Getting it right: Why classical music’s “pedagogy of correction” is a barrier to equity

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Most of us will agree the importance of precision and accuracy when playing learning music. Playing the right notes in the right order, in tune and in time, is surely a prerequisite for a successful performance. This is true across many genres of music, but in classical music, with its ideals of being faithful to the score and the composer’s intentions, it perhaps reaches its zenith. This requirement for precision and accuracy is apparent in the way music teachers prioritise technical ability[[1]](#endnote-1), and in the qualities that examiners and judges look for in a successful performance. For example, in international instrumental exams the marks scheme includes “accuracy”, “security of notes” and “correct notes”, all the way from beginners through to advanced players[[2]](#endnote-2). But it’s not just about getting through exams. Musicologist Lawrence Kramer in his book ‘Why Classical Music Still Matters’ goes further, and suggests that precision and detail are, in a large part, where the beauty and value of classical music reside[[3]](#endnote-3).

But can we go too far in our quest for accuracy and precision? Where does the balance lie between getting it right and letting pupils go their own way? And most importantly for those of us interested in questions of equity and social justice in music education, what are the implications of this “pedagogy of correction” for inclusion of children and young people from marginalised groups? An erstwhile pianist and music educator myself, when I carried out research with young people playing in classical music ensembles in England I began to notice patterns of exclusion and marginalisation that seemed to be linked to its pedagogic practices. The priority placed on getting it right above young people finding their musical voice was benefiting some groups at the expense of others. As a result I began to ask, have we gone too far with our quest for accuracy?

I delved into research on literacy to see if researchers who work on reading had asked similar questions. I found that there was a huge wealth of research and discussion about the role of correction in literacy education, asking when, how, and why teachers should correct students when they made mistakes. But in music education, there exists only a small body of research on this topic. Music education researchers have found that teachers spend a large proportion of lessons stopping pupils to correct errors. For example, Jennifer Blackwell, in a recent study observing instrumental lessons given by two highly expert teachers, found that two-thirds of student errors resulted in the student stopping playing to be corrected by the teacher, and younger pupils were stopped more frequently than older students[[4]](#endnote-4). This, then, is the gold standard of classical music education: being stopped and corrected for two out of every three mistakes you make. But a wider discussion of the purpose and impacts of this correction in developing the student as a musician is absent from this literature.

As a sociologist, I am interested in questions around inequalities, diversity and inclusion in music education. In my research, I am also interested to hear from young musicians themselves about how they experience classical music. After carrying out research with young people playing in out-of-school youth classical music ensembles – youth orchestras, a youth choir and a youth opera group – I found that for the most part, they found these groups to be a hugely valuable, positive space where they bonded with other like-minded young people. But alongside this positive social scene, there was plenty of evidence of a culture of fear. This had little to do with the very dedicated adults running these groups, and much more to do with the culture of classical music education more generally. The young musicians told me that they were terrified of having to play solos, of being corrected in front of the group, or even just of playing in front of their fellow musicians. Not only that, but I found – in some groups more than others – that the main activity in rehearsals was correcting errors. Indeed, as I observed rehearsals, the only voice I could hear was that of the conductor giving instructions on intonation, ensemble, or accuracy to the young musicians. This level of correction was not only accepted but actively desired by the young musicians – if the conductor *didn’t* correct an error, then they would judge him negatively.

This is what I am calling the “pedagogy of correction” – a teaching practice where the majority of the pedagogic input consists of correction. It also relates to the questions of diversity and inclusion that I was interested in. It was clear from my research – and is evident in research more widely – that the children who do well in classical music overlap significantly with those who do well at school. Many like to argue that this is because classical music teaches cognitive skills and improves children’s academic achievement. However, in a recent meta-analysis of 54 high quality academic studies, researchers Giovanni Sala and Fernand Gobet found conclusively that “that engagement in music has no impact on people’s non-music cognitive skills or academic achievement”[[5]](#endnote-5). This is, perhaps, a shocking finding as in recent years the importance of music education has often been argued in terms of non-musical benefits. It forces us to go back to some fundamental questions about how music education is organised and who benefits from it.

Instead of music improving academic achievement, I think there is a different explanation of the overlap between these two areas – a sociological one. This is that the same qualities that are rewarded by mainstream schooling – obedience to the teacher’s authority, sitting still, following instructions – are those that allow pupils to reap benefits in classical music education. Indeed, decades ago, in France, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu made a similar argument when he found that children from middle-class families do well in school because there is a continuity between the culture of the school and the culture found at home, not least because teachers are drawn from the ranks of the middle-classes. As Bourdieu described it, those who know how to “play the game” are rewarded, while those who don’t even realise that they are breaking the rules are penalised[[6]](#endnote-6).

To me, this explanation goes a long way towards making sense of continuities between classical music success and academic achievement (alongside the fact that classical music education is simply more accessible to middle-class families, financially and because they are more likely to be familiar with it). This explanation also raises questions about the role of correction in classical music. How do different groups of young people react to the experience of having their errors continually corrected by a teacher or authority figure? Some young people, who understand the rules of the “classical music game”, take this correction in their stride and understand that it is not anything to do with their fundamental adequacy as a person. But for some of the young people in my study, especially those from less privileged or somehow marginalised backgrounds, the pedagogy of correction that was the bread-and-butter of their classical music education had a negative effect on them. For Andy, a young man from a working-class background who was playing in an elite youth orchestra, playing in front of his peers was “to do with putting yourself out there and having someone say, this is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong”. Miriam, a brass player, described how “my teacher at music college ripped me to shreds on a weekly basis, [… and ] I took it all as a sort of personal attack”[[7]](#endnote-7).

How, then, could we re-think our relationship to correcting errors, as music teachers? Is it time to ditch the ‘pedagogy of correction’ and work towards a more inclusive mode of education? A different approach is described by ethnomusicologist Byron Dueck in his study of working-class musicians in Canada[[8]](#endnote-8). One teacher in his research described a pedagogy of “non-interference” where the pupil explores and develops at their own pace, with the teacher taking a much less active role than in classical music education. This feels like a huge shift from the normal methods of classical music tuition. And of course there are huge barriers to this way forward. Moving beyond a “pedagogy of correction” would mean a shift in what we hear as valuable in classical music. But the pay-off, in terms of creating a more inclusive environment in music education and creating less fearful, more confident young musicians could just be worth it.

1. David Barton. “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. <http://researchonline.rcm.ac.uk/id/eprint/1715/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music. “Piano Syllabus 2021 & 2022.” ABRSM, 2020. <https://gb.abrsm.org/media/64599/piano-practical-syllabus-2021-2022-online-8-july-2020.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Lawrence Kramer. *Why Classical Music Still Matters*. Berkeley, Calif.; London: University of California Press, 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Jennifer Blackwel,. “Expertise in Applied Studio Teaching: Teachers Working with Multiple Levels of Learners.” *International Journal of Music Education* 38, no. 2 (May 1, 2020): 283–98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0255761419898312>. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Giovanni Sala and Fernand Gobet. “Cognitive and Academic Benefits of Music Training with Children: A Multilevel Meta-Analysis,” January 15, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/7s8wr>. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. Second Edition. London; Newbury Park, California: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1990. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Anna Bull. *Class, Control and Classical Music*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Byron Dueck. *Musical Intimacies and Indigenous Imaginaries: Aboriginal Music and Dance in Public Performance*. New York: OUP USA, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)