

Debates in Music Education

Thursday 21st March 2013

1.30-3.30pm



ABSTRACTS

JOHN FINNEY:

Examining The Ideology of Musical Composition

"The context for music education is currently in flux and we are keen to see composition and creative music-making as central to these developments and at the heart of young people's music education"

(Nancy Evans, BCMG's Learning)

Composing of course may not be the same as creative music making and although composing has persisted as a bedrock component of Music at GCSE, its place in the pre-14 music curriculum is less clear. The Listen, Imagine, Compose project investigates the place of composing in the musical development of children and young people.

The teaching of composing in our schools is hardly a great success story, and there remains considerable mystery surrounding its teaching and not least the role adopted by the teacher if indeed there is one. In recent informal approaches to learning music the teacher as leader, model and mediator of compositional techniques and strategies is called into question and this exposes the ideology of musical composition. Important questions arise:

- 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?

GARY SPRUCE:

Musical Knowledge, Critical Consciousness and Critical Thinking

The concept of critical thinking is understood in a number of ways. In some definitions it is close to the idea of metacognition - 'thinking about thinking' - whilst in others it describes a process of 'logical thinking' involving the gathering, assimilation and analysis of evidence from which emerges a 'reasoned' conclusion. In his book *Democracy and Music Education* (2005) Paul Woodford suggests that although critical thinking is supposed to 'develop independence of mind' it is almost always equated in curriculum documents 'with the application and development of abstract thinking skills and abilities divorced from

social, moral, ethical or political considerations' and that 'Few music teachers realize that this separation of mind and matter is a perversion of what Dewey, one of the fathers of the contemporary critical thinking movement, intended' (Woodford 2005: 95).

In this presentation I will explore critical thinking as part of the framework of critical (social) theory and examine how, 'properly embedded, critical thinking and understanding enables pupils to make connections between their musical learning in school and their lived reality, and thus empower them as learners' (Spruce 2009: 36). Critical thinking is conceptualized here as a key element in the development of a more socially just society in which all are enabled to fully participate. I will argue, however, that in order to create the conditions within which critical thinking can flourish, we need to examine the ways in which knowledge is conceptualized and understood and how knowledge, particularly in school, is positioned in relation to the 'knower' or 'learner'. I will suggest that such a reconceptualization will inevitably present challenges to some pedagogical approaches.

I began the chapter this session is based on by exploring the philosophical underpinning of some commonly-held conceptions of the nature of knowledge and the relationship of the knower to knowledge; noting through examples from music education the impact these relationships can have on young people's experiences of music in school. Drawing on the ideas of Paulo Freire (1970; 1974) I then explored how, through a process of 'conscientization' leading to critical consciousness supported by a critical pedagogy, critical thinking might be nurtured and 'independence of mind' developed within the music classroom. At various points in the presentation I will exemplify the points being made with brief examples or more worked-out 'case studies' from music classroom practice.

ROBERT BUNTING:

Listen Imagine Compose - A New Curriculum Model?

The pedagogy of Listen Imagine Compose could be a model for all curriculum planning. Among 11 key features that could be transferred from Composing to Performing and Listening are:

- Rich, challenging experiences - mind-expanding, thought-provoking.
- Emphasis on the utmost quality and precision of thinking.
- Slow deep learning - thorough mastery of a small set of objectives.
- Composer/teachers teach with authority - that is, they work solely and unashamedly from their individual areas of musical expertise.
- As a result pupils produce genuinely individual, independent, exploratory work.

The present National Curriculum severely hampers good teaching and limits quality of learning. Among its many weaknesses:

- When the curriculum is described as a set of activities (performing, composing, listening) rather than as different ways of thinking, it becomes impossible to accurately define learning and progress
- Overcrowding: there is not enough time to do all of singing, notation, listening, and composing properly - 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.
- The demand for a 'broad and balanced' variety of topics discourages teachers from working to their individual strengths and interests.
- The 'Levels' are obscure and uninspiring. They're about progression, not progress. When misguidedly used to measure progress they have become an alienating force and an enemy to good learning.

Just as Listen Imagine Compose is about learning how an exploratory composer thinks, we can develop other curriculum models concerned with learning how an exploratory performer thinks or learning how an exploratory listener thinks, built on the same pedagogies. (*Detailed examples are provided in the full paper*). The skills needed to deliver such curricula are not learned overnight. We need a much clearer

understanding of how music specialists learn and grow as teachers over time. Yet currently we have no developmental model of CPD, and hence no convincing way of nurturing this slow learning and growing.

Perhaps a simpler 'foundation curriculum' is needed for less experienced teachers, though it must be one that contains the seeds of all the more advanced and specialised approaches.

CHRIS PHILPOTT:

Assessment for Self-Directed Learning in Music Education

This presentation explores the role of assessment in the self-directed learning (SDL) of pupils, a theme that is relatively underexposed in the literature and support materials developed for schools. It would be fair to say that self-directed learning presents many challenges to current assessment practices, which are not easily adaptable to SDL, rendering the relationship highly problematic. In some seminal and pioneering research on SDL Lucy Green tacitly acknowledges this when noting:

Another central educational issue that was left untouched, at least from the research point of view, concerns assessment ... teachers found that they could apply their usual assessment methods to the project. It would be fascinating to investigate exactly how they did this, and to develop approaches that combine best practice, or that offer alternative approaches ... This could include considering approaches to assessment based on apprenticeship models of learning, as well as how to give more weight to pupil self-assessment and peer assessment.
(Green 2008: 184).

For the assessment of self-directed learning critical questions surround notions of: Whose music? Whose learning objectives? Whose criteria? Whose interventions? Whose targets? Whose outcomes? Whose assessment? By way of pursuing a critical perspective on these issues, this presentation will examine case study examples from the UK: the *Musical Futures* project and the National Strategy Key Stage 3 Music Programme. Self-directed learning is here taken to be an approach to music education exemplified by, but not entirely synonymous with, the *Musical Futures* project. Current assessment practice, especially 'assessment for learning', is taken to be exemplified by, but not entirely synonymous with, the National Strategy.

While new models of assessment for the new 'pedagogies' await further development, it is most likely that teachers will default to what Fautley calls 'bolt-on accessories' (2010: 202). This presentation aims to show why the 'bolting on' of current assessment practices to SDL is problematic and how the relationship can be reconceptualized.