



Getting Ready for...

KS5 (A Level) Music

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Even within each of the various A Level exam boards there is a great deal of variation in the styles of music studied. Most courses offer optional modules so it would be worth checking with your school precisely which exam board and which parts of the course you will be studying to allow you to get a head start on any listening.

As with GCSE, regardless of exam board you will be assessed in three areas: performing, composing and listening.

The following activities are designed to give you an insight into the step up required from GCSE to A Level to help you prepare as best you can.

Composition

The type of work you'll undertake towards your composition coursework will be broadly similar to the work you completed for GCSE. However, at A Level, the expectation is that you expand your horizons and begin to write music of greater depth and complexity.

1. “I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore”

At GCSE, it's likely that the majority of the harmony you will have used will have been based on triad chords, perhaps with the odd dominant 7th chord. With the move to A Level, it can be really useful to start to experiment with extended harmony (i.e. chords involving notes beyond the triad - 7th, 9th, 11th, 13ths.)

- Either at your instrument or using music production software, take a triad-based chord sequence you're familiar with and experiment with adding additional notes to the chords.
- Make notes on the effects of the different notes. Some will simply add 'colour' to the progression, some will completely change the character of the chords.

2. When it comes to the crunch...

As with the use of extended harmony, one of the ways you can show development from GCSE in your composing is to experiment more with dissonance in your melody.

- Find a short piece of music and work out the chords used within it.
- Once you've figured out the chords, circle any of the notes in the melody which don't 'fit' with the harmony.
- Listen to (or, if possible, play) the piece paying particular attention to the circled notes. Why do they work? (Or do they?)
- If you want to push yourself further, try to see if you can find a definition for each of the types of dissonance you've found.



3. Living large(r)

While writing for a small chamber ensemble would suffice for GCSE, it is often a good idea to look into larger ensembles when composing for A Level.

- Investigate larger ensembles [8+ musicians] across a range of musical styles. What instruments are used? What are their roles in the ensemble? Are there specific pitch ranges you need to bear in mind?
- Listen to pieces written for each of the types of ensembles you find. Is there anything you could draw on in your own work?

Performance

As with composition, performance at A Level follows a very similar format to GCSE. Clearly you will be performing on your instrument, but you should expect to be performing more pieces and to a higher standard. Regardless of your instruments, it is imperative that you maintain and build on the practice regime you had for GCSE in order to make the required progress for A Level.

1. Like a broken record

Everyone hates hearing a recording of their speaking voice and it's often the same for musicians. However, as painful as it can be, any effective practicing on an instrument should include recording and reviewing yourself. You don't need to have an expensive recording set-up, a phone voice memo is usually more than enough.

- Try to get into the habit of recording yourself regularly and taking time to go over the recordings. Listen closely to any sections you struggle with and make notes of things to work on in your next practice session.

2. An eye for details

Clearly you need to be able to perform on your instrument with the right notes in the right places. However, the thing that will separate performances which achieve middle band marks and those higher up is the small details. Where you place your breathing, holding notes for their full length, using the correct fingering to allow you to move around your instrument fluidly - each instrument will present its own set of challenges.

- The best way to prepare for these (aside from recording and reviewing your practice) is dedicating serious time to the technical exercises specific to your instrument. Many students manage to get away without this technical precision at GCSE, but it is far trickier at A Level.
- Scales, arpeggios, rudiments, breathing exercises - without them you may be able to complete some pieces to a decent standard at the moment, but your



Year 13 self will thank you if you dedicate regular practice time to them now.

3. Get with the program

Hopefully preparing your GCSE music performance program has taught you that it is always better to play a simpler piece really well than a more complex piece poorly.

It is also worth remembering that performance pieces do not necessarily need to be drawn from a graded syllabus to qualify as the acceptable standard.

- The very beginning of the course is a little early to have your performance program completely planned out, but now would be a good time to start talking to your music teacher about pieces they might recommend you work towards. Are there any specific techniques they feel you should work on?
- If you are self-taught, it is worth looking at the mammoth [Edexcel Difficulty Levels Booklet](#) (regardless of which exam board you will be working towards). This huge document provides examples of pieces for a wide range of instruments which have been graded for difficulty. This will give you a good selection of pieces you could try out to give you an idea of the standard you need to be working towards.

Listening

The A Level listening exam is a very different beast to the GCSE paper. While on the face of it they are very similar, the level of analysis expected at A Level far outweighs that seen at GCSE.

In terms of content covered, the listening section sees the greatest variation between the exam boards of all the three elements of study. As such, the following broad activities are designed as a springboard into more focused investigation of the specific music you'll be studying.

1. The devil is in the details

- Speak to your teacher/course leader to find out about artists and styles you will be covering and complete some detailed research into their lives and musical backgrounds.
- Try to listen to several pieces from each artist and/or each style and plot the pieces onto a musical timeline. How has their music changed over time?



2. Spreading your wings

- Having spoken to your teacher/course leader, identify areas you will be studying which you have less experience in.
- Research standard instrumental groupings from each and listen to examples, ensuring you are able to identify the differences between common instruments.

3. DR SMITH

Most A Level syllabi have a greater focus on extended writing than GCSE and this is often a skill which requires development early in Year 12.

Think about a piece of music you know really well, perhaps a piece you studied for GCSE, and write an analysis of its key points. Aim for a short paragraph on each musical element in DR SMITH:

- Dynamics
- Rhythm
- Structure
- Melody
- Instrumentation
- Texture
- Harmony

You will probably be familiar with the PEE paragraph structure for writing (Point, Evidence, Explain) from GCSE English. This is a good starting point for writing at A Level Music though you will need to work towards writing in greater depth as you move through the course.

