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Reflection, theory and practice



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A brief review of the state of music education in the UK at the time of the creation of the British Journal of Music Education (BJME) leads to a consideration of the range and focus of topics since the initiation of the Journal. In particular, the initial requirement of careful and critical enquiry is amplified, drawing out the inevitability of theorising, an activity which is considered to be essential for reflective practice. The relationship of theory and data is examined, in particular differentiating between the sciences and the arts. A 'case study' of theorising is presented and examined in some detail and possible strands of future development are identified.

Introduction: the origins of the journal

As one of the founding editors of this Journal it gives me very great pleasure to participate in the celebration of the contribution made to music education by the *British Journal of Music Education* (BJME) over a quarter of a century. It is impossible to look through the journals of those early years without experiencing a warm sense of gratitude, which I know I share with John Paynter. Many of the contributors are now old friends; some have risen to influential positions. After some reflection I decided not simply to confine myself to reminiscence and rejoicing but will attempt a contribution to thinking about music education. This will involve a selective overview of some of the themes occurring in BJME articles, during, but also beyond the first 14 years of editorship. Given this opportunity, I shall also engage with some issues arising from my work, mainly to the extent that these have appeared in the Journal.

At the time of the launch of the BJME in 1984, music education was in a state of transition. Composing in the classroom had become a major feature, especially in the UK, and was often linked to the exploratory attitudes and serious work of contemporary composers. Murray Schafer in Canada had been influenced by composers such as John Cage. In Britain Peter Maxwell Davies's work in Cirencester had become known during the 1960s and also during that decade, George Self and Brian Dennis were publishing experimental projects and materials. John Paynter's leadership of the Schools Council Secondary project between 1973–1982 and his publication with Peter Aston in 1970 of *Sound and Silence* were significant landmarks (Paynter & Aston, 1970). The approach to composing in the classroom tended to be holistic and aural, rather than dissected by notation and analysed into separate 'elements'. The outcomes of pupil compositions were not generally to be predicted and the starting points were not confined to such closed tasks as: 'compose a melody of eight bars, modulating to the dominant halfway and returning to the tonic'. The new emphasis was much more aural and exploratory, involving projects often lying outside conventional tonality and metric organisation.

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There was also a deeper theoretical cleavage to do with the nature of music, how and where music is learned and how that learning may be assessed. Research in the psychology of music and music education had for a long time been preoccupied with defining and testing musical '*abilities*'. The earlier tests are conceived in terms of inherited *talents*, as, for example, is the case with Seashore and Kwalwasser. Allied to these is the notion of musical *intelligence* as used by Herbert Wing who claimed to be able to identify the musical age of a subject. Further along the line we have Edwin Gordon's musical *aptitude* and Bentley's *ability* which are more suggestive of the possibility of development than either 'talents' or 'intelligence'. Whatever it is that is supposed to be measured, the basis for most of these tests is discrimination of isolated sub-musical particles, often requiring a comparison between two sounds, for example, counting the number of notes in a chord, judging levels of intensity and timbre and recognising the point of change in pitch or rhythmic fragments. In the case of Wing, there was a dubious attempt to deal with value judgements as to the best of a pair of phrasings of the same melody, or the most 'appropriate' form of harmonisation, a culturally loaded task purporting to be a measure of intelligence.

This tradition of isolating sounds, usually outside of any musical context, and giving a numerical summative 'score', ran right across the 'creativity' grain of pupils' composing associated with a holistic, formative approach to assessment. The psychometric movement had strongly influenced thinking about the school music syllabus in many developed countries and curriculum documentation came to be atomised along the lines of the tests. So the property of 'frequency', which becomes pitch perception in ability tests, in turn, translates into curriculum documentation in terms of 'concepts' such as up-down, intervals, scales, modes, chords and register etc. Likewise 'duration', featured as 'time' in the early ability tests, produces lists of such curriculum 'concepts' as pulse, metre, note-length and rhythm patterns, a somewhat sterile, atomistic and bottom-up approach to the richness of musical experience.

Of course, many teachers remained somewhat aloof, suspecting that both research in the psychology of music and creativity in the classroom were either a waste of time or destabilising influences. Even so, they sometimes got hold of the Bentley music ability tests which occupied classes for half an hour. And some tried 'creative' activities, such as having students collect street sounds on tape recorders, an occupation which took much longer than half an hour and had interesting, if less clear-cut, outcomes.

