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ARTICLE

# Forty years of the General Certificate of Secondary Education: analysing the role of the performing–composing–appraising examination structure in secondary music education in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland

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**Abstract**
The introduction of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in 1986 marked a significant shift in music education practice across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Unlike previous qualifications, the GCSE emphasised a central triumvirate of accessible, practical skills – performing, composing, and appraising – which, forty years later, remain foundational in secondary music education across the three nations. In this article, we therefore analyse how the tripartite performing–composing–appraising structure has shaped the development of the GCSE between 1986 and 2026. Using historical and documentary evidence, we identify four trends of political quiescence, progressive divergence, neoliberal convergence, and neoconservative coalescence, and suggest that across all three nations a subtle shift towards a fourfold performing–composing–*knowing*–appraising framework is beginning to erode the GCSE as an accessible, practical approach to assessment.

**Keywords:** assessment; neoconservatism; neoliberalism; policy; progressivism

## Introduction

The introduction of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in 1986 marked a significant shift in music education policy and practice across the three nations of England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.[1] Following years of regional disparity and variable quality in the provision of secondary music education for pupils up to the age of sixteen, the GCSE in music aimed to regulate the examinations and qualifications available across different schools, improve the inclusivity and accessibility of the course for pupils from diverse backgrounds, and emphasise the interrelated practical skills of performing, composing, and appraising as central to music education (Pitts, 2000; Wright, 2002; Rainbow & Cox, 2006; Finney, 2011). In doing so, it emphasised a tripartite curriculum structure of performing–composing–appraising as foundational to music education at all ages and stages.

Forty years later, music education policy and practice across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland illustrate the lasting influence of the development of the GCSE. Statutory and non-statutory guidance such as England's National Curriculum (DfE, 2014) and Model Music Curriculum (DfE, 2021); the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2020) and Welsh

National Plan for Music Education (Welsh Government, 2022); and the Northern Ireland Curriculum (CCEA, 2007) demonstrate various iterations of the performing–composing–appraising triumvirate, sometimes divided into two areas (e.g., 'making music' and 'responding to music' (CCEA, 2007, p. 38)) or four areas (e.g., 'singing, listening, composing, performing' (DfE, 2021, p. 5)), but usually with the intention of preparing pupils for examination in the three skill sets assessed at GCSE. For example,

> the [Model Music Curriculum (DfE, 2021)] provides a blueprint for progression through primary and secondary towards GCSE and other qualifications. In line with the national curriculum's aims, it outlines a sequence of learning across singing, listening, composing, and performing/instrumental performance. (DfE & DCMS, 2022, p. 23)

However, since its earliest introduction, the threefold structure of the GCSE has prompted ongoing debate about the nature and assessment of propositional, practical, and personal musical knowledge. Given its characteristic diversity and sociocultural specificity, musical knowledge has been widely conceptualised and contested. Drawing on the foundational work of Swanwick (1979), many typologies identify at least three categories of musical knowledge (Fautley, 2021; Philpott, 2026). The first, *knowledge about*, comprises abstract, factual knowledge about music – such as its composer, genre, and form. The second, *knowledge how*, involves practical and procedural knowledge, such as the technical know-how required to play an instrument or the perceptual know-how to distinguish musical features by ear. The third, *knowledge of*, constitutes the intuitive knowledge of acquaintance: knowing music like knowing a person, building a meaningful relationship with it without necessarily possessing any formal knowledge about it or knowledge of how it works.

Debate around the integration of *knowledge about*, *knowledge how*, and *knowledge of* within the GCSE's development has been significant in shaping the performing–composing–appraising triumvirate throughout subsequent decades of music education. Yet, as Pitts (2000) has noted,

> that an educational debate was active at the time of GCSE's inception is important, as the opportunities for public discussion of new ideas were becoming rarer, and the futility of doing so was to become increasingly apparent as new legislation proceeded with little genuine recognition of professional opinion. (p. 147)

It is our contention that this trend – away from meaningful, critical, and dialogic constructions of musical knowledge and towards narrow, predetermined prescriptions – has continued throughout the forty years since the development of the GCSE, thereby endorsing some ways of musical knowing while delegitimising others. Within this article, we therefore seek to examine the implicit and explicit impact of the GCSE upon political, professional, and practical conceptualisations of secondary music education in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland over the past four decades.

