Teaching Songwriting: Some alternative approaches and pitfalls?

How should we attempt to teach songwriting? What approaches have you seen during your teaching placements?

Suspend your own views for a moment and consider what we’ve discussed. A brief search on the internet uncovers a common approach (see Songwriting Guide from www.musicatschool.co.uk)

Approaches like these are:

- Based around developing pupils’ understanding of various musical components of a song (structure, texture, chords, melody, lyrics, etc), often in an isolating kind of way;
- Progressively linear and deterministic (simple to complex);
- Full of stereotypes and often unhelpful assumptions.

Is this the way that songwriters work? Is this what actually happens when songwriters write songs? Is this a useful approach to teaching pupils to write songs? Will this produce end products that inspire them? Or could approaches like this create what one might call ‘artificial’ or ‘unrealistic’ knowledge and continue to divide pupils’ musical experiences within and outside the classroom.

Let’s look more widely than the classroom into the ‘real’ musical world. What do we know of songwriting from our own experiences of composition, or from a consideration of evidence from artists we admire and respect? Thinking about one’s musical preferences, a huge number of artists could be researched for ideas. We’ve only time for one.

Let’s listen to a short song by Sting before considering what he has to say about songwriting.

Listen to *The Shape of My Heart* (All This Time DVD)

In the following extract, listen to how Sting expresses his views on what makes for effective songwriting. While you’re listening, think about key areas that he identifies as important for the production of a successful song? Try and relate them to the song you have just heard.

Listen to chapter ‘Songwriting’ from the All This Time DVD
What are the key features that Sting identifies in this extract?

- Content is personal, experiential and autobiographical
- Simplicity of expression
- Organic process of revelation during composition
- Importance of metaphor and image
- Environmental influences
- Conciseness (stories in miniature)
- Follow your instincts
- As therapy

How many of us have seen songwriting schemes of work based around these issues and concepts? Not many I suspect.

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. No one so many of them switch off, halfway through if we’re lucky but often before then!

Approaches to teaching songwriting that I have observe and, in the past, have utilised in my teaching are characterised by placing the:

- Technical before the expressive
- Simple before the complex
- Artificial before the authentic
- Unified before the diverse

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?

Let’s consider what the ethnomusicologist Patricia Shehan-Campbell has to say about children’s song development:

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 in Green 2001, p.208)

On the basis of studying community popular music projects for teenagers, Horn says:

One might argue that chaos activity could be more widely used for the development of creative skills, particularly in our educational institutions. Indeed, an encounter with what might he described as 'moments of not knowing' is a pre-requisite of creative action. (Horn 1984, p.116 in Green 2001, p.208)

Lucy Green’s recent publication (2001) highlights the importance of informal learning practices in the development of musicians outside the realm of formal music education. These, she suggests, can inform and develop our work as formal music educators in the classroom environment. What might these approaches entail us 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)

We need to redefine key concepts and notions 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. Green discusses a number of these areas in her final chapter, including promoting alternative approaches to:

• Developing listening and aural skills
• The acquisition of formal instrumental skills
• The importance of musical theory and notation
• Linking into pupils’ notions of valuing and liking music
• Expanding friendship, taste and peer-directed learning
• The relevance of practice
• Systematic or haphazard progression and experimentation
• Changing assessment strategies and definitions of success

Thinking about how these approaches might outwork themselves within a songwriting scheme of work is a challenge for all of us. I suggest that a scheme of work that takes Sting’s criteria and outworks them through Green’s approaches seems like a valuable area of enquiry for those of you wanting a challenge. Just consider the alternative for a moment. Doesn’t it look rather bland in comparison? Don’t just take your ideas for the classroom from within the established educational environment. If you look outside you’ll find many more interesting ideas and approaches. And your pupils will prefer them too!

Bibliography

