**Challenging classical music’s genre conventions: Findings from a project on youth voice in instrumental education**

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**Biographical statement:** Anna Bull is a Lecturer in Social Justice and Education at the University of York. Her monograph, *Class, Control, and Classical Music* (Oxford University Press, 2019) won the British Sociological Association’s Philip Abrams Prize in 2020. She was lead author on the research report *Slow Train Coming: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in UK music higher education* published by the Equality and Diversity in Music Studies Network in 2022. Her other area of research is sexual misconduct in higher education, on which she has published multiple academic articles and public reports.

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**Abstract:** This article explores classical music education through analysing data from a project on embedding ‘youth voice’ within instrumental teaching and learning. Drawing on theorisations of classical music as a genre, I describe how the young people in this project saw classical music’s genre conventions as working against a youth voice approach. The article also outlines the ways in which youth voice was shaped through social relations in this space as well as the ‘institutional ecology’ of music education. I argue that embedding youth voice approaches in instrumental education will only be effective if the genre itself is open to transformation.

# **Introduction**

Despite a burgeoning critical literature on instrumental teaching and learning, there is evidence that the ‘traditional model’ of pedagogy[[1]](#footnote-1) remains the default in many contexts. This model, as Pozo et al. describe, is characterised by ‘authoritarian and one-directional social interactions’[[2]](#footnote-2) in which pupils’ views are not typically sought or listened to. The persistence of such a model is perhaps surprising given that it contravenes the United Nations Convention on Children’s Rights. Countries that are signatories to this convention – that is, every country in the world except the United States – are required to give children the ‘right to express […] views’ and for these views to be given ‘due weight’.[[3]](#footnote-3) These rights have, to date, remained underexplored in relation to instrumental teaching and learning. In order to open up such a discussion, this article situates this ‘traditional model’ of instrumental teaching and learning in relation to policy and theoretical approaches on ‘youth voice’ as well as theorisations of classical music as a genre. Building on this framing, the article explores how embedding youth voice in instrumental music education has the potential to change not only the pedagogy, but also to change the genre of classical music in ways that enable it to become more inclusive. In short, it asks how classical music might change if young people’s voices were listened to.

As such, the article draws on and contributes to international policy, practice and academic debates on diversity in classical music[[4]](#footnote-4) as well as youth voice in music education.[[5]](#footnote-5) It draws on qualitative data from a study carried out with partner organisations Sound Connections and Lewisham Music. Sound Connections is a music education sector support organisation that focuses on youth voice, and Lewisham Music are a music education ‘hub’ (as outlined below) in south London.

The project built on findings from my monograph *Class, Control, and Classical Music*,[[6]](#footnote-6) which asks why classical music in the UK is predominantly played by people who are white and middle class. In the book, I argued that classical music’s classed history in the UK shapes its conventions and practices today. These conventions and practices are reproduced through its institutions; the book focused specifically on music education institutions, highlighting the role of exam boards and conservatoires established in the late nineteenth century in shaping the musical lives of the young people playing classical music today. In short, the book argues that the aesthetic conventions of classical music do some of the work of boundary-drawing to retain it as an elite social space. These aesthetic conventions include the canonic repertoire, the instruments, and the technical requirements to be able to create the ideals of beauty that are valued within this genre. All of these conventions require a long-term, intensive investment of money, time, and effort that is more possible and makes more sense for middle- and upper-class families. Classical music’s exclusionary practices are, therefore, to some degree embedded in the aesthetic itself. But this boundary-drawing is usually conceived of as musical rather than social; inclusions and exclusions occur on apparently purely musical grounds around ‘talent’ or ability rather than on the basis of membership of a social group. In this way these classed, racialised, and ableist exclusions are camouflaged by concepts such as ‘talent’ or ‘the music itself’. The inequalities that have been documented across classical music education and the profession[[7]](#footnote-7) are therefore not a coincidence but are built into the genre’s conventions and institutions.

This means that in order for classical music to become more diverse, not only do its institutions, its selection and progression mechanisms, and its culture need to change, but its aesthetic conventions should also be open to scrutiny. This point also follows a basic premise of diversity work: that the space that ‘diverse’ others are being invited into has be open to being changed by those who are joining it.[[8]](#footnote-8) There are multiple angles from which we could approach this ‘diversity’ work. Some of these are being explored by musicians who are experimenting with ways in which diversity might support the aesthetic renewal of classical music[[9]](#footnote-9) as well as by music educators who are exploring how genre diversity can lead to social diversity in music programmes.[[10]](#footnote-10) However, one route suggested in *Class, Control, and Classical Music* is embedding ‘youth voice’ in classical music education. To explore such a possibility, this article asks how youth voice in the form of musical and creative decision-making can be embedded within instrumental classical music education. It also explores classical music as a genre, asking to what extent the conventions of classical music shape young people’s voices.

The article first explores theorisations of youth voice outside and within music education and then outlines the notion of classical music as a genre. It then introduces ‘The Music Lab’, the project which this article discusses, before outlining findings across four themes: first, how young people experienced the project and how it contrasted with their existing instrumental teaching; second, how young people understood classical music as a genre; third, how the ‘institutional ecology’ of classical music education limited the extent of transformations that were possible in the space of The Music Lab; and fourth, how the social relations of the space shaped participants’ musical voices. Finally, it discusses these findings in relation to the questions of diversity in classical music raised above.

## **Introducing youth voice**

Concepts and theories associated with youth voice have been influential within international human rights policy for more than 30 years. The most widely-used policy formation in this area, the UN Convention on Children’s Rights (UNCRC), states that:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Since it was adopted by the United Nations in November 1989, 196 countries have signed up to the UNCRC with only the United States having failed to ratify it. However, instrumental teaching and learning – perhaps due to its fragmented and largely unregulated status in the UK – has only minimally engaged with this concept, as outlined below.

There exist various models for theorising how children’s views should be heard. Perhaps the most commonly-used one is Roger Hart’s ‘ladder of participation’,[[12]](#footnote-12) developed in the 1980s out of Sherry Arnstein’s earlier model of (adult) citizen participation.[[13]](#footnote-13) This model conceptualises children’s and young people’s levels of participation in decision-making in any activities they are involved with. The bottom three rungs of the ladder denote manipulative, decorative or tokenistic involvement of young people. For example, orchestral education programme El Sistema Venezuela sits at this level of the ladder as it involves children and young people in tokenistic or even manipulative ways to accrue prestige for the project rather than allowing children a meaningful say.[[14]](#footnote-14) The middle rungs of the ladder involve adult-led projects that children and young people understand and contribute to. At the top of the ladder sit child or youth-led projects which may not involve adults at all. Despite the popularity of this model, it has been substantially critiqued, including by Roger Hart himself, for its cultural bias in favouring North American and British cultures, and Hart has also argued that it is time to move beyond the ladder towards alternative metaphors and theories for children’s participation.[[15]](#footnote-15)

One of the moves beyond the ‘ladder’ is to conceive of children as ‘social change agents’.[[16]](#footnote-16) This approach draws on a critique that Karen Malone and Catherine Hartung make of children’s participation models, and the projects that draw on these models. They argue that such models aim to maintain the current status quo rather than enabling social transformation as a possibility.[[17]](#footnote-17) This critique draws attention to an interesting tension in projects embedding ‘youth voice’ in instrumental classical music education: to what extent is classical music – its pedagogy, repertoire, conventions, instruments, and other genre norms – able to be transformed through youth voice interventions?

