Subject specific vocabulary

The following subject specific vocabulary provides definitions of key words and terms used in our GCSE Music specification. Students should be familiar with and gain understanding of these terms.

12 or 16 bar blues

A 12-bar blues progression is composed of three four-bar phrases, whilst a 16-bar blues progression is composed of four four-bar phrases. The chords are based on I, IV and V (eg jazz, rock, R&B etc).

A cappella

The performance by a singer or a singing group without instrumental accompaniment. In DJing, this refers to vocal-only tracks.

Accompaniment

Pieces written with an instrumental or vocal part designed to support or complement the melody.

Anacrusis

A note or sequence of notes which precede the first strong beat of a musical phrase, particularly at the start of a piece.

Anthem

A vocal piece that has special importance for a particular group of people or a country, often performed on a special occasion (eg Coronation anthems).

Antiphony

A musical texture in which the musical ideas are passed between different groups of instruments or voices.

Annotation

Diagrams, screenshots and written notes showing how the piece was composed, including aspects such as the use of instruments, harmonies, key etc.

Arch-shape

A structure of contrasting sections in the form A-B-C-B-A.

Arco

An instruction given to string players to use the bow.

Areas of study

Specified genres, styles and traditions of music that must be studied.

Aria

A composition for solo voice, usually contained within a larger musical work and which may be accompanied by instruments or a full orchestra (eg oratorios, operas). An aria is usually sung after a recitative.

Arpeggio

A type of broken chord in which the notes that compose a chord are played or sung in an ascending or descending order (eg an ascending arpeggio of a C major chord is C, E and G).

Articulation

The effect on how the note is played (eg phrase mark, staccato, slur, accent and legato etc).

Atonal

Music composed without a key or tonal centre.

Audio recording

Sound recording of students' final performances.

Augmentation

A compositional device where the time values of the notes of a melody can be lengthened, or the interval between two notes can be widened (eg augmented 4th).

Automated double tracking (ADT)

ADT imitates the effect of doubling voices or instruments using double tracking, without the need for a musician to overdub their part (they perform their part only once).

Balance

The relative volume levels between voices and/or instruments to achieve clarity of recording, as used in music production.

Backbeat

A strong rhythmic accent on the second and fourth beats of a bar of a piece in 4/4 time, used especially in jazz and popular music.

Baritone

A male voice with a range midway between tenor and bass.

Beat boxing

Using your voice to produce musical and rhythmic sounds (eg drum beats, hi-hat or cymbal noises, brass effects etc).

Binary

The structure of a piece of music which is divided into two different sections. It is usually written as an AABB or AB form.

Blues scale

A six-note minor pentatonic scale with the addition of a flattened fifth (eg a blues scales in C minor includes the notes C, Eb, F, Gb, G and Bb).

Blues note

A flattened note (lowered in tone by a half step), usually the third or seventh, used especially in blues music.

BPM

Stands for ‘beats per minute’ and used for measuring the tempo of a piece of music.

Break

A short instrumental solo, often improvised and used in pop and jazz.

Cadence

A pair of chords in which the harmony marks the end of a musical statement (eg perfect, plagal, interrupted and imperfect).

Cadenza

A passage usually towards end of a solo piece, where a soloist plays an elaborate flourish or showy solo passage in a skilled way.

Call and response

A feature of instrumental and vocal music where the leader plays or sings a melody and the rest of the group plays or sings in response.

Canon

A musical texture in which a melody is played and then imitated (one or more times) after a short delay in another part. It is a contrapuntal technique as the melodic lines move independently of one another (eg Pachelbel’s Canon).

Ceilidh

A social gathering with music and dancing that is associated with Celtic folk music.

Choir

A musical ensemble of people who sing together. Different types of choirs include mixed choirs (usually SATB - soprano, alto, tenor and bass), male voice choirs, female choirs and a cappella ensembles.

Chord

The simultaneous sounding of two or more notes.

