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Tributes to John Paynter

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The big challenge of John Paynter's work in music education from the late 1960s on was that his approach to children's music was that of composer to composer. This was markedly at odds with the training of most music teachers at that time whose specialism – whose status even – was most likely to be rooted in their performance skills. For many teachers, composition was an entirely alien activity, with 'real' composers as distanced figures, to be approached through history and appreciation or possibly performance of their works.

John's work over subsequent decades changed the course of school music education by treating children's music as an inherently valid part of contemporary culture, deserving to be heard, explored, valued and understood. He also saw that composing music through the practical processes of refining improvisations was a way in which children could come to understand the stuff of music through their own voices, hands and ears-on creative experiences. Such practical understanding of children's development and their learning processes had been slow to infiltrate music education, the pedagogy of which had been left lagging far behind practice in the other arts or education generally. It was grounded in John's eight years' experience of teaching in primary and secondary schools and a further seven years working on musical pedagogy with trainee teachers in Liverpool and Chichester.

John Paynter and Peter Aston were both composers, collaborating on the writing of their seminal book *Sound and Silence* (1970) shortly before John took up a Senior Lectureship in 1969 at the University of York, where Peter also taught. *Sound and Silence* is a highly practical book, but its embedded values and philosophy acted as a radical catalyst for change in music classrooms. In it the authors develop an approach that demands from teachers high-level skills of listening, together with a willingness to explore contemporary and earlier music, set out on an ongoing quest for compositional insight and bring their own creative responses to the classroom. Many were excited by this, feeling the potential of where it might lead, but for others it was too demanding. Some rejected the approach as impractical and not for ordinary classrooms or young people. Others were frankly lost in the new musical worlds it drew on – the practice of contemporary composers whose music was unfamiliar to many.

The fact is that John was an outstanding teacher – of children and of his students. Those of us who studied music education at York with John witnessed frequently his extraordinary ability to practise what he preached, with children, with students of music of any age, and with trainees struggling to develop their own teaching. Observing John teach a class of children, as I did on numerous occasions early in my career, was inspirational; I know other colleagues will testify to this also.

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John had extremely high expectations of any class of children to bring acute ears, sensitivity and imagination to the work of creating music. He had absolute faith in the power of music itself to intrigue, excite, express – for the young as much as for anyone else. He believed in children's ability to work from the experience they already brought, knowingly or not. He accepted their first offerings, from the highly inventive to the most tentative, and then he challenged them relentlessly. He expected pupils to listen and to work as composers, responding to the raw materials, but always engaging further in thinking and feeling as musicians. He insisted on the interdependence of creativity and skills and set the highest expectations for teachers and students to develop both.

Power of personality is something individual to any teacher. John's classroom presence was strong – a quiet manner, quick responses, a ready sense of humour, a deference to each individual to have their work respected and great enthusiasm that was shown by his total engagement as much as by words. A key was his ability to bring really attentive, focused listening and to somehow make this catching, so that young people started to listen to themselves and others, and began to rate what they heard as worth pursuing. I have watched John with a most challenging, difficult class, take their work seriously at a level they had simply never experienced before and seen them transform from weighing up how to destroy to mild curiosity followed by genuine musical engagement.

John's students were changed by these encounters and often this was through having their sights and standards for themselves raised to a level they might not have expected for themselves. Somehow the effect of new self-belief takes learners to the next rung of the ladder or the next unknown journey.

You need the tools to move forward in this kind of teaching and *Sound and Silence* points the way. If teachers are not themselves willing to listen, learn, experiment, risk failure and hone the basic technical skills of music they cannot give students the quality of teaching they deserve. John's own teaching brought to life the adventure of *Sound and Silence* and of the many other projects and approaches he described in later writings. His philosophy was deep and searching and he seemed constantly to question and doubt himself.

It is easy to be cynical in education and to dismiss the next idea as a fad or to reject the hard road of a new challenge, whether from insecurity or disbelief. What the young need is encouragement and belief, and that too is what all learners need. John's unswerving belief in his students, through the inevitable ups and downs of learning gave a gift to many that is rich to pass on.

Reference

PAYNTER, J. & ASTON, P. (1970) *Sound and Silence. Classroom Projects in Creative Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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