However, despite the decades-long engagement with youth voice in education research, practice, and policy, discussion of youth voice in the field of instrumental education remains in the early stages.[[18]](#footnote-18) There currently exist competing definitions, terminology and theorisations, including ‘learner voice’ ([Després](https://www.frontiersin.org/people/u/733227) and Dubé), ‘a musical say’ (Davis) or ‘dialogic’ musical voice (Spruce). Jean-Philippe [Després](https://www.frontiersin.org/people/u/733227) and Francis Dubé focus on decision-making in their definition of ‘learner voice’ in music education as:

the process by which learners are listened to, consulted, included, take part, or take charge of the decision-making process or take action about their learning or their education in diverse contexts.[[19]](#footnote-19)

[Després](https://www.frontiersin.org/people/u/733227) and Dubé go on to outline the characteristics of ‘authentic learner voice initiatives’, which should ‘allow for two-way exchanges between teachers and students, are participatory and inclusive, challenge established power relations and allow for effective changes’.[[20]](#footnote-20) This definition does, therefore, include the possibility for learners to act as a ‘social change agents’. However, I will suggest below that conceptualisations of youth voice in music education need to include a dual focus: as well as ‘learner voice’ as outlined above, they also need to include *musical* voice. By this I mean the ways in which musical learners might discover an expressive, creative voice through their music education. This conceptualisation is centred in Sharon G.Davis’ definition of ‘voice’:

**a musical say includes opportunities to contribute in ensemble settings and the development of musical voice through ownership, agency, relevance, and personal expression— and the investment of these dynamic and fluid meanings in the ensemble process.**[[21]](#footnote-21)

Here, Davis combines decision-making or ‘a musical say’ with ideas of musical voice as ‘personal expression’. She situates this discussion within a framing of identity formation, drawing on Etienne Wenger to argue, ‘that understanding who we are is a result of “incorporat[ing] the past and the future in the very process of negotiating the present.”’[[22]](#footnote-22) In other words,**rather than assuming that ‘voice’ is something that is already there to be uncovered, it is instead formed through the experiences in the music classroom (as well as outside it), within the formation of a wider (musical) identity. Davis’ definition makes clear why definitions of youth voice in music education cannot be taken directly from other education settings but need to include this dual focus of learner voice as well as expressive voice.**

**The third definition of ‘voice’ that I draw on comes from Gary Spruce, who argues** that the development of musical voice is dialogic or relational rather than individual; musical voice is developed through interactions within the pedagogic space as well as in relation to musics from other times and spaces. This approach means that we need to draw on ‘a musical pedagogy that seeks to engage the voice of the learner—both musically and verbally—not as an individualized, “personalized self,” but as existing always in relation to an “other”’.[[23]](#footnote-23) Spruce further suggests that it is necessary ‘to interrogate the pedagogical values and ideologies that construct the voice and which privilege certain voices and messages while rendering others unheard’.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Spruce’s approach fits well with – and indeed draws on – **Madeleine Arnot and Diane Reay’s theorisation of ‘pupil voice’,**[[25]](#footnote-25) **the final theorisation that I will introduce. Arnot and Reay’s approach is not specific to music education but rather takes a critical sociological approach towards education systems more widely.** Arnot and Reay argue that **‘voice’ is far from a straightforward concept and in educational projects that centre voice, it is crucial to distinguish which types of voice we are eliciting.** Most notably, they argue for ‘the development of what we called a sociology of pedagogic voice which engages with the power relations which create voices’,[[26]](#footnote-26) suggesting that ‘key to this analysis is not that voice cannot change power relations, but that shifts in power relations can change ‘‘voices’’’.[[27]](#footnote-27) Similarly to Spruce’s and Davis’ approach, this theorisation counters the assumption that individual voices already exist and simply have to be elicited. Instead, all of these authors foreground the ways in which ‘voice’ is produced within social relations, dialogically, over time. Arnot and Reay’s approach is particularly important for understanding how marginalised pupils may experience pedagogic spaces. Janet Batsleer, in her study of an informal education project using arts-based methodologies with marginalised young men in Manchester, argues that **‘the analysis of ‘youth voice’ needs to recognise how the discourses or codes of youth are shaping participation practice and delineating what can and cannot be spoken’, noting that** ‘paradoxically, inviting young people to speak, especially those who have been marginalised by school, can in some ways intensify that marginality.’[[28]](#footnote-28) Such a reminder is particularly important in projects where young people from social identities that are marginalised in classical music education are expected to negotiate complicated power relations in order to speak, or even more so in order to enable creative, expressive voice. In summary, Arnot and Reay’s and Spruce’s sociologically grounded readings of voice are generative in that they recognise and foreground the complex social dynamics that shape the possibilities for youth voice in classical music education.

In the discussion below I draw on these theorisations to formulate two distinct versions of ‘youth voice’. The first version I will call ‘learner voice’, drawing on [Després](https://www.frontiersin.org/people/u/733227) and Dubé. This refers to the extent to which learners have a say in their own teaching and learning. The second version I will call ‘musical voice’, referring to the development of young people’s musical, expressive capacities. This version draws on Spruce’s and Davis’ work. Both of these types of voice are formed dialogically, as part of a wider identity-formation process, within the power relations of pedagogic spaces. In order to operationalise these ideas and explore them empirically, in the research questions (as outlined below) I focus on decision-making[[29]](#footnote-29) which captures both of these versions of voice: being able to make decisions about how learning takes place, as well as musical or expressive decisions about what sounds good.[[30]](#footnote-30) Before introducing the research questions, I first outline the socio-aesthetic context in which this musical decision-making is taking place by exploring theorisations of classical music as a genre.

### **Classical music as a genre and a pedagogic model**

In using the term ‘classical music’, I am drawing on a theoretical approach from popular music studies where the concept of genre is used ‘to understand the relationship between the social and the aesthetic by studying the circulation of common ‘orientations, expectations and conventions’[[31]](#footnote-31) between producers, audiences, industry, and texts. This theoretical lens allows for social and aesthetic conventions to be studied together rather than assuming that ‘the music’ exists separately from the social practices through which it is created. As a result, identifying and analysing genre conventions can reveal how social norms are legitimised by aesthetic ideals, and/or vice versa, and how systems of musical meaning are reproduced through these conventions.

Lydia Goehr, Lucy Green, Georgina Born, Christopher Small, and myself have all theorised ways in which musical meaning and value are constructed within classical music. A full discussion of these theorisations is beyond the scope of this article but is outlined in *Class, Control, and Classical Music*.[[32]](#footnote-32) To summarise, Lydia Goehr traces how classical music’s autonomy from social concerns came about at the turn of the nineteenth century and was crystallised in the notion of the ‘musical work’ wherein meaning lay within the work itself, rather than its social function.[[33]](#footnote-33) Lucy Green identified classical music’s ideological values as universality, autonomy from social concerns, complexity, and originality.[[34]](#footnote-34) Georgina Born, in a wider theorisation of music and genre, describes the ‘the mutual mediation of music and social processes in Western art music’, against its discourses of universalism that assert classical music as existing outside of social concerns.[[35]](#footnote-35) The hierarchy of composer-performer-audience is described by Christopher Small as fundamental to classical music’s ontology, as well as the prioritisation of harmonic over rhythmic complexity, among other points.[[36]](#footnote-36) Finally, I have identified aspects of classical music’s culture among young people in the south of England that form a ‘contingent connection’ with white middle-class values and identities, such as prioritising long-term investment over short-term enjoyment; valuing ‘emotional depth’ and ‘serious’ music over ‘fun’ music; and formal, gendered modes of social organisation of music-making. Within these wider social systems of meaning-making, specific social and aesthetic conventions can be identified. For example, the convention whereby audiences refrain from clapping between movements at concerts makes sense if one understands the meaning of a musical work as a coherent whole which should not be interrupted.

Classical music’s pedagogic conventions can also be understood in relation to these systems of musical meaning. Indeed, the ‘traditional’ or ‘master-apprentice’ model of instrumental teaching and learning gains its power in a large part due to its relationship with classical music’s genre-specific ontologies (which are in turn upheld through its institutions). For example, Pozo *et al.* describe how the ‘traditional model’ of instrumental teaching and learning assumes objective ‘positivist’ knowledge and involves ‘direct or transmissive teaching methods based on strictly prescribed, regulatory, authoritarian and one-directional social interactions, in a teacher-student method dyad’, which is ‘centred mostly on musical score decoding and technical control of the instrument’.[[37]](#footnote-37) In a similar vein, Harald Jørgensen describes the ‘master-apprentice’ style teaching in instrumental education ‘where the master usually is looked at as a role model and a source of identification for the student, and where the dominating mode of student learning is imitation’.[[38]](#footnote-38) Finally, I have outlined classical music’s ‘pedagogy of correction’ as ‘a teaching practice where the majority of the pedagogic input consists of correction’ or ‘getting it right’.[[39]](#footnote-39) These pedagogic practices contribute to upholding the wider systems of musical meaning described above, such as the hierarchy of composer over performer, or the assumption that musical meaning exists in the composer’s intentions as represented in the score, transmitted via the authority of the teacher.

