

Editorial

We have become used over the years to a growing literature addressing the question ‘What’s wrong with school music?’ Recently there has been a well-publicised addition to the debate in the form of Sir Peter Maxwell Davies’s Royal Philharmonic Society lecture, given on 24 April, 2005, and entitled ‘Will serious music become extinct?’

Maxwell Davies expresses many familiar concerns: the lack of specialist musicians in schools, the impression that many music teachers are unfamiliar with the world of classical music, and the influence of pop culture and television on young people, ‘drugging constructive, creative thinking’. He worries that many initiatives which are usually presented positively are in fact having a detrimental effect: outreach programmes by symphony orchestras have only a transitory impact, lessened frequently by inadequate follow-up in schools; and the growing popularity of computers means that music making for young people risks becoming a solitary activity. Many music educators would challenge this pessimistic picture, but Maxwell Davies’s views are widely shared, and supported by statistics stating that only around 8% of pupils in compulsory education in the UK are learning a musical instrument.

But what makes Maxwell Davies’s lecture resonate with music teachers, is his affectionate remembrance of his own years as a music teacher at Cirencester Grammar School, 1959–1962. In drawing on his own experience, he shows music to be ‘a healing and binding force’ in schools and the wider community. At Cirencester, the majority of children were able to compose and improvise, and many participated in the school orchestra, junior orchestra, or one of several choirs. In ordinary classes, Maxwell Davies divided the pupils into small groups, each composing small, collective music-theatre works – a novel teaching method in the era of strong emphasis on formal training. The children, he recalls, drew on ‘their own pristine creative vision’, and in turn influenced the work of their composer-teacher: ‘Had I not served my time as a school music teacher, I would not have been the composer of *Eight Songs for a Mad King* ... – I learned more about liberation through music from the Cirencester children than they ever learned from me’.

What should our response as music educators be to all of this? Should we yearn for a return to the conditions of the 1950s and 1960s? Or should we face the future with a different vision? Should the blame for the collapse of support for the western classical tradition be placed at our door?

Coincidentally, in this issue of the journal Nita Temmerman provides an Australian perspective in which there are clear parallels and connections with these concerns, and in a sense reflect an insider’s view in dealing with inadequate support, insufficient curriculum time, lack of teacher confidence, lack of subject status. She throws out a number of challenges: to articulate the value and complementary nature of both intrinsic and extrinsic arguments for music in education; to connect the three contexts of school, home and community; and to develop co-ordinated collective action to ensure that all of this occurs.

The other articles in this issue are on varied topics, but the authors are united in a desire to improve matters, and to strengthen the effectiveness of music education, whether

meeting the needs of adult learners, developing insights into the careers of peripatetic instrumental teachers, trialling new ways of assessing pupil composing competencies, or developing a theory for music technologies in the classroom.

Maxwell Davies has brought the debate about the future of music and music education into the public arena and for this we should be grateful, whether or not we agree with his position. We believe BJME can act as an influential forum for responding to such a debate, developing a music education which is as powerful in its effect as Maxwell Davies recollects.

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