

Main Document – with full author details and affiliations**Teachers' and students' music preferences for secondary school music lessons: reasons and implications.**

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Abstract

This paper is based on the data collected from a longitudinal study of seven maintained, secondary schools in England that have adopted Musical Futures as an approach to teaching music. The research had a particular focus on key stage 3 (11-14). For the purposes of this paper, data gained from 18 music staff and 325 student interview transcriptions were reviewed to answer research questions about the music preferences of teachers and students in the context of school music lessons. The data indicated that when teachers chose music they were particularly conscious of difficulty whereas student choices, when permitted, were based solely on liking. Teachers' choices were often informed by inclusion and feasibility. The music students enjoyed depended on how it was incorporated into the lesson rather than purely on style. Some implications of how music is categorised and chosen are discussed.

Key words: music teaching, genre, musical styles, music preferences, Musical Futures

Selecting music for school music lessons

The main aim of this paper is to explore teachers' reasons for choice of music in secondary schools and to consider some possible implications of those choices. Music teachers select music just as English teachers select certain texts deemed to be appropriate for educational purposes (see, for instance, '*Choosing Texts*' in Sheridan [2009]). Reasons for choice are likely to include personal preference, the interests of young people and the educational value of a resource. The most essential feature of music for many people is how much they like the sound of it. Evidence indicates a high sensitivity to particular sounds. Gjerdingen and Perrott (2008) report recognition of genres from excerpts lasting for as little as a quarter of a second. Such sensitive sound discrimination is a precursor to preference and, indeed, prejudice. Music preferences have been linked to changes in the adolescent brain that are likely to heighten the emotional response to different sounds and thus reactions to music used in secondary schools (see, e.g., Thomas [2015]).

Cultural context is important in determining both personal preferences and curriculum content. Keith Swanwick ([1999] 2012, 33) describes some of the historical shifts in school music, such as attempts in the 1960s to remove the 'historical clutter of inherited classical traditions'. He also refers to 'the educational difficulty of accommodating popular music traditions, the alternative musical preferences of many students'. Philpott (2001) outlines the different positions taken regarding music education. One idea is that musical development is best achieved through study of a canon, works considered to be the best of their kind. The other is that music is a practical activity which involves listening, composing and performing a wide range of styles.

Lucy Green (2005), in considering the difficulties for music teachers when planning which music to select for classroom teaching, refers to the delineation of one style from another and the relevance of social context in separating styles. If music can be divided into types, then there must be features that are recognisable which allow delineation to occur. At the moment an agreed-upon taxonomy of musical styles does not exist. Although there are apparently many different types and styles of music, there is a tendency to use simple categorisations when discussing school music. For example, an Ofsted report (2013) comments that classical music tended to be avoided in a survey of primary and secondary schools. However, the only example of classical music referred to in the report as a possible resource is a Mozart symphony, which cannot represent a highly diverse style of music.

One approach to music education in schools is Musical Futures, adopted by all of the schools in our research, which offers suggestions for music choices in its teachers' guide. Musical Futures was launched in 2003 by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation with the aim of increasing engagement with music at Key Stage 3 in particular (D'Amore n.d.). It is an approach to learning that is founded on the principle of informal learning (see Green 2002, 2008) and non-formal teaching. Informal learning is led by students whereas non-formal teaching is led by adults. Each school is expected to develop its own way of implementing the approach and, indeed, there were a number of differences between the schools in our research in terms of implementation. Nonetheless, shared elements included an emphasis on practical music-making and informal learning.

Using music preferred by young people is a way to motivate students 'before moving them into other musical and learning styles' (D'Amore n.d., 9). However, Abigail D'Amore also reminds teachers that 'style and genre of music is not the focus with Musical Futures, rather the approach to teaching and learning' and dispels the 'misconception that teachers need to be fully skilled in and knowledgeable about rock, popular and urban styles of music to be able to run Musical Futures' (17). Classical music could be part of the approach and something that some students are familiar with through instrumental tuition and most students through adverts, television programmes or films although, as D'Amore says, 'whether because of peer pressure, or genuine issues of taste and identity, classical music is a problem area for most students of this age group' (D'Amore n.d., 158).

