MUSIC TEACH TALK

Reflections on teachers' responses to the priorities set by Ofsted in *Wider Still, and Wider*

John Finney

Reflections on http://www.teachingmusic.org.uk forum responses by teachers to the Ofsted priorities set in *Wider still, and wider*

Ofsted priority 1: Using sound as the dominant language

A reflection on teachers' feedback

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> *'… music is our primary language as musicians and our secret weapon … always prioritise musical communication … so why don't we all aim to start our sessions with music? It's a simple idea but it just might work … out of good music will come feedback and debate … sometimes, words just don't cut it. … I feel certain that students need to experience and internalise musical sounds before we can hang words upon them … I love the fact that I'm a musician and get to play everyday in my lessons. I also think the pupils respect that as staff we practise what we preach...'*

(From the teachingmusic forum)

Using the target language has been a contentious issue for some time within Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) teaching. An MFL colleague tells me that the key question is this: When and why do we desist from use of the 'target language'? The MFL teacher considers when it is judicious to use the mother tongue rather than the second language being learnt – when it is principled to do so. In music, and judging from the Ofsted report, music teaching is some way off from emulating this kind of thinking, if indeed this is what we should aspire to.

The difficulty with this challenge from Ofsted is understanding exactly what is involved in using sound as the dominant language. The discussions on the forum also raise the question of knowing when it is appropriate to do so, as well as when (and why) it might not be, as well as offering insights into the strategies currently being employed in the classroom.

Modelling vs immersion

There seem to be two classroom scenarios described on the forum. The first centres around the role of **modelling** - the process of seeing, hearing and feeling music linked to some kind of process of assimilation or instructional focus. Jane Werry's instructions: *'copy what I'm doing'*, or *'work out this melody, it starts on C…'*, and Bill Martin's *'listen and copy!'* give insights into the necessity of the instructional process in which sound is the dominant language. This involves the presentation and sharing of musical material that is intended to inspire some kind of response and often to form the basis for a task.

For Liz Olner, modelling is what she does constantly and this involves responding musically to the musical responses of her students. Perhaps this goes to the heart of what modelling involves – a kind of musical dialogue through which we can see what degree of musical understanding is evident and respond in appropriate measure. Anthony Anderson poses a good question about this: are we talking about demonstration or modelling? These two strategies have quite different purposes, and this shows how easy it is for terminology to muddy the waters, highlighting an urgent need for more precise and more differentiated pedagogical language.

The second scenario suggests some kind of **immersion**, which is essentially about living the music of a particular tradition or style. Samba and Senegalese Drumming come to mind. While this second scenario involves a process of modelling, the purpose may be different.

And then there is simply the idea of 'musical experience', implying the presence of music sounding (also perhaps silently sounding in the imagination). We can't have a musical experience unless music is present for real or in mind. This way of thinking may be the most helpful. I will call it 'being in the medium.' And 'being in the medium' involves thinking (and feeling) the music being engaged with, whether that is listening to Rick Wakeman's 'War of the Worlds' or the whole class performing as a minimalist ensemble.

'But we can't do it all through music'

Assuming that, like teachers of MFL, and as recommended by Ofsted, we are mostly 'in the medium' of music, why then would we come out of it, whether for a moment or for some sustained period of time? As Jane explains, without this step back from the music there would be no meta-cognition – i.e., no understanding about what we are learning. Talking and writing develop a form of thinking that leads to finding a meta-language serving, as David Ashworth suggests, a conceptual and procedural grasp of the subject. This may have little to do with key words and word banks and so on, but much more to do with the way in which we create a classroom conversation, and the barely-conscious use of ongoing dialogue which the teacher sensitively lowers, using a language that explains clearly and leads to an 'ah, I see!' moment. Jennie Francis's detailed description of a Year 10 workshop on the forum shows both the complexity and subtlety of this in practice.

