Making more of music: Improving the quality of music teaching in primary schools
In February 2009, the Ofsted report *Making more of music: an evaluation of music in schools 2005–08* produced detailed evidence and analysis from inspections of music teaching. It is clear from the report that, where the music provision is good, everyone benefits: teachers and pupils enjoy music, and music contributes much to the school and community. However, while there is some outstanding provision, pupils do not make as much musical progress as they could, especially during Years 5 and 6.

The report described how the best teaching engages all pupils and enables them to develop musically through well-chosen progressive and accumulative tasks. This booklet includes examples of effective practice in primary schools and compares them to descriptions of some of the less effective lessons inspectors saw. It draws on work seen during the academic year 2008/09, as well as from the report itself.

The main weaknesses in music provision, all related strongly to the quality of teaching, included:

- a lack of emphasis on increasing the quality and depth of pupils’ musical responses
- inconsistency of musical experiences within and across key stages
- ineffective assessment.

The quality of subject leadership, and the extent of the support, challenge and professional development which leaders were able to provide, were the most important factors in improving provision in primary schools. The quality of subject leadership was more important than whether classes were taught by music specialists or class teachers. Teachers who called themselves non-specialists were able to provide good music teaching when they were supported effectively.

This is a very positive time for music education, with the Government providing considerable funding, particularly for instrumental and vocal work in primary schools. At its best, schools’ involvement in instrumental/vocal programmes provided excellent professional development for primary teachers. However, there was often insufficient dialogue between specialist instrumental teachers and classroom teachers, and their involvement in programmes was too short to have any lasting impact.

While improving the quality of teaching lies at the heart of improving music provision, it is important to recognise that each lesson must be developed as a part of the whole curriculum provision and in the light of the school’s particular needs and ambitions. Schools should therefore ask themselves the following four questions before they use this booklet; the answers should have a significant impact on the way teaching is developed.

- What are the most important outcomes we want to achieve in relation to musical progress, involving pupils in additional musical experiences and the broader contribution of music to pupils’ personal development?
- Is the subject leader for music given enough time and opportunity to develop and share expertise with staff? If not, how can more time be found?
- Have we explored fully how instrumental and vocal programmes can help improve provision for our pupils and increase teachers’ understanding of how to teach music?
- How will we know we have been successful – for all our pupils, by gender, ability or background?

**What are the essentials of good music teaching and what makes it outstanding?**

Evidence from inspections and comments made by the best subject leaders identified three essential aspects of effective teaching:

- a simple, clear focus for each lesson, developed through all activities, so that pupils are helped to ‘do more of less’
- always starting with sound – developing pupils’ aural skills through constantly modelling work and using talk sparingly; introducing notation only after pupils have developed the ability to hear and repeat the sounds
- helping pupils to get better at music by:
  - defining clear steps of progression
  - having high expectations, giving constant attention to the quality of pupils’ musical responses
  - adapting work to meet the different needs of pupils and using simple ways to check all are making progress.

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1 [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/080235](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/080235)

2 Schools which are unaware of these programmes should contact their local authority to ask how allocated funding is being used.

3 Schools could also make use of the materials on the Sing Up website: [www.singup.org.uk](http://www.singup.org.uk)
The chart on pages 6 and 7 traces these aspects, describing the satisfactory, good and outstanding features seen in music inspections. The examples which follow the chart (pages 8–15) compare good and outstanding lessons with those that were less effective. Examples 1–5 were taught by class teachers, with support from the subject leader and/or visiting music specialists. Example 6 was taught by visiting specialists. Example 7 was taught by the subject leader but also illustrates many of the features of the best instrumental programmes.

An inspector’s overall judgement on a lesson is based on the balance of all features and, most importantly, on the impact they have on pupils’ musical progress. Outstanding teaching will generally show nearly all the outstanding features and, as a result, pupils make rapid progress. Other lessons generally have a mix of these features – both in number and quality. The challenge for schools is to develop teaching so that all satisfactory features become good and all good features outstanding.

The relatively high proportion of schools where music is not yet good shows that there is much to be done. However, inspectors found that most schools had at least some positive features on which to build.

