

Informal Approaches to the Development of Young People's Composition Skills

Introduction

I would argue that composing activities should be placed centre-stage in a child's music education. And I'm not alone in this belief. Consider the following:

Composing is ... the surest way for pupils to develop musical judgment and to come to understand the notion of "thinking" in music. (Paynter 1997, p.18)

Music is essentially a creative discipline in all its aspects. For many music educators, however, creativity is at its strongest in the act of composition where knowledge, imagination, intellect and skill come together in one pursuit. (Barnes 2001, p.92)

There is a significant body of recent research relating to how children compose within the classroom. Part of this can be found within the traditional 'boundaries' of music education research, but an equally interesting and provocative range of research can be found outside that often traditional field. For example, surveying a recent music education journal one finds a wealth of material relating to the many shapes and guises of composition in the 'formal' education sphere: music and technology (Savage & Challis 2002a), developing melodic improvisations (Brophy 2002), comparing compositional processes and products (Hewitt 2002).

But the world of compositional pedagogy is not solely the domain of the educationalist. Beyond the traditional music education research journals, other individuals and bodies are exploring and writing about innovative approaches to compositional pedagogy. A recent journal of the Sonic Arts Network, the UK body of electroacoustic composers, featured two such articles (Savage & Challis 2002b; Vishnick 2002). Across the Atlantic one can find other interesting studies. For example, take the field of acoustic ecology - a possibly fertile field for educational application. The December 2001 edition of *Soundscape*, the journal of the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology, contained fascinating accounts of children's compositional activity in this medium from across the globe (see Valentine 2001; Cumberland 2001; Ferrington 2001; McGinley 2001; Wagstaff 2001; Imada 2001).

But perhaps of most interest to classroom practitioners has been the NAME publication *Composing in the Classroom: The creative dream* (NAME 2000). This book is a worthy effort to represent the best of classroom practice from around the United Kingdom, and it certainly paints and celebrates a diverse picture.

However, not everything is as rosy as it might seem. Like the writers of *Composing in the Classroom*, in my visits to classrooms throughout the northwest of England I have been struck by the diversity of practice in compositional pedagogy. But have noticed one common theme, the prevalence of composition work around clear metrical frameworks and melodic patterns. This substantiates Walker's recent claim:

Current educational practices, based as they seem to be on notions of language acquisition, not only are inappropriate to an activity like music, but are possibly inimical to the true nature of musical expression and perception as it occurs in cultural tradition. The very lack of children's musical compositions in schools is testimony to the misconceptions about music referred to here, and to the timorous attitudes toward children's activities with sound, particularly those that do not result in recognizable rhythms or melodies. (Walker 2001, p.140)

Some might find this claim contentious. But to take an example from the field of ICT and music, when was the last time you saw a whole class of pupils using computers to explore sounds without the aid of an electronic keyboard or MIDI sequencer? An analysis of an article surveying trends of ICT and music in UK classrooms (Mills & Murray 2000) showed that 62% of references to classroom technologies were related to computer, keyboard and MIDI sequencing packages, tools designed to frame sounds within the traditional parameters of, as Wishart calls it, the pitch and time lattice (Wishart 1996, p.11).

Walker also claims that current educational practice may well be very different from the 'true nature' of musical expression as it occurs in specific cultural contexts. Building bridges between music within the classroom and the musical worlds that pupils inhabit beyond the school boundary is going to be a key theme within this research project.

It seems clear from this brief survey of recent research literature that the purpose for, and practice of, composition in our classrooms is up for debate. Some would claim it as a vehicle for developing pupils' 'thinking' or 'creative' skills (Bunting 2001, p.173); others would seek to subjugate it under the higher skills of performing (Elliott 1995, p.172);

others would promote it for its intrinsic value. Many individuals and groups beyond the immediate world of education are making legitimate claims and demands that need to be examined too. Whatever your view, the pedagogy and practice of classroom composition is due for a re-examination.

This Research Project

Odam and Paterson's research (NAME 2000, p.11) suggests that as many as one third of children are actively composing outside of the classroom, as part of their everyday lives. Certainly the tools that might encourage this activity are out there. The increasingly domestication of technologies that, until recently, were the domain of professional recording studios has meant that all one needs to record, edit and arrange sounds is a reasonably powered multimedia computer, a range of free software, and possibly a microphone and minidisc.

From my experiences of teaching in two high schools and visiting many others, classroom composition is often conceptualised and practised in what one could call an 'inauthentic' way; as a kind of sub-culture separated from the 'authentic' compositional practices carried on by song writers, popular musicians, DJs, classical composers and others outside school context. It is clear that classroom composition is culturally loaded and carries with it a range of assumptions, prejudices and stereotypes, some of which may be educational valuable and many of which are not.

