

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

*Jonathan Savage, Institute of Education, Manchester Metropolitan University  
799 Wilmslow Road, Didsbury, Manchester M20 2RR (j.savage@mmu.ac.uk)*

### **Introduction**

This presentation will report on the current progress of a one year research project investigating authentic models of composition in popular music, focussing primarily on the genre of the popular song. In presenting these thoughts at the mid-way point of the research project I hope that other delegates will reflect and respond on the issues raised. I believe that through this dialogue the final research paper, and the application of its findings in a CDROM for classroom use, will be that more rigorous and illuminating.

### **Background**

There is an increasingly significant body of recent research relating to how children compose within the classroom and the perceived educational benefits that this activity brings. Perhaps of most direct interest to classroom practitioners has been the NAME publication *Composing in the Classroom: The creative dream*. This book is a worthy effort to represent the best of classroom practice from around the United Kingdom. It paints and celebrates a diverse picture.

In my visits to classrooms throughout the northwest of England I have been struck by this diversity of practice in compositional pedagogy, particularly at Key Stage 3 (age 11 – 14). Following the example of Lucy Green's recent research in instrumental learning, I contrast what might be called inauthentic models of classroom composition with authentic models of composition employed by musicians of many types in the wider community. This divide can be illustrated with reference to the popular song.

### **Aims of the research**

- To investigate and redefine compositional pedagogy at Key Stage 3 in light of an examination of authentic practices deployed by popular musicians.

### **Methodology**

The research methodology is qualitative in design, drawing on a range of approaches including case study, grounded theory and naturalistic enquiry. The final stage of the project will utilise a collaborative action research strategy with a Head of Music from a local high school in south Manchester.

## Methods

The key aim of this project is to think about how conventional compositional teaching practices might be investigated and redefined in light of an analysis of models of authentic compositional practice deployed by popular musicians. The project is generating a series of detailed case studies of popular musicians focussing closely on the practical ways in which they carry out the task of musical composition. 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.

## Project Description

Popular songs saturate popular culture. Pupil's familiarity with them represents a tremendous educational opportunity. Unlike electroacoustic music or the Baroque concerti, where a teacher may have to go to considerable lengths to bridge the 'listening gap' between pupils' previous aural experiences and the new style, popular songs may be a key link in engaging musical interests and imaginations. Yet too often pupils' latent interest is suffocated by an over-prescription of content and formalisation of ideas.

A brief analysis of current practice and published resources revealed that 'traditional' approaches to songwriting:

- Develop pupils' understanding of a song's musical components in isolation from each other (structure, texture, chords, melody, lyrics, etc);
- Were progressively linear and deterministic in their treatment of musical materials;
- Placed the technical before the expressive;
- Imposed a unified approach;
- Contained many stereotypes and assumptions.

These strategies are summarised under the heading of 'inauthentic songwriting strategies'. The research has gone on to consider what 'authentic' songwriting strategies might be and how might they be used to inspire and develop a stronger model of classroom music composition.

One famous songwriter's work was key as a starting point for this process. Sting released his album *All This Time* at the end of 2001. Within the DVD is an extensive range of materials documenting the process by which the songs on the album were composed and arranged. This material illustrates a number of key themes that may help 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 songwriting process;

- Metaphor and image play an important role in generating and sustaining ideas;
- Environmental influences shape ideas;
- Conciseness is an asset (he calls his songs ‘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 from conventional approaches. But how might it be used to help us teach more effectively? Your responses to these questions may help in generating a debate that moves the argument forward:

- 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?

### **Provisional Findings**

- Conventional ‘classroom’ based approaches to songwriting are seldom seen in the work of popular musicians working in the community or professional contexts;
- Songwriters exhibit highly flexible ways of working through multiple pathways of compositional choices and processes;
- The function of ‘play’ within the creative endeavour is strongly significant for songwriters;
- Inspiration and creativity is often a result of a collaborative process;
- Music technologies are an integral part of the compositional process and, for some, replace and redefine traditional notions of musical or songwriting skills;
- Personal expression is the most highly valued attribute of being a professional songwriter.

### **Tentative Conclusions/Implications for Practice**

In relation to children’s understanding of songs, Shehan-Campbell’s research on ‘childsongs’ has proved very helpful in understanding how young children ‘acquire’ and ‘invent’ their own songs. The musical complexities in their invented songs are often greater than those that adults might suppose are ‘suitable’ for use in the classroom. Their

natural and inventive processes of song formation are easily observable and have been a feature of my earlier research investigating compositional processes with new technologies.

In a similar way, Lucy Green's recent research highlights the importance of 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 within 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 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 from popular musicians and other researchers that our classroom models of composition are due for reconsideration. Shehan-Campbell's and Green's ideas seem to be relevant and vital in considering potential changes.

This qualitative study of songwriters in the community is confirming some of my initial suppositions. Working alongside other partners during this year, including the Virtual Learning Environments Foundation, has enriched the possibilities for future collaborations and research. Interactive, cross-curricula and web-based songwriting resources are in an early stage of development. These will extend a new model for the teaching of songwriting in innovative ways that will draw on the observations and findings of this research project. The testing and evaluating of these materials within teaching in a number of Manchester high schools will be reported on later this year.

The comments of delegates about the ideas contained within this project would be most welcome, either in the plenary following the presentation, during the conference itself or afterwards via email.