So what about written work? The question we should ask is when is its use judicious - when is it principled? Thinking about written work as 'evidence' seems unhelpful while at the same time an understandable response to the surveillance culture we live with. One way forward might be to ask the English teachers of our classes to help. My English colleague advises me on the various genres of writing that might be drawn upon and which our students are being taught how to use in their English lessons. There is persuasive, descriptive and technical writing, poetic writing, and of course poetry itself. We are likely to get poor quality writing if we fail to connect in this kind of way. But in turn we would need to tell our English colleagues about genres of music writing that are out there. And our students need to tell us what reading they do about music, its genre and style. After all, the art of writing is usually associated with the art of reading.

Jonathan Westrup's honest reference to the challenges of learning to be a music teacher may get close to the heart of the problem. Talking 'at' students is an obvious coping strategy, as is having desks. In becoming a music teacher there is a lot to master and too few strong mentors to guide and to nurture confidence in being musical alongside and with young people from the start. And then there are school protocols and Senior Leadership Teams looking for 'evidence' of attainment and progress, and the difficulty in explaining to others what we think learning to be musical might mean.

Moving forward

At least two actions may be needed to tackle this challenge set by Ofsted. First, more detailed descriptions by teachers of their interactions with students in the classroom. This requires teachers to observe themselves and each other, looking for the smallest detail and the critical moments, and being articulate about these. This will consequently facilitate the second action – the growth of a meta-language in order to better understand teaching practice. This will enable us all to talk more precisely about what exactly is meant by '*establishing sound as the dominant target language*', for example.

It would seem reasonable that in the light of expecting our students to talk and write in the cause of developing a meta-language, that this should be expected of teachers too. The teachingmusic website makes this possible. Through discussion we can become clearer about what assumptions a commitment to musical sound dominating the classroom implies. What principles, beliefs and values are we living by and for what purpose? (It is not possible for any of this to surface in an Ofsted report.) Furthermore, we should ensure a level of critical reflection of what is written on the forum boards and blogs in order to preserve and implement the value of the discussions.

Ofsted priority 2: Challenging inequality of opportunity

A reflection on teachers' feedback

John Finney

Inequality of opportunity in a democratic society is generally regarded as social injustice and despite sustained attempts to overcome barriers for the majority to have access to a music education through the institution of the school, music education in England has struggled to engage and musically educate the majority.

However, the music teachers responding to this forum discussion are all proactive thinkers and doers in respect to achieving fuller participation. For these teachers the school is a site where musical formalities and informalities live side by side, and where students as leaders and collaborators are accepted as stakeholders in making the curriculum with all its extensions and hidden corners. Jane Werry writes about providing '*opportunities for students to run their own activities and follow through on their ideas … managing to create a culture where students are happy to come to us and say 'Can we?'*

Student autonomy

In this way a sense of student autonomy is created. This is an obvious theme running through the forum responses, where many examples are given of students leading musical activity and drawing on skills often beyond the reach of the music teacher, satisfying niche interests and reaching less well-represented groups of students. For Caroline Dearing, achieving fuller participation involves '*asking students directly what they feel they are lacking in the way of opportunity, skills and experience, and involving them in redesigning the Key Stage 3 curriculum, extra-curricular opportunities, etc.*'

If the secondary school music teacher is as much generalist as specialist, and if diversity is the watchword, then while there are students leading and their 'voices' contributing within a collaborative approach, there will also be talented visiting instrumental teachers on hand and, as Ingrid MacLean suggests, the budget can be used to buy in skills, such as local film composers inspiring KS3 'gifted and talented' students, and open house DJ workshops.

David Ashworth points out that the wider community should be connected with, and local bonds strengthened. Community choirs, composers, groups, amateur ensembles, arts organisations, faith groups, and so on, can all share in educating our students.

