

# Reflections for Musical Futures Canada: Guest Editorial

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My initial inspiration for devising the informal learning model goes back to childhood and teenage years. A white English girl, I was born and brought up in India, living mainly in Mumbai, where I heard very little music. Mumbai had no TV at the time, and I didn't know anyone who had a radio. My family didn't have one, nor a record player or reel-to-reel tape recorder (this was before cassette players): so basically I heard no recorded music. Apart from one outstanding, unforgettable occasion, the only live music I heard was the organ and scratch choir in our tiny Anglican church; and going to a ballet class where the mother of the French ballet teacher played the piano, while in the next room the brother of Ravi Shankar played the sitar for the Indian dancers. We had no piano or other instrument in our little, virtually open-air school. The only music-making was an evening hymn sung in unison at the end of the school day.

The one occasion when I heard a live instrumental performance was during my only night-time visit to Bombelli's café, on what is now the Bhulabhai Desai Road. I was with a friend and her family who I didn't know very well, and I felt shy of asking questions. When we entered I didn't know what on earth I had walked into, but much later I came to realise it was a jazz trio. No one else in the café seemed surprised or even faintly interested. The pianist was directly behind me and I thought it would be outrageously rude to turn around and look, so I spent the entire meal with my ears bent backwards.

I became very excited when my mother told me I could have piano lessons from the church organist. She was a rather strict woman from the United States who taught me a lot of theory, using American terms; how to play simple Bach and American folk songs such as 'On Top of Old Smokey'; and of course how to do it all from notation.

When I came to England at the age of 10, playing the piano was my solace for leaving behind every familiar thing in my life, apart from my family. I threw myself into all the pieces in the handful of piano books my mother had brought with us. I was without a teacher for a while until I went to a formidable lady who told me everything I'd learnt was wrong and that she would have to start me all over again. She put me through grade 1 and set me on the UK grades trajectory.

My other solace was *Top Cat* (later known as *Boss Cat*), *The Monkees*, *Cilla*, (as in Cilla Black – a famous TV presenter

and singer) and *Top of the Pops* on TV. My favourites included the Beatles, the Who, Dusty Springfield, Donovan, the Seekers, Sandy Shaw, Lulu, the Shadows, Manfred Mann, Herman's Hermits and countless others.

Thus began a journey along two paths that ran side by side, but rarely met: one, listening to but never playing popular music; the other, learning to play but never listening to classical music. I loved both activities with a vengeance, and never even considered the one in relation to the other.

The first time that the two paths collided, if only in my own mind, was at the age of about 14 at a friend's house. We were listening to an Incredible String Band song 'Ducks on a Pond' from *Wee Tam and the Big Huge*. The String Band was a very free, highly imaginative, eclectic group, who took a very improvisatory approach to everything. In the middle of the song, quite unexpectedly, they broke off and played a whole verse of the nursery rhyme 'Boys and Girls Come Out to Play'. I remember being distinctly surprised and wondering how the instrumentalists could possibly have managed to learn a pre-existing tune without notation!

Another experience which has stayed in my memory is from a similar age, when I went along with a rock band, consisting entirely of boys, and sat cross-legged in the church hall whilst they rehearsed for a gig that evening. It felt strange because I was in about Grade 5 piano by that time, and these boys were playing relatively simple music by comparison, but I had absolutely no idea how they did it. It was a mystery. (There was of course a gender issue in there as well, but that came to expression later in life in a different aspect of my work.)

Those two experiences stuck in my mind.

Much later I married a man who is one of those fortunate musicians who can play both popular music by ear and classical music from notation. He would sometimes talk with enthusiasm about how he'd learnt his popular skills, in a classroom but not one where a teacher was present – rather, in the lunch hour with other boys.

Putting together all that created some of the sparks that fired my interest in making an academic study of how popular musicians learn. Whilst writing the book of that name, the group of people I expected to be least interested in it, or I feared, even a bit disdainful of it, was popular musicians

themselves. But I have always found their response quite the opposite. Often these musicians were the ones to enthuse the most, saying things like: 'no one's written it down before and made it kind-of formal', or 'no one's recognised the value of what we did'. After presentations I've even had people in their 50s or 60s coming up with comments such as: 'You brought me to tears!' and 'You've written my life!' I of course can take no credit for that. I was merely the mouthpiece of the popular musicians who I interviewed, the channel through which their words were represented.