## Historical overview

The emergence of the GCSE around 1986 stemmed primarily from the merger of two previous qualifications used in schools in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland: the General Certificate of Education (GCE) and the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE). The GCE was introduced in 1951 with 'Ordinary' (O-level) and 'Advanced' (A-level) curricula and examined pupils in the three 'measurable' areas of music theory, aural skills, and historical knowledge. However, as a solely 'paper' rather than 'practical' assessment (Pitts, 2000, p. 131), the GCE favoured pupils who attended academically selective (grammar) schools, so in 1965 the CSE was introduced as an alternative pathway for pupils at non-selective, comprehensive schools. The CSE prioritised teachers' roles in designing and examining curriculum content and aimed to offer a balanced programme of

non-practical (theory and history), practical (playing and singing), and listening (aural and appreciation) skills (p. 137). Compared to the GCE, the CSE, therefore, situated practical music-making at the heart of the curriculum; but in doing so, it reinforced perceptions of an 'élitist and divisive' hierarchy between higher- and lower-status examination options (Wright, 2002, p. 227).

Disparities between the GCE and the CSE in music highlighted a growing need for reformation of the assessment system: first, to standardise qualifications across regions; second, to make them more equitable for pupils from all backgrounds; and third, to offer a more musical mode of examination. Thus was born the GCSE. Introduced in 1986 and first examined in 1988, the reformed GCSE in music sought to encapsulate aspects of best practice from the GCE and the CSE through emphasising 'the central importance of performing, composing and listening' (DES, 1985, p. 16). Drawing upon Swanwick's (1979) *A Basis for Music Education*, which reiterated the primary role of composition, audition, and performance and the accompanying role of literature studies and skill acquisition (p. 45), in the GCSE, 'the idea that there are three essential, integrated musical experiences [ . . . ] was given official credence' (Pitts, 2000, p. 141). By 'requir[ing] pupils to demonstrate both their capacity for personal expression and ability with technical skills' (Lamont & Maton, 2008, p. 274), this tripartite structure had the potential to become 'a radically different examination [ . . . ] recognizing the interests of pupils and encompassing "all kinds of music"' (Finney, 2011, p. 87).

However, while many welcomed the ways in which the GCSE reflected some of the progressive, child-centred trends that had characterised music education during the 1970s (e.g., Paynter & Aston, 1970; Vulliamy & Lee, 1976; Swanwick, 1979), the course was not without critics. Some on the political right argued that assessment should remain concerned with theoretical appraisal and aesthetic discrimination and that an emphasis on practical and diverse music-making would be at the expense of the appreciation of canonic western masterpieces (Fautley, 2021, p. 284). While such criticism had limited impact on the GCSE itself, it did gain traction in the growing regulation of schooling prior to the GCSE. In England, the establishment of the National Curriculum (DES, 1992) bore some resemblance to the GCSE's tripartite performing–composing–appraising structure in its two attainment targets: performing and composing, and listening and appraising. Yet rather than recognise the complementarity of *knowing about*, *knowing how*, and *knowing of* within this formulation, the National Curriculum implied that the 'skills' of performing and composing could not be acquired and developed without an attendant degree of knowledge and understanding of concepts related to music (Finney, 2011, p. 88).

