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What is music education for?

Understanding and fostering routes into lifelong musical engagement

Abstract

Music education has a long history of defending its place in the school curriculum, with practitioners and researchers alike arguing for the creative, social and cognitive benefits of music in young people's lives. However, the fact that these arguments are continually being made suggests that they are not being sufficiently heard by politicians, headteachers, parents and others who still need persuading. Those who doubt the benefits of musical learning – or more likely give them very little thought – are themselves the product of their own music education, just as much as the many amateur musicians and music listeners, a smaller number of professional musicians, and indeed the music education workforce in schools, universities and beyond. There are challenging questions to be asked, therefore, about what lasting values and attitudes the majority of the population acquire during their formative musical years – and what responsibilities school music education holds for shaping those values across the population. This keynote paper from RIME 2015 draws on diverse empirical studies with infant schools, chamber music audiences, and lapsed amateur musicians, using this evidence to reflect on how music educators could be more aware – and make others more aware – of their contribution to lifelong musical engagement, and of the risks, challenges and opportunities inherent in the shaping of musical lives.

Keywords

Lifelong musical engagement, infant schools, audiences, participation, benefits of music education

What is claimed for music education?

For well over a century, writers on music education have been making powerful claims for the benefits of including music in a rounded, creative curriculum (see Pitts, 2000; Rainbow & Cox, 2006). With advocacy as strong as this from Yorke Trotter – one of the first to argue for participatory music learning with his mantra of 'sound before symbol' (1914: 76) – it might seem surprising that such messages are still frustratingly unsuccessful in reaching politicians and other educational decision makers:

If by our manner of education we can cultivate and develop the inner nature of our citizens, we will be raising up a nation full of vitality, striving after ideals, and ever pressing on to higher and higher stages. Even the weariness of life, which is felt so deeply by many of us, will disappear with our new ideals, for the art of music will give the means for self expression, and will provide a new interest in life. (Yorke Trotter, 1914: 136)

In Yorke Trotter's vision, an education with music at its heart will transform society, by equipping citizens to live fulfilling and creative lives, and so banishing the despair which is also strongly evident in his statement (situated as it is near the outbreak of the First World War). Why then, is it still necessary to be making the case for music in education, one hundred years later?

Musical activities can lead to a sense of accomplishment, enhanced determination and persistence and of children being better able to cope with anger and express their emotions more effectively. There are also reported benefits in terms of discipline, time management, relaxation, coping with difficulties, communication, and the ability to work with others. (Hallam, 2014: 16)

In her review of the impact of musical activities on intellectual, social and personal development, *The Power of Music* (Hallam, 2014), Susan Hallam brings together several decades of research evidence that supports the case for music enhancing psychological well-being, school engagement, creativity, empathy, language and literacy, spatial awareness and numerous other skills and qualities. References to these 'transferable benefits' have become commonplace in justifications for the role of music in education (e.g. Bugaj & Brenner, 2011; Costa-Giomi, 2004; Schellenberg, 2006), but as Hallam is careful to point out, the effects of music teaching are not guaranteed to be positive: 'when teaching is poor there may be no benefits and negative outcomes' (p. 18). More fundamentally, the emphasis on outcomes other than musical ones risks distorting the place of music in the curriculum, positioning it as an enabler of other kinds of development rather than a valued subject in its own right.

If there were any doubt about the dangers of limiting musical ambitions – or replacing them with extra-musical ones – again the long view is helpful to show how little the political understanding of music education has changed over the past century. In the days when the Board of Education in England respectfully issued 'suggestions to teachers' rather than operating an inspection system, they were nonetheless somewhat modest in their expectations of music in schools:

The aim of music teaching considered as part of a school curriculum should be rather the cultivation of a taste than the acquirement of a proficiency; it should lay the foundation for the intelligent study and enjoyment of music in after life. (Board of Education, 1926: 238)

Contrary to Yorke Trotter's (1914) hopes, here music is viewed quite passively: the next generation of listeners and audiences is being trained in England's classrooms, with the expectation that they will continue these habits into adulthood. On the one hand, this is a simple example of lifelong musical engagement, which was much more straightforward when access to a range of musical genres was greatly limited, both for pupils in the classroom and for adults in the repertoire of professional concerts and the availability of recorded music. Nowadays, with infinite musical variety available to students in and out of school, the 'cultivation of a taste' is a much less realistic and desirable aim for music education: rather, the best music education equips young people with the practical and discriminatory skills to continue their learning in any number of directions beyond and after school. Whether our politicians are convinced of this, however, remains highly doubtful – as

demonstrated with particular tactlessness by the Secretary of State for Education, Nicky Morgan, during the course of pre-election debates in the UK in November 2014:

If you didn't know what you wanted to do [for a career] ... then the arts and the humanities were what you chose because they were useful, we were told, for all kinds of jobs [...] We now know that this couldn't be further from the truth. That the subjects to keep young people's options open are STEM subjects – science, technology, engineering and maths. (Morgan, 2014)

Morgan's assertion that the arts limit opportunities and employability have been reinforced by UK Government policies that have prioritised STEM subjects, and have seen numerous schools reducing or ceasing their provision of music exam courses (Cultural Learning Alliance, 2015), so raising obstacles to continued musical study and employment for a generation of young people. While Morgan's aim to get more girls, particularly, into areas where they have been traditionally under-represented is a laudable one, making this case at the expense of arts subjects reinforce a science-arts divide that is unhelpful to all teachers and students striving for a truly comprehensive education.

Rhetoric and political discourse, therefore, do not get us very far in answering the question 'What is music education for?' They drive us towards simplistic measures of success: school league tables, A Level student numbers and results, and the health (or otherwise) of music in higher education. Defining the purpose of music education more widely, however, reveals a much stronger evidence base, seen everywhere (but not always noticed) in the uses of music amongst the general population. In the UK, an estimated 117,000 people work in full-time music-related jobs (UK Music, 2015), while upwards of 1.6 million amateur musicians participate regularly in group music-making and performing (Dodd, Graves & Taws, 2008), so contributing substantially to the creative economy and to the lives and wellbeing of those involved (Making Music, 2015). Further influence is seen in the broader cultural decisions made by musical learners later in life: children are more likely to take up and continue learning an instrument if their own parents had that opportunity and therefore bring insight to supporting instrumental practice in the home (McPherson, Davidson & Evans, 2016), while many music teachers enter the profession in response to their own experiences of music learning, whether inspirational or otherwise (Pitts, 2012). That our politicians hide their arts interests or cheerfully deny them (Higgins, 2005), shows that support for music education is lacking in public discourse, so making the need for research evidence and practitioner advocacy increasingly urgent.

I have explored the long-term effects of music education elsewhere, through over 100 'musical life histories' collected for *Chances and Choices* (Pitts, 2012), by asking open-ended questions about how music has shaped people's lives:

- What kind of music was going on in your home as a child? How influential do you think this was in your development?
- What are your memories of school music? (People, activities, opportunities...)
- Who has been influential on your musical behaviour at various stages of your life?
- What have been the highlights of your musical life history so far?
- Do you have any regrets about missed opportunities in music?

(Pitts, 2012: 12)

Analysing these collected stories, across generations and contexts, by influences and outcomes, reveals both the far-reaching and sometimes unexpected impact of music education, but also its limitations and occasionally destructive effects. The influence of the home is intertwined with that of the school, and musical learning takes place in many settings, as has been richly documented by researchers working in America (Campbell, 1998; 2002), England (Green, 2002), Australia (Barrett, 2015) and around the world (Green, 2011). Children begin school as already sophisticated musical learners (Harwood and Marsh, 2012), whether they have been fortunate enough to join in with songs, games and a wide repertoire in the home (Barrett, 2015), or have instead learnt that music is ‘not for the likes of us’ on grounds of class, education or religion (Custodero, Britto & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Musical life histories therefore begin in different circumstances, and will end in many different ways too: the constant challenge for those who teach and research in music education is to consider how musical opportunities can remain open to all learners, throughout their lives – and what role school music plays in supporting or inhibiting that aim.

Three case studies follow, in which this challenge is explored in a range of settings: children and their parents and teachers in three infant schools; audience members at classical chamber music concerts; and a more disparate group of adults who have ceased participation in amateur music-making. The shared questions across each setting are these:

- How are musical skills and interests acquired and nourished?
- Where does musical confidence come from?
- What role does music education play in fostering musical engagement?
- How could all these factors be enhanced and better supported?

Each case study demonstrates the lasting influence of attitudes to musical engagement as well as opportunities to participate. Formative musical experiences are about the acquisition of identity as well as skills, so shaping children’s musical futures in powerful and sometimes unintentional ways.