In this climate of change and conventional resistance there were some who tried to understand and formulate a rationale for music education. John Paynter has already been mentioned and a second major book further established his position (Paynter, 1982). I like to think that my own *A Basis for Music Education* also made a contribution to the debate (Swanwick, 1979). It so happened that, thanks to an invitation to a seminar in Jamaica from Joan Tucker, Paynter and I met informally over a sustained period of time. John already had contacts with other colleagues and with Cambridge University Press and it was agreed that a journal should be set up where all kinds of contributions were to be welcome, so long as the writers avoided jargon and based their work on careful and critical enquiry, a stipulation to which we shall return. So the *British Journal of Music Education* came into being.

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The range of topics

There were of course other related UK journals already in existence, including *Psychology of Music* and the professionally orientated *Music Teacher* and *Music in Education*, but the BJME was the first attempt to open a seam of research-based debate in the field of 'mainstream' music education and to attract contributor practitioners. The journal contents have been a reasonably reliable barometer of change in the field. Since 1984 the quality of the articles may have waxed and waned but a number of the texts have become classics, known world-wide, cited in dissertations and translated into several languages. As to content, the indexes of 1984–1988 and 1989–1993 both show a large number of articles on music curriculum issues, while 'composing' has a total of 16 index references in the first four-year period but only two in the second. Women and music and world music appear in the indexes only after 1988. Curiously, 'research' is a separate category in the indexes for these years and seems to have been associated mainly with explicitly quantitative methodologies. More recent issues still have a number of articles on composing and some on 'world music' and globalisation, though nothing is quite as outstanding in this area as Volume 15, Issue Number 2 in July 1988, an issue devoted to music education in Africa. For obvious reasons, more recently there has been a much greater focus on new technology.

The emerging National Curriculum, instrumental teaching and music in higher and teacher education have been important recurring topics. Many of the early articles communicate a strong commitment to and even passion for music education. Reported methodologies range from ethnographic observations to controlled experiment. Research *foci* include the nature and development of musical understanding (cognition), response to music, music aesthetics, curriculum evaluation (including the relationship between composing, performing and audition), music and personality, the history of music education, the development of instrumental/performing skills, musical motivation, the social functions of music, music therapy, music and gender and formal/informal music education.

Over the years there were BJME contributors who set out to challenge prevailing orthodoxies and sought to take us back to the human roots of musical experience. For example, Keith Stubbs and more recently, John Finney reminded us of the deep personal significance of music and worried about losing the magic in lists of curriculum formulations and the daily round of schooling and that the emotional development of children through 'creative self-expression' was the main focus of education in the arts (Stubbs, 1988; Finney, 1999). Writing from the USA, Tom Regelski warned of the aridity of teaching musical 'concepts', the so-called 'elements' of music based on the 'ability' movement – metre, melody, harmony, etc. – and instead advocated 'action learning'. This was perhaps a premonition of music education as 'praxis' (Regelski, 1986).

As joint editors, John and I were concerned that articles would always illuminate something of the relationship between music, student and teacher: this dynamic triangle was to be to be the central focus of publications. However broadly we may define the field of music education, there is always an implication that someone somewhere is getting into music, learning something, and responding somehow. Probing the nature of musical understanding has been a strand of my own work, avoiding the term 'cognition', partly

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because of its traditional separation from affective experience. Whatever the focus or terminology, the centrality of musical transactions was identified in the first editorial.

> Fundamentally we are interested in the musical and personal transaction between teachers and students in whatever setting. The centre of our focus is the practice of music education. But this also implies a degree of reflection upon this practice and some analysis of what is involved. In other words, there will be important theoretical considerations at every level of discussion in the pages of this journal.
>
> (Paynter & Swanwick, 1984: 4)

Careful enquiry, reflection, theory and practice

This explicit connection between reflection and theory is worth further comment. Reflective practice consists both of doing and thinking about what is done. And thinking inevitably involves sifting, comparing, categorising and contextualising; elements of theorising. Humans cannot resist attempting to organise impressions and to explain. There is nothing as useful as a good theory. However, we should not think that theories simply 'emerge' from data. This is almost a kind of animism, a belief that observed phenomena will organise themselves. But of course no one gathers any evidence without first choosing where and how to look. 'No one now seriously believes that the mind is a clean slate upon which the senses inscribe their record of the world around us' (Medawar, 1969: 27). The evidence of the senses, even when augmented by scientific instrumentation, is essentially subjective experience framed by and interpreted through theoretical networks. Data cannot be neutral. There is no independent 'real world' available to the unbiased eye. Without theories we cannot have 'findings'. As Adorno says:

> The superstition that research has to begin with a tabula rasa, upon which data gathered without any preconceived plan are then assembled into some kind of pattern, is one that empirical social research should rid itself of once and for all.
>
> (Adorno, 1962, in Connerton, 1976: 252).

