

Pipelines and conduits – plumbing in the profession of music teaching
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We often talk of a pipeline in music education. This normally involves a trajectory running from instrumental and classroom music lessons as a child, through more advanced instrumental, vocal, and academic study, then on to higher grades, GCSE, A-level, Vocational Qualifications, degrees at conservatoires and universities, and leading to careers in various aspects of music and music education. But what is this pipeline, and how does it function as a conduit from a young child taking their first faltering steps, perhaps in whole class ensemble tuition (WCET) to them graduating from an institution of higher education? Whilst the metaphor of a pipeline is quite helpful in some regards, in others it is not. It might be seen to suggest a kind of linearity of experience, an inevitability of choice, with the idea that young musicians are operating in quite narrow parameters. In reality, of course, young musicians have diverse musical interests and experiences which might lead them to conservatoires, or onto something else altogether, playing in a ska band, being a singer-songwriter, creating techno tracks, or a combination of all of the above! Let us try and do some plumbing investigation and see what this system looks like in its component parts.

The authors of this article all work in higher education, doing, amongst other things research and teaching. Sometimes these roles can reveal insights into the pipeline, and allow us to comment on what we see as issues with the system, which means that, to us, at least, the conduit does not have a clear run from source to end. For example, in researching those aspects of music teaching and learning that come before higher music education, we find that, for a start, we have seen an overall decline in the number of young people taking music qualifications. In a past issue of Music Teacher magazine, we wrote about the precipitous decline in A-level music nationally (Whittaker and Fautley, 2021). However, it must be noted that there are significant variations in the rates of this decline in different parts of the country. Although there was a small numerical uptick in entries last year, this is accounted for by a larger year 13 cohort than in previous years. However, we have also been looking at vocational qualifications (VQs) in various aspects of music too. Getting to what's in the U-bend in this VQ pipeline is not as straightforward as with A-levels, but we have done a bit of plumbing troubleshooting. Taken together, we're in the region of 35-40% down in terms of the number of people taking a level 3 (that's A-level, or 6th form or FE equivalent) music qualification of any sort than we were 10 years ago. The narrative we sometimes hear, that the decline in A-level uptake is the natural consequence of directly switching across to vocational qualifications, seems to indicate that there is not so much a pipeline blockage, but that the water has gone off somewhere else entirely by this stage. This narrative can account for some of the decreases on one side, but not entirely; neither does it speak fully to the range of choice that students have, or progression routes not connected to school-based qualifications, but it does give a sense of the pipeline problem.

Additionally, what we also see is that these possible blockages are not experienced equally everywhere. If you go to an independent school, you're much more likely to have A-level music on offer, supported by a suite of extra-curricular musical activities and, in all probability, individual instrumental lessons. If you attend a state school, you may have access to all of the above, but probably not to the same extent. You

may access small group instrumental lessons via a music education hub, and there may be some ensembles that take place in the local area. What is similar to the independent school situation, however, is that these are likely to be paid-for additions. If a state school does offer a music qualification, there's a good chance that there is only one. It might be the right one for you, but it might not be; if that's the case, you'll have to go somewhere else. Except, of course, that the nearest somewhere else might be 25 miles down the road. From where we are based, if you live in the West Midlands, you're less likely to study for a music qualification than if you live in the South East, especially if you attend a state school. The reasons for that are complicated and interrelated but we can probably all make a bit of a pipefitter's guess at why that might be.

All of this points to a looming pipeline problem, especially in terms of making our student bodies more diverse, and our curricula more inclusive. If many young musicians are falling out of the system at earlier stages, or choosing not to pursue music, then what is a conservatoire to do to broaden its recruitment. Throw up its metaphorical hands in despair? Simply say 'it's the pipeline'? Or put in active interventions for those students who need extra support? Well, the latter is a means to do this positively.

However, we know that oftentimes there is a disconnect between the experiences in these active interventions (such as immersive programmes and interactive workshops delivered by conservatoire outreach departments and other arts organisations) and the experiences that a student may encounter when they arrive at a conservatoire for study. We have to ask ourselves, to what extent are the wider conservatoire teaching staff aware of the huge diversity of musical experiences of aspiring young musicians of today? What sort of pipeline did tutors themselves experience? What can be taken for granted, and what can't? Are tutors' past learning experiences similar to the students they teach, or are they very different?

These are important questions because the leap into higher education can be challenging enough as it is, even more so if students who have different experiences from their teachers, find the notion of individual principal study unusual and/or challenging. There is a danger that such students can be 'othered', in other words 'they are not like us'! This picture is made even more complicated by notions of what a conservatoire is, and what it should be.

According to the National Plan for Music Education in England in its latest iteration from last year (DfE 2022), there is an urgent need for teachers and practitioners to build their skills and connect with each other and the wider music education ecology. Arguably, conservatoires have an important role to play here in ensuring that their graduates, many of whom belong to the music education workforce, are best equipped to support musical learning in children and young people. However, in the UK, performance training can appear to be valued over and above all other aspects of conservatoire curricula, and students who have significant strengths in other areas can be overlooked, even dismissed. According to the Association of European Conservatoires (AEC, 2010), instrumental teaching is often seen as a career for those who have failed as a performer. Anecdotally, we still hear that students at conservatoires all over the country sometimes believe that if they become a teacher they can consider themselves as being a 'failed musician', whereas 'to be a

performer you have to be the best', implying that one does not need to 'be the best' to pursue a teaching career. To underline this, a recent graduate said: 'I remember talking to my peers about maybe going into something other than performance, but it was always met with "well then, you're not taking it seriously"'.

This need not be the case, though, and to address this the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire now offers pedagogy modules right from the get-go in Year 1, enabling students to develop their teaching skills throughout the entire four-year BMus programme if they wish. In tracking students' development over time, we have found that many students seem to gradually move away from self-interest and perfectionism in relation to their own artistic development, towards caring about the impact their practice as musicians could have on others, and especially the confidence and progress they have the potential to nurture in young people. Halfway through 2019, 59% of Y1 students claimed that a 'community engagement' module had led them to become a more open-minded musician, and of those who had never previously considered that teaching could form part of their future career, 87% began to contemplate it. Furthermore, after completing a range of teaching placements during their course, a final year student revealed a completely changed career outlook, having realised that becoming a successful professional musician is not only about 'the things you can gain' as a performer, but much more importantly, 'the things you can give.'

In order to address some of these issues, and provide high-quality music educators – "high quality" being a phrase found many times in the new NPME – maybe greater valuing and expansion of instrumental teacher education in conservatoires might help to ensure that their graduates become part of a pipeline of music educators who are well prepared to engage and support learners from wide-ranging backgrounds, sustaining and diversifying future recruitment streams and above all, feeding into the wider music education ecology.

The pipeline matters, it has two ends!

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