This research project will develop a series of detailed case studies of a few popular musicians, with a range of experiences, focusing closely on the practical ways in which they carry out the task of musical composition (using songwriting as an example process). Having done this, a CDROM of illustrative and support materials will be developed that carry forward the applications of some of these observations for classroom composition. These materials will facilitate teachers and pupils in developing a range of ideas, experiences and examples that promote more 'authentic' composition skills for Key Stages 3, 4 and 5. This material will be trialled and evaluated within a high school in Manchester.

Having briefly described the project, I'd like to illustrate why this research is timely by reference to one common type of classroom compositional activity - the popular song.

Teaching Songwriting: Some alternative approaches and pitfalls?

Our pupils are completely familiar with one musical genre - the popular song. It saturates popular culture and therefore represents a tremendous educational opportunity. Unlike electroacoustic music or acoustic ecology, where a teacher may have to go to consider lengths to bridge the 'listening' gap between pupils' previous aural experiences and the new style, pupils' enculturation with popular song may be a key link in engaging their musical interests and imaginations. Yet too often pupil's latent interest is suffocated by an over-prescription of content and formalisation of ideas. One example that may be familiar to high school teachers of music is Unit 15 from the DfES/QCA exemplar schemes of work, entitled 'Songs: exploring songs and the use of music technology'. Whilst I am sure that any competent teacher would not teach this material exactly as described in this publication, the inherent strategies within it often surface within our classrooms. These approaches consist of:

- Developing pupils' understanding of the various musical components of a song in isolation from each other (structure, texture, chords, melody, lyrics, etc);
- Placing the technical before the expressive;
- Progressively linear and deterministic treatment of musical materials - at all levels (simple to complex);
- Promoting a unified approach to a practice which is incredibly diverse;
- Stereotypes and, often unhelpful, assumptions (placing the artificial before the authentic).

What do songwriters and producers do when they write songs? Are there similarities between their approaches and the one identified above? Is the QCA scheme a useful approach to adopt when teaching pupils to write songs? Will it produce end products that inspire them? Or do approaches like this reinforce the divide between what one might call artificial and authentic knowledge, thereby continuing to separate pupils' musical experiences within and outside the classroom?

A key feature of my previous research has been to draw lessons into the classroom from an examination of other's practice, particularly electroacoustic composers. This principle can be applied here. There are many skilful and articulate popular musicians, DJs and composers whose compositional working practices and ideas could prove to be very informative and applicable in developing a stronger model of classroom music composition within our schools. Thinking about one's musical preferences, a huge number of artists could be researched for ideas. I'd like to take one artist as an example: Sting.

Recently, Sting released an album (and DVD) *All This Time*. Within the DVD is an extensive range of materials documenting the process by which the songs on the album were arranged and also how a one-off concert was rehearsed for the night of September 11th 2001 (part of the footage dealing with how Sting and his musicians, many of them American, sought to come to terms with the horrendous events of that day and the changing nature of the evening's proposed concert). Sting has demonstrated a long established ability to reflect not only on the songs he has written, but also the processes by which he has brought them into being. Towards the end of the 1980s a similar film, *Bring on the Night*, saw him reflecting on his working practices as a rock musician in conjunction with an elite group of American jazz musicians.

In the following transcript, Sting expresses his views on what makes for effective songwriting:

Most of the best songs I've ever written are about love. But I think love is a important thing to write about. Particularly in my position, at my time of life, that the experience I've had as a man and a boy are all there. And that's what I want to talk about.

Songs have to be simple. They can have a subtext which you can find. But you shouldn't be singing about an issue. You shouldn't be saying down with this or down with that. That's just journalism.

Art is something else, something veiled. I often feel that songwriting is about putting yourself into a state of receptivity or, to be more cosmic about it, a state of grace where the song can reveal itself to you. And I think you're lucky if you can be in a beautiful place because nature is full of stories, full of images, powerful healing images.

It's not like you have huge canvas to paint on or a novel length to fill. You've got to tell the story in two verses, a bridge and a coda. That takes some skill. It's stories in miniature. And I like that. Sometimes you've got to tell a huge amount of information in one line.

I don't know how intentional any of it is. I mean, there's an instinct that you have about songwriting and what seems to be correct and what seems to be wrong. And you follow that instinct. So songwriting is a kind of therapy for both the songwriter and the listener. If you choose to use it that way.