If your school is outstanding, this text celebrates the work of schools like yours. You will be aware that it is one thing to achieve excellence and another to sustain it. Perhaps there are ideas here that will help.

How to use this leaflet

This leaflet is intended as a discussion document for all the staff who teach music in primary schools. It should also be discussed with members of the senior management team so that they can provide additional support where necessary.

The chart on pages 6 and 7 is not meant to be used as a tick list. It is the extent to which all aspects come together and enable the quality of musical response that is important – not whether each aspect is being covered.

Use the leaflet and the chart to analyse what is working well and what could be developed further. The challenge is to look closely at the extent to which teaching engages all pupils and enables them to make musical progress.

1. Read and compare the examples of lessons to understand the features which have been identified.

2. Consider which examples match most closely what is done in your school and discuss which aspects are seen most often and which are not being used yet.

3. Observe lessons and write some new examples. Then use the chart to evaluate them.

4. Discuss the examples and identify specific features to explore and develop as a school.

5. Increasingly, involve pupils in evaluating lessons – ask them what they feel they have learned, what they can now do better, how the lesson helped them learn and how the lesson could have been even better.

*Teachers could share their examples more widely by using the teaching music website: www.teachingmusic.org.uk.
### Moving to outstanding teaching

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<th>Satisfactory</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Outstanding</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Define a simple, clear musical focus for the work and use it to link all activities – do more of less</td>
<td>The learning focus describes what pupils are to learn – not do: for example, ‘develop performing skills’ rather than ‘perform together as a class’.</td>
<td>The clear learning focus identifies specific skills and/or knowledge that are to be learned, for example, learn to listen to each other while performing so the parts fit together.</td>
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Tasks broadly relate to the focus but opportunities are missed to help the pupils make direct links between experiences, and lessons can have too many different activities. Clear links are made between the different tasks by relating them back to the learning focus. As a result the same learning is reinforced and consolidated. All tasks are planned so that they build progressively and accumulatively, thus enabling pupils not only to consolidate but also to extend their learning and enjoy a musical experience of quality.

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<td>2. Start and finish with sound – put the emphasis on aural development</td>
<td>Pupils are given opportunities to listen carefully but their learning does not always start from sound; for example, notation is used too early in the learning process and much of the work is based on spoken instructions and verbal response.</td>
<td>Much of the learning arises out of what is heard so that pupils can respond musically: for example, notations are used sensitively as a support and not as a gateway into the work and pupils are encouraged to show what they understand. There is no doubt this is a music lesson – all learning grows out of what is heard; audio recordings of pupils’ work are used constantly so that pupils can hear what they need to do to improve their work further and can celebrate improvement; work is constantly modelled.</td>
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<th>3. Help pupils to get better at music</th>
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<td>3a. Identify simple steps of progression – so pupils know how to improve their work</td>
<td>Pupils are clear about what they are learning to do but are not always as clear about how they can improve what they have done.</td>
<td>Pupils know what they need to do and have ‘something to aim for’ so that they know what would make an even better response and recognise achievement (beyond completing the task).</td>
<td>Pupils help to define how they will show they have got better and all know how to improve their own and the class response – so all gain a sense of individual as well as collective achievement.</td>
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<td>3b. Set high expectations – listen critically to pupils’ musical responses and spot what needs to be improved</td>
<td>Pupils are encouraged to improve their work and some weaknesses are identified but tasks are sometimes repeated without a focus on what needs to be improved and there can be some overgenerous praise.</td>
<td>Specific weaknesses are identified and there is focused improvement; pupils are challenged to improve the musical quality of their work and close analysis of why some are finding it difficult leads to different approaches being explored.</td>
<td>All pupils see themselves as musicians as a result of the high expectations for all and the constant emphasis on improving the quality of their individual musical responses as part of the whole experience.</td>
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<td>3c. Adapt work to meet different learning needs – make use of simple ways to assess pupils’ progress</td>
<td>The teacher watches how pupils respond and provides some extra support and challenge where needed.</td>
<td>Simple records of pupils’ responses in relation to what is expected help to ensure that work is adapted to meet different learning needs.</td>
<td>Expectations are raised in direct response to the progress made; simple records lead to pupils being actively involved in extra-curricular activities and extra support is given to those who need more help to develop their musical skills.</td>
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Example 1: Having a clear musical focus

