



Debates in Music Education

Thursday 21st March 2013
1.30-3.30pm



Chaired by David Ashworth

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Listen Imagine Compose: Ten questions and two thought experiments

Robert Bunting

Listen Imagine Compose (LIC) aims to bring about significant change in the way composition is taught in secondary schools. Six action research projects have taken place around the country investigating six key questions relating to teaching composition at KS3 and 4. Themes include evaluation, effective feedback, the role of listening in the creative process, introducing unfamiliar aesthetics, creative use of technology and how expert composers and performers can be most effectively used in the classroom.

The key feature of LIC has been a set of extended classroom partnerships between a teacher and a 'contemporary classical' composer, team-teaching classes in Key Stages 3 and 4, with each team exploring one of the six key questions. The response from pupils, teacher, and composers alike has been extremely positive, and the initial findings provide a wealth of key learning and implications for practice.

In the next phase of the project, the Listen Imagine Compose team will aim to support the good practice it has generated, and to disseminate it to a wider community through publications, presentations and training events. Please contact Judith Robinson at Sound and Music Judith.robinson@soundandmusic.org if you wish to be part of this exciting initiative.

QUESTION 1

Is Listen Imagine Compose something that only composers can do, just a stimulating break from the usual curriculum, or can teachers do these things within the curriculum?

Let's carry out a thought experiment - imagine that with the right training teachers could do these things within the curriculum, and see where that takes us. Immediately, to two more questions:

QUESTION 2

Is Listen Imagine Compose a whole curriculum; or does it just provide individual units as part of a more variegated scheme of work, sitting alongside such activities as whole-class Ukulele, Samba, and Musical Futures?

QUESTION 3

Is Listen Imagine Compose just about composing - and 'contemporary' composing at that; or does it provide a broad approach to all musical learning?

To help us answer Question 3, here are some of the features of LIC; can any of them apply to other styles of music, or to performing and listening as well as to composing?

1. A whole term working (through exercises and sketches) towards just one high-quality presentation (in LIC's case a composition).
2. Rich, challenging experiences - mind-expanding, thought-provoking.
3. Emphasis on the utmost quality and precision of thinking.
4. Slow deep learning - thorough mastery of a small set of objectives.
5. Composer/teachers teach with authority - that is, they work solely and unashamedly from their individual areas of musical expertise.
6. 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.

7. As a result pupils produce genuinely individual, independent, exploratory work.
8. Genre, style, context are marginal - personal expressive gestures and inventive processes/structures are central.

QUESTION 4

How valuable are these eight features to young people's development?

QUESTION 5

How often are they seen in current practice?

Now, another thought experiment. Let's imagine for the sake of argument that LIC can provide a model for the whole curriculum. How could that be achieved? Well, LIC is essentially about **learning how an exploratory composer thinks**.

QUESTION 6

What would be involved in learning how an exploratory **performer** thinks?

QUESTION 7

What would be involved in learning how an exploratory **listener** thinks?

Continuing this new thought experiment a stage further:

If the essence of LIC is not a certain activity (composing), nor a certain style ('contemporary classical') but a focus on exploratory thinking, wherever it can be found in any style and any activity:

QUESTION 8

How far would we have to travel from our current practice to be teaching a LIC-inspired curriculum?

QUESTION 9

Would the journey be worth the effort?

We would only answer "yes" to Question 9 if something were deficient in our current curriculum. So -

QUESTION 10

Is anything wrong with our current curriculum? If so, what?

Appendix

LISTEN IMAGINE COMPOSE - MY OWN ANSWERS TO THE TEN QUESTIONS

Question 1

In my view composing - in the exploratory, speculative way characteristic of contemporary classical, jazz and dance music - is something every teacher can learn to do and to teach. It should be a regular part of the curriculum.

Question 2

I really can't see LIC making sense as an occasional unit within a variegated curriculum that incorporates many other teaching and learning styles. The pedagogy is too specialised, the learning too intensive and the progression too long-term.

If the answer to Question 2 is "Yes, LIC has to be a whole curriculum", while that to Question 3 is "Yes, LIC is just about contemporary composing", then LIC is a niche curriculum for the dedicated few. No harm in that - maybe lots of different niche curricula are exactly what we need.... But my own answer to Question 3 would be:-

Question 3

I believe LIC offers a model for all curriculum music teaching, a model that is radically new yet offers rich rewards.

Questions 4 and 5

My own answers to these questions:- they are very important - yet hardly ever seen. Current conventions of curriculum design, based on the 1988 National Curriculum, and in particular the Exemplar Materials produced at its launch, have seriously impeded our effectiveness as teachers¹.

Question 6

Thinking like an exploratory performer goes way beyond picking out the notes of Ode to Joy from a worksheet, or whole-class ukulele strumming. It has to include all of: internalising the sounds we plan to produce, along with the physical movements and the feelings the music inspires - achieving thorough technical and expressive mastery of the materials - researching the contexts that have shaped the music - developing a range of personal imaginative interpretations - communicating the music's meaning (as we interpret it) to an audience.

