classroom where experienced students interact and support those students who are taking up music for the first time (Music teacher, online survey).

There were concerns expressed about the nature of music education in primary schools. This is interesting as this was not explicitly sought in the consultation but emerged throughout the responses.

Students music training is very sporadic in primary music, and could be easily amended by appointing a musician/qualified music teacher to teach across all years (Third level lecturer/researcher, online survey).

Firstly, despite the excellent training primary teachers receive and the very fine teaching which takes place in primary schools, the sad reality is that many children pass through primary school without a very basic musical experience (Society for Musicology in Ireland).

When considering the impact of this on the new specification, one respondent concludes:

It is a challenge to have the syllabus at the right level; so that it challenges the more experienced student while also engaging the less experienced student. Presently I do not feel the current curriculum is challenging enough (Music teacher, online survey).

This last statement poses one of the biggest challenges for the development group: How to ensure that students who are new to music are offered a stimulating and engaging environment where they acquire knowledge and skills; while ensuring that students who already have acquired music education in primary or other settings are challenged to further develop their knowledge and skills.

The survey next referred to the section in the background paper on some recent initiatives in the arts domain and asked for comments on some of these and how they could impact on the music specification.

2.3 National Developments in the Arts

The consultation sought feedback on two national initiatives: the [Arts in Education Charter](#) and the [National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development](#). On a positive note, some comments reflected the opportunities that could be realised through these initiatives:

As music teachers we must broaden our activities to involve more students, to be more creative in our work and to learn more about best practice in complementary and emerging areas of arts practice (Music Centre Manager, online survey).

Offers opportunities to increase students' engagement with music as a cultural topic rather than a school subject (Music teacher, online survey).

I think that bringing the community into music education is essential for it to be relevant and meaningful (Music teacher, online survey).

Many of the comments were supportive of the 'real world' experiences that could be explored through the ideas expressed in the Charter:

I 100% believe that community-based projects that involve students, parents and the wider community would be of huge benefit to second level students and give them an experience of making music in the real world (Third level student, online survey).

Students should experience providing music in the community in order to understand the power of their music making and how it can make both themselves and others feel (Music teacher, online survey).

However, it can be difficult to realise this ambition as:

In an ideal world, students should be able to make links between their experience and school, but the mind-set of the student often prohibits this as they separate school and life (Music teacher, online survey).

Regarding the Strategy for Sustainable Development, there was broad support for what this could mean for music and music students. Some respondents felt that Priority Action 3 of the Strategy could bring about a real engagement with Irish Music, through students developing an appreciation and respect for how diverse values, beliefs and traditions have contributed to the communities and culture. The Strategy could also link to educating students on music copyright and the social responsibility afforded them.

Of concern to many of the respondents when commenting on these initiatives, was the need for clarification on the implementation and the operation of these initiatives and the funding that would be required to allow the ideals in the policies be realised and to ensure equity of access.

The problem often is the cost of getting musicians in, and travel costs which limit school trips to a once a year outing (Music teacher, online survey).

How do schools access these types of learning opportunities? How can we guarantee access to arts/musical education for all? There is limited funding available to schools (Music teacher, online survey).

The sustainability of such initiatives was also questioned:

However, a once off visit from a practicing musician/artist is insufficient. In order for the learning to be effective, the students must be immersed in the approaches and practices of music (Third level student, online survey).

To ensure the sustainability and feasibility of arts-in-education 'interventions', detailed mandates are therefore required in regards to the funding, coordination and organisational structures, alongside a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities, particularly in relation to principals and music teachers (in terms of facilitation, requirement and assessment). SMEI therefore recommends that specific guidelines are developed as to how these visits/performances/workshops connect and enhance the main elements of study (Society of Music Education in Ireland).

2.4 A New Junior Cycle: Overview

The background paper outlines some seminal research on current and emerging practice in classroom music education. This was focused on the areas of

- music and technology
- the balance between the integration and acknowledgement of the formal and informal learning that music students experience
- assessment cultures in other jurisdictions.

When asked on whether technology should be included as a performance option (as is the case with the Leaving Certificate), there was comprehensive support for this (85%), with seventy nine percent expressing the view that technology should permeate the teaching and learning of music. Ninety percent of respondents were of the opinion that music is important for the shaping of students social identity and eighty percent were of the view that musical theatre has a place in the new specification.

In relation to assessment, and specifically the possible Classroom-Based Assessments that could be considered by the development group, the findings give some indication on how assessment should be framed. There was overwhelming support for the inclusion of a composition portfolio/appraisal booklet (89%) and eighty two percent of respondents were of the view that students should be allowed compose in styles/genres of their choosing. The idea of a compulsory group performance was posed in the survey, and this met with a mixed response (59% agreed, 41% disagreed). There was broad support that inquiry based learning be incorporated into the specification (90%) and ninety one per cent were in favour of students engaging in more cross-curricular work.

More detailed comments were sought on these themes, and views elicited on the opportunities and challenges of embracing these ideas.

2.4.1 Opportunities with new specification:

Broadly speaking, when commenting on the opportunities that the new music specification offered, the views expressed were either concerned with amending some existing practices (particularly with relation to composing), or suggesting new avenues that could be explored.

With specific regard to the experience of **composing** the following quotes offer a sample of responses:

Composing should be examined under music technology where they can creatively learn to produce their own music as well as responding to exam requirements (Music teacher, online survey).

There should be an option to compose on one's chosen instrument, including voice, instead of writing on staff notation (Music teacher, online survey).

Given the critique of the assessing (thus the teaching) of composition current in Junior Certificate Music (as highlighted earlier in the BGP), SMEI welcomes the focus on the flexibility of approach to the teaching and assessing of composition (including the assessment through portfolio) evident in the GCSE and Scottish curricula. We believe that this will allow for greater creativity and self-expression (Society for Music Education in Ireland).