Expectations and experiences of music in three diverse settings

1. Infant schools in Sheffield

In 2013-14 I worked with a music outreach project in Sheffield, Music in the Community, led by Polly Ives, to explore the effects of a series of music workshops in three infant schools for children aged 6-7 years. Three blocks of weekly visits by the workshop leader and professional musicians were undertaken, leading to a families/schools concert of *Sir Scallywag and the Golden Underpants* with music by children’s composer in residence, Paul Rissmann, and a jointly composed soundtrack to *We’re Going on a Bear Hunt*, performed by the participating schools at a culmination concert (see www.musicintheround.co.uk for related videos and resources). Research was carried out with the full range of participants in the project: observation of the sessions and events was supplemented by questionnaires and group interviews with the children involved (n = 163), and with their teachers (n = 6) and parents (n=27) (see Pitts, 2014 for full details of the project). This wealth of data, which including children’s drawings of themselves as musicians, as well as evidence of how much of their musical learning emerged in their play and talk at home, offered up some striking findings about the children’s views of themselves as musicians.

The children showed awareness that learning instruments takes effort: one reported that in his piano playing “it took me a year to get up to the grade of Yankee Doodle already”, while another

boy stated that “I’ve got a recorder but I only know one letter and that’s ‘A’”. The children were aware of their status as musical beginners, and could make comparisons between their own playing and those of the professional musicians who visited their schools, who had practised a lot to “learn all the fingers, just in case you don’t know them, and you don’t get mixed up”. This insider knowledge on what it takes to be a musician is in contrast to the popular myth of musical genius that inhibits so much musical learning (Sloboda, Davidson & Howe, 1994): these children knew that improvement on their instrument would take practice, and the encouragement and structured activities of the workshops also helped them (and their teachers and parents) to see a sense of musical progress across the year. However, quite understandably given their level of maturity and experience, the pupils had less clarity on the specific plans needed to put their musical ambitions into place: amongst the most detailed responses was a sequence of events from “play a song on my piano” in primary school, “be in a band” in secondary school, then “be world famoz [famous]” as an adult. Giving children insight on how to get from their current level of musical learning to a future in which music-making plays a significant part is rarely a feature of school music or even instrumental lessons, though retrospective accounts of musical life histories show how strongly both those settings influence lifelong musical outcomes (Pitts, 2012).

The children also demonstrated in their responses that learning music requires continuity and challenge: the intermittent nature of school music experience was evident in the memory that “a man came with a guitar, a long, long time ago”, while future music sessions were viewed with excitement “cause we might do more new stuff that we haven’t done”. These children are open to musical challenge, and grew measurably in knowledge and confidence across the year (Pitts, 2014: 138), but their uncertainties illustrate how musical life stories need to be nurtured in their earliest stages with the provision of musical opportunities and the consistent encouragement to pursue them. The workshops provided as part of this project achieved the aims of widening musical horizons and ambitions, and providing musical role models, both through the visits of professional musicians and through raising awareness in conversation of those teachers, parents and peers who were cited by the children as “being musical”. Teaching music with future adult engagement in mind might seem premature for these 6-7 year olds, but their rapidly forming musical attitudes and ambitions show how critical such early interventions (or their absence) are in shaping musical identities and increasing the potential for continued involvement.

2. Audiences for live classical music

My research with audiences over a ten year period with a chamber music series, a symphony orchestra, a jazz festival and a jazz club has enabled further explorations of how and why people engage with music throughout their lives. Regular, committed concert-going, as demonstrated most strongly by the chamber music audience of Music in the Round, Sheffield (Pitts, 2005a; Pitts & Spencer, 2008), is sometimes undertaken as a process of learning and self-development, as well as being an activity that brings personal enjoyment and social engagement. Choices around how often to attend, what repertoire to seek out, and why live music is valued are often rooted in earlier experiences and attitudes, with memories of childhood concert attendance with school or family featuring prominently in the musical life stories of frequent attenders (Pitts, 2012). Taking live classical music audiences as any measure of the success of music education, however, raises some worrying questions about declining numbers and ageing listeners, reported internationally (Kolb, 2001; Australia Council for the Arts, 2010) as well as by the participants in my recent studies: as one

chamber music listener stated, “I would love to see the audience profile expand – not that I have anything against retired white middle class academics” (Pitts, 2005a: 263).

