

# Conceptions, functions and actions: teaching music musically

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**Abstract.** Clearly, the organisation of music education varies widely between countries. However, global values of music education include that music is taught “musically”. Music education is music making: composing, performing and listening. It is not learning *about* music: the names of orchestral instruments, or the decoding of staff notation. In England, as in all countries, we have some examples of very fine musical teaching. Some of this work is idiosyncratic. Examples include a 9-13 school where the pupils used descant recorder as a medium for composing and performing, that culminated in jazz where everyone “soloed”. In a 13-18 mixed school, boys began using their voices as a medium, just as their voices began to change. We also have examples of teaching that is poor. The causes may include published schemes of work; bandwagons; dogma; not daring to be different; the difficulty of analysing one’s own teaching; the difficulty of analysing one’s own musical development; and underexpectation of students’ musical development. In the UK we have growing numbers of primary and secondary teachers who teach music musically. But we still have much to learn from other countries.

**Keywords:** music education, conceptual education, music education in England

**Resumo.** Claramente, a organização da educação musical varia amplamente entre países. Entretanto, valores globais da educação musical incluem aquele de que a música é ensinada “musicalmente”. Educação musical é fazer música: compor, apresentar e ouvir. Não é aprender *sobre* música: os nomes dos instrumentos da orquestra, ou a leitura de partituras. Na Inglaterra, assim como em todos os países, temos alguns exemplos de educação musical de qualidade. Parte deste trabalho é idiossincrático. Os exemplos incluem uma escola para alunos de nove a 13 anos onde os alunos usaram a flauta doce como um meio de compor e apresentar, que culminou em um jazz no qual todos realizavam solos. Já em uma escola mista para alunos de 13 a 18 anos, os garotos começaram a cantar como médios, bem quando suas vozes começaram a mudar. Também temos exemplos de ensino de baixa qualidade. As causas podem incluir esquemas de trabalho publicados; repetição de outros padrões; dogma; falta de ousadia para ser diferente; a dificuldade de analisar a própria capacidade de ensinar; a dificuldade de analisar o próprio desenvolvimento musical, e a subestimação do desenvolvimento musical dos estudantes. No Reino Unido, temos um número crescente de professores primários e secundários que ensinam música musicalmente. Mas ainda temos muito o que aprender com outros países.

**Palavras-chave:** educação musical, concepções educacionais, educação musical na Inglaterra

## Introduction

I would like to start by thanking you, most sincerely, for giving me – and my colleague Rosie Burt – the opportunity to participate in this conference. Neither of us have visited Latin America before, and so we are looking forward to learning as much as possible about your enormous continent, in particular its music education, over the next few days.

We have, of course, seen many television programs about aspects of Latin America: the cultures, the climate, the people, the history, the social challenges and social opportunities. But learning from a television programme is never quite the same as learning first hand. When I watch television programmes about things in England that I

think I know about, I often spend time muttering that “they” have got it wrong. I expect that you may feel similarly about some of the television programmes about aspects of Latin America. I feel that there are parallels here with the need to teach, and learn, music first hand.

Of course, there can be many perceptions of even the most simple of events. Some examples of “wrong”, are just a different, and potentially interesting, point of view. Some of the most enraging television programmes are enraging because they present as giving an objective view – often through the use of some spuriously collected statistics – when they are really just offering a point of view. The same is true of television documentaries about music education, or aspects of music education, in various countries of the world.

There can be no doubt that visiting a country is more illuminating than reading about it, or watching television programmes about it. A Japanese music education researcher who recently spent a year working in London, and who had only previously met the English at conferences when we were a long way from home, commented:

I used to wonder why the English were always talking about the weather. Now I know. It is because the weather in England is always changing. In Japan, I look at the calendar and know what clothes to put on.....

and he went on to give a truly English account of how he kept waiting for summer to arrive, and had become drenched and cold when he set off from a sunny London on one day the previous week, and “the weather broke” when he was on his way to Cambridge, which is only an hour or so drive.