The aim of this paper is to draw on the data derived from a longitudinal study of schools that have adopted a Musical Futures approach to answer the following questions:

- Which music was preferred by teachers for their classes and why?
- Which music was preferred by students for school music lessons and why?
- What implications are there for music teachers and their learners?

Method

The data for this paper derive from a three-year longitudinal study of seven English secondary schools. These were selected by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, the funder of the research. They were Champion Schools for Musical Futures, an initiative supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. The research used a mixed methods approach, collecting data

through questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and observations. In total, over three years, 18 music staff and 325 students were interviewed about the processes involved in implementing or experiencing music lessons in a department that adopted a Musical Futures approach. The head of music in each school was asked to select students for the focus groups, and to include a sample of students who could be identified as low, middle or high achievers in music and, except for the single-sex school, approximately equal numbers of male and female students. The sample also reflected the different ethnicities in the schools. The data were collected during the second term of the academic year, usually in March. Some adjustments were made to the questions asked in the second and third years in order to explore some aspects in more depth as the research progressed.

All of the schools are maintained and non-selective. All have sixth forms (16-18) except school G. The number of 11-16 year old students ranged between approximately 700 and 1400. School A is a large school in which most students are white British. School B is the largest of the schools and is a single-sex (male) institution with a high proportion of black and minority ethnic students. School C is a large school with mostly white British students. In school D, 75% of students are from a minority ethnic background. Schools E and F are both predominantly white. School F is the second smallest of the schools and is a Church of England school. School G is the smallest of the seven schools with just under 700, mainly white British students.

In the course of the research, students and teachers referred to different styles of music that were integral to their experience of classroom music in general and of Musical Futures in particular. However, some specific questions about music choice were asked. The semi-structured individual interview schedule for students (in years one and two) included a question about which aspects of music lessons they enjoyed and which they did not enjoy as much. In year 3 one of the questions on the semi-structured interview schedule for staff was ‘What music genre is chosen, why, how, and how does it fit with inclusivity and motivating students?’

This paper compares different teachers’ approaches to selection of music both within and between schools. As already indicated above, there was some variation in the way that Musical Futures was implemented, which led to different choices of music being made. The first two research questions are addressed in the next section. This is followed by a discussion

focused on the third question by exploring some of the implications of teachers' approaches to choosing music for the classroom.

Which music was preferred by teachers for their classes and why?

The emphasis on styles of music was slightly different in each school, reflecting the catchment area of the schools, teacher preferences and skills, and resources. The rationale for choice of music is presented by school.

School A used informal learning in year 9. In years 7 and 8 instrumental skills were developed to prepare them for the work in year 9. Musical Futures work was based on student preferences and song-writing. By the third year of the project, music staff had a clearer idea of what worked well and why, including technical aspects, regional influences, the resources, acceptability and student preference.

(Head of music) We're doing Bruno Mars at the moment...they're so easy. They're mostly 4 chord songs...the straightforward pop music is popular...The old R'n'B doesn't really happen round here. It's quite hard to replicate that ... a lot of it is very well produced and sampled ... A lot of language in it isn't appropriate for school either.

School B incorporated many of the suggestions in the Musical Futures guide, which meant practical music-making through whole class and small group work. In year 7 Stomp was used as well as allowing students to work in small groups. It was trialling salsa and Taiko drumming for year 8 students. Composing music for a film was also included. The music department worked well together, trying out the salsa project before using it with students. One member of staff had been a professional Taiko drummer and the school was able to capitalise on his expertise. Discussions about music choices involved considering what was popular at the time, striving to be inclusive and making use of available resources.

School C implemented Musical Futures in year 8 and 9. Music was chosen for its level of difficulty (for instance, simple chords) but broader musical knowledge was incorporated such as composing music for a film using riffs and the Mixolydian mode. The head of music drew a parallel between chamber music and bands, but pointed out the greater relevance to the lives of young people of the latter. She was a highly accomplished musician with a passion

for a more practical and meaningful approach to classroom music. Unlike school B, where there was general agreement about the approach to teaching, in school C music staff had quite different views about how to teach music, which caused some tension. However, the head of music was clear about her aim.

