

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Investigating the canon in A-Level music: Musical prescription in A-level music syllabuses (for first examination in 2018)

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Abstract

The canon forming the backbone of most conceptions of Western music has been a feature of musical culture for decades, exerting an influence upon musical study in educational settings. In English school contexts, the once perceived superiority of classical music in educational terms has been substantially revised and reconsidered, opening up school curricula to other musical traditions and styles on an increasingly equal basis. However, reforms to GCSE and A-levels (examinations taken aged 16 and 18 respectively), which have taken place from 2010 onwards, have refocused attention on canonic knowledge rather than skills-based learning. In musical terms, this has reinforced the value of ‘prescribed works’ in A-level music specifications.

Thus far, little attention has been paid to the extent to which a kind of scholastic canon is maintained in the Western European Art Music section of the listening and appraising units in current A-level music specifications. Though directed in part by guidance from Ofqual (Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation, the regulatory body for qualifications in England), there is evidence of a broader cultural trend at work. The present article seeks to compare the historical evidence presented in Robert Legg’s 2012 article with current A-level specifications. Such a comparison establishes points of change and similarity in the canon of composers selected for close study in current A-levels, raising questions about the purpose and function of such qualifications.

Introduction

An increasingly diverse higher education (HE) sector for music has led to the development of a wide range of music qualifications that can help prepare students for entry into advanced musical study.¹ New providers have entered the market, offering potential music students the opportunity to study at a range of institutions and, in some ways, a variety of delivery modes. Although some A-level entrants will not continue into higher music education, the qualification is designed by and large to provide some kind of preparation for more advanced study in this area. Indeed, Ofqual and UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, UK organisation who operate application processes for British universities) have both stated the importance of A-Levels as an accurate indicator of aptitude for HE, and thus some form of connection ought to be formed between musical learning at A-level and higher musical study (Ofqual, 2015; UCAS, 2018).

A-level music is taken by many higher music education providers, especially music departments in universities from the so-called “Russell Group”, as a partial indicator of foundational knowledge of diverse musical contexts. It is often used in conjunction with an audition or music performance qualifications (principally those offered by examination boards such as ABRSM and Trinity College London) to make entry offers at undergraduate level, along with formal interviews and other written examinations. The contextual study aspects of A-level music lay the

Table 1. Assessment Objectives from Ofqual guidance (Ofqual, 2015)

	Objective	Weighting
AO1	Interpret musical ideas through performing, with technical and expressive control and an understanding of style and context.	25-35%
AO2	Create and develop musical ideas with technical and expressive control and coherence.	25-35%
AO3	Demonstrate and apply musical knowledge.	10%
AO4	Use analytical and appraising skills to make evaluative and critical judgements about music.	30%

groundwork for an understanding of musical context and the application of theory, features that are understandably not as prominent in music performance qualifications. These skills, however, are essential for topics in historical and critical musicology, a key component of most ‘traditional’ university-based music degrees. Thus, A-level music can be argued to play an important preparatory role, given that its operational model is quite distinct from other music qualifications.

Although there are a number of examination boards offering Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF)² Level 3 qualifications in music, only four examination boards offer an A-level qualification in music: OCR, AQA, Edexcel, and Eduqas. Thus, these four boards account for all of the A-levels in music taken by the many English and Welsh applicants to study music at UK higher education institutions. The syllabuses from these four examination boards for the 2018 ‘reformed’ A-level (A2) music specifications offer detailed overviews of the types of material that students are expected to engage with over their course of study.³ By implication, they might also give some insight into the shape of many musical curricula in earlier stages of secondary schools across England and Wales. These documents therefore have the power to determine approaches to learning, and impact directly upon the perceived ‘high status’ musical knowledge acquired by many in pre-university formalised music education. Despite some differences across the specifications, three main subject areas persist across the board: composing/improvising, performing, and listening/appraising. The inclusion of these three areas is a requirement for formal accreditation as an A-level qualification; this combination is deemed integral to the rigour of the certificate (Ofqual, 2015).

Listening and Appraising and Ofqual Guidance

Ofqual’s guidance on the subject requirements for A-level qualifications in music demands the development of skills in listening and appraising in two of its four assessment objectives: AO3 and AO4 (see Table 1).