I thank you also for allowing me to speak to you in English, and for all the time spent by Professor Dr Sérgio Luiz Ferreira de Figueiredo in translating this talk into Portuguese. There would not be any point in me attempting to speak to you in Portuguese, as I simply do not have the skills! But I am conscious of my “language deficit” whenever I speak at a conference in a country where another language is spoken. I am equally impressed by the language skills of those, for whom English is a second (or third, or fourth ...) language, and who attend conferences in England. Sadly, few concessions are made to them.

At a conference in Norway, a delegate from Sweden who I did not know, and who did not know me, commented “your English is flawless”. Perhaps it is, perhaps it isn't. But I *am* English, and so speaking, and thinking, in English is easier for me.

### **Are there global values for music education?**

It goes without saying that the ways in which music education is organised differ between our different countries.

In England we have a national curriculum for music that must be taught to all students aged 5 – 14 in state schools (I know that there is something strange about having a national curriculum that is compulsory in state schools, but optional in private schools, but in England we have largely got used to this anomaly). England did not have its first national curriculum until 1990 (1992 in music). It has always been a document that is slim in comparison to the national curriculum of many countries, and leaves much to the discretion of teachers. Provided that teachers teach their students to compose, perform on instruments, sing and listen, and teach them to do this in a way that helps them to make progress, they will probably meet the requirements of the national curriculum.

However, not all teachers see it this way. Some secondary teachers consider that the national curriculum is an imposition. Many primary teachers think that it is too difficult for them to implement. In fact, it only appears too difficult because it is, in my view, rather badly written, and ‘supported’ by some official documentation, including schemes of work, that do not make a great deal of sense. Because primary teachers tend to lack confidence in teaching music (see, for example, Mills 1989) they often think that they do not understand the national curriculum because of weaknesses in themselves, rather than weaknesses in the documentation.

*Music from 5 to 16*, which was written by HM Inspectors in 1985, is a more friendly and musical book for primary and secondary teachers to read, as is, I hope, my book *Music in the Primary School* (1991).

Sweden introduced a national curriculum many years before England, but has recently reduced its description of its music curriculum to a few bullet points. This is because it was thought that teachers had ceased to think sufficiently about their teaching. It may be many years before other countries become ready to dispense with any form of national music curriculum. Issues include the availability of training for teachers.

The UK consists of four nations, England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland – each with its own national curriculum. The curriculum for Wales includes Welsh music, and Welsh music making.

Is it possible to have global values for music education? ISME believes that it is, and I agree. In my view, the most important characteristic of 'music education' is that it is "musical", i.e. of music.

In 1988, John Paynter said<sup>1</sup>:

I have to say, in the end, I think that all that matters in music education is that what we do is musical. I don't care what it is. I would applaud whatever was happening in a classroom provided that it actually involved children in musical experience.

I think that this statement comes close to one that could apply to music education anywhere, with students of any age, and with music of any kind. But when I opened *Music in the School*, in 2005, I said a little more:

I begin by restating a view about music in the school that is almost 20 years old – but which has, I believe, stood the test of time. John Paynter offers a picture of schools where students learn through direct engagement with music as musicians, for example performers, composers or listeners. What could be better – more 'musical' in the sense 'of music' – than that?

I feel that this is a statement that does not apply only to schools, important though they are.

In 2002 I was asked, among others, by the International Society for Music Education to contribute an answer to the question "why teach music in school?" This is what I wrote:

Why teach music in school?

There is recorded music almost everywhere in everyday life, but so little music making, and so much misunderstanding of what music is all about. People think that they are 'not musical'. Or that to play an instrument you first have to learn to read music. Or that if they have tried to learn an instrument, but did not make too much progress, this was necessarily their fault. Or that you have to be Mozart to compose. Or that music teachers are only interested in classical music composed by men who are long dead.

Teaching music in school enables us to put all this right before it goes wrong. We build on the natural affinity for and joy in making music – including making up music – that all children bring to their first day at school, and help them on the early stages to achieving their full musical potential. We avoid dogmatic approaches to music teaching that constrain children, but rather guide them as they grow musically, and exceed our very high expectations of them. We make it easy for children to carry on thinking that making music is just as natural as speaking, reading and writing. We show children that there is much more to music than the 'Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy' or 'Mary Had a Little Lamb'. We engage with the music of children's own culture, and also help

them to broaden their musical perspectives. We help the children who become so passionate about music that they want a career in it to achieve their goals. And we also carrying on showing all the other children that music can be a major force in their lives, if that is what they want.