Chord symbols

Specific symbols used to represent chords on musical notation (eg C7).

Chorus

In Pop music, this is a repeated refrain in a verse-chorus structure. In Classical music, it refers to a large group of singers in a choral work or opera.

Chromatic

Chromatic notes do not belong to the key of the music (ie they are not in the key signature) and are usually evident in the melody and/or harmony parts.

Clave

A name of an instrument and the name of a rhythm (called ‘son clave’) used in Cuban popular music. The latter is a repeating two bar pattern, where the first bar has three accented beats and the second bar has two accented beats.

Compatible tracks

Tracks of music that work well together in DJing (eg harmony, key, tempo etc).

Compound time

A metre in which the main beat can be subdivided into three. The opposite is simple time.

Composing

Composing is the process of making or forming a piece of music by combining the parts, or elements of music. This could include notation, instrumentation, orchestration, musical

montage and sound production.

Composing log

Record of how a composition has been developed.

Composition to a brief

Composition produced in response to an AQA externally set brief.

Conjunct

A melody that moves by step.

Con sordino

Played with a mute on the instrument.

Contextual understanding

Making critical judgments about a piece of music by analysing, evaluating and comparing musical styles and genres in relation to the period in which it was written.

Contrapuntal

A musical style which involves intertwining two or more independent melodies, similar to polyphony.

Consonant

Notes that sound ‘pleasing’ when played together at the same time (eg 3rds and 6ths).

Continuo

Continuo, sometimes called ‘basso continuo’, is found in baroque music and is an accompanying part that includes a bassline and harmonies. The harmonies are typically played on a keyboard instrument (eg organ or harpsichord) and are supported by a bass instrument (eg cello, double bass, bassoon etc).

Conventions

Musical terms and concepts (eg melody, accompaniment, tonality).

Countermelody

A secondary melody that is sung or played in counterpoint with the original melody.

Cross rhythm

The effect produced when two or more conflicting rhythms are heard together (eg two eighth notes played against triplet eighth notes).

Cyclic

A type of structure in which a musical theme is heard, sometimes in a varied form, in more than one movement.

Delay

A time effect that postpones the sound from playing for a number of milliseconds.

Devices

A technique used for achieving a particular artistic effect. They can be wide ranging and include harmonic, rhythmic and melodic devices (eg ostinato, melisma, syncopation, pedal notes etc).

Diatonic

Refers to chords or notes which exist within a given key in Western music.

Diminution

A compositional device where the time values of the notes of a melody can be shortened, or the interval between two notes can be reduced (eg diminished 5th).

Direct Input (DI)

Sometimes called ‘direct input transformer’, this refers to recording or playing directly into a mixing desk or computer without the use of an amplifier.

Disjunct

A melody that moves in leaps using larger intervals than a 2nd.

Dissonant

Notes that sound harsh or unpleasant when played together at the same time (eg augmented 4th).

Distortion

Distortion and overdrive are sounds created to alter the sound of amplified electric musical instruments (eg electric guitars).

DJ

Using turntables to manipulate tracks and demonstrate an understanding and a range of techniques specific to DJing.

Dominant

A term used to describe the fifth note of any diatonic major or minor scale (eg G in C major) or the fifth triad, the chord built in thirds from the fifth note (eg G-B-D in C major).

Dominant 7th

A term used to describe a chord built on the fifth note of any major or minor diatonic scale and including the root, major third, perfect fifth, and minor seventh (eg G-B-D-F in C major). In roman numerals it is written as V7.

Double tracking

The process of recording two different performances of the same material to thicken a musical line.

Double and triple stopping

Two or three notes played together at the same time on a string instrument.

Drone

A harmonic effect or accompaniment where two notes are continuously sounded throughout most or all of a piece.

Dynamics

Used to describe the volume or changes in volume in a piece of music (eg such as loud (f) or soft (p), in a piece of music).

Echo

Echo is a type of reverb in which a sound is repeated.