All this represents a general ethos of openness, generosity and resourcefulness that works to support a strategy of inclusion. But what about activity targeted at specific challenges? There is Martin Said's example of boys' singing in transition; Jane Werry's boys-only choir in a mixed school; John Kelleher's example of the local music service providing resources for Free School Meal students (will the 'pupil premium' work though the channel of music?); Ingrid's example of the support for autistic students and Youth Music's provision of a music therapist; music technology specifically designed for SEN students; and, as Jonathan Westrup discusses, there need be no barrier to particular ethnic groups succeeding musically. Indeed, it would seem that our global-local musical culture is evolving in such a way that the days of rigid musical identities are receding, for both students and teachers. Perhaps we can now think in terms of multiple musical identities, creating a post-modern culture where mixes, hybrids and fusions sit side by side with genre loyalty and tradition as young people grow through the secondary school. And in the process music can be viewed as a source of cultural blending, calling for open music departments as places of cultural exchange where, as Matt Allen says, we can '*actively encourage students to cross typical self-imposed boundaries and try out something different.*'

Ofsted priority 3: Progression

A reflection on teachers' feedback

John Finney

In their report, Ofsted noted the difficulty music teachers have in articulating a rationale for the content of their curriculum as a source of musical progression. Contrary to this finding, many teachers on the teachingmusic forum managed to express their progression strategies clearly:

> *I have always started any curriculum structuring by looking at NC Targets and what the student would actually have to do to achieve that target. Having identified the goals, I then work backward and ascertain what steps need to be covered in order to get from ability levels around levels 2 or 3 up to those targets. The result is a simple spreadsheet/diagram that outlines each step from entry at year 7 until the end of year 9.*
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> *Actual topics/musical content is then devised to make sure that students will engage in musical activities that will provide them with a chance to progress along the developmental lines I have outlined. Simple rhythmic composing in year 7 eventually morphs into African Drumming in year 9, with increased levels of complexity, adding vocal work whilst playing an instrument, for example, via heterophonic Gamelan composing in year 8. As the years have gone by, these topics have included varying amounts of singing, technology, group vs individual work, instrumental techniques, performing styles (e.g. inclusion of movement) amongst others.*
>
> (Matt Allen)

Matt describes a curriculum that feels something like a tree in growth, where there is an organic branching out of learning while at the same time there is recoil which draws strength from what is already established so that, as Matt went on to say, *'musical ideas and techniques are revisited with increasing complexity and musical maturity.'* It is a curriculum that works through progressive differentiation and integration. All this appears to fit the official call for '*progression in demand, progression in range, and progression in quality*' (p49, *Music in schools: wider still, and wider*).

A dialogic approach

Like Matt, both Hanh Doan and Jane Werry wrote confidently of working within the framework provided by the National Curriculum. Jane described how she devises bespoke units of work and teaching strategies that make it '*possible to track very tangible progression.*' As an example, she teaches harmonic principles at Key Stage 3, with '*very pleasing success...*', a strategy which bears fruit in the Key Stages that follow. But there is also a dialogic approach in play and this implies students and teachers working together to make sense of where things are going and where they might go. There is choice, flexibility, and the recognition that student and teacher will have to work on achieving progression together.

Like Jane, for Liz Olner the place to start in securing progression is through a dialogic approach. In this view, progression arises from the day to day, moment by moment careful attention to students' responses to what they are experiencing and thinking.

> *Whilst there is a massive amount of practical activity, each lesson is built on the previous and relies on students recalling the activities (both verbally and practically), and gradually taking leadership roles in warm-ups and music-making which I initially led. I have used more dialogue than I would ordinarily, and I did not expect to retain student engagement but they have and their progress is far more well-rounded than I have previously experienced. I am especially pleased with the development of questioning, which has become contributions to a discussion by nearly the whole class, building a much bigger picture and extending both musical knowledge and contextual knowledge. I'm now exploring the idea of informal questioning techniques - discussion based, rather than what I suspect they assume is always a right-or-wrong scenario – being linked to an improved depth of understanding.*

Thus, Liz connects us with the issue of how to make music lessons musical while at the same time developing her pupils' thinking in support of their music-making. Lots of music, lots of thinking about it, lots of listening to each other and lots of progress.

