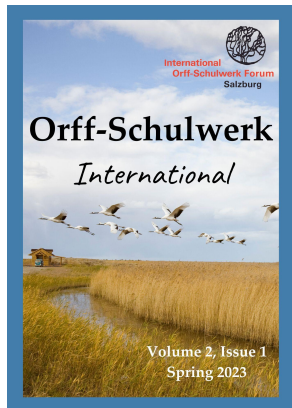




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Freedoms and Constraints: A Critical Reflection on the History of Creative Music Education for Children in Schools in England

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History

Freedoms and Constraints: A Critical Reflection on the History of Creative Music Education for Children in Schools in England

Sarah Hennessy

Perhaps ‘freedoms’ is too ambitious a word in this context as - with constraints, they are relative and, in many ways, subjective. But I opted for this title because I find it a useful way to look at both ideas and practices of teaching creatively and teaching for creativity in music, and as a way to reflect on how policy has proscribed and/or facilitated more or less freedom for teachers to provide and develop creative music education for their students. In creative work constraint can sometimes be a more positive condition than freedom so I don’t want to suggest that constraint is bad and freedom good. However, in a policy context constraint can often become oppressive and obstructive to effective teaching and learning.

Although I have some experience and knowledge of how music education is organised and taught in other countries – both in Europe and further afield, I can only confidently present my experience and ideas from a British (and even then, English) perspective. Although I hope that readers will find resonance in the content even if references and time frames are different.

Creative Music Education in England – A Short History

‘It is a way of saying things which are personal to the individual...the freedom to explore chosen materials.....It is essentially an experimental situation’. (Paynter 1970).

I want to consider how the practice and focus of creative music education has developed in recent decades. I am mainly focusing on state schools in which children of all abilities are educated. This includes children with special educational needs which might include physical, behavioural, emotional and/ or learning disabilities. I am not explicitly referring to Special schools where children with multiple or profound disabilities are educated but this does not mean that creative music education is absent from such schools. It may be that creative approaches have been nurtured more fully than in mainstream classrooms due partly to recognition of their therapeutic value.

For the best part of the past 50 years there has been a growing consensus within the music teaching profession (at least in the UK) that young people should learn through practical engagement and develop knowledge and skills to make their own Music through exploring and experimenting, improvising and composing. Writers such as John Paynter, Keith Swanwick, Christopher Small, David Elliott, Lucy Green and many others have argued cogently and convincingly for this as a central aim in music education. And as the ways in which young people learn music have become more divergent and self-determined, the purpose and role of the teacher has also had to change, although I would argue that pedagogy hasn’t always kept up with these changes

Music Education in the UK – up to the 1960s – was dominated by singing for children up to the age of 14. As in many countries, learning to sight sing and singing simple classical songs,

folk songs, rounds and canons with perhaps some musical ‘appreciation’ (i.e. listening to and learning about music), was the diet for most children. Free instrumental lessons were offered through the late 60s and up to 1988 when it all but ceased...and in that period there was a rapid development of ensembles and youth orchestras all over the UK. The difficulties of balancing this more visible, high status aspect of music education (essentially about nurturing a minority) and the messy world of the mixed ability classroom have never really been resolved.

Orff-Schulwerk, introduced by Margaret Murray in the 1960s, had a significant influence on primary school music in the UK but was gradually subsumed into other creative music making ideas developing in the UK for secondary music at the same time. This is a good example of how innovative and successful ideas found in primary education were often discounted by those who teach older students. The status of primary teachers was far below that of secondary music specialist teachers.

Many secondary school teachers trained in the 1970s and early 80s were exposed to the new and radical ideas of contemporary composers such as Peter Maxwell Davies, George Self, Brian Dennis and most importantly, John Paynter. All these composers developed creative projects and teaching materials for teachers. Most worked as teachers themselves. In broad terms these new ideas reflected the interests of the period with *musique concrète* and early experiments with electronic music (e.g. tape loops) being emphasised. Working with found sounds, words, images, movement and drama were encouraged and exemplified through the projects found, for instance, in *Sound and Silence* (Paynter, 1970 CUP) *Projects in Sound* (Brian Dennis, 1975 UE) and later *Sound Inventions* (Richard McNichol, 1992 OUP).

