



The Archdiocese of Birmingham Schools Singing Programme: Curriculum in Context

An Overview of the Archdiocese of Birmingham's Schools Singing Programme in the Context of the National Curriculum for Music in Key Stage 2 with a Review of Identified Areas for Growth

Introduction

The National Schools Singing Programme ('NSSP') is inspired by the model developed by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Leeds in 2003, working in the existing infrastructure of Catholic state schools and offering a high quality, inclusive music programme in diverse communities which otherwise have limited access to the broader choral music world. The Archdiocese of Birmingham joined the NSSP in 2022 and its Programme commenced in September 2023.

Like other NSSP schemes, the Archdiocese of Birmingham's Programme (the 'Programme') delivers whole-class singing teaching in weekly sessions to primary schools in, currently, three Catholic Multi-Academy Companies ('MACs') in the Archdiocese. Classes are delivered by professionally-qualified Choral Directors employed by the Archdiocese, most of whom in addition to music degrees hold postgraduate choral conducting qualifications.

The Programme is financed by 'start-up' grant funding from the Vinehill Trust, a charity (Sir John Rutter is the chair of the trustees), together with 'recharge' payments from the participating MACs. This 'start-up grant' is £75,000 payable over the first 5 years of the Programme, with £25,000 in year 1, falling to £5,000 in year 5, and is intended to help with the start-up and administrative costs of setting up the Programme. In Birmingham, we have been uniquely fortunate in that it has been possible to use the bulk of the grant to subsidise the cost of employing the Choral Directors, and so save some cost to the MACs through the engagement of free administration and management services and material support from the Archdiocese.

In addition to providing weekly primary school choral classes which enhance schools' music education, covering two academic years, the Programme will provide, when requested, in-service support for teaching staff in primary schools and support for any primary school choirs who sing in their local parish churches on a regular basis (which the Programme and the Archbishop encourages). Primary school children who show particular aptitude and the right attitude will be selected to join with secondary school pupils to join 'cross-MAC' choirs to rehearse after school on a weekly basis to sing at bigger events.

Delivery

The Programme employs a core delivery method of 'whole-class' teaching, providing 30 choral classes per year for two years. This model meets a key recommendation from the



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2022 National Plan for Music Education (see p10) as a way to efficiently support pupils' development by maximising the reach of teacher contact. Following a successful trial in two schools in the Summer Term 2024, the Programme has now added a whole-class keyboard module which began operating in September 2024 in two MACs.

The choral singing curriculum aligns with the key sections of the Model Music Curriculum (see p19) and covers the Key Stage 2 portion of the National Curriculum:

1. **Singing** – As a choral education programme, singing is obviously at the heart of everything we do. Every aspect of our curriculum is either delivered through singing or linked directly to the sung material.
2. **Listening** – Many aspects of our curriculum, from our focus on “my-turn, your-turn” demonstrative teaching to our fostering of ensemble singing skills, develop pupils' listening skills both directly and indirectly.
3. **Composing & Improvising** – Composition is consistently cited as the weakest aspect of music curricula in inspected schools; while the Programme does not directly focus on formal composition many aspects of our curriculum create opportunities for pupils to synthesise new musical ideas and develop “the underpinning knowledge that pupils need in order to learn how to construct and deconstruct music” (*‘Striking the Right Note’* p5); children are encouraged to improvise rhythms and melodies as a natural part of learning to sing.

The Programme has recently been revised in a project led by Dr Rebecca Berkley, Associate Professor in Music Education at the University of Reading, who leads the teaching on the BA in Primary Education (Music Specialism) course. She is also a specialist in choral training for primary-age children. Accordingly, from September 2024, the Programme contains exercises which involve children in an even greater proportion of composition and improvisation study than was originally the case. This was the key area of the national curriculum that was not delivered previously.

4. **Performing** – A key feature of the Programme is its trajectory towards and emphasis on performance, in a range of contexts and on a variety of scales, from informal performances in classes and assemblies, to more formal school concerts and services, and beyond to external performances in parish churches, cathedrals, and other venues. This is perhaps the biggest strength of the Programme compared to other competing providers of music tuition, in that, once the children have reached the appropriate levels of technique, we will bring to bear an extant infrastructural network of performance opportunities and venues through the churches and services of the Archdiocese, with a focus on Catholic Faith – something wholly unique to the Programme.