Assessment demands

But of course, as a number of teachers report, there is an elephant in the room. Both Matt and Jane express the frustrations of having to meet unhelpful assessment demands where assessment has been elevated to a position beyond its calling, obscuring what musical learning and progression might be. Martin Fautley writes:

> *Too often I think music teachers are forced by a performativity agenda to see assessment as an end in its own right, rather than as a tool. We ought to be able to decide what learning is, what progression is, and what attainment is, then find ways of assessing these musically. Not deciding what we want to assess, because we can, and because we need to 'prove' pupils are progressing.*

For music teachers, 1999 marked the installation of levels of attainment which were broadly welcomed and thought to assist in making more informed judgments about student's progress and therefore contribute to ongoing planning for progression. Yet the level descriptors and the misunderstanding of them have been further aggravated by a regime of high-stakes assessment focused almost entirely on the tracking of pupil progress in reductive terms. This, it would seem, may hinder many music teachers from developing a more holistic view of what they do.

In the work of teachers like Matt, Jane and Liz above we see the skill to reflect upon their students' musical attainment, and to enter into the process of curriculum evaluation and curriculum revision, and their consideration of the curriculum as mobile and experimental. Where confidence is expressed about musical progression there is also confident expression of interaction between curriculum and pedagogy.

This interminable process of working out not only 'what works' but 'what works better' was once thought to be one of the purposes of assessment. Assessment led to evaluation of the curriculum. With so much emphasis on the reductive tracking of pupil progress linked to the idea of assessment the evaluative function of assessment may have been lost. Thus, it would seem that the idea of musical progression, as conceived within the existing National Curriculum framework, is virtually exhausted. We need to find a new language as part of finding clearer purpose for our music education.

Ofsted Priority 4: improve pupils' internalisation of music through high quality singing and listening

A reflection on teachers' feedback

John Finney

> *'…the essential ingredient in the music education of young children is the ability to internalise musical sounds and that when we engage in listening with children we should specifically encourage the development of this internalised mental activity.'*
> (Kemp, 1986: address given at the 4th International Music Conference in Baghdad 1986)

> *'Singing (which encompasses improvisation with vocal sounds) is a requirement in the Programme of Study at all Key Stages. If developed consistently, singing provides a central resource in performing and composing at every level.'*
> (Teaching Music in the National Curriculum, Ed. Pratt and Stevens, 1995)

> *'Our mind is our first instrument, then our voice, then guitar or whatever it happens that the students play.'*
> (Martin Said, www.teachingmusic.org.uk forum)

> *'… aspirations (to include singing) outstrip actuality.'*
> (Swanwick, 1989)

At the inception of the National Curriculum for Music in 1992, the Music Working Group's reports and commentaries made it clear that singing was being reinstated as a non-negotiable element of the curriculum and that it should be thought of as a 'central resource.' Twenty years later the singing worm is turning. Impetus has come from the 'Sing Up' programme leading to questions about transition to secondary school and continuity of experience. There is the contemporary culture of talent, celebrity and recognition gained through the voice; there is 'the last choir standing' and the growth of the community choir movement as a statement of a more democratic musical society and even singing as an aspect of a restored British national identity. The lost pedagogy of singing with its attendant musicianship theories are back with us.

In respect to singing the Ofsted report is concerned with 'improvements in the internalisation of music', and through the teachingmusic online forum we have begun to tease out what this might mean. If internalisation is the watchword then we are drawn to the idea of a musical mind and the significance of learning to *'think (and feel) in sound'* (Kemp, 1986).

Singing as a central resource

While we still see *'aspirations outstripping actuality'* in our music teachers' responses, there are strong markers of progress towards creating Secondary school singing cultures and an awareness of singing as a central resource or first instrument of the mind, as Martin Said puts it:

> *Increasingly I am asking students to compose with their voice first then find the notes. To think of the mind as being the first instrument is only possible once we have encountered and internalized specific sounds or techniques …*

> *I look back when I started teaching and at GCSE I had students sat around the room with headphones on composing directly into Sibelius, a kind o music by numbers or trial and error. It is horrific to think back! Now it delights me to hear some of our students even those from a more classical background telling the guitarist in their group, no it needs to go "naah naaaah nah nah".*

Martin is recognising a relationship between vocalisation, musical thinking and music making. Singing is to be viewed as more than a mode of musical performance. If it is believed to have a key role to play in the development of the ability to think in sound then developing a culture of singing in Secondary schools is likely to be a good starting point.