Other than some of the work outlined above, critical discussions of classical music instrumental pedagogy have not tended to be situated within social analyses of classical music as a genre. Nevertheless, such a framing is important because pedagogic conventions – similarly to other genre conventions – reproduce systems of musical meaning, and in order to make changes to instrumental teaching and learning it is helpful to understand the systems of meaning that are upholding current practices. The framing of genre therefore allows the ‘traditional’ model of instrumental teaching and learning to be understood in relation to the wider ideological systems of musical meaning and value identified by Goehr, Born, Green, Small, and myself. Furthermore, from a youth voice perspective, theorising classical music as a genre explores how it is understood by those who are playing or listening to it in a particular context (in this case the young people in this study) rather than attempting to find a definition that remains consistent over different times and places (which as other authors have found, is not possible[[40]](#footnote-40)). Finally, such a perspective allows an understanding of genre as fluid, occurring through the mutual mediation of the social and the aesthetic.[[41]](#footnote-41) As Live Ellefsen has argued in relation to classroom music, despite music teachers’ mobilisation of genre categories as ‘**neutral and natural’,**[[42]](#footnote-42) **they actively (re)produce these categories through everyday classification processes. She describes these processes as ‘genring’. This term ‘**refers to productive acts of temporary interpretation and signification, in which **existing classification systems and genre categories in the social are operationalized and (re)negotiate**d’.[[43]](#footnote-43) The concept of ‘genring’ reminds us that genre conventions do not reproduce themselves but must be actively reproduced by teachers and students. It draws attention to the pedagogic and socio-cultural work that goes into upholding these conventions. This approach is particularly important for classical music due to the ways in which social, economic, and cultural value are stored within its institutions and spaces.[[44]](#footnote-44)

### **How do young classical musicians experience ‘youth voice’ approaches?**

[Després](https://www.frontiersin.org/people/u/733227) and Dubé, in their literature review of research into ‘learner voice’ in music education, found only seven peer-reviewed articles in English published since 2007 that also included qualitative data from young people. They outlined the following findings:

most music learners (a) don't like to be lectured and tested, they prefer to be active in a collaborative and non-stressful environment; (b) don't like to be directed in a top-down approach, they want to take part in the decision-making process, and (c) prefer not to specialize too quickly: they value learning various instruments and songs.[[45]](#footnote-45)

This analysis draws on studies from across a range of genres. However, when comparing these findings with studies carried out specifically within classical music, it appears that they may not hold up. In classical music education, both Geoff Baker and I have found evidence that directly challenges [Després](https://www.frontiersin.org/people/u/733227) and Dubé’s finding that learners ‘don't like to be directed in a top-down approach’. These findings lead to challenges around incorporating a youth voice approach in classical music. In ‘Rethinking Social Action Through Music’ Geoff Baker analyses a classical music programme in Colombia (the ‘Red’). His study documents attempts to move away from a Sistema-style programme – which relies on strict authority, rote learning, and prioritising musical over social learning – towards a more pupil-centred model of teaching and learning where the ‘social action’ side of ’social action through music’ is taken seriously.[[46]](#footnote-46) Baker documents resistance from both teachers and students within the programme to these changes, finding that older students were the most likely to resist the inclusion of a more ‘social’ dimension:

Members of the student committee of the youth orchestra, having spent years climbing the institutional hierarchy, were keener on performing European masterworks than playing Colombian repertoire or composing their own music, and they *wanted* the orchestra to be exclusive […] The Red’s management was pushing for a more participatory ethos, but the most advanced students wanted a more presentational emphasis.[[47]](#footnote-47)

In this instance, youth voice is conservative, defending hierarchy, exclusion, and ‘top-down approaches’. Similarly, in my study of youth music groups in England, attempts to challenge hierarchies in two youth orchestras – which would potentially have given more of a say to the young musicians – were unpopular; existing hierarchies whereby adults held positions of power were defended.[[48]](#footnote-48) There existed a deep trust in adult leaders running these groups, and a disavowal of power relations between conductor and musicians, despite the fact that all the musical decisions were made unilaterally by conductors. Many of the young people stated that they enjoyed this top-down approach.[[49]](#footnote-49)

It is important to note that both Baker and I found these attitudes among older ‘young’ classical musicians who had been investing in their music education and in the culture and hierarchies of classical music for a significant period of time. Presumably these young musicians wanted to reap the benefits of their investment and hard work. Drawing on Reay and Arnot, the defence of the status quo that Baker and I found shows how young people’s voices were shaped by power relations in the form of the conventional pedagogies and genre norms of classical music.

These findings demonstrate that the project of embedding youth voice in classical music education – whether ‘learner voice’ or ‘musical voice’ – brings with it significant challenges. If young people defend the status quo whereby they do not have a voice in their learning or their musical expression, then ‘youth voice’ in classical music is doomed to fail. However, if the genre conventions of classical music are contributing towards these hierarchies of value and authority, then identifying and critically discussing these genre conventions with young people could open up space for transformation. As a result, building on the theoretical framings above, the research questions that this article addresses are as follows:

1. To what extent do the conventions of classical music shape young people’s musical voices?
2. How can youth voice in the form of musical and creative decision-making be embedded within instrumental classical music education?

## **Introducing The Music Lab**

This project came about through conversations I had with Jenn Raven, deputy director of Sound Connections, a London-based music education charity that supports other music education organisations to embed a youth voice approach. We were awarded a small grant from music education and social justice charity Agrigento to run a project on youth voice in instrumental teaching within a music education ‘hubs’ in the UK.[[50]](#footnote-50) Following a competitive process, Lewisham Music was chosen as our hub partner to run The Music Lab. We also recruited music facilitator Isabella (Issy) Mayne and youth worker Jacob Sakil to run the sessions, and Liz Coomb from Sound Connections managed the project. The decision to include a youth worker as well as a music facilitator was an explicit one that recognised the expertise of youth workers in facilitating critical dialogue with and between young people and ‘tipping balances of power in young people’s favour’.[[51]](#footnote-51) Following multiple delays due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the project was eventually run over two days in 2021 during the October half-term school holidays.

The project was free for young people to participate in, and an invitation to participate was sent to all young people enrolled in Lewisham Music’s instrumental teaching programme who played orchestral instruments or piano, at grade three or above ‘in a classical style’. This recruitment approach was designed to focus on classical music as a genre, as discussed below. 19 young people (nine girls and ten boys) between the ages of 11 and 16 ended up participating in the project who had all started learning their instrument between the ages of six and 10. Importantly for considering social diversity in classical music education, the majority of young people described themselves as having racialised identities which are minoritized in the UK (although not necessarily in London).[[52]](#footnote-52) The sample was also more privileged in relation to class than the wider population of Lewisham with 11 out of 19 being clearly middle-class.[[53]](#footnote-53)

It is important to contextualise the findings within Lewisham as an area, and within Lewisham Music as an organisation. Keith Sykes, the community music lead at Lewisham Music who was our liaison in this project, described Lewisham as a fertile and exciting place musically and socially, where young people seemed to have a particularly wide variety of musical interests and tastes. Lewisham is therefore not a typical music education hub (if such a thing exists) nor a typical area. A further factor affecting the dynamic of the project was that it was a one-off workshop rather than an ongoing project. This is important in thinking about the power relations and possibilities for youth voice within the space: it was a new space for the young people, and while some of the young people knew each other from their Saturday music school, many of them did not know any of the other participants. It was also short-term; we were creating a ‘temporary autonomous zone’[[54]](#footnote-54) where the rules could be discarded and experiments could be tried out. The invitation invited pupils to

explore, together, ways of teaching and learning classical instruments differently. You’ll be our co-researchers, bringing your ideas about what you want from your music education and experimenting with how to do things differently.