In 2025 pupils on the Programme will lead the music at the Mass to be held at the CBS Arena as part of the Diocesan Leadership Conference. To that end, all classes on the Programme are being taught a common Mass setting as well as the official



hymn for the Year of Jubilee. We are also planning a major musical performance for all children on the Programme through their individual MACs in the summer term of 2025 and we are looking at the feasibility of having a major event in each area for the Year of Jubilee.

Curricular Timeline

Our two-year curricular plan lays out a framework that aims to address common flaws in music curricula across the country, where material is organised in isolated units, undermining pupils’ “longer-term musical development across the key stage,” (*‘Striking the Right Note’* p5), or where too much focus is spent on creating a range of opportunities rather than a clear programme for “incrementally developing musical knowledge and skills.”

The Programme’s framework is made up of two broad but interconnected categories: Areas of Focus and Notation Modules.

The table below maps out the allocation of these modules over the course of the two-year curriculum, which is based upon work carried out by the National Youth Choir of Scotland (‘NYCoS’) for the NSSP, led by Lucinda Geoghegan, the Creative Learning Director of NYCoS. It is heavily based upon the Kodály Musicianship Training Method.

<u>Half-Term</u>	<u>Modules</u>	<u>Areas of Focus</u>
Year 1 - 1	NYCoS Sessions 1-5	Dynamics
Year 1 - 2	NYCoS Sessions 6-10	Tempo
Year 1 - 3	NYCoS Sessions 11-15	Tonality (major / minor)
Year 1 - 4	NYCoS Sessions 16-20	Review
Year 1 - 5	NYCoS Sessions 21-25	Vocal Production
Year 1 - 6	NYCoS Sessions 26-30	Performance
Year 2 - 1	NYCoS Sessions 31-35	Texture
Year 2 - 2	NYCoS Sessions 36-40	Structure
Year 2 - 3	NYCoS Sessions 41-45	Articulation
Year 2 - 4	NYCoS Sessions 46-50	Review
Year 2 - 5	NYCoS Sessions 51-55	Choirs
Year 2 - 6	NYCoS Sessions 56-60	Performance

Figure 1: NSSP Choral Singing Curricular Plan

These Modules are designed to support and outline, rather than dictate, the curriculum of each school’s Programme; other aspects, such as the repertoire and performances, are necessarily tailored to the specific needs and resources of each school. The delivery of repertoire will, in particular, develop other skills throughout the curriculum, including vocal technique, singing in parts, and aural skills. A typical weekly session in the Programme will generally follow a four-part structure:



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1. **Starters & Warm-Ups:** These exercises and chants introduce key elements of vocal technique and musicianship, and are designed to introduce and reinforce the demonstrative teaching model used throughout the session.
2. **Development – Repertoire:** This will vary the most from class to class, depending on the performance goals and broader musical life of the school. Songs are learned through a mix of aural learning, lyric sheets, and staff notation. The delivery of repertoire teaching can be adapted as needed to best incorporate the current Area of Focus.
3. **Development – Notation Modules:** The NYCoS-supplied materials, as referenced above, develop pupils’ ability to read notation from basic rhythms up to full staff notation, and can be tied to existing repertoire and the relevant area of focus.
4. **Concluding Activities:** The final segment of each lesson will consolidate the week’s learning and similarly to the repertoire teaching can be adapted to best meet the class’s needs. Activities might include performing a new song for their peers or teachers, performing an already-known song while implementing new musical ideas, listening to a piece of music related to their lesson, or playing a musical game to reinforce and integrate their learning.

These weekly sessions are designed to follow Rosenshine¹ principles in their basics of progression, incrementally introducing new material followed by practice, focused questioning, modelling, and review – “incrementally developing musical knowledge and skills.” (see *‘Striking the Right Note’* p9). Material is introduced with a “my turn, your turn” approach which creates a cycle of modelling and practising, allowing the instructor to provide ongoing, reactive feedback “that improves the quality of pupils’ music making [sic] both in terms of technique and expressive quality.” This approach is crucial to “routinely demonstrate to pupils what high-quality musical responses sound like.”

