The music curriculum as lived experience: children's 'natural' music learning processes

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Attempts have been made in many countries to close the gap between two musical worlds: that of pupils' musical culture outside school, and that of the classroom. However, whilst the former musical world, represented by various popular musics, now makes up a major part of curriculum *content*, the informal learning practices of the musicians who create these musics have not normally been recognised or adopted as teaching and learning *strategies* within classrooms. The gap between the two musical worlds has in that crucial sense, remained unbridged.[1] This article discusses a current UK research project which aims to investigate the feasibility and possible benefits of bringing at least some aspects of informal music learning practices into the high school music classroom.

Informal popular music learning practices and their differences from formal music education

Informal popular music learning practices involve two main approaches, both of which take place largely in the absence of adult supervision or guidance. The first is solitary and usually occurs in the home. It involves learning music aurally, stretching from experimentation with instruments, to copying from recordings, loose imitation, improvisation and composition. The other main learning practice takes place in groups, and involves conscious peer-direction and unconscious learning through peer-observation, imitation and talk. Listening, performance, improvisation and composition are integrated at the individual and the group level. All the activities revolve around music in which learners are thoroughly encultured, and with which

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[1] I further substantiate these claims in *How Popular Musicians Learn: A Way Ahead For Music Education*, London and New York: Ashgate Press, 2002; and "From the Western classics to the world: secondary music teachers' changing perceptions of musical styles, 1982 and 1998", *British Journal of Music Education,* Vol. 19, no. 1, pp.5-30.

they strongly identify. Through these practices, young popular musicians can develop relatively advanced aural, improvisatory, compositional and technical skills, and in some cases, theoretical understanding. They value personal qualities of co-operation, responsibility and commitment. They place more emphasis on musicality or 'feel' than on technical prowess. Most significantly perhaps, they respect a wide range of music, including classical music, and display high levels of motivation, commitment and enjoyment in music-making[2] (Green 2002a).

Such learning practices differ from the teaching and learning strategies associated with formal music education, in so far as they involve:

- learning based on personal choice, enjoyment, identification and familiarity with the music, as distinct from being introduced to new and often unfamiliar music;

- recorded music as the principal, aural means of musical transmission and skill-acquisition, as distinct from notated or other written or verbal instructions and exercises;

- self-teaching and peer-directed learning, as distinct from adult supervision and guidance, curricula, syllabi or external assessment;

- the assimilation of skills and knowledge in haphazard ways according to musical preferences, rather than following a progression from simple to complex;

- integration of listening, performing, improvising and composing throughout the learning process, as distinct from their increasing differentiation.

The current research project[3]

So far, an initial study has taken place over six weeks in a North London school, followed by a further study lasting around one term in three schools in West London. At the time of writing I am still in the throes of collecting and analysing data, so this article is very much work-in-progress. In each school, the focus was on one class of

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[2] *How Popular Musicians Learn.*

13–14 year-old students. Altogether six teachers, including four experienced Heads of Music and two newly qualified teachers were involved. The work was ethnographic and sought rich data from observation, field-notes, audio and video recordings, teacher pro-formas, teacher interviews and pupil interviews.

Many practicalities are involved in curriculum innovation, including of course the usual ones of there being not enough space, time, equipment and staff, amongst others. However, all the teachers who have taken part in the project so far have agreed that these are not insurmountable. In this article I will focus on some of the more interesting and substantial issues that are arising.

Stage one

Firstly, pupils were asked to bring in their own choice of music. Not surprisingly a large array of CDs was carried enthusiastically into class, all containing music that had recently been in, or was still in the UK Top 40 charts. The project was introduced through a brief discussion of how popular musicians learn. Interestingly, this turned out to be something that pupils in all four schools had not thought about before, and they appeared to be unaware of the main informal practice of learning from recordings by listening and copying. Pupils then formed small friendship groups, ranging in number from 2 to 7. Being able to work with friends is a crucial part of informal popular music learning practices, so as much freedom as possible was given. Altogether across the four schools, twenty-two groups were formed.

