**Music Education in England as a Political Act: Reflections on a Craft under pressure**

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*Introduction*

In this chapter ways in which music education, curriculum, and assessment, focussing on the specific context of the lower secondary school, are sites of contestation and hegemonic intervention. The ways in which this situation has come into being are explained, and related historical aspects discussed. This chapter takes as its starting point the observation made by Magne Espeland that:

Knowledge is the basis for power and power produces knowledge. Curricular reforms are… examples of a process where there is a close connection between the production of knowledge and power. (Espeland, 1999 p.177)

Curriculum and assessment in music education are both issues that dominate discourse in a number of jurisdictions across the globe. Whilst music education may seem an unlikely site for political activity, and of the politics of knowledge, nonetheless it is the case that this is so. Sometimes discourse in this arena takes the form of tacit, and unarticulated valorisation, and the very music educators directly involved in it can be unaware that this is occurring. This chapter focuses on teaching, learning and assessment in the generalist music classroom, and considers how political views on these matters affect the day-to-day working of the music teacher. It takes the perspective from England as the main focus, as it is there that these matters have played out significantly in terms of how teachers work, and how they are required to act. The overarching theme of this book is *the craft of music education*, and the idea of ‘craft’ is an important one to bear in mind when thinking about this music education context in England. The notion of *craft* in the English situation has become complex, and possibly obfuscated, by a steady stream of political intervention, and of interference in ways of working.

*Music education and curriculum in England*

The statutory nature of music education has become increasingly fractured over the years. England got its first National Curriculum in 1992 (Department for Education and Science, 1992), but this was the result of much political and sociological fighting in terms of both approach and content. In the run-up to its publication a high-profile argument took place, often played out in the columns of national newspapers. This, for example, from *The Times* in 1991, as the draft National Curriculum was being considered:

Music education in the state sector has been in a mess for 20 years. These new recommendations only codify the confusion. Old certainties of the post-1944 era classroom singing, a traditional grounding in classical music history and the rules of harmony and counterpoint were swept away in the late 1960s. Some reform was necessary; only a tiny minority of children was benefiting fully from this rigorous academic framework. But what has replaced the old buttresses?

The new recommendations enshrine a tired form of anything-goes egalitarianism, of letting children “express their feelings” and “discover things for themselves”. Musical literacy is no longer seen as the key to true creativity or musical appreciation; rather, it is presented as a marginal option. Yet when it comes to active participation in musical activity, no amount of access to expensive synthesisers, or “project work'’ on the life and times of Michael Jackson, can prepare a child half as well as the certain knowledge that All Cows Eat Grass. It is as basic to musical growth as teaching the meaning of tens and units is to numeracy. (Morrison, 1991)

The reference to “All Cows Eat Grass” being a coded description of the ways in which many pupils in England were (and still are) taught the names of notes in the bass clef, A-C-E-G being the mnemonic for the notes in the spaces of the stave which arise from this. The fact that Morrison does not feel that he needs to explain what this means is a link forward to a work that has come to dominate the thinking of English Politicians in early years of the 21st century, namely E.D. Hirsch’s ‘Cultural literacy: What every literate American needs to know’ (Hirsch, 1987). In this book, Hirsch argues that in order to fully understand what is being written or discussed, children and young people need a thorough grounding in cultural matters:

“Cultural literacy,” the grasp of background information that most writers and speakers assume their readers and listeners already have, is the key to effective education, Hirsch says. That background information, even when much of it is rather vague, is what enables us to grasp the point of a magazine article or make sense of a television news broadcast because it allows us to make connections between new information and what we already know, without stopping to check an encyclopedia or dictionary or almanac every few words. (Lauermann 1987)

What is particularly relevant in the context of this current book is that Magne Espeland had encountered the work of Hirsch in the Norwegian context in 1994. He was later to describe his feelings after hearing Hirsch speak at a conference:

At that time very few Norwegians had heard about Hirsch's work. At the conference, he presented his ideas about cultural literacy and the necessity of strengthening the body of shared general knowledge in education. For the few of us who knew a little about Hirsch's ideas, the link to the minister's ideas about a core curriculum became obvious. The teachers and the academics present seemed puzzled when Hirsch severely criticized the progressive movement in education, calling it "romantic educational formalism."