We teach music in school primarily because we want children – all children – to grow as musicians. But music, also, improves the mind. While it is hard to catch the results of this in a scientific experiment, or to plan music teaching so that this will necessarily happen, no-one who has had the privilege of observing really good music teaching, and has watched children grow intellectually in front of them, can doubt that this is the case. It may be the raising of children's self-esteem through success in music making that helps them towards achievement more generally. It may be that enjoying music helps children to enjoy school more. It may be that chemical changes induced in the brain by music facilitate learning more generally. Or perhaps the thought experiments that musicians must carry out to improve their performing and composing help children to extend their thinking more generally. I don't much mind what the reason is, but am certain that it happens.

Music making is something that we can draw on to make the bad times in life more bearable. Sometimes this is just in little ways. But I know an elderly man who struggles to make himself understood in words through the fog of Parkinson's disease. The other day, he stood up from the dinner table, moved to the piano, and played the songs of his youth perfectly, and with such communication. I know a much younger man, an outstanding physicist, who has cystic fibrosis. When the frustrations of his life now, and his limited prospects, become too much, he sits down at the piano and improvises for hours and hours...

But music is mainly about good times, and making them more frequent and even better. Music is not a gift but a right...

While I was asked (in 2002) to write specifically about schools, I believe that this statement applies beyond this context.

This word "musical" has caused, and still causes, a lot of problems in music education. It has many potential meanings, not all of them constructive educationally. I do not believe that "musical" can usefully be used to describe people. If I ever believed that there were two groups of people – the "musical" and the "unmusical" – I rejected this notion a very long time ago, just as I have rejected the categorisation of people into two groups called "musicians" and "non-musicians". I accept that some people describe themselves occupationally as musicians – I would be mad not to accept this – but I do not think that it makes sense for this or for any other reason to talk about an opposite group of non-musicians, just as we do not typically speak of non-

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<sup>1</sup> Salaman, W. 1988, p. 28-32.

dentists, non-plumbers, non-gardeners or non-headteachers. We all have potential as musicians, and even the most famous musicians among us have potential that remains untapped. And musical training does not always have a comprehensively improving effect. Some forms of training may actually interfere with the realisation of our musical potential. Working in Japan, Hiromichi Mito (2002; 2004<sup>2</sup>) has found that students with absolute pitch find it more difficult to transpose on keyboard instruments.

No, when I used “musical” in this talk, other than when I explain further, I use it, as did John Paynter, simply to mean “of music”. Thus, “musical experience” in a classroom engages students – all students – in doing music: making it, creating it, responding to it. This means that classroom activities such as looking at a violin, looking at a picture of a violin, drawing a picture of a violin, learning to spell the word “violin”, or learning that the great violin composer JS Bach had 12 children – or that violins have four strings – are not musical experiences. Neither is it “musical” to have music playing in the background – rather like wallpaper – as students do mathematics, or carry out science investigations, or move around the corridors or into assembly, or do drawing or writing that is unrelated to the music being played. And activities such as echoing rhythms, or learning about the time values of the different sorts of notes used in staff notation, are not musical experiences *per se* either – although they can, in some circumstances, be educationally helpful interludes within them.

My guess is that most of us would agree with most of this. But I look forward to a lively debate with you in due course!

### **Some examples of good music learning in England**

In a later section of this talk I shall be speaking to you of bad practice in England. But I would not wish you to think that all of our music education in England is bad! So here is an insight into just three examples of the more successful music education in England. I could have brought many more than three examples of good music learning with me, but there would not be time to show them.

All of the examples were in comprehensive (i.e. all ability) schools. Everyone in England goes to school, and so “all ability” really does mean “all ability”.

