

Editorial

Some thoughts on curriculum in music education

Curriculum is currently a big issue in England. What a school-based music curriculum should entail, what sorts of things should be taught and learned, and what makes for good learning experiences are all under consideration. One of the issues that crops up in England, and possibly in other jurisdictions too, when these sorts of discussions take place, involves considerations of what sorts of music children and young people should be involved with, what should they learn, and what is important for schools to be teaching. This immediately places discussions beyond what might be termed the strictly musical, and into the area of values. What music is valued by education systems, and what music should be foregrounded in educational settings become a significant arena of contention. This is especially the case when politicians become involved, as they will often have fixed or politically-motivated views about what they think *should* be taught and learned in school music classes. As ever, the pages of the *BJME* provide some interesting views on this matter, and so it is worth a brief trawl through the archives. The *BJME* home page search engine on the website produces 168 results for the term “curriculum”, so clearly this will be a highly selective sampling from these rich pickings in this editorial.

One thing becomes immediately clear when thinking about curriculum in music education is that there are often conflicts between what music educators believe, and what those in other fields of endeavour think. Take this restating of the aims from the Australian National Music Administrators’ Conference back in 1980:

Ultimately, though music is valued because it gives insight into human experience and enables us to delight in living. (Gifford, 1988 p.117)

This seems to be something which most music educators would be able to get behind! However, a problem with discussions of curriculum is that very soon they become embroiled in discussions of worth and value. After all, as Magne Espeland has observed:

Knowledge is the basis for power and power produces knowledge. Curricular reforms are . . . examples of a process where there is a close connection between the production of knowledge and power. (Espeland, 1999 p.177)

And the issue can be that those in power may well have political views on what should be taught and learned in music which may be different from music educators, in daily contact with what children and young people think is important. What may start out as a question about curriculum moves very rapidly to one of hegemony. As a previous editor of the *BJME* observed:

A warning light appears: a relationship is being established between a specific musical genre and values which are to be imposed upon the pupils. (Cox, 1992 p.244)

Cox goes on to warn of the dangers of policies which promote certain types of music as being problematic, and with potentially unforeseen consequences:

It can come to represent the self-interests of a powerful sub-group which has access to manipulative means. Policies which assert cultural identity can lead to racism and fascism, consequently the arts in schools should resist being used to reinforce tribal boundaries. . . . (Cox, 1992 p.251)

This is very close both in substance and in tone to an observation made by another former editor of the *BJME*:

The idea of the arts as a cultural heritage in which children have to be initiated is not necessarily pernicious but it does need watching. The Third Reich in Germany was in many ways rooted in European high culture and its leaders were certainly very conscious of the importance of the concept of heritage. (Swanwick, 1994 p.169)

We have in music education, especially in generalist music education which is the case in schools in Britain, often maintained an uneasy truce between *making* music, and learning *about* music for children and young people in classrooms. It is in this learning *about* music, which many would see as not encompassing musical learning at all, that hegemonic issues also arise. There is clearly far too much music to be able to construct a curriculum that involves listening and studying even a very small fraction of it. For every piece of music that is listened to, sung, or performed, there are millions which are not. So, in curriculum terms, what is 'in', and what is 'out'? Hegemony again, as this question can get to the very heart of music education – is its purpose to enculturate young people into what can often be social class-related values about “whose music” (Shepherd et al., 1977) matters, or is it something else? This becomes very apparent when we think about the study in school classrooms of the history of music:

The concept of music as an historical phenomenon is limited to one particular tradition, and even within that one tradition, the twin concepts of an ongoing historical development, evolving through the work of 'influential' composers, must be perceived as less than credible. The historical strand in the National Curriculum seems to be intended as a means of regenerating a particular musical tradition through A-level, and into the field of higher education, thus perpetuating a specifically Eurocentric view. This suggests a dangerously inward-looking attitude on the part of the older universities, a refusal to consider the realities of the musical world beyond their confines, and a perception of tradition as a collection of ideas to be handed on uncritically from one generation to the next. . . . (Terry, 1995 p.41)

Yet another former editor of the *BJME* has commented on this, in an observation made last century, but which still has a great deal of resonance twenty years later:

The hegemony of western classical music is then rationalised by evaluating non-art music on art music's terms: as an autonomous object, detached from its social and cultural context, valued only in terms of the relationships between its musical materials. An exercise in which non-art music can only come off worse. Thus the

bourgeois aesthetic is confirmed as intrinsically superior and, by association, so are its consumers and creators and indeed all who are in any way associated with it. Thus, despite the increasing acceptance in schools of rock groups and non-western ensembles, it is arguable that music of the western classical tradition still enjoys much greater status...(Spruce, 1999 p.79)

These are all complex matters. There is, of course, an argument to be made that the purpose of music education should be to enable children and young people to meet, in the words of Malcolm Arnold's (1896/1993, preface) frequently quoted maxim "... the best that has been thought and said..." and no music educator is going to want to be working with music that is not of this order. But the hegemonic question arises again and again, "who says" this is the best? This is a question which busy classroom teachers will have to be addressing for themselves, and with their pupils and students in schools all over the world on a daily basis.

But whilst politicians and music experts think about the nature of the curriculum, and of teaching and learning music in England, the *BJME* casts its usual worldwide sampling of current research in music education. In this issue we begin with an article which leads on from the matters discussed in this editorial, with a piece by Melissa Cain and Jennifer Walden, investigating the practice of music educators in Canada and Australia. Interestingly, they state that "... despite the pervasiveness of ingrained Western-based pedagogy in these countries, [the music educators] are forging ahead with culturally diverse music programmes". This article also raises the matter of hegemony, raising awareness of those music educators "... who feel bound by the hegemony of Western music...", and they recommend that "teachers need to be able to see exemplars of culturally diverse music education in action and speak with experienced mentors to create ways of implementing similar diversity in their own programmes". This has clear resonances with the discussions in the opening section of this editorial.

For our next paper we cross over to the Nordic countries, and have a study based in Norway and Finland. This paper by Sigrud Jordal Havre, Lauri Väkevä, Catharina Christophersen and Egil Haugland looks the use of the video game *Rocksmith* as a basis for pedagogic activity, and how it can be used as a way of thinking about different areas of music teacher knowledge, finding that "... playing entertainment music games in music teacher education can contribute to transforming our perceptions and experiences of what musicianship and music educatorship can be, and help us construct new kinds of learning practises...". This is an important finding, and takes us into new ways of thinking about pedagogy for the twenty-first century music educator. We stay in Norway for our next paper, which is by Aslaug Louise Slette, and which investigates ensemble playing and musical problem-solving in specialist higher music education. The study finds that there are differences between what are labelled as collaborative and cooperative ways of doing this. Collaboration is an area which is often described as a key skill for our connected times, and so this is another useful way of thinking about the contribution music can make.

From Norway we cross over the border into Sweden for our fourth paper, by Christina Larsson and Eva Georgii-Hemming. This is a literature review concerning the place and role of improvisation in general music education. From this review they find that "... the field of empirical studies on improvisation in general music classrooms is limited. There

are only a few empirical studies which look directly at improvisation . . .". This seems to be a matter of some concern, and we can state with certainty that here at the *BJME* we would be very pleased to receive more papers on this important topic.

For our fifth paper in this edition we move over to Wales, where Antonia Ivaldi reports on an investigation of teacher assessment of student playing in lessons. She notes the "... importance of looking at embodied assessments as essential components to the learning dialogue in music, as well as discussing the implications that the different types of assessments have for opening up and closing learning interaction". We know that assessment is a major issue in music education internationally (*inter alia* Brophy & Fautley, 2018), and so this seems to be a useful contribution to our understandings.

The final paper in this edition straddles opposite sides of the globe, as Lotte Latukefu and Jane Ginsborg from Australia and England respectively report on what we mean by portfolio training in music. The phrase 'portfolio career' has entered the lexicon of ways in we can talk about musicians and their ways of working, yet, as this article shows, understandings of what is meant by this term vary significantly between music professionals.

We began this editorial talking about current matters concerning curriculum in England, and yet, as the *BJME* reminds us every month, there is a whole world of music education, and music education research out there. We need to try to find ways our politicians do not constantly try, in the realm of short-term or electoral expediency, to forget that the collective knowledge and wisdom of the professionals involved in music education and music education research are significant, and have been over many years. What we will be doing is promoting the *BJME* as both a repository of much of this knowledge, but also as a forward-facing means of thinking about the future.

MARTIN FAUTLEY and ALISON DAUBNEY
Co-Editors

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