It was only towards the end of writing the study that I really began to think about how to capture these musicians' informal learning practices – how to adapt the joy and commitment, the aural skills, the freedom and the improvisatory capacities that they experience – for the classroom situation.

From my years as a secondary music teacher, another experience stands out in my memory. In a challenged inner London comprehensive where I was Head of Music, a girl in Year 9 (age 13-14) was not doing the work that I had set. It was to play a tune on an electric keyboard. I can't remember exactly which tune it was, or what instructions I had given for how to learn it. Most other members of the class appeared to be enjoying the activity. They were assiduously attempting the task, with varying levels of difficulty and success. But she, sitting at the back, was distracting two friends next to her, and all of them were doing nothing. Familiar story?

So I said to her: 'What's the matter; why aren't you doing the work?'

She said 'It's pathetic; it's boring; it's just "play this and play" and that's it'.

'Oh' I said, 'OK so you can do it can you; you don't need to learn anything? If it's so pathetic and boring then show me how well you can do it, and if you can do it I'll suggest something else'.

She reluctantly switched the keyboard back on and played the whole thing, double the speed of anyone else in the class, note-perfect and rhythm perfect.

My jaw dropped. I said 'Well! Why didn't you tell me you've had piano lessons? I would have set you something more challenging'.

'I haven't had piano lessons.'

'What? Have you not played the piano before? You must have played some other instrument and had lessons, then, or at least-'

'No, you just told us to play it and I just played it.'

'My God girl, you are seriously talented.' Now *her* jaw dropped.

A couple of years later, when I left the school, having guided her through the national 16+ music exam (she got the highest grade), she sent me a letter saying 'You unleashed my creativity and showed me that I had a talent I did not know I possessed.' I think

that came about partly because I was fascinated by what she could do, without her having been taught how to do it.

As I neared the end of writing *How Popular Musicians Learn* I was turning over in my mind how I could adapt popular musicians' informal learning practices and bring them into the classroom environment – without contravening the limitations of space, time and equipment, the legal demands and the multitude of other considerations faced by the music teacher in a school setting. I still remember the Eureka moment, which occurred whilst I was taking the dog for a walk along a familiar path, when I devised the whole 'Into the Deep End' approach, in a flash. It seems so obvious now, but at the time, it involved a leap of faith.

Without any funding or official backing I asked an erstwhile Master's student if I could go into the school where he was Head of Music and try out the approach. He said yes. I told him I wasn't sure if it would turn out to be any good or not, but he was up for a challenge. As I hadn't observed the kids in that school before, I had to rely on his opinion as to whether the approach contained anything worthwhile, above and beyond, or different to what he would normally expect of them. If he didn't think it was any good, whatever I myself might think, that would have been bad news. He did like it though, and so did the kids. On the basis of that I was fortunate to be awarded some funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, which enabled me to try out the strategies again, and research them more systematically, in three further London schools. This time after 'Into the Deep End' I developed the 'Word Up' materials for stage 2, 'Modelling Aural Learning' as well. Again, overall the approach was met with great enthusiasm by teachers and students alike, and I began to notice some findings about the teaching-and-learning that was going on, which had started to really intrigue me.

It was during that time that John Witchell of Hertfordshire Music Service, having come across *How Popular Musicians Learn*, asked me to join their bid to become part of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation's Musical Futures project. Abigail d'Amore (then Walmsley) was appointed to assist me, and the rest, as they say, is history: or in other words, is presented and discussed in the Musical Futures website, this journal issue and a number of other publications, so I will not go into it further here.

In so far as the approach has taken off across many schools, and in different countries, I think it must be because it is based on a way of learning devised, not by trained, expert, adult musicians, but by young learners themselves. Many teachers have been a little doubtful about using it at first, mainly because they fear it will undermine their authority and allow the students, and the situation, to get out of control. Once they try it, in most cases so long as they have understood the spirit of the approach, disbelief usually falls

away, because they see high levels of motivation and engagement, new ways of learning and teaching, and unexpected sides to their students.