**Best practice:** This example from Key Stage 1 shows how the teaching went beyond linking a music task to a class project on weather to ensuring emphasis was placed on increasing pupils’ musical creativity. A simple musical focus – learning to use sounds expressively – was used to link tasks effectively. Pupils learned through listening and constant attention was given to improving the quality of the work. The teacher also recognised the need to help pupils to move on from just creating sound effects and used the descriptions of progression as described in the National Curriculum levels, that is, from organising sounds to combining sounds. The whole class shared in the sense of achievement in the performance at the end of the lesson. However, there were some missed opportunities, such as making an audio recording so that pupils could hear again what they did and extending some pupils even further by asking them to take on the role of the teacher in creating different class compositions.

The focus of the Year 2 lesson was learning to use sounds expressively. It built on previous work where pupils had learned how sounds could be changed. The class was challenged to find sounds that might describe winter weather. Pupils were encouraged to make different sounds and to decide which ones they would bring to a class performance. The teacher noticed that pupils were tending to use the instruments they wanted to play rather than selecting the ones that would give the most appropriate sounds, so she encouraged them to keep trying different instruments. Most pupils produced literal sounds, such as the crunching of footsteps and the sound of the wind on single instruments and took turns in playing their chosen sound. However, through the teacher’s encouragement and challenge, some pupils were helped to explore how sounds could be combined to create more interesting effects. One group discovered that adding thin metal sounds on a cymbal played with a triangle beater to the sounds made by high notes on a glockenspiel played with hard wooden beaters created exactly the sound they wanted in order to describe ice freezing.

**Weaker practice:** In contrast, the following classes made much less progress because of an over-emphasis on literacy and the inappropriate use of notation. There was no clear musical focus and pupils were given no help about how to improve their responses.

The main part of the lesson focused on songwriting. Pupils listened to a song, but the teacher’s questioning was focused on the words of the song rather than its musical structure. The task placed too much emphasis on pupils’ ability in literacy and some struggled. While pupils did gain some basic information about musical structure by the end of the lesson, they did not make as much musical progress as they could have done.

Pupils were asked to compose descriptive, atmospheric ‘soundscapes’ using crotchets and minims. Their natural response to this creative task stimulated combinations of sounds not easily represented in traditional rhythmic notation. As a result, they either constrained their ideas to fit the patterns of crotchets and minims or found it very hard to get beyond their difficulties with this form of notation to think creatively about the sounds they wanted to use.
Example 2: Doing more of less

Best practice: Rapid progress was also seen in this lesson that focused purely on increasing the pupils’ sense of pulse through well-chosen progressive tasks. This showed how ‘doing more of less’ makes teaching music easier to manage and enabled the teacher to give greater attention to musical detail. Pupils were helped to develop their musical understanding of how sounds can be combined and also enabled some to begin exploring the relationships between sounds. It showed, too, how linked work across different sessions can be particularly effective, especially when the class can see how learning in one lesson is helpful for the next, as this increases their motivation.

Weaker practice: In contrast, pupils made much less progress in another lesson, which was too full of unrelated activity. Teaching skipped from one activity to the next without any links being made between them.

The lesson began with clapping exercises where pupils repeated short rhythmic patterns. The teacher also sang some short melodic patterns and the pupils repeated these with varying degrees of confidence and accuracy. The class then learned a new song, line by line, and talked about the words and what the song was about. They sang two other songs through, which they had learned previously, and the class was then divided into groups. They were asked to compose sounds to a story they had read in class in an earlier lesson. While pupils had experienced a wide range of activities, they found it very difficult to see what they had learned because the activities were unrelated. As a result, opportunities were missed to consolidate learning through, for example, using melodic and rhythmic patterns from the new song at the beginning of the lesson, and making stronger links between the story and the songs chosen so that pupils had a richer sound vocabulary to draw on when creating their own pieces.
Example 3: Starting with sound

Best practice: In one outstanding school, the whole emphasis of the teaching and learning in all musical activities was on insisting on internalising sound – that is, helping and expecting pupils constantly to hear the sounds in their heads first.

