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Mr R Prew
Acting Headteacher
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Dear Mr Prew

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: music

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 3 and 4 October 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; a meeting with a representative of Berkshire Maestros music service; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; observation of six class lessons (including two joint observations), one assembly and three school musical ensembles; and short visits to two instrumental lessons.

The overall effectiveness of music is good.

Achievement in music

Achievement in music is good.

- Students' attainment in Key Stage 3 is above average. From broadly average starting points, they make very rapid progress in Years 7 and 8. They experience a wide range of musical styles and learn to understand the common, and different, musical characteristics within them. In Year 9, students sustain these above average standards but within a much narrower range of musical activity. Overall, progress in Key Stage 3 is good.
- GCSE music results are consistently well above average and on an improving trend. The numbers of pupils taking the subject each year fluctuate considerably, though are consistently in a proportion higher than

the national average. Students' current work, including their coursework and compositions, indicates they are making excellent progress.

- In the sixth form, students make good progress to meet suitably challenging grade targets. Standards are above average at AS and A2 level.
- Singing is a particular strength. In lessons, singing is widely used by staff and students to emphasise, explore or explain musical ideas. The quality of students' singing is good; it is very well pitched and controlled. All students participate in singing and good vocal training in assemblies. An enjoyable inter-class singing competition has a high profile. All this does much to promote a sense of community within the school.
- The quality of performance of the school's musical ensembles is very high and the students involved benefit much in terms of their personal development from participation in a wide range of concerts and, for some, a tour in Germany. Overall, the proportions of students taking part in instrumental tuition and /or extra curricular music activities are good. All groups of students are represented; however, the proportions of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities, and those known to be eligible for free school meals, are much lower than those for all students.

Quality of teaching in music

The quality of teaching in music is outstanding.

- Teachers demonstrate great musical expertise. They share this clearly and adeptly, ensuring that students receive the needed input, suggestions or explanations at just the right time. Teachers model excellence in musical performance. These strengths ensure very high expectations of the students, enabling them to know clearly what they need to do to learn very well independently and in group activities.
- Lessons are very well paced and structured. Activities, including those involving performing, listening and composing, are excellently linked together. Teachers ensure that the content of lessons is practical, closely matched to students' needs and constantly challenging. In A-level lessons, a fast-paced seminar type atmosphere enables students to think carefully and manage new learning with alacrity. Relationships between staff and students are very positive and committed.
- Students who find any tasks difficult, or who need additional help, are helped carefully by teachers. Often this is by working alongside other students in carefully managed ways, so that they can progress well. Students who are particularly high attaining are well challenged by carefully planned, open-ended tasks.

Quality of the curriculum in music

The quality of the curriculum in music is good.

- The time allocation for music in all key stages is appropriate and sufficient to promote a good depth and range of learning.

- In Years 7 and 8, students enjoy a very well-structured, inclusive and demanding music curriculum. The scheme of work builds quickly on primary school learning, ensuring that students have very worthwhile experiences, involving a wide range of musical styles from different cultures. Through enjoyable practical tasks, students see how these different musical styles have both common and different elements. For example, in Year 8, students learn about musical form through Indian raga and their own computer-based compositions.
- In Year 9, the music curriculum changed last year to an approach based on the 'Musical Futures' approach to learning. Although knowledgeably taught, it contains less variety and, in some key respects, less challenge than in the programme for younger year groups. For example, it does not continue to develop the understanding of musical form developed in Year 8. It is based on only one aspect: performing and composing pop songs in groups. Students enjoy much of this work but also show disappointment when the group tasks are not well enough structured to complete successfully or quickly. The previous Year 9 cohort produced some very worthwhile performances but showed awareness that the activities across the year as a whole were not always challenging.
- The curricula for GCSE and A-level are well constructed to meet examination requirements in interesting and relevant ways. Students are helpfully consulted and involved in making some of the decisions.
- The good accommodation is very well managed. There are large classrooms and a good number of small practice rooms. The department is well equipped with carefully chosen instruments and resources. These are readily available, and carefully and tidily stored. Well-constructed displays help to explain musical learning targets and terms. They also celebrate successful recent concerts and events.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in music

The effectiveness of leadership and management in music is good.

- Senior staff are very committed to the importance of music in the school. The whole-school systems they operate, such as those for self-evaluation and assessment of students, serve the music department well. Music in the school is generally accurately self-evaluated; however, the weaknesses in the Year 9 curriculum were underestimated.
- Music is placed within the performing arts faculty, which is the school's specialism. This very effectively supports music in its involvement in community events, in work with local primary schools and in its self-evaluation.
- The music department itself is led well. The level of teamwork, and shared planning and thinking, is good. Thus the school does not need to rely extensively on external expertise. Nevertheless, it has well-established partnerships with Berkshire Maestros, the local music service, and local teachers it recruits directly, to provide instrumental lessons to a large group of students. The Berkshire Maestros checks on the quality of the work of its teachers. However, the school has no formal mechanism for

assuring the quality of the work of the teachers it recruits directly or the progress students make in these lessons.

- The department has a simple but effective philosophy based on high expectations, engagement and inclusion of students. In most respects this is very well met. However, the school has not analysed in depth why more students from underrepresented groups do not attend extra-curricular activities and instrumental lessons and, despite some worthwhile actions, does not have a well-formed plan to try to redress this.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving the curriculum in Year 9, so that it builds more closely, and through a broader range of activity, on what has taken place in Years 7 and 8
- analysing carefully why more students from the groups underrepresented in extra-curricular activity and instrumental lessons do not take part; and using this analysis to inform a plan to increase the proportions of such students involved
- evaluating the effectiveness of the school's directly recruited instrumental teaching by:
 - including these lessons appropriately in the programme of school lesson observation
 - checking rigorously on the progress made by students in these lessons.

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

Robin Hammerton
Her Majesty's Inspector