What are the purposes of classroom Music Education?
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The role of the classroom music teacher is a highly complex one, involving many tasks, all of which have to be dealt with simultaneously. Together with the complicated plate-spinning of practical music-making, there is planning for and delivering teaching, learning, and assessment.

However, there is another area which does not always get the attention it deserves, namely the philosophy of music education. Raising this as an issue is not some obscure diatribe, or academic navel-gazing, but a very real concern with an issue that faces the classroom music teacher every time they think about schemes of work, particularly at key stages 2 and 3. This can be condensed into the question "what is classroom music education for?".

As Thomas Regelski (2002 p.103) eloquently put it: "Many music teachers have been led to believe philosophy is irrelevant to praxis… Nothing could be further from the truth because, in fact, no teacher can avoid having (his or her) philosophy." In this article I want to try and unpick some of these issues and draw attention as to why this is a problematic area.

What's in school music lessons?

There is a genuine concern that as music educators we have never quite got to grips with this matter, for, as Simon Toyne (2021 p.105) bluntly puts it, "provision for music is inadequate and the understanding of what constitutes it is muddled. And a lack of consensus on its purpose has created a disconcerting arbitrariness in terms of what music education pupils receive in school".

Let me illustrate why I think this is the case with some examples. In the popular press, and in social media, there can often be a found a sentiment expressed that the purpose of school music education is to 'make' children like classical music. This standpoint assumes that music lessons should primarily entail what we used to call 'music appreciation'. A related stance is that music lessons exist to teach children to read staff notation, so that they can then sing or play an instrument later in life. Yet another, and rather different view, is that the purpose of KS3 music is to prepare learners to take GCSE or other qualification at age 16+.

Then there are the various methods, all of which have protagonists utterly convinced theirs is the best (and sometimes only!) way in which classroom music should be taught. All of this complex mix is compounded by legislation, including the National Curriculum, the Model Music Curriculum, Ofsted requirements, and many other competing forces.

Alongside, but separate in many ways to these classroom variations, there exists the view that music education is – or at least should be – mainly concerned with those

youngsters in receipt of instrumental or vocal music lessons, and that this is where *all* efforts should be concentrated. What this complex picture results in, is that as a profession in England at least, not only are we are not clear on what the purposes of music education are, we can go further than that, and say that as a society we are muddled as to what music education is in the first place!

Choices, choices…

For many classroom music teachers, the essence of what is done on a day-to-day basis in the classroom is practical music-making: singing, playing, composing and so on. However, even this is fraught with philosophical problems. The issue of genre creeps in at every possible moment of music-making, as it is very difficult to produce genre-free music. There is far more music, and far more musical genres, that can be dealt with in a KS2 or KS3 course. So, what should be chosen? If the same musical point can be made using a movement from a Haydn string quartet, a song by Taylor Swift, or "roll out the barrel", which one will teachers choose? This is a philosophical matter. It's worth observing, too, that some headteachers may have a different view from the music teacher!

Music lessons – complex ecosystem

One of the purposes mentioned earlier was that of preparation for examination courses at 14+. We know that in England the statistics show that only around 7% of pupils take music at this level. Does this mean that KS3 music should *only* be geared towards them? What about the 93% who don't take it? Does the latter mean that we – and they – have been wasting time? What would happen if we thought of the end of KS3 as being the end of music lessons in schools (which, sadly, appears to be increasingly the case for many)? How would this impact on the way music classes were to be structured if we thought these ended at age 14?

Allied to this is the issue of who is making a strong case for classroom music, and who is listening to them? We could, as a profession, be thinking about what all these various purposes are, and how we can manage a system in which numerous 'flavours' of music education can peacefully co-exist. To do this we need to think more carefully about what a coherent philosophy of classroom music might entail, and how, within what will doubtless continue to be a complex ecosystem, the various types of classroom music and non-classroom music can flourish. Without such a philosophy there is a danger that we are doomed to perpetuate the messiness that Simon Toyne pointed out in the quotation above. We need to do this with some degree of urgency too, as otherwise if we are too busy being confused, then external views will cut through any nuance with diktats and legislation, and we probably won't like that!

This complexity of views and approaches can be seen to be played out in each issue of *Music Teacher* magazine, where there is an eclectic mix of articles encompassing all the various shades of what will be of interest to the readership. All those of us involved in music education – and this is an area which breeds passionate responses – need to think about not only what we would want, but what would be best for our children and

young people as we move in to the second quarter of the century. We owe it to the youngsters to try and sort this out!

REFERENCES

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