

Viewpoints

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

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Introduction

This short article introduces a current research project investigating authentic models of composition in popular music. I hope that, as a result of presenting the design and intentions here, readers might reflect on the issues raised and respond via these 'Viewpoints' pages or directly to me. I believe that through dialogue the research, and the application of its findings (as a CDROM classroom resource), will be more rigorous and illuminating.

There is an increasingly significant body of research relating to how children compose within the classroom and the perceived educational benefits that it brings:

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)

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)

Composing in the Classroom: The creative dream (NAME, 2000), a recent publication in the UK, has generated much interest amongst classroom practitioners. It set out to present examples of best practice in the teaching of composing in secondary schools across the UK, and offers a valuable and diverse picture.

But not everything is as positive as it might seem. In my visits to classrooms in the northwest of England, I have been struck by the diversity of practice in compositional pedagogy. Like Walker, I have noticed that there are many 'timorous attitudes toward children's activities with sound, particularly those that do not result in recognizable rhythms or melodies' (Walker, 2001, p. 140). Walker argues that current educational practice may well be very different from the 'true nature' of musical expression as it occurs in specific cultural contexts. Inauthentic models of classroom composition can be

contrasted with authentic models of composition employed by musicians of all types in the wider community. This divide can be illustrated with reference to the popular song.

Songwriting: Inauthentic and Authentic Approaches?

Popular songs saturate popular culture. Pupils' familiarity with them offers a valuable educational opportunity. Unlike electro-acoustic music or the Baroque concerti, where the teacher may have to go to considerable lengths to bridge the 'listening gap' between pupils' previous aural experiences and the new or unfamiliar style, popular songs can be a key link in engaging musical interest and imagination. Yet, in my experience, pupils' latent interest is often suffocated by an over-prescription of content and formalisation of ideas.

One example that may be familiar to high school teachers of music in the UK is Unit 15 from the exemplar schemes of work for Key Stage 3 (11–14 age range) (DfES/QCA, 1999), entitled 'Songs: Exploring songs and the use of music technology'. Whilst any competent teacher would not teach this material exactly as described in this publication, the strategies within it often surface within our classrooms. These consist of:

- Developing pupils' understanding of a song's musical components in isolation from each other (structure, texture, chords, melody, lyrics, etc);
- Progressively linear and deterministic treatment of musical materials (simple to complex);
- Placing the technical before the expressive;
- Imposing a unified approach to diverse practice;
- Stereotyping and assumptions (placing the artificial before the authentic).

Readers may have a similar view or may disagree and a response to my critique would be interesting; in particular:

- Are they as *inauthentic* as I have described?
- If they are, how can the teacher act as a mediator in reconstructing the concepts and ideas into a more holistic and authentic experience for the pupil?
- From your experiences, do teachers regularly do this?
- Can you describe other models of authentic or inauthentic classroom compositional pedagogy that you have experienced?
- Are the terms *authentic* and *inauthentic* helpful in describing these approaches?

If these strategies can be summarised under the heading of 'inauthentic compositional strategies', what about the 'authentic' ones? How might they inspire and develop a stronger model of classroom music composition? I would like to take one artist's work as an example.

Recently, Sting released his album *All This Time*. On the DVD is an extensive range of materials documenting the process by which the songs on the album were arranged. 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 an 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. 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.

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. (A&M Records, 2001)

Sting identifies a number of key themes that may help us to develop alternative, authentic approaches 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 shape ideas;
- Conciseness is an asset ('stories in miniature');
- Following your instincts is important;
- Songwriting is a therapy for the writer and listener.

These ideas seem to present a very different model. But how might it be used to help us teach more effectively? Responses to these questions may help in generating some debate:

- How many of us have seen songwriting schemes of work based around these issues?
- Do teachers back off from these 'grander' themes, perhaps arguing that pupils need a range of discrete skills before they can tackle such ideas?
- Do we underestimate pupils' abilities by packaging ideas in logical and sequential ways?
- Although many of Sting's comments focus on the lyrical content of his songs, can similar ideas be transferred to a song's other musical features?
- How might these ideas work in generating new classroom pedagogy for composition?
- What might the characteristics of alternative 'authentic' songwriting approaches be?

Conclusion: Widening the context

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

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)

Children’s natural and inventive processes of song formation are easily observable. In my own classroom I can recall pupils quite spontaneously creating songs with minimal formal tuition (Savage & Challis, 2001, p. 143).

Lucy Green’s recent work (2001) highlights the importance of these natural and informal learning practices in the development of popular musicians’ instrumental skills. She suggests that key principles in our teaching need to be redefined in order to bring music within the formal classroom alongside pupils’ experiences of music in the ‘real’ world and, more importantly, in line with their natural musical learning processes. Her final chapter discusses a number of these principles, including re-evaluating:

- The development 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 pupils’:

- Own notions of value and preference in music;
- Friendship, taste and peer-directed learning;
- Notions of systematic or haphazard progression and experimentation.

There seems to be convincing evidence that classroom models of composition are due for review. Campbell’s and Green’s ideas are relevant and vital in considering potential changes.

The Project

The project will generate a series of detailed case studies of a few popular musicians focusing closely on the practical ways in which they carry out the task of musical composition. A CD-ROM of illustrative and support materials will be developed from case study examples. These materials will facilitate teachers and pupils in developing a range of ideas, experiences and activities that promote more authentic composition skills for high school pupils. The material will be piloted and evaluated at a high school in Manchester.

The challenge for the project is to consider how conventional teaching practices might be redefined in the light of an analysis of models of authentic practice. A discussion of these ideas through these pages would be warmly welcomed.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

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—of any age — who are engaged

in interesting models of composition (or songwriting) in their classrooms, homes, garages or wherever!

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