When you see your stuff help other people that's great; a wonderful confirmation that you're doing the right thing. That's what music's for - to help people. (A & M Records 2001) In this discussion, Sting identifies a number of key themes that may help us to develop an alternative approach to teaching songwriting. They are that:

- Content is personal, experiential and autobiographical
- Simplicity is a key for effective expression
- An organic process of revelation occurs during the composition process
- Metaphor and image play an important role in generating and sustaining ideas
- Environmental influences
- Conciseness is an asset ('stories in miniature')
- Following your instincts is important
- Songwriting is a therapy for the writer and listener

How many of us have seen songwriting schemes of work based around these issues and concepts? Maybe teachers back off from these 'grander' themes, arguing that pupils need a range of discrete skills before they can tackle such ideas. But many times in our teaching we underestimate the abilities of our pupils. We package what we consider to be important knowledge in a logical and sequential way, expecting pupils to dutifully work through the designated path we have decided they should follow.

What might an alternative songwriting approach be characterised by? Sting, after all, is a versatile and accomplished musician surrounded by a wealth of talented instrumentalists. Surely his approach can't be uprooted and transplanted directly into the classroom? Perhaps not, but we can certainly learn plenty of lessons from Sting's approach which may then help us to gain a fuller understanding of how children come to understand, appreciate and compose with a genre like the popular song.

Widening the Context

In relation to children's understanding of songs, Shehan-Campbell's fascinating research paints a complex picture of children's song acquisition:

Parents, teachers, and professional songwriters often establish that songs suited for children should be simple in rhythm, sparse in pitch information, and quaint in their texts about animals, friends, and modes of transportation (i.e., trains, boats, and planes). While many of the songs children sing - particularly those perpetuated by adults in their interactions with children - fit these criteria, many more do not. In fact, children's musical expressions do not always fit the adult conception of some universal progression of forms from simple to complex, either (Blacking, 1992). Songs, called 'childsongs', that children invent or refashion from earlier music materials and that they preserve in their transmission to other children (Campbell 1991a) may often consist of greater musical complexities and more diverse texts than those found in the numerous collections of songs that adults have prescribed for children. (Campbell 1998, p.191)

The existence of these natural and inventive processes of song formation are easily observable. I have seen my own children work through such activities in their play with no adult guidance or interference. Similarly in my classroom, during one or two exhilarating episodes, I can remember pupils quite spontaneously creating songs with minimal formal 'tuition' from myself (Savage & Challis 2001, p.143).

Lucy Green's recent publication (2001) highlights the importance of these natural and informal learning practices in the development of popular musicians instrumental skills. These, she suggests, could usefully inform and develop our work as formal music educators in the classroom environment. So what might these approaches entail formal educators doing?

In some ways the introduction and adaptation of informal learning practices would require teachers and lecturers to be inactive rather than proactive, which might be found unusual and difficult to justify; and for many formal music educators, making way for informal learning would take a considerable amount of courage, or even a leap of faith. However, if being less proactive than usual means that educators feel they are learning alongside their students, this amounts to a near-replication of many aspects of informal learning practices which we have seen are habitually employed by young popular musicians. Courage and faith develop with knowledge and understanding, so that the more formal educators are able to observe and join in informal music learning practices, the better we can judge their value and suitability for the formal sphere. (Green 2001, p.186)

Green suggests that there is a need to redefine key concepts in our teaching in order to bring music within the formal classroom alongside pupils' experiences of music within the real world and, more importantly, in line with their natural musical learning processes. She discusses a number of these principles in her final chapter, including re-evaluating:

- the developing of pupils' listening and aural skills;
- the acquisition of formal instrumental skills;
- the relative importance of musical theory and notation;
- the relevance of practice;
- changing assessment strategies and definitions of success;

and giving more significance to:

- linking into pupils' own notions of value and preference in music;
- friendship, taste and peer-directed learning;
- notions of systematic or haphazard progression and experimentation.

The challenge for this research project is to think about how conventional teaching practices in these areas might be challenged and redefined within a songwriting or composition scheme of work that draws on an analysis of models of authentic practice. What would such pedagogy look like? A potential way forward might be to take Sting's criteria and outworks them through Green's approaches. But I'm open to other offers and ideas!

I am very grateful for the support of a grant from Palatine to support this research over the next twelve months. I would welcome expressions of interest in this project, particularly from teachers and those popular musicians out there - of any age - who are engaged in interesting models of composition (or songwriting) in their classrooms, homes, garages or wherever! Please contact me via email: j.savage@mmu.ac.uk

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