(Head of music, school C) I want [the students] to have the feeling of really achieving something they're passionate about ... I don't want to replicate my experience because I'm very different...I think the Goldberg Variations is one of the greatest pieces of music but I think Fluorescent Adolescent is the most fantastic three minute pop song. We're more likely to get our students playing and enjoying learning through Fluorescent Adolescent than we are through the Goldberg.

What was important, she believed, was to foster mutual respect for different preferences so that students would be more willing to appreciate less familiar styles of music.

I could play my year 9s anything. I could say this Schönberg is the most fantastic piece of music. You don't weaken yourself by first of all acknowledging [students' preferences]. You teach them by example; I value your music, I value your music making. I don't lie to my kids. I always say to my students for me no one comes close to Mozart, no one.

Other members of staff in the department tempered choice based on their knowledge, or opinion, of what was feasible or acceptable in a school environment. Furthermore, since much of the work was done aurally by students and teachers, the choice needed to be one that teachers had the skills to support students with. The choice was therefore not quite as free as implied.

(Music teacher, school C) I said...you've got to choose the song today but there is no point in choosing Bohemian Rhapsody because you're not going to touch it...Yesterday I gave the class free choice but said you might want to do X Y songs and one group said I want to do Surfing by the Beach Boys.

(Head of music, school C) I decide, they have their own choice and then I decide...it will tend to be some kind of four chord pattern, and also [music] that is current, because that's part of the philosophy.

School D used band work in years 7 to 9, first copying a song and then composing one. The head of music was grappling with music choice, which was based on his own knowledge and skills as well as thinking about what students could manage. His comment highlights a challenge when choosing music to copy aurally; the original key may be technically awkward for unskilled musicians. Nonetheless, the learners were prepared to be challenged.

(Head of music) At the moment year 7 kids do *Horse with No Name* which I chose because a) I can play it b) it's only got two chords c) the changes are easy on the guitar although the chords are harmonically quite complex... in year 9 I tried to do *Mercy* by Duffy, that needs a bit of thinking about because it's in G minor and it's not a good key for guitar...the kids in year 9 said they wanted to keep doing it even though it's too difficult. (School D, head of music)

In school E the music staff varied in the amount of experience they had with Musical Futures and the degree to which they embraced it. There were some staff changes during the course of the research. The head of music at the beginning of the research felt strongly about the choice of music and its connection with teaching methods. She was against revisiting stage one, which was copying a piece of music, suggested by the Musical Futures guide. She also thought that a completely free choice for students is not necessarily the best approach.

(Head of music, year one) The reason it becomes a free for all is that sometimes the teachers just fall back on ... oh I don't know what to do today, hey everyone here's a CD, copy it; sometimes it's because the kids actually like that one the best and I feel we shouldn't always be pandering to what they like - we should be continually challenging them.

With a new head of music came a different approach. One concern was how to blend Musical Futures with the National Curriculum. Different cultures had to be included and Gamelan was chosen because of the resources available (xylophones and keyboards) for year 7 students. The 'need to do something interesting' with year 8 students meant starting with the

blues and associated chords, followed by reggae and world music ‘so you’ve ticked the box for world music’. Striking a balance between the box-ticking and student interest underpinned choice.

(Head of music, year three) Pachelbel’s Canon...gives me the opportunity to say there is classical music around, this comes from ages ago, but we do all the cover versions in pop music so we’re integrating some classical with what they already know to keep them motivated.

In school F Year 7 students learnt Reggae, specifically Bob Marley’s 3 Little Birds, as a class. They then worked on a version in friendship groups. Musical Futures was introduced in year 8 using ‘In at the Deep End’, which is the suggested first stage of informal learning in Musical Futures. Students bring recordings of a piece of music they like and recreate it on instruments by careful listening. This happened a year earlier than in the other schools because the selection of options took place in year 8 rather than in year 9. By the second year of the research a classical element had been introduced. Students could choose between several pieces including the music from the films Chariots of Fire, Star Wars and Pirates of the Caribbean.

The music department used suggestions from the Musical Futures website, which the head of music had contributed to. Incorporating music that students could relate to was seen as beneficial. By year three, the Coolio version of Pachelbel’s Canon (See you when I get there) had replaced the original version. A music teacher also commented on the gendered nature of musical styles when talking about a less successful lesson using a Musical Futures, informal learning approach.