A teacher in the Foundation Stage showed children different instruments. Before she played them, she asked them to imagine what they thought each instrument would sound like. Then they closed their eyes as she made the sound. Many of the children giggled as, clearly, what they had imagined sounded nothing like what they heard. Others were delighted and said ‘Yes!’ All the children were utterly engaged and kept asking for more.

Another teacher asked pupils to imagine their own rhythmic part as she played the backing on the piano. There was much nodding of heads and physical movement as she played. When they finally added their parts, the result was outstanding as all the parts fitted together excellently.

Weaker practice: In contrast, many of the teachers seen often inhibited pupils’ aural development through insensitive use of musical vocabulary. Insufficient attention was given to considering what the pupils were hearing. For example, the concept of ‘pitch’ is confused not only by the language associated with volume, such as ‘turn the volume up’, but also by teachers teaching ‘high’ and ‘low’ by using sounds that include many different pitches.

A teacher played a note on a glockenspiel and asked the class if it sounded high or low. On the surface this seemed straightforward but the children were confused because they heard different sounds including the high ringing sound of the note and the low dull thud of the hard beater on metal. Pupils find it easier to respond when asked to compare different sounds but, again, they need to make a sophisticated decision about which pitch is dominant.

The same is true for tempo (fast/slow). Most music is made of different layers so that, for example, a slow melody may have fast-moving parts played underneath.

A class was asked if the theme tune from the television programme, The Vicar of Dibley, was fast or slow – without any recognition that, while the piece has three fast beats in a bar, it also has a much slower underlying pulse of the first beat in each bar. So, answers of ‘slow’ or ‘fast’ were both right but the teacher accepted only ‘fast’ as the correct answer.
Example 4: Listening critically

**Best practice:** The teaching in the following Year 3 lesson helped pupils to make excellent musical progress through well-selected tasks that progressively and accumulatively extended their musical skills and understanding. Above all, the work enabled them to develop their ability to listen carefully so they could match the sounds they were making to those made by the teacher and also to develop their aural memory.

The focus of the lesson was on learning how to improve performing skills by listening more carefully. Year 3 pupils were taught to play a simple three-note melody on the recorder by progressing through, and building on, a sequence of activities. They went from rhythm games, which included the rhythms in the melody, to echo singing activities which included the melodic patterns and, finally, to copying the melody on the recorder. All the pupils managed this excellently because they had already internalised the rhythm and melody through the earlier tasks. The teacher could therefore challenge them to make it sound more musical by asking them to copy her playing and listen more closely to each other. At the end of the lesson, the teacher was absolutely correct when she told the class: ‘Your listening ears are coming on a treat.’

**Weaker practice:** In contrast, too many of the teachers seen did not listen closely enough to the pupils’ music-making and therefore missed opportunities to identify what might have been improved through more focused input. They accepted pupils’ first responses, praising their efforts indiscriminately with no correction of musical errors, or merely repeated the task without any emphasis on improvement.

The staff divided pupils into groups and gave them the task of working out their own rhythmic pattern. The pupils worked together and then, at the end of the session, played what they had created. The teacher said, ‘Well done,’ and that is where it ended. The teacher did not know how to develop the ideas further, so the pupils’ responses were not improved.

Example 5: Making musical progress

**Best practice:** The next example, in addition to many of the aspects highlighted so far, illustrates the potential benefits of classes and teachers working together. The school had maximised work with Sing Up (see footnote 3, page 3) so that teachers were now applying what they had seen in their own teaching. One of the teachers in this session had previously said she could not teach music. While there were some missed opportunities, such as encouraging the class to think about how to increase the expressiveness of the song rather than how it could be changed, and singing the two songs more quietly so the classes had to listen even harder, pupils made good progress and the teachers showed considerable skill.

