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Stephanie Pitts

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Stephanie Pitts

Monitoring musical progress: approaches from the UK

Defining standards for music

The process of defining music education standards involves some important preliminary decisions: what is music education for?; who is music education for?; and where does music education fit?

The purpose of music education has been hotly contested for many decades, with its contribution to the curriculum being variously argued in terms of creating good citizens with a knowledge of classical repertoire, preparing children for lives as discerning listeners or amateur performers, or giving them opportunities to acquire musical skills and associated personal skills of co-operation, decision-making and self-critique. The arguments for including music in the curriculum are plentiful, but are sometimes confused by an implicit doubt over who music education is for: should schools be concerned with identifying a talented minority and providing them with high-level tuition, or with giving all children access to musical opportunities? British music educators have overwhelmingly favoured the latter option, but the situation is different in other European countries, where the culture of amateur music-making is not so prominent, and where high standards of musical achievement are seen as more important than widespread access to learning. These broader cultural contexts affect the final question posed above: where does school music fit amongst the other kinds of musical learning undertaken by young people? The past decade has seen increasing research and policy interest in the informal learning that takes place beyond school, as teenagers become expert listeners in their chosen genres of pop music, and work together as performers and composers in bands run without any teacher intervention (cf. Green, 2002; Folkestad, 2006).

This paper will illustrate how developments in the British music curriculum have been affected by these underlying questions of the purpose of music education. A historical perspective will show how the current curriculum has been added to over decades, resulting in broad definitions of music which resist standardized content and teaching approaches. The effects of the English National Curriculum, introduced in 1992, will be considered, in the hope that the long-term impact of defining standards in music will provide some useful questions, even warnings, for those now attempting the same challenge in relation to German music education.

Historical perspectives from the UK

School music in Britain was once clearly defined and minimally debated: at the start of the twentieth century it contributed to the educational aim of turning children into good future citizens by providing them with knowledge of the classical 'masterworks' and ensuring that they could sing tunefully and were familiar with folksongs and other national repertoire. The first decades of the twentieth century were the era of 'musical appreciation' classes, in which children listened to classical repertoire, at first on the piano, and later using the new technology of the gramophone and schools radio broadcasts. Singing was also prevalent, with a clear progression

from learning melodies by ear, to singing in harmony from sol-fa or staff notation. Children following this music curriculum were prepared for a life of concert-going and potential participation in the amateur choirs that flourished around this time, and were thereby protected (as educators saw it) from the influences of low art music by their proper respect for their classical heritage.

As new technologies brought wider access to music in the home, and the raising of the school leaving age changed conceptions of childhood as a mere preparation for adult life, music education began to adapt to a more complex and ambitious educational climate. The 1940s and '50s saw a growth in performance culture in schools, with the establishment of orchestras and choirs and the beginning of the extra-curricular musical provision that still characterizes UK music education today. The cultural heritage of classical music remained important, but children were seen less as passive receivers of this legacy and more as participants in making and enjoying music. Where previous decades had seen children visiting their local concert halls to hear professional performers, now there were chances for the pupils themselves to be the performers, as a still traditional curriculum was supplemented by activities beyond the classroom. The dependence of music education on the enthusiasms and energies of individual teachers became more apparent; a factor which is still evident in the diverse school cultures of contemporary Britain.

Two revolutions in UK school music education were about to take place: the first, led by John Paynter and other composer-teachers, brought composing to the classroom, and championed the idea that the *process* of musical learning was as important as the product. Children were encouraged to explore, develop and refine their own musical works, bringing school music closer to contemporary art music for the first time (Paynter & Aston, 1970). These new teaching methods were enthusiastically embraced by some teachers, but understandably resisted by others, who perceived a threat to long-held values in music education. It took the second revolution, which came from the unexpected direction of examination reform policies, to enshrine the tripartite musical curriculum – performing, composing and listening – in the new General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), introduced as the 16+ examination in 1986. Those pupils who now opted to take music as an examination subject were required to develop all three of these musical facets, such that the principles of developing musical knowledge and skill through active involvement were officially at the heart of the curriculum for the first time.

With the exception of the politically-imposed GCSE reform, change in music education had occurred slowly through the twentieth century, largely as a result of adaptation to changing musical and educational circumstances, and the influence of a few key individuals working as inspectors, teachers or writers on music education (for further detail see Pitts, 2000; and Rainbow with Cox, 2006). Indeed, education more widely had been professionally-driven, with little political interference beyond the national system of inspection and the publication of government 'suggestions' for various subjects and age groups. This lack of political intervention became a source of concern to the right-wing Conservative government of the 1980s, who perceived declining standards in education, and sought greater standardization across schools through the introduction of a National Curriculum. Music, perhaps inevitably, was amongst the last subjects for which curriculum orders were drafted, by which time the 'core' subjects of maths, science and English had already run into difficulties through over-prescriptive and unrealistic orders, which were causing a high level of professional dissatisfaction. The Music Working Group, appointed to

define curriculum content and standards in music, were asked to make their proposals brief and straightforward, so as to confine music to its allocated hour a week in the school timetable and avoid the problems of earlier subject orders. This brought for the Working Group the enormous challenge of capturing the best of current practice in music while ensuring a robust and achievable curriculum that would be welcomed by professionals and politicians alike.