The complex relationship between the practical performing–composing–appraising framework that was perceived to be so progressive in the GCSE of 1986 and the more conservative emphasis upon propositional knowledge expressed in the National Curriculum of 1992 has had a pervasive impact upon music education across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Recently, this is perhaps most evident in the extension of GCSE assessment objectives from the threefold performing–composing–appraising to the fourfold performing–composing–*knowing*–appraising, phased in across all three nations for first teaching between 2016 and 2017. This development – alongside concomitant changes in subject specification content – begins to illustrate the evolving role of the GCSE in shaping the accessibility and equity of music education.

### Research question

In order to assess the past and present impact of the GCSE qualification across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, in this article, we focus specifically upon the influence of the performing–composing–appraising model upon conceptualisations of secondary music education and examination at age sixteen. We ask: *how has the tripartite understanding of music education as performing–composing–appraising influenced the development of the GCSE between 1986 and 2026?*

Rather than engage solely in thematic coding or content analysis (cf. Schreier, 2014; Saldaña, 2025), we instead seek to understand the cultural situatedness and social construction of documentation related to the GCSE. We therefore 'examine the processes of production and consumption – be they technical, linguistic or conceptual – as well as the content contained within documents' (Coffey, 2014, p. 370) relating to historical contexts, political discourses, curriculum structures, and examination specifications. Throughout our analysis, we refer to recent changes in assessment objectives and subject criteria, documented in Tables 1 and 2 (Supplementary Materials),[2] to identify how the three distinct sociopolitical contexts of Northern Ireland, Wales, and England relate to three distinct trends of development over the past forty years. First, we address the *quiescence* that has characterised GCSE music in Northern Ireland as a result of wider political unrest and conflict. Second, we consider the *divergence* of progressive aspirations – as captured in the original GCSE – in Welsh devolution. Third, we discuss the *convergence* and narrowing of conceptualisations of music within the English GCSE as a result of neoliberal standardisation. Finally, we consider the future ramifications of a fourth, overarching trend towards *coalescence*, in which recent policies across all three nations have adopted an increasingly prescriptive, neoconservative understanding of music education as performing–composing–*knowing*–appraising.

## Quiescence: systems and conflicts in Northern Ireland

It is impossible to consider any aspect of the complex contemporary education system in Northern Ireland without considering its complicated historical, political, and social context (Early et al., 2023). All facets of current education, and any potential to change them, are rooted in a long history which 'placed education at the centre of a struggle between the English state and the Catholic Church in Ireland' (Smith, 1995, p. 168). Biaggi (2020) suggests that education and religion in Northern Ireland have been 'closely intertwined' since the reign of King Henry VIII, and today the education system continues to reflect a sociopolitical duality 'based largely on the segregation of Protestants and Catholics' (Simpson & Daly, 2004, p. 168).

In spite of the optimism heralded by political and educational devolution following the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, the impact of 'entrenched "tribal" tensions' (Gardner, 2016, p. 346) remains influential in Northern Ireland. Its 'almost unique system of state-endorsed academic segregation in secondary education' (p. 353), where pupils can sit examinations to gain selection to a grammar school, maintains an 'unenviable choice of separate "Protestant" and "Catholic" test systems' (p. 358). By the time pupils sit GCSE examinations at age sixteen, 'although religious affiliation is a key indicator of social identity' (Early et al., 2023, p. 184), its influence on attainment is varied. The outcomes of this are both embedded and systemic in a 'deeply divided education system with demarcation most notable along ethno/religious and social class lines' (Hughes & Loader, 2024, p. 420).

Nevertheless, despite these challenges, music education in Northern Ireland is 'historically well-established' with 'a secure place in primary and secondary curricula' (O'Flynn et al., 2022, p. 371). The statutory curriculum prior to GCSE comprises several areas of learning: English and Irish, environment and society, mathematics, modern languages, physical education, science and technology, religious education, and the arts (music, art and design, and drama). Most pupils subsequently undertake GCSEs accredited by the Northern Ireland Council for Curriculum and Assessment (CCEA), specifications for which were most recently updated for first teaching in 2017. The music curriculum has been described as having the potential to support cross-community and interfaith cohesion (Scharf & Odena, 2023), and, in this vein, the GCSE music specification includes a traditional music topic 'seeking to develop understanding and awareness of each community's musical heritage' (O'Flynn et al., 2022, p. 370). The CCEA (2017) aims for GCSE music to be accessible:

> for everyone who loves music: composing, playing an instrument, listening to music, or using music technology. It encourages students to develop their musical potential by focusing on performing, composing and listening. Students can explore a range of music, including classical, pop, film, and traditional Irish music. (n.p.)

