

# The place of music education in a crowded school curriculum

Martin Fautley, Birmingham City University

This paper considers the ways in which school music education has been a topic of discussion in terms of what its purposes are, and how its content matters to a range of stakeholders. It considers historical views placing music as singing and musical appreciation, and then moves to a discussion of what would be relevant and appropriate in contemporary curricula. It concludes by recommending that classroom music teachers would benefit from subject-specific continuing professional development in curriculum construction, especially for Key Stage 3 music teaching and learning.

The importance of a 'broad and balanced' school curriculum is currently being emphasised in a range of official utterances. The importance of a 'broad and balanced' school curriculum is currently being emphasised in a range of official utterances. For example, the Ofsted chief inspector, Amanda Spielman, said this recently:

We have a full and coherent national curriculum and it seems to me a huge waste not to use it properly. The idea that children will not, for example, hear or play the great works of classical musicians or learn about the intricacies of ancient civilisations – all because they are busy preparing for a different set of GCSEs – would be a terrible shame. All children should study a broad and rich curriculum. (Spielman 2017)

But what does this mean in practice? And what should music education in

a crowded curriculum do? This paper endeavours to address these questions, and raises some broader issues which will hopefully be of interest to a wider community than music educators.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Historically, music education has always occupied a slightly uncomfortable position between presenting, in Arnold's (1896/1993) words, 'the best that has been thought and said', and working with children and young people to develop their own enthusiasms in music. These discussions are now coming around again, and so it is timely to revisit the place and purpose of music education in schools.

There are those who hold that the purpose of music education is to inculcate love of, and reverence for,

the great masterpieces of the classical music canon. This is strikingly similar to the sorts of music lessons that were taking place in the 1940s–60s, and which we used to know as 'music appreciation' lessons, the object of music appreciation being to present the great classical masterworks to learners. The music appreciation movement

*...emphasised the importance of guided listening to music in addition to the performance of music. The appreciation of music was to be improved by analytic study of the form of music, by increasing pupils' knowledge of the instruments of the orchestra and by giving historical information concerning the composer and the composition. (Shepherd et al. 1977: 203)*

Shepherd et al.'s notion of 'guided listening' is significant here, as it places the teacher firmly in control of what the lesson is about. The pupils are played music, and admire the composers from a distance, as it were, as though they were exhibits in what Lydia Goehr (1992) referred to as 'the imaginary museum of musical works'. As Witkin noted:

*... pupils are often brought to music as a shrine. It is there to be played or to be listened to but only the 'Masters' make it. Such a view would be intolerable to an art teacher but then art enters the world at the outset in its 'living form' and music has to be created twice, once by the composer and again by the performer. (Witkin 1974: 126)*

Musical appreciation was not the only aspect of music lessons during this time. Singing was widely used as a practical means of musical expression, with the sorts of songs sung being promoted in 1965:

*National songs are the very musical fibre of a nation's music, and no self-respecting British-born subject should think himself an educated man who cannot sing and play his national songs. (Proctor 1965: 44)*

Clearly no place for girls here! But what this also reveals is that which Gordon Cox was referring to when he noted about earlier work in national singing in England:

*... questions of social class and control have been raised, particularly in the struggle to 'contain' folksong. To [many at the time] there was no doubt that the literate tradition was superior to the oral. But such a view reflected middle-class criteria. (Cox 1992: 251)*

It is the notion of 'middle-class' criteria that reappears throughout discussions of music education. Indeed, it may be of little surprise that only three years after Proctor's deliberations on singing national songs, Enquiry 1 (Schools Council 1968), an investigation into school leavers' attitudes, was published. This noted that many of the students in schools at the time had become disaffected by music in education. The figures that were produced were categorised under the heading of subjects that the students found to be 'boring' and 'useless', with responses categorised by gender. Music came top of both, with 48% of boys and 34% of girls saying this was the case for them. Standing in stark opposition

to these figures, 20% of boys and 35% of girls were noted as saying that pop music was an important issue for them.