My notes from that day are not very optimistic. I was worried about what the combination of core curriculum and severe criticism of the progressive movement in education could lead to in terms of guidelines for the coming curriculum process, including the creation of subject syllabuses. Was it going to be a turning point? Would it lead to a weakening of arts education and a turn "back to the basics"? (Espeland, 1997)

Maybe Magne Espeland was right to feel uneasy, certainly with regard to music education in England there do seem to be echoes of his concerns. The influence of Hirsch will be picked up later in this chapter, but for the moment, to return to the Morrison piece quoted above, the author did not feel he needed to explain “All Cows Eat Grass” to his literate, culturally endowed *The Times* of London readership. But it is a number of the other background constructs to this Morrison comment piece that warrant unpicking somewhat, as they have remained more or less constant since that time. These can be categorised in two main areas:

1. Music literacy means being able to read western classical staff notation. (This carries the implication that any music which does not utilise this is probably inferior.)
2. Allowing children and young people to “express their feelings” and “discover things for themselves” is a bad thing.

The view of item 1, that of music which does not employ western classical staff notation, was amplified a little later by another article, this time in *The Sunday Times*, when it was observed that:

Classical music is in danger of disappearing from school timetables, with pupils learning instead about the greatest hits from the world of rock, rap and reggae. Government-appointed education experts have turned their backs on tradition and excluded the names of Beethoven, Bach and other great composers from the national curriculum.

Teachers will be free to choose Madonna and MC Hammer over Mahler and Haydn, in spite of government promises that new guidelines on what should be taught would strengthen the already perilous position of the classics. (Hymas, 1991)

Whilst Madonna and MC Hammer may no longer be the contemporary icons which appeal to young people today, nonetheless the sentiment of valorisation has continued.

The rationale behind the ire aimed at the authors of the National Curriculum are to do with a number of factors. These include the ways in which various types of music are considered, and what the perceived statuses of these different types of music are. The attitudes displayed in the *Times* articles from the last decade of the previous century are often not too far in the background today, as politicians and commentators become involved in the teaching and learning of music in schools.

*The privileging of knowledge*

The attitudes displayed in the articles considered so far in this chapter reveal a hankering after what were felt to be, as Morrison put it, “old certainties of the post-1944 era” which were now felt to be in danger of being dissolved. But in cultural terms this view is likely to have always been the case, with what many have thought of as a previous ‘golden age’ being just out of sight around the last corner of looking back into the past. After all, back in 1885, the librettist W S Gilbert placed similar sentiments into the mouth of Ko-Ko, in the Gilbert and Sullivan Operetta “The Mikado”:

Then the idiot who praises, with enthusiastic tone,

Every century but this, and every country but his own…

But this ‘golden age’ notion is very appealing to politicians, who can show how their recent predecessors from different political parties presided over a lowering of standards, and that, as the song has it, ‘things aren’t what they used to be’. This is an appealing tactic for politicians, as it taps into a zeitgeist of dissatisfaction.

In England and Norway the work of the American, E D Hirsch, has already been noted as being influential. Indeed, a long-serving education minister in the 2017 Conservative government, and the preceding Conservative and coalition governments, Nick Gibb has observed that:

No single writer has influenced my thinking on education more than E. D. Hirsch (Gibb, 2015).

What Hirsch work involved, coming as he did, from an American context, was to produce a list of things that, as the title of his book states, “What every literate American needs to know” (Hirsch, 1987). This publication established Hirsch’s position, and he then went on to help found the ‘Core Knowledge Foundation’ which produced school curricula that were based on his ideas. Similar activities took place in England.

