MUSIC: PROGRESSION OF VOCABULARY

Bredbury Green Primary School | Nursery–Year 6 curriculum companion

Purpose and principles

At Bredbury Green, we recognise that a secure understanding of musical vocabulary helps children to listen carefully, talk about what they hear and make increasingly purposeful choices when performing and composing. Musical language is taught explicitly and revisited regularly so that children can use it with growing accuracy and independence.

This document supports our Music curriculum and identifies the key vocabulary children should know and understand as they move through school. It includes Tier 2 vocabulary that supports thinking, discussion and evaluation, alongside Tier 3 vocabulary linked directly to musical knowledge and practice. Vocabulary is deliberately cumulative: children revisit familiar ideas such as pulse, rhythm, pitch, dynamics, tempo, timbre, texture and structure in increasingly sophisticated contexts.

In EYFS, vocabulary develops through singing, movement, listening, sound exploration and musical play. Nursery provision focuses on listening, imitation, turn-taking and describing contrasting sounds, while Reception builds these foundations through songs, rhymes, percussion, movement and simple patterns in preparation for Year 1.

Across the school, children learn vocabulary through listening, singing, playing, improvising, composing, notating and evaluating. Technical terms are most useful when children can hear, demonstrate and apply them in practical music-making.

Whole-school conceptual vocabulary

Concept	Early language (EYFS–Y2)	Developing language (Y3–Y6)	Retrieval thread
Pulse and rhythm	beat, steady, pattern, clap, rest	pulse, rhythm, crotchet, minim, semibreve, dotted rhythm, syncopation	beat → steady pulse → rhythm pattern → notation → rhythmic independence
Pitch and melody	high, low, higher, lower, tune	pitch, note, melody, scale, chord, drone, harmony	high/low → named notes → melody → scale/chord → harmony
Dynamics and expression	loud, quiet, louder, quieter	dynamics, piano, forte, crescendo, diminuendo, expression	loud/quiet → dynamic contrast → markings → expressive control

Tempo and duration	fast, slow, long, short	tempo, duration, adagio, allegro, note value	fast/slow → tempo → named markings; long/short → duration → note values
Timbre and texture	sound, voice, instrument, together, alone	timbre, texture, layer, solo, ensemble, accompaniment, ostinato	different sounds → timbre → layers → texture → ensemble roles
Structure and composition	beginning, middle, end, repeat, pattern	structure, binary, ternary, rondo, 12-bar blues, repetition, variation	pattern → sections → AB → ABA → rondo → genre structures
Notation	mark, symbol, picture, pattern	graphic notation, score, staff, treble clef, crotchet, minim, rest, annotation	visual pattern → graphic score → rhythmic notation → staff notation
Listening and evaluation	listen, notice, like, change, improve	identify, describe, compare, analyse, evaluate, refine, interpretation	notice → describe → explain effect → evaluate → refine

Vocabulary progression by year group and unit

Nursery | Exploring Sound and Song

Curriculum strand: EYFS musical foundations

Tier 2: academic / transferable	Tier 3: musical / unit-specific
listen, copy, repeat, choose, move, stop, start, same, different	sound, song, rhyme, beat, loud, quiet, fast, slow, high, low, instrument, voice

Retrieval and progression: Begin with familiar Tier 2 language such as listen, copy, repeat, same and different, alongside Tier 3 language such as sound, song, loud, quiet, fast and slow. Children build these words through singing, movement, sound exploration and musical play.

Reception | Singing, Moving and Making Patterns

Curriculum strand: EYFS musical foundations

Tier 2: academic / transferable	Tier 3: musical / unit-specific
listen, respond, remember, repeat, pattern, change, perform, describe	beat, pulse, rhythm, pitch, high, low, loud, quiet, fast, slow, percussion, pattern

Retrieval and progression: Retrieve Tier 2 vocabulary listen, copy, repeat, same, different, move, stop and start and Tier 3 vocabulary sound, song, beat, loud, quiet, fast, slow, high, low, instrument and voice from Nursery. Build towards pattern, perform, describe, pulse, rhythm, pitch and percussion.