Eisner holds the view that changes in educational practice are the 'function of the attractiveness of a set of ideas, rather than the rigour of a body of data-based conclusions' (Eisner, 1985: 260). A 'set of ideas' is essentially a theory. A teacher who believes that a music education programme should be 'performance based', or another who affirms that composing is the gateway to musical understanding, or someone who emphasises the importance of bringing young people into contact with a particular heritage of music through listening to recordings and attending professional performances; all are participating in shared networks of beliefs and assumptions. To reflect upon and to articulate such beliefs is to theorise.

An example of theoretical deficiency can be seen in many studies of musical abilities. From Seashore to Bentley and beyond there have been attempts to show that specific musical abilities develop before or after others. Unfortunately these inferences are largely confounded by the absence of any linking theoretical frame of reference. Hargreaves asserted that the development of rhythmic skills is among the first to emerge (Hargreaves, 1986), and Bentley argued that the ability to discriminate rhythm develops earlier than

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an ability to discriminate pitch and to perceive chords (Bentley, 1966). But their evidence is culled from dramatically varying instruments of measure. For instance, a measure of rhythm pattern discrimination, such as Bentley gives, cannot be compared with his quite separate measure based on counting the number of notes in chords. The tests are discrete and the results are calibrated differently. It is no more logical to compare the results of these separate tests than it would be to compare tyre pressures on a car with the oil level. There is no connective theory, though it might be possible to establish a correlation relating to the length of time since the last service in the garage. There can though be no base-line for comparing say, melodic with rhythmic development unless we have a persuasive theory of musical development and understanding, a meta-theory that overarches specific and isolated measures of individual skills.

Whatever the topic, whatever the method, it is the quality of theorising that will commend the project or otherwise. For example, although a study based on descriptive ethnography may not permit generalisation to wider populations, it is possible that such descriptions 'are generalisable to theoretical propositions' (Yin, 1989: 21). Whether or not this is always achieved, data of this kind are taken as illustrative of a theoretical perspective. There may be projects where theories are not obvious or explicit, where there may appear to be only literal descriptions of teaching and learning, classroom resources, or whatever. These are rare, since mere description is not enough to meet the criterion of critical engagement and some attempt at explanation nearly always arises out of an anecdote or table of figures. At times it may be that the reader is drawn in to theorise about what is described, even if the writer seems reluctant to do so. Only then is interest really stirred and some nugget of information may elicit from us the response, 'well, fancy that' or, 'I've often wondered', depending on the 'story' (the theory) we happen to have in mind.

We should notice that theorising characterises both scientific and artistic endeavours. One difference lies in the relationship between theory and data. In science data should never be fudged or invented to fit a theory. Carefully gathered evidence is crucial. In artistic work though, 'data' are being worked on to produce something that best matches the theory, the idea, the hunch, the vision. The 'evidence' in the arts is the 'work', that which results from the manipulation of data.

Although it seems currently unfashionable to embark on or defend grand theories, I take the view that there is nothing as potentially useful as strong theoretical work, provided that it is continually tested and contested. As Karl Popper says, it is 'from our boldest theories, including those which are erroneous, that we learn most' (Popper, 1972: 148). Lively and critical theorising is a defence we have against the arbitrary, the subjective, the dogmatic or the doctrinaire. One fairly 'bold' theory was set out in the BJME in the early years of the journal and immediately provoked discussion and contention, first among members of the Journal Board and subsequently in the music education research community (Swanwick & Tillman, 1986). There have indeed been many times in the last 20 years when I felt the need to escape from the Swanwick/Tillman paradigm. On returning to it though, it still appears both robust and provocative, as does some of the preceding and subsequent theorising and related research. I cannot resist this opportunity to respond briefly to some critiques of this work and in so doing exemplify the productive give and take of theorising.