A couple of times I tried different things. I remember before we had Youtube, it might have been Green Day actually; as soon as I said we’re doing Green Day [imitates students’ groaning sound]. There’s a lot of very girly girls, and lots of boys who just want to do hip hop, so the girls thought Green Day was too boy-like and the boys didn’t like it anyway. (School F, music teacher)

Because of its faith school status, students heard live performances of religious music.

(Head of music) We do have, in assembly on a Wednesday, a performance of classical music; this morning for example they heard a performance of *Pie Jesu* and Rutter's Bless you and Keep you, and *Ubi Caritas*, so they're hearing that, and I do play some but I think I'm more biased to other [styles].

The whole school assembly provided an opportunity to hear a range of styles, however, including performances of band music by the students.

In school G, the head of music, a brass player himself, had seen how much more enthusiastic students were when given choice. However, that choice was usually guided.

[Musical Futures is] pupil-led, they choose the songs they want to do or they choose what they want to play, you can guide kids towards what would suit them... a child with educational needs... a guitar [or] keyboard part that's much simpler to play... I've got a trumpet player who's a grade 7 trumpet player, I'll write out an obligato trumpet part or we'll choose a song that has a trumpet part in, Black Eyed Peas or something. (School G, head of music)

In the same department was a teacher who was less confident with a non-formal approach to teaching and very aware of what she felt comfortable with.

When they first started to do the group work...they've all done Chasing Cars... it's something that's well known, it's a good way into it...I wouldn't know where to start to be honest to find the right stuff, I think that's an age thing as well sometimes. If it's all seventies music then fine, I know exactly where I'm going. It's stood the test of time! Anything with a tune in I'm happy with! (School G, music teacher)

Summary of key points

A more formal approach to learning took place in years 7 and in some cases year 8, which prepared students for a more informal approach in year 9 (year 8 in one school). The informal approach embraced the idea of student choice so that music lessons were of interest and therefore motivating. In practice, choices were not entirely free. The main reasons for

moderating free choice were suitability to be reproduced on the resources available, appropriateness of lyrics for a school context, teachers' ability to support students with their choices and the difficulty of the music. In terms of difficulty, the original key was taken into account when music was to be reproduced through listening so that it was not too technically challenging; music based on four chords (I, IV, V, VI) were seen as suitable. Many teachers had found particular pieces of music that students both enjoyed and could reproduce or develop. School context was influential because students were exposed to a range of different musical styles according to teachers' specialisms and through performances in school assemblies.

Which classroom music was preferred by students and why?

The students spoke about their preferences in the focus groups and were consistently enthusiastic about practical music experiences. This was true for all year groups.

(Year 7 boy, school B) My favourite one was when we did a performance of Stomp because all of us got enthusiastic. We just experienced how sticks can be used to make music.

(Year 8 boy, school F) Last year we did the Killers and we're doing it again now, and it was really good because you're free to do whatever you want and you can practise using musical instruments.

(Year 9 girl, school C) I really liked when we did Crazy because we got to play instruments and sing.

How much a specific piece of music or musical style was enjoyed was connected to how it was learnt. Similarly, although the music that was not enjoyed varied, it tended to be associated less with the style than with the availability of instruments, instrumental skills, who chose the music, and the amount of time spent on an activity. As a consequence, the same music could evoke very different opinions.

(Year 9 girls, school A)

(girl 1) Samba band, when we played samba music that was good.

(girl 2) We did samba or something like that and you didn't always get an instrument, you clapped or something, because it was a class of 30 and it was quite boring.

Lack of musical skills reduced enjoyment of music chosen by the teacher, although the time spent on a piece was also a factor. The style of music itself was not necessarily the issue. A further factor was lack of familiarity although part of the difficulty was being taught a piece rather than using a more informal approach.

(Year 8 girl, school A) When The Saints Go Marching In. We had a really long music thing, keyboard. It was like separate hands. It was a bit hard.

(Year 9 boy, school C) I didn't really like the 12 bar blues. I found it a bit boring, having to learn all the notes and I'm rubbish at piano.

(Year 9 girls, school E)

(girl 1) The reggae wasn't very good.

(girl 2) ... I know we have to like explore different like music things but reggae was a really hard one to do because none of us had really heard much reggae so we didn't know what it's like.

