

Reasons to teach music: establishing a place in the contemporary curriculum

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Studies in the history of music education reveal much about the place and purpose of music in the changing curriculum. In this article, the ideas of some significant British music educators of the twentieth century are considered, in an evaluation of the apparent goals of music teaching that have been articulated over the decades. The connections between rationale and practice are discussed, with published ideas placed alongside the views of contemporary teachers in a small-scale questionnaire survey. The conclusion is proposed that school music, as a small part of the child's musical identity, must be modest in its intentions but ambitious in its provision.

Introduction: the contemporary context

Music can underline our campaign to raise standards and provide other valuable aspects of a child's education. It can be part of a cross-curricular approach, helping with numeracy, developing the talents of those with special needs as well as the gifted. It can also draw on the tremendous history of folk music and ballad writing to reinforce understanding of the history of our culture. (Blunkett, 1998)

So wrote David Blunkett, as Secretary of State for Education and Employment, concluding an article that, whilst pledging to support music in schools with 'a dedicated pot of money', managed also to make it quite clear that music ranked some way below 'standards in the 3Rs' in the Government's perception of educational priorities. Politicians allegedly choose their words carefully, especially on contentious subjects, and close analysis of Blunkett's closing remarks reveals much about the contemporary political view of education, and specifically of music's place in the curriculum. The now familiar 'campaign to raise standards' has been a battle-cry for education ministers for well over a decade, and the connection of music with numeracy is asserted with conviction by Blunkett, despite the conflicting evidence of recent research. Equal opportunities, cross-curricular links and balanced educational provision – the buzz words of late twentieth-century education – are all present in his statement. Add to that a confusion of historical and cultural allegiances, evident in the assumption that 'folk music and ballad writing' encompass the essential features of British culture, and we are left with a somewhat unsatisfactory rationale for music in the curriculum.

It is easy to mock politicians' attempts to enter the field of educational philosophy, but the problem of articulating ideals and directions for music education is no recent

phenomenon. Opinions on the place of music in the curriculum have been expressed throughout the history of music education, and common ground can be found across generations and continents (cf. Reimer, 1970/89). Confining the discussion to the wealth of British literature relevant to the purposes of this article, arguments can be found to promote the teaching of musical skills for their influence upon the child, the community, and the culture, with the emphasis varying in degrees according to prevalent teaching methods (cf. Pitts, 2000). For it is certainly the case that the way that music is taught is affected by, and affects in turn, its place in the curriculum and its role in the education of young people. Broadly speaking, music education has been advocated only rarely for the acquisition of subject knowledge, but rather for its desirable cultural influence, its preparation for the profitable use of leisure time, and its development of sensitivity and imagination. A historical perspective on the way these ideas have been exchanged across the decades will go some way to answering the central question: which of these reasons, if any, is sufficient to justify the place of music in the curriculum? This question, or at least the effort to answer it, ensures a vitality of debate in music education, as discussion of methods and practicalities is rooted in this sense of purpose and integrity.

Music as a desirable cultural influence

Blunkett's (1998) assertion that 'the history of folk music and ballad writing' is essential to the understanding of 'our' culture owes much to early twentieth-century education in Britain, when the predominance of singing and listening in the curriculum reflected a similar belief. Implicitly, it points to a style of teaching that is designed to instruct, presenting music as a fixed body of knowledge that children must acquire. The most efficient way to do this, as the early twentieth-century educators found, is through teacher-directed listening and singing lessons:

. . . surely the composer creates not for the performer but for the listener. The performer's intervention is necessary, of course, and, by applying his intelligence and musical feeling to the interpretation of the composer's imperfect notation, he even becomes a bit of the composer himself. But, with all his importance, the performer is really only the servant of the composer and the listener. *Music is composed to be heard and the performer is the means of its being heard.* Music is an ear-art, not a finger-and-voice art, though it calls for fingers and voices to give it utterance. So I see the matter! (Scholes, 1935: 122)

Scholes's views were expressed in his book *Music, the Child and the Masterpiece* (1935), a title which of itself reveals a reverence for the classical masterworks, and their beneficial influence on children. For Scholes, the listener held the ideal position in the musical process, able to absorb the beauty of this well-established canon, without getting involved in the more temperamental occupations of performing and composing. Music, therefore, was something that already *existed*, rather than something that demanded to be *created*, and this inherent passivity was to remain the premise of music education for many decades.

