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by Simon Rushby

## INTRODUCTION

This is the third of three resources designed to help students revise effectively and positively for this summer's written music exams. The first (*Music Teacher*, March 2019) was a general resource, filled with tips about making revision effective, productive and – most importantly – positive and stress-free. The second resource (April 2019) was aimed at GCSE students but contained plenty of information that would also be relevant and helpful to those preparing for AS or A level exams this summer.

In this resource we look specifically at how students doing AS or A level music exams this summer can prepare with confidence. Key to this will be two important facets of effective revision:

1. **Activity:** keeping the passive revision (reading and re-reading) to an absolute minimum.
2. **Positivity:** ensuring that every revision session leaves the student with a sense of continuing progress.

### What have we covered already?

Here's a concise summary of some of the key facts from the last two resources, which we need to keep in mind as we go through this resource. If you have time, it would definitely help to read these previous resources as well.

The first resource dealt with ensuring that revision is effective and manageable, so that students are motivated to do it and feel that it is time well spent. Among others, the key points made were:

- The word 'revision' means 're-visualising', so it's important to make it a **new process**, where students look at things in a new way.
- Revision needs to be **started early, tailored** to each student's learning style, done in a positive, **distraction-free** environment, and **organised** with a timetable.
- The majority of revision time needs to be spent honing **skills and application** through doing practice questions and understanding how best to use knowledge to gain marks in the paper.
- The biggest target in revision is always to feel that **progress** is being made. Sessions should be short but **focused** and steps must be taken to manage distractions, particularly from phones, tablets and computers.
- Students need to develop their **metacognition** – their understanding of how they think and, in turn, learn most effectively.
- Students should aim to work '**smart**' rather than 'hard', and avoid spending too much time on areas that they are already quite proficient in.
- A really good revision timetable needs to have **spacing, variety, scaffolding and testing** built into it.

In the second resource, aimed primarily at GCSE students, there were some topics that apply equally to those doing A level. These included the following suggestions:

- Ensure that a **timetable of practice** listening questions and extended answer questions (in class) is agreed with the students so that they can focus their revision time on preparing for these.
- Get students to **work together**, marking questions and giving each other **feedback**, and developing ways to analyse their own strengths and areas for further work.
- Revision needs to be active and have **purpose**. Students should make sure that every period of revision ends with an activity that helps them to **consolidate and apply** the work they have been doing. These activities can include writing a summary from memory, being quizzed by a friend or family member, doing and marking a practice question and drawing up a table of similarities and differences for an unfamiliar piece.
- **Managing time** and staying focused and 'in flow' are key to effective, positive revision. Students can consider trying the **Pomodoro technique**, thinking about their revision '**sounds**' (music, rain sounds, white noise, etc), making their **environment** conducive to good work (but not distracting), and working on their **mindfulness** and **well-being**.

- A section of the GCSE resource dealt with **command words** and **assessment objectives**. It provides tips on how to secure better marks in short and extended-answer responses. We will do some specific work on this later in this resource but if students have time it would be helpful to read through last month's ideas and suggestions.

As students approach the summer AS and A level music exams, they will be searching for ways to practise listening skills, analytical skills and essay-writing skills while coming to terms with the sheer volume of content that the specifications expect them to have in their memories.

In this resource, we'll look at practical ways to overcome the barriers and doubts about being able to walk into the exam feeling fully prepared, by developing **strategies** for the key types of questions that tend to be asked, whichever board students are doing. Specifically, we'll focus on:

- Preparing for elements-based **short-answer questions** on familiar and unfamiliar music.
- Constructing effective **extended-answer questions**.
- Developing a **wider contextual knowledge** that will help with understanding of unfamiliar music.
- Honing **listening skills** such as dictation and recognising keys, chords and cadences.
- **Listening proactively** rather than reactively.
- Developing **skills** that reduce the pressure to 'learn' set work content by learning how to appraise music 'on the fly'.

## SHORT-ANSWER LISTENING QUESTIONS

It's easy to fall into the trap of under-preparing for those short-answer listening questions that ask you to focus on certain elements. A trawl through the AS and A level sample and past papers (available from the exam boards' websites) shows that a good knowledge of the **elements** and characteristics associated with each one is essential for doing well in these questions.

