B. J. Music. Ed. 2008 25:3, 237–243
doi:10.1017/S0265051708008073
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Reflections on progress in musical education



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This article raises questions about three features of musical education that have been explored in the pages of the British Journal of Music Education (BJME) over the last 25 years: the assessment of creative work; the nurturing of an elite among young musicians; the uses of electronics in music classrooms. The article suggests that teacher-based assessments of pupils' compositional work rarely promote deeper understanding because pupils learn better by considering the extent to which they have fulfilled their own musical intentions. The dilemma of serving the needs of all pupils while attending to the musical needs of the most gifted musically is explored, and it is suggested that, inter alia, *pupils aged 12 should have a strong voice in their choices within arts education. Electronic keyboards have become sufficiently embedded in schools for broad judgements to be made. There are few signs that basic electronic keyboards offer expressive opportunities of value whereas the use of computers in support of composition have led to results of quality that merit close attention.*

As a newly appointed university lecturer in 1976, I was expected to study for a PhD degree. My professorial head of department asked me what question I wished to answer. That's what PhDs are all about, he explained. They provide answers to questions, not yet answered or maybe, never asked before. A master's degree gives students methodology and understanding of small-scale research but a PhD is different. It extends the boundaries of knowledge significantly. When you have completed your research you will be the world's greatest expert in that corner of knowledge, so said my professor.

The editors of the *BJME* are privileged in having access to so much research in music and musical education, much of it deriving from study for PhD degrees or from the theses themselves. However, few, if any of the PhD theses on musical education that I have read in full provide 'answers'. More, they offer informed opinion that only those as well-informed as the authors might challenge. PhD theses by three ex-editors of this journal, John Paynter, Piers Spencer and myself prove nothing, but offer compelling responses to the questions that the authors asked – well, that is so in the cases of Paynter and Spencer. I should not judge my own work so favourably.

As time passes, one's attitudes change. It is widely stated (if not believed) that wisdom attends age. Having entered my golden evening, I find that I am no better at providing answers than I was when younger, and I realised rather late that I had not answered any particularly significant questions in my huge PhD thesis. Further, I find that few articles in learned journals provide convincing answers either. The reason for this gap in the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051708008073 Published online by Cambridge University Press

answer department stems from the absence of answers in the first place. Sometimes, no answers exist. (How long is a piece of string?) More interesting than the 'answers' that might emerge are the questions that are asked in the first instance, and the further questions that emerge consequently. That is what makes many articles in the BJME so interesting despite the convention of providing a 'closed' solution as a final flourish. The authors often ask intriguing questions even if their answers turn out to be equivocal. In this article, I shall ask three questions. I doubt that I will offer definitive answers, but I hope the thoughts might encourage further debate.

The first question is 'Can music-making be assessed?' (In this context I consider music-making to comprise performance and composition.) The immediate answer is 'Of course it can because, if it can't, we wouldn't be assessing it.' A veritable army of examiners traipse across the UK, indeed, across the globe to judge candidates in the practical examinations of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), TrinityGuildhall and others. Another army (well, a battalion maybe) of examiners award grades for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), British and Technician Education Council (BTEC), Advanced Supplementary Level (AS), Advanced Level '2' and other examinations. And in English schools, each child is given a 'level' in each of the subjects of the national curriculum at the ages of 7, 11 and 14, awarded by their teachers. One of the subjects is music.

Almost without exception, such assessments are 'criterion-referenced', that is, judgements are made in the light of criteria. The same is true of the practical examinations in instrumental playing and singing. For example, candidates taking a lower grade examination (grades 1–3) of the ABRSM are bound to gain 'pass' grades if their playing is continuous and rhythmically accurate. They will do better, i.e. gain merits or distinctions, if they play 'musically', for example, by paying attention to dynamics and other marks of expression.

The system seems to earn widespread acceptance in the realm of practical performance, but doubts arise when we try to assess composition. The criteria used in the national curriculum and GCSE examinations rest on assumptions that should be challenged. It is assumed that contrasts in *timbre*, variety in instrumentation and the development of musical ideas are essential for students to gain a high mark. This, in turn, suggests that *Syrinx* for solo flute by Debussy wouldn't attract a lot of marks (one timbre only). Nor would *Stimmen* by Stockhausen, since it is built on one chord throughout its considerable duration. Plenty of other established works might be penalised similarly.

