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Dr M Willis  
Headteacher  
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Dear Dr Willis

### Ofsted Subject Inspection Programme – Music

Thank you for your assistance and hospitality and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 29-30 April 2009. At the end of the inspection I fed back my judgements and this letter is to confirm my findings.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on the extent to which every student is benefiting from your music provision. It also explored any links you have developed with other schools and agencies.

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 unless to highlight exceptional practice. In such circumstances the school would be contacted prior to publication to agree the exact wording. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: discussions with members of staff and students, discussions with members of the parents' support group, meetings with the head of Bristol Music Service and the headteacher of a feeder primary school, scrutiny of relevant documentation and students' work, and observation of lessons and ensemble rehearsals.

This inspection came at an important time in the development of the music department. The head of department was promoted to his post in January 2009. The two other curriculum teachers, both temporary appointments and newly-qualified, joined the school in January and April 2009. There are currently some aspects of teaching that are key areas for development, but with an excellent curriculum offer, strong performance in examinations and exceptional attitudes to learning from many senior students, the overall effectiveness of music at present is good with outstanding features. The new

subject leader, with superb support from senior leaders, has a very good understanding and ambitious plans to enable the department's further development.

## Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards in music are good, with outstanding features.

- The proportion of students taking music examination courses in Key Stage 4 and 5 is high. In recent years, standards have been well above average at both GCSE and A Level, representing good progress given students' starting points. At A Level, progress in Music Technology has been particularly good.
- The school's tracking of current students' progress suggests that, at GCSE, most students are on track to achieve their target grades with students performing better in the performance and composition elements of the course than in the listening examination. At A Level, most students are on track to achieve at least their target minimum grades.
- Standards in Key Stage 3 are more variable. Whilst some students make good progress from their average or below-average starting points when they join the school, others make less progress but still achieve within national expectations by the end of the key stage.
- Participation in additional instrumental or vocal tuition and in extra-curricular activities is good, and students really enjoy these experiences. High standards are reached in the chamber and gospel choirs, although the proportion of girls in these groups is significantly higher than boys. Similarly, standards of vocal work are less well-developed in Key Stage 3 class lessons.

## Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is good overall. Whilst standards of teaching are currently satisfactory, the exemplary attitudes shown by many senior students and the full advantage that they take of the excellent opportunities and resources that the school offers help them to make good progress in their learning.

- Teachers have good subject knowledge. Music Technology expertise is outstanding. However, whilst examples of good and outstanding teaching were seen during the inspection, too many lessons place more emphasis on students' completion of tasks than on the quality of their musical responses. An example was seen in a lesson on minimalism where teaching had been effective in showing students how to control the software, but not how to control and shape the musical elements of their work. In contrast, in an outstanding sixth form Music Technology lesson, teaching gave equal emphasis to enabling students' facility with the technology as well as developing the quality of their musical responses through questioning but, more importantly, through listening to and

appraising their work. Consequently, students produced work that was both technologically and musically polished.

- All lessons are carefully planned and well-resourced. Students with learning difficulties and disabilities are identified in lesson plans, and extension work is planned for those who are most able. However, in practice, teaching is not always differentiated sufficiently, particularly in Key Stage 3 where there is an over-dependence on worksheets leading to too much reliance on teachers' spoken instructions and students' written responses.
- Work is assessed regularly, but typically teachers use assessment as a means of recording students' attainment, rather than as a tool for helping students to improve their work. Using assessment more effectively to improve the quality of both teaching and learning is a priority that has been correctly identified by the new head of department.

### Quality of the music curriculum and extra-curricular provision

Overall, the quality of the curriculum and extra-curricular provision is outstanding.

- The great strength of the curriculum offer is the breadth and depth of musical styles and experiences available to students. In addition to an excellent range of additional instrumental and vocal tuition, there are three choirs, band and jazz ensembles, and a 'band academy' for rock musicians.
- There is a dedicated world music room, with a Gamelan orchestra, steel pans, and djembe drums. A recording studio complements excellent classroom facilities for ICT. A suite of practice rooms is available for individual and small group work, although students rightly comment that some of the pianos in these rooms would benefit from refurbishment.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum covers all statutory requirements and includes a good, broad range of well-chosen topics. Whilst outline schemes of work are in place, the depth of planning is less consistent; the new head of department has again correctly identified the need to revise schemes of work and teaching resources to better meet the needs of students across the ability range.
- In Key Stage 4, the GCSE music course is offered via two pathways – one traditional, and one using music technology. Similarly, both traditional music and music technology qualifications are offered at A Level. As with Key Stage 3, outline schemes of work are in place, but have yet to be fully detailed to reflect the new specifications at GCSE and A Level.

## Leadership and management of music

The leadership and management of music are good, with outstanding features.

- There are very high expectations for music. It is clear that, over time, the school's senior leadership has built an excellent vision for music and, through specialist arts status, has matched that vision with excellent resources.
- The new head of department has a very clear understanding of the strengths of the department and the areas that could be developed further. He is given outstanding support and encouragement from the head of faculty and the senior leadership team. There is a noticeably strong collegiate ethos to the arts faculty. Wisely, with significant staffing changes, since his appointment he has focussed on maintaining the curriculum offer and ensuring the completion of this year's examination courses. He has clear priorities for development from September 2009, including in improving the quality of teaching and learning, particularly in Key Stage 3.
- A particularly positive aspect of the school's specialism is the work done in feeder schools by the primary liaison teacher. This work includes workshops for pupils and teachers, as well as opportunities to visit and perform at Cotham.

## Subject issue: Inclusion

- Most groups are represented in examination courses, instrumental lessons and extra-curricular activities. However, students do not always receive sufficient support or challenge in Key Stage 3.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring that teaching has a clear and relentless emphasis on students' musical participation and the quality of their musical responses, particularly in Key Stage 3
- ensuring that assessment is used effectively in lessons by teachers to improve the quality of students' work, as well as measure their attainment, in all Key Stages
- ensuring that ICT is used to support students' musical learning as well in Key Stage 3 as it is in Key Stages 4 and 5.

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

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

In 6-12 months after the inspection visit, we would like to gather information on the impact of this inspection on the improvements in this subject in your school. To this end you may be contacted by telephone or sent a questionnaire to complete. We appreciate your co-operation in this evaluation.

Yours sincerely

Mark Phillips  
Her Majesty's Inspector