Effects

Ways of changing the sound/length of notes (eg amplification, distortion, reverb, delay, echo and equalisation etc). Reverb and delay are the most common time-based effects in music production.

Enharmonic

Two notes which sound the same but are written differently (eg C# and Db).

Ensemble

A group performance of two or more musicians (including DJing).

Excerpt

Short extract from a piece of music.

Expression

Representing in music a feeling, idea or situation using, for example, dynamics, tonality, articulation.

EQ

EQ is short for equalisation. It is the lessening or boosting of different frequencies to add more bass or treble to a musical track.

Falsetto

Male singing in a high register, the same range as an alto or soprano voice.

Fusion

A fusion genre is music that combines two or more styles.

Free composition

Composition composed freely from a student's own idea.

Fugue

A contrapuntal composition in two or more voices. It is built on a theme that is introduced at the beginning and which is frequently used in imitation throughout the course of the composition.

Genre

A category that identifies some pieces of music as belonging to a shared tradition or set of conventions (eg jazz, hip hop, folk, rock, etc).

Glissando

A pitch sliding from one note to another, including all the chromatic notes in between. In music notation, a line between the two notes will be added.

Ground Bass

A short theme played in the bass which constantly repeats with changing harmonies.

Grove

Refers to a rhythm that deviates from the straight beat of the music (eg funk, rock, swing, fusion etc).

Guide recording

A recognised recording submitted in place of a score.

Hammer-on

A technique guitarists use where the finger is ‘hammered’ on a fretboard, causing a note to sound.

Harmony

A combination of simultaneous sounds including chords, accompaniment and counterpoint that can support a melody.

Hemiola

A musical figure in which two groups of three beats are replaced by three groups of two beats, giving the effect of a shift between triple and duple metre.

Heterophonic/heterophony

A musical texture in which two identical melodies are played simultaneously, but one is a decoration of the other.

Hook

A short melodic phrase used to catch the listener’s attention and make a song memorable (eg ‘Call Me Maybe’ by Carly Rae Jepsen).

Homophonic/homophony

A musical texture that is chordal.

Improvisation

The spontaneous and creative performance of musical ideas.

Imitation/imitative

A compositional device where a melody is played or sung and then repeated/copied in a different instrument/voice.

Instrumental

Music composed for or performed by instrumentalists.

Interpretation

The mood and style of music using musical elements and techniques eg phrasing, dynamics.

Interval

The distance between two notes sounded simultaneously together or one after another.

Intonation

The accuracy of pitch in playing or singing.

Intro

The introductory section before the main section, often used in pop music.

Inversion

The word inversion has different meanings.

- An inverted melody is a melody turned upside-down.
- An inverted chord is a chord which has a note other than its root note in the bass note.

Key

The scale on which the piece is based (eg G major).

Layering

A term referring to layers of sound within a piece of music and mostly used in association with texture (eg used in polyphony, melody and accompaniment etc).

Lead sheet

A detailed framework giving structure and musical substance from which a performance can be produced that meets the composer's intentions.

Listening/appraising

Ability to evaluate music heard demonstrating knowledge and understanding of musical elements, context and language.

Looping

Where a short musical idea or sample is repeated over and over again.

Melisma

A melody of several notes sung to one syllable of text.

Melody

A melody is a linear succession of musical notes that the listener hears as a single entity.

Melody and accompaniment

A musical texture in which the melody and accompaniment can be clearly distinguished (eg a pop song with a solo singer accompanied by a band, or the first violins in an orchestra playing the melody while the rest accompany).

Metre

The pattern of strong and weak beats in a piece of music which helps determine the time signature (eg 3/4 is three quarter notes in a bar).

Middle eight

The bridge section or middle section in song form, often 8 bars in length.

Minimalism

A musical style that is based on very simple repeated patterns and rhythms.

Mode/modal

Refers to the use of modes rather than the major or minor scale. Each mode has a different combination of tones and semitones.