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A 'case study' of theory as a dynamic process

There are, of course, antecedents for any theory. The main elements preceding the Swanwick/Tillman collaboration were set out in *A Basis for Music Education*. What later became *materials, expression, form and value* were there presaged as skill acquisition, expressive gesture, norms and deviations and 'meaning for', as distinct from 'meaning to' (Swanwick, 1979: 67). This, in turn, was an attempt to integrate seperate theories such as refentialism and formalism. The detailed layers of the spiral theory were to some extent informed by a short, insightful paper by Robert Bunting, which he contributed to the York Schools Council Project. This was based on observations of his students composing in school (Bunting, 1997).

Initial responses to the 1986 developmental theory ranged from 'this is what we have been waiting for' to 'hey, wait a minute!' There were those who were worried about the comprehensive scope of the theory: that it might somehow impinge on the delicate issue of musical and personal response. It certainly made waves that rippled into existing theorising about composition and its assessment. New theories can be very unsettling when we already have alternative explanations.

We need to be quite clear that the proposed developmental sequence was, from the outset, considered to be both cumulative and recursive. 'We do not merely pass through one of these modes but carry them forward with us to the next' (Swanwick 1988: 63–64). There seems though to be an almost ideological fixation alleging rigidity about Piagetian developmental stages. And rather like those fictitious 'weapons of mass destruction' in Iraq; if a false claim is made often enough it somehow gets to be accepted as truth. It is frequently asserted (quite wrongly) that Piaget thought each 'stage' somehow separate from the others. For example, Gardner claimed that for Piaget 'the child does not even have access to his earlier forms of understanding. Once he is out of a stage, it is as though the prior stage had never happened' (Gardner, 1993: 26–27). Hargreaves also refers to 'Piagetian-style developmental discontinuities in thinking' (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2003: 153). This curious and widespread misreading of Piaget is contradicted by him explicitly. For example, when writing of the development of children and what he calls the successive structures (sensory-motor, symbolic, preconceptual, intuitive and rational), Piaget tells us plainly:

> It is essential to understand how each of these behaviours is continued in the one that follows, the direction being from a lower to a higher equilibrium. It is for this reason that in our view a static analysis of discontinuous, stratified levels is unacceptable.
>
> (Piaget, 1951: 291)

To illustrate this crucial point it is necessary to reactivate very briefly the original proposed developmental sequence, though it seems unnecessary to reproduce here the original, often reproduced spiral. To avoid automatically thinking in terms of low to high the order is here reversed and, unlike the original descriptions of compositions, these very brief statements are wholly positive and can be applied to composing, performing and audience-listening settings. It is quite a useful exercise when trying to make an evaluation of student work to see how far along this sequence it is possible to get.

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Eight cumulative developmental layers

Layer 1 People enjoy/explore sounds
(*and*)
Layer 2 they classify/control sounds
(*and*)
Layer 3 they identify/produce expressive shapes, mood/atmosphere
(*and*)
Layer 4 they identify/produce expressive shapes within common musical conventions
(*and*)
Layer 5 they perceive/produce expressive shapes in transformed or contrasting or surprising relationships
(*and*)
Layer 6 they locate structural relationships within specific idioms or styles
(*and*)
Layer 7 their musical perception/production shows strong personal identification and commitment
(*and*)
Layer 8 they relate to music with sustained, original and involved independence.

One outstanding issue is the relationship between the spontaneous natural development of individuals and the cultural environment in which this development is realised. It should not be automatically assumed that children in Piaget's theory somehow exist outside a cultural location. As Serafine points out, Piaget was an interactionist, emphasising 'the reciprocal effects of both the external milieu and the internal cognitive structures' (Serafine, 1980: 3). Similarly, the Swanwick/Tillman model supposes that musical development tends towards equilibrium between assimilation and accommodation, between personal predispositions (the left side – odd numbers) and cultural conventions (the right). The manipulative, vernacular, idiomatic and systematic modes (even numbers) are all indicative of social processes, accommodatory, hence the original spiral diagram arrow from left to right labelled 'towards social sharing'.

Although Swanwick and Tillman proposed that certain structures of musical thought and action precede others as they emerge during childhood, this process by no means conforms to a rigid age timetable. In general though, very young children do not usually aspire to idiomatic authenticity but enter the world of music with some excitement over sound materials and enjoy control of them before engaging with vernacular conventions. By the age of 14 years or so, making music in idiomatic ways becomes a strong imperative for many young people.