Year 1 | Storytime

Curriculum strand: Rhythm and Composition

Tier 2: academic / transferable	Tier 3: musical / unit-specific
recognise, create, perform, pattern, improve, expression	pulse, rhythm, pitch, rhythm tag, cat, monkey, rest, tuned percussion, untuned percussion, dynamics, loud, quiet

Retrieval and progression: Retrieve Tier 2 vocabulary listen, repeat, pattern, perform and describe and Tier 3 vocabulary beat, pulse, rhythm, pitch, high, low, loud and quiet from Reception. Build on this with create, improve, expression, rhythm tag, tuned percussion, untuned percussion and dynamics, while securing the difference between pulse, rhythm and pitch.

Year 1 | Playing and Performing A

Curriculum strand: Playing and Performing

Tier 2: academic / transferable	Tier 3: musical / unit-specific
control, improvise, perform, together, pattern, technique	glockenspiel, beater, pitch, high, low, note C, pulse, rhythm, scale, backing track

Retrieval and progression: Retrieve Tier 2 vocabulary recognise, pattern and perform and Tier 3 vocabulary pulse, rhythm, pitch, high and low from Storytime. Build on this with control, improvise, technique, glockenspiel, beater, note C, scale and backing track so that children connect rhythm and pitch in instrumental performance.

Year 1 | Sounds Interesting

Curriculum strand: Inter-Related Dimensions of Music

Tier 2: academic / transferable	Tier 3: musical / unit-specific
identify, describe, compare, effect, mood, expression	rhythm, pulse, dynamics, tempo, pitch, duration, timbre, texture, structure, ostinato, tap, shake, scrape

Retrieval and progression: Retrieve Tier 2 vocabulary recognise, create, perform, improve and expression and Tier 3 vocabulary pulse, rhythm, pitch and dynamics from earlier Year 1 work. Build on this with identify, describe, compare, effect, mood, tempo, duration, timbre, texture, structure and ostinato.

Year 2 | Sequences

Curriculum strand: Rhythm and Composition

Tier 2: academic / transferable	Tier 3: musical / unit-specific
sequence, distinguish, compose, notate, complex, ensemble	rhythm tag, cat, monkey, rest, cow, pulse, rhythm, xylophone, glockenspiel, body percussion, vocal percussion, tempo, dynamics

Retrieval and progression: Retrieve Tier 2 vocabulary recognise, create, perform, pattern and improve and Tier 3 vocabulary pulse, rhythm, pitch, dynamics, tuned percussion and untuned percussion from Year 1. Build on this with sequence, distinguish, compose, notate, ensemble, xylophone, body percussion, vocal percussion and tempo.

Year 2 | Playing and Performing B

Curriculum strand: Playing and Performing

Tier 2: academic / transferable	Tier 3: musical / unit-specific
compose, improvise, notate, accuracy, confidently, ensemble	glockenspiel, notes C D E, melody, 8-beat melody, rhythm tag, pulse, pitch, dynamics, backing track

Retrieval and progression: Retrieve Tier 2 vocabulary control, improvise, perform, technique and together and Tier 3 vocabulary glockenspiel, beater, note C, pulse, rhythm, pitch and backing track from Year 1. Build on this with compose, notate, accuracy, ensemble, notes C D E, melody and 8-beat melody.

Year 2 | Selecting and Combining Sounds

Curriculum strand: Inter-Related Dimensions of Music

Tier 2: academic / transferable	Tier 3: musical / unit-specific
select, combine, contrast, narrative, convey, record	soundscape, body percussion, tuned, untuned, graphic notation, binary form, AB, timbre, texture, dynamics, tempo, structure

Retrieval and progression: Retrieve Tier 2 vocabulary identify, describe, compare, effect and mood and Tier 3 vocabulary rhythm, pulse, pitch, dynamics, tempo, timbre, texture and structure from Year 1. Build on this with select, combine, contrast, narrative, soundscape, graphic notation, binary form and AB.