(girl 1) It was very structured as well, there wasn't much freedom whereas now we can just basically do what we like with it whereas then it was very much you've got to play this.

Students were asked about their views on classical music. Opinions varied considerably from an appreciation of its technicality to its lack of relevance to the young people. However, when some students talked about classical music they were referring to music that had stood the test of time, including rock and pop from the first half of the twentieth century. Those who disliked classical music stereotyped it as lacking rhythm or going on for too long. The suggestion that classical music is slow or suited to adults because it is relaxing, expressed by a number of students in different schools, demonstrated a limited knowledge of the style. Importantly, many students were able to explain their opinion and were prepared to air their differences, shown in this exchange during a focus group.

(Year 8 boys, school F)

(boy 1) It depends what type. Because we did this Pachelbel's canon thing and that was really good ... we were given the My Chemical Romance like twist on it, we got given two classical ones, a rapping one and the one was just a choir singing it

(boy 2) Titanic

(boy 1) No it was, it was Coolio. And I didn't like the Coolio one so much but I did quite like the two classical ones. So iconic classical music is very good but when it just goes on for like an hour it just gets really boring.

(boy 2) I'm not into that sort of music because I just find it a bit boring and bland, if you get what I mean, I prefer like rock and pop music, and like I said rap...I think for rap it like tells a story or something but for like pop and rock it's just more upbeat and like more tuneful.

A year 9 GCSE group in school F, when asked about their views on classical music talked about a trainee teacher who had been influential in spite of a relatively brief time at the school. Students said they were more appreciative of classical music because the teacher had shown them on the guitar how contemporary songs linked to historical music.

A number of specific pieces of music and styles were mentioned. The music varied according to catchment area. For example, in a school with a high number of Asian students, Bhangra and dhol drumming were referred to. Elsewhere rap, hip hop, pop and rock were popular. Several schools used films as a stimulus for composition. Composition and improvisation allowed for differentiation. Students could use their skills and incorporate their preferred style. One group of students enjoyed Pachelbel's canon and improvising but did not enjoy R'n'B or reggae.

(Year 8 boys, school E)

(boy 1) I think the practical work was quite good but with Pachelbel's canon and the film music we were able to improvise.

(boy 2) What I think at the beginning is let us make our own songs. Reggae I actually hated it, same thing, er, er, er, er.

One student talked about becoming familiar with certain sounds, which could be more palatable if incorporated into a familiar style of music.

(Year 10 boy, school B) I think it was in year 8 we did as a class a Gnarl's Barkley cover, didn't we, so some people were using cellos so you get to hear the sound of an instrument that you wouldn't normally hear.

In year 3 of the research, individual interviews were carried out with a small sample of students from years 10 and 11 who had continued to study music as an option. One of the year 10 students who had opted to study creative music regretted his choice. His interest in the subject had declined to a point where he was unsure if he wanted to continue with the course. Something that stood out was his interest in nature, particularly birds. The researcher added a note to the end of the interview. The point raises a question as to whether natural sounds could be included as a style of music and therefore a potential resource in music teaching.

(Researcher's note) We talk about birds again and bird song and oscilloscope patterns and whether females sing so at least we end in a happier place. I couldn't help wondering, given MF and personalised learning, whether musical aspects of nature, bird song, whale song, crickets etc., couldn't have been drawn on to engage him.

Summary of key points

Practical music-making was, perhaps predictably, the most enjoyable aspect of music lessons, to some extent regardless of style, as well as opportunities to compose. Students varied considerably in how much they liked particular styles of music. Many were receptive to a range particularly if there were suitable instruments (body percussion being less popular), it was not too technical for their level of skill on an instrument and it was not too repetitive. Some students held stereotypical views on classical music although there were different interpretations of 'classical'. The unfamiliarity of styles or instruments was overcome by helping students to make links to music that was more familiar to them. It is possible that musical sounds beyond what is traditionally considered to be music could be incorporated to suit individual interests or to broaden musical styles.

What implications are there for music teachers and their learners?