The ramifications of Enquiry 1 were felt for many years. One of the things that music teachers and other commentators needed to consider was why this should be the case. Young's (1971) analysis of the school curriculum was widely influential at the time, and he categorised knowledge as 'high-status' and 'low-status', and so one avenue available was to categorise the children and young people as somehow lacking:

*In order to preserve the rigid stratification of knowledge in schools and the consequent rigid hierarchy between teacher and taught, the culture of the pupils has to be seen as a deprived one, so that cultural deprivation becomes a plausible explanation for educational failure. (Shepherd et al. 1977: 207)*

According to this view, the pupils are suffering from 'cultural deprivation', and so their inability to address (and enjoy) the middle-class nature of the music curriculum is identified. Indeed, even before Enquiry 1, this had been the *raison d'être* of musical appreciation lessons:

*The primary purpose of musical appreciation is to inculcate a love and understanding of good music. It is surely the duty of teachers to do all they can to prevent young people falling ready prey to the purveyors of commercialised 'popular' music, for these slick, high-pressure salesmen have developed the exploitation of teenagers into a fine art. (Brocklehurst 1962: 205)*

This view persisted, and crops up regularly when there is a focus on teaching and learning music in schools. For example, during discussions about the National Curriculum for music in the 1990s:

*The triumph of popular culture over serious, classical culture seems complete... a recent report on music and the National Curriculum suggested*

*that African drumming, reggae and pop music were as important as Mozart... Teachers will be free to choose Madonna and MC Hammer over Mahler and Haydn, in spite of government promises... (Langan 1991)*

Popular culture is inferior, this states, and has no place in schools. The philosopher Anthony O'Hear was quoted by Langan in the same piece as observing:

*Schools should concentrate on introducing children to works and ideas that have stood the test of time and are not just two-day ephemera. Hardly anyone would put Mills and Boon on the syllabus alongside Shakespeare. (O'Hear, quoted in Langan 1991)*

But what knowledge is, and whose knowledge matters in music education are not innocent and value-free questions. Thinking about the place of music in the National Curriculum, Ruth Wright observed that

*The knowledge that finds its way into schools as the music curriculum is never neutral. It is the result of ideologically impregnated policy through which it becomes filtered to enhance and preserve the cultural and economic interests of the dominant social group. As such, it is a relay for certain social and cultural values. For Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist, the control of knowledge is critical to preserving the ideological dominance of certain classes, a process he terms hegemony. Gramsci identifies schools as playing a central role in this process by distributing to students the form of knowledge required to preserve and produce that society's institutions. (Wright 2012: 23)*

This has serious implications for music educators. If nothing else because it takes careful manoeuvring to assume a neutral position as a music teacher, as, at worst, teacher-pupil classroom relationships can descend into to a hegemonic slanging match, 'my Wagner is better than your Arctic Monkeys' as former secretary of

state for education Michael Gove implied:

*Richard Wagner is an artist of sublime genius and his work is incomparably more rewarding – intellectually, sensually and emotionally – than, say, the Arctic Monkeys. (Gove 2011)*

Valorisation-based classroom arguments are how badly conceived musical appreciation lessons can end up when handled badly. But we now know much more than we used to, and sensible broadening of horizons is something that all music teachers wish to do. Simply setting up classroom culture wars will do no one any good.

What is worrying for music education is that it may well be the case that culture wars are where the discipline could be heading, with the ‘wars’ being those started on the outside, as Prothero (2016) observed:

*... culture wars have been conservative projects, instigated and waged by conservatives anxious about the loss of old orders and the emergence of new ones... (p. 13)*

*This anxiety... is then expressed in two forms, first as a narrower complaint about a particular policy; second as a broader lament about how far the nation has fallen from its founding glory and how desperately it is in need of deliverance. (p. 17)*

This is how music education is placed when its content is questioned. ‘Madonna and MC Hammer over Mahler and Haydn’ becomes a hegemonic argument from those who sneer at popular forms of culture. As Frith observed:

*Underlying all the other distinctions critics draw between ‘serious’ and ‘popular’ music is an assumption about the source of musical value. Serious music matters because it transcends social forces; popular music is aesthetically worthless because it is determined by them. (Frith 2017: 257)*

Serious music matters, and this should be the focus for the classroom, but how

to get to this point? There are few who would disagree with this view, and despite assertions made in the press, very few school music curricula are based solely on pop and rock music alone.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

So what does all this mean for the busy music teacher in the classroom? One obvious outcome is that notions of hegemony are alive and well in school classrooms in terms of Bourdieu’s notion of social capital, but even more so with regard to cultural capital. Much in the same way that the rich often tend to think that the poor are just like them, but have less money for some reason, those in possession of cultural capital sometimes believe that those without it are simply missing something. This raises all sorts of other issues, which would require more space to discuss in detail, but suffice to say it is problematic for school music. Indeed, there are strong arguments to be made for musical engagement at all levels, in all types, styles and genres of music, and especially so for those marginalised children and young people whose hectic lives are complicated. The charity Youth Music says about itself:

*We’re Youth Music. We’re a national charity investing in music-making projects for children and young people experiencing challenging circumstances.*

*We believe everyone should have the chance to make music.*

*Our projects help young people develop musically, of course, but they have personal and social outcomes too.*

*We know that those facing difficulties – economic problems, lifelong conditions, tough circumstances or behavioural issues – are often the ones who get the most out of music-making.’ (Youth Music, n.d.)*

This surely is true, and the very worthwhile music projects run by Youth Music are

testament to this. Taken in a wider context, the notion that music helps all young people is a significant one, and music teachers will not want to disparage learners who seem to express little admiration for Wagner but may be very keen to work on their own songwriting projects. This, it has to be said, does not mean that they will never encounter Wagner, as shall now be explored.

## PLACING AND SITUATING MUSIC CURRICULA

One of the many issues that we do know about is that secondary school music teachers tend not to receive much help with the design and creation of their own curricula. This is especially true at Key Stage 3 (KS3). What tends to happen is that what Bruner might have termed a ‘folk pedagogy’ emerges, where lots of music teachers tend to do similar sorts of things, because this is what they have seen whilst undergoing initial training and this is what all their colleagues in local schools are doing. We know, for example, that there is a deal of commonality in the KS3 topics taught in London secondary schools’ music lessons, with the blues, film music and songwriting being the three most popular topics (Fautley 2016). What we also know is that GCSE music is taken by about 7% of the population of secondary school students, so some 93% of the population do not take it. This being the case, it behoves us to design curricula which will be complete in themselves for children and young people who will finish their in-school music lessons at the age of 14, if not sooner. This places a big responsibility on the teachers concerned. We know that there are almost no textbooks for KS3 music, so what are teachers to do to try to bring coherence to the teaching and learning process? Many use the Musical Futures approach, whose philosophy is stated thus:

*Our approach to teaching and learning is based on the real-world practices of popular and community musicians, making it relevant and engaging for kids. (Musical Futures, n.d.)*

Which is clearly a long way away from compulsory Wagner for 13-year-olds! Being relevant is only part of the story, though, as engagement with music is known to have both intrinsic and extrinsic benefits. But relevance is a slippery construct: it can depend on context, location, time and a variety of other factors. There is therefore a very significant range of music education content, style and delivery in the secondary school. It can be hypothesised that maths lessons at, say, Eton would not be hugely different in form, content or substance from those in a school in, say, Hackney. But in music the form and content of a music lesson in a specialist selective music school is likely to be very significantly different from that in an inner-city comprehensive school. For music education this is widely understood, and in terms of GCSE preparation both schools will be working equally hard to ensure that their pupils are well equipped to do GCSE. This is not a narrative of failure, or ascribing lack of cultural capital, it is simply that they are different, and that good education means teaching the class of children and young people there in the room, not an idealised one. The children in the inner-city school will be working at music on their own terms, and doing the best that they can, as will the children at the specialist music school. This is not a cry for dumbing down, but simply one which

has been recognised in music education for a long time, that to take children and young people on a musical journey, it helps to know where that journey is setting out from. Back in the nineteenth century Mrs Curwen knew this, as when she was writing her piano method tutor books in 1886, she advised music teachers to 'proceed from the known to the related unknown' (Curwen 1886). Today, still, this is one aspect of what classroom music teachers need to do.