In music education we are in a highly problematic situation with regard to notions of cultural literacy, and, to borrow Hirsch’s phrase, ‘what every educated child needs to know’ at the end of their school music course. There are many reasons for this, and sometimes these are in conflict with each other. An obvious example of this is that the knowledge required for classroom music is very likely to be of a different type and order to the knowledge required for instrumental music learning. Indeed, so complex can these areas be that it is possible to think of them as entailing different content domains. A highly simplistic division of music teaching and learning encounters would entail a range of these aspects:

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| --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | Classroom music | Where whole classes in schools have a generalist music education, including singing, playing, composing, listening, history, theory |
| 2 | Formal instrumental teaching  | Where an individual child learns how to play a musical instrument. Can take place in or out of school |
| 3 | Group instrumental teaching | As above, but in a group  |
| 4 | Whole Class Ensemble Teaching | WCET in England, combines elements of 3 and 1 above, whole classes learn to play an instrument together[[1]](#footnote-1) |
| 5 | Theory of music | Separate classes focussing solely on this aspect |
| 6 | In school Informal learning  | Where teaching and learning focus on building up competencies in areas the children and young people choose |
| 7 | Out of school informal learning | As 6, but undertaken entirely out of school, e.g. learning songs together in garage bands |
| 8 | Formal ensemble playing | Where children and young people in receipt of lessons in 2 and/or 3 above come together to perform, directed by an expert |
| 9 | Informal ensemble playing  | As above, but potentially more ad hoc, e.g. in churches, folk groups, jam sessions |
| 10 | Specialist music learning | Takes place out of normal school, although in some jurisdictions replaces it by focusing on a selected elite |

There are undoubtedly more possibilities than this list entails, but even with these ten variations, it should be clear that the knowledge types involved in each of these can offer distinctly different ways of musical thinking, learning, and doing. The knowledge required for formal instrumental teaching from the learner may well involve a range of different aspects from that required by a group of young people getting together in one of their dad’s garage to work out how to play some favourite songs on instruments they have only just acquired.

The reason that these matters become contested issues is that some in society want to place different cultural values on these activities. This means that what is being done is that a hierarchic taxonomy or lexicon of knowledge types is either overtly produced, as in the case of Hirsh’s book, or tacitly assumed, as in the case of the newspaper articles cited above. For those who do not have to work with or alongside children and young people this need not be a problem, they can issue their diktats from afar; but for teachers whom needs must work with the same young people on a daily basis, this creates a problematic relationship from the outset. We know that children and young people are constantly making value judgements about what they like, as Sefton-Green observed back in 2000:

I don’t think in the end it’s a question of whether you teach it or not [aesthetic judgement], it’s the easiest thing in the world to get kids to make aesthetic judgements. They do it all the time. The hardest thing in the world is to stop them. Oasis are better than Blur. Eastenders is better than Brookside. The question is how well they articulate it ... and distinguish between the things which are personal and the things which are not necessarily universal or transcendental but are shared. (Sefton-Green, 2000 p.21)

Where this becomes problematic is when it becomes central to curriculum content discussions with these same children and young people. Another English politician, Michael Gove, at the time the Conservative minister for education made the observation that:

…I am unapologetic in arguing that all children have a right to the best. And there is such as thing as the best. Richard Wagner is an artist of sublime genius and his work is incomparably more rewarding - intellectually, sensually and emotionally - than, say, the Arctic Monkeys. (Gove, 2011)

This is a straightforward statement for a politician to make, and will ‘play well’ with the constituency of the newspaper article authors and associated readership cited above. But for a teacher working with children and young people who enjoy the music of the Arctic Monkeys, or whoever is trending at the time, there is a danger that this can become a slanging match of the ‘mine is better than yours’ variety. This then places the learners in the situation of being perceived as having inferior tastes, and that the teacher is there to help them rise above the poor choices they have made in terms of the music they like. At the very heart of this is the notion of what counts as ‘good’ music, and, related to this, who says so. It seems highly unlikely that class of young people are going to be terribly impressed by what a politician tells them to like, and so it is doubtful that having read Michael Gove’s thoughts on the matter, that they would immediately see the error of their ways, and start listening to *Tristan and Isolde*!