The schools of the early twentieth century were struggling to redefine their identity, as a slow increase in access to secondary education changed the nature of the school population. McCulloch (1998: 34) notes that the first attempts to devise a practical

curriculum for the 'working classes' included an emphasis on the 'cultural', which suggests that music had a role to play in the social and vocational aspirations of these newly educated classes. At whatever social level, music was a means of forging a collective identity, and the pre-war attempt to train listeners and singers to be able to participate in the thriving amateur musical scene had much to commend it as an educational goal. Music was not only a desirable cultural force, but offered protection from influences beyond the teacher's control:

the three R's will prove a feeble barrier against the vulgar and soul-destroying influences to which so many children are exposed, almost as soon as they are born. (MacPherson, 1923: 27)

This concept of music as a 'barrier' against untold degeneration draws strongly on the ideas of cultural (and, implicitly, social and moral) superiority that assured the place of music in the pre-war curriculum. MacPherson (1922; 1923), whose writings were principally concerned with the systematic teaching of musical knowledge, particularly through appreciation classes, would apparently take issue with today's political emphasis on literacy and numeracy in education, supporting instead the argument that music and the arts have something unique to offer in education. A definition of this 'uniqueness', which connects the social, cultural and individual purposes of music teaching, has remained elusive throughout the century, and the continued attempts to clarify it will be discussed later in this article.

The belief in music as a positive cultural influence continued into the post-war years of compulsory secondary schooling, particularly amongst those who favoured traditional teaching methods and curriculum content:

The aim of musical education . . . is not so much to train the singer or instrumentalist, as to restore the belief that music is as much an element in culture as a literature or a science – and that it cannot be disregarded or neglected. (Winn, 1954: 3)

Winn's somewhat defensive tone highlights the shifting parameters of music in education in the 1950s and onwards, as the move towards comprehensive schooling coincided with the expansion of popular music. The culture was changing, and the complacent view that music, particularly classical music, was a desirable part of adult life had to be reconsidered.

As gramophone records and radio broadcasts became more widely available, the notion of musical 'taste' was carried forward into the debate surrounding popular music in the classroom, as teachers grappled with the question of who, or what, was shaping their pupils' musical identities. Changes to the examination system, including the introduction of the more flexible Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE), provided further challenges to the knowledge-based curriculum that had dominated up to now, allowing those teachers who chose to recognise popular music in schools to construct their own syllabuses (cf. Farmer, 1979). World musics were to complicate the issue still further (cf. Vulliamy & Lee, 1982), and in the last quarter of the century, the simplistic construction of music in the curriculum that sustained years of appreciation and performance teaching has become increasingly outmoded. It is no longer sufficient to say that music is a desirable cultural influence; 'music' and 'culture' require careful definition (as indeed they always did), and the dominance of the teacher's world over that of the child is challenged. Small (1977/80)

suggests that schools in general are reluctant to question these implicit definitions, and his comments are certainly applicable to music:

In a school, pupils are taken away from their experience of the world (which even at the age of five is considerable) and experience instead only the hermetic world of the classroom and playground. If they are successful in school, they may even learn a great deal about the world, but, successful or not, their experience of it is seriously impaired; we have produced a generation who know more about the world, and experience it less, than perhaps any other generation in human history. (Small, 1977/80: 192)

Blunkett's (1998) statement, with which this article began, illustrates that the 'cultural' focus of music is still believed by some to have a valid function within the curriculum. It is evident, however, that it cannot stand alone, and that the induction of the listener into the classical and national repertoire that served the purposes of early twentieth-century teachers and pupils is no longer sufficient to justify music's place on the timetable. The complexity of such cultural arguments is now openly acknowledged, and music as a school subject cannot rest so heavily on a contested 'masterworks' view of the curriculum. Undoubtedly, teachers still aim to introduce children to a lively and varied repertoire, but for a rationale that is more relevant to today's pupils, we must look to arguments that address the impact of music teaching on individual lives, rather than for the collective social good.