Here are some examples:

### One-mark questions

- 'What is the **texture** formed by the two plucked string instruments at the start of this excerpt?' (AQA AS)
- 'Give the term that best describes the **bass part** heard in the introduction.' (AQA A level)
- 'Name the **harmonic device** in bars 23 to 26.' (Edexcel A level)
- 'Identify the overall **tonality** of the music.' (Eduqas A level)
- 'Name a feature of the **rhythm** in bars 15 and 16.' (Edexcel A level)

### Two-, three- or four-mark questions

- 'Describe the **texture** in bars 21 to 27.' (Edexcel AS – two marks)
- 'Describe the **texture** in the passage from bar 91 to 97.' (OCR A level – two marks)
- 'Describe two differences in **tempo** and **metre** between sections 1 and 2 of the excerpt.' (AQA A level – two marks)
- 'Describe the features of the main **melody** and the way that it is introduced.' (Edqas A level – three marks)
- 'Explain the use of **texture**, **rhythm** and **metre** in bars 9 to 16.' (Edexcel A level – three marks)
- 'Describe the **phrase structure** of this excerpt.' (Edexcel A level – four marks)
- 'Explain how **melody** and **harmony** are used to evoke the atmosphere of the text.' (Edexcel A level – four marks)

Clearly it's important to be able to make **quick links** between the elements mentioned in the questions, and the features to hunt for in the music. Sometimes, as in the last example, links have to be made to the **effect** on the listener or the atmosphere or mood of the music.

An important part of revision is to learn how to find these **key features** in any music, familiar or unfamiliar. You can prepare for this by learning a set of questions that help you to look for the right things for each element. Marks are often lost because correct features are identified but the element in the question is not sufficiently understood. Though the list below is by no means exhaustive, it could be very useful.

**If the question is about melody:**

- Is it conjunct or disjunct? Does it rise or fall?
- Is it phrased regularly or irregularly? How are the phrases structured? Are any repeated?
- Is it treated in sequence, repeated a lot, developed in a cellular way?
- Is it characterised by any particular intervals?
- Is it varied in some way – maybe by pitch/register?
- Is there more than one melody – maybe a countermelody?

If the question is about harmony:

- Is the harmony diatonic (remains in the key) or chromatic (uses notes outside the key)?
- Does the harmony use mainly primary chords? Is it functional – with lots of cadences?
- Are different harmonic progressions used when passages are repeated?
- Is the harmonic rhythm quick or slow? Does it change – for example as it approaches a cadence?
- Is there any use of suspensions or harmonic sequences? Any cycles of 5ths?
- Are there any pedal notes? Are they in the bass or inverted? Are they tonic or dominant pedals?

If the question is about tonality:

- Are there modulations? How do they affect the music? Are they to related keys?
- Is it major, minor, modal, chromatic or atonal? Does it change?
- Are dissonant passages bitonal or atonal, or just brief chromatic passages intended to colour the music?

**If the question is about rhythm and/or metre:**

- What is the metre? Is it simple or compound?
- What is the tempo? Does it change?
- Is there use of dotted rhythms, double dots, scotch snaps (reverse dots), triplets or other notable types of rhythm?
- Are there regular or irregular rhythms/metres?
- Does rhythm play an important part in the melody or accompaniment?
- Does the composer make use of ostinato?
- Is there syncopation or other sorts of rhythmic interest/devices?
- Is there any use of polyrhythm or cross rhythms?

If the question is about texture:

- What use is made of homophonic, polyphonic, monophonic or heterophonic textures? Is it melody-dominated? Is there antiphony?
- How many parts are there (particularly if it is polyphonic)?
- How is the texture varied or contrasted?
- Is texture increased or decreased to provide impact?
- Is there much imitation or use of countermelody?

If the question is about instrumentation/sonority:

- Are instruments treated individually or as groups? Is one orchestral section particularly prominent?
- If there is only one instrument or a small number, how are they used? Is there variety – for example in register, playing style, articulation etc?
- Are melodic ideas shared around instruments or associated with one instrument?
- How can you describe the tessitura?
- Is there any special combinations of instruments – colouristic effects? Any unusual instruments?
- If there is percussion or voices, how are they used?

- Is there any interesting use of dynamics or terraced dynamics?
- Are there any specific playing instructions – pizzicato, tremolo, flutter-tongue, mutes, etc?

If the question is about structure:

- If the extract is long enough to ascertain it, what is the structure?
- Is there much use of repetition or some kind of refrain/repeating section?
- What devices are used to increase or decrease tension?
- Is the piece programmatic or through-composed?
- If there is repetition, how are the repeats varied?