The concert hall initiation of childhood, if and when it occurs, brings obvious benefits in terms of knowing how to behave and ‘fitting in’ later in life, and new audience members have frequently express anxieties about being surrounded by more experienced listeners: “everybody else seems to know [what to do] because they’ve obviously been going to lots of concerts” (Dobson & Pitts, 2011: 368). Beyond this, audience members at all levels of experience bring their past musical encounters to their listening, providing further evidence of the lasting impact of music education in their attitudes and insight on the live performance. Even limited past experience as a player can bring an insider perspective on the performance: as one chamber music listener reflected, “I like to play the piano to understand how the music works, but can’t play it for anyone else to listen with pleasure” (Pitts, 2013: 89). Indeed, balancing the pleasures of playing and listening forces musically engaged adults to make choices about the time and effort they spend on music: the late-developing amateur cellist Wayne Booth has observed the ‘sacrifice’ of time spent creating string quartets to a lower standard than could be heard in a professional concert (Booth, 1999: 150), while professional pianist Susan Tomes reports the threat to listening enjoyment of being ‘condemned to see the inner workings, the loose threads, all the bits they forgot to include’ (Tomes, 2010: 85).

Having sufficient insight to appreciate the performers’ perspective, but not so much as to lose the enjoyment of listening, seems to be the ideal – though perhaps not in itself a desirable aim for music education. The ‘insider view’ is sought in other ways through the visual elements of live performance, according to both jazz and classical audience members, who have commented on the absorption, eye contact and gestures of the musicians as being a visual guide to listening, indicating “how the music moves – seemingly just on the nod – from one player to another” (Pitts & Burland, 2013: 14). Audience members therefore offer one example of how limitations in past learning can be overcome or diverted in adulthood: limited or lapsed success as a performer is channelled into enhanced satisfaction as a listener, in ways that audience members can articulate and appreciate, even while often expressing regret that their own playing did not advance further. For those people who find the concert hall a welcoming environment for listening, and have the resources, opportunities and inclination to become regular audience members, there is clearly much pleasure to be gained from enjoying live music in the company of like-minded others. That this is a relatively small proportion of the population could be taken as indicative of a failure in music education to prepare routes into lifelong listening – or more optimistically as being illustrative of the many other genres and contexts for listening that exist, each with their own benefits for musical identity and engagement. Nonetheless, the lasting influence of music education is seen in the choices and open-mindedness of future audiences, and in the misplaced perceptions of classical music as being difficult and inaccessible that keep many potential listeners away from the concert hall.

3. Ceasing and continuing amateur music-making

Following previous research with enthusiasts for musical participation (Pitts, 2005b), I became interested in those people who have lapsed in their participation – who have the skills to belong to an amateur group, but lack the motivation, opportunity or need to do so. Using questionnaires (n = 21) and interviews (n = 17) with current and past members of amateur orchestras in and around Sheffield, I investigated some of the obstacles to continued music-making in adulthood, and the

extent to which formative experiences of music-making appeared to affect people's attitudes towards continuing to play (Pitts, Robinson & Goh, 2015).

On the surface, the barriers to lifelong music-making were quite predictable: life gets in the way, and time, energy and priorities are taken up by the other demands of early and later adulthood. However, these factors are obstacles for only some amateur musicians, while others find the distraction and escape of a weekly rehearsal to be a coping mechanism for other pressures, rather than one demand too many in their busy lives. The interviews revealed that these commonplace attitudes often masked deeper reasons for ceasing participation, broadly related to musical confidence and to the expectations that had been shaped by school and youth ensemble membership. Musical participation had faltered for some players whose motivation was primarily social, fuelled by memories of fun and friendship in school ensembles. Joining a group after relocating for work, for example, one player had found that opportunities to make friends were limited by the format of a typical rehearsal: "the social life isn't that good because you go on a Friday night, you get there, say hello, play, goodnight, and then you go home!" Others reported "clock-watching" during rehearsals, or finding the coffee breaks awkward, generally reflecting a sense of not belonging in the ensemble they had joined.

Sometimes this lack of belonging could arise for musical reasons, and in particular around the anxiety of not being "good enough". These experiences ranged from feeling self-conscious during the tuning of the orchestra in case other players were listening critically, through to self-imposed retirement as playing skills deteriorated with age-related health problems: "it crept up on me really that I wasn't doing the orchestra any good, and that it would be much nicer if they had a better second clarinetist." Conversely, this sense of responsibility to the rest of the group was a motivating force for some adult players, who maintained daily practice regimes in amongst other commitments, with the deliberate side-effect of encouraging their own children into musical participation by modelling the effort and progress involved in learning an instrument. Indeed, a stated or implicit awareness of the benefits of musical participation seemed to be one factor in ensuring continued satisfaction, as illustrated by one retired player, who had replaced her musical activities with pottery to provide "a bit of creativity in my life" and the social contact of opening her studio to visitors and talking with other amateur craft-makers. Knowing how and why music is valuable appears therefore to be one potential route to sustaining that involvement.

