

## The relationship between the piano teacher in private practice and music in the National Curriculum

**Elizabeth Goddard**

*goddard@1oldlane.freeseve.co.uk*

*This article, based on research for an MA (December 2000), investigates the connections between the private teacher and music in the National Curriculum. In the process present perceptions and practice are explored to gain a clearer understanding of the situation as it is today. Various ways of improving communications between schools and private teachers are looked at, with a view to helping the pupil feel that school and private lessons are working in harmony. From the research it has been found that an awareness exists of the need to develop teaching philosophies that relate the private lesson to music in the National Curriculum.*

### Introduction

As a private piano teacher I am aware of the gulf that traditionally divides my profession from that of the school music teacher. The piano teacher is seen as the purveyor of keyboard skills, based on a comprehensive knowledge and ability in scale and arpeggio playing, plus a repertoire that encompasses composers from the sixteenth century to the modern day. Success is usually judged by the number of examination certificates amassed. In my experience this has not changed in the last 50 years.

In the 1980s the school curriculum underwent a dramatic change with the introduction of a hands-on approach to learning enshrined in the three concepts of performing, composing and listening. In the current curriculum (DfEE, 1999) all pupils are required to perform, compose and appraise, these interrelated skills enabling them to listen to music and to apply their knowledge and understanding.

My aims are to identify any links that already exist between the private teacher's lessons and pupils' school music lessons, and to consider strategies that might be employed to promote greater understanding between school and private teaching.

Data for my research were gathered from questionnaires to private piano teachers and from interviews with the school music teachers of my pupils. The objective of the questionnaire was to establish the general picture; to find out where private teachers teach and how many pupils they have; to discover if private teachers know the requirements of the National Curriculum for Music, which elements of the National Curriculum are included in the private lesson, and whether private teachers consider their pupils' school music experience relevant to their own teaching. Finally I wanted to find out whether any existing liaison between the private teacher and the school is seen to be helpful. The response was exceptionally high, 43 out of 47 questionnaires being returned.

Interviews were the preferred method of gathering information from the school music teachers, as I felt personal contact was important, and in talking face to face it is possible to adapt to the situation and pick up on points made by the interviewee. Interviews were held with seven teachers, three in secondary schools, one in an independent girls' school and two in middle schools. Of the six primary schools contacted only one, an independent girls' school, agreed to an interview. In my initial contact with the teachers I had suggested interviews should be between 20 and 30 minutes in length. However, two interviews lasted approximately one hour as the teachers had earmarked more time and were happy to continue. My aim was to get an overview of the music in each school and to discover the perception of the private teacher held by the school music teacher. I also wanted to find out if there was any liaison between the two and, if not, how the situation might be improved to the advantage of the pupil.

In this article reference to the private teacher means primarily the piano teacher. However, much of what is said covers the wider spectrum of instrumental teaching, and in most cases the differentiation is of little or no significance.

### **The private teachers: who are they?**

My research centred on 42 private piano teachers mostly in the Leeds/Bradford area of the UK. Some were members of professional bodies such as the Incorporated Society of Musicians (ISM) and the European Piano Teachers Association (EPTA); others advertised locally. I found that the majority of them do all their teaching at home. Of the remainder, some teachers do some of their teaching in schools and one or two visit their pupils' homes. The Associated Board review (2000) bears this out: 81 per cent were found to teach mainly at home, with 28 per cent visiting their pupils.

In my survey the number of pupils each teacher had varied considerably, the lowest being 4 and the highest 60. This is no surprise as teaching may be undertaken for many reasons. Those for whom teaching is their livelihood need a large number of pupils in order to achieve this. Others fit teaching in around their playing engagements, and, for some, teaching is more a pastime pursued for its enjoyment. These teachers may have only a handful of pupils. One teacher, who had nine pupils, said she taught beginners up to grades 1 or 2. Many, though, will look on music as a part-time occupation that can be conveniently fitted into their daily routine. The Associated Board (2000) found that there appeared to be 'a wide-ranging but constant spread in the number of pupils that teachers taught in a year'. The average is down to 36, as opposed to 50 taught in 1994.