These two assessment objectives, AO3 and AO4, must therefore account for 40% of the overall assessment of A-level music qualifications. It is through these that the young people taking A-level music examinations come closest to historical musicology and some fundamental musicianship skills, including aural training and the development of analytical approaches to music, especially from score-based traditions. This article considers the ways in which the requirements of these assessment objectives are enacted by examination boards, and the prioritisation of specific composers in A-level music specifications for first examination in 2018. It also explores the implications that these decisions might have for a continued defence of a kind of ‘scholastic canon’ of composers as worthy arbiters of the musical art, and raises questions about the evidence of hegemony in these qualifications. The present article does not, however, explore the specific pieces of music selected, a point to which I hope to return in a future publication.

Before considering the notion of a ‘scholastic canon’ in more detail, a few brief remarks on the development and continued presence of a musical canon are required. The process of musical canonisation began in earnest in the nineteenth century and has lingered in classical music culture ever since, though its status is increasingly contested (Kurkela & Väkevä, 2009; Shreffler, 2011; Wilkinson, 2009) in academic discourse. Canons, arguably frameworks which serve to perpetuate and legitimise hegemonic power, are historical constructions that skew musical retrospectives and draw attention to important issues in musical historiography (see, for example, Citron, 1993). Dominant canons supported by institutions, such as those perpetuated by formalised education, coexist with personal canons, all representative of their social, cultural, and (perhaps) political context.

Understanding the formation and, perhaps more pertinently, the perpetuation of such a canon as it exists in formal qualifications, is important because it represents a formally recognised, actively promoted, cultural agenda deemed to be of educational importance by those in power. The documents prescribing these pieces of music underpin our programmes of study and undoubtedly represent ‘high status’ knowledge in the eyes of the policy makers the exam boards must satisfy. The mode of interrogation is seemingly of lesser importance than the focus of study. In effect, it could be argued that this constitutes a ‘scholastic canon’ of sorts, authorised on a nationwide scale. Despite the broadening of scope in school-based curricula, and the welcome legitimisation of musical traditions beyond Western European Art Music (sometimes referred to as WEAM), it is significant that the body of music set for compulsory study at A-level bears remarkable points of overlap with the choices made over half a century ago.

Context

In 2012 Robert Legg analysed historic A-level music examinations in England from the period 1951–1986, arguing for the presence of a scholastic canon (Legg, 2012). He identified a clear pattern in the composers whose compositions were selected as study pieces in A-Level syllabuses for the now defunct Oxford Local Examinations board, arguing that such an act may have had a detrimental impact on social mobility. The hegemonic power of such prescription, he argues, affects a kind of symbolic violence, to borrow Bourdieu’s term, upon those with different types of cultural capital, a point especially true in the context of mass education (Swartz, 2012). In effect, such prescription from within an apparently fixed body of canonic works fuels a cycle of reproduction (Harker, 1984).

However, to view this cycle as a simple mechanistic notion for photocopy-like reproduction is overly reductive. As Harker notes, ‘There is always a “slippage” toward a compromise with specific historical circumstances, and it is in this discontinuity, this gap, that *production* is possible, that human agency has room to move’ (Harker, 1984). Thus, extrapolating from this, changes to perceived canonic knowledge are possible, but any redefinition is contingent upon a willingness amongst human agents to affect such changes. In policies on music education, this has not always happened with the greatest of rapidity, as highlighted in Legg (2012). That said, widening participation and social mobility agendas have gained considerable political traction in recent times, even if the tangible outcomes of these are mixed and complex (Kirby, 2016).

Such reticence towards change might be seen to impact negatively upon the musical knowledge and development of young people studying for qualifications under this model, creating a ‘discriminatory power dynamic’ (Legg, 2012). In short, it is musically exclusive rather than inclusive, perhaps serving to inculcate a particular cultural heritage. Tied to this are competing priorities for inclusion in specifications, such as the balance between subject breadth and depth of study, and the connectedness of the different aspects of the qualification. These issues are, of course, far from specific to music, but are especially complex given the multiple modalities operating across different musical styles.

The historical decisions highlighted in Legg’s study hold contemporary relevance given the shift towards greater canonic prescription in other aspects of secondary and further education, as advocated by successive education secretaries and ministers since 2010: see for example

Gove (2011) and Morgan (2015). Unlike a few decades ago where universities largely controlled examination boards, these now operate mostly independently of the university sector, with only OCR being linked to a university through its association with the Cambridge Assessment Division.⁴ Instead, they are regulated by Ofqual, the national body that ensures that qualifications are administered, constructed, and assessed in a sufficiently robust fashion.