Although Barrance and Elwood (2018) highlight the 'collapse of three-country regulation' (p. 253) leading to a move away from a 'common' GCSE across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland from 2013 onwards, the 2017 GCSE music specification in Northern Ireland broadly retains the familiar tripartite structure common across the three nations: performing and appraising; composing; and listening and appraising. However, in line with similar developments in England and Wales (Table 1, Supplementary Materials), these three skill components are divided into four assessment objectives which separate appraising and evaluating music from demonstrating and applying musical knowledge (CCEA, 2017, p. 14):

1. Perform with technical control, expression, and interpretation.
2. Compose and develop musical ideas with technical control and coherence.
3. Demonstrate and apply musical knowledge.
4. Use appraising skills to make evaluative and critical judgements about music.

While 'the Northern Irish curriculum [prior to GCSE] ha[s] not been reviewed during the past 17 years' (Givan, 2025, p. 3; cf. Crehan, 2025), the restructuring of the CCEA's (2017) GCSE into four assessment objectives offers some semblance of development within the wider ecology of educational stasis. However, the fourfold structure does not align well with the more integrated approach to the arts in the Northern Irish curriculum prior to GCSE and seems primarily to reinforce continuity rather than offering innovation or change.

## Divergence: Welsh aspirations of progressivism

As in Northern Ireland, the devolution of power from the British government to a new National Assembly in Wales in 1999 included control of education policy. From this point onwards, education policy in Wales became independent of that in England and Northern Ireland. However, even before devolution, the Welsh curriculum for music prior to age sixteen had been Wales-specific: in Wales, the tripartite performing–composing–appraising framing of music championed by Swanwick (1979) was adopted into the National Curriculum without modification, while in England, tensions with the Conservative Secretary of State for Education, Kenneth Clarke (Swanwick, 1992), resulted in an awkward compromise dividing the skills of performing and composing and the knowledge informing listening and appraising (Gammon, 2006). Some commentators subsequently praised the more consensual approach to the Welsh National Curriculum (e.g., Smith, 1992), but others on the cultural and political right criticised the 'unbrookable momentum of mediocrity' (Scruton, 1991, p. 19) espoused by a curriculum that did not prioritise the appreciation of western art music.

The Welsh philosophy supporting the performing–composing–appraising framework in the National Curriculum was in keeping with that illustrated by the GCSE music qualification introduced in the 1980s, and the decision to adopt similar approaches across the curriculum prior to GCSE allowed consistency in the framing of music education. For example, early GCSE subject criteria emphasised 'singing and/or playing an individual part [. . .] with technical control, expression, interpretation and, where appropriate, a sense of ensemble' (ACCAC, 2004, n.p.), while the National Curriculum (DCELLS, 2008, p. 14) expected pupils to be able to:

1. Sing with increasingly sophisticated technique and with control of subtle changes within the musical elements.
2. Play instruments with increasingly sophisticated technique and with control of subtle changes within the musical elements.

In their desired outcomes for pupils, both the GCSE subject criteria and the National Curriculum in Wales emphasised the demonstration of practical musical skills – without prescribing genres, composers, or works. Wales, therefore, appeared to be decisively breaking with the legacy of the GCE: moving away from the appreciation of canonical western art musics and towards a holistic philosophy of practical, child-centred music education.