### **The private teacher's knowledge of the National Curriculum for Music (Figure 1)**

Most private teachers feel they know the requirements for GCSE and A-level, but few know what their pupils are learning at Key Stages 1, 2 or 3. Finding out is not easy: questioning

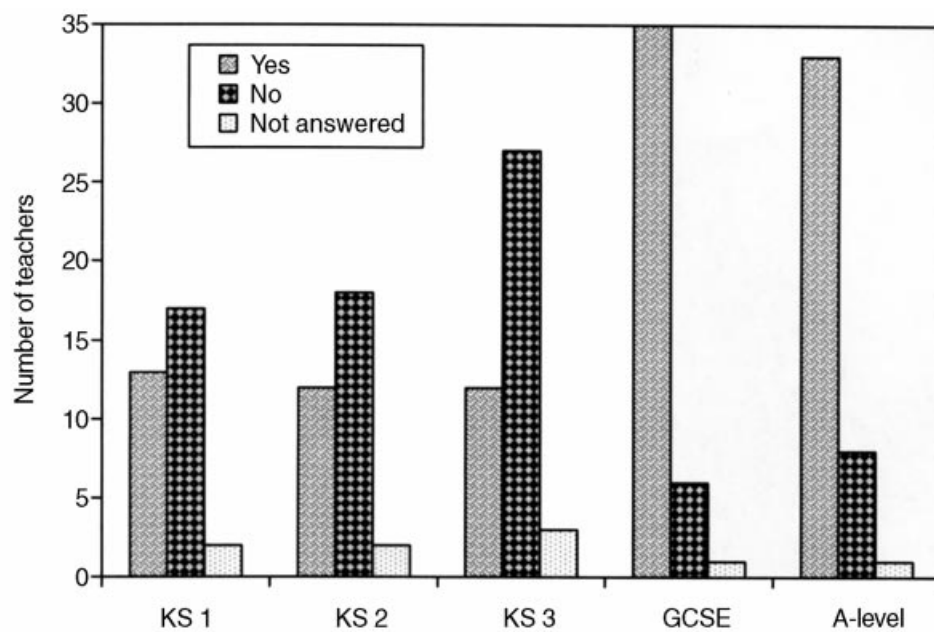


Fig. 1 Private teachers' knowledge of school curriculum requirements.

pupils rarely gives an accurate picture and, as I found out from the interviews, what is taught may vary considerably from one school to another.

### Elements included in the private lesson (Figure 2)

All the elements listed in Figure 2 are part of the National Curriculum for Music. The aim was to find out which ones private teachers considered important to their lessons.

**Listening** was included in all 42 teachers' lessons. Pupils listen, not only to their own playing, but also to their teacher's when demonstrating a point, or when they play duets together. They may also listen to a tape or CD to hear different styles of music or playing.

**Playing music by living composers** was included in 41 teachers' lessons, with only one not doing so. Teachers of beginners usually prefer to use tutor books rather than make up their own curriculum. This tradition has persisted since the beginning of the twentieth century when Walter Carroll's *Scenes at a Farm* was first published and is continued today by Carol Barratt with her 'Chester the Frog' series and by Joanna MacGregor and her recently published *Piano World*. As pupils progress a wealth of music is available for them by composers such as Richard Rodney Bennett, Charles Camilleri, Peter Maxwell-Davies, John McCabe, and many others.

**Performing** and **Appraising** were contained in the lessons of 40 of the teachers. Performing occurs every time a pupil plays to another person. Normally playing to the teacher is not seen as a stressful experience, although there are pupils who find it difficult at first. It is when pupils have to perform at music festivals, examinations or concerts that