The Ofqual guidance notes for accreditation somewhat tie the hands of the examination boards, with the notional standard of rigour arguably used politically as a tool to resist any change to the hegemonic status quo. Although in some respects the link between universities and school examinations has been broken, it has been replaced instead with a framework that is susceptible to considerable influence by the direction of political opinion at a given time.⁵

The current education landscape is changing for schools in England and Wales. As evidenced in recent discussions, the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and Progress 8 may have had a detrimental impact on uptake of arts subjects at GCSE levels in schools, contrary to claims made by the Schools Minister, Nick Gibb (a representative sample of the range of views can be found across Adams, 2017; Gibb, 2016; Lloyd-Webber, 2017; Thomson, 2017). If these subjects are suffering at GCSE level, their future at A-level seems precarious in most schools and further education institutions, especially those with more limited resources.

Despite the negative impact these structures appear to be having on music and arts education more broadly, successive education secretaries – most notably Michael Gove – have singled out music as a marker of cultural excellence: ‘... there is such a thing as the best. 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). The disconnection between this view and the type of music with which most of the public engage is immediately apparent. Viewed from the perspective of consensual control, to borrow a Gramscian term, Gove’s assertion therefore has disturbing undertones. An authoritative mouthpiece subtly undermines widespread popular cultural norms that pose an emerging threat to the dominant hegemony, something which the wider public does little to challenge (Bates, 1975). In this case, education is used as the means to legitimise such a practice as being for the ‘greater good’. Indeed, Bourdieu – approaching this from a more sociological perspective – argues that mass education systems are mostly responsible for the transmission of social inequalities in modern society (Swartz, 2012). Such a view holds close relevance to the present examination of capital-rich cultural selection. In the case of Gove’s statement, it acknowledges an implicit view that in order to function appropriately in society, one must appreciate particular cultural objects correctly. The objects to be valued are often designated by those in power, sometimes concealed by institutional proxy, sustaining cultural hegemony.

Compare this view with the guidance from Ofqual that states that A-Level music must offer a broad course that enables students to ‘engage with, and extend appreciation of, the diverse heritage of music in order to promote personal, social, intellectual and cultural development’ (Ofqual, 2015, p.3). Statements like Gove’s place musical genres in a hierarchy and highlights, to draw on Lydia Goehr’s term, a kind of ‘imaginary museum’ (Goehr, 1992) of musical objects that are probably out of step with the musical interests of young people (McPhail, 2013). Small wonder that A-Level music (including AS level) entries are decreasing at an alarming rate, with these having fallen from 7,089 to 6,428 in 2017. This is also indicative of a broader trend borne out in GCSE entries in the creative arts (Cultural Learning Alliance, 2017). Similar anxieties about engagement with specific musical genres can be traced back to the introductory phase of the National Curriculum; Anthony O’Hear remarked that ‘On this curriculum, pupils will be able to study music for 10 years without gaining a sound knowledge of either the history or the techniques of Western classical music, which is surely one of the greatest achievements of our civilisation’ (O’Hear, 1992).

Thus, the potential dismay implied in this statement points to the strong links between Western European Art Music and formal music education. Given that the apparent intrinsic value of such cultural artefacts is seemingly crucial to both academic and social development, this type of musical study is for the ‘greater good’. Legg’s case study (2012) of A-level music examinations

demonstrates the adherence to such a closed cultural canon of composers over a long period of time, and draws attention to the potentially limiting effects that this might have upon individual understanding.⁶ The case study that follows picks up Legg's findings and explores their relevance to the current A-level specifications.

A case study

Across all four A-level music examination boards – AQA, Edexcel, Eduqas, and OCR – students engage to some extent in the study of 'set works' from the Western European Art Music tradition, supported by extensive additional listening. Other optional areas of study are offered in all specifications of the current A-levels, including film music, jazz, pop music, world music etc., delineations which were not present on historical syllabuses. As this analysis considers the representation of Western European Art Music, these other areas of study are not explored here.

Table 2 presents the names of composers whose pieces are prescribed elements of the classical music study areas of A-level music courses taught in England. Composers working in the 20th and 21st centuries appear in italics, and those that appear on more than one syllabus are marked in bold. Explorations of the specific pieces required for study, and the approach taken to these, extend beyond the scope of the present analysis, but I do hope to pursue this in future research.

