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Justifications for Music in the Secondary School Curriculum

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INTRODUCTION

Although music is a prominent component of what one might consider the Western identity and is typically a feature of many school timetables, there are many other activities that are prominent in our lives but do not feature in the school curriculum (Koopman, 1996). A secondary music teacher's ideas about aims, content and methods are each characterised by an underlying attempt to justify that place in the curriculum. Below, Brocklehurst explains further that by justifying curricular music we not only provide the teacher with a sense of sanity but also a model style of teaching and learning of which they can strive to achieve.

> It is clearly essential for the teacher of music to be convinced that music is an indispensable constituent of a truly liberal education. Such a conviction will determine the enthusiasm, vitality and quality of his teaching and prevent his being unduly discouraged by inadequate timetable, accommodation and equipment provision or overwhelmed and exhausted by a wide range of extra-curricular musical activities (Brocklehurst, 1971).

Through an examination of the literature and classroom resources out there, it is possible to identify distinct and contrasting theories about why we should musically educate children. In the following piece of writing, I will compare three rationales of some significant music educators, looking at their strengths and limitations. It is not my intention to find a single justification for music in the secondary school curriculum since this would be impossible. However, I may find one particular reason that I align with more so and use this a model for my own teaching.

MUSIC FOR THE PURPOSE OF ACQUIRING MUSICAL KNOWLEDGE

A survey of the literature reveals that current justifications fall roughly into two categories. Koopman, for just one example, divides these into Musical and Non-Musical justifications. Non-Musical justifications do not value any directly musical-related outcomes, but rather they value the bi-products of engaging with musical activities (Koopman, 1996). Alternately, musical justifications arise from a certain conception of education, where the value of engaging with music is linked to the aesthetic nature of music itself (ibid).

In many music classrooms across the country, one can expect to encounter the music teacher who finds musical meaning in experiencing and studying the elements of music itself such as pitch, rhythm, timbre, form, style - mostly through examples from the post-Renaissance classical era (Plummeridge, 2001). Below is a syllabus outline from the KS3 National Curriculum, published in September 2013

(Fig 1). This syllabus illustrates that there are many 'checkpoints' to be reached in KS3, the nature of which lend themselves to the study of traditional western music theory and performance.

SUBJECT CONTENT, KS3 SEPTEMBER 2013.
• Play and perform confidently in a range of solo and ensemble contexts using their voice, playing instruments musically, fluently and with accuracy and expression • Improvise and compose; and extend and develop musical ideas by drawing on a range of musical structures, styles, genres and traditions • Use staff and other relevant notations appropriately and accurately in a range of musical styles, genres and traditions • Identify and use the inter-related dimensions of music expressively and with increasing sophistication, including use of tonalities, different types of scales and other musical devices • Listen with increasing discrimination to a wide range of music from great composers and musicians • Develop a deepening understanding of the music that they perform and to which they listen, and its history

Fig 1: KS3 National Curriculum for Music – 2013 (Education, 2013)

Charles Plummeridge calls this the 'traditional' approach to music education, adding that it is 'underpinned by a particular, and some would say limited, view of music itself' (Plummeridge, 2001, p. 25). The music teacher with this approach will preach that musical knowledge ultimately enhances musical experience and may go on further to believe that the understanding of intrinsic musical knowledge is a way to satisfy 'one's self-knowledge, making the world more comprehensible, and elucidating one's individual existence' (Koopman, 1996, p. 489).

The principles of approaching music education as an intrinsic experience come with a sense of heritage preservation and are what Martin Skilbeck defines as 'classical humanism' (Skilbeck, 1976 in Plummeridge, 2001, p. 25). A classical humanist will divide subjects into levels of hierarchy and in which music will rank low in a system that is dominated by core subjects such as maths and science (Plummeridge, 2001). Ultimately, this way of thinking leads to the idea that true success in music can be achieved by the talented few. Examples of this ideology can be found in schools where there are ample extra-curricular musical activities, but absence of music as a class subject (ibid). We need to ask what evidence is there to suggest that a person will fail in society should they not become acquainted with hard musical knowledge?

MUSIC FOR COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

As I enter a school music department, I am faced with a brightly coloured poster which has headings reading 'Music is a Science', 'Music is a Language' and other captions of a similar nature. Many of us will be familiar with these statements, but do they hold any truth? Or do they ultimately devalue the integrity of music as a self-sufficient subject of its own?

In the case of the poster I stand before, using Koopmans's ideology, this is a resource of a non-musical nature since is justifies music through its abilities to enhance extrinsic abilities (Koopman, 1996). Plummeridge might even label this as a piece of propaganda (Plummeridge, 2001).

> There is frequently a tendency on the part of those who advocate (non-musical justifications) to assume that it is, *de facto*, of (musical justifications); when this is the case, genuine discussion of educational issues can all to easily be replaced by rhetoric and propaganda (Plummeridge, 2001, p. 22)

It is often expressed in the media that engagement in music encourages the growth of cognitive abilities and worthy dispositions and thus a justification such as this is often incredibly attractive to governments, schools, teachers and students. However, it is a justification with little evidence behind it and after all, many other subjects further intellectual development, not just listening to the music of Beethoven (Finney, 2001).

Furthermore, Plummeridge says:

> Such skills could just as likely transfer from studies in any other discipline. It is one thing to say that the study of music has transfer effects but quite another to claim that this makes music unique which in turn provides its justification as a curriculum subject (Plummeridge, 2001, p. 24).