Music for life and leisure

The concept of music as a subject which prepares young people to have fulfilling lives outside work as adults also has a long history, and is partly connected with the cultural and social impetus to introduce children to music. In their *Handbook of Suggestions for Teachers* (1927), the Board of Education drew attention to the growth in performance and broadcasting in the preceding decades, attributing this in part to successful introductions to music at school level:

Subjects which can be made to subserve material ends are apt to be stressed in education, since their practical usefulness is patent to all. But when it is realised that education must take into account the whole man and aim at enriching his personality, and when the wise use of leisure is acknowledged as one of its chief objects, then the arts, and especially music, are seen to deserve generous recognition. (Board of Education, 1927: 239)

Music's place in the curriculum of the early twentieth century reflected its status as a leisure subject: it was linked with handicraft and gardening in the School Certificate (SSEC, 1932: 25), and still ranked below rural studies and physical education when the Newsom Committee discussed the 'practical subjects' some thirty years later (Ministry of Education, 1963: 139). The sense that music adds something to an otherwise utilitarian education still pervades contemporary thinking, with the National Curriculum Music Working Group making reference to the 'greatly enriched leisure pursuits' that a school grounding in music could offer (DES, 1991: 3). The same report refers to 'preparation for employment in the music profession, the music industries and teaching' (*ibid.*: 3), which, whilst true for a small but significant number of pupils, is in danger of becoming a circular argument; music

teachers are necessary in order to train future music teachers. Education as a preparation for life beyond school is a well-established premise, but as the Gulbenkian Foundation report on arts education so eloquently points out, the immediate effects of school experiences are just as important:

To see education only as a preparation for something that happens later, risks overlooking the needs and opportunities of the moment. Children do not hatch into adults after a secluded incubation at school. They are living their lives now. (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1982/89: 4)

Despite this fundamental weakness in the argument, support for music as a lifelong pursuit has remained high throughout the century, and the role of the performer, supported by the growth of the instrumental music services, has gained greater emphasis. The opportunity to participate in music, as a listener, performer or, more recently, a composer, is the driving force of this argument, with an implicit emphasis on skills and access over subject knowledge. The ability to be involved in music, at whatever level, competes with the reverence for music that was at the heart of the appreciation movement, although the sense of equipping children to live more fulfilling lives is the impetus for both.

Like the 'cultural' arguments surrounding music, the concept of music as leisure was complicated by the popular music debate of the 1960s and onwards. For the first time, many pupils inhabited a musical world that was perceived, not least by them, to be separate from the classically trained background of their music teachers, and so the disparity between 'school' and 'home' music became obvious. To an extent, the distinction had always existed, as is evident in one 1930s headmaster's hope that his pupils might 'persuade mother to buy a gramophone record other than a jazz tune' (Scholes, 1935: 234). Apparent generational conflict was nothing new, but the supremacy of the 'school' view was being increasingly challenged by children who had growing control over their access to a wide range of popular musics. The irony that music teachers should be 'preparing' children for a leisure activity that many already pursued independently was not lost on the Newsom committee, which highlighted the growing divergence of musical interests and behaviour between school and home:

Out of school, adolescents are enthusiastically engaged in musical self-education. They crowd the record shops at weekends, listening and buying, and within the range of their preferences, they are often knowledgeable and highly critical of performance. (Ministry of Education, 1963: 139)

This description, with the accompanying information that music ranked very low in most children's curriculum preferences, has haunted music teachers ever since. Ross has suggested that the problem persists, warning teachers against 'the academic invasion of a highly personal musical space' (1995: 189). Perhaps the caution ought to be against generalisation, both in the assumption that all children since the 1960s have been ardent pop music fans, and in the belief that musical leisure is a desirable goal for everyone.

The idea that music is relevant for all children underpins the place of music in the curriculum today, and fuels opposition to any government attempts to reduce music provision in the name of a 'streamlined' curriculum. Associated arguments tend to focus upon the extra-musical benefits of the subject; 'transferable skills' in today's jargon. As so

often, this is nothing new, and in a series of lectures published in 1905, Mills, a music inspector and teacher, disputed the common assumption that lessons had relevance only for those with a recognised talent:

The concentration of purpose, the clearness of thought, the untiring energy combined with ceaseless patience, the quick and eclectic sympathy needed for and created by the earnest, persevering study of music make it a valuable means of training for the young. (Mills, 1905: 17)

Mills highlights the non-musical outcomes of successful music teaching as being universally applicable; 'the acquisition of knowledge' takes second place to 'the discipline and training of the character' (*ibid.*: 17). This is 'music for life', rather than specifically for leisure; a character-forming occupation, which impacts upon the social development implicit in the cultural arguments of Scholes (1935) and others.

