

Editorial Article: Music education in a time of pandemic

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Introduction

In the first half of 2020, our daily lives, and music education, have undergone seismic unforeseen and unexpected changes as the Covid-19 pandemic sweeps across continents and communities. At the start of April, media reported that “half of humanity [are] now on lockdown” (Euro News, 2020) as the pandemic spreads around the world, leaving in its wake millions of identified cases of the coronavirus and a rising death toll (Johns Hopkins University, 2020). As a consequence of the restrictions imposed on freedom of movement, the changes to everyday life and to education have also been significant. Unesco (2020) reported that “as of mid-April, 1.5 billion children and youth were affected by school closures in 195 countries”. In this article we offer a commentary on these issues, and, as this is the British Journal of Music Education, we are focussing on the perspective as seen from events in the UK.

Across the UK, educational establishments closed to the vast majority of pupils by the end of the school day on 20th March 2020, with the new lockdown measures imposed on 23rd March. With immediate effect, only the children of key workers and those considered vulnerable or with additional learning needs had the option to attend school and the role of schools changed overnight. The important and often hidden holistic contribution of schools and educators, at the centre of a community rather than as providers of education, became immediately more apparent as schools became hubs of distributing food, providing home education, and looking after vulnerable pupils. Smaller numbers of children and young people were now attending this new socially distanced schooling, which continued throughout the school Easter holidays. Over the course of just one weekend, schools needed to shift significantly from their established models of learning to a hybrid form, including online learning and sending home learning packs, thereby signalling a significant shift in content, modes, outcomes, and purposes of education offered. Parents and carers assumed a new role in their children’s education through this new home learning arrangement, often doing so alongside trying to work from home themselves. It is impossible to gauge the impact of music in the home at this time, but given the previously researched and reported notion of importance of music in our everyday lives (DeNora, 2011; Greasley and Lamont, 2011; Youth Music and Ipsos Mori, 2019) we can assume that individual and inter-generational, informal and non-formal engagement with, and exposure to, music in a myriad of ways may be influential, even where ‘set’ musical learning may seemingly not have been much engaged with.

As we write this piece for this edition of the British Journal of Music Education, we focus on raising some of the challenges, which we have no doubt will be examined through future research over the coming months and years. The ramifications of this pandemic will undoubtedly be felt for a while to come, and the potential to change the future of music education in both the immediate and longer term has already been shown. Whilst much of the focus of this present piece of writing is on the impacts on curriculum and assessment, it is important nevertheless to mention some of the other significant changes and challenges. Without the capacity to be physically together, many regular aspects of ‘music in everyday life’ across the lifespan have either stopped altogether, or been significantly adapted. The

impact on mental health across the population as a result of living through this period of time is one of the unknown consequences of Covid-19; however, the role that music plays in people's lives, including, for example, their emotional wellbeing and their ability to flourish and survive, is well documented (APPG, 2017).

Modes of learning

An important part of music education in the UK is the contribution of music education hubs, often led by music services, alongside other private providers of individual, small group and whole class music lessons and ensembles run both in and alongside school provision. For example, WCET, the whole class ensemble tuition music learning programme, funded via a government grant distributed via Arts Council England, seeks to ensure that "... every child aged 5-18 has the opportunity to learn a musical instrument (other than voice) through whole-class ensemble teaching programmes for ideally a year (but for a minimum of a term) of weekly tuition on the same instrument" (DfE & DCMS, 2011 p.26). There is much already written about this in a recent special edition of the British Journal of Music Education (Issue 36, 3, 2019). Instrumental and vocal musical learning across the UK relies on a mixed model of funding, including, for example, government grants, charities, schools funding it directly, contributions from councils and parental funding. Inevitably, with all face-to-face teaching suspended, many models of learning have either had to be stopped, or significantly adapted to meet the demands of lockdown learning. This has implications on many fronts, including the impact on teachers' income, with many teachers being 'furloughed', and with some able to claim modest government payments as self-employed music teachers. Perhaps inevitably, though, not all teachers are eligible for the payments, and a worrying number have limited or no access to income, as highlighted by surveys from membership organisations such as the Incorporated Society of Musicians and the Musicians' Union, which represent the interests of working musicians. Of particular worry is that, once mainstream education re-starts, there may not be employment for all of the music education workforce, as the immediate and longer-term economic implications of the virus become evident. Consequently, the availability of opportunities for musical learning remain precariously positioned, as it is a sad reality that many young people can only learn an instrument with a teacher because their parents or another source contributes some or all of the cost.