Each group then went into a practice room with their CDs and a CD player, and spent around one whole lesson (from 50 minutes in one school to 90 minutes in another) choosing a song to copy, without any guidance from teachers. Acting as observers, the teachers and myself considered that all groups were 'on task'. They spent the time listening and discussing features, difficulties and possibilities of a range of songs, and beginning to organise who would play what. Having chosen their song they selected instruments, ranging from electric guitars and keyboards to glockenspiels and maracas; and then set about attempting to copy the song from the recording in whatever way they saw fit. It was made clear that the class teacher and myself were available to offer help if requested, but that otherwise we would not be teaching them. Altogether this stage lasted for between three and six lessons, varying from school to school for a number of practical and pedagogical reasons.

What happens when a group of 13 and 14 year olds are sent into a room with several of their own CDs, a CD player, a set of instruments, and told to copy a chosen song in any way they wish? The teachers and myself did not know how things would

turn out. We were pleasantly surprised. One group in one school did have particular difficulty and were considered to be 'off task' most of the time during this stage of the project. At least two other groups, each in a different school, also did not apply themselves consistently. However in general, all the groups, including those mentioned above, were considered to be more motivated and enthusiastic than usual; over half were considered entirely 'on task' throughout the entire project; and with the exceptions mentioned, the others were considered mainly 'on task', despite the lack of teacher-direction.

The most interesting data are found in the audio recordings and pupil-interviews. Here for example is my annotation from a recording of a group of five boys in their third lesson. They were not aware of being recorded at the time (but gave their permission for the recording to be used in research later), and there was no teacher in the room.

Michael and Nicholas's group are apparently mucking around. It sounds like chaos. Someone is playing something on the piano, nothing to do with the chosen song. The radio is put on. There is random drumming and talking.

Michael and Nicholas's group 10 minutes later, still having had no teacher input. Something is emerging; Nicholas is working out the notes of the song on the piano (D E D E D E D E in a syncopated rhythm in the right hand, with a downwards-moving bass in the left hand). Discussion is occurring. Someone is singing along to the piano pitches.

A further 20 minutes later: you can hear the guitar now, and the opening has been organised. There is percussion using floppy sticks on the rim of the snare. Listening and counting are evidently occurring:

-Nicholas: How many beats are there?

Inaudible discussion.

-Michael: Hey you guys, I'm playing it now.

More inaudible talk.

-Adimbola: Hurry up.

-Nicholas: How many beats, how many beats are there?

-Adimbola: Sixteen.

-Nicholas: It's either 16 or 32.

At the end of the lesson, the group gave a performance to the rest of the class in which the drum-kit played a 16-beat opening in a quasi-rock style, finishing with a crash on the ride cymbal. Along with this the guitar played a melody made of the opening notes as indicated above. At the ride cymbal crash the piano entered for a repetition of the melody, now played in unison with the guitar. There was hand percussion throughout expect for some pauses at appropriate structural moments. There was a sense of vitality in the playing, and I observed an air of serious concentration on the faces of the boys, who afterwards expressed considerable pride in what they had achieved. The class spontaneously applauded. The Head of Music murmured 'Very impressive, very impressive indeed', and after the lesson the class teacher said: 'When the individual groups performed, the whole class listened a lot more closely and a lot more carefully, in comparison to what they do in ordinary music lessons. Definitely.' I do not wish to pretend that such successes occurred at the end of every lesson; but similarly celebratory moments did arise during class performances in all four schools overall.

How did these students move by themselves from apparent chaos to something musically organised and celebratory? Many answers emerge, from which I have picked just two strands to introduce in this article.

Strand one

This strand concerns beat, structure and the notion of 'natural learning process'. At the very first stages of attempting to copy their chosen song, it was noticeable that in several groups, the percussion played along with the rhythm of the *vocal* line. For example, in another concealed recording of a group of five girls, the kit-drummer can be heard attempting to play the rhythm of the lead vocal line of Jennifer Lopez's hit 'My Love Don't Cost A Thing'. During the second lesson an explicit beat emerges, then disappears. At one point there is some discussion of whether the drums ought to be playing a beat. Gradually something approximating to a rock beat emerges. By the end of the third lesson the drummer is playing a basic rock beat with an occasional habaňera rhythm inserted into it. She plays with sensitivity to the overall structure of the song, marking structural moments with an up-beat figuration, and enhancing occasional climactic moments with a hit on the ride cymbal.

The idea of a beat, and the use of the drums to mark structural features, seems to have come to this group almost 'naturally' and certainly without any teaching. This raises several questions, including whether children in general would tend to hear the

relationship between percussion, melody, beat and structure in a similar progression, for example.

Strand two

The second strand concerns ensemble skills and the notion of progression. With several groups, children started off by playing and singing well in time together, but went out of time at a later stage. Often they played and sung out of time for lengthy periods, even for an entire song, but just kept going without appearing to notice anything wrong. In such situations our tendency as teachers is probably to feel that they are getting worse, not progressing, and to offer help to get them back on the right tracks. However one of the strategies adopted by the project was *not* to teach; and indeed on one occasion when the Head of Music and myself together failed to resist the temptation, it became clear that our help was quite dysfunctional as the group appeared to get more out of time the more we 'helped' them. During the next lesson, they got themselves perfectly in time without any help whatsoever. I made several other audio-recordings of groups going through similar processes of being in and out of time with each other at different stages. In this way, the project calls into question whether progression always goes along straight paths, and whether our help is always helpful.

Pupils' views

At the end of the activities described above in the three pilot schools, I interviewed pupils in the same small groups that they had worked in during the lessons. Again, I have picked out just two emerging strands.

Strand one

I asked pupils what they thought of the fact that they were 'thrown in the deep end' without any help from teachers. This lead to three categories of answers. Firstly, not being taught was part of the fun, and that was generally agreed by everyone. Secondly, some pupils said it would have been nice if they had got more help from the teachers. Thirdly, at least an equal number had the alternative view, that not being taught was beneficial. For example:

> -You can learn more by yourself; you can experiment; there's no-one telling you it's wrong; you can't do nothing wrong.
> -We can learn by trial and error … 'cos you learn what mistakes you made.

Several suggested similar approaches should be taken by other curriculum subjects. Some said that the ideal situation would be for the teacher to help them only as and when they felt they needed it (which is indeed what we had aimed for).

> -Adimbola: I think that's a better way. So, we tried to handle it ourselves but if we can't do it someone will help us.

Strand two

I asked pupils 'Since you've been doing the project, have you noticed any differences in the ways that you listen to music, say if you're watching Top of The Pops [the most famous UK charts show] or something at home?' Some looked bemused and shook their heads. Several immediately and forcefully said 'yes'. For example:

> -Natalie: Yeah. I think I have because I've been listening to music recently and I've like kind of picked up the different rhythms and stuff.
> -Sharon: Ummm…I think I listen to more the instruments now than the actual words?
> -Ellie: Yeah. I listen more to the beat more than the lyrics… I think [inaudible] we were really concentrating on the, like, rhythm and the beat of that song, and now, to me, like, in songs, the rhythm and that stands out more than…I don't really take any notice of the words.

What happens next?

The next stage of the project took place in the three pilot schools only, and lasted from 3 to 4 lessons. It retained the central task of copying music aurally from a CD. However, pupils were indeed given more help, as the music had been chosen for them and was broken down into fifteen separate tracks of about 1 minute 20 seconds, each containing a single, repeated riff taken from the song. The song was a riff-based instrumental version of a funk song, with a high level of repetition over a four-chord cycle, so it was well-suited to the task. The first CD tracks were very easy to copy and play, involving only three notes in step-wise movement at the rate of one per bar. Then the tracks became progressively more demanding. For example some tracks were the same as the easy ones, but with a more elaborate ending; others were fast, involving continuous eighth-notes; others contained octave leaps; one started on the second beat of the bar, and so on. Some tracks, such as the earlier ones, could be

played together in harmony, either by two players taking one riff each, or by one player using two hands, or in some cases by one player using two or three fingers of the same hand, or any mixture of these approaches, depending of course on the players and the instruments being played. A worksheet accompanied the CD, giving the note-names for each riff, but no indication of pitch-contour or rhythm. The riffs could be played in any order and for any number of times, so each group had the opportunity of making their own song out of the given materials.

My hope was that pupils would transfer the listening and copying activity from their own choice of music and their own approaches in stage one, to this more structured and teacher-directed task, so they would understand the point of it, and feel they had ownership of it.

At first there appeared to be less enthusiasm from some pupils, who groaned when they saw a written worksheet and were told the song had already been chosen by the teachers. However, this quickly gave way to enthusiasm, and in most cases a huge amount of observable enjoyment, as students took charge of organising their groups, sharing out riffs, switching riffs around to fit smoothly end-on to each other, and coming to the realisation that riffs could be played in harmony:

> -Oh look, look, look, look, look, look, look!
> -Look, D and B-flat!
> Demonstrates.
> -Then B-flat and G, yeah?
> -Where's C and E?
> -Oh yeah!
> They continue playing the two tracks, now in 3-part harmony, out of time.
> -I know it's easy to play it together.
> -Yeah but what two are we playing together?
> -Or, or, we two can play together.
> -Look, I can play it together.
> -Imran, Imran, listen, we two can play it together, like quadruple!
> -Yeah!
> -Yeah!
> -Play it.

In one school the Head of Music said 'That was a really positive lesson,' as pupils finally left the room having been prized off the last remaining instruments. In

interviews afterwards, I asked pupils 'If you were to be told now to go back to stage one, go into a room with your own CD and just copy it, without any guidance, like you did before, do you think you could do it better now?' In almost all groups the answer was a unanimous 'yes'. I asked them if they would like to repeat it, and got the same response.

At the present stage of the research a number of possible routes for the further development of similar exercises suggest themselves. These include building in roles for community or other visiting musicians, ideally with scheduled time to break down students' own choices of recordings; of using music other than popular styles, including Western classical music, as the recorded resource (how did J. S. Bach learn as a young child?); of introducing composition and improvisation tasks (some of which are already spontaneously creeping in to students' work in the current project); and many more.

Some 'concluding' thoughts

I put the word 'concluding' in inverted commas, because as mentioned earlier, this research is very much on-going rather than having reached a point of conclusion. I think initial findings suggest that a number of questions would be worth future investigation. For example:

- What are the effects of giving students more autonomy to direct their own learning; what advantages and disadvantages are involved in teachers standing back and being prepared to watch them making mistakes; and do students learn from mistakes, as many of them seem to believe in the current project? How much help do they want? How much help do they need?

- Is children's 'natural' approach to listening and copying the most helpful approach? If so, what can we do to enhance it? If not, how can we guide them?

- How important is personal choice of music; to what extent should we build it in?

- Would repeated listening and copying exercises lead to a significant improvement in students' ability to cope with the task, or would their ability deteriorate?

- How do students organise themselves in small groups; how well do they cooperate; what do they gain in terms of personal and social development?

- To what extent might such approaches enhance pupils' musical participation in the community, and the formation of bands away from the classroom?

Closer observation of such classroom activities might also cast new light on children's musical development. It is only recently that work has begun to focus on how children, on one hand, and vernacular musicians on the other hand, learn informally in the world outside the school, or to what extent informal approaches can be harnessed by education.[4] No neat final sentence can or should suggest itself to me – there is much exciting work to be done!

3,317 words

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[4] See for example the above, and Patricia Shehan Campbell, "Of garage bands and song-getting: the musical development of young rock musicians", *Research Studies in Music Education*, no. 4, June, 1995; and her *Songs in Their Heads: Music and its Meaning in Children"s Lives*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998; Joanna Glover, *Children composing, 4-14*, Sussex: Falmer Press, 2000; Kathryn Marsh, "Children"s singing games: composition in the playground?" *Research Studies in Music Education* no. 4, pp. 2-11, 1995; and her "Mediated orality: the role of popular music in the changing traditions of children"s musical play" *Research Studies in Music Education*, no. 13, December 1999; Kathryn L. Wemyss, "From T. I. to Tasmania: Australian indigenous popular music in the curriculum", *Research Studies in Music Education,* no. 13, December 1999.