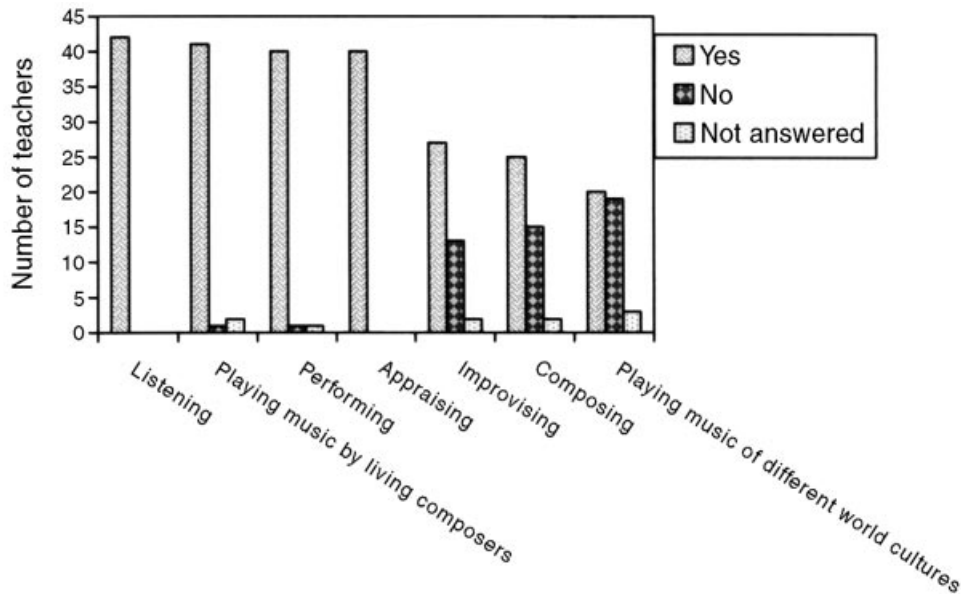


Fig. 2 Elements included in private music lessons.

nerves can become an inhibiting factor. Careful preparation for such occasions is most important and has to be addressed by both teacher and pupil.

Two teachers did not answer the question about appraising. This may suggest they were unsure of the meaning of the word. One commented, ‘Appraising what?’ As I found in my review of literature on the National Curriculum, many teachers believe appraising to be a form of assessment *of* the pupil rather than *by* the pupil. An interesting study was conducted by the Research into Applied Musical Perception Unit (RAMP) at Huddersfield University. After identifying nine areas within which appraising occurs, the following definition was formed:

- Appraising music is an activity which is carried out by pupils in their composing, performing and listening.
- It happens when they: listen purposefully to music; respond thoughtfully to music; think actively about music; make choices and evaluate judgements about music; use an accumulated experience to do this.
- It is a way of coming to know and understand the processes involved in music and musical thinking. (Pratt, 1995: 14–17)

The current curriculum (DfEE, 1999) gives the following definition under the Key Stage 3 requirements: ‘Pupils should be taught how to analyse, evaluate and compare pieces of music; to communicate ideas and feelings about music using expressive language and music vocabulary to justify their own opinions; and to adapt their own musical ideas and refine and improve their own and others’ work.’ All this can be covered in the private lesson.

**Improvising** was included in lessons by 27 of the 42 teachers and **composing** by 25.

Improvising and composing are closely linked, the first often leading to the second. In our Western musical tradition we assume music will be written down, but it has not always been so and many cultures today have no written music. Improvising used to be part of performance in the eighteenth century. Today performers such as Django Bates, Carol Liam and Joanne MacGregor all use improvisation. Including composing as part of the lesson not only gives pupils a sense of personal achievement, it helps them to understand the structure of the music and is one way of learning how to write music.

**Playing music of different world cultures** was contained in the lessons of 20 teachers; 19 said they did not include it. 'Different world cultures' refers to music from India, Africa or China. As the piano is not part of these cultures one would not expect to see this type of musical education included in the private piano lesson. The inclusion of music from the other side of the Atlantic, such as jazz, pop or rock, is more likely to occur.

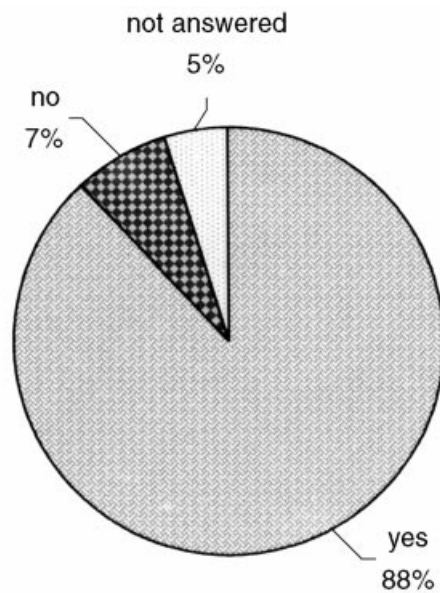


Fig. 3 The percentage of private teachers who thought school music was relevant to their own pupils' work.