Each week, new material is constantly integrated with what pupils have already learned and worked on. Because the session is fully practical, pupils are constantly synthesising new information, reinforcing their listening skills and improving their aural memory.

Integrated Areas of Focus

Over two years the Programme integrates key Areas of Focus into delivery, organised in roughly half-termly units which, crucially, are cumulative, in order to “[build], incrementally, pupils’ knowledge of the technical and constructive aspects of music.” The benefits of teaching these concepts in integrated, wholly-practical sessions are numerous: the delivery of repertoire teaching provides plentiful opportunities for pupils to return to material and consolidate short-term learning, and the rehearsal process necessitates repetition of key curricular content while new ideas, methods, and concepts are gradually introduced. The Areas of Focus chosen for the choral programme align with identified

stages of knowledge progression of indicative musical features in Key Stage 2, as laid out in the table at Figure 2 below.

NSSP delivery of the Areas of Focus must necessarily be interwoven with other areas of the sessions during what is recognisably a limited amount of contact time. This framework follows a clearly-defined scheme which is designed to reasonably be mastered in the time available, remembering that sometimes less is more. (see ‘*Striking the Right Note*’ p9)

	Initial stage	Intermediate stage	Final stage
Rhythm, Metre and Tempo	Downbeats, fast (<i>allegro</i>), slow (<i>adagio</i>), pulse, beat	Getting faster (<i>accelerando</i>), getting slower (<i>rallentando</i>), Bar, Metre	Simple time, compound time, syncopation
Pitch and Melody	High, low, rising, falling, pitch, range (doh-soh)	Pentatonic scale, major and minor tonality, pitch range (doh-doh)	Full diatonic scale in different keys
Structure and Form	Call and response; question phrase, answer phrase, echo, ostinato	Rounds and partner songs, repetition, contrast	Ternary form, verse and chorus form, music with multiple sections
Harmony	Drone	Static, moving	Triads, chord progressions
Texture	Unison, layered, solo	Duet, melody and accompaniment	Music in 3 parts, music in 4 parts
Dynamics and Articulation	Loud (<i>forte</i>), quiet (<i>piano</i>)	Getting louder (<i>crescendo</i>), getting softer (<i>decrescendo</i>), smooth (<i>legato</i>), detached (<i>staccato</i>)	Wider range of dynamics, including very loud (<i>fortissimo</i>), very quiet (<i>pianissimo</i>), moderately loud (<i>mezzo forte</i>) and moderately quiet (<i>mezzo piano</i>)
Instruments and Playing Techniques	Instruments used in Foundation Listening	Instruments used in Foundation Listening, including playing techniques	Instruments used in Foundation Listening, including playing techniques and effects, for example plucked (<i>pizzicato</i>) for mysterious and trembling/wavering (<i>tremolo</i>) for dark and expectant

Figure 2: Progression in Knowledge of Indicative Musical Features for Pupils in KS2, from Model Music Curriculum

Notation Modules

The Notation category of our curricular framework employs modular resources, developed by Lucinda Geoghegan and the National Youth Choir of Scotland (NYCoS), which incrementally develop pupils’ ability to sight-read staff notation, a key component of the national curriculum. Like all NSSP material, Notation Modules are practical, incremental, and cumulative – a framework that enables coherent teaching within the format of wholly-practical singing sessions. Pupils first encounter the musical concepts underpinning various notational elements aurally, embedding them in procedural knowledge and linking them to repertoire development and the Areas of Focus; once aural familiarity is established, declarative knowledge is built atop the existing foundation. These Modules develop the

ability to read and understand staff notation in line with identified stages of progression of knowledge of notational elements in Key Stage 2:

	Initial	Intermediate	Final
Crotchets	√	√	√
Paired quavers	√	√	√
Minims	√	√	√
Semibreves			√
Semiquavers			√
Rests		√	√
Time signatures 2/4, 3/4 and 4/4			√
Fast (<i>allegro</i>), slow (<i>adagio</i>)	√	√	√
Getting faster (<i>accelerando</i>), getting slower (<i>rallentando</i>)		√	√
Stave, lines and spaces, clefs, reading dot notation	√ doh-me; range of a 3rd	√ doh-soh; range of a 5th	√ doh-doh; range of an octave
Loud (<i>forte</i>), Quiet (<i>piano</i>)	√	√	√
Getting louder (<i>crescendo</i>), getting softer (<i>decrescendo</i>)		√	√

Fig.3: Progression in Knowledge of Musical Notational Elements for Pupils in Key Stage 2

By strongly linking notational elements with aural skills through solfege and Kodaly-Curwen² hand-signs, and by connecting them with repertoire and Areas of Focus, pupils' notational knowledge is developed incrementally as part of their long-term musical development.