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## CONSTRUCTING EFFECTIVE EXTENDED-ANSWER QUESTIONS

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Here are some examples of questions demanding longer answers, found in sample or recent past papers. Some can be found among the listening questions and others require essay-style answers.

- ‘Outline any interesting or unusual features in this movement’s **structure**, referring to **tonality** where appropriate.’ (Eduqas A level – five marks)
- ‘Describe the **structure** and **harmony** in this song.’ (OCR A level – six marks)
- ‘The music has a **calm and lyrical** character. Describe the **musical elements** that help to create this character.’ (AQA AS – ten marks)
- ‘Discuss how the composer used **musical elements and language** to depict scenes from the life of a **heroic** character.’ (Edexcel A level – 20 marks)
- ‘Choose pieces by two named artists that you have studied and explain their contrasting approaches to **rhythm, tempo** and **metre**.’ (AQA A level – 30 marks)
- ‘Discuss how at least two composers... used **harmony** and **tonality** to illustrate the **text** in religious works.’ (OCR A level – 25 marks)
- ‘Discuss the use of **melody, harmony** and **texture** in [this music]. Relate your discussion to other relevant works. These may include other set works, wider listening or other music.’ (Edexcel A level – 30 marks)

As the number of marks available increases, so does the necessity to make links between the music featured in the question and other music, by focusing on the effect that the music is creating drama, tension, atmosphere or mood. There’s a greater emphasis placed on being able not only to find features in the music – whether it is familiar or unfamiliar – but also to explain how these impact on the listener and show understanding of how this has worked in other contexts.

Students need to be fully aware of the two Assessment objectives – AO3 and AO4 – that are set by the exam boards’ regulator and apply, often equally, to longer-answer appraising questions.

**AO3** is the simpler of the two, as it looks for students’ ability to ‘demonstrate and apply musical knowledge’ in their answers. It therefore covers all the vocabulary and understanding that go with the actual music being written about. It is about knowing how the music is constructed and how it works – if you like, the mechanics of the music.

**AO4** is, it seems, where marks are more likely to be missed in extended answer questions. It requires students to ‘use appraising skills to make evaluative and critical judgements about music’. Put simply, students have to show that they can see music in its context and understand and explain how it affects us. Sometimes only half of the marks are available if a student merely identifies the musical features in their answer. To score well in AO4, they need to explain the *effect* of each feature they have identified, in relation to the question, and make a *link* to another piece of music which works in a similar way.

As an example, let’s imagine that a student is writing an extended answer about a piece of orchestral music from the Romantic period, and putting together a couple of paragraphs about melody. They write:

‘**The melody is chromatic**’.

This happens to be true, and in terms of AO3 the student has successfully identified a relevant feature of the melody (underlined). But there is so much more needed to make this statement full, in the context of the

answer. First of all, they need to **evidence** their point, by saying exactly where in the music they are talking about. Bar numbers are good but not always possible if there isn't a score provided in the exam, so other ways of evidencing the point have to be found:

**'The opening melody is chromatic.'**

Or even better:

**'The opening flute melody is chromatic.'**

Now the student needs to show how the feature links to the **context**, and this will largely depend on the question. For example..

**'The opening flute melody is chromatic, a typical feature of late Romantic melodic writing.'**

This would be great if the question was asking about how the music is typical of its time or style. If the question is more about the effect or dramatic impact of the music, maybe this:

**'The opening flute melody is chromatic, which creates an unsettled mood and increases the tension for the listener.'**

Now the student is much better focused on those elusive AO4 marks, and the final missing part is to link this to other music that the student has studied, either set works or through the all-important wider listening:

**'The opening flute melody is chromatic, which creates an unsettled mood and increases the tension. Film composers such as Bernard Herrmann in *Psycho* also use this tension-building technique.'**

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## DEVELOPING WIDER CONTEXTUAL KNOWLEDGE AND APPROACHING UNFAMILIAR MUSIC

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As part of the revision process, a useful 'bank' of contextual and wider-listening knowledge needs to be built up so that students can quickly think of relevant music to link to when they are writing their answers. This is a tricky skill, and no short-term cramming session will help – the development of a wide mental library of music needs to take place over time.

