

Editorial

Notation and Music Education

Every year on the pre-service teacher education course with which I am associated in England, we have something we have come to refer to as ‘the notation argument’. When this happens varies, but it normally occurs fairly near the beginning of the course. In essence, what happens is that a divide opens up between those pre-service teachers who believe they need to teach western classical stave notation in isolation from other aspects of music, and that this needs to be done in advance of other musical activities, as preparation for them. The other group of pre-service trainee teachers counter this with the case that there should be some sort of a need for this knowledge, and that acquiring it in isolation is unlikely to happen anyway. This notation argument can rage, on and off, for a good proportion of the first term, depending on how the issues are dealt with, and how passionate the various advocates are.

The place of notation is indeed a contested issue, not just amongst these pre-service teachers, but also, I would venture to suggest, amongst the music education community, and wider society at large. This editorial is a very personal take on this issue, by one of the co-editors, as reflected through articles published in the pages of the *BJME* over the years.

One of the biggest issues with notation is to do with how we talk about it. It is common parlance to talk of ‘reading’ music, but what may be more apposite is to consider ‘speaking’ it. This is because whilst a learner may be taught to decode letter names and note lengths, recognising a dotted quaver D, followed by a semiquaver D, then a barline, then three crotchets E, D, G, then another barline, then a minim F#, is good and useful as declarative knowledge, but utterly meaningless if the ‘reader’ is asked what song begins like this, and then cannot name *Happy Birthday!* To do this they have to be able to *speak* music, not just read it. In a similar vein we wouldn’t want people to only know D-O-G as three isolated letters, and not have any notion that there is an animal being described. To do this they have to be able to *speak* English, not just read it. Now, this analogy breaks down after a while, but in essence the important parts of ‘reading’ music are often accompanied by ‘speaking’ it, whether vocally or instrumentally. As a young double bass player, I was instructed by my teacher to sing phrases at sight before playing them. Simply saying, ‘It’s all crotchets, F#, F#, G, A, A, G, F#, E’ wouldn’t give the opening of a famous melody, or offer any help in being able to perform it.

But this view is countered by those who say that decoding the western classical symbol system *first* is a prerequisite of musical learning. This view is in turn argued against by those who point out the myriad of world music, pop, rock and jazz that does not rely on it. Indeed, as a previous editor of this journal has pointed out:

... music itself is an activity that is in some way representative of our experience of the world. Music is a primary symbolic system. Notations, verbal descriptions or graphic representations are secondary systems, offering a translation from one representational domain to another. In this process some loss of information is inevitable. (Swanwick, 2001, p. 232)

Interestingly, and possibly surprisingly, given the controversy that the 'notation argument' engenders, there are only 22 results from the *BJME* search engine for the word 'notation', and only five which appear to contain the word in the title (Reybrouc, Verschaffel & Lauwerier, 2009; Wishart, 1985; Terry, 1994; Lau & Grieshaber, 2010; Pramling, 2009). Looking at what these authors had to say about notation is interesting. Starting with the earliest, Wishart (1985) looked forward to our current century:

However, as we move on towards the twenty-first century it is clear that we are beginning to see a fundamental reorientation of the relationship between musical practice and the way we 'record' musical composition. (Wishart, 1985, p. 326)

However, given the prevalence of the notation argument, some 32 years later this shows no signs of occurring. Fast-forward nine years, and Terry (1994) was quite withering in his dismissal of the idea western classical notation would be of any use to learners in the English National Curriculum (NC) of the time at all:

The learning of staff notation will only be of value to specialist performers who intend to spend the greater part of their professional lives performing or studying an existing musical literature. If the National Curriculum is genuinely intended to encourage all pupils at Key Stages 1 to 4 to engage with sound, then there is no practical reason why they need to be burdened with an anachronistic notational system: technology allows students to compose directly onto a retrievable system. (Terry, 1994, p. 110)