### **The relevance of school music to the private teacher (Figure 3)**

Most private teachers felt that their pupils' school music experience was relevant to their own teaching. Remarks showed that this varied in extent from 'to a small degree' to 'extremely important'. Some teachers thought there is 'little cross-fertilisation' in the early years, while others drew attention to the variability of music teaching from school to school, particularly at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3. The perception of music within the school is of great importance to the development of the pupil. One respondent commented that if music is seen only as a 'passive time-filler' then certain skills learned in the private lesson

could be seen as an embarrassment and the pupil might be 'stigmatised through peer pressure'. On the positive side, private teachers may discover that their pupils have other musical skills that may not have surfaced in the private lesson. This happened to me once when I heard one of my pupils playing in a backing group for a school musical they had composed themselves. It showed me her potential, both in improvising and in ensemble work. Pupils may also be motivated by activities in the classroom, which then stimulate their instrumental playing. Several teachers felt that a more holistic approach to learning music could only benefit the pupil. Amongst the school music teachers I talked to there was general agreement that pupils who learn an instrument have a much better understanding of music and can be expected to achieve a higher assessment level than their classmates who do not have the opportunity. However, school music teachers do not always know which pupils learn privately. This raises the question of communication.

Hallam (1998: 322) notes four areas where information may need to be exchanged:

- Progress
- Examination entries
- Examination requirements
- Concert performances.

#### Contact between the school and the private teacher (Figure 4)

Private teachers were asked if schools informed them when their pupils performed at school concerts. The majority said they were never informed. However, more than half of them said they had no problem with this. Perhaps this implies a certain lack of interest. It is apparent from the comments of those who experienced problems that there are serious concerns. One of the most obvious is that insufficient notice is given for preparation. This

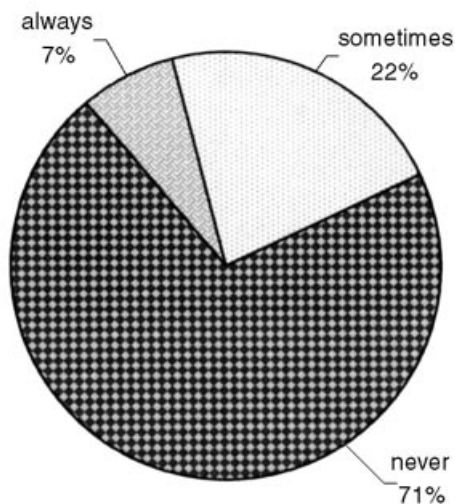


Fig. 4 The percentage of private teachers informed about school concerts.

may not be so important if the performance is within the class, but it is a very different situation at a school concert with parents and governors present. An insecure performance, or worse still a breakdown, reflects badly not only on the pupil, who may lose confidence, but on the private teacher. I found that it was assumed by the school teacher that pupils would inform their instrumental teachers if they had been asked to play at school, and surprise was expressed that little, if any, information ever got relayed in this way. Should we really be expecting so much of our pupils? At present the onus is on the private teacher to make contact with the school, but as I found from the questionnaire, although private teachers say they are prepared to contact schools, the majority do not, even when it matters most at GCSE level. This is often the culmination of the pupil's school music experience, when pupils are required to demonstrate their ability to perform on an instrument of their choice, both as a soloist and in ensemble playing. With school music teachers I raised the possibility of setting up a database of private teachers in schools. There was general agreement that this would be a good idea and would make communication easier. In three of the schools the pupils' files said whether or not they had private lessons, so to add the teacher's name and contact number would not be difficult.

**Access to the school music calendar for private teachers (Figure 5)**

Thirty-four private teachers thought it would be helpful to have information about the school calendar to help plan their pupils' work, not only for concerts or festivals, but also for examinations.

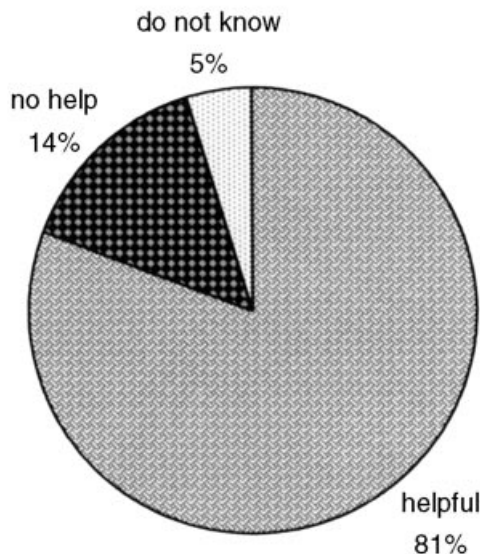


Fig. 5 Access to school music calendar for private teachers.