Music in the National Curriculum

When the National Curriculum for Music was introduced in 1992, teachers had only recently adapted to the change in music education brought about by the GCSE. Performing, composing and listening had secured their place at the heart of the music curriculum, but for some teachers this had meant substantial changes in teaching habits, and the Working Group were sensitive to the need to build on these developments, rather than interrupting them (see Pitts, 2000; also Pratt & Stephens, 1995). Their draft proposals suggested that 'Making Music' and 'Understanding Music' should form the structure of the curriculum; by the publication of their final report these components were changed to 'Performing', 'Composing' and 'Appraising', the latter word intended to capture the idea of acquiring knowledge and critical skills through listening. The detail of the curriculum was given in non-statutory 'levels of attainment', which emphasized the value of a creative approach to musical learning, so acknowledging the developments in music teaching since the 1970s. The Working Group were committed to 'holistic' learning, in which all aspects of music were explored through active participation, drawing on a wide variety of genres and repertoire.

Neither the government nor the Working Group can have been prepared for the enormous public debate that followed publication of the draft proposals. On the one hand, right-wing commentators lamented the lack of classical music specified in the proposals, fearing that its previously dominant position in the curriculum would be lost, bringing with it a decline in cultural standards. Conversely, musicians committed to providing performing and composing opportunities in schools campaigned against the government's stated desire to reduce the draft proposals still further, so threatening the thriving musical cultures in UK schools. Keen to bring an end to debate over what had been assumed to be a small and uncontroversial subject, the government-appointed National Curriculum Council over-ruled the Working Group's desire for the tripartite nature of musical learning to be evident in three attainment targets, and when the curriculum became law in April 1992, it consisted of two components: 'Performing and Composing' and 'Listening and Appraising'. Further discussion went largely unheard amongst the review of core subjects which was already underway, and the 'slimmed down' curriculum introduced in 1995 meant few changes for music, already one of the less prescriptive documents.

The National Curriculum and its impact continued to be fiercely debated by academics and educators in the subsequent decade, many expressing indignation at the loss of professional status implicit in the political drive to impose standards across the curriculum. Twenty-five years later, however, the National Curriculum is an accepted fact of professional and political life, but is rarely mentioned in music education research, which has shifted its focus to specific elements of musical learning which transcend curriculum debate; music technology, informal learning, equality of opportunity and so on. The 'levels of attainment' which comprise the current National Curriculum for Music are broad (some might say vague) and leave scope for the pursuit of individual interests and opportunities – far removed from the standardized curriculum first

envisaged by politicians in the 1980s (see http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ for full details). Exploration of musical sound and its uses and effects runs throughout the levels of attainment, involving pupils in generating, refining and critiquing musical ideas. There is scope within the orders for music to be taught imaginatively and passionately, and so the fears of educators and musicians that inspiring music teachers would be driven out of the profession have proved to be unfounded. Equally, though, the standards could be met through a bare minimum of unimaginative teaching, particularly in schools where resources are inadequate and disadvantaged catchment areas results in a school population with limited musical opportunities and encouragement at home. The impact of the National Curriculum is therefore open to question, and it is easy to see with hindsight that achieving an ideal music education in all schools is subject to many more factors than simply the provision of a well-written curriculum

So are standards important?

While the National Curriculum forms the legal basis of music education, developments in the subject continue to be more substantially influenced by the enthusiasm of individual teachers, the provision of local opportunities and resources, and the introduction of other initiatives designed to bring music to disadvantaged schools and form stronger connections with local communities. Many orchestras and other musical organisations now run 'outreach' programmes, encouraging children to engage with live performance, and so fostering the next generation of concert-goers as well as enriching school experience. Some of these projects are funded by Youth Music (www.youthmusic.org.uk), which in turn draws income from the National Lottery and has a particular remit for working with disadvantaged groups where musical provision is currently minimal (an admission in itself that the National Curriculum has not achieved a uniformity of provision across the country). Another prominent organisation is Musical Futures (www.musicalfutures.org.uk), a forum for sharing good practice which sponsors independent research as well as investing in school projects and innovative teaching. Partly government-funded, Musical Futures is distinct from but sympathetic to the recent Secondary National Strategy, which has generated a professional development programme for music teachers designed to reinvigorate teaching in lower secondary education (see http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/secondary/keystage3/). Musical Futures has produced a document comparing its own aims with those of the National Strategy, illustrating that their intentions are broadly comparable, while showing also that there are now multiple voices in the music education debate, reaching far beyond the statutory curriculum (download this document from http://www.musicalfutures.org.uk/teachers_pack_inner_comparative.html).

The emphasis in contemporary music education debate in the UK, therefore, is no longer on the National Curriculum, its values or effects. Twenty five years after its introduction, the National Curriculum has secured the place of a political voice in educational debate, ending the professional autonomy that had characterised UK education, while now restoring some of the respect and status which was lost in the wrangling over curriculum reforms. For music, the curriculum is a backdrop to debate, but is considerably overshadowed by more recent developments, and in particular the provision of funding for particular types of educational projects. The idea that musical understanding is acquired through active involvement is now so widespread as to be hardly mentioned, and the Music Working Group and all those who supported their proposals must take some credit for this, since the easier political decision at the

time would have been a return to more passive, classically-orientated learning. Music, as throughout its history in schools, has a passionately defended place in the curriculum, with all the dangers and opportunities that its minority status affords.

The UK experience of introducing standards has shown that a flexible curriculum requires ongoing support if its positive potential is to be realised. Achieving standardisation in music education has been shown to be virtually impossible, though this goal was never strenuously enforced, and indeed would have met with considerable resistance from UK music educators, committed as they generally are to providing opportunities beyond what is measurable in music. The Bremen symposium group have the freedom of working outside a political schedule, and of choosing to propose standards rather than being required to do so. This is certainly a healthier starting point for such a quest, offering the opportunity for consultation with music education professionals, and for clear debate about the purpose and desirability of standards. I hope that the hindsight of the UK experience encourages German colleagues to look beyond current music education to the potential impact of standardisation – and I wish you every success in finding a musically authentic model to ensure opportunities for learning across German schools.

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