The following tips may help:

- **Go on 'listening journeys'**. Using YouTube or Spotify, students can take themselves on a related listening journey quite easily. Starting with, say, a set work, they can look at the streaming site's suggestions of related music and work through more pieces in the same genre or with similar features. For example, in YouTube a search for Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* leads on to Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty*, then Debussy's First Arabesque and finally a Chopin nocturne. In four steps this improves knowledge of ballet music, the Romantic style, the use of the orchestra or the piano for colour, and the way in which music can be used to evoke an atmosphere.
- **Keep a listening diary and swap suggestions for daily listening**. Some music departments use their Twitter feeds to suggest a daily piece of music for students to discover. Students can easily do this themselves by pairing up or working in groups and sharing suggestions for targeted listening, which can be logged (in a brief way) in a listening diary. This diary can then become a useful revision resource by reminding students of wider listening done earlier in the course. Brief notes on features heard, linked to their effect, can be very useful too.
- **Listen analytically and try to make links**. For every new piece of music, encourage students to identify aurally a handful of features that they can use to link the music to set works. Dip into radio stations or TV channels (such as BBC4 or Sky Arts) that play a wide variety of music. Play new music on your instrument (great for sightreading!) and listen to each other play or talk about music you have recently heard.

In the exam, when faced with unfamiliar music, students can often forget to go back to what they **already know**. Here is a useful list of strategies to help to break down an unfamiliar piece when under pressure of time:

- Go back to the **elements**. Use the questions earlier in this resource to find a number of relevant features – perhaps in the melody, rhythm or instrumentation to start with.
- Constantly **link** every point to the question.
- Repeatedly **refer to the piece of unfamiliar music** to justify the points made. Make the answer factual about the music rather than trying to pull ideas out of thin air.
- Refer to **other relevant music** as much as possible, especially if this is mentioned in the question.
- Use **musical vocabulary** – ‘ostinato’ instead of ‘repeating pattern’, or ‘dissonant’ instead of ‘clashing’.
- Get into the composer’s shoes – think about the composer’s **intentions** when writing the music.
- Use **descriptive language** when linking features to the effect they have on the music.

## REVISING FOR LISTENING QUESTIONS

The listening part of the exam, particularly the parts of it that focus on the ‘aural’ skills such as melodic dictation or identifying keys and chords, tends to cause a lot of anxiety among students. There is a misunderstanding, perhaps, that little preparation work can be done, and that aural skills will be tested ‘on the fly’ under the pressure of the exam itself.

Actually, there are a number of ways in which students can prepare thoroughly and effectively for questions that ask them to respond to music played to them in the exam – whether this music is familiar or unfamiliar. Broadly speaking, these can be broken down into five **keys to listening success**:

- Knowing how to **focus** your listening on the right things, shutting out the rest.
- Being **proactive** and positive when listening.
- Ensuring you have the right **knowledge** to access the answers.
- Ensuring you use the right **strategies** to get to the answers.
- **Applying** your strategies and knowledge in the right way when under exam pressure.

Above all, the best way to prepare for the listening part of the exam is to **practise**, so that all the skills and strategies are second nature when it comes to the big day. Let’s look at each of these keys to listening success in a little more detail.

### Focusing the listening

Listening tests vary from board to board, and while some allow unlimited, self-controlled repeats of the music for each question, others might give you a set number of playings. The important thing is to get to the answers on as few repetitions as possible, so that time isn’t wasted in the exam.

Every time the music is played, the most successful students will know **in advance** what they are listening for. They need to avoid distractions – by example by writing too much while the music is playing or by letting their mind focus on another part of the music – and concentrate on a **pre-determined plan** for each play-through of the music. If they have control over the playback, make a note of important timings so that appropriate portions of the music can be accessed quickly. They need to trust that they will remember answers, and write them down when they are not actively listening.

### Being proactive and positive

Listening questions must be approached in a proactive, not a reactive, way. Students need to work out as much as they can **before** they hear the music, making **educated guesses** as to what the answer is most likely to be. For example, if a cadence comes just before a double barline or a repeat mark, there could be an increased chance that the cadence is perfect. Knowing this in advance helps to confirm (or otherwise) when the student listens to it.

Being reactive in listening makes it more difficult. Hearing the music first, and then trying to match what you hear to the questions in front of you can be frustratingly hard. If the music comes with a skeleton or single-line score, doing some pre-listening **detective work** could be really helpful. Students could try asking themselves a series of questions such as:

- What key is the music in? What are the related keys to this key? If I'm being asked to identify a modulation, what is the most likely answer? Does the harmony help me identify the tonality, perhaps with cadences (ie functional harmony)?
- What are the things to look for when analysing a certain element? If I'm being asked to describe an element, how many marks is the question worth? What are the key things I could say?
- Is there any clear structure obvious in the score? Any halfway point or repetition? Does the tonality help me identify a structure (ie functional tonality)?
- If I'm being asked to complete a portion of melody, what is in the score to help me? Is there any conjunct melodic movement? Any sequences? Any repetition from other bars?
- Are there any obvious similarities or differences in melody, rhythm or texture? Any clues in the use of instruments or sonorities?