Due to this framing of the project being advertised as being something different to their usual music-making, there was likely to be a degree of self-selection in who signed up.

During the two-day session, decision-making was shared between the facilitator, Issy, and the participants, drawing on principles of community art.[[55]](#footnote-55) The main activity across the two days was devising music based on musical material either learnt by ear or from a piece of music they had brought in themselves. They spent much of the time working in small groups of 4-5, with myself, Issy and Jacob providing help if needed. Their devised pieces were then combined into a longer piece for the whole group at the end of each day.

Clearly it is not possible to disrupt participants’ many years of socialisation into classical music’s genre conventions within a two-day period. Instead, the project was designed to explore how young people whose instrumental learning had taken place within a ‘traditional model’ of classical music’s genre conventions responded to a workshop-style setting where youth voice was foregrounded, and to explore how this contrasted with their existing instrumental music education. We saw this approach as the first step in a longer process towards embedding youth voice in instrumental classical music education, which would necessarily involve building up young people’s capacity for decision-making and voice over time.[[56]](#footnote-56)

The project was granted a favourable ethical review by the University of York’s Department of Education ethics committee. The decision was made not to anonymise the organisations or music facilitators involved in project[[57]](#footnote-57) in order to acknowledge their contributions to the project publicly as well as to appropriate attribute authorship to Isabella Mayne for the youth voice toolkit that has been published coming out of this research.[[58]](#footnote-58) The findings discussed below draw on four main sources of data: first, participant observation including observation and participation in music-making and informal conversations with participants during breaks; three focus groups on the second afternoon which all of the participants were involved in and a fourth focus group at the end of the project with the facilitators and organisers; written comments elicited from participants onto a padlet in the introductory session held on zoom; and a short questionnaire asking for demographic data and music education background. The youth worker, Jacob Sakil, and project coordinator, Liz Coomb, also contributed to participant observation, sharing their notes from observations of the small group work. Reflexive thematic analysis[[59]](#footnote-59) of all the data except the questionnaire (which was used solely to describe the demographic characteristics of participants, as outlined above) was carried out. This involved repeatedly reading over the data (focus group transcripts, online comments and ethnographic fieldnotes) in an iterative process, drawing out initial codes that were then shaped into the themes that are outlined below. The theoretical lenses that were drawn on to identify codes in the data were youth voice (in particular ‘learner voice’ and ‘musical voice’ as noted above); classical music’s conventions; and ‘diversity’ whether of genre or demographic group. The interpretations reached, while grounded in the findings, are therefore specific to the theoretical lenses that were applied; an alternative theoretical lenses would have resulted in different findings from the same data.

The article structure follows the four themes that were identified in the data analysis. The first three themes focus on the first research question, exploring how the conventions of classical music shape young people’s voices, while the final theme and the conclusion explore routes towards, and challenges in, embedding youth voice in instrumental classical music education.

## **Theme one: Comparing musical decision-making in The Music Lab to participants’ existing instrumental education**

Similarly to Davis, I found that young people had ‘strong ideas about expressive musical decisions’.[[60]](#footnote-60) Participants got involved in musical decision-making quickly and easily, it seemed. In the small groups, while they did spend some of their time chatting or ‘messing around’ with their instruments rather than working on the task they had been assigned, there was also a substantial amount of musical decision-making going on, with comments such as ‘it sounds nice when…’, ‘what are we doing *here?*’, ‘how do we make it flow between groups? [when putting several parts together], or one group member saying to the others, ‘if you have ideas for the bass line just add it in’. One of the older participants (age 16) described his group’s process as follows:

It was like this journey of different ideas and some ideas went to a dead end because it sounded horrible sometimes, and sometimes it worked really well.

The group dynamics varied across the four groups (as explored below), but all of the groups were able to come up with musical material to share in the plenary sessions at the end of each day. During sharing sessions, young people appeared to have a strong sense of ownership over the musical material they had co-created.[[61]](#footnote-61)

In focus groups and informal discussions with participants during the breaks, it became clear that the mode of music-making that they were experiencing in The Music Lab formed a strong contrast with their instrumental education more generally. In the online session that was held before the workshops started, participants were asked to write down a time when they had, or hadn’t, had a say in their instrumental lessons. They gave examples of both ‘musical voice’ and ‘learner voice’: choosing to learn their instruments, choosing repertoire, and control over interpretation or composition. Typical examples of a time when they had had a say included ‘when I choose the grade pieces I do’, or another example was:

My violin teacher normally chooses the pieces and if I'm going to skip a grade. The time I had a decision was deciding to play the violin for the first time.

As exemplified in this quote, repertoire choice was an area where many participants felt they did not get a say. This finding is in line with Nielsen et al.’s survey of 151 music teachers in Norway, which found that particularly when teaching classical music (as opposed to popular music or other genres), teachers’ preferences and tastes were more influential than pupils’ preferences on choice of repertoire.[[62]](#footnote-62) Similarly, in David Barton’s survey of 486 private instrumental teachers in England, teachers stated that they did offer repertoire choice to pupils, but in reality these choices tended to be tightly circumscribed, for example ‘allowing pupils to choose from a selection of pieces pre-chosen by the teacher’.[[63]](#footnote-63)

Other than choosing repertoire or choosing what instrument to learn, most examples related to musical voice, and participants gave more examples of times when they had not had a say than when they had. One example was an attempt at interpretive decision-making:

Once with a teacher, I put in my own phrase and breath marks but my teacher told me it was incorrect and changed them all – but I didn't think it sounded good!

While this intervention by the teacher might have been intended to help the student improve their technical mastery, the student experienced it as a correction which failed to support her own musical voice.

Another description of a student’s musical voice being ‘corrected’ was as follows:

I wanted to add other aspects to the piece I was playing, but when I tried it out, [my teacher] listened and said it wasn’t how to play

These examples show that some of the young people in The Music Lab were experiencing instrumental learning as correction or being told that their musical voice was not acceptable. Despite ongoing work to shift the ‘traditional model’ of instrumental teaching towards a more dialogic one,[[64]](#footnote-64) these experiences suggest that there is still a long way to go with this work. Indeed, it seemed that creative music-making workshops along the lines of The Music Lab were not the norm for participants; only five out of the 19 volunteered that they had previously been involved in any creative music-making sessions or workshops; some also described doing Musical Futures-style learning in secondary schools[[65]](#footnote-65) but that this did not involve their own creative input. For most participants, being engaged in creative music-making that gave space for their own musical voice appeared to be new.

## **Theme two: Exploring how participants understood classical music as a genre**

From the findings presented so far, it was clear that the young people participating in The Music Lab had, for the most part, experienced a relatively conservative model of instrumental education. This is not surprising since, in the UK, the majority of instrumental teachers have not had any training and therefore are likely to be relying on teaching the way they were taught.[[66]](#footnote-66) However, rather than holding individual teachers solely responsible, it is instead important to understand the wider structures and institutions that are shaping teachers’ practices. These include the genre conventions, and associated pedagogic practices, of classical music. Some of these have already become clear in the previous section, in which participants described teachers choosing their repertoire for them; upholding the genre convention of fidelity to the score;[[67]](#footnote-67) and engaging in the ‘pedagogy of correction’.[[68]](#footnote-68)

Indeed, when we explored participants’ understandings of ‘classical music’, the young people’s descriptions included many of the genre conventions of classical music that are familiar from critical literature in this area.[[69]](#footnote-69) Fidelity to the score was seen as being important to classical music as a genre. For example, as one participant described:

So if you're playing a piece of classical music and I don't know, there's a tremolo in there and you don't want to play the tremolo ‘cos it sounds bad, but you have to play it ‘cos that's part of the music, otherwise it won't be classical music.