So what is the spirit of the approach? Fundamentally it lies in the role of the teacher. Sometimes I have regretted using the expression 'stand back' to refer to the teacher's role, partly because it has on occasion been mistakenly assumed to apply to the whole approach (even though I clearly state that it applies to the first few lessons only); and partly because it has sometimes been taken too literally, as if it refers to every single action a teacher might take. By 'standing back' in the first couple of lessons, I mean that the teacher should not intervene in basic things such as the students' choice of song, the make-up of the friendship group, the instruments selected, and how the group organises itself. Of course it takes the teacher's judgement to know the *extent* to which this is advisable. If there is no song being chosen, no group being formed, no instruments being selected and no group organisation of any kind, teachers must intervene to make these things happen. If, however, those things *are* happening and the teacher intervenes in them too much, too soon, then the informal learning approach is simply not being put into practice. Rather, I have advised 'standing back, observing students, and attempting to empathise with the goals that students are setting for themselves; then and only then, helping them to achieve those goals'.

Exactly *when* to step in, is and will always remain up to the teacher's professional judgement, sensitivity and experience: no 'method' or 'approach' can ever, or should ever, attempt to replace that. Exactly *what* to do, having stepped in is also up to the teacher's professional judgement. With hindsight, in the book *Music, Informal Learning and the School*, I paid insufficient attention to the actual pedagogic processes that we found helpful in the informal learning-and-teaching setting. This was a conscious decision, partly to do with the publisher's word-limit, and partly because my own focus in writing that book was very much on the learner. This is something I have tried to address in my final follow-up book, *Hear, Listen, Play*, which contains some previously unpublished transcripts and analysis of teaching approaches from Musical Futures classrooms and other contexts.

I was in a classroom a few years ago talking with the teacher about the needs of learners. He said 'You know the thing I think is most important, Lucy, is that we should give children encouragement and help them to believe in themselves'. 'I couldn't agree with you more' I said, at which point he leaned over to see what a boy was doing on the keyboard next to us, and proffered: 'The trouble with you Frank, is that you have absolutely no rhythmic sense'. I wonder how it is that someone whose expressed philosophy is to encourage children and help them to believe in themselves, can make a remark like that? It must, I believe, relate to a view of a view of humanity which includes people with no musical ability. That is something I have always disputed. It may also suggest

a view of the young learner as someone who lacks the capacity to learn for themselves and who simply has nothing to offer. It is perhaps because the teacher was looking for certain skills, the display of which *he* had devised, rather than being open to what the learner might be doing above and beyond his own conceptions and expectations. It relates partly to not having made that leap across from being familiar with one learning path, to acknowledging that there may be others.

I am sometimes asked by teachers, 'What shall I do if I walk into a room and there's a kid doing nothing?' In that case I would say leave it and if they continue to do nothing for more than about 15 minutes, intervene. Standing back mostly occurs when students are engaged and learning, including learning by making mistakes and getting things wrong. It does not occur when students are literally doing nothing that is remotely connected to listening to or making music; but in such a case, it might be wise to give them a little time before you assume you know what is going on in their head. There may be a hundred reasons for them not joining in, one of which could be that they are listening carefully, or learning by watching another student. Other reasons might be issues that you can solve, or that are susceptible to a compromise. 'What's the matter – why aren't you participating? What instruments do you like the most? Ah yes, it's a shame that another group has got that one, but everyone will get a chance with it at some point. Let's see if there's another one that would do at least for the moment. What music do you like? Ah, it's a pity no-one else in your group wants to play that song, but there will be other opportunities, and the thing is, if you learn with the song they've chosen, then you can always use those skills to play the songs you like yourself. What notes shall we try to play first? Let's listen to the song and pick out some, and let me show you a couple...' and so on.

Bring them into the process: see the learner; hear the learner; listen to the learner; believe in the learner; build on what the learner can do. Recognise the learner. This to me is the spirit of the approach. Such attitudes are possibly the most important activities in the role of a teacher in any setting, but they come to the fore particularly in the informal learning classroom.

Working with Musical Futures has been a fantastic experience and opportunity for me. The ways in which the team and the many teachers continue to build on the initial research, creating more and more diverse opportunities to develop and share their own adaptations of all kinds of learning and teaching experiences and innovations, is formidable. Thank you; and thank you also to the Musical Futures Canada team for the invitation to write this guest editorial. Good luck to all!

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