Modulation

The move from one key to another (eg tonic to dominant).

Monophonic

A musical texture consisting of a single unaccompanied melodic line.

Musical chronology

The timelines used in the development of music (eg from baroque to classical to romantic).

Musical context

Writing about musical styles, composers and their works in relation to the audience, time and place.

Musical elements

Terms used in the composition of music (eg dynamics, rhythm, structure, tempo, melody, texture, tonality, timbre/sonority, instrumentation and harmony).

Musical language

Staff (stave) notation, chords symbols and musical terminology and vocabulary.

Music production

The use of technology (eg computers, effects units or software used to perform and compose music).

Music software

Computer programs for composition and production of music.

Mute

A device attached to a musical instrument which changes the instrument's tone quality (timbre) or lowers its volume (eg as found on brass and string instruments).

Notated score

Detailed performance information through musical notation (eg dynamics, tempo, and techniques where appropriate).

Notation

The method of writing down music (eg score and lead sheet).

Note addition

Where notes are added to a musical phrase (eg minimalism).

Off beats

The weaker beats of the bar. In 4/4 time, these are beats 2 and 4.

Oratorio

A large-scale musical composition based on a sacred or semi-sacred subject, for solo voices, chorus, and orchestra (eg Handel's Messiah).

Ornaments

The embellishment of a melody, either by adding notes or by modifying rhythms.

- Trill – two adjacent notes that are played rapidly one after the other.
- Appoggiatura – a note with a long or short duration that temporarily displaces, and subsequently resolves onto, a main note, usually by stepwise motion. It is sometimes called a 'leaning' note.

- Turn – a short decoration consisting of four notes: the note above the one indicated, the note itself, the note below the one indicated, and the note itself again.
- Acciaccatura – a note which is played as quickly as possible before the note that follows it. It is sometimes called a 'crushed' note.
- Mordent – formed by playing a note, the note above and then returning to the first note.

Ostinato

A short melodic, rhythmic or chordal phrase repeated continuously through a section of a work or the whole piece.

Outro

The closing section after the main part of the composition, often used in pop music.

Overdub

The process of adding additional tracks to a recording in music technology.

Palm muting

A guitar technique where the sound is muted by resting the palm of the picking hand across the strings near the bridge.

Panning

The process of placing a sound in the stereo field (eg in the left or right outputs).

Passing note

A note that connects two consonant pitches by stepwise motion and usually occurs on a weak beat.

Pedal Note

A single note (usually the tonic or dominant) that is normally sustained or repeated in the bass and sounds against changing harmonies in the other parts. An inverted pedal note is a sustained or repeated note in a high register.

Pentatonic

A musical scale consisting of five notes (eg C, D, E, G, A).

Performing

Performing is one or a combination of the following: playing music, singing music and/or realising music using music technology.

Phasing

A compositional technique in which the same part is played on two musical instruments, in a steady but not identical tempo.

Phrasing

Grouping consecutive melodic and/or rhythmic notes, both in composition and performance. This is often thought of as equivalent to a sentence of spoken words.

Pitch

The lowness or highness of a note, such as bass (low) and treble (high).

Pizzicato

An instruction for string players to pluck the string rather than using the bow.

Pitch bend

A musical effect that enables a player to bend the pitch of a note being sounded. It can be applied to bowed and electronic instruments and vocals.

Polyrhythm

A combination of two or more rhythms played simultaneously while moving at the same tempo.

Polyphonic/polyphony

A musical texture consisting of two or more simultaneous lines of independent melody.

Popular music

For the purpose of this specification, popular music is defined as mainstream music including a number of musical styles and genres including pop, jazz, musical theatre and computer gaming music from 1960 to present.

Portamento

A pitch sliding from one note to another (similar to glissando) which can be applied to bowed and electronic instruments and vocals. In music notation a line between the two notes will be added.

Power chord

A chord or combination of notes played by a guitar and selected to sound good at loud volume and high levels of distortion (eg rock music).