As can be seen from these quotes, there is broad support for offering students a richer and more challenging compositional experience that will allow creativity and imagination to flourish. From a more diverse and student-centred approach to how composition is experienced in the classroom, to the consideration of new ways to assess the composition element, the consultation offers the development group a clear indication of the way forward.

There were also suggestions as to what other music experiences could be included in the new specification. Some respondents recommended the inclusion of **conducting** to the specification.

Conducting is a higher level activity, requiring a thorough understanding of written music and the performance of it, students should be encouraged to develop this skill as an option for performance and preparation for the Leaving Cert (Music teacher, online survey).

While, others were keen to see students offered the opportunity to consider the **historical context** in which music operates. There was an acknowledgement that currently there is no requirement for

students to study music history, and if this was incorporated into the new specification, students could develop a deeper level of awareness about the styles of music, while developing their research skills.

An emphasis of musical context could be encouraged to a greater degree. This makes the students more aware of the timeline and development of music (Music teacher, online survey).

We request that the NCCA will offer a stronger foundation in music history in addition to a more diverse musical experience (Society for Musicology in Ireland).

Technology featured prominently in the consultation as highlighted above, and this quote sums up the views of many of the respondents:

If students are to be successful in music, then they must be technology literate to some degree. The integration of music technology into the new subject specification alongside the core skills of listening, composing and performing will ensure that students are fully equipped to deal with an ever evolving modern music industry (Kylemore College).

Providing training for students in the use of digital recording and editing technology (both audio and video) does not fit neatly into any of the above strands, but it is an area which can and should be integrated into Junior Cycle music (Music teacher, online survey).

Regarding the general pedagogical approach to the future of classroom teaching and learning, there were several comments on the potential for the new specification to embrace more collaborative and creative processes:

More collaborative work should be facilitated in the new subject specification where composing and performing are concerned (Music teacher, online survey).

We hope that students' music learning will encompass both individual and collaborative activities... We hope that the new specification will have an emphasis on the creative processes of music making and on critical listening, and an avoidance of rote learning (Arts Council).

In addition, a strong focus on group performance should be considered as a compulsory element of any new performance strand (Kylemore College).

As referred to above, there was strong support for the possibility of incorporating **musical theatre** into the new specification. One teacher in the online survey was of the view that links with drama should be explored to include musical theatre, while another teacher expressed that:

I do think there is an onus on us to recognise and include the informal knowledge students have of bands, popular music and in particular musical theatre, which is very popular and has great scope for developing their music skills (Music teacher, online survey).

On a final note regarding the opportunities, it was interesting to see some comments on an addition to the performance element, where students would have to include as part of their performance some background information on their pieces and their performing medium:

I think that it would be very interesting to have the study of the voice or the students' performance instrument included and the background/history of the pieces they choose to perform. This could provide an alternative to the current special study (Music teacher, online survey).

Alongside the opportunities outlined here, there were concerns raised and challenges highlighted by some respondents.

2.4.2 Challenges with new specification:

The challenges expressed in the survey centred on ensuring that students continue to secure a foundational knowledge in music and the need for a more integrated approach to classroom teaching and learning.

Regarding the first point, the following quote highlights the challenge here:

Our concern is striking the right note between creativity and content. If students don't have a broad foundational knowledge of the subject it is very difficult for them to engage with it critically (Society for Musicology in Ireland).

This emphasis on the need to ensure that the rudiments of music are not waylaid are echoed by a teacher when they say:

With regard to composing, creativity, and taking a step away from the formulaic nature of the current syllabus, while this is important, students need to know their rudiments in order to facilitate meaningful creativity (Music teacher, online Survey).

On the challenge towards integration, these quotes outline some of the main concerns:

The worry is that teachers (and by inflection, students) see these as three separate entities and do not make explicit connections between each. The fact is that all

three components should be running side by side, and that every element of the syllabus should be experienced through active music making (Music teacher, online survey).

Composing, performing and listening are different but complementary manifestations of musical thought and we believe that structuring the new specifications around these activities has considerable value. However, the structure of the new specifications needs to facilitate a constructivist pedagogy and the integration of these key processes of music-making, so that students develop their knowledge, skills and understanding of the way in which music works, while also demonstrating their knowledge, skills and understanding in musically meaningful ways (Society for Music Education in Ireland).

3. Implications for the Brief for Junior Cycle Music

The brief for the development group (contained in section 7 of the background paper) indicated the areas that the development group needs to address in the design of the new music specification. Feedback from the consultation supports the brief as presented in the background paper, but the following findings are particularly significant and will need careful deliberation by the development group.

- While there was support for the inclusion of space for creativity, collaboration and innovation in the music specification, this will need to be carefully balanced with the need to ensure that this is not at the expense of securing the foundational knowledge to allow for these skills to flourish.
- There is a need to ensure that the music specification is accessible and challenging for all students irrespective of their prior musical experiences.
- The strands of composing, performing and listening are seen as having merit, but need to be seen as providing an integrated and holistic approach to teaching and learning and not interpreted as discrete components.
- There were many respondents that suggested additional topics for inclusion in the specification (technology, music history, composition portfolios and experiences of real world and community music). The challenge for the development group will be in designing a specification that offers these broad experiences while being cognisant of keeping this manageable for teachers and students.
- Composing was the element that generated the most responses throughout the survey. The comments sought for ways to provide more flexibility in how it is accessed, how it is assessed and the formats students might embrace. Much deliberation will be needed in this area.

4. Appendix

Written Submissions

Kylemore College

Society for Musicology in Ireland (SMI)

The Arts Council

Society for Music Education in Ireland (SMEI)

Department of Education and Skills (DES)