Year 3 | Binary AB

Curriculum strand: Rhythm and Composition

Tier 2: academic / transferable	Tier 3: musical / unit-specific
develop, cohesion, solo, group, notate, improvise	pulse, rhythm tag, armadillo, binary form, AB, dynamics, texture, timbre, composition

Retrieval and progression: Retrieve Tier 2 vocabulary sequence, compose, notate, ensemble and contrast and Tier 3 vocabulary pulse, rhythm, dynamics, timbre, texture, binary form and AB from Year 2. Build on this with develop, cohesion, solo, improvise and more complex rhythm tags, including armadillo.

Year 3 | Playing and Performing Instruments 1

Curriculum strand: Playing and Performing

Tier 2: academic / transferable	Tier 3: musical / unit-specific
maintain, control, associate, accuracy, technique, clear	recorder, posture, breath control, fingering, B A G, crotchet, minim, rest, rhythm pattern, tone

Retrieval and progression: Retrieve Tier 2 vocabulary perform, accuracy, technique and ensemble and Tier 3 vocabulary pulse, rhythm, pitch, melody and tuned percussion from KS1. Build on this with maintain, control, associate, recorder, posture, breath control, fingering, B A G, crotchet, minim, rest and tone.

Year 3 | Notating Dynamics and Tempo

Curriculum strand: Inter-Related Dimensions of Music

Tier 2: academic / transferable	Tier 3: musical / unit-specific
contrast, communicate, represent, tension, annotate, interpret	dynamics, piano, forte, crescendo, diminuendo, tempo, adagio, allegro, graphic notation

Retrieval and progression: Retrieve Tier 2 vocabulary identify, describe, contrast, effect and mood and Tier 3 vocabulary dynamics, tempo, loud, quiet, fast, slow and graphic notation from KS1. Build on this with communicate, represent, tension, piano, forte, crescendo, diminuendo, adagio and allegro.

Year 4 | Ternary ABA

Curriculum strand: Rhythm and Composition

Tier 2: academic / transferable	Tier 3: musical / unit-specific
extend, refine, confidence, cohesion, structure, expression	rhythm tag, elephant, ternary form, ABA, tuned percussion, untuned percussion, dynamics, texture, timbre

Retrieval and progression: Retrieve Tier 2 vocabulary sequence, contrast, compose, notate and cohesion and Tier 3 vocabulary pulse, rhythm, dynamics, texture, binary form and AB from Years 2 and 3. Build on this with extend, refine, confidence, ternary form and ABA so that children can explain and use a returning section.

Year 4 | Playing and Performing Instruments 2

Curriculum strand: Playing and Performing

Tier 2: academic / transferable	Tier 3: musical / unit-specific
interpret, correct, identify, accuracy, confidently, fluent	recorder, B A G C D, posture, fingering, breath control, treble clef, traditional notation, tone

Retrieval and progression: Retrieve Tier 2 vocabulary maintain, control, accuracy and technique and Tier 3 vocabulary recorder, posture, breath control, fingering, B A G, crotchet, minim, rest and tone from Year 3. Build on this with interpret, correct, fluent, C D, treble clef and traditional notation.

Year 4 | Programme Music

Curriculum strand: Inter-Related Dimensions of Music

Tier 2: academic / transferable	Tier 3: musical / unit-specific
represent, narrative, character, evaluate, effective, planned	programme music, tempo, dynamics, timbre, structure, graphic notation, storyline, composition

Retrieval and progression: Retrieve Tier 2 vocabulary contrast, communicate, represent, mood and interpret and Tier 3 vocabulary tempo, dynamics, timbre, structure and graphic notation from Year 3. Build on this with narrative, character, evaluate, effective, programme music and storyline.