Other points of agreement outlined the association between aesthetic and social conventions. When discussing the question of what classical music is, one participant gave this answer:

Really old stuff. Like just... really old songs that everyone knows for some reason, that are normally played on orchestras, a piano or a violin or something and you can't really change it unless you're really brave and you've got to do it in front of the teacher

Here, this participant gives a comprehensive overview theorising the genre through the instruments and repertoire, as well as outlining how the genre convention of fidelity to the score and the composer’s intentions are produced through hierarchical relations of teaching and learning. The aesthetic convention of fidelity to the score (‘you can’t really change it’) is directly associated with the social relations of classical music pedagogy via the master-apprentice model (‘you’ve got to do it in front of the teacher’).

Most importantly for this discussion, in some cases participants perceived the principles of youth voice to be directly opposed to classical music’s genre conventions. One participant described how:

I think it's just very structured, you don't get to interpret a piece how you want, it's like, this is a sad song so you have to play it sad, and if you think something sounds better in forte, it's 'no it's mezzo piano, you're doing it wrong'.

This participant explicitly states that ‘you don’t get to interpret a piece how you want’. Their musical voice is positioned as unimportant compared to the genre convention of fidelity to the composer’s intentions.

On the whole, there was broad agreement about what ‘classical music’ as a term referred to, and many of the young people were critical of its genre conventions, in some cases passionately so. But despite these critical perspectives, it was clear that classical music’s conventions were shaping their musical decision-making even in The Music Lab where their ‘musical voices’ were explicitly supported. The most obvious way in which this occurred was through a reliance on notation. In the process of devising musical material most of the groups used flipchart paper to note down the structure of their pieces of music. This was to help them remember their piece, or to make sure they agreed on the structure.[[70]](#footnote-70) Another example of use of notation occurred in a group that was building on a recording that one of their group had brought in. Rather than learning the piece by ear, as we had done on the first day, two members of the group (the two violinists) searched online to find the sheet music for the piece and then read the music off their phones. This seemed to be their default way of operating and was carried out without much discussion. These two examples of relying on notation in different ways seemed to suggest a habitual reliance on a written text, as is the norm in classical music, rather than trusting to their musical memories or improvisatory ability. Therefore, while participants were critical of some of classical music’s genre conventions, others were accepted uncritically.

## Theme three: The power relations created by the ‘institutional ecology’ of instrumental education

Perhaps the most compelling finding from this project around the role of classical music’s genre conventions related to the wider ‘institutional ecology’[[71]](#footnote-71) that these young people were operating in, and how this ‘ecology’ shaped their musical voices. My argument here builds on ideas introduced above about the power relations that create voices. As Arnot and Reay suggest, ‘voice cannot change power relations, but shifts in power relations can change ‘‘voices’’’.[[72]](#footnote-72) While we went some way towards shifting classical music’s genre conventions in The Music Lab, there still remained wider institutional power relations that could not be altered by any actions taken in this space.

This discussion also reveals how the wider institutional ecology of classical music shaped young people’s musical voices. By ‘institutional ecology’ I am referring to the ‘framework of organisations that make up the classical music world’.[[73]](#footnote-73) This ‘ecology’ consisted of mapping all the groups and institutions that young people participated in as part of their musical lives. This analysis revealed that the classical music education institutions set up in the late nineteenth-century – grade exam boards and conservatoires – were still heavily influential in the lives of the young classical musicians today. Any discussion of classical music as a genre within the context of music education therefore needs to take into account this institutional framing in shaping the circulation of common ‘orientations, expectations and conventions’[[74]](#footnote-74) that form and reproduce the genre.

The importance of this institutional ecology was also apparent in The Music Lab. To illustrate this, below I have reproduced a transcript from one of the focus groups in which we were talking about playing interpretations that are different to what the composer intended. Nate, the main discussant, was a 13-year-old Black boy from a working-class background who had been relatively quiet in the discussion until this point. There were four other participants in the focus group, three who were white middle-class and one from a white immigrant family whose class position was unclear; their comments are not individually attributed as the speakers were not fully clear from the focus group transcript.

Anna: Why don't you think people usually do that? [i.e. do things differently to what the composer wrote]

Nate: In grade exams if you do something different to how the piece is written, the examiner will mark you wrong.

Anna: So that's why you wouldn't do it differently?

Nate: If I was practising for an exam

Anna: What about if you weren't practising for exams? Would you do it the same or differently? […]

Nate: I mean, different, because you're not really being tested for anything, you're not really being watched so you can do anything you want with it, because you're not going to go and show it to some people who are marking it, you're just doing it for fun.

Anna: So do you guys agree with Nate, if you're not doing it for an exam you should mess around with it?

[several people] Yeah

Anna: And do you guys do that?

Sometimes [one person], yeah [two people]

Anna: Are your teachers ok with that?

[several voices]: No; Not really; No - Sometimes, I don't know

I do it at home

Yeah

Sometimes, once I've practised

Anna: So you do your own thing at home?

Yeah, Sometimes, if I've practised it properly then after

Anna: You also said no, your teacher doesn't let you, Nate, can you say more about that? Why's that?

Nate: Because she's very strict on what I do, like she really wants me to pass exams.

From this discussion, first of all it is clear that the genre convention of fidelity to the score is reproduced through the disciplining mechanisms of grade exams, as Nate explains. The wider power relations of instrumental education in the UK context are clearly created in a large part by institutions including grade exam boards. Indeed, in Nate’s account, grade exams and the correcting gaze of the examiner – as channelled through his teacher, who wants him to do well in exams – are *the* reason why the genre conventions of instrumental teaching and learning cannot be changed. Voice cannot change these power relations; this example shows the limit to what a focus on youth voice can do in the context of this wider institutional ecology that upholds the genre conventions of classical music education.

A further genre convention is revealed in this discussion: the discourse of classical music being ‘serious’ and other genres of music being ‘fun’.[[75]](#footnote-75) The young people in this study – similarly to my previous research with young classical musicians – saw ‘hard work’ as part of learning ‘proper’ classical music, while the creative ‘messing around’ that The Music Lab involved was not valued or validated by the institutional ecology and the genre conventions of classical music. ‘Doing your own thing’ and ‘doing it for fun’ were described as something to do *after* participants had ‘practised properly’, rather than being an integral part of their music education. This focus on classical music as ‘work’ is, I have argued, one of the genre conventions that maintains classical music’s status as ‘serious’ and as more valuable than other genres, which by comparison are seen as ‘fun’. Similarly, here, we can see that from these participants’ perspectives, this hierarchy of value is upheld – in their minds – primarily by the dominance of grade exams.

Despite this hierarchy of ‘proper practice’ being valued over ‘doing your own thing’, it became evident through discussions with The Music Lab participants across the two days of the workshop that many of them were engaged in creative-music-making on their own at home. This appeared to be taking place independently of their formal lessons, without institutional support or the support of teachers. One example was described by two friends, Grace and Sienna. They were both learning with the same teacher, who they described as ‘very very strict’, explaining that she ‘mostly just will work on grades’. Alongside this formal instrumental education, both of them engaged privately in creative music-making on their violins at home. Sienna told me how she plays along to songs she likes, playing long notes as harmonies or drones. Grace described how:

I’d go online and search for tunes I like, like the Avengers theme tune and play it just because I like it. But I didn't always feel like I could play it that well because my teacher didn't help me [with it]. But if I'm doing something like that on the side it makes me want to play the violin more because I enjoy it.

For both girls, this way of music-making was a tactic they used to sustain their enjoyment in playing, or as Sienna put it, ‘I try to train my brain to think “violin - that's not a chore”’. The other advantage of creative musical exploration outside of formal lessons was that ‘You do [your own thing] much more when you're alone. You don't have everyone saying, “hold the bow properly”’. Similarly, as Grace described:

It feels like I'm not being judged while I'm playing [on my own at home]. Obviously my mum can hear but I'll be like, I'm not going to practice, I'm just going to play something random, she's like, ok, and it doesn't put pressure with people watching, if I mess up it doesn't feel bad.