There are issues too with equality of access. Whilst it has been encouraging to see many arts organisations and companies offering materials and platforms free of charge or at a vastly reduced cost for a limited period of time, supporting and supplementing learning organised by schools, not all households have access to instruments and technologies, or the support or space to learn, and for others there are greater priorities right now. This has always been the case; perhaps, though, Covid-19 is bringing this inequality more sharply into focus. For those who have access, however, there are many opportunities to engage with learning through online media.

That arts and cultural organisations have shared educational resources whilst simultaneously fighting for survival is testimony to the sense of collaboration and responsibility that has been engendered through this crisis. It has also been heartening to see that, around the UK and other parts of the world, organisations and individuals have taken on the challenges to find new and different ways for teachers to facilitate online

learning and musical collaboration. Whilst the technology available to many households has brought to the fore issues with latency, rendering live ensemble playing challenging, if not impossible, a scan of social media would suggest that many teachers have persevered with ways of teaching groups and individuals through a combination of pre-recordings, resources and live teaching. Over time, it will be interesting to see which, if any, of the new ways of working and learning feed into the mainstream once the range of possibilities once again open up.

Small (1987) notes the active nature of music, and implicit within this is the social, collaborative nature of musicking.

... music is not primarily a thing or a collection of things, but an activity in which we engage ... the act of musicking is central to the whole art of music the world over. In most of the world's musical cultures this is taken for granted without even having to think about it (Small, 1987, p.50).

Musical events around the world are cancelled, and at the same time the past few weeks have seen a proliferation of 'virtual' and 'real' opportunities for musicians of all ages and experience levels to find creative ways for their music to still be a collective pursuit. One such example is the heart-warming recording of collective virtual ensemble pieces such as Harry Gleason's "Cornwall My Home", taught through online sessions to Cornwall Music Hub's choirs and recorded individually in homes across the county¹. Another example is the growing tradition of performing "Somewhere over the Rainbow" both online and on the streets as we stop to take part in a deeply moving communal tribute, clapping for National Health Service (NHS) staff, carers and keyworkers at 8pm every Thursday; through this, we perhaps see the ambition of musicians of all experience levels striving to be part of a larger 'something', to function musically, with a purpose, with other people, and for the music to bring meaning to them and others. The aesthetic dimension of music is so often overlooked in education, and yet it is central to its existence.

Assessment and Curriculum

In Britain external examinations and tests have been cancelled for this year. This affects pupils aged 11, although no music exam takes place at this stage, as well as at age 16 and 18, where GCSE and A-level examinations in music have been suspended. What will happen instead is that teacher's assessments will be used, but teacher grades will be 'adjusted' by the exam boards. What teachers of examination groups in schools are being asked to do is to grade their pupils according to their knowledge of what they think pupils would have been awarded had they sat examinations as normal, and then within these awarded marks to also rank order the young people within each grade boundary. Official instructions are these:

We are asking schools and colleges to use their professional experience to make a fair and objective judgement of the grade they believe a student would have

¹ Cornwall My Home https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1doM6_M42M

achieved had they sat their exams this year ... We are also asking schools and colleges to provide a rank order of students within each grade. This is because the statistical standardisation process will need more granular information than the grade alone (Ofqual, 2020 p5).

There are a number of issues here, as teachers of all subjects will be working with what may well be incomplete datasets, as the course has come to an abrupt and unplanned end. Teachers here will be having to rely on their professional judgment, yet will be doing so against a backdrop of policy and discourse which has, in effect, not trusted them to do so for some years. This decision has generated a lot of discussion, and has some interesting ramifications. Principal among these is the notion that for many years government has not truly trusted teachers, and instead used what Power (1994) refers to as “audit as control of control”. When looked at from this viewpoint:

...trust and valuation has moved away from the professionals... [as they] are not deemed trustworthy, because they are embedded within the profession. Instead only abstract systems of control can be deemed wholly independent (Power, 1994 p.15).

The notion of teachers being responsible for high-stakes assessment grades has caused consternation. What has been interesting to follow in this regard is the generation of teachers who have grown up under this system saying that they don't feel their grades can be trusted either! Here in England we have one of the youngest school teaching workforces, according to the OECD (2018), and so they have no other experiences to draw on. There has been much debate on social media of the ‘things cannot go back to how they were’ variety. The notion of education existing solely to prepare pupils for tests, and that a purpose of such tests is not just to certificate attainment, but also to provide ‘league tables’ of schools, is a longstanding, but pernicious issue in education. As Koretz observed:

...two misunderstandings of achievement testing: that scores on a single test tell us all we need to know about student achievement, and that this information tells us all we need to know about school quality (Koretz, 2009 p.6)

This use of tests and assessment grades as proxies for school quality has long been an issue, here it is being brought right to the forefront.

