



Debates in Music Education

Thursday 21st March 2013
1.30-3.30pm



Chaired by David Ashworth

PAPER: JOHN FINNEY

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Examining the ideology of musical composition

John Finney

I am looking through John Paynter's *Sound and Structure* (1992) and what I see is an approach to teaching how to compose music which I doubt is currently much used or has even been considered by many.

In Project 5 'Growth Points', for example, five assignments are set out, each a little more extensive than the one before. Each assignment cleverly sets boundaries through instructions that serve to release imagination.

'Assignment 2: Choose any two notes. Experiment with distinctive ways of playing them. From this experiment derive a two-note musical motif and explore ways of keeping it going, using changes of dynamics and articulation to vary it and to make it grow and develop. Try a number of possibilities: some fast, some slow.'

We note the words 'experiment', 'explore', 'try'. Setting an assignment like this requires skilful teaching. The teacher will be with the class all the way, open to unexpected turns and enjoying and taking advantage of strange co-incidences as the process unfolds. In this way of working distinctions between what is informal, non-formal and formal are rendered meaningless, and ideas such as co-construction and co-learning passé.

It is an approach that accumulates material and compositional strategies as well as a developing appreciation for the architecture of what is being made.

(John Finney, Blog, teachingmusic.org.uk)

In proposing such a method John Paynter had offered a way of creating and developing musical ideas as well as the architecture that would support these. I went on to write that "*...in the ideal composing workshop the teacher will be with the class all the way, open to unexpected turns and taking advantage of strange co-incidences as the process unfolds.*"

My blog received a penetrating critique from Musicteacher who pointed out that what I was advocating had all the hallmarks of a Western art music aesthetic and one not necessarily easily recognized by students. It was suggested that the teacher leading in this way will be drawing on the musical language of western art music as they guide students through a series of musical tasks. The students' social identity and musical enculturation would be ill-tuned to a potentially alienating experience.

In this scenario the teacher is the main agent of power and in control of the learning, and quite unlike informal learning where the student is empowered and recognised as the main agent of learning. In Musicteacher's view it is now that the teacher can have a genuine dialogue with students.

Musicteacher argued that by creating an informal learning environment the music teacher's habitual ways of being and thinking are challenged, enabling the teacher to interrogate "*their own claim to power and [to] see their own limits as musicians and educators and so draw in those students looking in from the margins.*"

In citing the Paynter *Sound and Structure* example I had in mind one of the six Listen, Imagine, Compose projects that I had been a part of.

Music teacher Lizzie, composer Fraser Trainer and myself challenged Year 9 with an unfamiliar piece called Gadget that had been composed by Fraser. This we did through a series of compositional workshops, working with the material and compositional strategies use by Fraser in Gadget. The class came to appreciate Gadget, and this didn't mean they necessarily liked it, rather they reported that they

could get their heads around it, appreciate it. They said that the experience had opened their minds to the unfamiliar. Their final whole class composition constructed and directed by themselves was both strikingly original and lovingly crafted.

They had been taught through intensive whole-class teacher-led workshopping, insisting on whole body engagement, with an approach to listening that sharpens musical perception, calls for clarity of musical intention and teaches ways of creating musical material, how it might be developed and how an architectural form emerges.

The class seemed to enjoy yielding the locus of control to their composer - teacher and students quickly realized that they were able to appropriate the material and strategies taught to their own ends by being given the space and time to shape what became their music. This scenario was a sustained whole class process and advanced music teaching skill was required in passing the locus of control between teacher and student, power being flipped continuously, but always, it should be noted, with the teacher able to infer but not express the students' needs.

In Robert Bunting's characteristic features of exploratory composition there is:

"two-way listening, dialogue, debate, disagreement, trust; teachers have a close relationship with/respect for pupils' own musical values, give them an honoured place, but constantly challenge and extend them"

We can recognize this as a Paynteresque ideal learning situation and I can hear Musicteacher repeating his critique. Musicteacher's intervention opens up interesting questions that need to be debated.

- Who is entitled to be the main agent of power, teacher or student?
- Is the idea of musical composition hopelessly tethered to a Western European aesthetic?
- Who provides the material as the starting point for exploratory practice?
- Is the teacher-led composing workshop doomed to deny students ownership of learning?
- Does the teacher-led composing workshop deny the possibility of critical thinking?
- What is critical thinking in music?