We can imagine a class working for a whole term to prepare a short presentation to a specific audience. This might be themed, but will certainly include a balanced and contrasted group of items, either mostly sung, or including a goodly amount of playing. Some items will be whole-class, others group and individual. It is essential to approach this as taking place in the classroom, not the rehearsal-room - we are teaching, not directing. So, much of the material will be learned by ear, supported by informal co-constructed aural-analytical processes (movement, graphic notation etc.), while research and interpretation will be carried out by pupils rather than teacher. Ideally there will be contact and collaboration with more experienced performers during the project. Even if the teacher chooses not to take a leading role in the actual presentation, his/her particular interests and performing expertise will be central to the project; this will include modelling and evaluating, but also finding material that ensures all pupils are technically and imaginatively stretched. The programme may include some improvising, and perhaps some compositions (either pastiche or exploratory) related to the theme. Pupils in discussion with the teacher will plan the programme, staging, lighting etc., write programme notes, and evaluate the event.

Question 7

Thinking like an exploratory listener goes way beyond sitting in silence answering factual questions from a worksheet. It has to include: internalising the sounds of the chosen music and the feelings it inspires - close but informal co-constructed aural analysis at the appropriate technical level - researching the contexts that have shaped the music - developing a range of personal interpretations through group discussion, in dialogue with the teacher - communicating the music's meaning (as we interpret it) to others.

We can imagine a class working for a whole term to develop a deep understanding of a single musical work (or a compilation of short related works). The music chosen will repay repeated close audience listening. It is music the teacher knows and loves, and can when needed perform with authority. Although much of the work may depend on recorded sound, a live element is essential, including visiting artists and/or going to an out-of-school performance. A series of exploratory activities will include: singing and playing short extracts - inventing variations on these extracts - discerning underlying processes of rhythm, melody, design etc., and composing sketches using these - close, imaginative listening to, and group discussion of, short passages of key interest - developing a shared vocabulary to describe the music - creating graphic scores of extracts from the music, including whole movements - individual reading of relevant background texts - presentation of conclusions through talking, writing, movement, drawing and modelling, singing and playing.

Question 8

The curriculum models I have sketched here depend on highly skilled teaching, the coming-together of a range of pedagogies acquired by patient practice over a number of years. They are not for beginners.¹ But how does a young teacher ever get to there? CPD is the elephant in the room, hugely important yet never seriously considered. For all our research, and our grand national projects, **we** have no clear understanding of how music specialists learn and grow as teachers over time. We have no developmental models of CPD, and hence no convincing ways of nurturing this slow learning and growing. I would suggest that before less experienced teachers launch out on the more challenging approaches - such as full-scale composing on the LIC model - they need to master a 'foundation curriculum' of less demanding pedagogies which yet contain the seeds of LIC and the various other advanced curricula described or alluded to in this paper. As I see it, creating such a curriculum, and such models of professional growth, is the most urgent problem we face, and one I am increasingly engaged in solving. I would welcome further discussion of these issues; you can contact me on buntingbc@tiscali.co.uk

Questions 9 and 10

In my view the current curriculum is seriously flawed. Recent OfSTED reports on the quality of music teaching make grim reading. But it **isn't teachers' fault!** The review led by Tim Oates makes clear that the whole thrust of National Curriculum philosophy over 25 years has been towards fragmentation, superficiality and mediocrity. We need whole-sale reform if we are to make a more serious contribution to the quality of young people's learning in future.

Among the weaknesses of the Orders for Music in the current National Curriculum:

1. Focusing on musical '**understanding**' defined in terms of "the processes of selected **genres, styles and traditions**" puts understanding 'out there' as a codified set of abstractions, rather than 'in here', as a live response to the particular music we are engaged with.
2. '**Understanding**' is any case a static and abstract outcome; we would do better to talk in terms of 'learning to think and respond musically'.
3. When the curriculum is described as a set of activities (**performing, composing, listening**) rather than as different ways of thinking, it becomes impossible to define accurately what constitutes learning and progress.
4. **Overcrowding**: there is not enough time to do all of singing, notation, listening, and composing properly - because in each of these activities, quality work needs immense amounts of time. So outcomes are always going to be poor, progress slight, and pedagogy under-developed. **We need permission to specialise.**
5. The demand for a '**broad and balanced**' variety of topics is alienating - it discourages teachers both from responding to their particular contexts, and from working to their individual strengths and interests. **We need permission to specialise.**
6. '**Broad and balanced**' results in fragmentation - an unending series of half-term Topic-based Units, isolated fragmented chunks of material each calling on a different way of thinking. This distracts us from the key issues of long-term continuity and depth of learning.
7. Within each Unit "**Integration of Practice**" dictates that performing, composing and listening must all be included in every six-week block; this leads to the trivialisation of all three.
8. There is a perception that the '**elements**' of music are all equally (and thus only moderately) important - whereas in reality some (e.g. Dynamics) need almost no teaching while others (Duration, Pitch) are formidably complex, demanding rigorous sustained effort over many years and a highly-developed pedagogy. We should make more serious efforts in those areas where they're most needed.

¹The same could be said of Musical Futures, and even perhaps of Sing Up in its most developed form

9. The language used in describing the '**elements**' (Duration, Pitch, Dynamics, Timbre, Structure) is an ugly mass of high-level abstractions, which don't suggest any human ways of thinking or working with sound; we need a new language, one of processes not elements.
10. The weak rationale for selecting **styles and genres** creates a pick-and-mix attitude, implying all are equally (and thus only moderately) important; this has trivialised our view of our musical inheritance, and obliterated the things that seem to be difficult (e.g. serious audience music - symphonic, Indian Classical, Jazz etc.), although they are central to our culture and an essential part of developing high-level musical thinking.
11. The **Levels** are obscure and uninspiring. They're about progression, not progress; when mis-guidedly used to measure progress they become an alienating force and an enemy to good learning.