Year 5 | Rondo Composition

Curriculum strand: Rhythm and Composition

Tier 2: academic / transferable	Tier 3: musical / unit-specific
recognise, organise, refine, role, cohesive, evaluate	rondo, rhythm tag, anteater, semibreve, drone, chord, melody, harmony, dynamics, ensemble

Retrieval and progression: Retrieve Tier 2 vocabulary compose, structure, refine, cohesion and evaluate and Tier 3 vocabulary binary form, AB, ternary form, ABA, rhythm, melody and dynamics from Years 3 and 4. Build on this with organise, role, rondo, semibreve, drone, chord, harmony and ensemble.

Year 5 | Playing and Performing Instruments 3

Curriculum strand: Playing and Performing

Tier 2: academic / transferable	Tier 3: musical / unit-specific
consistent, controlled, accuracy, fluency, evaluate, refine	recorder, pitch, tone, dynamics, treble clef, dotted rhythm, rest, ensemble, backing track

Retrieval and progression: Retrieve Tier 2 vocabulary interpret, correct, accuracy and fluent and Tier 3 vocabulary recorder, pitch, tone, treble clef, traditional notation and rest from Year 4. Build on this with consistent, controlled, evaluate, refine, dotted rhythm, ensemble and backing track.

Year 5 | Understanding and Composing Ostinato

Curriculum strand: Inter-Related Dimensions of Music

Tier 2: academic / transferable	Tier 3: musical / unit-specific
analyse, layer, theme, intended, communicate, effectiveness	ostinato, rhythmic ostinato, layer, texture, programme music, tempo, dynamics, pitch, timbre, technology

Retrieval and progression: Retrieve Tier 2 vocabulary represent, narrative, evaluate and communicate and Tier 3 vocabulary programme music, tempo, dynamics, pitch, timbre, texture and structure from Year 4. Build on this with analyse, layer, theme, intended, ostinato, rhythmic ostinato and technology.

Year 6 | Song Writing - 12 Bar Blues

Curriculum strand: Rhythm and Composition

Tier 2: academic / transferable	Tier 3: musical / unit-specific
variation, genre, style, reflect, effective, improvise	12-bar blues, Blues, chords I IV V, Blues scale, chord, melody, lyrics, harmony, repetition, variation, improvisation

Retrieval and progression: Retrieve Tier 2 vocabulary organise, refine, evaluate and cohesive and Tier 3 vocabulary rhythm, melody, harmony, chord, rondo, drone and ensemble from Year 5. Build on this with variation, genre, style, 12-bar blues, Blues, chords I IV V, Blues scale, lyrics, repetition and improvisation.

Year 6 | Playing and Performing 4

Curriculum strand: Playing and Performing

Tier 2: academic / transferable	Tier 3: musical / unit-specific
interpret, fluent, refine, inaccuracy, expression, coordinate	traditional notation, treble clef, pitch, rhythm, rest, ensemble, backing track, dynamics, melodic phrase, improvisation

Retrieval and progression: Retrieve Tier 2 vocabulary accuracy, fluent, controlled, evaluate and refine and Tier 3 vocabulary traditional notation, treble clef, pitch, rhythm, rest, ensemble, backing track and dynamics from Year 5. Build on this with interpret, coordinate, inaccuracy, expression, melodic phrase and improvisation.

Year 6 | A Night on the Bare Mountain

Curriculum strand: Inter-Related Dimensions of Music

Tier 2: academic / transferable	Tier 3: musical / unit-specific
interpret, analyse, atmosphere, complex, intention, critically evaluate	programme music, graphic score, annotation, tempo, dynamics, pitch, timbre, texture, structure, narrative

Retrieval and progression: Retrieve Tier 2 vocabulary analyse, layer, intended, communicate and effectiveness and Tier 3 vocabulary programme music, tempo, dynamics, pitch, timbre, texture, structure and narrative from Year 5. Build on this with interpret, atmosphere, complex, intention, critically evaluate, graphic score and annotation.