This discussion reveals the distance between young people’s self-directed, private music-making, and their formal music education. However, this exploration of their musical voices was occurring outside of, and separately to, their formal instrumental education, even while they used it as a strategy to maintain their interest and commitment to learning their instruments.

Drawing on a genre studies approach, institutions – such as grade exam boards – are part of the framework that forms and reproduces genre. The influence of institutions, and how genre conventions circulate through institutions, is, in this way, connected with the social and aesthetic conventions of classical music. In this way the genre conventions of classical music affect possibilities for youth voice in teaching and learning. To relate this to the dual focus on voice that I introduced above, it shows that while young people in this study were not necessarily enabled to have a ‘learner voice’ whereby they could have a say in how they learn, they were still developing their ‘musical voice’ independently, even if this had to take place in secret and remained unsupported by formal music education.

## **Theme four: The role of peer interactions in shaping voices**

The final theme considers the ways in which peer interactions were shaping participants’ voices in order to allow a discussion of youth voice as dialogic.[[76]](#footnote-76) This contributes towards addressing the second research question of how young people’s voices can be embedded in classical music education. In discussing the development of ‘learner voice’ in instrumental teaching and learning, [Després](https://www.frontiersin.org/people/u/733227) and Dubé’s recommendations include ‘explor[ing] avenues to build and realize the full potential of social connections with peers’. [[77]](#footnote-77) Similarly, as discussed above, Gary Spruce argues that pupil voices always exist in relation to an ‘other’ in a dialogic model. These ‘others’ can include wider musical influences, but also peer influences. In The Music Lab, these peer influences included the voices of others in their small groups. Nevertheless, it is important, as Catherina Christopherson describes, to challenge a 'stereotypical and problematic perception of collaborative learning environments as purely consensual and dialogical communities'. Instead, ‘acknowledging the presence of power and conflict is necessary if a nuanced concept of collaborative learning in […] music education is to be developed'.[[78]](#footnote-78)

Social relations between peers became much more important in The Music Lab than is usual in classical music education due to participants’ spending much of their time working in small groups, often without an adult or tutor present. Perhaps surprisingly, however, my ethnographic observations found that the musical-decision making taking place in The Music Lab appeared to be relatively inclusive. While participants who were more articulate and confident contributed more, these contributions didn’t clearly map onto age, class, race or gender. For example, in one group, two working-class Black boys were both giving their input confidently and clearly, and in other groups many of the girls – including younger girls – were also taking leadership roles. In fact, the musical activities seemed to be more inclusive than the socialising that took place during breaks, whereby the groupings that young people self-organised into were more obviously patterned by gender, age, and to some degree race and class.[[79]](#footnote-79) However, it is important to note that the ways in which social identities were shaping interactions were not necessarily fully apparent to an observer, not least given the weight of evidence that inequalities shape participation; as Howe and Abedin found in their review of four decades of studies of classroom discussion, ‘student participation is not equally distributed around the classroom, but heavily dependent on such factors as gender, ethnicity and history of attainment’.[[80]](#footnote-80)

Despite these observations, small group working still proved to be challenging. Indeed**,** one group had entirely disintegrated by late morning on the second day. Two members of the group – both 11-year-old girls – split off to work together on their own piece, while the other two members of the group drifted off on their own or joined another group. This indicates the difficulties of working across age, ability, gender, race and class differences. Indeed, in my previous research with young classical musicians, I found that young people were unwilling to work with those with a perceived lower level of ability to themselves and only wanted to work with those at a similar or higher level of ability. While in The Music Lab, this attitude was much less present – perhaps supported by the devised nature of the music-making whereby participants could come up with parts that suited their abilities – other difficulties arose which affected participants’ musical voices.

One of the biggest challenges appeared to be the lack of skills in ‘deliberative talk’ to enable participants to make collaborative musical decisions**.** The concept of ‘deliberative talk’ comes from human rights education and involves a set of shared principles for discussion, including truthful expression of one’s views, providing justifications for these views, being open to changing one’s mind, and thinking of the common good rather than solely individual self-interest.[[81]](#footnote-81) While these principles need to be adapted to be appropriate for creative decision-making, the focus on exploring processes for decision-making is one that was needed by groups in The Music Lab. Across all of the four groups, to different extents, creative decision-making appeared to be ad hoc, even chaotic. Furthermore, when one member of the group disagreed with an interpretive decision, the young people were not, for the most part, able to effectively deal with this situation. An example of this occurred in a group I participated in on the morning of the second day. I noticed that one member of the group, Ryan, wasn’t contributing as much as the others. During a hiatus in the session, he turned to me and asked ‘which one sounds better?’, playing a short passage from the piece they’d devised the previous day. He played two versions: one with a dissonance and one without. His group had chosen to play the dissonance, overriding his preference for the version without the dissonance. He was clearly still mulling it over and was appealing to me as an adult with authority over what was correct or incorrect; he argued that the piece was supposed to be in D minor so including an F sharp – the dissonance – was wrong. This disagreement exemplifies the decision-making process in this group, where suggestions for new ideas were either adopted immediately, or ignored, without any discussion of why they were being accepted or rejected. In this case, such an approach had led to Ryan feeling that his expressive voice hadn’t been listened to. As a result, he withdrew from making further suggestions to his group.

Research on young people’s deliberative discussion shows that this is a skill that is lacking in education settings in general, not just in music education. This is at least in part due to the dominance of modes of pedagogy that are ‘teacher centred and hierarchically controlled, so that talk largely flows through the teacher and adheres closely to their concerns’.[[82]](#footnote-82) Therefore, in their study of deliberative dialogue within secondary school citizenship classrooms in the UK, Lee Jerome, Anna Liddle and Helen Young argued that ‘educators need to value the process of deliberative discussions and avoid a push for conclusive answers’.[[83]](#footnote-83) In keeping with this wider educational context in which deliberative discussion is not taught or learnt, within the normal genre conventions of classical music education, skills in group decision-making appear not to be foregrounded. In my previous research, I found that while young people in youth music groups emphasised their agency within youth choir or youth orchestra rehearsals, in reality very few asked questions or made contributions.[[84]](#footnote-84) These findings suggest that music teachers could draw on Jerome *et al.*’s resource for helping teachers to support deliberative classrooms.[[85]](#footnote-85)

For the purposes of this article, it is clear that the development of ‘dialogic’ voice in music education, as described by Spruce, requires attention to deliberative discussion in ways that go beyond – and sometimes may go against – classical music’s genre norms of ‘getting it right’. Similarly to Jerome *et al.’s* findings in secondary school classroom’s in the UK that ‘task completion’ was seen as valuable in a way that inhibited deliberative discussion,[[86]](#footnote-86) ‘getting it right’ seems to contribute towards a closing down rather than an opening up of possibilities, and relies on teacher-directed ‘correction’ which does not develop skills in consensus or discussion. This meant that in The Music Lab, participants were not (for the most part) able to draw on developed levels of deliberative skills in peer group creativity to overcome differences of opinion or deal with conflict. As a result, lack of deliberative discussion in some cases inhibited the development of participants' musical voices. This is therefore an important area to address in embedding youth voice in instrumental classical music education.

# **Concluding discussion: can youth voice contribute to diversifying classical music?**

The first research question for this study asked to what extent classical music’s genre conventions shaped young people’s musical voices. Young people in The Music Lab had a clear perception of classical music’s genre conventions. The first convention that they identified as shaping musical voice was ‘getting it right’ or the ‘pedagogy of correction’, in which the overwhelming focus on correction – whether technical or ‘musical’ – meant that in cases where pupils did not want to prioritise getting it right, this was not able to be voiced. The second convention identified was around the dominance of grade exams. This led to – or justified – a lack of choice over repertoire as well as modes of teaching and learning where pupils were primarily working on exam preparation, within a model of musical progression that foregrounded technical progress. Third, and related to this, was the genre convention of ‘hard work’ which was prioritised over creative messing around. This was also described as ‘practicing properly’ versus ‘doing your own thing’. I have argued that this upholds classical music’s status as ‘serious’ versus other types of music-making as ‘fun’. Indeed, outside of their instrumental lessons, young people were finding ways of exploring their musical voice and playing the types of music they chose, but this ‘undercover’ music-making was seen by participants a way to keep up their motivation for learning their instrument rather than as part of the ’work’ of learning an instrument. Fourthly, the genre norm of fidelity to the score and/or the composer’s intentions was still very present in young people’s understandings of classical music and the teaching that they were experiencing. This echoes Small’s description of the hierarchy of composer-performer-audience as one of the genre conventions of classical music.[[87]](#footnote-87) Fifthly, as has been explored at length in existing literature, the ‘traditional’ or ‘master-apprentice’ model – whereby teaching and learning classical music involves a hierarchical relationship between teacher and pupil – disallowed or discouraged young people’s musical decision-making. And finally, while young people didn’t explicitly identify it, a further genre convention that was visible in The Music Lab was a reliance on written notation.