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STORM MUSIC
Brian Dennis | Oliver Bevan

STORM MUSIC Directions for Performance
For four groups of players with non-pitched percussion instruments

This piece is modelled on a live thunderstorm, and should be interpreted as follows:

- wind sounds (any number of whistles, recorder mouthpieces or vocal imitations). The curve of the lines represents the rise and fall of pitch and/or intensity.
- lightning sounds (a short, sharp roll on any high-pitched metal instrument—triangle, etc.). The length of the zigzag represents loudness.
- rain sounds (wooden instruments or any two hard objects ‘clicked’ together). The density of the signs represents their approximate number at any given moment.
- thunder sounds (varied rolls on low drums, on the lower strings of the piano, etc.). The height of the shape indicates loudness. Most of the ‘peals’ start quite loudly, then die away in diminishing bursts (crescendos and diminuendos).

Each vertical division should last at least 12 seconds. A conductor should give a precise beat on each line.
Duration is three to five minutes.

A page from Projects in Sound (1975)

They all offered frameworks and starting points that would allow mixed ability classes to explore and create or arrange musical ideas. I found this rare film of experimental composition (1969). It shows a class of secondary pupils and then a class of primary age children (at 13 minutes) with Brian Dennis and other teachers presenting their pupils’ group compositions.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsigOnPJTtA>

We might look rather enviously at the scope of these projects now – the time and opportunities to introduce these ways of teaching were much more plentiful given that teachers were relatively autonomous and schools could be more flexible and, one suspects, more open to experimenting with new ideas. But perhaps one should add that while the quality and scope of music education was still very much in the hands of individual teachers and there was more support and sharing of practice available compared to now, one could argue that constraints were tacitly self-imposed as a result of each teacher's own musical values and training even though there was much more freedom to choose what and how to teach.

Teaching for Musical Creativity

Orff-Schulwerk emphasises the interactions and musical dialogue that underpin music making, and Paynter, Schafer and Wishart also use the class or group as essential to their suggested activities and projects – a social form of learning. Although not expressed in this way at the time it has become evident that a social constructivist perspective was being employed. Understanding that the learner brings their own 'musical world' into the group and that the teacher has to 'step back' and adopt a variety of roles at different stages, shifted the often entrenched tendency for teachers to believe they must instruct and direct to ensure a successful musical 'product'. The other shift that a constructivist perspective offers is to require the teacher to focus on the process of a creative task rather than fixing attention on the product. Understanding improvising and experimenting as musical play that shares characteristics with other forms of learning through play can help teachers recognise the value of creative music in the curriculum – and how to plan and support it. In this concept of creative music education improvising and composing, as a way of music making and developing musical thinking, are recognised and taught at every age and stage. Thus, we can use the same terminology to describe what a 4-year-old does and what a professional composer or improviser does. The differences are not in the essential processes involved but in how levels of intentionality, technical mastery, musicianship, and musical knowledge and experience are employed.

Composing and improvising in the classroom are often framed or supported by some given musical material or stimulus such as stories, images, words, or a musical idea. Framing can be tight or loose and be adapted to individuals ... students can find their own place in the group and in the musical texture/structure to avoid or increase exposure or challenge. Resources can also be used to limit possibilities – a constraint might challenge a musically competent student or support a less competent one. Free choice can be paralysing or provide unforeseen possibilities teachers learn to adjust to the needs of groups and individuals within the class. Invariably teachers set the 'commission' for a composition. Jo Glover, in her excellent book *Children Composing 4 to 14* (2000) argues for teachers to allow children to bring their own ideas for compositions into the classroom *'if children aren't encouraged to devise their own musical starting points, an essential aspect of their musical creativity is lost.to take away the expectation that they will have their own ideas about this is to turn composing into a kind of problem – solving activity from which the meaningfulness of the problem has been removed'*.

John Paynter's second book, written in 1990 after at least a decade when composing and improvising had become a much more central part of the music curriculum in UK schools, is called 'Sound and Structure' and gives much more attention to the teacher's role: *'the intention ..is to re-present the case for creativity as a basis for the music curriculum and to specifically argue for greater emphasis upon the structure in the kind of composition teaching now expected in schools'*. The projects in the book are offered as a 'way of explaining a style of teaching appropriate to the aims of the book'. (Paynter 1990). Again, the focus is on secondary schools with specialist teachers.