### Strategies and knowledge

When revising and preparing for a listening test, strategies and knowledge are the two important things to focus on.

**Strategies** – the 'how will I do it?' part – will depend on what each student finds easy and hard. How will they make the hard things easier? These strategies will develop through practice of the right skills. Some students might find that making marks on the skeleton score will help, for example.

**Knowledge** is the specific information that will help students make those educated guesses we referred to earlier. Knowing the cadences, the cycle of 5ths, details of instruments and voices, stylistic features of musical periods and genres, and learning the questions set out earlier in this article for each of the elements, will help hugely.

**Applying strategies and knowledge** effectively is the key to doing well in listening tests, and again, this improves through practice. Let's take a moment to look at some types of listening questions and think through the ideal approaches to them. No similarity to any one board is intended, though inevitably some types of questions may be more relevant to one board than another.

#### COMPLETE THE MISSING MELODY IN BARS 7 AND 8.

The dictation type of question is common and often feared. Strategies to help make sense of it could include:

- Identifying the **key** in bars 7-8 and writing out the scale and chords I, IV and V in that key.
- Working forwards from the last 'given' note in the score, and backwards from the first 'given' note after the missing melody. Often there will be **conjunct** movement.
- Listening out for a **sequence, arpeggio, cadence** or other musical device that will help work out some of the notes.
- Listening for **repetition** – either of a pattern of notes within the missing section (such as a sequence) or of a figure or phrase from elsewhere in the extract.
- Trying to spot **chromatic** notes – inevitably there will be one or two that do not belong to the scale or key. Do they sound like 'sharpenings' or 'flattenings'? Are they moving the music to another key (such as the dominant or relative minor) or are they chromatic passing notes – creating semitone movement?
- Trying to spot **notable rhythms** – triplets, dotted notes, reverse dotted figures, syncopations.

#### IDENTIFY THE CHORDS/CADENCE/KEY IN BAR 16.

Using knowledge is essential here. If chords are to be identified, what are the common chord progressions associated with this style of music, or most likely to be found in this part of the music? Often the chords to be identified will form part of a cadence – perhaps a **Ic – V – I** pattern. Or it might be a progression that has been heard and is partly notated elsewhere – maybe in a pop, blues or musical theatre example it is a recognised progression like **I – VI – II – V (or C – Am – Dm – G)**.

Cadences depend very much on their **place** in the music – imperfect cadences at midpoints in phrases, interrupted cadences for sudden 'surprise' effects, plagal cadences for 'serious' phrase endings, perfect cadences might underline key changes.

Identification of modulations needs thorough knowledge of the workings of the **cycle of 5ths**. Think of how the modulation **sounds**. Is it sounding sharper or brighter? Then it could be moving towards the dominant or further

along the 'sharper' (clockwise) side of the circle. Is it sounding flatter or darker? Maybe it is moving towards the subdominant or 'flatter' (anticlockwise) side of the circle. If the modulation is more jarring it could be to a more distant key, in which case listening for intervallic leaps in the bassline can be useful. Knowledge from the set works of types of modulations that are associated with styles – such as **pivot notes** in Romantic music, **rises of a tone** in pop music or **tertiary modulations** in film music – can be very helpful.

#### **COMMENT ON THE USE OF RHYTHM IN BARS 4-5.**

There is plenty written on this kind of question earlier in the resource. The important thing is to look at how many marks are available, stick to features that are relevant to the element or elements mentioned in the question, and use musical vocabulary. 'It is syncopated' will get you one mark, but if two are available a better answer might be 'It is syncopated and there are triplets'.

#### **COMPARE/CONTRAST BARS 9-10 WITH BARS 14-15.**

'Compare and contrast' means you can state **similarities or differences**, so take an elements-based approach to this question. Again, look at the number of marks available, and remember that 'bars 9-10 have conjunct melodic movement while 14-15 are disjunct' might only get you one mark if there is more to be said.

#### **COMMENT ON THE USE OF INSTRUMENTS/SONORITIES IN THIS EXTRACT.**

It's very often not enough simply to list instruments or types of voices that can be heard. Is there anything to be said about the way in which sonorities are used – such as pizzicato cellos, staccato flutes or only female voices?