Note: The Key Stage Progressions in figures 1 to 3 above envisage covering elements across three academic years whereas the Singing Programme covers them across two academic years.

Concluding Activities

Each lesson ends with one of a variety of concluding activities, designed to consolidate the session's learning and connect it with previously-covered material. These activities take three forms.

- **Informal Performances** – Pupils might perform a song that they have newly learned, or one that they have learned before but with the application of new concepts. As well as building towards out-of-session performances, such as school assemblies, collective worship, or external engagements, these provide much-needed opportunities to assess the pupils' learning in a manner that doesn't needlessly consume their teaching time.
- **Listening Sessions** – Pupils might listen to a recording or watch a video of a musical performance. This could be of a piece they have learned or are going to learn, or a piece which relates to the current Area of Focus or another topic. By encouraging pupils' active listening with guided, focused questioning, we reinforce aural learning and memory and encourage synthesis of both new and previous concepts. Listening

Sessions can also create opportunities to historically contextualise repertoire and link it to different traditions and cultures.

- **Musical Games** – Pupils might take part in musical games or action songs, providing a wide variety of opportunities to incorporate areas of focus, build foundational procedural knowledge for future sessions, and reinforce vocal technique and aural skills. These games can also allow pupils to improvise with their voices using the concepts they have learned, as Composition & Improvisation is an oft-neglected aspect of the national music curriculum.

Keyboard Module

The Diocese of Leeds has in recent years introduced whole-class keyboard tuition which has successfully introduced entire year groups to fundamental keyboard skills in coordination with their choral classes. These sessions are made possible by whole-class sets of melodicas, simple keyboard instruments which comprise metal reeds (similar to those of a harmonica or accordion), made to sound by blowing through a detachable air-hose. Melodicas are cheap, small, relatively robust, and require no electrical power, making them ideal for whole-class use. Beyond strengthening the children’s musicality, diversifying their musical knowledge, and supporting their progression in line with the national curriculum, the keyboard programme has enabled the Leeds NSSP to identify pupils who would particularly benefit from additional one-to-one tuition on other keyboard instruments, including piano, organ, and accordion. This has enabled them to build a thriving community of young instrumentalists, and has empowered students who otherwise might not have considered pursuing lessons in these instruments.

Inspired by this success, but wanting more directly to integrate keyboard tuition into our Programme, we have developed a keyboard curriculum that aligns with and complements the existing two-year choral curriculum, bridging the gap between Y3 and Y5. Having been introduced to foundational concepts and notation in their first year of choral classes, pupils are better positioned to successfully undertake the keyboard classes in Year Four, which in turn further develops their musical knowledge in preparation for the second year of choral classes.

The keyboard curriculum follows the plan below:

<u>Half-Term</u>	<u>Modules</u>	<u>Areas of Focus</u>
Term 1-1	Keyboard: First Steps	Basic Keyboard Skills
Term 1-2	Keyboard: Developing I	Applied Notation: Rhythms & Dynamics
Term 2-1	Keyboard: Developing II	Applied Notation: The Staff
Term 2-2	Keyboard: Developing III	Two-Hand Playing
Term 3-1	Keyboard: Concluding I	Two-Hand Playing (cont’d)
Term 3-2	Keyboard: Concluding II	Ensemble Performance



The use of applied notation throughout the keyboard classes reinforces knowledge gained in the Y3 choral classes, and creates scope for tutors to employ NYCoS modules if desired, while the introduction of two-hand playing and ensemble performance towards the end of the year prepares pupils for further development and performance opportunities in their Y5 choral classes. Whilst still in its early stages, the keyboard tuition represents an exciting opportunity to expand the Birmingham Programme to coherently and consistently deliver the majority of students' music education across Key Stage 2 in participating schools.