Hanh Doan sets out a developing vision of a school with a vibrant singing culture involving feeder schools and then carrying on up through the whole 11-18 age range.

> We have started to visit some of our feeder schools to do vocal workshops which means they are aware that they will be expected to sing. We create safe environments for them - our first Year 7 "baseline" project is all about singing and playing in small groups after having done lots of classroom vocal work and singing. From then on at key stage 3, there is usually a point in most schemes of work where something vocal is appropriate. There's medieval Music, Blues, Indian Raga, Pop Music and more.

Here we see singing not so much underpinning all that is done, but rather something to draw in, something to look out for, not yet integral, and Hanh recognises this as she plans to *'chart the progression of vocal work through KS3 properly - a summer job.'* Jane Werry is in much the same place as she writes *'I know we have work to do, and bringing singing back to the core of what we do throughout KS3 is a priority for next year.'*

Sing-listen-analyse

If singing is difficult to sustain at KS3, what may help are the ideas which promote it as a powerful tool in KS4, where there is stronger synergy between singing, listening and thinking in sound (the Ofsted priority). It was Martin who told of moving away from having the GCSE class sitting at computers to a communal classroom of shared musical thinking though singing. Hanh tells of a communal singing classroom as the hub of upper school work - the singing of set works through a workshop where musical analysis intersects with performance work. And this prompts the idea of a Key Stage 3 curriculum built around works that can be explored through the voice, works exemplifying all that is important to the musical style or genre being studied. Can we think of a musical work as chant, song or symphony?

This idea of 'sing-listen-analyse' is aural development with the voice not only as a thinking instrument but the source of thinking about music. Hanh explains:

> At A level, like an apple a day, we will sing through a chorale a week. Again, if you don't have all the parts, it doesn't matter, only do S and A if you only have girls, then add a B if you have less confident boys and then T can be added by girls or boys later, or even just the piano filling in. Lead from the piano if you can (or play through Sibelius) and sing and analyse .It's much more fun and the internalisation is much quicker than by just listening. Intervals and chords can be done through this and of course, just have a go at any of the vocal "set works". On the Edexcel "Sing we and chant it" went down well but if there's a fugue to be taught, then why don't you whip out the Banquet Fugue by John Rutter as a start?!

Returning to what the Ofsted report says:

> Developing pupils' intrinsic musical understanding – an understanding that goes beyond words and which is expressed through the quality of their musical responses – has at its heart the development of listening skills. These skills do not develop primarily on paper or in words – they develop in musical sounds, inside the head. In turn, the development of another internal musical process – singing, where the sound comes from within the body – links inextricably to the development of listening with musical understanding. Singing and listening are natural partners in musical learning, in the same way that speaking and listening underpin verbal language learning.

There is a great deal here to unpick.

In invoking the idea of *'intrinsic musical understanding'* there is recognition that to 'know' music is to 'be it' - to 'live it.' *'I am the music while the music lasts'* writes T. S. Eliot. Some have thought of this as 'experience-knowledge', 'intuitively-felt knowledge', 'tacit knowledge', without which little else makes sense. In linking this to the notion of 'internal musical processes', a psychology of musical behaviour is opened up, one with a long history. Anthony Kemp encouraged us to use the metaphor of the 'mind's ear' to consider how we learn to 'think and feel in sound', a mental activity developed through singing, moving and playing instruments and which Edwin Gordon encapsulated in the concept of 'audiation.'

For Ofsted it is singing, rather than movement or playing instruments that is the key. Singing, coming from within the body, and involving movement of the larynx and associated muscular systems, can be thought of as an essentially kinaesthetic-tactile operation. Linking this with musical understanding asserts that musical knowing is 'embodied.'

This opens up a fascinating perspective on music education and one that could act to substantially re-orientate it. By Ofsted recognising the significance of 'the mind's ear', leading to considering the fundamental role of 'audiation' in developing musicianship, possibly defined as the quality of thinking and feeling in sound, there are considerable implications for the way singing, moving and musical instruments are approached, and this includes the way music technology is used, our last area of Ofsted priority.