Year 5 pupils entered the hall clapping a rhythm given by the teacher in their classroom (adjacent to the hall). As they were being organised into two circles, Year 3 pupils came in – clapping another rhythm. Each of the Year 3 pupils sat next to their Year 5 ‘buddy’ (a whole-school approach as pupils are paired up across classes). Each teacher stood in front of one of the mixed circles. One of the teachers quickly began fun singing exercises. The class were very familiar with these and immediately joined in singing the ‘chewing gum’ warm-up. This cleverly exercised facial muscles and increased the resonance of the pupils’ singing voices. They repeated a phrase, changing the vowels each time. Each new vowel was impressively led by a different pupil selected by the teachers. Throughout the warm-up the teachers reminded the classes about posture – standing with feet slightly apart – but did this while they were singing so no time was wasted. They started the first song and added body percussion, with close attention to accuracy of rhythm. Different patterns were added, with the same focus on consolidating pulse. The warm-up and emphasis on posture resulted in good singing.
The teachers kept changing the speed and volume of this song and the classes responded again, quickly and with obvious enjoyment. The teacher asked the class, ‘How can we improve the song?’ Lots of hands were raised and the teacher selected different pupils who suggested ‘go faster’, ‘go slower’, ‘give each other a bit more room to sing’, ‘make it higher’, ‘add some more actions’. These were tried out and then two songs were sung simultaneously – one by each mixed-year circle. This went very well, with all the rhythmic work paying off as they kept together completely. The teacher suggested they try the different ways again and asked one circle to go quicker to see if the other circle could stay with them. This again was done very well as they had to listen closely.

One circle went with one teacher into the classroom and the other stayed in the hall. Each group then learned two songs – first Year 5 taught Year 3 a song and then the other way around. The ‘buddy’ pairs made this an outstanding social experience as they were working together; it also made it an excellent music experience because every pupil was taking the lead. Both classes picked up the songs very quickly and really enjoyed learning from each other. In one of the circles the Year 3 pupils showed Year 5 the movements they had learned that went with their Polish song.

The class sang through a song but found one interval very difficult. As a result, they missed the highest note. The phrasing of the song was also weak because they took breaths in the wrong place. The teacher did not notice either of these points and so the pupils made little musical progress.

Pupils made good progress in Key Stage 1 in this school but, in Key Stage 2, progress was satisfactory rather than good: there was insufficient challenge for the more able pupils and too little support for those who were finding the work more demanding. Singing was generally good, with opportunities to sing in two parts, but no focused help was given to the few pupils who had not yet found their singing voice and no opportunities to take the lead were given to those who were singing very well. A heavy emphasis on notation on a stave also prevented some pupils from making as much progress as they might have done: they could not interpret the notation quickly enough and so were left behind.

Weaker practice: In contrast, while in many of the schools visited, pupils enjoyed singing, all too often there was insufficient attention to improving the quality of the singing or sufficient increased challenge.

In a singing assembly, worship songs were sung through with a backing track – with some enthusiasm, mostly from the younger pupils – but no corrections or improvements were made. The children learnt the song by listening to the backing track (with guide vocals) and then repeatedly sang the song through with the track. The progress they made was only through their increasing familiarity. It was not better than satisfactory because the teacher did not challenge the pupils to improve the quality of their work through questioning, explaining or demonstrating what was needed.
Example 6: Adapting work to meet different learning needs

**Best practice:** This school divided a Year 4 class into two, with one group being taught by the class teacher (see example 2). The other group learned to play the cello with a visiting specialist. Sessions were organised so that all pupils in the class had the same opportunity to learn the cello. Other instrumental lessons were provided and inspectors also viewed a guitar session for selected pupils. In both the cello session and the guitar session there was the same focus on improving the quality of the sound and the overall performance. Pupils learned while playing: they listened to what the teacher demonstrated and then tried to copy this in their own playing. A very effective strategy was the way in which the teachers built up the performance through extensive repetition so pupils were given enough time to really explore, discover and control the sounds they made. The guitar session also matched different lines of music to the pupils’ different levels of expertise so that all of them played the part that gave them an appropriate challenge.

Through the constant emphasis on the quality of musical response, a cello session for six pupils in a primary school was very successful. Pupils sat with their cellos for the whole half-hour session, with tuning being done by the teacher before the group arrived so that each child did not have to wait at the beginning. The teacher demonstrated throughout the session and the pupils copied not only his hand positions but also his tone. There was excellent repetition of a melodic pattern until it had been achieved. Those that were able to copy the pattern quickly then focused on matching the way they played it to the very musical example given by the teacher. He provided musical backing by playing a simple rhythmic sequence of chords on the piano. This maintained the energy of the lesson and created a musical performance which all recognised, rightly, as being good.