Large-scale education reform in Wales from 2013 onwards placed teachers on notice that the early 2020s would see the end of the existing National Curriculum and GCSEs. In their place would be a new Curriculum for Wales and complementary Made for Wales qualifications at age sixteen. In a reversal of the 1980s and 1990s, the reforms of the 2010s and 2020s introduced the Curriculum for Wales first (Welsh Government, 2020), with the qualifications for sixteen-year-olds (eventually confirmed to be GCSEs) coming later (Qualifications Wales, 2024). However, while the progressive Curriculum for Wales aimed to increase autonomy for individual schools, reduce prescriptive curriculum content, and allow teachers greater flexibility to explore creative and interdisciplinary approaches (Welsh Government, 2020), the subsequent approval criteria for the Made for Wales, single-subject GCSE in music (Qualifications Wales, 2024) were modelled closely on the previous, more conservative GCSE qualification (WJEC, 2016). This GCSE – contemporary with similar updates across England and Northern Ireland – took initial steps away from the performing–composing–appraising triumvirate that had been so influential in the devolution of Welsh music education, dividing the demonstration of musical knowledge from the assessment of appraising skills (WJEC, 2016) (Table 1, Supplementary Materials).

Like its predecessor, the proposed Made for Wales GCSE splits the three skills of performing, composing, and appraising into four assessment objectives, constructing a fourfold paradigm of knowing–performing–appraising–composing (Qualifications Wales, 2024):

1. Demonstrate and apply knowledge and understanding of a range of music.
2. Develop and apply performance and/or realisation skills.
3. Reflect on, analyse and evaluate their own work and the work of others.
4. Create and develop ideas to communicate meaning in compositions.

Nevertheless, while these new assessment objectives appeared to prioritise conservative notions of 'musical knowledge' – listed first over the skills of performing, composing, and appraising – the approval criteria set out by Qualifications Wales (2024) maintained the more progressive view that pupils were required neither to study set works nor to read staff notation. However, the national examination board, the Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC) – which in practice awards around 99% of all GCSEs in music in Wales (Carr, 2021, p. 5) – did require pupils to know about specified set works, musical elements, and terminologies associated with western art traditions and staff notation in treble, bass, and alto clefs (WJEC, 2024; Tables 2 and 3, Supplementary Materials). In making these choices, the WJEC's first Made for Wales GCSE specification therefore suggests a growing tension between aspiration and reality in Welsh music education policy. With few commonalities with the agentic Curriculum for Wales – or, indeed, the progressivism that led to the adoption of the performing–composing–appraising GCSE framework in the 1980s – it seems possible that teachers may abandon novel, local approaches to the Curriculum for Wales in favour of realigning with the traditionalism of the Made for Wales GCSE, given that they are held externally accountable for pupils' public examination results.

## Convergence: England's neoliberal standardisation

In contrast to the conflicting progressive and conservative discourses around the Curriculum for Wales and the Made for Wales GCSE, music education policy and practice in England over the past forty years have been characterised by a gradual narrowing of legitimate musical knowledge (e.g., Spruce, 2013), a steady increase in state control over curriculum design (e.g., Anderson, 2024), and a sharp rise in accountability and performativity measures (e.g., Fautley, 2024). These features typify a convergent trend towards neoliberalism: a political ideology that prioritises individualist capitalism and the core propositional knowledge and high standards of excellence required to compete successfully within international markets (Cole & Mackay, 2015; Horsley, 2015). Such emphases – which concurrently devalue practical and artistic learning – have been widely criticised as contributing to the national and global decline of opportunities for music education (Aróstegui, 2016; Lilliedahl, 2023).

The GCSE has played a significant role within England's convergence towards neoliberal standardisation. Education reforms under the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government established in 2010 introduced the English Baccalaureate, a performativity measure requiring GCSE pupils to study languages, sciences, and humanities – but not arts (Daubney et al., 2019; Underhill, 2020) – to keep their 'options open for further study and future careers' (DfE, 2019, n.p.). Further GCSE reforms introduced in 2016 (Ofqual, 2018) revised curriculum content and grading systems to increase academic rigour, recognise outstanding achievement, and compete with 'the best performing education systems in the world' (DfE, 2018, n.p.) – sentiments reiterated by the 'vision for a world-leading curriculum and assessment system in England' (DfE, 2025, p. 13) proposed in the recent Curriculum and Assessment Review.