So, can things go back to how they were? Given the way in which worldwide, the neoliberal turn has taken hold in many countries, doing so may prove problematic:

...what is perhaps the key ideological effect of neoliberalism: the enforcement of the idea that no alternative to the current organization of society and education is possible or imaginable (De Lissovoy, 2013 p.423).

It is this which becomes a concern, and not only for the young teachers who know no other way of doing things; indeed, one of the effects of neoliberalism is to recast and shift the process of audit from an external stance, to one which becomes internalised by the individual teacher. This is a cunning move, and results in Smith’s observation of:

Audit as [a] key tool in the neoliberal imaginary: a chimaera that cloaks fabrication, simulation while simultaneously representing itself as objective & authoritative. (Smith, R. Twitter, 2020)

What all this is doing is to situate education not so much as a good thing in its own right, but as a transaction which can only be viewed as such:

...the overriding ideological influence of the market as a conceptual lens through which to understand, organise and valorise educational practice. Every action, interaction and behaviour is one that is mediated as a market transaction with economic value that is subject to a process of quantification. (O'Leary & Cui, 2020 p.143)

But audit of education is not the only concern that has been placed on hold during the time of this lockdown. With school buildings closed to most children, the site of much educational activity has shifted to the home, with parents often trying to juggle working from home themselves with educating their children. This has highlighted a number of issues in music education. However, a government-backed online curriculum, launched after the Easter holidays in 2020, included very little by way of music and focused predominantly on the narrow range of subjects included in the EBacc. To make up for this lack of inclusion, all sorts of other organisations, from academy chains to opera groups have been putting music resources of their own on line. There is now a wealth of these, and the choice of activities includes all the elements of the English National Curriculum for music, composing, listening, and performing.

One of the many questions that this raises for the sector is that out of this time of difficulty, a plethora of curricula approaches have been offered – and taken up – with a significant element of choice involved. This does rather bring into question a former approach that the English government was taking, of producing a (singular) 'model' music curriculum. The considerable expertise of the various organisations, as well as the labours of individual musicians and teachers has revealed how broad an offer there can be for music education. The question of curriculum offer, as these materials have by-and-large been purposed for parents working with their children and young people in a time of lockdown, does raise the question as to what will happen when schools do finally reopen. What we have had in England, at least, is a Governmentally promoted emphasis on STEM subjects, with a few extras; this is the so-called EBacc (so-called as it is not, like other Baccalaureates, a qualification, but a measure of schools). The ways of knowing that music and the arts foster are different from those promoted by STEM subjects, and as Louth observes, they may actually be more suited to an unknown future than the regurgitatory modality which some other ways on knowing involve:

Artistic ways of understanding may in fact prepare students better for flexible thinking than math or science studies, since artistic decision-making pathways are arguably even less specifiable than those based on discursive forms of thought. True artistic understanding prepares students for future engagements with problems whose forms cannot be predicted (Louth, 2020 p.101)

This is important for thinking about what happens when schools do finally reopen, as a rush to fill in time for missing learning in STEM subjects may be misplaced, it seems possible that it is the artistic and aesthetic ways of knowing which will be most suitable, most useful, and above all, most human, for bringing children and young people back into the fold of a school. After all, it has not been massed videos of long-division in lockdown which have caught the attention of social media, but various forms of cooperative and conjoint music-making, albeit made with a status of social isolation, from Italian streets to online bands, orchestras, and choirs!

In music education we have long been aware that music should be available to all pupils, and that artistic talent (whatever that is!) is not restricted to those in the highest socio-economic classes. A possible worry for post-lockdown is that children and young people will have had very different experiences of musical activity and learning in lockdown. The more well-off may well have their own laptops and tablets, with unlimited Wi-Fi, and a room of their own in which to practise, or at least to escape to. The less well-off may well be sharing devices, or have no access at all, physical space is likely to be at a premium, and just keeping body and soul together may well have been the primary concern of them and their carers. Under this scenario, there is likely to be a huge disparity between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' when schools do finally re-open. Despite the best efforts of Government to make schools responsible for everything, being accountable for poverty is not, and should not be laid at the door of schools during these extraordinary times, we hear daily of school teachers going 'the extra mile' to make sure pupils are fed. Yet in music we know there are talented youngsters who possess talent, but lack money, and, potentially, opportunity (Bath et al., 2020). After all, as the late Duke of Westminster observed when asked about his recipe for success: "Make sure they have an ancestor who was a very close friend of William the Conqueror," (Evans & Milne, 2016); sadly this is not the case for many of our young people in flats, temporary accommodation, and bedsits!