While there is undoubtedly some evidence to suggest that musical studies can result in extra-musical benefits, it soon becomes obvious that there are limitations and risks in using such evidence to justify the inclusion of music in the curriculum. If we decide to only include music as part of children's education because it will improve their intellectual performance, then Ofsted, for example would have to take this into consideration during their evaluation. As a result, music programmes would only be considered successful if it could be proved that they enhanced the performance of students in other subjects. Consequently, poor performance in mathematics could be attributed to the quality of music lessons in the school. How would it be possible in the school context to show such a connection? Nevertheless, if we do then accept that music enhances one's skills in maths, then why not have more of maths on the timetable? Or, does music provide more?

MUSIC AS AN OUTLET FOR AESTHETIC APPRECIATION AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

> Music is a moral law. It gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, and life to everything… Without music, life would be an error. (Plato)

This is perhaps the most ambitious justification for curricular music because it proposes the development of the aesthetic capacities of the individual human being rather than the pupil and their subject knowledge or skills. It is also the justification that I align with most since it overcomes the limitations of educating children simply for the purpose of increasing their musical knowledge or

cognitive abilities but still allows the teacher to concentrate on musical aims and 'to be free from the distraction of those non-musical ones that education policy makers continually call for' (Finney, 2001).

The idea of the aesthetic encounter formed the motive for writers with contrasting views; For example, *The Intelligence of Feeling* (1974) by Robert Witkin created tensions in music teaching because he claimed that arts teaching should be about self-discovery and its ability to heighten and strengthen a student's sensitivity, thus improving their lives (Witkin, 1974). Yorke Trotter had strong beliefs that there should be a balance between emotional and technical responses to music, with the 'feeling side' of the child given priority over the 'intellectual side' (Trotter, 1914, p. 134). To access the 'feeling side' and enter the realm of aesthetic appreciation in music, one must be able to experience cognition at the same time (Koopman, 1996). Reid calls this 'cognitive feeling' (Reid, 1980).

> We may know the notes, understand intellectually the structure of, say, a piece of music as performer or listener; but unless we discriminatingly feel the flow and progress of it directly and intuitively, we are still mainly knowing about it in a detached way (Reid, 1980, p. 12 in Koopman, 1996, p. 486).

Trotter and Reid place the music student above the subject; their views reject what we know about music for the acquisition of musical knowledge and value it at more of a spiritual level, demanding much higher levels of commitment from the teacher (Plummeridge, 2001). This is because the justification of music as an aesthetic experience requires it to be in the present, and not second hand. There must be a complete presence of attention without multi-tasking. For this to happen, the teacher must relinquish their role as the tutor and transform into a facilitator for experience.

> It is clear that, whatever one's attitude towards musical aesthetics, the teacher can play a vital role in strengthening important links in the chain of musical communication by developing his pupils' listening skills and receptive powers, providing them with creative and executive experiences and influencing their musical attitudes and tastes (Brocklehurst, 1967)

There are undoubtedly cons to this argument which brings with it exotic terms such as 'aesthetics' and 'self-discovery'. Koopman argues that music education cannot afford to base its existence on the idea of the aesthetic experience alone since there are so many other subjects that one can gain this experience from (Koopman, 1996). Furthermore, can we really expect a child to experience a revelatory emotional discovery within what is essentially a fabricated environment placed on timetable? Brocklehurst also argues that it is very difficult to measure a child's emotional response to music since it is mostly an unconscious process that often adults, let alone children, find difficult to describe using words without referring to stereotyped responses (Brocklehurst, 1967).

Nevertheless, Swanwick has argued a strong case that we can all relate to music and the music of others beyond our sometimes limited cultural experiences because we are all acquainted with common patterns of meaning behind sounds, images, symbols and gestures (Swanwick, 1999). In turn there is

so much to be gained from delivering music with this justification in mind, particularly when one considers that it does not encourage division between those that are talented and 'not-talented' in music.

CONCLUSION

Three rationales have been explored which link to different aspects of music education and to a certain extent are compatible with the requirements for listening, performing and composing which form the national curriculum. If our aim is to pass on sound musical knowledge to children through listening to and appraising music, then it is necessary to have an established repertoire of widely varying musics. Music for cognitive development suggests the requirement of active engagement with sight reading and aural skills practise, but the truth in this needs more research in order to stand its ground. On the other hand, music for aesthetic appreciation and emotional development places greater emphasis on composition and improvisation and stands more chance of appealing to the student, but not necessarily the Department for Education. As Koopman says: 'In order to justify a place for music in the curriculum it is not sufficient to demonstrate that musical activities have positive effects. We should also be able to demonstrate that teaching music is an efficient way of bringing about these effects.' (Koopman, 1996, p. 484).

All of these ideas clearly reveal the wide diversity of reactions we have to music and confirm that music is a subjective phenomenon (Brocklehurst, 1971). However, because music is a holistic experience, it is practically impossible to divide the rationale in the way I have as a means to use in real life. The search for an over-arching goal for music education will inevitably fail if it assumes that the aims and outcomes will be the same for all children. There are ultimately too many independent variables. Secondary school music lessons can only be a small part of a child's music identity and so music lessons should be prudent in their intentions but determined in their provision (Reid, 1980).

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