As the sources and discussion so far have shown, reasons for teaching music are interconnected throughout the educational theory and practice of the twentieth century. Scholes (1935) and other proponents of the music appreciation movement focused on the benefits to society of teaching music, whilst the educational reports discussed above asserted the long-term advantages to children, which could be more cynically interpreted as a desire for 'value for money'. Such educational returns are also socially motivated, to the extent that they are expected to reach full effectiveness after the child has left school and is participating in music as an adult. The final reason to be discussed here, music for emotional and imaginative development, takes up an aspect that has been present in both of the other categories, by focusing the debate more closely on the immediate experience of music for individual children.

Music for emotional and imaginative development

Whilst the teaching of music for leisure and for cultural understanding had specific ends in mind, leading to a fairly narrow definition of lesson content and even repertoire, music as a means of expressive or imaginative growth transcended these practicalities, and formed the rationale for writers with otherwise contrasting views. This last reason for teaching music is perhaps the most ambitious, proposing as it does the development of the individual child, rather than focusing more closely on subject knowledge or skills. It relies upon some relinquishment of the teacher's formerly dominant role, emphasising experience above tuition, and moving away from the reverence for music that is implicit in the more culture-orientated views of the curriculum.

Some of the most far-reaching views come from the earliest years of the twentieth century, as isolated voices rejected the prevalent view that education was a preparation for life and asserted the immediate benefits of learning music. Yorke Trotter's strong belief in the need for balance between emotional and technical responses to music, with the 'feeling side' of the child given priority over the 'intellectual side' (1914: 11), led to a clear statement of the purpose of music in the curriculum:

If we consider that music is only a refined, pleasing diversion, or an elegant accomplishment, we must admit that its place in education can at best be only a very subordinate one. But if we take the view that art is the expression of what I may call the inner nature, that nature which feels, which has aspirations and ideals, which reaches out to something beyond the material

needs of this world, we must claim for our art of music a very high position in the scheme of education. (Yorke Trotter, 1914: 134)

This visionary support for music in education (c.f. Pitts, 1998) placed the child above the subject with a confidence that few contemporary writers shared. Already rejecting the view of music as an 'elegant accomplishment' that was to prevail for a good many more years, Yorke Trotter values music at an almost spiritual level, demanding the highest integrity and commitment from the teacher. The detail of Yorke Trotter's teaching ideas is not so different from those of his contemporaries, suggesting that motivation and intention were of greater concern to him than specific curriculum content: an interesting thought, given that most educational debate tends to focus on the detail of the syllabus, rather than the broader reasons for its existence.

The Cambridgeshire Council of Music Education (1933), which was formed to discuss the relevance of music to the wider community, echoed Yorke Trotter's words when it stated that 'music is to be regarded not as a mere means of earning a livelihood, nor yet as a mere distraction for spare time, but as a guiding principle to regulate and illumine all the activities of our existence' (1933: 16). For the Cambridgeshire Committee, this view supported a belief in a practical music education, fostering links between schools and community through accessible performance opportunities. Thirty years later a similar emphasis on the value of music in education was expressed by Brocklehurst:

Most obvious are the opportunities music can provide as a means of self-expression, for awakening and developing the imagination and for emotional and spiritual development; the fact that the aesthetic subjects begin to make a special appeal to children during their adolescent years makes it all the more deplorable that music should so often cease to be represented on the time-table after the second or third form. (Brocklehurst, 1962: 6)

These ideas bring with them an unfamiliar vocabulary, with terms such as 'aesthetic' and 'self-expressive' becoming commonplace in the broader arts debate of the 1970s and following. Books such as Witkin's *The Intelligence of Feeling* (1974) were to create new tensions for music teaching, with claims that arts teaching should be about self-discovery and expression; the resolution of 'sensate disturbances' in 'reflexive responses' (Witkin, 1974: 15). Music sits uncomfortably in these discussions of content-based meaning, being essentially an art that achieves its emotional import through tension and resolution achieved over time, rather than by communicating specific messages. This is a necessarily glib rendering of a complex argument, but makes the point that music education cannot afford to base its sense of purpose on the careless employment of 'aesthetic' terminology. To guarantee such deep experiences of music within the essentially false environment of a timetabled classroom lesson is a tall order. Emotional discovery and understanding might well result from the experience of music in schools – although many have asserted otherwise (cf. Fletcher, 1987/89) – but to specify this as a curriculum objective needs careful consideration, and even more careful implementation.