Out of these genre conventions, the first five – ‘getting it right’; the dominance of grade exams; ‘practicing properly’ rather than ‘doing your own thing’; fidelity to the score and the composer’s intentions; and the ‘master-apprentice’ model – were all identified by young people as ways in which their musical voices were inhibited. Despite having a clear sense of the ways in which they wanted to draw on their ‘musical voices’ in their instrumental education, these were seen as untenable within the ‘traditional model’ of classical music education as they directly opposed classical music’s genre conventions. Young people were highly aware of the wider conditions that shaped their voices, in particular the ‘institutional ecology’ of music education. In this way, while young people wanted to act as ‘social change agents’ within classical music by challenging its genre conventions, the power relations that shaped their voices inhibited this possibility. Overall, the findings outlined above demonstrate that it is not possible to bring a youth voice approach into classical music education without disrupting its genre conventions and aesthetic norms.

Nevertheless, to answer the second research question – how can youth voice be embedded within instrumental classical music education – this study has identified concrete ways forward in which instrumental teachers can incorporate youth voice. First, a ‘youth voice’ approach in instrumental classical music education has to make space for *both* learner voice and musical voice. There is a risk that only ‘learner voices’ are elicited, whereby young people are asked about how they want to learn, but are not given the chance to explore their *musical* voices and decide for themselves what sounds good. Second, exploring ‘musical voice’ may involve challenging the genre conventions of classical music. In particular, the convention of fidelity to the score and to the composer’s intentions should be loosened or abandoned. Instead, pupils can be encouraged towards freedom of interpretation, for example changing the tempo or dynamics, or adding in elements that they have devised themselves. Fundamentally, this is about allowing pupils to make decisions about what sounds good, even if their preferences go against aesthetic conventions of good taste. Third, young people can be given meaningful choices of repertoire. This means moving beyond tokenistic modes of repertoire choice where pupils are allowed to ‘choose’ between a handful of pieces pre-selected by teachers or exam boards. Instead, teachers need to find ways of supporting young people to play the music that excites them. As this study showed, young people were already finding ways to play the music they wanted to play but this was sometimes taking place in secret without any support from their teachers.

Fourth, teachers need to engage learner voice in order to allow learners to choose the mode of correction that they prefer. This means giving pupils a say in when/how they want to be corrected. Some pupils may want high levels of correction while others may want none, and these preferences may change over time. As I have argued elsewhere, ‘a wider discussion of the purpose and impacts of correction’ is needed.[[88]](#footnote-88) Fifth, drawing on Spruce’s discussion of voice as dialogic, I have outlined ways in which peer-to-peer interactions affected musical voice, describing how lack of skill in deliberative discussion inhibited participants’ abilities to make musical decisions as a group, therefore leading to some feeling that their voices were not being heard. Resources are needed to help teachers to build pupils’ skills in deliberative discussion so that young people are better able to negotiate creative differences in group work with peers.

Finally, teachers can make space to discuss with pupils the social and institutional structures and power relations that shape young people’s musical voices. As Live Ellefsen has suggested,

In addressing the “genring” that creates “genres” and sustaining the idea that music is “genred” rather than “belongs to genres,” music teachers may enable discussions about and understandings of the various social functions of music. They could bring to students’ attention the procedures that naturalize, canonize, and historicize music and musicians and thereby the procedures that may trivialize and exclude musical acts.[[89]](#footnote-89)

I would add, not only can the social functions of music be discussed, but the aesthetic itself should not be separated from the social in these discussions. The genre conventions of classical music – such as the hierarchy of composer over performer, the musical work as an integrated whole, or valuing harmonic complexity over other musical qualities – can also be made visible as acts of ‘genring’ which should be open to discussion and challenge.

Some of these changes – most notably the changes to aesthetic conventions that would result from abandoning fidelity to the score – will open up possibilities for classical music as a genre to change. This kind of openness to variation would be in keeping with the ways in which other genres (whether in music or in other cultural forms such as television, film, or fiction) evolve over time in a complex interplay of repetition and difference.[[90]](#footnote-90) Such an evolution could, therefore, open up possibilities for the creative and social renewal of classical music.

There are some limitations to this study. First, it was a short-term, small-scale project. Questions remain, therefore, about what would happen when these kinds of practices are carried out in a longer-term way. In addition, this article has not discussed parental involvement, which was an important theme in young people’s discussions and was clearly an influence on young people’s participation in The Music Lab; in fact, one participant described how his mother had signed him up to the project without asking him – ironically for a project on youth voice. Furthermore, while this study focused on young people learning within a classical style, it is important to acknowledge that youth voice may also be inhibited in other genres. However, genre-specific approaches to addressing youth voice are needed, and it is particularly important to study the genre conventions of classical music education because classical music forms the basis for much wider music education pedagogy.[[91]](#footnote-91) Finally, this cohort of young people might have been distinctive, due to being located in Lewisham – a musically fertile area – and having signed up for an experimental workshop. Nevertheless, the findings from this study suggest that for some young people at least, there is an appetite for doing things differently. This finding goes against Geoff Baker’s and my previous studies among older teenagers, where we found resistance to changing classical music pedagogies.

Returning to the discussion of diversity that this article opened with, I will finish by asking whether challenging classical music’s conventions can contribute to greater social diversity within those learning and playing it. To what extent does this kind of work have the potential to change the aesthetic of classical music in order to allow it to become more inclusive? It is important not to assume that changing the aesthetic will automatically lead to social diversity; indeed, a danger in projects such as The Music Lab is that opportunities are improved for confident middle-class children who already have a plethora of options, without any changes for less privileged young people. Furthermore, as Anne Schreffler’s discussion of the new music scene in the US notes, changing aesthetic norms can in fact create even more boundaries around race and gender, rather than opening up access to under-represented groups.[[92]](#footnote-92) As noted in theme three, above, embedding a youth voice approach does not necessarily change anything about the structures that have created these patterns of exclusions in the first place. Having said that, however, the creative music-making activities that were carried out in The Music Lab did, I would argue, have the potential to lead to musical and social diversification of classical music. For example, young people were, for the most part, willing to work across different levels of ability, in contrast with my previous research on young classical musicians. Furthermore, by exploring music-making activities that were outside the normal conventions of instrumental teaching and learning, young people were also opening up possibilities for collaborations across different social groups. This means that rather than classical music working as a space for social closure by segregating young people from middle and upper-class families into an extracurricular social space (as I found in *Class, Control, and Classical Music*[[93]](#footnote-93)), workshops such as The Music Lab can facilitate music-making across genres and technologies of music-making. This means that social closure among classed groups – while still possible – is less inevitable.

To conclude, incorporating youth voice into classical music education *can* contribute to diversifying it, but does not necessarily do so. There are various factors that need to be in place in order to support greater diversity. Wider institutional change – including changing the power relations that shape voices – is also necessary. Most notably, as I have highlighted in this article, embedding youth voice approaches in classical music means opening up the possibility of challenging its genre conventions. In contrast with my previous research, young people in this study were heavily critical of the ways in which the genre conventions of classical music instrumental education did not allow space for youth voice – whether ‘learner voice’ or ‘musical voice’. These findings show that young people will act as ‘social change agents’ in classical music, if they are given the space to do so.