The lists in Table 2 include the names of composers who would be familiar to those with even a fairly modest degree of musical knowledge, along with a few lesser-known figures. Comparison with the right-hand column of Table 2 highlights some points of divergence from the figures listed in Legg (2012), though the titans of Western European Art Music are still to be found; Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Mozart.⁹ This, in itself, is not that surprising, given that pieces by these composers continue to dominate most concert programmes, even with the growth of digital recording technology enabling music outside of the canon to be promoted to a wide audience through CD sales and digital downloads. It is also interesting to note that composers most often associated with 19th-century opera, such as Giacomo Puccini and Giuseppe Verdi, are absent from A-level study of Western European Art Music. This omission occurs in a cultural context where opera audience attendance continues to thrive, with the Royal Opera House reporting 96% average occupancy for its opera productions (Royal Opera House, 2016).

Aside from Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, and Mozart, however, there is a great deal of variation in the composers prescribed by examination boards. Antonio Vivaldi is the only other composer to feature on more than one syllabus for the current round of examinations.¹⁰ It seems significant that Edexcel prescribes pieces by five composers working in the 20th and 21st centuries (italicised in Table 2) as required study. These selections represent 50% of the prescribed works in Edexcel's 2016 A-level specifications, the highest proportion of the revised specifications from any examination board.

The composers selected by Edexcel show something of a departure from the conservative twentieth-century English music that so characterised contemporary music selections on earlier A-level examinations: Igor Stravinsky, John Cage and Kaija Saariaho are hardly conservative choices. Interestingly Saariaho is the only living composer listed on Edexcel's art music selection and is the sole representative of contemporary music post-1950.

The case is a little different for Eduqas, which features two areas of study focusing on contemporary music: 20th-century music; and 21st-century music. Students must study one of these two areas, and thus music from the last 100 or so years occupies a significant space in the specification, something not necessarily required by Ofqual guidance. Of particular interest here is the provision of an area of study on music from the 21st century, featuring Thomas Adès and Sally Beamish, composers who have appeared in many BBC Proms seasons over the last decade or so (BBC, 2018). Thus, this represents something of a stylistic choice working within the definitions set out by the regulatory body.

Table 2. Composers of prescribed study pieces in 2016 iterations of A-level music syllabuses specifications for AQA, Edexcel, Eduqas, and OCR, along with those from Legg (2012)⁷

AQA (2016)	Edexcel (2016)	Edquas (2016)	OCR (2016) ⁸	Composers most frequently prescribed (1951–1986) (Legg, 2012, p. 162)
Johann Sebastian Bach	Johann Sebastian Bach	Joseph Haydn	Ludwig van Beethoven	Johann Sebastian Bach
Johannes Brahms	Hector Berlioz	Felix Mendelssohn	Joseph Haydn	Béla Bartók
Frédéric Chopin	<i>John Cage</i>		Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart	Ludwig van Beethoven
Edvard Grieg	<i>Claude Debussy</i>			Johannes Brahms
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart	Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart			Benjamin Britten
Henry Purcell	<i>Kaija Saariaho</i>			William Byrd
Antonio Vivaldi	Clara Schumann			Claude Debussy
	<i>Igor Stravinsky</i>			Edward Elgar
	<i>Ralph Vaughan-Williams</i>			George Frederic Handel
	Antonio Vivaldi			Joseph Haydn
				Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
				Henry Purcell
<i>*James MacMillan</i>		<i>* Francis Poulenc</i>		Maurice Ravel
<i>Olivier Messiaen</i>		<i>Claude Debussy</i>		Heinrich Schütz
<i>Steve Reich</i>		<i>Sally Beamish</i>		Dmitri Shostakovich
<i>Dmitri Shostakovich</i>		<i>Thomas Adès</i>		Richard Strauss
				Igor Stravinsky

To offer a point of comparison, AQA's representation of 20th-century art music, which interestingly is not compulsory and constitutes a separate optional study topic, includes Olivier Messiaen, Steve Reich, and James MacMillan. Indeed, Messiaen, Reich, and MacMillan offer particularly great scope for students to be engaged with important issues in contemporary art music. The study of Messiaen's music, for example, opens up the opportunity to study European avant-garde music of the mid- to late twentieth century and the pivotal role that he played in tutoring the next generation of musical innovators at the Paris Conservatoire.¹¹ Steve Reich's compositions provide a window into American minimalist cultures as an alternative narrative to the hard-edged aesthetic of European modernism. James MacMillan's work represents trends in contemporary British musical culture, making a direct connection with the vibrancy of new British music.