### **Liaising with schools**

My question to private teachers about liaising with schools referred specifically to GCSE Music, where pupils are required to demonstrate their ability at performing on an instrument of their choice, both as a soloist and in ensemble. In view of this I felt it was the most likely time for the teacher to communicate with the school, as they are involved, directly or indirectly, with the preparation of the pupil. Direct involvement occurs when there is liaison with the school music staff, checking the requirements of the syllabus and the dates of the examinations. Indirect involvement is in the development of the pupil's skills, but without any communication with the school as to the requirements for the examinations.

I found that two-thirds of those private teachers who teach within a school liaise with the school music teachers, as opposed to one-third of those who teach at home. Being in the school one might expect it to be easier to locate and talk to music staff, but this is not always the case. Evans (1985) found that the visiting instrumental teacher has little time to talk with school colleagues and can 'rarely feel closely involved with the school'. The schedules of both private and school music teachers are usually so full, it is difficult to find a spare minute when both are free. It is possible that some teachers who do not liaise have no pupils entered for GCSE Music – they may not be in that age group. This point cannot be confirmed from the answers given. Without knowing how many teachers had pupils entered for GCSE, it is impossible to draw any conclusions as to why so many teachers have no contact with schools.

The results from the questionnaire show there is a willingness among many private teachers to liaise with schools, although this happens little at present. The results suggest that the lack of communication might be due to a perception that music in school has little to do with the private teacher's curriculum. Another factor may be the lack of guidelines on liaison between instrumental teachers and school music teachers. The study shows that many of the elements of the school curriculum are already part of private teachers' lessons. An awareness of this would perhaps help private teachers to take a greater interest in what their pupils do at school, so creating a more holistic learning experience for the pupils.

### **Recent developments – towards a more holistic view**

Gane (1996) researched the need for instrumental teachers to take on some of the opportunities that the National Curriculum presents, in particular the need for a music-centred approach encompassing improvising, composing and appraising as central activities, in addition to performing. She focuses on the essential principles and outlooks that contribute to shaping a more coherent picture for the instrumental pupil, and identifies some of the issues that arise in considering the National Curriculum and the private teacher's curriculum. Gane points out that although instrumental teachers can design their own schemes of work with 'attainment targets' and 'end-of-key-stage statements' of learning, the key stages can never be an 'exact framework' because pupils begin and end learning at different ages. However, with regard to any potential map of progress she suggests that it should show:



- Length of time the pupil has been learning
- Standard of both the progress and the achievement that have been reached
- Level of work that represents the normal learning outcomes for the time the pupil has been learning
- The National Curriculum stage and the age of the pupil.

In considering 'music of different times and cultures and by well-known composers and performers, past and present' (DoE, 1995), Gane observes that repertoire in the instrumental lesson has traditionally been shaped by external examinations, tutor books and other published material as well as music from the culture and style most familiar to the teacher. This has tended to favour Western classical music from 1680 to 1900 and music in printed form at the expense of jazz and popular music (much of which is improvised), contemporary classical and popular music, as well as music from non-Western traditions. As Gane says, 'a shift of perspective is needed to absorb different stylistic and cultural traditions into the instrumental lesson'. Areas that need to be considered include:

- Aural approaches to repertoire/material to be equally valid to the printed note
- The necessity for teachers to recognise that they do not have to be skilled in a particular style in order to explore it with their pupils
- A choice of repertoire other than that provided by traditional sources
- A willingness to learn from the skills and interests of children and their communities for potential material. (Gane, 1996: 53)

The practical steps that can follow include:

- Curriculum plans can be circulated by teachers
- Pupils' profiles of work can include progress and achievement from the private sector
- Instrumental teachers' schedules in schools can include more class-based support
- Tapes/material/ideas can be shared between the instrumental and class spheres. (ibid.: 64)

*Shared Music Teaching* (ISM, 1997), which is intended for school and private music teachers who teach the same pupils, is based on the premise that a pupil's knowledge is informed by a variety of sources that cannot be 'compartmentalised'. Teachers from both sides need to be aware of their respective contributions to the pupil's musical education. These are some of the points made in the introduction:

- Very few private teachers are unaffected by the school life of their pupils. It can influence their timetables, what they teach, their pupils' general approach to work, and the reasons why their pupils came to them in the first place. Private teachers can help themselves enormously if they see their work as part of the whole framework of their pupils' education.
- School music teachers need to be aware of the pattern of pupils' lives outside school, of the activities that parents encourage as part of their children's personal development and which might involve other, independent teachers.
- This code of practice acknowledges a need for more communication on all 'sides' in order for it to become apparent that there are, in fact, no sides. The real dialogue to be

developed is about the relationship between general and specialist music teaching. The educational aspects need to be discussed – the why, what, how and when of each pupil's musical education.