1. Pozo Municio, Juan Ignacio, José Antonio Torrado, and Lucas Bano. ‘Teaching Music: Old Traditions and New Approaches’. In *Learning and Teaching in the Music Studio: A Student-Centred Approach*, edited by Juan Ignacio Pozo Municio, María Puy Pérez Echeverría, Guadalupe López-Íñiguez, and José Antonio Torrado, 21–46. (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2022), 42 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Pozo et al., ‘Teaching Music’*,* 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Convention on the Rights of the Child.* (United Nations, 1989). <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child> (accessed 22 December 2022) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See for example Boghossian, Paul, and Michael Beckerman, eds., *Classical Music: Contemporary Perspectives and Challenges* (Open Book, 2021); Cox, Tamsin, and Hannah Kilshaw, *Creating a More Inclusive Classical Music. Executive Summary* (DHA and ICM, 2021) <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Executive_Summary.pdf> (accessed 21 February 2023); Bull, Anna, Laudan Nooshin, and Christina Scharff, eds., *Voices for Change in the Classical Music Profession: New Ideas for Tackling Inequalities and Exclusions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See for example Després, Jean-Philippe and Dubé, Francis, ‘The Music Learner Voice: A Systematic Literature Review and Framework’, *Frontiers in Education*, 5 (2020); Spruce, Gary, ‘Music Education, Social Justice, and the “Student Voice”’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Justice in Music Education*, ed. by Cathy Benedict, Patrick Schmidt, Gary Spruce, and Paul Woodford (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2015), 287–301 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bull, Anna. *Class, Control, and Classical Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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17. Malone and Hartung, ‘Challenges of participatory practice with children’, 33 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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49. Bull, Anna. *Class, Control, and Classical Music* [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. ‘Hubs’ were established in 2012 following the National Plan for Music Education, replacing local authority music services. As Ally Daubney and colleagues describe: ‘Hubs comprise groups of organisations – such as local authority music services, schools, other Hubs, Arts organisations, community or voluntary organisations. The Hubs were designed to augment and support music teaching in schools […] so that more children could experience a combination of classroom teaching, instrumental and vocal tuition and input from professional musicians’ See: Daubney, Ally, Spruce, Gary, Annetts, Deborah,. Music Education: State of the Nation. All-Party Parliamentary Group for Music Education, Incorporated Society of Musicians (Brighton, University of Sussex, 2019), 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. de St Croix, Tania, *Grassroots Youth Work: Policy, Passion and Resistance in Practice* (Policy Press, 2016), 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Seven self-identified as white, three as mixed race, two as British Chinese, one ‘Asian’, and five who were of Black African or Caribbean descent. One participant described themselves simply as ‘British’. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. In order to understand class position, participants were asked about their parents’ occupations and their eligibility for free school meals, a measure of income. 11 (58%) had parents who were in jobs that clearly placed the young people as upper-middle or middle class, in NS-SEC 1 or 2, against 45% of the adult population in Lewisham. See Local Government Association, ‘Explore Data’ (Local Government Association, 2022) <https://lginform.local.gov.uk/dataAndReports/explorer?category=200006> (accessed 28 June 2022)). Four participants described semi-skilled or unskilled jobs, and three answered that they were ‘unsure’ when asked if their parents did paid work. A further marker of class in the UK is whether pupils are eligible for free school meals (measured on income) and out of the 19 pupils, three were on free school meals and one was unsure. This means that 16% (or possibly 21%) of pupils were on free school meals, as opposed to 28% of secondary school pupils in Lewisham (against a national average of 22.2%). See: Local Government Association, ‘Percentage of Secondary School Pupils Known to Be Eligible for Free School Meals in Lewisham’ (Local Government Association, 2022) <https://lginform.local.gov.uk/reports/lgastandard?mod-metric=2174&mod-area=E09000023&mod-group=AllBoroughInRegion_London&mod-type=namedComparisonGroup> (accessed 28 June 2022) [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
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56. A pedagogy that supports this approach is being developed by Helen Dromey in her PhD research looking at string teaching for pupils progressing after experiencing Whole Class Ensemble Teaching (a statutory requirement in music education ‘hubs’ in England). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. This is in line with the British Educational Research Association’s guidelines: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018-online>, 27, paragraph 40 (accessed 21 February 2023) [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
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60. Davis, Sharon D., ‘Fostering a “Musical Say”’, p.279 [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. This finding is similar to other studies exploring small group informal learning in school music education. See for example: Evans, Siân E., Gary Beauchamp, and Vivienne John, ‘Learners’ Experience and Perceptions of Informal Learning in Key Stage 3 Music: A Collective Case Study, Exploring the Implementation of Musical Futures in Three Secondary Schools in Wales’, *Music Education Research*, 17.1 (2015), 1–16 [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Nielsen, Siw Graabræk, Anne Jordhus-Lier, and Sidsel Karlsen, ‘Selecting Repertoire for Music Teaching: Findings from Norwegian Schools of Music and Arts’, *Research Studies in Music Education*, 2022, [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Barton, David. ‘The Autonomy of Private Instrumental Teachers: Its Effect on Valid Knowledge Construction, Curriculum Design, and Quality of Teaching and Learning’. (PhD dissertation, Royal College of Music, 2020), 150 [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
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65. The ‘Musical Futures’ mode of informal learning, devised by Lucy Green, relies on small group, self-directed learning within the school music curriculum whereby pupils learn music by ear from recordings. However, unlike Musical Futures, The Music Lab did not involve copying recordings but rather devising their own music based on an existing piece, including classical pieces. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Norton *et al.* in a survey of 496 instrumental music teachers in the UK during 2013-14 found that over two-thirds did not hold any teaching qualifications, and only a third had done any continuing professional development training in teaching. Similarly Boyle’s (2020) survey of 388 instrumental teachers in the UK found that the majority of respondents started teaching without any training at all, nor had they done any formal CPD during their careers. Kerry Boyle, *The Instrumental Music Teacher: Autonomy, Identity and the Portfolio Career in Music* (London: Routledge, 2020); Naomi Norton, Jane Ginsborg, and Alinka Greasley, ‘Instrumental and Vocal Teachers in the United Kingdom: Demographic Characteristics, Educational Pathways, and Beliefs about Qualification Requirements’, *Music Education Research*, 21.5 (2019), 560–81 [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
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68. Bull, Anna. ‘Getting it Right’ [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. See for example Bull, Anna. *Class, Control, and Classical Music*; Goehr (1992); Green, Lucy, ‘Why “Ideology” Is Still Relevant for Critical Thinking in Music Education.’, *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*, 2.2 (2003), 1–24; Small, Christopher, *Music, Society, Education*, Music / Culture (Hanover N.H.; London: University Press of New England, 1996) [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. In Marín and Echeverría’s typology of the function of musical scores as ‘pragmatic’ and/or ‘epistemic’, the young musicians in The Music Lab were clearly using scores for a pragmatic function, i.e. to reduce cognitive effort. See: Marín, Christina and María Puy Pérez Echeverría. ‘Reading Music. The Use of Scores in Music Learning and Teaching’. In *Learning and Teaching in the Music Studio: A Student-Centred Approach*, edited by Juan Ignacio Pozo Municio, María Puy Pérez Echeverría, Guadalupe López-Íñiguez, and José Antonio Torrado. (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2022), 199 [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Bull, Anna. *Class, Control, and Classical Music* [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Arnot and Reay, ‘A Sociology of Pedagogic Voice’, 316 [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
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75. Bull, Anna, and Christina Scharff, ‘“McDonalds” Music’ Versus “Serious Music”: How Production and Consumption Practices Help to Reproduce Class Inequality in the Classical Music Profession’, *Cultural Sociology*, 11.3 (2017), 283–301 [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
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78. Christophersen, Catharina, ‘Perspectives on the Dynamics of Power within Collaborative Learning in Higher Education’, in *Collaborative Learning in Higher Music Education*, ed. by Helena Gaunt and Heidi Westerlund. (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
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