The mistake that commentators can make is summed up in the well known English phrase “I know what I like, and I like what I know”. This applies to the ways in which popular music could be approached in the school curriculum. Writing back in 1994, Shepherd and Vulliamy noted this:

The value of music could not be judged across cultures according to a scheme of absolutes taken to be objective, but only in relation to criteria developed as an integral aspect of the socially constructed reality of the group or society creating the music to be evaluated. Popular music as introduced into the secondary school curriculum could not therefore be judged according to an 'objective' set of criteria – which without exception turned out to be abstracted from the technical and aesthetic criteria of music of the established Western canon – but only according to criteria which were much more closely associated with those who created and appreciated the music. (Shepherd & Vulliamy, 1994 p.29)

This is an important observation, as the ‘technical and aesthetic criteria’ which Shepherd and Vulliamy are describing here is clearly related to the sorts of music which the commentators cited above are familiar with. Again, presenting children and young people with judgements of why their music falls down, Shepherd and Vulliamy’s phrase, ‘according to a scheme of absolutes taken to be objective’, (but which is in fact nothing of the sort!), makes this a particularly difficult way for education to proceed.

Shepherd and Vulliamy went to point out that music creates meanings which are relevant for the audiences they were intended for. This is bound up with what we think of today as musical identity, but nonetheless what they wrote all those years ago still resonates today:

… while music is powerfully affective in a direct and concrete yet symbolic manner, the route from music's sounds to 'music's meanings' is more slippery and elusive than hitherto supposed. The construction of affect and 'meaning' through music-the processes through which students in classrooms engage with the sounds of music – seem to be much more complex than debates of either a political or intellectual nature have hitherto supposed. (Shepherd & Vulliamy, 1994 p.38)

And it is this that matters to the listeners of such music, that the meanings it creates for them, in their lives, in their contexts, in their situations, are what matters to them. It is this aspect which Lucy Green was describing when she wrote about *delineated meaning* that music has for the listener,

Images, associations, memories, queries, problems and beliefs inspired in us by music are musical meanings that, rather than inhering in musical materials and pointing only to themselves, point outwards from music and towards its role as a social product, thus giving it meaning as such for us. Music communicates. It does so not only through its inherent interrelations as they pass in time, but it also communicates its social relations as they are through history. Music delineates a profile of its position in the musical world amongst these social relations, and thereby also delineates ideas of social relations and social meanings to us: I will call these *delineated musical meanings*. (Green, 1988 p.28)

Green distinguished such delineated meanings as being separated from what she saw as the *intrinsic meaning* contained within the music, both in and of itself. These delineated meanings matter for the individuals, and they matter especially for children and young people who are still maturing, and for whom identity construction, especially with how they are regarded by others, particularly in their peer groups, is a key and evolving part of their growing up.

All of these issues, as we have seen, will affect how teachers are able to engage with their learners. This will also be influenced by the fact that many teachers will themselves be sympathetic to the musical tastes of the children and young people in their charge. This may be especially observed to be the case in England, which has one of the youngest teaching workforces in Europe. This is different from the situation in many other countries, as the OECD noted:

The relatively young teaching force in the UK stands in stark contrast to the situation in many European countries where inflexible employment conditions coupled with declining youth populations have led to ageing teacher populations. (OECD, 2013 p.6-7)

However, alongside their comparative youthfulness, the music teachers in the UK are likely to have come through an education and training route which has continued to emphasise the western classical element of music, a point noted by Wright and Davies:

The vast majority of teachers at present working in school music are still products of a musical training firmly embedded within the western art-music tradition. In Bourdieu’s terms, as western art music tends to advantage children possessing middle-class habitus, schooling’s reproductive processes assure that many of these teachers are themselves from a middle-class background ... While this is not to say that all school knowledge is middle-class knowledge and that, for this reason, it is inevitably rejected by working-class pupils, it is being argued that there are habitus/class code issues about recognition and acceptance of curriculum content, particularly in the creative domain, extending from the acceptability of the canon in literature to the standing of musical genres. (Wright & Davies, 2010 p.46)

This matter of personal background will be more of an issue in some schools than others. The sorts of music listened to, and participated in, by pupils in schools in England should not be considered to be uniform. It will not only vary from place to place, but will also vary within schools, between school year groups, and within school classes. All of which makes presenting a viable unitary music curriculum a singular issue, which is probably best addressed by each teacher thinking about what is, and what could and should be taking place in their school, in their classes, with their learners. This point was recognised back in the nineteenth century, when the author of a celebrated piano teaching method, Mrs Curwen, produced a set of maxims for the teacher. One of these was “*Proceed from the known to the related unknown*” (Curwen, 1886). This is a way in which many teachers have worked with their charges in order to move the learners’ knowledge of music into new and hitherto undiscovered directions for them. Of course, this is not the only way to do this, but in many cases contextualisation matters. As a profession, we found out in the middle of the last century that music appreciation lessons as a way of getting children and young people to appreciate the canon might not always be a good thing. Music as a social improver has a long history, but with increased attention to youth voice, becomes harder to sustain over time.

*The place of assessment*

At its simplest, assessment can be considered in two modalities, assessment which arises from curriculum, and assessment which leads curriculum. These two modalities can be easily spotted in music education. Graded instrumental music examination, such as those in the UK offered by the ABRSM (gb.abrsm.org) and Trinity College London (www.trinitycollege.com) will often lead to a teaching programme constructed so as to enter the young musician for the examination, in other words assessment which leads to curriculum. In the UK classroom generalist music in the lower secondary school, normally for children aged from 11 to 14 years old, will often be constructed by the music teacher in a school according to National Curriculum strictures, but with individual elements and progression frameworks designed by that teacher. This will be an example of assessment which arises from curriculum, as in these instances it is the teacher who constructs and administers any such assessment. This aspect is returned to later in this chapter.

In the cases of curriculum which arises from the assessment, there is the possibility of what is referred to as *backwash* in the assessment literature, arising from the assessment back onto the teaching and learning programme. This is not a pejorative view of either assessment or curriculum construction, indeed, as Biggs, one of the first to describe this phenomenon, noted back in 1996:

Backwash is no bad thing, particularly if it can be harnessed from the centre outwards, so that performance indicators send out the kind of messages to teachers that teachers say they want to send out to their own students. (Biggs, 1996 p.14)

This is not only going to be the case in instrumental musical learning, but also for those aspects of musical teaching and learning where there will be some form of significant or high-stakes examination at the end of the programme of study, in the case of England, these will be GCSE exams at age 16, and A-level at age 18. What it does mean, however, is that in cases where curriculum arises from assessment, then the choice of materials that will be examined will have a significant impact upon the nature of what will be taught. Examination bodies will be writing a syllabus which sets out the content of the examination. The various sorts of examinations that we have in music education all have their own range of materials. Thus a graded music performance examination will specify the repertoire, the pieces of music that need to be played at each grade point for that examination board. GCSE and A-level music examination boards will decide on topics for content in historical studies, and which pieces of music will be required as set works for study and analysis. What this means is that the choices of these materials will have a significant impact on what is taught and learned in music lessons in those schools. Thus if an examination board chooses music from the Baroque era to be studies, with a corresponding set work, for example Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas*, then this is what will be studied. Timetabled opportunities being limited for teaching and learning in all schools subjects, it would take a brave music teacher to venture too far from this topicality and teach a unit on Reggae, for example, knowing full well it would not feature in the examination. Indeed, it could be argued that such behaviour would be reckless and inappropriate! The effects of this are that the contents of various examination syllabi operate a form of hegemony as well as backwash on the curriculum content of what is being taught and learned.