The question of who chooses the music is a fundamental aspect of Musical Futures but applies to all approaches to teaching music. A number of implications arise from choosing particular pieces of music in relation to style and accessibility. Permitting students to choose their own music was found to be important in terms of increased motivation although

opinions varied regarding the amount of freedom that teachers should allow. Teachers monitored choice for difficulty and for appropriateness of lyrics for a school context. However, some students would overcome the challenge posed by choosing difficult music because of their desire to reproduce it. The role of the teacher is then less about choice and more about facilitating that choice. Indeed, the recommendation for 'In at the Deep End' is to leave the choice to the students, which has implications for the skill of the teacher in dealing with the difficulties that might well ensue.

...the students will be more interested in selecting songs that they like, rather than ones that they think will be easy or suitable to copy. However, it is essential that they are allowed to choose, and that they like and identify with the music they are working on. (d'Amore n.d., 144)

Where choices were made by or manipulated by teachers, the number of chords and the key were taken into consideration. Very often the aim was to choose simple music that could be achieved by all rather than allowing more difficult choices and supporting those selections. For year 9 students, three or four chords were cited as appropriate in some instances. A further implication of this approach is for inclusion. One interpretation is that inclusive practice was, at times, more to do with everyone being able to participate rather than taking a differentiated approach to inclusion in which individual students worked at a level according to their skills or potential.

Lack of familiarity with a style of music is one reason why many students and some teachers expressed discomfort with certain pieces. The cognitive principles of categorisation, stereotyping and prejudice (Tajfel 1969) apply to music as much as they do to any other entity. Unfamiliar music may be categorised negatively, at least initially. Hargreaves (1982) reported that greater musical experience was associated with more objective responses to different styles whereas less experienced listeners reacted more subjectively. This does not take prejudice away but shifts an emotional response to a more reasoned one.

The Musical Futures research presented here indicated that teachers who valued the music students enjoyed could encourage a reciprocal appreciation of different styles. Teachers who were described as 'good' in our research were more influential in broadening acceptance of

different styles of music. Good teachers were described as those who were respectful of students, valued their musical preferences, and managed behaviour in a firm, positive way. Acceptance of or resistance to the style of a piece of music can be explained by an attitude theory such as balance theory (see, e.g., Crano & Prislin [2010]) whereby the like or dislike of a piece of music depends on the like or dislike of the person promoting or dismissing it, which could be staff or peers.

Working with peers exposed students to less familiar music. Owing to these interpersonal factors, some students appreciated the technicality of what they understood to be classical music and many began to appreciate other styles. Formal co-operative learning (Johnson & Johnson 2000) has been used to reduce racial prejudice in schools, but the same principles apply to any form of prejudice, including against music. The 'In at the Deep End' project, which involves choosing a piece to recreate by careful listening, requires co-operative learning if that piece of music is to be reproduced successfully and can serve to introduce students to different styles of music when group members' preferences differ.

However, it might be that the first step to reducing prejudice would be to discourage thinking of music in stylistic categories and focus instead on active music-making or on shared musical elements above 'genre'. The trainee teacher who was able to demonstrate the connection between contemporary and classical music inspired students to think differently about the latter. As one head of music said, 'good music is good music' regardless of imposed separation of music into types.

Limitations of the research

Firstly, it is acknowledged that there are implications beyond the scope of this paper. These include implications for assessment and progression, which are important considerations when deciding which music to select or permit. Secondly, some of the music referred to for illustrative purposes will almost certainly have changed, given the amount of music produced and shifting trends. In addition, changes to the National Curriculum will be influential in choosing music. Even so, the principles behind choices may remain because of the strong values expressed by the teachers. A final point is that the data reflect the questions asked and there will be further reasons and associated implications that were not explored in sufficient detail or at all.

Conclusion

Teachers played an important part in selecting music for the classroom so that there was rarely completely free choice for the students. The main reasons given were accessibility and suitability. Although familiar music tended to be favoured by the young people, they were open to new sounds if these were introduced in positive ways. Valuing students' preferences, even if not liking them, is fundamental to encouraging a more open approach to styles of music and could apply to all music teaching. Other strategies that broadened students musical horizons as well as developing musical skills were found to be experiencing different music styles, allowing choice and, crucially, practical work.. The most recent National Curriculum reintroduces the idea of a musical canon (Department for Education 2013). However, attempts to classify music are fraught with difficulties and can lead to unhelpful stereotypes. If categorisation is inevitable, reference to musical elements might provide a less divisive method.

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