While the teacher as facilitator came into focus more clearly – it coincided with competing demands and pressures on them. A broadening range of musical genres and styles, uses of technologies and a deepening concern about students in the 11-14 age range switching off school music (see Ross 1995) all conspired (for good or ill) to shift the attention away from the Paynter's approach and towards more stylistically familiar and more pop infused content especially in the secondary context. In the hands of less confident teachers composing tasks could become rather formulaic. In primary schools an increasing emphasis on the teaching of literacy and mathematics, a less flexible timetable, and a reduction in time for music training for new teachers conspired to reduce both time for music and the confidence to teach it.

The Impact of Government Policy and Where We Are Now

Up to the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1990, music's place in the curriculum was rarely questioned and generally considered civilising and positive for individuals as well as the school as a whole. Thus teachers had a great deal of freedom to pursue creative music education or not. This freedom didn't change much with the National Curriculum for Music (introduced in 1992) which required teachers to include creativity in their music teaching through exploring, improvising and composing at every stage (5-14). Most teachers recognised that creative music making had the potential to engage a much wider range of pupils. And, if all children were to gain experience and skills in improvising and composing then it was unrealistic to base this solely on the language of European art music. A more flexible approach involving more diverse, accessible and relevant musical genres and styles was needed as well as the ideas learned from Paynter et al. Of course, through this same period from the 1960s to the 2000s other genres and styles were becoming central to the repertoire of school music – especially pop music, blues, samba, gamelan, and music of African and South Asian cultures. Technology also played (and continues to play) a dominant part in how music was taught ...and was seen as an important tool in making creative music making possible for mixed ability classes. Today it would be unthinkable to exclude digital technologies from the music classroom.

The past 30 years have seen the erosion of the structures that supported a more or less 'arm's length' approach to education by the government. The introduction of a centralised National Curriculum, a punitive inspection system, and the reduced role of local government in supporting schools gave central government the ability and power to influence school education much more rapidly and radically. Thus, we have had a blizzard of policies which have pushed the arts in some cases almost completely out of secondary schools and to the margins of many primary schools.

The focus of policy for music education and its public perception is on learning to perform. There is funding for an introductory year of instrumental teaching in primary schools and out of school ensembles but very little for any other aspects. The training of music teachers for primary is almost non-existent and music has become something for more privileged students. Such policies gradually change the attitudes of teachers and parents towards the nature of music education – what is valued and what the aims of music education are believed to be.

A progressive view of education still hovers in the background but one could argue that it now occupies the spaces outside of formal education – in community settings, non-formal activity, and sometimes in the outreach projects taken into schools by orchestras and other musicians. In the UK, as the control of schools tightened through the 90s and into the 21st century, the growth of partnerships between creative practitioners and schools has grown. This approach aims to enrich the arts curriculum and provide professional development for teachers.

The school system and how teachers are trained has become more fragmented – despite the push to unify through a national curriculum we now have a more diffused and unequal system than ever. We have a rich inheritance of knowledge and practice about how to provide creative music education but seem to be further away from having the political will and resources to achieve it for all.

So Where is the Future for Creative Music Education?

A recently published survey into young people's musical lives shows that two thirds of young people (aged 7-17) were actively engaged in music making and for the majority of poorer children this was not in school:

'Greater autonomy and choice is resulting in a move away from genre-based tastes, and instead moving towards a more all-embracing fusion of styles, with a focus on creating the right mood'. <https://www.youthmusic.org.uk/sound-of-the-next-generation>

It is evident that music in school as it is presently construed doesn't work for many young people, and that creative music learning is more and more to be found in elective settings out of school. Individual teachers continue to teach creative approaches successfully – always in schools where there is clear support from senior management, the key to whether music is taught at all and whether there is space for creativity.

Some Questions

- Does school-based music education focus on the most relevant and valuable aspects to provide young people with the creative tools and critical agency to take their music learning further?
- Is non and informal music education a more suitable place for creativity to be nurtured?
- Is it more difficult for parents and policy makers to understand the value of creative music making compared to technical mastery and the visible 'show' of performance?

- Is creative music education best promoted for its apparent non-musical benefits and as a means of motivating learners towards the 'real' goal of performance?
- Does music teacher training address the needs of creative music education?

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[A longer version of this article was given as a keynote at the Conference 'Creative Interactions' in May 2019 at the *Hochschule für Musik und Theater* Munich/Germany].

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