In reforming the GCSE in music in 2016, England's Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) retained the performing–composing–appraising structure that had characterised the course since its inception in 1986. However, as in Wales and Northern Ireland, this was supplemented by the requirement to 'demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the musical elements, musical contexts and musical language' (DfE, 2015, pp. 5–6) and a shift from three to four assessment objectives (Ofqual, 2011, 2015) (Table 1, Supplementary Materials):

1. Perform with technical control, expression, and interpretation.
2. Compose and develop musical ideas with technical control and coherence.
3. Demonstrate and apply musical knowledge.
4. Use appraising skills to make evaluative and critical judgements about music.

The division of appraising skills into 'demonstrating and applying musical knowledge' and 'making evaluative and critical judgements' suggested a renewed emphasis upon core propositional *knowledge about* music. Compared to previous subject criteria (QCA, 2007), in which performing, composing, and appraising (p. 4, para. 9) were listed *before* the additional expectation for 'learners to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the use of musical elements, devices, tonalities and structures' (p. 4, para. 10), in the updated guidelines (DfE, 2015), the explication of performing, composing, and appraising (p. 6, para. 8) fell *after* extensive lists of 'musical elements, musical contexts and musical language'. As summarised in Table 2 (Supplementary Materials), these covered understanding of numerous musical dimensions and vocabularies, compositional and sociohistorical backgrounds, and staff notation and chord symbols (p. 5, para. 7). Such content sought to ensure progression from the National Curriculum requirements to perform and compose, 'develop musical ideas by drawing on a range of musical structures, styles, genres and traditions', and 'use staff and other relevant notations appropriately and accurately' (DfE, 2014, p. 259). According to the Model Music Curriculum (DfE, 2021) – a detailed outline of the 'core set of competencies and shared knowledge' (pp. 4–5) to be fostered by the National Curriculum – staff notation would therefore be introduced at age seven (p. 21), with the expectation for pupils to be

competent in treble and bass staves, major and minor keys, regular and irregular rhythms, and simple and compound metres by age fourteen (p. 44).

The expansion of the fundamental performing–composing–appraising triumvirate through the emphasis upon music's abstract 'inter-related dimensions' and 'appropriate musical notations' (DfE, 2014, p. 257) in England's music education policy was accompanied by increasingly stringent guidance around 'the best in the musical canon' and 'the works of the great composers and musicians' (p. 257). The Model Music Curriculum (DfE, 2021) and revised National Plan for Music Education (DfE & DCMS, 2022) included 'most prescriptive' (Bacchi, 2023, p. 236) and lengthy catalogues of core repertory and talent pathways in western art music practices, with only brief references to 'popular music' and 'musical traditions' from elsewhere in the world (e.g., DfE, 2021, pp. 41–42). Likewise, GCSE subject criteria (DfE, 2015) determined that 'at least one area of study must be drawn from music composed in the Western Classical Tradition [ . . . ] between 1650 and 1910' (p. 7). While both overly narrow terminology (e.g., 'the musical canon') and overly broad programmes of study have now been identified by the Curriculum and Assessment Review for future revision (DfE, 2025, p. 98), growing emphasis upon propositional, 'subject-specific knowledge of theory, notation and instrumental techniques' (p. 99) continues to marginalise practical musical know-how. That National Curriculum, GCSE, and subsequent A-level guidelines (cf. Whittaker, 2020) imply 'that it is enough to specify knowledge [that] can be handed on in a simple model of transmission and teacher-led pedagogy' (Young, 2023, p. 151), insinuates that the profusion of neoliberal performativity measures in England may simultaneously be perpetuating 'a neoconservative attempt to gain strong control over legitimate music knowledge' (Young, 2023, p. 150; Mullen, 2019).

## Coalescence: revitalising neoconservatism across three nations

While the development of the GCSE in music over the past forty years has varied across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, previously divergent trends characterised by socioeconomic neoliberalism in England, aspirational progressivism in Wales, and political quiescence in Northern Ireland have recently begun to coalesce towards greater homogeneity. Although England is the only nation to have implemented a new grading strategy at GCSE,[3] the four assessment objectives for music – performing and interpreting musical works; composing and developing musical ideas; demonstrating and applying musical knowledge; and appraising and evaluating with musical judgement (Ofqual, 2015) – are mirrored in the current specifications in Wales and Northern Ireland. In all three countries the performing–composing–appraising framework has remained influential, but, as illustrated in Table 1 (Supplementary Materials), the addition of separate requirements to 'demonstrate and apply musical knowledge' (CCEA, 2017, p. 14) or 'demonstrate and apply knowledge and understanding of a range of music' (Qualifications Wales, 2024, p. 7) suggests a subtle shift in the interpretation of what it means to 'know' music.

The nature of musical knowledge has become an increasingly contested issue in light of recent political discourse around 'core' knowledge (e.g., Gibb, 2015; Hirsch, 2016) and 'powerful' knowledge (e.g., Young, 2013; McPhail, 2022). However, the typology of *knowledge about*, *knowledge how*, and *knowledge of* demonstrates how the performing–composing–appraising triumvirate characterising the earliest GCSE syllabi had the potential to attribute equal precedence to diverse ways of musical knowing. Performance, composition, and appraisal skills each require factual knowledge about (elements, repertories, or styles); practical knowledge how (to sing and play, to write and record, or to listen and evaluate); and intuitive knowledge of (the feeling of ensemble, the progression of harmony, or the expression of affect). However, in the recent addition of a fourth assessment objective singling out theoretical musical knowledge, *knowledge about* has become elevated in its status.

The prioritisation of *knowledge about* music, rather than *knowledge how* or *knowledge of* music, is closely aligned with wider global policy trends towards neoconservatism. Neoconservatism – a reactive movement against growing relativism and secularism dating from the 1960s United States – is typified by its emphasis upon a shared moral sensibility, national identity, and cultural literacy guarding against social decline (Lepistö, 2021). Disseminating such principles through state-sanctioned curricula of sociocultural knowledge enables dominant political actors to control teaching and learning and delegitimise alternative ways of knowing. In the case of music, this has resulted in prescribing knowledge about musics of high sociocultural capital, rather than allowing pupils to develop knowledge how or knowledge of musics they discover for themselves. Canonic western art musics are therefore privileged; non-western, non-art genres are othered; and concomitant white, Eurocentric, male, heternormative, upper-middle-class, and ableist values are normalised (Mullen, 2019; Mellizo & Cabedo-Mas, 2022; Young, 2023).

In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, the movement towards neoconservative values through expanding performing–composing–appraising to performing–composing–*knowing*–appraising has been reinforced by an emphasis on an 'understanding of the musical elements, musical contexts and musical language' (DfE, 2015, p. 5) and the study of mandatory set works. As summarised in Table 2 (Supplementary Materials), current specifications across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland all prioritise factual recall of musical dimensions such as melody, harmony, tonality, structure, and texture. While this is applied to diverse musical styles and genres – such as the forms 'reel, jig, polka, [and] hornpipe' in Irish traditional music (CCEA, 2017, p. 11) – it is framed through a western art music lens which gives precedence to dimensions such as the forms 'binary, ternary, rondo, [and] theme and variations' (p. 11).