At this point it is pertinent to refer to a course that I ran for teachers on the topic of assessing composition for the GCSE examination. I asked the participants to provide GCSE grades for two compositions without conferring with each other and without their being given any information on the composers or on the compositions. They assumed that the pieces were by pupils, and the grades they awarded varied widely; no-one gave the highest grade for either piece and many awarded rather low grades. After the exercise, I let them know that the pieces had been composed by Stravinsky and Stockhausen.

When we assess the musical achievements of ordinary pupils in ordinary schools we are entering a perilous area. The national curriculum 'levels' are almost meaningless in their abstraction. While teachers of music nationwide dutifully append 'levels' to their students' attainments, the ground becomes strewn with the emperor's new clothes. Colleagues inform

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me that equivalent practices and attendant doubts arise in the visual arts, also in dance and drama. (It is rather sad, perhaps, that because dance and drama are not regarded as subjects in their own right within the national curriculum, new 'unofficial' levels have been invented to provide some cod-legitimacy to the subjects.) The obvious purposelessness of such assessment is ample reason for its cessation, but pupils' musical education is further hindered by a significant wastage of time. There is a tendency among teachers of nearly all subjects to 'teach to the test', to carry out the test, to mark the results and then to conduct a post mortem. Having said that, there must be many teachers of music who resist such nonsense, who keep their heads below the parapet, and who hope they will not be discovered doing something sensible instead. If musical attainment is to be assessed, then some other ways of doing it might be considered, especially in the area of composition.

Music is an expressive art but 'expression' is virtually impossible to assess. If the basic ingredients of expressive playing are defined and measured, then their expressive impact is diminished. To 'note' that a performer has achieved a *crescendo* followed by a *decrescendo* poisons that moment successfully. How much more rewarding and exciting it is to *feel* the effects of such expressive nuances than it is to define them. The world seems to love *Bolero* by Ravel. In the full version, the work comprises a single *crescendo* lasting 15 minutes, stretching from *ppp* to *fff*. A fine performance of *Bolero* makes the sensitive listener almost ill with excitement, but knowledge of technical terms plays a small part in this tidal wave of emotion. For many listeners, it plays no part at all.

Judgements on pupils' compositions are equally and similarly treacherous. Marks given for 'expressive contrast', 'variety in timbre', 'coherence of form' etc. may be at least as damaging as they are constructive because, by awarding marks along such lines, the critic (or teacher) is expecting the composer to conform to preconceived yardsticks of compositional virtue before the work has begun. Most fugues by Bach are wonderful examples of concision and musical logic, but few of them offer the 'variety' that attracts high marks in the GCSE examination or gain the upper 'levels' within the national curriculum. Having enjoyed the privilege of observing hundreds of music teachers at work, I have come to the conclusion that the most productive and exciting composition lessons are those that stimulate students to consider what they are *trying* to achieve, not those that lay down firm instructions on what they *should* achieve. For example, if students, either individually or within groups, are aiming to create an expressive effect using particular practical means, they are in a strong position to judge how well they have met their objectives. They can ask themselves focused questions such as 'How can my/our music have been made more effective or expressive?' 'Which additional instruments or voices might have heightened the impact of the music?' Whether they append marks, grades or levels to their conclusions seems to be of minor importance. Comparing this approach to that of 'composing by numbers', such as fitting pitches randomly to rhythmic patterns supplied by a teacher or a textbook, the benefits of objectives-based teaching, learning and assessment, become apparent.

Whether or not the *BJME* has influenced the debate on assessment within musical education, one cannot tell for sure, but I suspect that a journal of this sort is more comfortable reflecting trends than spearheading them and, in any case, 'bucking the trend' is not a stance that responsible researchers undertake frequently or comfortably. I am disappointed that 'assessment' in one form or another has been the flavour of the month,

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the year and then the decade, maybe several decades. If assessment cannot support and enrich creativity and expressive music-making in their widest senses, then it might best slink away for a long rest.

