



musicfirst lighthouse

Real Stories of Success in Music Education

A Transformed Music Department

**Mark Aitchison, Head of Music,
Droitwich Spa High School**

Welcome to our MusicFirst Lighthouse series.
Inspiring stories capturing how institutions have implemented online learning into their curriculum using innovative technology and creative thinking.



**DROITWICH SPA
HIGH SCHOOL
AND SIXTH FORM CENTRE**



In Conversation with Mark Aitchison



Tell me about your background as a music teacher – where you started from and what brought you to Droitwich Spa High School?

Following a degree at Cardiff University, and teacher training at the University of Wales Institute, I taught at several schools. Then I came out of the classroom and taught as a peripatetic for a while. In 2011 I started doing one day a week at All Saints Academy, Cheltenham and that built up to full time. Then I progressed to become Head of Music at Droitwich Spa High School in 2018.

What were the technology facilities like in the Music Department when you joined the school?

The Music Department had a room with twenty 12-year-old Macs. We looked at replacing them with upgrades, but it was too expensive. I started using GarageBand with Year 7 – recording using a metronome and listening critically to the recording to look for ways for them to improve. By the time the students reached Year 10, they were really good at using the technology. They often taught themselves! But this only took us so far...

“Our GCSE students love using Focus on Sound. We do the OCR specification but use all of the lessons from other exam boards too for wider listening. It’s great music teaching!”

What did you do when schools were forced to close in 2020?

We all panicked! Then I saw a Facebook post from MusicFirst offering help – free access for three months through the lockdown period. I jumped on it! We set up Years 9 to 13 so they could access everything from home. It worked really well so that when we came back to school, we were still using the cloud-based software and could see there was longevity to it. I made videos doing tasks on Soundtrap and then students could learn at their own pace. When we returned to school, working in bubbles, I distributed MIDI keyboards around the school so students could plug them into whatever device they were using. When the benefits became clear, the Head decided that we should invest to keep it going.

How do you use Focus on Sound in the classroom?

All our teaching uses Focus on Sound and we’ve embedded this right down to Year 8. For example, we’ve just starting Reggae so we use Focus on Sound for this and do the tests at the end of the lesson in Classroom Presentation Mode using the whiteboard. We make it like a blankety-blank game with points to the person that gets all the answers right. Then we set similar tests for homework to reinforce the learning. This embeds it and we can collect results for data reports. It all becomes possible and realistic through self-marking homework. We use specific tests three- or four-times a year so students can always track their own progress and parents can see it too. Our GCSE students love using Focus on Sound. We do the OCR specification but use all of the lessons from other exam boards too for wider listening. It’s great music teaching!

About Mark

Mark Aitchison combines the roles of Head of Music at Droitwich Spa High School with Subject Lead for the PGCE (Post Graduate Certificate in Education) in Secondary Music and Lecturer in Music Education at the University of Reading, where he recently completed his Master of Arts in Music Education with Distinction.

Passionate about ensuring outstanding music education is accessible for all students, Mark is keen to engage students in a curriculum which both challenges their skills and develops their knowledge. This aims to ensure students become inquisitive about how music is constructed by exploring different styles and genres of music.

An experienced performer, in both orchestral and choral music, Mark has also directed, musically directed and produced musical theatre productions. He aims to provide students with the opportunity to explore these activities and enjoy the rich cultural heritage that our world has to offer.

In Conversation with Mark Aitchison *continued*



Tell me about some of the other ways you use cloud-based technology?

Students really enjoy using Soundtrap's collaboration feature. We have D.I. boxes to allow students to plug in instruments so they can work together from different locations. We do band projects where students chose between drumkit, bass guitar, electric guitar, keyboard, and voice. When they have learnt their part, they record it on each person's Soundtrap project, so everyone gets the same instrument part played by the same person in their individual project. We then focus on mixing skills and show them how to get the best out of the parts in their project. We also set work like this to be completed at home, such as working as a group to create a pop song but with no recording time in lessons. They use their own devices in their own time. It's often like a game and the students love it.

What methods do you now use when assessing students?

We never ask children to play out loud in the classroom on their own because we think that's fundamentally not fair. We talk through what is being assessed, then demonstrate as necessary. Then I set up a Soundtrap template for each class. Each student records onto one track when they are ready. I'd never have enough time to hear 30 performers one after the other but using Soundtrap I can capture them all and focus on each student. Using Soundtrap, we can also allow for more than one attempt, and have conversations about how they've done or what might improve their performance. Students can then go back and make those improvements and come back for an assessment when they're ready. Using Soundtrap also allows students to share their work with parents. We also assess them using things like quantizing, editing notes, changing note velocities, or using automated volume controls. Projects include building a whole band, track by track. By the start of GCSE or Vocational courses, students can demonstrate their musical ability using Soundtrap. This feeds into their composition work as well as performing.

Has cloud-based software changed your approach to teaching using technology?

Cloud-based software has wiped out some of my biggest frustrations using installed software. The biggest is being able to use the software at home both as a teacher and a student. For example, using Noteflight to open MIDI or Music XML files from other notation software is very easy; or exporting files as MP3s at home to then import into Soundtrap to add further tracks. It can be time-stamped, we can add comments onto the score or project and students can adjust and improve their work like musicians do. It has also been a great time-saver. My marking load has got lighter, particularly using Focus on Sound's self-marking lessons and tests for homework. Storing and sharing work is completely different – no raft of folders and email attachments to wade through. Homework has become a musical reality that supports and extends classroom work. The quality of lesson content has improved using Focus on Sound, and the students are much more engaged, especially at Key Stage 3 where we can turn tests into games. There is meaningful data on each student's progress report, and GCSE marking using Soundtrap and Noteflight has become instantaneous.

Why did you want Droitwich Spa High School to become a MusicFirst Lighthouse Institution?

I welcome the opportunity to showcase my department and let others see what we do. It's great for the students too – they appreciate being valued. They can also lead the way technology is used – students find ways to make things work so we problem-solve together. Other teachers and students are welcome to come to us and see what we've built and ask for advice. For 20 years my frustration has been that there is so much that can be done that's not being done because we can't get access in schools. Having cloud-based technology makes high quality tools accessible to everyone who needs them. I want to be able to use my experience to try to influence others and being a MusicFirst Lighthouse Institution give me a chance to be heard and learn about future developments.



“
**Homework
has become a
musical reality
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Mark Aitchison, Head of Music –
Droitwich Spa High School

Contact Us

For further information about
MusicFirst or on how your school can become
a Lighthouse Institution contact us today.

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