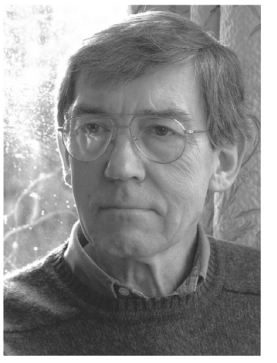
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John Paynter, 1931–2010: an appreciation

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John Paynter's death this year has deprived British music education of its most inspirational advocate during the second half of the 20th century. John's teaching in primary and secondary schools during the 1950s played a major role in shaping his vision of music at the heart of the curriculum. With his ear for an apt phrase, John loved to quote American novelist Toni Morrison's description of the wonderful presence and power of music as 'a way of *being* in the world'. During the 1960s, John trained teachers in colleges in Liverpool and Chichester, before joining the innovative music department at the University of York, where he remained until his retirement in 1997. It was with the publication in 1970 of *Sound and Silence* that his years of pioneering work with children and older students came to fruition and the force and originality of his ideas about music education made their first big impact.

Throughout his life, John was a prolific and accomplished composer. Although he would never claim to work in the *avant-garde* of musical modernism, he was a fierce supporter of other composers, such as Trevor Wishart, Bernard Rands and Morton Feldman, and the new thinking that they promoted. Among teachers, perhaps John's best known piece was 'Autumn', a precise and poetic distillation of a Japanese *haiku* for classroom performance. The combination of the familiar and the strange in less than two minutes of music-making, in which every child in a class could participate, typified an approach to musical learning that John had developed over many years of thought and personal experiment. However, John composed much fine music besides this, both for children and for adults.

By 1970, developments in musical education in Britain since the Second World War told what was, superficially, a success story. Children had wider opportunities to learn instruments and orchestras and choirs flourished in schools. Heads and governors loved music departments for the sense of community engendered by their concerts. However, the subject recruited few pupils when it became optional past the age of 14. School music was a positive extra-curricular pursuit for the few, but failed as a curriculum *subject* for the majority. Government reports from the late 1960s confirmed this bleak picture, showing music in primary schools 'lagging behind' other arts subjects and secondary school students condemning the subject as 'boring and useless'. What made these findings particularly uncomfortable was emerging evidence that left to their own devices, increasing numbers of young popular and folk musicians were creating music of significant quality without having learnt so-called 'basic skills' such as reading notation.

Something needed to be done to reform music as a contribution to the education of *all* pupils and *Sound and Silence* fitted the bill. With the wonderful sense of theatre that never

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deserted John during all the years that I knew him, the book opened with three striking cameos: a small boy imaginatively conjuring up sounds to accompany a mime, a group of teenagers improvising spontaneous vocal harmonies round a campfire, and two older students exploring the sonorities of a piano frame. These descriptions did not just centre on the music; they conveyed vividly what these students were *experiencing* through the sounds they were creating. As I continued reading through the book, with its passionate language, illustrated by beautiful atmospheric photographs, I felt that here was a living testament written by someone who *knew* that music was exciting for children to explore independently and that it could be approached in a multitude of different ways. The book challenged conventional 'linear' notions about learning and introduced teachers to ways of organising lessons that ensured that every pupil could explore and make decisions about sounds through working at composing projects. Today, we forget how revolutionary the division of a class into smaller working groups was in the early 1970s. More than any other book published at the time, *Sound and Silence* showed teachers how to organise such lessons so they could be both rewarding and stimulating for pupils. The careful advice given in the introductory chapter has never been bettered. As a young teacher, reading *Sound and Silence* inspired me to pursue research in music education with John at the University of York.

Throughout his career, John displayed a talent for lateral thinking: making often startling connections between disparate kinds of music and between music and the other arts. There are examples of wisdom and penetrating insights on almost every page that he wrote, from *Sound and Silence* to important later books such as *Hear and Now* (1972), *All Kinds of Music* (1976) and *Sound and Structure* (1992). I cannot over-state the debt I owe to John's writing, but also to my experience of him as my research supervisor. My data consisted of recordings of compositions, improvisations and arrangements created by children. I would come to tutorials armed with what I thought were clever thoughts. In response John would always ask, 'Yes, but what were they *learning* through doing this?' And I would have to go away and quite often re-think my approach to justifying these children's efforts. In the final stages of writing up my thesis John's knowledge of the fine details of academic presentation proved absolutely invaluable. His skill in giving tactful and constructive support to other researchers was later evident during his years as a founding editor of the BJME from 1984–1997.

Between 1973 and 1982 (a period that coincided with my association with him as a student), John directed the Schools Council Project *Music in the Secondary School Curriculum*. The project gathered contributions from many schools, produced documentary videos of good practice and culminated with a book with the same title (1982). The mid 1980s saw the establishment of new examinations for 16-year-olds and the first published criteria for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) included composing as a core music activity, a direct result of the Project's influence. After 1990, music became a foundation subject in the National Curriculum and, again, John's seminal impact could be felt not only in the inclusion of composing in the programme of study, but also in the wide and eclectic cultural embrace of many of its suggestions for an appropriate repertoire for pupils to explore.

One could argue that John's approach derived in part from teaching methods that had been tried and succeeded previously in other creative arts. However, it was a two-way

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process: John stimulated the thinking of educators involved with the whole of schooling. Michael Marland (1971, p. 46) said 'the excellent discussion of the general versus specialist theme' in *Sound and Silence* was worth reading by any subject teacher devising a curriculum for all pupils. Harry Rée (1982, p. vii), while advising all secondary heads to pass *Music in the Secondary School Curriculum* on to their music teachers also thought that 'the flow might well be reversed'.

What remains of John's legacy today? His influence is now written into the curriculum and aspects of his method can be seen in classrooms where group composing is a common lesson structure. Over the years, in response to an increasing demand for practical music, there has been a huge expansion in the room facilities and the range of equipment available. I have heard stunning examples of GCSE work: imaginative music composed to accompany short films, electronic pieces exploring the far reaches of timbre and textural density, touching songs of adolescent yearning and harmonically assured jazz improvisations. All these achievements stem ultimately from John's initiative.

It is disappointing, but perhaps not surprising, that the press and public at large still seem to see school music mostly in terms of instrumental lessons and extra-curricular performances. Yet it is in the humble classroom where John's ideas have had the greatest influence. Here pupils can get close to the essence of musical creativity and explore 'what the individual has to say', using their personal aural imaginations rather than simply following an interpretation of the music through the ears of their teachers. It is almost 30 years since John said that music 'is not one thing, but many, many things and provided that we teach it *musically* (i.e. in terms of its *sound*) there are any number of paths that we might usefully take' (1982, p. 32).

When asked what he thought was the lasting impact of the French Revolution of 1789, the Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai is reported to have quipped 'It's too early to say'. Perhaps it is still too early to assess the true impact of the revolution in musical teaching and learning that John instigated some 40 years ago. But there is no doubt that he will be missed by those of us who want music education to mean something for all pupils.

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