**Weaker practice:** In contrast, less effective programmes tried to cover too much and did not make the most of the specialist skills and opportunities which visiting teachers brought to the school.

In one lesson seen, the pupils used their violins for only about 10 minutes in a 40-minute session, the rest of the time being used for singing and clapping exercises. Teachers wrongly thought they had to include all the National Curriculum requirements in a single lesson. By trying to do too much, pupils were not able to make much musical progress in any of the different activities. While care needs to be taken that the physical demands of playing the instrument are not too much, the teachers seen often missed opportunities to develop pupils’ skills, knowledge and understanding by using the instruments and thus increasing their instrumental skills.

A guitar session in the same school used similar techniques and skilfully built up individual lines (all learned together) into a group performance. The teacher, again, provided a model for every part so the pupils listened, watched and copied. The teacher then added a high-quality broken chord accompaniment on his guitar and all achieved a very musical performance – which gave all the pupils a sense of tremendous satisfaction.

In the instrumental/vocal programmes which inspectors judged were ineffective, the same provision was offered to all pupils with the expectation that those with talent would emerge and others would not do as well. Problems were ignored, as in this example:

The whole-class performance was a cacophony of sound where nobody felt any sense of achievement or satisfaction. They played the instruments for only a short while, since every task was interrupted by the teacher’s analysis and by more instructions. There was too much talking and not enough demonstration and learning. All mistakes were glossed over. Pupils were not engaged and became tired.
Example 7: Doing it all and having fun

Best practice: This final example was led by the subject leader using instruments provided by the local authority’s music service. It is similar to some of the best instrumental and vocal programmes as all pupils learned to play an instrument as part of a whole-class experience. The clear focus in this session was on developing specific instrumental skills in order to improve the quality of the overall performance. The session enabled pupils to make excellent progress and demonstrate attainment beyond the expected levels. Pupils’ understanding of how sounds could be combined (Level 3) was absolutely secure and all were showing increasing understanding of the relationship between sounds (Level 4). Some were showing clear understanding of the devices used in samba (Level 5).

Talk was used only when it was essential to clarify and extend learning. The teacher kept clear records of pupils’ attainment in relation to the expected outcomes for each unit of work and these were accurately linked to National Curriculum levels. These records were built up over the term with a few comments added each lesson as individual pupils showed particular strengths or weaknesses. The information, together with the teacher’s own detailed knowledge of the pupils, enabled all work to be matched completely to their learning needs. Regular audio recordings were also used to help pupils see what they had achieved, and staff develop a shared understanding of expectations.

The session took place in a mobile classroom in which all the samba instruments were laid out. As pupils were led into the classroom they were instructed as to which instrument to play and given new earplugs which they all had to wear. (These were purchased from the local music supplier and are essential for percussion work in relatively small spaces.) The class did this quickly, with an obvious sense of anticipation and knowledge of the names of the different instruments. They also quickly moved into groups of the same instrument, again showing understanding of how instruments are organised in this style of music. Almost before the class was in position, the teacher started playing a rhythmic pattern, and spontaneously the class joined in. Hardly any time had elapsed since the first pupil stepped through the doorway. The teacher then built the music, line by line, so that, as each line was established, the next group would learn another line while the first one continued to play its pattern. The teacher then reminded the class about the structure and demonstrated the different sections. The class was familiar with aural cues through the use of the whistle and achieved a secure performance of the whole piece. The teacher then practised the parts that were not as good and tightened up all the rhythmic parts so they fitted exactly together. Throughout the session the teacher moved around the class, helping pupils improve their playing techniques – highlighting exactly what needed to be improved, waiting to see that the pupil had understood and then moving on. Different pupils were given the opportunity to lead the performance, which they did with confidence and musicality – allowing the teacher to provide more individual help. Opportunities were given for pupils to improvise their own rhythms as part of the performance. Every pupil enjoyed the same buzz from the high quality of his or her work and recognised that everyone had an equal responsibility and made an equal contribution, whatever the part being played.

This leaflet has been written for all staff in primary schools to use. A similar leaflet is available for music teachers and senior managers in secondary schools: www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090085.
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