Pull-off

A technique guitarist's use on a fretted string that is already ringing. By lightly 'pulling' the string while removing the finger holding down the note, a new note can be played without re-picking the string. It is the opposite of a hammer-on.

Raga

A scale pattern or melodic motif used as the basis for melodic improvisation in Indian classical music.

Rap

Rhythmic spoken words.

Recitative

A type of vocal writing where the music follows the rhythm of speech. It is usually a short section for a solo voice and its purpose is to move the story along (eg oratorios and operas). Sung most often before an aria.

Requiem

A Requiem (also known as 'Mass for the Dead') is a sacred composition celebrated in the context of a funeral service or concert and is part of the Roman Catholic liturgy.

Relative major/minor

A pair of keys that share the same key signature, one major and one minor (eg g major and E minor).

Reverb

The persistence of sound after it has been produced, often used in recorded music. Echo is a type of reverb in which a sound is repeated.

Riff

A short, repeated musical pattern used in popular music (eg 'Day Tripper' by The Beatles).

Rim shot

A drumming technique where the player hits the drum head and the rim at the same time, to create an accented effect.

Rondo

A piece of music where the musical material stated at the beginning of the piece keeps returning. This opening music can be called either the theme or the refrain (eg ABACA).

Rhythm

The arrangement and accent of notes with different values.

Rubato

Rubato means 'robbed time'. It is the temporary abandonment of strict tempo and allows the performer to be more flexible with their pace.

SATB

SATB stands for soprano, alto, tenor, and bass and refers to the make-up of a choir.

Sampling

The process of lifting a section, such as a drum beat or vocal melody, from a song and including it in a new song.

Scale

A number of notes (usually eight) arranged in a specific order in a range of tones and semitones (eg major - t, t, s/t, t, t, t, s/t).

Scat

The singing of nonsense syllables instead of words (eg jazz and blues)

Score

Written music that shows instrumental/vocal parts.

- A full score includes all instrumental and vocal parts generally on separate staves.
- A vocal score can show voice parts with a simplified two-stave accompaniment, usually piano.

Scotch snap

A rhythmic pattern consisting of a short note followed by a long one.

Scratching

A term used in DJing where two decks are required. One deck plays a track whilst on the other, scratching rhythmic patterns are produced.

Sequence

The restatement of a melodic (or harmonic) passage at a higher or lower pitch.

Shuffle beat

A beat where straight quavers are relaxed into a more triplet feel, similar to a swing rhythm. (eg ‘Harlem Shuffle’ by The Rolling Stones).

Simple time

A metre in which each beat of the bar divides naturally into two (eg 2/4 4/4).

Sitar

A stringed instrument used in Indian music that has a long neck, a rounded body, and movable frets. It usually plays the raga/rag (ie the melody).

Skanking

An off-beat strumming pattern where the upbeat is more prominent than the down stroke. Commonly used in Reggae music.

Slap bass

A percussive style of bass guitar playing, which involves both pulling on and ‘slapping’ the strings.

Slide guitar or bottleneck

A guitar playing technique where a metal or glass tube on one finger is slid across the frets to create a glissando effect.

Solo

A composition written for, or performed by an instrumentalist or vocalist.

Sonata

A composition for one or more solo instruments, usually consisting of three or four independent movements varying in key, mood, and tempo.

Sonata Form

A structure consisting of three main sections: an exposition, a development, and a recapitulation (eg used in symphonies and sonatas etc).

Sonority (Timbre)

The sonority or timbre of an instrument or voice is the colour, character or quality of sound it produces.

Staff/stave notation

The set of five lines on which music is written.

Stereo separation

Distribution of sounds between two channels.

Structure

The overall layout or plan of a piece of music (eg binary, ternary, rondo, theme and variations, sonata, 12-bar blues etc).

Study piece

Specific musical pieces that enable students to critically appraise music in the Areas of study using musical elements, context and language.