For Swanwick and Tillman the process of musical development is not a once-in-a-lifetime, linear affair. The broken ends of their original helix indicate that the layers are recursive: for example, when we encounter new music or a performer begins to work on a new piece, or when a composer engages with a computer music program for the first time, or an improviser starts up in a new acoustic; in novel situations we are likely to find ourselves once again at the start of the process, engaging with the 'sensory' impact of sound or seeking manipulative control. We can choose the layer in which we function. For example, what we called the 'vernacular', using commonplace, non-intrusive music

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may be most appropriate in certain social situations. In the same way, just as at the age of one a child may be able to stand, at the age of two she can probably walk. By three or four she will probably stand, walk and hop, even skip, though she may sometimes prefer or need just to stand. She just has a greater repertoire of mobility at the age of four. Simply because certain functions and actions tend to be developmentally 'prior' is certainly not to denigrate them. Are the first infant words in some absolute way inferior to the speech of a five-year-old or, in developmental terms, a staggering achievement? The 'hierarchical' nature of common developmental processes is not usually a cause for concern.

It would also be an error to suggest that the spiral theory somehow separates out affective properties from cognition, that it is in any way 'dualistic', or that responses to expressive, affective elements are considered inferior to those relating to structure and form (Barrett, 2007: 612). Bundling together such meta-theories makes it a little too easy to pigeonhole and dispose of particular theories wholesale. Of course the main layers of materials, expression, form and value become integrated and run alongside in musical experience. But they emerge initially and developmentally in a fairly predictable sequence. And we have known for a long time that response to 'form' is a cognitive/affective construing of relationships between expressive gestures carrying its own affective charge (Meyer, 1956). Sound materials are perceived as expressive shapes that may be combined into new relationships, organic forms of feeling which have the power to reach into and relate to our personal and cultural histories. This is 'affective cognition' and it characterises musical encounters, permeates musical environments and lies at the heart of musical development. The elements of the developmental helix are not separate inert boxes but are rich layers or strands in which musical dialogue is energised.

The 1986 theory can be seen as complementary to and not in competition with ethnographic studies of composing or improvising which attempt to 'situate' the process rather than look for general developmental patterns (Burnard, 2000, 2007; Barrett, 2002). Even within the limitations on generalising from particular cases, such studies provide valuable insights into the processes of learning and there is much to be learned about the details of developmental processes. However, observing, describing and interviewing children making music in specific locations does not invalidate the overall theory. It seems important also not only to understand something of *how* students learn and respond to music but also to address the epistemological issue of *what* is being learned, the quality of the transaction. Both aspects are involved in the processes of musical development.

The future of the BJME and the discourse of research

In a very pragmatic British way, and with some exceptions, contributors to the BJME have tended to avoid contentious theoretical issues, except and for obvious reasons in the review section, which has been greatly strengthened since the early days. It is perhaps in the reviews that professional debate has become most evident. What is exciting about the discourse of such a journal is the potential for professional development, for renewal within the field. Gunther Kress picks up something of this process and the same thing could be said of discourse in music.

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> Each individual exists in a particular set of discursive forms deriving from the social institutions in which she or he finds herself or himself. The resolution of these tensions, contradictions, and incompatibilities, provides a constant source of dialogue . . . '
>
> (Kress, 1985: 31)

Over a quarter of a century the BJME has put before its readers a wide range of research and reviews. It has been stimulating, affirming and challenging, often shifting its ground as ideas and editors change, but always maintaining a voice of reason, encouraging musicians, teachers and researchers.

In the future we may expect to see a greater focus of work on diverse and informal music education across the spectrum, in schools, colleges and communities. Our original editorial concept of 'mainstream' music education has already given way to recognition of a plurality of settings, a network of tributaries rather than a single river. What will link these disparate contributions is the constant examination, illumination and evolution of underlying theories of music, an important part of human experience. Informed by such an evolving and dynamic discourse, future contributors will be able to further enrich our concepts of music education transactions and inform our understanding of how best to promote professional development. The BJME has been very well nurtured by successive editors and as it evolves will surely continue to make a distinctive international contribution to theory and practice in the field of music education.

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