

Assessment in instrumental music lessons

Prof. Martin Fautley (Birmingham City University) and Drs Luan Shaw and Adam Whittaker (Royal Birmingham Conservatoire) – all part of the Birmingham Music Education Research Group – share their thoughts on assessment in instrumental lessons and on the multiple understandings of assessment in different contexts

The place and role of assessment in instrumental music lessons can be problematic, and this is particularly so for lessons that take place in schools. As set out in *A Common Approach* (2002, rev. 2022):

‘Musical judgements of a qualitative nature cannot always be captured neatly in marks and grades, and caution should be exercised. Assessing performances by a particular set of criteria may not necessarily convey the whole picture. Sometimes performances go beyond criteria and are more than the sum of the individual parts.’ (source: Music Mark)

So, what is the purpose of the assessment then? This might seem an obvious question, with an equally obvious answer, but scratch the surface and you’ll find various issues. In classroom music lessons, there has long been a discussion concerning the different roles of assessment in attainment, progression, and prediction of future grades. School teachers have addressed these matters in various ways. But when visiting instrumental teachers are required to follow the same structures and systems as the classroom teachers, there can be misunderstandings. This article considers the systemic pressures of assessment in the Instrumental Music Lesson (IML), unpicking what is going on and what the thinking is behind this important aspect of teaching and learning.

Assessment tensions

With the IML, a complexity may arise from being a servant to two masters: there’s the individual learning and progression, then the musical preferences of the young learner. In addition, there is often an imperative for learners to undertake some form of graded music examination (GME), such as those of Trinity College London or ABRSM. Herein lies the start of some of the assessment tensions, with the wants and needs of the individual learner brushing up against systemic purposes. The learning delineated by GMEs has been structured externally from the school, music service or music education hub, and the instrumental teacher delivering the lessons. There can be pressures on the instrumental music teacher from various viewpoints to enter children and young people for these exams, which are demonstrable markers of progress. This pressure can also come from schools, especially where the results of these exams count towards school attainment targets. But doing this can result in a high-stakes system where the role of the instrumental music teacher is one of making predictions of future attainment.

Formative assessment and language

The way the assessment role of the instrumental music teacher normally plays out in the day-to-day IML is via formative assessment. Swanwick (1988) observed that 'to teach is to assess', and in the IML this is a constant feature. There will be a dialogue between teacher and learner, with the teacher commenting on the learner's playing, the technical challenges met, and demonstrating ways in which improvements can be made to ensure a secure instrumental technique. This well-established use of formative assessment is something that good IML teachers excel at; indeed, it has been a standard part of the IML since time immemorial. When we talk to our students at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire about assessment in instrumental music learning, we encourage them to think broadly about what constitutes progress and how assessment might be used to facilitate and understand that. After all, assessment of instrumental music learners takes place from the very first lesson.

In the context of a school, however, it may be the case that this use of true formative assessment – *assessment for learning* (AfL) – is subsumed within school requirements, frameworks and language. While many music services and hubs provide training for their staff, the language of assessment used by schools in this training is sometimes omitted (inadvertently). The IML teacher may not realise that what they are doing is in fact formative assessment, and when quizzed by schools – or worse, by Ofsted – that they are not using the terminology that is the bread-and-butter of daily school life. This issue is compounded when the IML teacher is asked by a school to provide details of their assessments for reporting purposes, sometimes requiring translation of valid and robust musical approaches into one-size-fits-all frameworks running across all subject areas.

Four modalities

So, what sorts of assessment are taking place in IMLs? At its simplest, there are four main assessment 'modalities' at play here. The first, and most obvious reason for assessment in the IML, is to provide the sort of formative assessment judgements which are the backbone of AfL and take place in every lesson. One of the issues with these is that they can be 'invisible' to the outside observer, and writing down everything said in a lesson is both unfeasible and unhelpful.

To this end, the second modality comes into play, namely *target-setting*. This can be done on a number of levels, in the short term ('by next lesson can you...'), medium term ('by Christmas I want you to be able to...') or long term ('we need to work on your...'). In many cases the target-setting journey is delineated by the choice of teaching materials, which will be designed to take the learner on a journey encompassing increasing complexity in various aspects of performance.

The third main modality is that of *tracking attainment*. 'Attainment' in an educational sense has a very specific meaning: it refers to what a learner can actually *do*. This

can be measured by the GME or, more informally, by learning programme mastery ('mastery' being another key term currently used in schools), such as being able to perform a specific piece regularly, not just as a chance occurrence.

The fourth modality is that of *summative assessment*. In the case of the IML, this need not be the GME or some form of end-of-term test or task; instead, a public performance, whether in class, assembly or a school concert, can be a summative assessment. Indeed, for some learners this can be as nerve-wracking as a maths test!

These four descriptions of assessment will come as no surprise to any instrumental or classroom music teachers reading this; but it is important, in these days of accountability, that all those involved in music education make themselves familiar with the terms and language used in different contexts. When the IML teacher visits a school, they will find that the language of assessment is likely to have been honed according to different contexts, with STEM subjects playing a major role in this. However, music has a long and honourable history of teaching, learning and assessment, and can claim to be one of the most studied areas of the curriculum over many years – centuries even – in this regard. And yet, so often, the rigorous ongoing assessment processes that characterise effective instrumental learning are not widely understood outside of the sector.

Different milestones

It is problematic to think about assessment in instrumental music learning without considering its impact on the motivation of learners. We know that individuals feel motivated when they feel connected and confident, and have the autonomy to make their own decisions. Therefore, one way of motivating instrumental learners is to support them in choosing their own repertoire and setting their own performance goals. These goals need not necessarily revolve around GMEs, especially if focusing on passing a certain grade by a specific point in the academic year puts pressure on the learner and could potentially curtail their love of music.

For example, learning to play by ear the opening bars of a favourite band's latest song could be a meaningful milestone for a learner, and serve a valuable purpose in an IML. The learner will have received ongoing formative feedback from their instrumental teacher along the way, during which time the teacher can be formatively assessing developing aural skills, posture, technique, rhythmic understanding, expressive awareness, and a whole host of other supposedly 'non-musical' – yet highly transferable – skills, not least self-discipline and problem-solving.

For some learners, progress might involve playing a piece fluently from start to finish with conviction and character, possibly for an audience. For others, progress may mean being able to produce their first sounds or having the confidence to play a few bars of a new piece without faltering, thus demonstrating a growing ability to practise

independently. After all, learners need to be guided to build skills in self-evaluation (also known as 'self-assessment' in schools), so that their individual practice between lessons has meaning and purpose. Furthermore, where pupils can share evidence of their progress in group scenarios where peer feedback is encouraged, assessment operates on many levels, often revealing musical skills, knowledge and understanding that may not have come to light previously. Capturing this complexity is certainly challenging, but that doesn't mean that it isn't happening.

Effective and robust assessment is a key component of any high quality IML. As teachers, both in classrooms and IMLs, we need to be confident and advocate for the intrinsic place of assessment in instrumental music learning. Moving to broader and understandings of assessment itself, how it functions in teaching and learning in the IML, and, importantly, the language of assessment in these contexts can only be beneficial for all involved.

Links and references

- **musicmark.org.uk/a-common-approach/application/assessment-recording-and-reporting**
- Swanwick, K. (1988) *Music, Mind and Education*. Routledge.

Suggested Other reading:

- Fautley, M. (2010) *Assessment in Music Education*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Mills, J. (2007) *Instrumental teaching*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Brophy, T. S. (2000) *Assessing the developing child musician: a guide for general music teachers*, Chicago, GIA Publications.

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