This will certainly set hackles rising even now, as the 'anachronistic' system is now a firm part of the current NC in England, and acknowledged either tacitly or overtly in many learning systems throughout the world. But what we do have is a situation that has been discussed in these editorials (Fautley & Murphy, 2013; 2016) and elsewhere recently, this being the matter of knowledge, and how this can and should be learned. Lau and Grieshaber (2010), arguing from the Hong Kong perspective, described how rote learning was encouraged there:

... current teaching practices favour transmission models where teachers are the centre of the learning experience; a uniform curriculum, structured activities and prescribed resources are used, and group conformity, competition and rote learning are encouraged ... This kind of education centres on transmitting an understanding and appreciation of culture from past generations to succeeding generations ... (Lau & Grieshaber, 2010, p. 128)

This is a situation which will be readily recognised today in many other jurisdictions, with the notion of 'core' or 'powerful' knowledge being sometimes mandated by simple transmission models as being the way in which education can be delivered simply and, importantly, cheaply, with all the political ramifications which that entails.

Eight years ago, Pramling (2009), and Reybrouc et al. (2009) were also concerned with children's invented notations. Pramling recognised the importance of thinking about the *meaning* of notation, a key point in the discussion earlier about *speaking* music, not just reading it:

An important developmental aspect of children's representations that is related to the previous point is the realisation that, in order to be understood by someone else, representations cannot be arbitrary (Pramling, 2009, p. 278).

Reybrouck et al. (2009) issued a challenge for music education researchers to consider the place of notation, and to think about further work in this area:

Besides a better understanding of children's listening and sense-making of music by means of further ascertaining studies, there is an urgent need of design experiments, aimed at improving music education by helping children to gradually and actively build up conventional formal notations out of their more intuitive and informal ways of representing music. (Reybrouck et al., 2009, p. 206)

This brief foray into the archives of *BJME* has shown that notation remains a contested issue, and is likely to remain so for a good while yet. As ever, it is to be hoped that the various sides of this arguments will find their outworking in the pages of the *BJME*, and that cases for both sides will appear here.

Which takes us to the matter of articles in the current edition. We have a number of articles in this issue which look at the matter of *informal learning* in music education, and, as might be expected, they all have something to say about notation, the theme of this editorial. The first article in this issue is by Susan Hallam, Andrea Creech and Hilary McQueen, and investigates informal learning and musical progression in seven English secondary schools. Progression in musical learning is a matter of international importance, and what is meant by the term itself is open to interpretation. This paper discusses the *Musical Futures* programme, and its effects on learners, teachers, and schools. Our next paper, by Julia Brook, Rena Upitis and Wynnpaul Varela, from Canada, shifts attention from the secondary school to the context of the instrumental studio, in this case a guitar teacher. The notion of differentiated pedagogies is discussed, and the ways this impacts on student learning described. Our third informal learning paper takes us to Hong Kong, where Annie O. Mok describes informal learning in a university musicianship class. She found that the undergraduates concerned forged a direct personal link with informal learning, and that this has been for many a new way of looking at music learning, which they themselves can put into practice in their own professional futures.

For our next paper, by Kim Burwell, we stay in higher education, and think about what might be considered as *ineffective* practices. This is clearly a troublesome and delicate arena to investigate, and this study has a number of aspects to reflect on for all those involved in studio pedagogies. Our next article take us to Spain, and looks at the reasons for instrumental choice by extra-curricular music students, some of which can be based on very thin ground, or so it seems. Our final piece in this issue, by Maria Calissendorff and Haukur F. Hannesson from Sweden, looks at the specific training of musicians before they begin work as professionals in orchestral settings, finding that such training can be very slight indeed.

This issue of the *BJME*, then, contains the usual eclectic mixture of articles from around the globe investigating a wide variety of music education practices. As ever, there is much

to be celebrated in music education research, and it is hoped that the current selection of papers provides both enlightenment, and gives pause for reflection.

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