Thus it is clear that AQA, Edexcel, and Eduqas have made attempts to facilitate some engagement with a broader stylistic range of 20th- and 21st-century classical music than was seen in earlier examinations, albeit in optional form in two of these cases. For example, in the 1960s, Ralph

Vaughan Williams was the sixth most prescribed composer, tied in that position with Benjamin Britten (Legg, 2012); now he appears just once.¹² We could recall the memorable description of Vaughan Williams's Pastoral Symphony as being the musical equivalent of 'a cow looking over a gate' (Smith, 1994). The apparent willingness to explore beyond the realms of English contemporary music in this more pastoral style in current A-level specifications undoubtedly enriches student awareness of classical musical styles, and perhaps shows an increased acceptance of musical trailblazers as acceptable study material.

However, such seemingly progressive developments are not replicated in all respects. The total omission of composers from ethnic minority groups within the Western European Art Music tradition – such as Chevalier de Saint-Georges (1745–1799) or Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875–1912) – is noteworthy but highlights an issue that extends well beyond the scope of this article. However, one element of the list of composers outlined in the table that is particularly troubling for the present argument is the almost total absence of female composers, save for the inclusion of Clara Schumann and Kaija Saariaho on the Edexcel syllabus, and Sally Beamish on the Eduqas syllabus. Female composers do not feature on the AQA and OCR syllabuses for this area of study, a point worth noting given that these specifications are newly written for the 2016/17 academic year; Western European Art Music is still a male realm.

Without wishing to underplay the significant shifts from historical A-level syllabuses that such inclusion represents, the fact that female composers still account for such a small proportion of music studied at A-level is concerning. It draws attention to a broader problem of gender delineation in music education, especially in the realm of composition, where gender bias has been shown to impact significantly upon perceptions of musical skill in education (Green, 2010). Such relative omission might constitute something of a re-enactment of compositional mastery as a masculine attribute, something a number of initiatives are attempting to change outside of formal education (Eastburn, 2017; Slater, 2018).

The issue is laid bare when it comes to the study of contemporary music, where the dominant force of an historical patriarchy is less invasive, albeit still present. Jessy McCabe, an A-level student who challenged the lack of female composers in the Edexcel specification, raised this publicly, leading to this initial response from Edexcel:

Given that female composers were not prominent in the western classical tradition (or others for that matter), there would be very few female composers that could be included. (Edexcel Head of Music, quoted in Khomami, 2015)

Following the public spotlight on this issue, Edexcel moved to include five female composers across the different Areas of Study outlined in the specification, showing a well-publicised change of policy in response to popular demands. Two of these changes appeared in the art music sections, with Clara Schumann being included in the historical classical works section, and Kaija Saariaho being added to represent female contemporary composers.

Such under-representation is not just confined to educational contexts, and is an issue that runs much deeper than I have the time to explore here. However, some statistics from the 2017 BBC Proms season are particularly revealing (Fowler, 2017). In 2017, female composers accounted for 7.5% (nine out of 120) of the composers performed across the BBC Proms festival. Such a low percentage, which interestingly had been slightly higher in 2015 and 2016, can be accounted for by the historical patriarchy of the classical music tradition. When it comes to works by living composers, female composers accounted for 22% of all music played across the festival. Further to this, female composers accounted for 30.8% of the new works commissioned by the BBC for the festival (Fowler, 2017). In the field of contemporary music, female composers are far from a fringe group; they are a driving force of the art form securing three in ten of the available commission opportunities at the Proms.

In addition to the relative paucity of female composers in the current A-level examinations, it is also significant that music by composers born before 1650 is not represented. Revisiting Table 3 from Legg (2012) highlights that this is a major point of departure from historic A-level music specifications. Such a move is noteworthy because of the apparent growth in early music over the last 30 years, with countless performing groups building significant reputations and being involved in high profile restagings and recordings of these historic works (Upton, 2012). Indeed, early music is now a central tenet of the soundtracks to countless film, TV, and videogames, and thus has currency in contemporary culture (Cook, Kolassa & Whittaker, 2018). Contrary to this growth in popular culture, it is clear that there has been something of a movement away from early music as a subject of study at A-level.