Furthermore, the application of *knowledge about* the musical elements is closely related to the study of canonic repertory. As illustrated in Table 3 (Supplementary Materials), the CCEA (2017), WJEC (2024), and three out of four examination boards in England (Eduqas, 2019; Edexcel, 2021; AQA, 2023) all include between two and eight set works, with at least one example of western art music designated as a compulsory area of study. The most frequently cited composers and artists across the board are Ludwig van Beethoven, Johann Sebastian Bach, John Williams, Esperanza Spalding, and Queen – a canon predominantly comprising white male musicians from the global north. This emphasis upon rote learning of set works, therefore, reinforces neoconservative notions of sociopolitical and sociocultural hierarchy and inclines towards teacher-directed, abstract knowledge transmission (Young, 2023) rather than the practical, accessible music-making endorsed by the GCSE introduced in 1986.

## Conclusions

When the GCSE in music was established in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland forty years ago, it was widely considered a force for progressivism (Pitts, 2000). The integration of performing, composing, and appraising as skills of equal value legitimised earlier movements prioritising pupils' voices, musics, and creativities (Finney & Harrison, 2010; Finney, 2011) and fractured previous intimations that music education should be the preserve of those of white, western, upper-middle-class sensibilities (Bull, 2019; Thomas-Durrell, 2022). In Northern Ireland, the reality of political conflicts and pressures meant that this conceptualisation of music education remained relatively unchanged until 2017, when specification updates saw an emerging emphasis upon *knowledge about* (rather than *knowledge how* or *knowledge of*) music (CCEA, 2017). At the same time, the expanded assessment outcomes, prescribed lists of musical elements, and specified mandatory set works evident in the English GCSE (DfE, 2018) epitomised a neoliberal drive towards rigorous, measurable outcomes worthy of competitive international league tables (Bate, 2020; Young, 2023).

In contrast, over the course of four decades, educational reform in Wales offered dramatic and progressive possibilities for the development of the GCSE in music. The professional agency and creative autonomy endorsed by the expressive arts stream within the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2020) resurrected the 1980s concern that teaching and learning in music be standardised, equitable, and musical. And yet, the reality of such reform has fallen far short of its promise. Despite having released new specifications twice as frequently as England and Northern Ireland (WJEC, 2016, 2024), GCSE music in Wales has coalesced into a close imitation of the conservative specifications of its neighbouring nations.

The turn towards emphasising *knowledge about* music in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland spotlights the GCSE as a force for neoconservatism which does not serve pupils from all musical backgrounds (Wright, 2002, p. 240). Given that GCSE uptake has already been steadily declining for many years (Wright, 2002; Lamont & Maton, 2008; Evans, 2012; Lilliedahl, 2023; Whitford & Kokotsaki, 2024), it therefore seems likely that this pattern will continue as the qualification becomes increasingly prescriptively regulated, inaccessible and inequitable, and potentially unmusical. Even if future revisions reconsider 'whether the requirement to "demonstrate musical knowledge" should be woven as a thread throughout [...] performance, composition and appraisal' (DfE, 2025, p. 99), the expectation for pupils to demonstrate high-status knowledge about musical elements, notational literacies, and western art music canons remains restrictive and exclusionary. For those who know music through expert creative skills, meaningful subcultural participation, or intuitive improvisational attunement, it is the fundamental integration and generative interaction of performing, composing, and appraising that is likely to remain best placed to legitimise their diverse musical knowledge.

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## Notes

**1** The fourth British nation, Scotland, is not included in this analysis, since Scottish schools offer the national qualifications National 5, Highers, and Advanced Highers (https://www.sqa.org.uk).

**2** Tables 1 and 2 summarise changes dating from 2007 to the present day. Changes prior to 2007 can be found in the Review of Standards in A-level and GCSE Music, 1985–2005 (QCA, 2007); however, official specifications predating the early 2000s are no longer publicly available.

**3** In 2018, England's grading systems moved from A*–G to 9–1, with 9 representing the upper reaches of an A* to allow for incremental differentiation between high-performing pupils (DfE, 2018; Ofqual, 2018).

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