- The best interests of the pupils are central to the principle of this code of practice. It is hoped all pupils' music teachers will come to view their work as a contribution to a common goal – not in the sense of having to share pupils, but in the far deeper sense of shared music teaching.

In *A Common Approach* (1998), the Federation of Music Services (FMS) and the National Association of Music Educators (NAME) prepared a framework for an instrumental and vocal curriculum. It 'attempts to provide a common approach to planning a coherent and progressive curriculum' that 'complements and reflects' the requirements of the National Curriculum. Whilst this document is aimed primarily at the instrumental teacher in school, the writers hope it will be helpful to private teachers as well. The overall aim is to help maintain and develop high-quality instrumental and vocal teaching and learning. The specific aims are:

- To establish broad and balanced programmes of study for the teaching and learning of music through instruments/voice which complement and reflect the requirements of the National Curriculum for Music.
- To provide a framework for instrumental/vocal teachers to develop schemes of work which are consistent in expectations and approach.
- To work towards agreed levels and standards of pupil attainment, i.e. quality of playing/singing.
- To develop commonly acceptable criteria and procedures for assessing pupils. (FMS/NAME, 1998: 2)

Five programmes of study are mapped out, each exemplifying 'a layer of attainment which builds on and incorporates previous learning'. Within this framework teaching objectives and outcomes are delineated. These statements are designed to be helpful in:

- Planning schemes of work for particular instruments/voice
- Identifying the focus of teaching and learning for particular lessons
- Identifying criteria for assessment
- Providing appropriate information to pupils, parents, colleagues and schools. (ibid.:5)

## Conclusion

Recent research and the publication of documents from various professional bodies, as well as articles in professional journals and music magazines, have shown that there is an interest in the development of better relations between the private instrumental teacher and the music teacher in school. The need has largely arisen from the developments in the school curriculum over the last ten years, which have brought instrumental skills to the forefront with the introduction of a more practical approach based on performing, composing and appraising. The importance of this to the private teacher is in the change of both teaching style and lesson content, shifting from the overall emphasis on 'performance skills' to a wider curriculum including 'composing and appraising'. It should be said that,

in promoting a shared approach, instrumental skills are still vitally important. However, in relating some of the key statements from the National Curriculum to the instrumental teacher's work one can provide a shared approach in which the pupil can learn and enjoy music.

### References

- ASSOCIATED BOARD OF THE ROYAL SCHOOLS OF MUSIC (2000) *Making Music 2000*. London: ABRSM.
- BARRATT, C. (1976–8) *Chester's Piano Books*. Chester Music.
- CARROLL, W. *Scenes at a Farm*. London: Forsyth.
- DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (DoE) (1995) *Music in the National Curriculum for England*. London: HMSO.
- DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT (DfEE) (1999) *The National Curriculum for England: Music*. London: HMSO.
- EVANS, C. (1985) 'Attitudes and change in instrumental teaching', part 1. *Music Teacher*, **64**, 5, 12–13. London: Rhinegold Publishing.
- FEDERATION OF MUSIC SERVICES/NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF MUSIC EDUCATORS (FMS/NAME) (1998) *A Framework for an Instrumental and Vocal Curriculum: A Common Approach*. London: Faber Music Ltd.
- GANE, P. (1996) 'Instrumental teaching and the National Curriculum: a possible partnership?' *British Journal of Music Education*, **13**, 1, 49–65.
- HALLAM, S. (1998) *Instrumental Teaching*. Oxford: Heinemann.
- INCORPORATED SOCIETY OF MUSICIANS (ISM) (1997) *Shared Music Teaching: A Code of Practice*. London: ISM.
- MACGREGOR, J. (2000) *Piano World*. London: Faber Music Ltd.
- PRATT, G. (1995) 'Performing; composing; listening and appraising'. In George Pratt & John Stephens (Eds.), *Teaching Music in the National Curriculum*, 9–22. Oxford: Heinemann.