Despite the important areas of difference explored above, it is significant that these revised qualifications show some striking similarities to a 50-year old A-level canon, seemingly perpetuating a hegemonic scholastic canon. Firstly, the similarity in the composers selected might suggest that the core of the scholastic canon has remained largely unchanged, with music of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, especially from Germany, being upheld as the bastions of musical excellence. Although the prioritisation of historical composers may differ slightly from the 1950s, knowledge of these gatekeepers still determines success in A-level music and, perhaps, the next stage of musical study, especially in a traditional university environment. Even in the context of a diverse higher education market for music, school-based examinations, seemingly at the behest of Ofqual, remain closely allied to traditional grand master narratives.

A simple list illuminates this point. The following composers feature in both the top 10 of composers of prescribed works from 1951–1986 (as collated in Legg, 2012) and on the current A-level music syllabuses. There are few surprises here:

- Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)
- Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)
- Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)
- Claude Debussy (1862–1918)
- Joseph Haydn (1732–1809)
- Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)
- Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)
- Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958)

Thus, eight of the composers currently prescribed on historic A-level specifications were also found in the top ten of earlier A-level examinations. Whilst there has been some change, it seems there has been little change at the top, perhaps betraying the broadening of music curricula across the sector. Recalling Wright and Davies's discussion of the early 1990s National Curriculum where some found it unthinkable for students not to study Western European Art Music, A-level musical study is still a witness to a habitus 'so deeply entrenched that they implied both complete confidence in the form of cultural capital embodied within it as superior' (Wright & Davies, 2010).

Despite the similarities, the case of Antonio Vivaldi shows a point of change, albeit within a conservative tradition. Vivaldi does not appear on any of Legg's tables from historical A-levels, but is now one of only a few composers prescribed on multiple current syllabuses. His status has gone from minority figure to a key composer in the scholastic canon, allied with the rapid growth of interest in his music. Although Vivaldi was known outside of specialist music collectors from at least the 1940s onwards (Talbot, 2016), A-level examiners ignored him until at least 1986.

The same can also be said for the inclusion of contemporary classical music by living composers as a compulsory element of Edexcel's syllabus, and as an optional topic for AQA and Eduqas. The music of James MacMillan, in particular, his work *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie* (1990), has acquired a strong popularity ever since its first performance. For many A-level students, aged between

16 and 18, 1990 would represent a more recent past, and thus its contemporary relevance is easily justified. Its inclusion is somewhat analogous with the study of Britten's works in the 1950s.

Following this line of enquiry, similar points can be made about the inclusion of pieces by living composers – Thomas Adés and Sally Beamish – on Eduqas' syllabus, both of which were written in the last decade. Such recent inclusions is demonstrative of the way that canonic knowledge can change and adapt to contemporary trends, and need not necessarily be viewed as an unchanging body of knowledge. This sentiment also extends to Kaija Saariaho's work, which is pathbreaking in a number of respects.

Although some might inevitably criticise the selections of contemporary repertoire, and the fact that it is only compulsory on two of the four main examination syllabuses and optional on the others, they demonstrate that some contemporary music has become an acceptable object of study. Classical music is, at least for some students whose teachers choose these options, taught as something approaching a living tradition rather than a dusty old museum. However, the relative paucity of music by living composers is still a cause for great concern.

Summary

The changes to the scholastic canon available for study at A-level music suggests that something of the older 'museum' approach is perhaps beginning to shift, even if there are still broader issues around the criteria for inclusion. However, given the changes in teaching approaches, assessment methods, curriculum resources, and extra-curricular opportunities, especially in popular musics, it is important to question the continued relevance of the study of a relatively fixed body of work established some 60 years ago remains a core requirement of Ofqual regulations for A-level music examinations. The relative absence of female composers from the most recent examination specifications is something that needs close monitoring, especially if A-level music is to represent diverse musical traditions fully, even if only within the field of Western European Art Music. The same can be said for the total absence of ethnic minority composers from this compulsory area of study, drawing attention to pressing issues on the representation of musical diversity both within and across traditions. The centrality of works by a certain group of composers from eighteenth and nineteenth century to formal musical study in the A-level syllabus suggests that something of the core of the scholastic canon remains strong and almost immovable. Despite the addition of a series of composers, both historical and new, the conservative canon still looms large over the study of music history and reinforces a set-work study paradigm over engagement at this level. The external power relations established clearly have potential benefit for those with a particular type of cultural capital, typically that of children in middle-class families, though to characterise this as photocopy-like reproduction is overly simplistic. Perhaps two more pertinent questions are: 1) Does A-level music really encourage young people, likely future HEI music students, to engage with, and develop understanding of, a range of musical styles? Or 2) Does it simply confirm and reassert the cultural hegemony of a specific branch of Western European Art Music as the shining light of musical creation?