Finding a musical 'fit' in adult life was also affected by instrument choice, expressed most strongly by a bassoonist for whom orchestral participation was tinged by negative memories of compulsory membership of school ensembles: "if you walk into a room there's a piano, and you can sort of play it, [...] whereas I think bassoons – people don't necessarily want" (Pitts & Robinson, 2016). Very few children – and their parents – typically look this far ahead in making instrument choices in childhood, but there is a strong case to be made for ensuring that young people leaving school are equipped with information about the musical routes that are open to them with their particular combination of skills and enthusiasms. Several participants had benefited from being encouraged back into participation in adulthood, including a cellist who resumed lessons with his old teacher and was persuaded by her to join a local amateur orchestra. For those players who had returned to music-making after a lapse of some years, or even decades, the time 'lost' to non-participation was often regretted, or even a source of astonishment: one trumpeter reflected that "when I look back on it now it's kind of incredible to me that it happened, that I put so much time and effort into, um, into music, into getting to a reasonable standard, and spending all this time participating in various ensembles, and you know, to a certain point, I just dropped it", while a horn

player who had returned to playing after an “eBay moment” in his forties half-joked that if he had “carried on forever [...] I think by now I would have been such a phenomenal player!”

The experiences of these lapsed participants, including those who have later returned to playing, show that musical life stories can falter owing to external circumstances, lack of opportunity, or lack of confidence and enjoyment in adult ensembles. Leaving school equipped with the skills to join or form a musical group is still no guarantee that this will happen: there are multiple social, musical and personal factors involved in supporting continued participation, and the routes into adult, amateur ensembles can often seem difficult or inaccessible. Some of the stories reported here demonstrate the effects of weak foundations to lifelong participation: too great an emphasis on the fun and social life of school ensembles leading to low musical standards, or insufficient enjoyment of teenage music-making leading to a rejection of classical ensembles as being “tainted” by institutional values. The balance of musical satisfaction and social enjoyment is obviously as challenging for adult players as it is for the teachers who organise school music-making. Those participants who had explicitly reflected on what they sought to gain from their musical participation were among the most contented in this study, suggesting that exploring the aims of groups and their members could be one tool for increasing recruitment and retention in amateur ensembles.

Conclusions: fulfilling the claims for music education

These case studies and my related research on lifelong engagement in music demonstrate the familiar truth that access to musical participation begins in childhood and is shaped – but by no means guaranteed – by the encouragement, opportunity, attitudes, and skills that children encounter in their schools and homes. More challengingly, the research also suggests that such provision is not in itself sufficient, and that sustained, forward-looking musical opportunities are essential in connecting formative music-making with future possibilities: in other words, an awareness of routes into lifelong musical engagement is essential to finding them. Some musical activities lend themselves more readily to this awareness: self-taught pop musicians experience a continuity of activity from teenage years into adulthood (Green, 2002) that is less obvious to participants in teacher-directed orchestras and bands (Mantie & Tucker, 2008). With lapsed participants able to articulate what they miss about their school music making, and a wealth of amateur organisations able to provide these benefits, better connections could be made between school and community music-making.

For an understanding of how so many potential music-makers cease their involvement in adulthood, a return to the gardening metaphor once beloved of educational theorists and teacher trainers is a useful illustration (McEwan, 2007). In this metaphor, the teacher provides the nourishment and care that a young seedling needs to grow into a strong plant: so music teachers offer encouragement, skills and opportunities to their students, and the entire population should in theory be equipped to participate in and promote lifelong musical development in adulthood. Any experienced gardener knows, however, that a sudden frost, the failure to water at a critical stage of growth, or competition from weeds or other stronger plants can mean the dwindling or demise of a previously healthy plant. So it is that a strong start in musical life can be lost through a whole range of external factors, internal motivations, and missed opportunities – and identifying and addressing these could be a valuable, socially responsible challenge to the low status of music in education and in political debate.

Recognising that one of the many things music education is *for*, to return to my opening question, is fostering a creatively engaged society, gives music educators greater responsibilities to

teach with a view to young people's long term musical futures; but it should also provide those teachers with greater support, as amateur organisations, arts providers and policy makers recognise the collective responsibility to shape and support those musical futures after school. Music education needs to be about leaving opportunities open, not closing them down; offering routes and role models for lifelong engagement, and articulating these possibilities for young people as part of developing and sustaining their musical identities.

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