Ofsted Priority 5: Improve the quality of musical learning through the use of technology

A reflection on teachers' feedback

John Finney

> *The survey also indentified very strongly that the past three years have brought insufficient improvements in the quality of musical learning through the use of technology. As with singing, a key reason for this was insufficient consideration by schools for the way that music technology can be used synoptically, across a range of activities, to engage all groups of students and develop their intrinsic musical understanding.*

(p54, para.155 *Music in schools: wider still, and wider*)

The synoptic use of music technology suggests that, like singing, technology is a central resource - an 'instrument' through which musical thinking and listening, musical ideas and musicianship are developed, and music experienced. Through music technology we can live in the medium of music, affording what the Ofsted report calls '*intrinsic musical understanding.*'

On the forum, Matt Allen provides a detailed account of music technology being used as the dominant medium across all years; a medium through which musical thinking and expression are channeled, enabling universal access and engagement. And Eugene Cantera describes a music environment where technology is both the highway of communication and the source of information, setting the bounds of the students' musical experience. For some of the teachers on the forum, *technology* and *music technology* define the culture of music in school. For others less so. When working with the 14-18 age range, Jennie Francis finds music technology less of a driver and rather something to be drawn towards, and for Year 9 students it is a medium largely of student choice '*if they think it will serve their interests well.*'

Retaining musical integrity

Jane Werry represents the "enthusiastic but skeptical" camp. While she understands *'technology's potential for engaging students, enabling them to do things that are not otherwise possible*', she is concerned that projects drawing upon technology should retain musical integrity, bearing in mind that time must be devoted to '*the regular practising of real live performing.*' Jane's way of thinking about musical performance may in some respects differ from Jonathan Westrup who also insists that music technology be used 'musically' with creative performance as its cornerstone, and that the creativity of approach is what counts. What is key is that students '*own the raw data – samples, loops – and by giving them esoteric starting points.*' For Jonathan, the 20th century's canon provides a rich source of such starting points.

This relationship with the late modernist and contemporary repertoire is important to other respondents. Jennie, now deploying music technology for a specific purpose, writes a detailed description of how a Year 10 class were taken 'inside' the music material and compositional strategies used by Steve Reich, showing the way in which 'thinking in music' and 'critically thinking about it' can work in synergy to achieve appreciation of musical works. And vocalization was a part of this, reminding us that the voice can be a 'central resource' through which to think, feel and know music. Something like this may be what the Ofsted report refers to as the synoptic use of music technology.

Like other contributors, Peter Romhany relates the use of music technology to 20th Century Art Music and gives a vivid example of Soundscape work with Year 7. Furthermore, he reinforces Jonathan Westrup's commitment to working with 'raw data' rather than what is given. And this example shows how moving away from the computer yields imaginative possibilities, which David Ashworth thinks of as 'authentic strategies' – i.e., the reason a composer might have for wanting or needing to explain their decisions and choices. In this way, the use of technology is contextualised and given greater significance. (We are

reminded here of Martin Said's forum post describing a sorry memory of 'composing by numbers at the computer' and in great contrast his current inspiring 'Bird song' project.)

This focus on musical decisions and choices is set out by Caroline Dearing who, like others, tells much about how her students are given the freedom to develop ideas within the process of composing through music technology. However, Caroline goes further and gives a detailed account of how this has little meaning without persistently challenging students to think more, reflect more and become articulate about intentions and develop the skill of musical criticism. It is technological resources that make this more telling than otherwise and all this becomes a part of recording, storing and the valuing (assessing) of students' work. This idea of the classroom as a conversation through technological resource is further developed by Hanh Doan with the use of a VLE, a Twitter feed and blog posts.

The forum contributors together provide an array of 'instruments' (too many to list here) through which pupils can make sense of their making of music, their thinking about it and their placing it in context. The forum discussion will be rewarding to read and re-read, and for continued thought given to ways in which music technology '*can be used synoptically across a range of activities, to engage all groups of students and develop their intrinsic musical understanding*' (p54, para.155, Music in schools: wider still, and wider).