The answers to these questions extend beyond the scope of this article, but the questions themselves offer a useful point of departure to stimulate thinking about the future of A-level music. With numbers of entries falling for A-level music, and curriculum time for music being squeezed to breaking point in both the lower and upper secondary school, it is important to challenge current approaches to appraising music and seek a reconsideration of the existing model, especially if we accept that political motivations are at work to an extent.

In short, it is not my intention to suggest that we consign Western European Art Music to the annals of history and uncritically accept the primacy of other more popular styles. To my mind, this would constitute a regressive step and deny epistemic access to a rich musical tradition for all concerned. To preserve and celebrate the study of the rich musical traditions that A-level music currently covers, a challenge to the current hegemony, political and cultural, needs to be mounted,

not to apologise for a musical tradition, but in order to recover it from the grips of misplaced and politically-motivated associations with capital-rich elitism.

Notes

- 1 These include, but are not limited to: A-levels; BTECs; practical music exams offered by bodies such as ABRSM, Trinity College London, Rockschoo; academic qualifications offered by Rockschoo across NVQ levels; and similar qualifications in music technology.
- 2 The QCF is a credit transfer system for qualifications, using eight levels to differentiate the equivalences of qualifications. GCSE grades A–C are considered to be Level 2 qualifications, Level 3 accommodates A-level examinations, and Level 4 marks the beginning of undergraduate study. See <http://www.accreditedqualifications.org.uk/qualifications-and-credit-framework-qcf.html> (accessed 14 May 2018).
- 3 Throughout this article, the term ‘A-level’ will refer to those known currently as A2 specifications, distinguishing these from the AS-level. AS-levels are no longer an intermediary certificate taken after one year of study on the way to A2 level, instead representing a standalone qualification. Thus, A2 levels will also cease to exist and will become standalone A-levels. It also be noted that Scotland has its own system of Scottish Highers, which fall beyond the scope of this article.
- 4 A more complete list of historical examination boards is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/replacement-exam-certificate/if-your-old-exam-board-no-longer-exists> (accessed 20 September 2016).
- 5 The need for and shape of the recent GCSE reforms were articulated first in speeches from Education Secretaries, and fit within a broader model of changes in performative measures in schools.
- 6 Legg (2012) does not explore the works chosen by examination boards in detail, only the composers selected. In a follow-up study I hope to offer a more detailed examination of the works themselves and the modes of inquiry.
- 7 20th-century composers are indicated by italics and those that appear on more than one syllabus are marked in bold.
- 8 OCR prescribe only one of these each year, demanding a deeper level of inquiry situated within broader contextual listening. The three composers listed here are those that will be compulsory for examinations in 2018–2020. It seems unlikely that the other boards will change their syllabuses significantly, and thus the comparisons drawn here are justified. Items indicated with ‘*’ from the AQA syllabus are part of an optional unit, but act as a useful point of comparison for Edexcel’s contemporary music selection. For Eduqas, contemporary music is divided into 20th- and 21st-century music. Candidates must choose from one of these two contemporary music units.
- 9 Recent work by Christopher Dingle on the body of historical works discussed in Olivier Messiaen’s *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d’Ornithologie* (*Treatise on Rhythm, Colour, and Ornithology*) raises some important questions about Messiaen’s own educational canon, and the possible dangers of deducing Messiaen’s musical tastes from these documents exclusively (see Dingle, 2017).
- 10 It should be noted that the works of these composers would have held great currency in the 1950s, though examiners still could have been more daring in their selection and acceptance of more experimental musical styles, particularly those emerging from the Darmstadt school.
- 11 Even where these composers do not feature as set works, they appear prominently on suggested listening lists: see, for example, OCR (2016).
- 12 It is interesting to note that the two works are different, and thus there is a degree of difference between the examination boards.

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