The first example was at a comprehensive school for students aged 8-12 in the north of England. Thus it is a “middle school” with some primary, and some secondary, students. There was just one class music teacher<sup>3 4</sup>, who taught music throughout the school. He had been a jazz pianist for many years, and his love of music (particularly playing jazz piano!) pervaded his work at school. He had taught all the students to play recorder, not because he was particularly keen on Elizabethan music, but because he thought that recorder was an instrument that all his students could use to play their performances and compositions.

The example that I will play to you is a jazz performance by an entire class of 12 year olds. All of the students soloed, and one of the aspects of this performance that I most like is that they soloed in different ways. The performance was fun for the students, and also gave the teacher an opportunity to assess them individually.

The second example was at another mixed comprehensive school in the north of England, this time for students aged 13-19. This school based all its performing and composing on singing. The (new) head of music was a singer who thought that it was important that students sang extensively, and it did not occur to him that this might be a problem given that boys (in particular) entered the school just as their voices were changing. As the teacher did not think that he had a “problem”, there wasn’t one!

The two short examples that I will play you are of singing by entire classes of students aged 14. This school “bands” students according to what is thought to be their “ability”, which is assessed mainly through subjects such as English and mathematics. It had not occurred to the music teacher that students who were “less able” might sing less well than their peers. And so they didn’t, as you will hear!

The third example was at a comprehensive school in the middle of England, with students aged

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<sup>2</sup> Mito, H. 2002; 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Other music teachers visited the school to give instrumental lessons to a view students, mainly on orchestral instruments. Parents typically have to contribute to the cost of instrumental lessons.

<sup>4</sup> Much effective music teaching in primary schools in England is given by teachers who lack confidence, rather than competence, in their ability to teach music, e.g. Mills, J., 1997, p. 29-35; Mills, J., 1995; 1996, p. 122-126; Mills, J., 1993; Mills, J., 1989, p. 125-138.



11-16. Unfortunately I do not have a recording that I can play to you. But I do have a photo, and you will see the joy with which a school student improvises alongside an undergraduate from the RCM, as they both work at an orchestral marimba.

Clearly, not all of the music education in the UK is as good as this.

### How not to teach music musically

I don't believe that any teacher would *try* to teach music unmusically. But this has happened to most of us, at least occasionally. It certainly has happened to me. Over the years, through reflection on my own teaching as well as on other people's, I have come to the conclusion that the factors that lead to unmusical teaching include:

published schemes of work

bandwagons

dogma

not daring to be different

the difficulty of analysing one's own teaching

the difficulty of analysing one's own musical development

underexpectation of students' musical development.

### Published schemes of work

Of course, commercial schemes of work are not always a problem. But a teacher who, in effect, teaches lessons that were planned by other people, sometimes ceases to think about what they are doing. And a teacher who has ceased to think is not poised to adjust their teaching when a student responds particularly favourably, or particularly negatively. The cellist Pablo Casals once observed:

Every year the leaves of the trees reappear with the spring, but they are different every time.<sup>5</sup>

Lessons are like that too. They need to be re-created each time that they are taught. A lesson that was written for another class in another school will not necessarily work well elsewhere, and I rather

suspect that some of the lessons described in some published schemes of work have actually not been taught anywhere!

### Bandwagons

Rudolf Radocy wrote:

Most American music educators do not follow learning theories and other developments in psychology closely, yet they often may follow educational fads or 'bandwagons', where an idea or school of thought becomes popular rapidly, as many people endorse it, often without careful consideration of what the idea really represents or implies<sup>6</sup>.

He gives the example of the so-called Mozart effect. Careful research<sup>7</sup> has suggested that music training, in particular listening to the music of Mozart, may improve young children's ability to reason abstractly in some specific contexts. These findings were over-generalised, not only in the US, by members of the media, and some organisations with a commercial interest in the presence of music in education, and it was not long before special Mozart materials for use with children were being published, parents and teachers were deluging children with Mozart, and all sorts of people were claiming all sorts of educational benefits for music that may, indeed, be true<sup>8</sup> – but which were certainly not proven. Some might ask whether this matters. If the end result of some – in effect – hysteria is that there is more music in education, then isn't that a good thing? Not necessarily. In addition to the intellectual dishonesty involved, which is at variance with the values that education generally attempts to instil in children, there is a danger that children's education may actually be harmed.