However, this raises still more problems. It is no easy task to establish what is known, and easy to underestimate the capabilities of children and young people. Aiming for the top is sound advice, but knowing the nature of the journey requires knowledge of all potential starting points as well as the destination. In this sense, music is a hard classroom subject to teach, as there will be as many pupil backgrounds within a single class as there are pupils within it, as well as many variations in learning. In addition, it is quite possible that the teachers themselves may have a different experience-set to the pupils. After all, as Dalladay (2016) observes:

*... many secondary school music teachers have developed their own musicianship within Western Classical music genres whilst many young people would tend to be more*

*interested in contemporary popular genres... Teachers themselves are often aware that their own values, tastes and priorities may influence the basis on which musical learning in the classroom is planned...*

But this does not mean that the task should not be attempted, or skirmishes in culture wars enacted. The big issue facing classroom music teachers in secondary schools now is in creating, conceptualising and then enacting KS3 curricula that are fit for purpose, where the work being done takes account of the starting points of the actual learners in the school, and where Mrs Curwen's notion of the 'related unknown' can be approached in a logical and systematic fashion. This requires new ways of thinking about content, as well as learning journeys. This important work will require support from a range of quarters, including focused subject-specific continuing professional development (something sadly lacking for music in many areas), but what is most important is that the distinct challenges and contexts of each school need to be both recognised and, importantly, addressed.

This is clearly a challenge, and there is much work to be done in this area, but hopefully this can be addressed in the near future, and music education in a crowded curriculum will be clearer on its purpose. ■

## May 2021 Postscript

Revisiting the article after a gap of some four years is most revealing! Writing in a personal capacity from my perspective as a music education research academic, there are two things I would like to focus on in this brief revisiting. The first of these is the considerable furore which surrounded the publication of a major research study I undertook with colleagues at Birmingham City University, this being the Youth Music funded *Exchanging Notes* project (Kinsella et al., 2019; Youth Music, 2019). It was from this report that marketing produced the hashtag *Stormzy vs Mozart*, which was picked up widely by the press and educational commentators. Interestingly, neither of these musicians are mentioned in the report; but *Stormzy vs Mozart* caught on, and produced comments ranging from “so what?” to “this is the end of civilisation as we know it”! The point of me mentioning this here is that back in 2017, I wrote about ‘...a discussion of what would be relevant and appropriate in contemporary curricula’. Clearly suggesting that for children and young people who were in danger of

becoming NEET – the whole purpose of the *Exchanging Notes* programme – undertaking activities involving music they liked to prevent them disengaging from school was a step too far for some commentators.

The second brief reflection I would like to offer here is the fact since my article was written, Ofsted have announced that they will be inspecting schools for cultural capital:

*leaders take on or construct a curriculum that is ambitious and designed to give all learners, particularly the most disadvantaged and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) or high needs, the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life (Ofsted, 2019 p.9)*

Sadly, what seems to have happened is that Ofsted have somehow elided Bourdieu’s description of *Cultural Capital* (*inter alia* Bourdieu, 1973) as a sociological explanation, with Hirsch’s

notion of *Cultural Literacy* (Hirsch, 1987), which is about knowledge acquisition. Many words have been written about this, but amongst the most withering are those by Beadle:

*What if the little that Ofsted knew about cultural capital was entirely wrong, confused with another concept, based on an utterly inadequate reading of the area... (Beadle, 2020 p.11)*

And yet, Ofsted’s dictums carrying the force they do, this has created a climate wherein schools are rightly concerned about what such inspection would produce.

So, after my revisiting the article, these issues seem to me to be the most worthy of consideration after the elapsing years. I appreciate that this ignores the serious ramifications of Covid for music education entirely, but the two issues described here are enough to keep me awake at night without any help! ■

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