My second topic concerns *elitism* within musical education. Here, an almost unspoken dilemma is apparent, a dilemma that has been reflected in the pages of the BJME from the start. It is best encapsulated in a question: should music in schools cater for all pupils or for the most musically inclined? 'Both', might be the immediate answer, but the unpopularity of music at secondary level (age 11 onwards) and the apparent need to nurture talent, suggest that unalloyed egalitarianism may not best serve either the most or the least musically able pupils. Carl Orff averred that no child is unmusical. Many practising music teachers would argue that some people (pupils or otherwise) are quite the opposite: they are fascinatingly unmusical: those who cannot pitch a note vocally; those who cannot feel or articulate a pulse; those who take positive steps to *avoid* music whenever they can; those who disrupt music lessons or, at best, endure them, twiddling their thumbs the while.

The educational establishment in the UK has long made mealy-mouthed use of the word 'entitlement' and its derivatives. 'All pupils are *entitled* to music lessons' might be an example. It really means 'All pupils are obliged to attend music lessons whether they wish to or not'. This curiously one-sided entitlement, that herds every child between the ages of 5 and 13 into weekly music lessons, suddenly becomes an entitlement *not* to be so herded at the end of that 8-year stretch, and around 93% exercise their new entitlement without a second thought. In other words, they give up school-based music for ever as soon as they can. The remaining 7% can now get on with the job properly and teachers can give them the attention they need and deserve. In short, they have become an elite. Many of the articles in the BJME have focused on the needs of the many or the needs of the few, but rarely on the dilemma itself. Research into the methodology of instrumental teaching is an example of 'elitist' musical education, and much of that research has been reported in the BJME. In contrast, reports on research into 'mass' musical education, for example class singing, general class teaching, running larger ensembles such as school choirs, have exemplified the concern for the musical education of *all* children that many teachers and researchers harbour. Some educationalists have held and articulated the view that musical education *en masse* is needed to ensure that an elite emerges. They seem to argue that the wastage is huge but the rewards justify it. For example Duhamel (1953) suggested that:

> Professional musicians are recruited from among young musicians. The virtuosi emerge as a consequence of a long and patient process of selection, which is initiated at the average level of the many. (p. 33)

This French view from the 1950s was echoed by the Russian, Lagutin (1976), more than 20 years later.

> Experience, accumulated by us over many years convincingly proves that progress in mass education is unthinkable without constant improvement in the system of professional music education. It is also clear that the success of music teaching at the ground level in its turn creates favourable conditions for professional musical activity. (p. 329)

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It could be argued that it is virtually impossible to teach music to 20 or 30 pupils at a time anyway. Consider the struggle in which a teacher and a pupil are engaged during a one-to-one piano lesson. Both are willing and it might be assumed that both are reasonably musical. Yet progress can be painfully slow. Compare that to a class teacher trying to create meaning and to promote progress with a full class of pupils with mixed talents and emotions.

The BJME published an interesting article by Grant Bocking (1985), 'Opting into music – a philosophy for the upper school'. Bocking suggested that pupils, not teachers, should shape their own arts education from the age of 12 rather than 13. He proposed that they could develop their particular aptitudes and enthusiasms rather than spend so much of their time on arts subjects in which they were less interested. Thus, a pupil, aged 12, might opt to study art, *or* drama *or* music and to give up studying the other two subjects. Teachers of arts subjects would find themselves teaching more committed (and better-behaved) students for more time each week, and would be in a stronger position to nurture the examination cohorts of the future. An especially interesting feature of this article is the fact that it was based on reality. The system was operating effectively at the school where Bocking taught: Queen Elizabeth's, Wimborne, Dorset, and in its partner middle schools. Alas, the absurd requirements of the national curriculum (introduced after the publication of Bocking's article) lay down that pupils are to be 'assessed' by their teachers at the end of Year 9 (i.e. at the age of 13). This renders such imaginative solutions difficult, almost impossible, to introduce.

My final question is 'Has the emergence of electronic instruments and computers in the music classrooms been beneficial for pupils and the subject generally?' I wrote at some length on these matters in the BJME more than a decade ago (Salaman, 1997). It seems that not a great deal has changed since then. The main developments are found in the proliferation of classroom resources (textbooks, keyboards, computers etc.) and the virtual universality of musical electronics at secondary level. For teachers, a major advantage is the comparative ease with which pupils can be controlled. Pupils wearing headphones are divided from each other, and when pupils are divided, the teachers rule. But are the results musical?