Conclusions: the contemporary perspective

Each of the rationales discussed above illuminates different aspects of music education that, to a certain extent, are compatible with the balance of listening, performing and

composing that form the contemporary curriculum. Music as a cultural influence, dependent largely on the communication of an established repertoire or, more recently, on the introduction to a wide variety of musics, can arguably be most effectively taught through listening and appraising. Music for life and leisure, on the other hand, implies participation and performing skills, whilst music for emotional and imaginative development places greater emphasis on composition and improvisation. The ideas are compatible then, within the context of a balanced curriculum, but music is a holistic experience, and it is too simplistic to divide the rationale in this way. The search for a general goal for music education will inevitably fail if it assumes that the aims and outcomes will be the same for all children. And yet a sense of purpose is undoubtedly necessary, for the teacher's sanity as much as for the children's benefit:

It is clearly essential for the teacher of music to be convinced that music is an indispensable constituent of a truly liberal education. Such a conviction will determine the enthusiasm, vitality and quality of his teaching and prevent his being unduly discouraged by inadequate time-table, accommodation and equipment provision or overwhelmed and exhausted by a wide range of extra-curricular musical activities. (Brocklehurst, 1971: 3)

Paynter (1997: 18) puts this more succinctly when he states that 'Believing in what we teach is what it is all about'. However it is expressed, the sense of commitment that individual teachers bring to their work is vital to the continued success and development of music education.

To gain the contemporary perspective on this historical research, I asked a small sample of ten secondary-school music teachers to complete a questionnaire that asked 'Why did you become a music teacher?', 'What do you see as the main purpose(s) of music in the curriculum?' and 'How do you set about achieving these aims in your everyday lesson planning and teaching?' Out of respect for the fact that teachers are inundated with paperwork the questionnaire was brief, but the replies received were detailed and thoughtful, suggesting that the questions had relevance to the way the teachers approached their work. To the first question, answers ranged from 'I was inspired by my own music teaching' to 'For a steady income!' with many references in-between to a love of music, an interest in teaching and a desire to make use of existing musical skills. Becoming a music teacher was, for most, a practical career decision, but answers to the second question, on the purposes of music in the curriculum, revealed a greater depth of commitment. Answers here fell into three broad categories: the development of specific musical skills, notably performing and composing; the acquisition of knowledge, contributing to a breadth of education; and the fostering of certain personal qualities, including concentration, organisation, self-expression and confidence. Answers to the final question were closely related to these categories, with references to target setting, differentiation and establishing high standards as ways of ensuring an effective music education.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these practising teachers make more reference to musical skills and lesson content than did the published authors discussed earlier: this is realism, not rhetoric (cf. Cox, 1999). An extensive study would be necessary to see if these tendencies are replicated more widely, and it would also be interesting to ask teachers to give their own reactions to the historical texts and their perceived relevance to contemporary practice. Whilst some phrases, such as 'developing social skills' and 'breadth of

education' are common to most of the teachers' replies, no single rationale emerges to solve this troublesome question of why music is in the curriculum at all. We are faced once more, then, with evidence that music in education has a diversity of roles, and it is perhaps a fitting reproach to the current political obsession with educational standards (and standardisation) to accept this, and to declare the search for a definitive reason redundant.

The reality is that none of the reasons discussed here seems sufficient justification on its own, and this in itself points to the answer. To expect music in the curriculum to do the same thing for all children is a false premise: what pupils encounter in their school music lessons impacts upon different ability levels, different experiences, different perceptions of school and of music. Music offers the opportunity for every child to move on from where they are, in skills, understanding and imagination. The use they make of their school music experience is beyond the teacher's control, and rightly so, given that the immediate and long-term effects of music are greatest when the child is fully involved and learning independently. The function of music in the curriculum is a facilitative one, where lessons are a source of learning and experience that form only part of the child's musical world and identity. Teachers should present their own musical beliefs and experiences with integrity, and the rest will follow: children will find their own sense of purpose if teachers are committed to theirs. Music is an important part of the curriculum, with a role as indefinable as the place that music holds in so many lives. We need to be modest about the place of school music in the overall musical development of the child, and yet be ambitious about its provision, resourcing and variety, if all children are to have the opportunity to discover its potential for themselves.

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