This in itself might not seem to be a substantive issue, but the backwash effects can be much greater than simply in the choice of materials for examination groups. In England about 7% of pupils take the GCSE music examination each year (Cambridge Assessment 2016) at age 16, after a programme of study that they have been studying since the age of 14. What this means is that some 93% of pupils are not taking up music as an optional subject at this stage, and cease their formal studies in music as a school subject at this juncture. The effects of backwash on the lower secondary school curriculum, however, mean that it many schools topics appear which are clearly there in preparation for the examination. In a 2016 study in London, and a 2018 study in Birmingham (Fautley, 2016; Fautley et al., 2018 ) it was found that a number of teachers are teaching topics in the lower secondary school which figure in examination syllabi. This may be no bad thing, after all we would want teaching and learning in the lower secondary school to lead seamlessly to exam preparation in the upper school. Where it becomes a problem is if such a programme is designed solely for the benefit of the 7% who will take the optional examination course, and ignores the wants and needs of the 93% who will not do so.

Although, as we have seen above, there is a National Curriculum in operation in England, it is actually very slight for music, with the outline of what children and young people aged between 11 and 14 should be taught coming in at a little over 200 words. What this means is that teachers in England can produce their own schemes of work, and so long as they involve composing, listening, and performing, they are likely to conform to the strictures of the National Curriculum. With this degree of freedom, it might be considered surprising, therefore, that as the London and Birmingham research cited above shows, there is not that much difference between many schools. What we see in the instances outlined above is a complex circularity wherein assessment and curriculum have a troubled relationship one with another. The notion of teachers deciding what it would be appropriate for the learners in their schools to be working on is replaced by one wherein teachers feel that they have to prepare the majority for a public examination which they will never take. This seems to be a sad situation, when there is so much in music that can be taught and learned, played and sung. This is also problematic when it comes to producing new musical and pedagogic ideas, which may fall foul of dominating hegemonic discourses, which openly favour historically conservative musical notions, particularly those that fall under the heading of western art music.

*Suggestions for the craft of music education*

In England, many music teachers are concerned with a range of worries, from *what* to teach, to *how* to teach it. Music education does not contain a neat set of pre-ordained content segments, it is a living and dynamic art form. With the ways in which neoliberalism spreads across countries and systems, it would be helpful for music teachers to be able to wrestle control of the curriculum back from politicians. The problem with this is that by the time policy reaches schools it seems distant. It is to be hoped that just as children and young people will always want to make music, there will always be teachers in post to guide and educate them, and that this can be done in a *musical*, not simply one that panders to the whims of whoever is in political power at the time. After all, music teachers will still be there long after those politicians have moved on to other positions - so there is hope!

*Conclusion*

Taken together, what these various elements show is that music curriculum, and its associated assessment in English secondary schools is a highly contested arena, and has been so for a number of years. The *craft* of music teachers involves a well-intentioned attempt to touch the lives of young people. Unfortunately what can all too often happen is that the desires of music teachers, and the wants and needs of children and young people, are thwarted by the outworkings of policy constructed by those whose own backgrounds often lie far from the very classrooms they are legislating for. The need for music education to move towards a truly inclusive curriculum and examination system which involves more than preparation for a bygone age seems to be an important role for the twenty-first century. Suggesting this is not an abdication of responsibility, but a recognition that things are moving on, and we want our children and young people to be prepared for the future. Of course this involves learning about the past, but it also involves learning *from* the past, and applying these lessons to music that has not yet been created.

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1. See Hallam (2016) for a discussion of the WCET programme in England [↑](#footnote-ref-1)