Strophic

A musical form in which a verse or passage is repeated. A strophic song refers to music in which every verse or chorus is sung to the same music.

Style

The characteristic features of how music from a certain era, within some particular genre, or a composer/artist's individual style is played or expected to sound.

Swing

A rhythmic style where straight quavers are relaxed into a more triplet feel, sometimes referred to as 'swung'.

Symphony

A piece of music written to be played by an orchestra. Symphonies are usually made up of four separate sections called movements.

Syncopation

When the off-beats are given a greater degree of emphasis than the main beats in a bar (eg beats 2 and 4 in 4/4 time).

Tabla

A pair of small different-sized hand drums used in Indian music which play the tala/tal (ie the rhythm).

Tambura/Tanpura

A long-necked plucked string instrument used in Indian music that plays the drone.

Techniques

To compose/perform in order to achieve a particular musical effect/idea (eg pizzicato, rim shot, reverb).

Tempo

Tempo means the speed at which a piece of music is composed and played.

Ternary

The structure of a piece of music which is divided into three different sections. The three sections are usually labelled A B A.

Texture

How the melodic, rhythmic and harmonic materials are used to create the overall quality of the sound in a piece (eg melody and accompaniment, homophonic, polyphonic, antiphonal, a cappella, monophonic, unison etc).

Through-composed

An instrumental or vocal piece where the music changes as it progresses and is written without repetition, using different music for each section.

Tièrce de Picardie

A major chord used at the end of a piece of music in a minor key.

Timbre (sonority)

The sonority or timbre of an instrument or voice is the colour, character or quality of sound it produces.

Theme and variations

A form that tells you how the music is organised. The piece begins with a theme that is the main melody which is then followed by one or more variations of that melody.

Time signature

Generally placed at the beginning of music to show how many beats there are in a bar (eg 2/4 is two quarter notes in a bar).

Transpose/transposition

When notation is played by certain instruments the sound they produce will be different to what is written (eg horn in F reads C and sounds F).

Tonal ambiguity

Music that is largely tonal but not clearly in one specific key. Sometimes evident where the key note is established but the middle note of the tonic chord is omitted, thus making the major or minor tonality unclear.

Tonality

Tonality refers to the overall sound of a piece of music as defined by the key or mode it is played in (eg G major, E minor).

Tonic

A term used to describe the first note of any diatonic scale (major or minor) or the first triad, the chord built in thirds from the first note (eg C-E-G in C major).

Tradition/traditional

For the purpose of this specification traditional music is defined as music that takes influences from traditional sources including folk music and reinterprets them in a contemporary style, and traditional music from traditional sources and cultures that is performed as intended by the composer.

Tremolo

A very fast repetition of a single note to produce a shivering, shaking effect.

Triad

A chord of three pitches, the 1st, 3rd and 5th notes of the scale which can be major or minor.

Triplet

Triplets are three notes played in the time of two.

Tritone

An interval of three tones (eg C to F#).

Unison

Two or more musical parts that sound either the same pitch or pitches separated by intervals of one or more octaves.

Vamping

A repeating musical figure played as a repeated accompaniment during intros or solos (eg as in jazz, Latin jazz, musical theatre etc).

Vibrato

A musical effect consisting of a slight pulsating change of pitch. It is used to add expression to vocal and instrumental music.

Walking bass

A bassline composed of non-syncopated notes of equal value, often found in jazz and baroque music.

Whole tone

A whole tone scale is an arrangement of notes, each separated from the next by a whole-tone step. Whole tone harmonies are also derived from the notes of the scale.

Western classical tradition 1650–1910

For the purpose of this specification, the Western classical tradition is defined as art music of (or growing out of) the European tradition, normally notated, and normally intended for public performance.

Western classical tradition since 1910

For the purpose of this specification, Western classical tradition since 1910 is defined as music that comprises modern, contemporary classical music and electronic art music, experimental and minimalist music as well as other forms.

Specifications that use this resource:

- GCSE Music 8271