**‘Youth voice’ in instrumental education: learning from young people**

The United Nations Convention on Children’s Rights – which the UK has signed – gives children the right to express their views and these views being given ‘due weight’. But what does this mean for instrumental teachers in music education?

In order to explore how to embed ‘youth voice’ in classical music instrumental education, I worked with sector support organisation Sound Connections and Lewisham Music on a project called The Music Lab, together with music facilitator Isabella Mayne and youth worker Jacob Sakil. We spent two days with 19 young people in Lewisham devising pieces based on material from classical music and talking to them about how their voices could be heard in music education.

But first of all, what is youth voice? It’s helpful to separate it into two strands. First, ‘*learner* voice’ is the ways in which learners have a say in how they learn, for example, deciding what their goals are. Second, ‘*musical* voice’ is about young people’s creative voice, as expressed musically, for example, having a say in interpretive decisions such as tempo, dynamics or phrasing.

In The Music Lab, a simple way that young people told us they wanted a voice in their music education was through choosing repertoire that excited them, rather than having a choice between pieces pre-selected by teachers or exam boards. In order to play the music they wanted to, they told us they sometimes played it in secret, without support from their teachers.

A more ambitious form of ‘learner voice’ is letting young people choose the mode of correction that they prefer***.*** Sometimes, instrumental classical music education relies on a [‘pedagogy of correction’](https://doi.org/10.1177/00274321221085132), where the majority of teachers’ input consists of correcting mistakes. However, young people in this project described how this focus on correction could inhibit their ‘musical voice’. By contrast, young people described ‘messing around’ or creative musical exploration outside of formal lessons, they were freed from this ‘correction’ approach. One described how ‘It feels like I'm not being judged while I'm playing on my own at home. If I mess up it doesn't feel bad’.

Learner voice in this context would involve teachers giving pupils a say in when or how they want to be corrected. This might change over time – sometimes a pupil might want a lot of correction, while for a different piece or on a different day they might prefer not to be corrected.

Finally, an example of ‘musical voice’ is learners getting to interpret a piece in whatever way they want. Young people in The Music Lab were excited about the idea of having more of a say in interpretive decisions. But this could mean going against ideas of good taste or genre conventions of classical music, as expressed through their teacher’s advice. Genre conventions are the unspoken rules that are shared between everyone involved the genre. In classical music, genre conventions dictate that it is (usually) acoustic, not amplified; the music is played off a written score; and performers try to be faithful to the composer’s intentions.

However, musicologists Daniel Leech-Wilkinson and Anna Scott, through studying historic recordings, have revealed that the idea of interpretations that are ‘correct’ or ‘faithful’ to the composer’s intentions are often a myth. In Dan’s book ‘[Challenging Performance’](https://challengingperformance.com/) he describes how ideas of appropriate style or taste in classical music have changed over time:

What we think is proper to a composer or a score is already slightly different from what our teachers’ generation thought. And over a century, as [historical] recordings show, these differences accumulate to such an extent that musicianship becomes in some respects unrecognisable.

These findings reveal that there is much more space for creativity in classical music interpretation than many people realise. Indeed, for most young people in The Music Lab, being encouraged to develop their ‘musical voice’ through creative activities was new. This means that a key message for embedding youth voice in classical music education is to make sure to include ‘musical voice’ as well as ‘learner voice’. Young people want the chance to explore their musical voices and decide for themselves what sounds good.As one participant in The Music Lab said:

If people are playing something, it's their interpretation, so it can actually say quite a lot about who they are.

The challenge for teachers is to give young people space to find out what they want to say through music. The genre conventions of classical music are more fluid than you might think.

# Further reading:

If you are new to principles of youth voice, you may wish to start with The Music Lab [toolkit](https://issuu.com/soundconnections/docs/the_music_lab_-_toolkit) which introduces ‘youth voice’ in the context of instrumental music teaching:

<https://issuu.com/soundconnections/docs/the_music_lab_-_toolkit>

If you want to think about how to apply ‘youth voice’ to classical music instrumental education, you may find this discussion guide for teachers helpful:

<https://www.sound-connections.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Music-Lab-Summary-for-music-teachers_by_Anna-Bull.pdf>

And finally, if you want to read academic articles explaining the points above in more detail and presenting further findings from The Music Lab, the following articles by Anna Bull may be of interest:

* ‘Challenging Classical Music’s Genre Conventions: Findings from a Project on Youth Voice in Instrumental Education’. *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rma.2024.13>
* ‘Getting It Right: Why Classical Music’s “Pedagogy of Correction” Is a Barrier to Equity’. *Music Educators Journal* <https://doi.org/10.1177/00274321221085132>.