I recall a primary school where a very committed teacher, determined to do the best for her quite challenging class, was playing them Mozart during much of the time that she was teaching. Some of the students were visibly distracted by the music, and at times it was difficult for the students to hear the teacher's questions and instructions, and for the teacher to hear the students' responses. Moreover, the students were confused by being expected to talk when music was played during science lessons, for example, but told off for doing so in music lessons, and so their behaviour had deteriorated.

<sup>5</sup> Corredor, J. M., 1956.

<sup>6</sup> Radocy, R., 2001.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Rauscher, F. H.; G. L. Shaw, et al., 1993, p. 611. Rauscher, F. H.; G. L. Shaw, et al., 1997, p. 2-8.

<sup>8</sup> Mills, J., 1998, p. 204-205.

It would be difficult to argue that any of this was enhancing students' education.

### **Dogma**

When considering the main influences on curriculum development in music over the last century or so, it is sometimes possible to spot the following pattern:

Someone has a very good idea: the Kodaly concept, an approach to music education of the very highest integrity, would be a case in point.

Disciples grow up around that person, and the very good idea spreads.

The disciples attract their own disciples. These second-generation disciples may never meet the originator of the very good idea, or read anything that the originator has written: they copy what the first generation disciples do, without necessarily understanding why they do it.

The very good idea recedes behind the dogma that is developing. Teachers put particular ingredients into their lessons because these are part of the dogma, rather than because they relate to the very good idea. As the content of the curriculum becomes disconnected from the very good idea, practices develop that would be anathema to the originator, but which are still credited to the very good idea. An example would be the dogma, frequently credited to the Kodaly method (note the change of title from "concept" to "method" as the approach has become more dogmatic) that the songs first taught to children in England should use only the musical interval *soh-me*. In fact, Kodaly believed that children's first songs should be drawn from their culture. Hungarian folk songs are, I understand, frequently based on *soh-me*: English folk songs, and the music that English children hear as they grow up, are not.

The dogma becomes the focus. The disciples are replaced by gurus who train teachers to carry out procedures, without explaining what the procedures are *for*. Teachers feel that it is their fault that they do not understand what the procedures are for, and their confidence as teachers diminishes. They teach lessons that just consist of procedures, and that have not been planned to enable students to learn. The music education of many students suffers.

### **In due course, the dogma falls into disuse.**

Some time later, someone has a very good idea...

Other examples of dogma include the use of pentatonic scales when students are composing, on the grounds that "everything will sound alright". If everything sounds alright, why bother? (In practice, some teachers in England use only one pentatonic scale: C D E G A.)

Sometimes teachers create their own dogma. An inspector recently told me of a lesson that she observed in a secondary school, one of the very few secondary schools in England that still teaches the descant recorder to all students. (Most secondary schools never did this, or gave up a long time ago, having observed that the descant recorder is not popular with many young people.)<sup>9</sup> The inspector looked up from her writing and saw that the student next to her was playing not a recorder, but her ruler. She held the ruler like a recorder, resting it on her lip, and placing her left hand above her right hand, and with her fingers nicely curled and their tips resting on particular centimetre marks. She sat upright "so that she could breathe properly" and fingered the "notes" of the melody that the class was playing from the board.

Inspector: Why are you playing a ruler?

Student: Because I have forgotten my recorder.

[Inspector pauses to consider, and notices other students playing rulers, and one student playing a pen.]

Inspector: Why is that student over there playing her pen?

Student: That's what we do when we forget our rulers.

What is the point of all that?

### **Not daring to be different**

Some of the most musically exciting music teaching that takes place in schools is idiosyncratic, and borne of the specific enthusiasms, expertise and interests of a particular teacher.

The jazz recorder work that I played earlier is an example of this. There are many other schools in England with an idiosyncratic curriculum that works well. I am thinking particularly of a school where all the 8 year olds learn to play jazz on harmonicas, and a secondary school, with no links with Russia, where large groups of students have learnt to play, and improvise upon, balalaika to a very high standard. I would not wish to discourage any of these schools.