Beyond the NSSP Sessions

In addition to the weekly sessions delivered by dedicated NSSP tutors, there are many extension opportunities to integrate our Programme into schools' music curriculum. Many of our activities can be replicated by classroom teachers to reinforce and review material between sessions, and can be easily learned during whole-class singing sessions. Teachers are also able to link other aspects of their music delivery to our curriculum, by listening to music linked to our sung repertoire, for example. Beyond individual classrooms, our curriculum is designed to connect deeply with a wider school community via a cross-classroom culture of shared songs. By linking curricular delivery with preparation for school events and collective worship, the Programme ties pupils' learning to out-of-session implementation, creating a practice that interconnects weekly sessions and creates a trajectory of musical development.

We have found that class teacher engagement vastly enhances the Programme as it can provide strong consolidation of matters covered in the Programme's classes. We have now developed a system of issuing follow-up worksheets to class teachers after such classes where requested, and have found that where teachers both attend classes themselves and use the worksheets this has:

- extended the musical education provided to our children to the 'ideal' one hour per week
- consolidated matters learned in choral classes so that children progress through the Programme at pace so that more time can be spent on developing repertoire
- provided teaching staff with a very real opportunity for professional development.

A particularly distinctive feature of our Programme is the implicit progression towards external performances in parishes and cathedrals. In preparing for these performances, the pupils are set up with natural assessment points every time a performance occurs. In the 2023 Ofsted Music Subject Report, assessments of musical achievement were found to be "weak in most of the primary schools visited;" in the Programme, regular performances provide efficient opportunities to gauge pupils' stages of learning without taking time away from learning the curriculum in the lessons themselves. Additionally, performances create concrete instances for the curriculum to identify "precise end points ... and then [set] out the knowledge and skills pupils need, step by step, to reach these end points." Performances are recognisable and definitive goals for school leaders, even those who are



not trained music educators. This helps to develop “a clear conception of what pupils should be able to do as a result of learning the curriculum.” (see *Striking the Right Note*).

In addition to the performance opportunities referred to above, we are planning to engage pupils with more of the ‘diocesan’ liturgies that take place during the liturgical year at St Chads Cathedral (and elsewhere) where the Cathedral Choir does not take part but supplies only a single cantor.

Conclusion

The NSSP integrates singing, listening, performing, and instruction in indicative musical features and notation into a robust, holistic music curriculum which fosters incremental development of musical knowledge and skill, provides enriching opportunities to create and perform music, and contributes to a broader musical culture. The Programme provides resources and materials which allow schools to develop a curriculum which is “coherently planned and sequenced towards cumulatively sufficient knowledge and skills for future learning,” and provide them with a course of study “designed to help learners to remember in the long term the content they have been taught and to integrate new knowledge into larger concepts” in their music curricula.

A parent shared their (unsolicited) view on how the Programme is already impacting children:

“Having spoken to a number of ... children at our child’s school, it’s clear that they absolutely love the sessions and have grown in confidence as singers. There is a very inclusive approach which encourages everyone, whatever their natural ability. The Choral Director radiates positivity and the children naturally absorb this. My own child has gained a lot ... and has started singing around the house – which in turn is helping the speech and language work we’re doing at home. A service well worth continuing from the MAC/Diocese.”

Referenced Documents and Notes

Note 1: ‘Rosenshein Principles’ - for a straightforward explanations of these learning principles see: <https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/early-career-teachers/0/steps/164331>

Note 2: Kodaly-Curwen can best be illustrated by considering <https://www.classicsforkids.com/curwen-glover-hand-signs/>

Documents:

“*Education inspection framework.*” Updated 14 July 2023 by the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills.

“*Model Music Curriculum: Key Stages 1 to 2. Non-statutory guidance for the national curriculum in England.*” Published March 2021 by the Department of Education.

“*National curriculum in England: music programmes of study.*” Updated 26 March 2021 by the Department of Education.

“*National Singing Schools Programme Curriculum Resources.*” Authored by Thomas Leech, Charlotte Woodhead and Lucinda Geoghegan; last revised with Dr Rebecca Berkley February 2023

“*The power of music to change lives: A National Plan for Music Education.*” Published in June 2022 by the Departments of Education and of Culture, Media & Sport.

“*Striking the right note: the music subject report.*” Published 21 September 2023 by the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills.