

Music as a media art: evaluation and assessment in the contemporary classroom

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Nowadays, almost any kind of music is a media art. Even a busker on a street corner is bound to be playing music that people can hear on a radio, CD player, television or some other type of technological reproductive equipment. Very often music is functionally tied to a media form such as a film, television programme, music-video or advert. Although there is still a tendency to think of classical music as autonomous and removed from the concerns of everyday life, and of popular music, contrastingly, as socially determined and tied to the machinations of the mass market, in fact, nearly all music is technologically mediated, and nearly all music both contributes to and survives by virtue of a commercial market. Different styles, sub-styles and genres of music exist only in contradistinction to each other: without classical music, there would be no popular music, and so on. Almost everyone living in this country as well as many other countries, is immersed in this musical diversity whether they like it or not. For pupils in school music classrooms the diversity is particularly poignant: as distinct from the normal, everyday relationships that most people have with music, pupils are explicitly required to engage, consciously and practically with whatever music or musical activities are specified by the teacher. Today, most schools include musical diversity within their curricula, some focus on one style to the exclusion of others: but whichever way it is, pupils cross the threshold between the diverse musical world at large and a different musical world of the school, every time they enter the music classroom. [1] Therefore whether pupils in schools are listening to, analysing, performing or composing a wide diversity or a narrow range of music, when considering the role of evaluation in music as a media art, we must take in the entire musical terrain.

In this chapter I will organise my discussion around three axes, each of which contains two distinct sides. The location of these axes can be helpful, although it is by no means the only possible approach, in considering the evaluation of music. After discussing each one, I will relate them to the music classroom.

Three evaluative axes

1) Notes or contexts

In the study of music we can detect two approaches which may be characterised, for the sake of clarity, as ‘ideal types’: one of these approaches focusses on the organisation and execution of musical ‘notes’, and the other, on the ‘social contexts’ of musical production, distribution and reception. In the terms of the former ideal type, there is immanent musicological analysis of parameters such as tonality, modality, melody, harmony, metre, rhythm, texture, form, and so on. This sort of analysis tends to focus on the relationships of notes to other notes within the piece under consideration and within the norms of the appropriate genre and style. Not only do musicologists consider how those norms are articulated, but also in what ways they relate to the norms of previous or contemporaneous genres and styles, and whether they are expanded to open up new musical horizons. This type of work, which is technical, is unfortunately too often disparaged as ‘formalist’ by some theorists working in other fields. However there is nothing inherently formalist about such work, which only becomes formalist if explicit claims are made to the untrammelled autonomy or universality of the music in question.

In the other ideal type, there is analysis of the social significance of a piece or pieces of music within the particular contexts of their production, distribution and reception. This analysis might be sociological, anthropological or it might take a cultural studies, or some other approach, often altogether avoiding any mention of notes or related musical technicalities. It, in turn, has initiated criticisms, including the complaint that it leaves out of consideration the very object (i.e. music) which should be at the centre of its project. Again, such criticisms are not pertinent in cases where no claims are being made to discuss the ‘music itself’ but concentration is instead explicitly focussed on the mediation of the music, the organisation of musical practices and the construction of musical values.

In the terms of these ideal types, a Beethoven piano sonata for example can be judged, on one hand, by musicological criteria concerning form, harmony, melody, counterpoint, voice-leading, metre, rhythm, grouping, modulation, development, fragmentation and so on with reference to classical sonata form; or on the other hand it can be judged in terms of the social functions of chamber music at the end of the eighteenth century, Beethoven’s position as a composer struggling to escape the fetters of aristocratic patronage, the changing role of the piano solo recital between the salon and the concert-platform during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,

and so on. A James Brown single, equally, can be judged in terms of musicological criteria concerning texture, metre, rhythm, riff, chord progression, sound-recording, form; or in terms of the social functions of funk as a sub-category of late twentieth-century popular music, funk audience expectations and practices, funk musicians' intentions, the relationship of various funk groups to the music industry, and so on. At best, both these approaches - that focussing on 'notes' and that focussing on 'contexts' - are merged. [2]

Both approaches inevitably confront some problems in making evaluative claims. For example, within the classical style, the 'greatness' of various pieces has been analysed by critics and musicologists over the years, aiding their sedimentation into a musical canon which has been more taken-for-granted than explicitly questioned. But today the canon no longer remains closed to dispute both within traditional musicology, and by virtue of challenges arising from, for example, feminist musicology, popular music studies, ethnomusicology, the sociology of music and other areas. Likewise with reference to folk, jazz, popular music and many other styles, there have been varying approaches to scholarship which remain fraught with disagreement as to which pieces, if any, are superior.

2) *Limited or universal criteria*

On one hand, when evaluating music it is possible to employ various different sets of criteria, each set of which is limited, and specifically pertinent to the piece of music under consideration. Today a number of theorists are still wedded to an out-and-out cultural and aesthetic relativism which suggests that any piece of music should be judged only within its own terms, and cannot legitimately be said to be better or worse than any other piece. This position not only suffers from its relativism *per se*, but also from a tendency to keep a very dark secret of exactly *what* the music's 'own terms' consist in. More realistically, it is possible to judge individual pieces of music in relation to criteria that are specifically pertinent to the music's genre within a broader musical style, by comparison with other pieces that go together to make up that genre within that style.

On the other hand, we can apply a single, unified or universalising set of criteria by virtue of which we attempt to evaluate all and any kind of music. In practice, this approach often involves an implicit and unexamined assumption of the superiority of certain styles, or one particular style,

of music; but it can alternatively reflect a conscious distillation of certain fundamental musical parameters that are empirically distinguishable across a diversity of cultures. Either way, the implication of such an approach is that universal criteria exist which are pertinent to all music.

3) *Individual pieces or whole styles*

The approaches outlined above seek to evaluate individual pieces, or individual musical events. But musical evaluation might equally well be addressed, not to individual pieces but to whole musical styles by comparison with each other. Surely, it is admissible to enquire for example, not only how good a Beethoven and a James Brown piece are as individual pieces of music, but whether the *style itself* employed by Beethoven and that employed by Brown are equally valuable?

Problems and great divergencies of opinion concerning the value of musical styles can arise when the ‘notes’ approach is used to attack the ‘context’ approach, or vice versa, and when the question of whether the evaluative criteria are drawn from either a limited or a universal paradigm, is not addressed. For example, Frith’s recent book *Performing Rites*, which takes a very contextual approach to evaluating popular music, was criticised from a ‘notes’ point of view, by Roger Scruton in a review. Scruton writes:

It is surely not difficult to establish the superiority of Cole Porter over R.E.M.; one only has to look at the incompetent voice-leading in *Losing My Religion*, the misunderstanding of chord relations, and the inability to develop a melodic line in which the phrases lead into one another with a genuine musical need.

But, once you look at modern popular music in that way, you will come to see how gross, tasteless and sentimental it mostly is, and how far it is from our tradition of meditative polyphony. You will begin to see why it is that musicology still concentrates on the classical repertoire and continues to ignore the daily diet of modern youth. (Scruton 1996, p. x)

The problem is two-fold, or in other words, it arises both within and between Frith’s and Scruton’s respective positions. Although the sub-title of Frith’s book is *On the value of popular music*, his concentration on contexts, including various ways in which different groups of listeners and musicians construct musical value, is to the exclusion of any comment from either himself or his subjects, on the notes or how they fit together at all. Scruton’s concentration on the

notes, contrastingly, derives from approaches that are pertinent to classical musical stylistic norms (not even necessarily to Cole Porter's style!), and brings to bear criteria that are wholly impertinent to the style of the popular music in question. (It might help if instead of 'looking' at modern popular music and 'seeing' how gross it is, he listened to it!)

The point of dissension between the two writers here provides an example of the sort of problems that are encountered when trying to evaluate music without making explicit reference to terms such as those suggested by the three axes around which I have organised this chapter. That is, it would be helpful to clarify whether the evaluation is taking place in terms of the 'notes' or the 'contexts' of the music; whether it is taking place with limited reference to other stylistically similar pieces or with broad reference to universalising criteria; and whether it is the individual piece or the style which is being evaluated.

Musical evaluation and music education

Musical evaluation, whether of 'notes' or 'contexts', whether with reference to limited or universal criteria, whether of individual pieces or of styles, is of course by no means only a scholarly activity, but an informal part of people's everyday assumptions and unconscious judgements about music. Furthermore, it is something which is implicitly engrained into the very interstices of the school music curriculum. Teachers cannot avoid making judgements about musical value; but more than that, they are in positions which make it imperative, not only that they *evaluate* pre-existing music, but also that they *assess* the level of skill and knowledge which pupils exhibit in their engagement with different music and musical practices. Here I want to split the discussion in two, and address evaluation on one hand, assessment on the other. In school as well as university and other music classrooms, the two are inextricably linked. I will focus my discussion on the school, although I hope it will have relevance to other areas of music education as well.

The evaluation of pre-existing music

The development of the National Curriculum was marked by high controversy over what music was considered valuable enough to be included, and what music was considered, not merely inferior, but harmful or pernicious enough to be excluded. [3] As it now stands, the document indicates the inclusion of a variety of music. Below is the wording of the Key Stage 3 (generally for pupils aged 11 - 14) programme of study on repertoire. This adds to, rather than alters, that of

the earlier Key Stages:

The repertoire chosen for performing and listening should extend pupils' musical experience and knowledge, and develop their appreciation of the richness of our diverse cultural heritage. It should include music in a variety of styles:

- a** from the European 'classical' tradition, from its earliest roots to the present day;
- b** from folk and popular music;
- c** from the countries and regions of the British Isles;
- d** from cultures across the world;
- e** by well known composers and performers, past and present.

(DFE 1995, p. 6)

This is not the place to examine the evaluative assumptions of the document in its entirety, but it is worth mentioning a few oddities with relation to the above passage. Given that classical, folk and popular music are all mentioned, it seems rather strange that jazz is not (particularly as jazz has for some years enjoyed a far more established position in Higher Education than have folk and popular music). It is also strange that the European 'classical' tradition is to be studied 'from its earliest roots to the present day', whereas folk and popular music are to be studied without any reference to their historical periodicity. The implication is that these musical styles have no history. The pin-pointing of 'countries and regions of the British Isles' under c) also seems peculiar, since presumably those countries and regions would be already represented under d), 'cultures across the world'. There seems to be an intention to forefront the British Isles, without a willingness to admit doing so. What, in any case, the difference is between 'countries and regions' (with reference to the British Isles) and 'cultures' (across the world), one cannot help wondering.

Teachers appeared to be much more firmly committed to musical pluralism than were the Schools Council Assessment Authority and the government during the development of the National Curriculum. Although little recent national research is available on this, it is reasonable to suggest that the majority of schools now do include a wide variety of music in their curricula, probably wider than that implied in the terms of the programme of study cited above.[4] In choosing the music to be used, teachers can focus, amongst other things, on notes or contexts, they can apply limited or universal evaluative criteria, and they can consider individual pieces or

whole styles. No systematic rationale for doing any of these has ever been produced, and yet many of these modes of evaluation go on all the time informally and subconsciously. For teachers, as for everyone else, musical evaluation will be greatly influenced by their own formal and informal musical and professional training, their acceptance or rejection of the ‘received opinion’ of various social groups, their taste, age, gender, ethnicity, class and so on.

It is helpful to have some idea of which evaluative grounds are being brought into play in making decisions about what music to include in the curriculum. This would avoid unsupported statements such as the following, by Nicholas Tate, then chief curriculum adviser to the government, who made a speech quoted in *The Times* (February 8th, 1996) containing the following sentiments:

Schools must introduce their pupils to high culture and help them to escape the growing creed that sees no difference between Schubert and Blur ... A fundamental purpose of the school curriculum is to transmit an appreciation of and commitment to the best of the culture we have inherited. We need a more active sense of education as preserving and transmitting, but in a way that is forward looking, the best of what we have inherited from the past. ... we should aim to develop in young people a sense that some works of art, music, literature or architecture are more valuable than others. (Charter, David 1996)

I would very much like to hear Nicholas Tate explain exactly what his grounds were for implying that Schubert is better than Blur; and in making this request I am not suggesting that I think Schubert is, or that I think he isn't. What I would like to know, amongst other things, is whether Mr. Tate is referring to ‘notes’, to ‘contexts’ or to some other parameters characterising the music in question; whether the unstated criteria for his evaluation are different for Schubert than for Blur, or whether he has used a unified set of criteria that he considers equally pertinent to both Schubert and to Blur; and whether he thinks Schubert is better because he was a better composer within the classical style of the early nineteenth century than are Blur within the Brit-pop style of the late twentieth century, or whether he thinks it is the classical style itself which is better. In this chapter there is clearly no space to go any further into these questions with specific reference to particular pieces of music; but what I am suggesting is that such questions are helpful, and that curriculum advisers, amongst other people, can benefit from thinking carefully about precisely

why they make evaluative judgements and particular choices concerning music in the curriculum.

The assessment of pupils' musical ability

The problems encountered above shift when, instead of *evaluating* the professionally or adult-produced music that we use for listening, history, analysis, performance, or as models for composition, teachers start to *assess* pupils' work. Here the same issues articulated in the three axes suggested above - that of distinguishing between 'notes' and 'contexts', that of using different, limited sets of criteria or one, universal set of criteria, and that of evaluating pieces with reference to given stylistic norms or evaluating styles themselves - are transplanted onto pupils' performances and compositions. But they bring with them the added complexity, that we have to assess pupils according to what it is reasonable to expect of their age in connection with their previous musical experience.

An increasing amount of work has been done on children's musical development during the last few decades, some of which has suggested that children develop musically in stages not unlike Piagetian developmental stages. One of the most influential pieces of research (Swanwick and Tillman 1986) suggests that musical developmental stages are not so much age-related as logically sequenced. Thus any learner in music, it is argued, is likely to pass through the earlier stages before proceeding to the later ones. The research was conducted through analysing 745 compositions by 45 children, mainly aged 3 to 11. The compositions suggested that at the earliest stage, referred to by Swanwick and Tillman as 'materials', children are interested in the quality of musical sound, which they explore at a sensory, then a manipulative level. The next stage, 'expression' arises when some development of musical gesture, phrase, or some quality of mood or drama becomes apparent, at first rather spontaneously and sporadically, then in more organised forms bearing similarities to music that the children will have heard or performed. The next stage, 'form', occurs when experimentation, expressive characterisation, then idiomatic, stylistic references are made showing technical, expressive and structural control. The fourth level, 'value' (which might be reached by a 15 or 16-year old, or not at all) involves musical communication, originality, the development of ideas, personal commitment and the systematic expansion of musical discourse.

This formulation has since lead to the development of assessment criteria not only for

composing, but also performing and listening, linked to each stage. [5] Through these criteria, as has been tested through the use of ‘independent judges’, it is possible for music teachers to reach a high level of consensus in assessing how far along the developmental sequence a pupil has gone. The assessment criteria purport to be relatively ‘style-free’, or in other words, they represent that single set of unified criteria mentioned as the second axis within this chapter, which are considered to be equally suitable for any music. However, although the criteria can help to measure how far along the developmental sequence a pupil has gone, what the criteria cannot tell us, is how far along the yard-stick of musical value the piece of music being composed, performed or listened to has gone. Nor can they help us to judge whether different *styles* of music require less skill and knowledge, or are less valuable, than others.

I will now explore these conundrums with reference to music assessment through some concrete examples. In doing so, it is necessary to distinguish between the assessment of performance, and that of composition. In the assessment of performance, we are not supposed to be evaluating the music, but assessing the pupils’ level of musical skill and/or knowledge, quite regardless of the value of the music being performed. In composition, we are both evaluating the music, and assessing the pupils’ level of musical skill and/or knowledge as displayed in the compositional evidence. The ramifications of this difference are extensive. First of all, I will examine some of them with regards to performance.

Let us say we are assessing two performances. One pupil plays Beethoven’s first piano sonata, and another pupil plays the trombone part in an arrangement of James Brown’s ‘Say it loud: I’m black and I’m proud’. We are to assess each pupil with reference to criteria provided by the examining body or by our own Scheme of Work, or whatever. The assessment is to be undertaken either within the limited terms of the accepted performance practices of each particular piece’s genre and style, or within the terms of universal, style-independent criteria. In either case, one problem for the teacher is this: supposing the performance of each of these pieces is considered to be pretty good, say each performance is awarded a mark of 8 out of 10. But suppose the genre and/or style of each piece does not *afford* an equivalent exhibition, or does not *require* a commensurate level of skill? Is it then fair to give each pupil the same mark?

Traditionally, since the end of the nineteenth century the assessment of (generally defined)

classical performance ability has been conducted through a system of graded exams that has existed in tandem with, but independently of, schooling. [6] The graded system means that, regardless of age, a candidate sits an exam in which the level of technical and interpretative difficulty of the pieces, has been pre-decided and is considered by the exam board to be approximately the same for all the pieces, and at a commensurate level of difficulty, appropriate to the grade being sat. The performance is then assessed against criteria governing agreed aspects of classical performance practice that musicians and teachers have developed over the years. These criteria vary to some extent depending on the instrument played and on the particular genre and style of the music. They involve a fine line between aspects of technique and aspects of interpretation. They refer, for example, to the candidate's tone quality, line, touch, accuracy, breath control, sensitivity, phrasing, dynamics, control of tempi, or whichever of these is pertinent in the circumstances, and so on. This system has been very successful in promoting the instrumental and vocal education of hundreds of thousands of children in many countries of the world. It has sustained some criticism, for example, as being inflexible, as encouraging teachers and pupils to work too narrowly towards the exam repertoire, and so on, but it remains a very strong presence in performance-related music education. Many of the music GCSE and A-level syllabi accept a specified grade of this exam system in place of or as an alternative to their 'own' exams, and many Higher Education courses specify particular requisite grades for applicants.

Problems with this system of assessment have arisen recently with the increasing desire of children and young people, as well as opportunities for them, to play or sing popular music and other non-classical styles. Traditionally one of the definitive marks of popular music, as well as jazz and other styles, has been that they are not taught in schools, or by professionally qualified private teachers. Given the intrinsically vernacular character of popular music, and the depth-embeddedness of existing informal mechanisms for passing it on, this situation will always prevail to some extent. But the recent entrance of popular music in some guise or other into the curricula of so many schools has brought a large portion of popular music firmly within the sphere of formal music education; jazz has been making in-roads into formal education at the conservatoire level for a few years and is also beginning to be incorporated in some schools; and the same goes for other musical styles from around the world, especially music associated with the ethnicities of various groups forming the catchment area of a school. This has in turn led to a demand for the inclusion of, particularly popular music and jazz within the existing graded system of

performance exams described above. The problems alluded to at the top of this paragraph arise because the criteria that have evolved over many years for assessing classical musical performance are not necessarily pertinent to other kinds of music. The appropriate tone and touch for a folk guitarist would certainly fail a candidate on a classical guitar; the vocal techniques of soul or blues singers would be completely unacceptable in *bel canto*; and the required manner of interpreting notation, where applicable, in jazz would be almost sacrilegious in classical music. The problems have not been resolved, but people are working to develop new examination repertoires and new criteria that are pertinent for different styles. At the time of writing, two initiatives in developing graded systems, one in rock and the other in jazz, are underway. [7]

The system of graded exams works regardless of the age of the candidates. You take the exam whenever you or your teacher thinks you are ready. This has gone hand in hand with the fact that candidates for graded exams have tended to be either taught privately, or taught in small groups or individually by peripatetic teachers within schools. The graded system is not suitable for assessing pupils grouped together by virtue of a classroom context or year-group such as in the National Curriculum or the GCSE. Here, as opposed to everyone being at the same level regardless of their age, the opposite occurs: everyone is the same age regardless of their level. One response to this has been the very helpful procedure of using what are often referred to as ‘difficulty multipliers’. Formally, within compulsory education, this has only been used in the GCSE exam, but there is nothing to stop teachers using it autonomously alongside the NC assessment guidelines. It involves making an evaluation of the level of performance-difficulty of a piece of music. This evaluation will of course be based on the sorts of criteria that are used, described above, to select pieces at certain levels for the grades. Supposing we have three candidates all taking a GCSE performance test on the piano. One candidate plays ‘Twinkle Twinkle Little Star’ in an arrangement that is considered easy, involving just one note in each hand, all the notes being either one beat or two beats long, the piece being played fairly slowly. The pupil plays the piece quite well, according to criteria similar to those used in the graded exams, and gains 8 out of 10. Because the piece is easy, we multiply 8 by an ‘easy’ difficulty multiplier of 1, making a total mark of 8. The next candidate plays a Scarlatti sonata which, by the same criteria, is considered to be of moderate difficulty. The pupil plays quite well and also scores 8 out of 10, but we apply a ‘moderate’ difficulty multiplier of 2, to get a mark of 16. The third candidate plays a Brahms sonata, again gets a mark of 8, and has it increased by a ‘difficult’

difficulty multiplier of 3 to gain an overall 24. Because the difficulty multipliers in this example range from 1 to 3, and because the performance is marked out of 10 before being multiplied, this means that the final mark is out of 30. Thus the ‘Twinkle Twinkle’ candidate gets 8 out of 30, the Scarlatti candidate gets 16 out of 30 and the Beethoven candidate gets 24 out of 30. In practice, difficulty multipliers are often used in fractions, to give a more sensitive final yield. Some exam boards use a different method of calculation to that described here, but with the same overall effect.

This system works well for assessing the performance of particular pieces of music, so long as there is sensitivity to certain factors, of which I would like to mention three. The first is that the ability of an individual to handle complex music can only reliably be assessed after accumulating evidence from a number of assessment points. The second is that the difficulty multiplier can only ever act as a gauge for the purposes of controlling validity and reliability: we are never assessing how well a pupil can play or sing ‘difficult’ music, but rather, how well a pupil can play or sing music *with musicality*, according to our pre-established criteria. Ultimately, ‘musicality’ will always elude precise linguistic definition, and can only ever be approximated to by descriptors such as ‘sensitivity’, ‘expressivity’, ‘individuality’ and such terms. Thirdly, the criteria which are used to judge how easy or difficult pieces are, and to judge how ‘musically’ they are being performed, must be systematic and pertinent to the style of the piece in question.

Problems arise as soon as new styles are introduced that seem to require new, and different criteria. Because of the history of music and of music education, there are very few people alive who are in a position to make really cogent judgements about exactly how difficult it is, for example, to sing in the accepted style for a nineteenth-century German Lied compared to how difficult it is to sing in the accepted style for twentieth-century soul. Because Lieder singing has for a long time been taught within formal educational establishments, excellence in this pursuit has gained a reputation (deservedly so of course) for being very difficult to achieve. The almost complete absence of any formal educational mechanisms for singing soul, conversely, gives the appearance that excellence in this feat, requiring no education, must be very easy to achieve. (Scruton again: ‘The assumption has been that we teach classical music because it requires disciplined study. Expertise in pop, on the other hand, can be acquired by osmosis.’ (1996, p. x) Typically, he has no grounds for this latter claim. Very little systematic musicologically-based

research has been done on exactly how popular musicians go about learning their skills. The best insight into it at present is probably to try learning the skills oneself - I would like to hear Scruton do this!) [8]

These appearances about how much 'discipline' and skill are required for the performance of different styles of music arise, then, not *necessarily* from any inherent qualities of the performance demands of the music or any contingencies of the musical styles in question; but potentially also from their social contexts such as, in this case, whether they are included in formal educational mechanisms or not. Although very little systematic examination of performance difficulty or performance quality in popular musics has as yet fed into any school-based educational syllabi in a formal sense, current-day scholarly attention to a wider range of music than hitherto is beginning to allow indications of such aspects, and will undoubtedly inform assessment criteria within the music education of the future. [9]

One final point on assessing performance: the type of assessment of musical skill involved in the exams described above tends to be focussed on the 'notes' side of things. A small amount of credit is sometimes allocated to 'presentation', (a fairly ill-defined area implying dress, comportment and such like) but other than that there is no real consideration of the music's context: and this means, among other things, that the role of the audience within the musical style is left out of consideration. For some styles of music, such as classical chamber music, this is not a particular problem; but for others, such as some types of funk, it is problematic because the relationship of the musicians to a noisy, responsive audience is part and parcel with their performance techniques, which would come across as larger than life in a room containing just one examiner. Music performance exams have traditionally, at school level, in conservatoires and within the graded system, taken place in rather rarefied circumstances. Only at undergraduate level in some universities, and beyond at post-graduate level, has a more realistic concert situation sometimes been possible; although even then, everyone knows that the examiners are sitting in the audience, making the event more like a competitive music festival than a real concert. This kind of scenario does take place frequently at the school level in classroom performances or at Higher Education level in the form of 'master classes'. An extension of such practices, involving the pupil- or student-audience in peer-assessment and structured listening, might be very beneficial if it could be organised.

Moving now to composition, I will use this word in the way it is generally used within school-level educational circles, to include individual and group composition as well as improvisation, notated in any form, or unnotated. Unlike musical performance, composition has been closely guarded by the academy, and until the 1960s was hardly ever practiced at all until undergraduate level, and not really practiced seriously until postgraduate level. The absence of composition from British schools changed gradually from the late 1960s on, and composition is now a major part of the National Curriculum for Music and the Music GCSE exam. [10] Contrasting with the history of performance exams, there has never been any system of graded exams in composition, nor do the exam boards or the National Curriculum Assessment Guidelines employ a difficulty multiplier.

The question I want to pose here is: if it is possible to assess the performance of a piece according to criteria which are sensitive to the level of difficulty considered to be involved in the performance, then why not assess the composition of a piece according to the level of difficulty considered to be involved in its composition? This question brings me back again to the three axes around which I've organised this chapter: firstly, that of whether we focus on 'notes' or 'contexts'; secondly, whether we develop a range of limited evaluative criteria or one unified set of criteria; and thirdly, whether we attempt to evaluate individual pieces or to evaluate styles.

In attempting to establish a graded system or a difficulty multiplier for composition, one of the most daunting problems to arise, is that traditionally there has been an intrinsic connection *between* difficulty and 'good' composition. This is not the case with performance. As we have seen, in the process of assessment, it is possible for a musician to give a performance capable of being considered 'good', even if the piece of music being performed, is considered very 'easy', (or for that matter, very 'bad'). A graded system or a difficulty multiplier responds at least in part to any unfairness or unreliability in the test, and a performance candidate will of course always be advised to choose pieces that balance his or her ability with the grade or difficulty multiplier to maximum effect. But the distinction between what is 'good' or 'bad' and what is 'easy' or 'difficult' in composition is more elusive, at least as far as assessment mechanisms are concerned.

By ‘difficulty’ in the assessment of composition, we cannot just take account of ‘technical complexity’. It would be possible for someone to compose a piece that was technically extremely complex, for example highly polyphonic, or totally serialised music, but which might just as easily have been generated by a computer, and which is aesthetically as dead as a door-nail. The kind of difficulty that is pertinent, the difficulty that contributes to musical value in composition, is not technical prowess, but the interaction of technique with those many factors which are impossible to describe accurately in words: factors, depending on the style and era of the music, such as expression in relation to the social and historical origins of the music, originality, or the relationship of the particular piece of music with the general style to which it alludes. Whereas in the assessment of performance, linguistically elusive factors such as ‘expressivity’ can be separated from the technical difficulty of the piece being performed, in the assessment of composition, they cannot so readily.[11]

Another, related problem in the establishment of criteria for assessing composition is that any criteria must be sensitive to what musical possibilities are afforded by the *style* of the piece in question. The piece would then have to be considered in terms of how well or how poorly it represented that style. But so often in the history of music - whether classical, popular, or any other - what has been considered most valuable, is precisely that certain composers do *not* simply represent the style: they go beyond it.

The GCSE exam boards’ criteria for the assessment of composition can be difficult to use. This is partly because whilst the boards mostly allow compositions to be submitted in any style whatsoever, they do not recognise anything akin to a difficulty multiplier with reference to composition, and they do not provide assessment criteria for composition that are tailored to suit particular styles of music. Instead, they provide that unified set of criteria alluded to in the second of my three axes: universal criteria which go across styles, and are supposedly pertinent to any style. But what if one style is much more difficult, or requires much more originality, or affords more compositional virtuosity, than another style? I would like to examine this question with reference to four contrasting examples.

Pupil A composes a piece in sonata-form in the style of Mozart; pupil B composes a jazz piece in the style of early Ellington; pupil C composes a rap involving voice, pre-set drum rhythm and a

bass line; and pupil D composes a John Cage-style aleatoric piece by throwing dice. All four pieces are to be assessed in terms of a set of unified criteria concerning generalised musical qualities such as, for example, balance, form, variety and so on. These criteria give no guidance about differences between musical styles, but in practice, teachers are bound to relate the given ‘universal’ criteria to the demands of the style of the piece of music in question. [12] Thus, let us say, all four of these pupils receive a mark of 8 out of 10. But the two pupils who composed the sonata and the jazz pastiche have demonstrated far greater understanding of far more musical *technical* parameters than the ones who composed the rap and the aleatoric piece. Is it valid, then, that they should all end up with equal marks? Clearly not, the reason being that the styles in which they are composing, do not allow for equivalent possibilities in terms of technical manipulation. This problem is added to at the school level, by the fact that no distinction is made in the National Curriculum or the GCSE syllabus, between pastiche and original composition. Whereas the Mozart and Ellington pastiches require a high level of technical proficiency, as pastiche, the exercise does not so much warrant *expressive originality* as faithfulness to a model. Contrastingly, the rap requires little technical skill, but allows, at least potentially, for a high level of expressivity and need not be pastiche but could be original. The aleatoric composition, pastiche again, affords very little of either technical proficiency or expressivity.

The only thing to do then, in the present-day situation where in schools and universities we are often assessing pupils’ and students’ compositions in a large variety of musical styles, is to establish different criteria for evaluating different styles of music against each other, including a type of ‘difficulty multiplier’ to distinguish between different styles. Any attempt to do such a thing would be highly contentious and would undoubtedly lead to some heated debate between defenders on one hand, and critics on the other, of the styles involved. But, because educational assessment has to have a degree of not only validity and reliability but also plain fairness, we *must* surely proceed along lines somewhat akin to awarding different value, in terms of the availability of marks, to different musical styles and compositional exercises?

The kinds of criteria that I would suggest in the present context, are linked to the three axes around which this chapter is organised, and would be built up as follows:

1) Notes or contexts

Evaluation would be linked to both ‘notes’ and ‘contexts’. Notes would be assessed in terms of pitches, rhythms, and the other similar kinds of parameters listed earlier on in this chapter; contexts would be assessed in terms of the music’s meaning and value within its usual terms of production and reception. The views of pupils and students would be relevant here.

2) Limited or universal criteria

Evaluation would employ different, limited sets of criteria for individual pieces of music, according to the music’s style. But at the same time, whatever specific evaluative criteria are used, all criteria must share certain overarching consistencies. Thus the relationship between whether we have a variety of limited criteria or one set of universal criteria is not a relationship of two equal and mutually exclusive alternatives; but a relationship of hierarchy. Limited, style-specific criteria and difficulty multipliers would make reference to particular stylistic norms and possibilities in terms of all manner of details. Overarching, universalising criteria would make reference to factors such as, for example, the tension between form and expression, unity and diversity, tradition and innovation, function and use. Even then, not all of these ‘overarching’ criteria would always be pertinent, as for example, in the case of evaluating the tension between unity and diversity in a piece of process music. To double-check such contingencies, we could again include pupils’ and students’ own voices to some extent, not only in the assessment procedure, but in the evaluation of music as well.

3) Individual pieces or whole styles

We must recognise that when we *evaluate* an individual piece of music we are always also making an implicit evaluation of its style. Then when we *assess* pupils or students, we must be willing to acknowledge that some styles of music do afford different levels of technical skill, expressivity, originality or other factors, at different historical periods and in the terms of different exercises within and between performance and composition, than others.

Many musical qualities will always escape any system of either evaluation or assessment: as the history of music demonstrates, technical proficiency has often been unrecognised, expression has been taken for tastelessness or ousted as unwanted political comment, and originality has been judged as incompetence or insanity. This is not something to bemoan - rather the opposite, we can celebrate music’s capacity to afford an experience that escapes language, that defies reason,

that opens new realms, that communicates in ways we can barely understand. There will always be a level at which we simply cannot be sure that we are cogently evaluating music, or adequately assessing musical skills and knowledge. But at the very least, awareness of the nature and extent of some of the difficulties involved can help us to bring the stylistic musical diversity which so enriches our contemporary lives, into some sort of representative and fair educational context.

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End Notes

1. For discussions of the pop-classical split in schools, see Vulliamy (1976), (1977a), (1977b), Vulliamy and Lee (1976), Green (1988), (1997).
2. For examples of such merging see Brackett (1995), Ford (1991), McClary (1987), (1991), Middleton (1990), Walser (1993), amongst others.
3. For discussions of the evaluative cultural and political undercurrents beneath the development of the National Curriculum, see Swanwick (1992), Shepherd and Vulliamy (1994), Gammon (1993).
4. See, for example, the descriptions of professional reaction to the development of the National Curriculum in the sources cited in Note 3; or peruse the academic journal, *British Journal of Music Education*, or professional journals such as *Music Teacher*, *Music in the Curriculum* and *Primary Music Now*, for evidence of the extent of the commitment.
5. For performing and listening as well as composing, see Hentschke (1993), Swanwick (1994), Stavrides (1995). There is also discussion in Swanwick (1988).

6. These are mainly run by the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), Trinity College of Music and the London College of Music. They take place throughout the UK, the Commonwealth, and in several other countries. The standard is from beginner (Grade I) to advanced (Grade VIII), and then diploma level.

7. Rock School currently run a graded system similar to that described above, offering grades III - VIII on electric guitar, bass guitar and kit, covering a variety of popular music styles including Latin, funk, rock, country and others. The ABRSM are, at the time of writing, developing a new syllabus for examining jazz, which is due to be published in January 1998.

8. Cohen (1991) and Finnegan (1989) provide excellent anthropologically-based accounts of popular musicians learning and teaching.

9. See for example Brackett (1995), Middleton (1990), Moore (1993), Walser (1993).

10. For early teaching methods, ideas and materials with reference to classroom composition see Paynter and Aston (1970), Self (1967), Dennis (1970), Schafer (1967). For further discussion see Swanwick (1979), Paynter (1982), HMI (1985). A large selection of teaching materials related to composing in the classroom is now available.

11. Green (1997) provides ethnographic evidence to suggest that teachers do in fact devalue pupils' compositions when they consider them to be 'merely' technically proficient; and that they place most value on those compositions which they deem to be 'imaginative', 'creative', or 'exploratory', even when technical proficiency is considered to be lacking. It will come as no surprise to many people, that in the research, it was overwhelmingly girls who were seen to produce the former type of composition, and boys the latter.

12. There is further discussion of this in Green (1990).

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