But neither would I wish to encourage teachers who do not have jazz guitar as a *forté* to make it

<sup>9</sup> The teacher who taught jazz recorder, see above, was one of those 'exceptions who prove the rule.'

compulsory throughout their school. Were I to do so, I would be in danger of introducing the next dogma.

### **The difficulty of analysing one's own teaching**

It is not always easy to "stand outside" one's own teaching and analyse it. Teachers in the UK often require help with learning to do this.

### **The difficulty of analysing one's own musical development**

Teachers in England often learnt to read staff notation at such a young age that they cannot imagine functioning without it. Consequently, they may want to teach it to children before they need it.

In *Music in the Primary School* I wrote:

Staff notation is simply a means of recording some types of western music. It is not a code that must be understood before any purposeful musical activity can take place. Some jazz musicians, and children learning the violin according to the Suzuki method, for instance, cannot read music. Some 20<sup>th</sup> century composers, including Luciano Berio, have occasionally found other forms of notation more appropriate to their purposes. And many musical traditions, such as [forms of ] Indian music and gamelan music, make little or no use of any written notation, let alone staff notation. Thus the study of written notation is not relevant to all forms of music making, and much worthwhile musical activity in any musical tradition can take place without recourse to it. Some music is not staff-notatable: other music is not notated.

Consequently, children need not be taught to read music until they are ready to use it. And once they have learnt it, it need not become the only way of recording or accessing music. Children who have learnt to read music in conjunction with piano lessons, for instance, still benefit from opportunities to compose by ear at the piano, and on other instruments. There is a parallel here with spoken language. Children do not learn to read and write until they have been speaking for some time. And once they have learnt to read and write, they do not stop talking to each other.

Since I drafted that text, in 1989, I have observed music being taught in many primary schools, and other schools, and now have even stronger reservations about the use of staff notation. Thousands of students every year are confused by teachers well-intentioned, but misplaced, attempts to teach them to read rhythms and pitches. It is like teaching students to read before they have learnt to speak.

Teachers sometimes forget that they learnt to read music using an instrument, for example the

recorder or piano, which can make a sustained sound, and try to teach children partial truths such as that "a crotchet is twice as long as a quaver" using clapping. A crotchet clap sounds exactly the same as a quaver clap – it is only the silence after it that changes in length.

John Holt, in his classic book *How Children Fail*<sup>10</sup> – first published as long ago as 1964 – wrote of a child: "What she needs is a broom to sweep out her mind ... If she could only forget nine tenths of the facts and rules she has all mixed up in her head, she might begin to learn something."

I think that many children in England who have been 'taught' to read music before they are ready, need a broom too.

### **Underexpectation of students' musical development**

Underexpectation of what students can achieve is another obstacle to teaching music musically. Expect students to achieve the moon, and they will often achieve the stars. Expect them not to be able to do even the most basic of musical tasks, and they probably won't be able to do them, particularly if a teacher has communicated this sense of their hopelessness effectively. Underexpectation can arise for many reasons, including the use of published schemes of work that expect too little, or dogmatic approaches to teaching. It can arise also through weak diagnosis of students' achievement.

### **Teaching music musically**

But I would not wish to end this talk by speaking of weak teaching and weak learning. There is much musical teaching of music in England and in the rest of the UK, and I am sure there is much musical teaching in all the countries where you live and work.

In *Music in the School* I wrote of:

Teachers who are teaching musically, [who] draw in students with their differing enthusiasms and backgrounds, and leave each of them at least slightly better for having been to a lesson. They teach through music (not just about music): students spend lessons making music, listening to music and reflecting on music. The teachers understand that all forms of notation are only a means to an end, that many ends do not require notation, and that some ends would be compromised by it. They have high expectations of their students: they organise lessons so that the sky is the limit, and do not oversimplify their teaching material. Their lessons

<sup>10</sup> Holt, J., 1984.

are ones that they, personally, would quite like to attend. They are observant of the response of their class, and continually fine-tune their lessons to maximise the benefit to students, adjusting their expectations upwards, where this is appropriate.

I look forward to working with you, over the next few days, to increase the number of such teachers, and their influence, in all of our countries. In the UK, at least, we still have much to learn.

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