Musical notation and performance vocabulary progression

Phase	Notation	Performance	Increasing independence
EYFS	picture, mark, pattern	sing, move, copy, play, stop, start	Respond to and copy sounds, actions and simple patterns.
KS1	rhythm tag, graphic notation, 8-beat pattern	pulse, rhythm, pitch, beater, tuned, untuned, ensemble	Create, record and perform short patterns and melodies with support.

Lower KS2	crotchet, minim, rest, treble clef, graphic notation, piano, forte, crescendo, diminuendo, adagio, allegro	recorder, fingering, posture, breath control, tone, solo, ensemble	Read simple notation, maintain a part and begin to identify improvements.
Upper KS2	semibreve, dotted rhythm, score, annotation, chord symbols I IV V	accuracy, fluency, controlled dynamics, expression, accompaniment, improvisation	Interpret notation, rehearse purposefully, refine independently and perform with stylistic awareness.

UNCRC connections

Music provides natural opportunities to support Article 12 (children expressing views and having them heard), Article 13 (freedom of expression), Article 29 (developing talents and respect for cultural identity) and Article 31 (participation in cultural and artistic life). These connections are most meaningful through performance, composition, listening, collaboration and engagement with music from different traditions.

Suggested retrieval routines

- Musical dimension retrieval: play or perform a short example and ask pupils to identify one or two dimensions and justify their response.
- Vocabulary-to-sound: give a term such as crescendo, ostinato or ternary and ask pupils to demonstrate it using voice, body percussion or instruments.
- Sound-to-vocabulary: perform contrasting examples so pupils select and use the most precise musical term to describe what changed.
- Cumulative notation: regularly revisit earlier rhythm tags, graphic symbols and traditional notation before adding a new symbol or note value.
- Rehearsal talk: require pupils to use agreed musical vocabulary when giving feedback, for example identifying an issue with pulse, dynamics, tone or ensemble cohesion.
- Structure retrieval: compare familiar forms such as AB, ABA, rondo and 12-bar blues so pupils explain what repeats, contrasts or returns.

What progression should look like

Phase	Listening and vocabulary	Performing and composing	Explaining and evaluating
EYFS	Notice and describe simple contrasts in sound using everyday musical language.	Copy beats and patterns; sing, move and explore instruments and voices.	Say what they notice and make simple choices about sounds.
KS1	Name core dimensions and distinguish pulse, rhythm and pitch.	Keep a pulse, perform simple rhythms and melodies, improvise and create short compositions.	Describe how musical choices affect mood, story or expression and suggest improvements.

Lower KS2	Use conventional terms for dynamics, tempo, notation and structure.	Read simple notation, play recorder, compose within AB/ABA structures and create programme music.	Explain how dimensions work together and evaluate accuracy, expression and effectiveness.
Upper KS2	Analyse combinations of musical dimensions and recognise vocabulary linked to genre and harmony.	Perform with fluency and control; compose using rondo, ostinato, programme music and Blues structures.	Evaluate and refine with increasing independence, using precise musical vocabulary to justify decisions.

Implementation notes

- Teach vocabulary through sound and musical action wherever possible: pupils should hear, perform or create the concept as well as define it.
- Keep the inter-related dimensions visible across units so that terms such as pulse, pitch, dynamics, tempo, timbre, texture and structure are repeatedly retrieved in new contexts.
- Maintain the school's rhythm-tag language while progressively connecting it to conventional rhythmic notation.
- Model precise distinctions, particularly pulse/rhythm, pitch/volume, tempo/rhythm and timbre/texture, as these can easily become confused.
- Revisit notation cumulatively. Graphic notation and scaffolded systems remain useful while pupils develop increasing confidence with traditional notation.
- Use listening examples from varied styles, traditions and periods and encourage children to apply the same vocabulary to music they hear and music they make.
- Assessment should consider whether pupils can apply musical vocabulary accurately during listening, rehearsal, performance, composition and evaluation, rather than simply recall definitions.