By and large, my verdict is negative with regard to electronic keyboards. Despite more sophisticated options, they are essentially inexpressive. Pupils have very little control over shaping phrases, introducing dynamic nuances or developing a sweet tone. The instruments have no equivalent to a reed, a mouthpiece or a bow. The existence of 'pre-set' rhythms, harmonic sequences etc. stifle imagination rather than kindle it. The introduction of computers is different, however. I have been priviledged to hear several innovative and effective compositions by school pupils, using computers to support their creative work. The tendency for *computer-aided composition* (shall we coin an acronym: CAC?) to rely on repetition too heavily is well known, but the range of musical possibilities is huge, and the more discriminating students develop an acute ear and fine judgement when travelling this route.

The title of this article, *Reflections on progress in musical education*, suggests that progress has taken place, so reflection is feasible and could be useful. I am reminded of certain events in the history of medicine, some occurring even within my own life span. For example, when I was a child, we used butter to sooth scalded skin. That has become anathema. Before my time, patients were prescribed mercury for a variety of ailments, they

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were bled with leeches and so on. If a remedy seemed not to be working, the doctors prescribed larger doses. Seldom did they consider the possibility that their 'cure' was the problem.

Within musical education over the last two decades or so, 'progress' has been hampered by such 'cures', for example time-consuming assessment procedures that lead to meaningless marks, levels and grades. This negative tendency has been balanced by much more constructive types of assessment, largely stemming from the pioneering work of John Paynter in the 1960s and 1970s, in which pupils were encouraged to reflect on their work, to make decisions and to make judgements on results in relation to their original intentions. This type of progress has been hugely beneficial in the burgeoning of musical composition in schools and in the musical freedom that is so often revealed in performance. The widening of the musical palette is another mark of progress. Pop, rock, non-western music, indeed, *any* style of music is now acceptable in most schools.

Much of the joy and energy in today's school-based music-making is found in the extracurricular work: the ensembles, choirs, bands, orchestras and stage shows. In some schools, large numbers are involved, in others, just a few. In either case, we may regard these committed young musicians as being an elite. The 'progress' in this field has been somewhat mottled, in that governments have inflicted major harm by curtailing the funding of instrumental teaching, and by the assumptions of some people that such usage of time and resources to benefit a minority is intrinsically unfair and not politically correct. On the other hand, progress is discernible. Pupils continue to take part in these activities; many 'specialist arts schools' are now firmly established across England; the advocacy of such luminaries as Sir Simon Rattle and Sir Peter Maxwell-Davies has tended to mute the Philistines. I cannot escape the conclusion that excellence and elitism are often seen to walk hand in hand. While I have some unease about advocating the nurturing of an elite, I have no doubt at all that to suppress any potential for excellence in the name of egalitarianism would be a retrograde move.

It strikes me as curious that the most seemingly obvious manifestation of progress in musical education, namely the use of electronics, is actually the least influential. Today, classrooms look very different from those of 25 years ago, but the same principal concern predominates, or should: if music is not expressive, is it music? In the paragraphs above, I suggest that music played on keyboards inclines to be lifeless, mechanical and inexpressive. I did not admit that prior to the introduction of electronics much of the singing, percussion work and so-called musical appreciation was also lifeless, albeit in different ways. But sometimes it wasn't. Sometimes, a magical expressiveness was discernible among the clumsiness and inaccuracy. That is what attracted me to teaching music. The electronics drove me out.

Computers are different. I shall finish with an anecdote. In the 1970s, I attended a music trade fair in the delightful Derbyshire town of Buxton. In one session, I listened to the latest developments in amplifier and loud-speaker manufacture, or so I thought. The salesman running the event twiddled a knob and a thrilling burst of sound emerged. It was that of a huge swing band. The rasp of the bass trombones underpinned the cavorting coloraturas of the clarinets and trumpets. The virtuoso percussion section explored every rhythmic opportunity with astonishing skill and accuracy. In all, the music was wild, exuberant and

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affecting. 'Which band was that?', we asked. 'None', replied the salesman. 'It was all done on a computer'.

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