Inspection and accountability

Much has been written about England's use of a governmentally organised inspection arm, Ofsted. With schools currently operating remotely and providing on-line lessons, inspection has been held in abeyance. What we do not yet know is that when schools re-open, whether Ofsted will return to judging them on the same criteria that were being used before the current situation happened. It is likely to be the case that schools will want – and need – a period of stability where they get their young learners back on course, and deal with the emotional baggage that many young people will bring with them. Let us not forget, many of these children will now have gaps where previously they had loved ones, friends, or family members. To divert schools away from the social and onto education alone is another legacy of Michael Gove's time in charge at the DfE, as he observed in 2012 "I have said in the past that teachers should not be social workers. They have to concentrate on education first and above all" (Gove, 2012, Q105), but it seems likely to be the case that teachers will need to attend to the social before they can address the educational, in many instances. We have known this to be the case, certainly since Maslow's (1943) discussion of a hierarchy of needs. For schools to work best for their learners, they will need to be relieved of the pressure of being judged, and spend their time rebuilding. The role of music, and the place of the music, will be vital in this.

Challenges for initial teacher education

Due to school closures, there have also needed to be significant changes to initial teacher education and teacher training courses (DfE, 2020). For postgraduate and many undergraduate teachers nearing the end of their courses, as well as those on QTS only routes, this has meant that their face-to-face teaching experience in schools as part of the course has been temporarily, if not permanently, curtailed. Simultaneously, many of these pre-service teachers have needed to adapt almost instantaneously to teaching and setting work for students in the classes of their placement schools to complete at home, whilst also undertaking their own distance learning in order to complete their courses. Job interviews now routinely take place online; there is no opportunity to visit a school and experience its musical culture and philosophy first-hand. It is encouraging that the Department for Education in England have updated their guidance so that most trainees will be recommended for qualified teacher status (QTS) within their initial timeframe, and there is at least some recognition at governmental level that these teachers are likely to need additional support at the start of their career. Secondary Music PGCE courses in England have under-recruited every year since 2012/13, and the number of trainee teachers set by a government target has been significantly reduced since 2010 (Daubney, Spruce & Annetts, 2019). Given the continued under-recruitment of trainee secondary music teachers, the on-time entry of this year's cohort into the already depleted secondary music teacher workforce will certainly be a useful addition to schools in the new school year and beyond.

Just as with school inspections, Ofsted's inspections of Initial Teacher Training are currently on hold, with schools and universities changing their modes of teaching away from face-to-face. What remains unclear, though, is the impact that the curtailed training will have on any judgements on ITE providers in the following academic year, given that Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) already controversially form part of the judgement about the quality of education offered by ITT providers. Additionally, the timing of Ofsted's proposed new Initial teacher education inspection framework, due to be implemented in September 2020, has come into question. It remains to be seen whether, as the sector has urged, this will be delayed for 'at least a year' (TES, 2020) to allow schools and universities to reopen, to work with their communities and, essentially, to take the time needed to reflect and move forward. Similar questions arise about the wisdom of bringing in the new ITE core content framework (Turvey et al., 2020) and the Early Career Framework, both due to be introduced in the near future.

Without doubt, higher education in the UK will look very different for the foreseeable future due to the severe impact of Covid-19, with opportunities to live and study in other countries significantly curtailed and an expected drop in income from student fees and grants. According to a recent report in the Times Higher Education Supplement (2020), universities in the UK 'face [a] £2.6bn coronavirus hit with 30K jobs at risk'. Whilst it is too early to say what the impact on the range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses will be, performing arts courses are already precariously placed in a fragile higher education ecosystem, and any changes risk further damaging the pipeline of potential musicians and music teachers in the future.

Conclusion

Classroom music education, in the UK at least, is one of the few arenas where all children and young people are supposed to receive a generalist music education. The situation caused by Covid-19 has created an unprecedented situation where schools have been suspended, but education has carried on, as well as it can under the circumstances. We feel strongly that there are lessons to be learned around the globe with regards to what has happened, and to what the future might bring. If we feel there are opportunities in future to do things better, or at least differently, then we need to say so, and explain what, and why.

We are very aware that we have written this piece entirely from a British perspective, and that the situation in other countries may well be different, but whatever is going on – or not – and wherever this is or is not happening, we hope that music education offers a way forward for our schools and communities to work together and make progress. Here at the BJME, we believe music to be a powerful thing, and we hope that the experiences of the current crisis have helped people realise just how important music and music education are in the lives of our young people.

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