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Response to special issue of *Action, Criticism and Theory for Music Education* concerning *Music, Informal Learning and the School: A New Classroom Pedagogy*

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Response to special issue of *Action, Criticism and Theory for Music Education* concerning *Music, Informal Learning and the School: A New Classroom Pedagogy*

Lucy Green

I would like to thank the editors and the six authors in this special issue of *Action, Criticism and Theory in Music Education* for responding to my book *Music, Informal Learning and the School: A New Classroom Pedagogy*. I am grateful for their care and thoughtfulness, and for the very interesting and constructive perspectives that have resulted. In this response, I have restricted myself to some general observations that came to mind whilst reading this valuable set of articles.

Many of the contexts outlined by the authors are very different from the context in which the research discussed in the book took place. Between them, they cover a range of teaching and learning practices related to Balinese gamelan, Irish traditional music, jazz, rock, various African contexts, the digital musical culture of information technology, teacher-education, and other areas. The authors have identified aspects of informal music-learning practices that can translate across these different contexts, and each author has made constructive connections between the work discussed in the book, and the work that they and others are doing in related areas. At the same time as acknowledging this translation of concepts across different contexts, however, every context of course has its own specificities. As I will suggest again below, whilst we can usefully identify overarching concepts, we must also retain the specificities of particular contexts, and the qualities that make one practice or object different from another. The authors have all succeeded in balancing both sides of this scale, in my view.

The reasons I focussed my research on popular music rather than any other musical style, genre or tradition, are perhaps worth mentioning here. A main one was that I was interested in pupils' responses to music education in the context of English secondary schooling. It seemed to me that the world of the popular musician was probably the most available to the greatest number of pupils, both in a cultural sense and in terms of the availability of material resources. Had I been working in Ireland, Jean Downey's suggestion

of adopting and adapting the informal learning practices of traditional Irish musicians may well have been just as high on my agenda as those of popular musicians. As she points out, the learning practices are very similar. This is especially the case nowadays with the advent of sound recording technology, which means that Irish musicians can learn by listening to recordings in a way that of course they could not do until the 20th century. In Ireland, the culture of traditional music is far stronger, more widespread, and more shared across the generations than it is in England. Although there are hundreds of folk clubs and a range of different practices keeping English (and other British) folk music alive in England, folk music does not currently denote national identity, or impinge on the lives of most school pupils, in a way which compares with its meaning and accessibility in Ireland (or indeed, Scotland and Wales). A research project to investigate that claim further might be worth doing!

Another reason for focussing on the learning practices of popular, rather than any other sort of musicians, was that many of the classrooms where I worked were made up of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural pupil populations; or, as in the case of one school, a population whose ethnicity formed a large majority at that particular school, yet was a minority in the 'host' culture of England. In such environments, the folk tradition of the 'host' culture would be meaningless to many of the participants (including most of those with English ethnicity, as discussed above); and any emphasis on English culture, without including a corresponding balance of other cultures, might be politically and culturally insensitive. It concerned me, however, that when given free choice of what music to play, so few pupils from ethnic minorities chose music that reflected their ethnic backgrounds, or that they and their parents may have been listening to at home.

I would have liked the opportunity to work for longer in schools with multi-ethnic or minority-ethnic populations. In those schools discussed in the book, where pupils were given a second opportunity to choose their own music, their purview broadened beyond current charts hits. Many of them came in to school with popular music dating from the 1960s and other eras. However there were very few ethnic minority pupils in those particular schools. My hypothesis would be that if pupils in multi-cultural or minority-ethnic schools were given a number of opportunities to choose their own music over a period of a few months, more variety of world music styles would surface. I also anticipate that there would be some interesting differences between schools which were multi-cultural/multi-ethnic and those

which were mono-cultural/mono-ethnic, whether the latter involved minorities or not. This kind of development, particularly the incorporation of self-selected music, as well as music-learning practices, that reflect pupils' ethnicities, is another area somewhat crying out for research.

Lauri Väkevä is quite right to point out that the rapid global proliferation of digital music culture is not covered in the book. I agree that research into how young (and older) people are using the internet to acquire musical skills and knowledge is extremely relevant, and there are already some fascinating results in this area. Research on the use of computer technology for composition and performance, aside from questions about the internet, is also important, as Lauri suggests. This has clear connections with many aspects of informal learning. In addition, it raises new and interesting questions, such as where being 'a musician' and gaining musical skills begin and end.

Again, there are quite a few reasons why I did not include these digitally-based areas in the research project. One incidental reason is quite simply that it has been a long project. I first started planning it in 1996, when I decided to investigate the informal learning practices, as well as the formal educational experiences, of a range of popular musicians, loosely defined, within the broad rock/pop guitar-band category. (This was published as *How Popular Musicians Learn: A Way Ahead For Music Education*, Ashgate, 2001/2.) At that time personal computers were only just becoming common, programmes such as Cubase were not widely available, and home access to the internet was only just beginning to be widespread. I could of course have studied how popular musicians learnt in other digital fields, particularly synthesised urban dance musics; and there were other prominent areas of popular music performance that I did not look at, notably rapping and DJ-ing.

The main reason I did not extend into such areas was that I wanted to maintain focus. By spreading our horizons we both gain and lose. We gain a wider perspective, but we tend to lose those specificities which, as I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, make things what they are and distinguish them from what they are not. By focussing, our work will be grounded in a locality and a style; and only once we are on a particular piece of ground, can we move off it to begin looking at what transcends that ground. Then we can consider what we can transfer from one ground to another. Furthermore, it is equally important to consider what we can *not* transfer from one ground to another; and this enterprise would also be sullied if we were not sure where we stood in the first place. I found that each article in this

special issue of *ACT* maintains a coherent focus and ground; and I believe that it is through the exchange of knowledge thus grounded, that the best progress can be made across the profession of music educationalists and researchers.

Throughout all the discussions, the authors are well aware of the need to be cautious with terms; and one that is particularly slippery is of course the term ‘informal’. For example, some musical traditions, although aural, are not really informal in many senses of the word, as Minette Mans points out. Indian classical and traditional musics, many of the African traditions that Minette discusses, and Balinese gamelan as discussed by Peter Dunbar-Hall, are good examples. Such traditions are taught and learnt aurally, and in this sense have a major feature in common with popular musicians’ informal music-learning practices. But there is often a certain level of formality in these traditions. For example, there is formality in the mere fact of having a specially-designated teacher, guru or master-musician. This teacher-learner relationship may involve the tacit recognition of considerable status-differentials between the participants, bringing with it concepts of superiority, obedience, respect and so on. There may be established and expected procedures for teaching and learning, which may or may not be consciously formulated and theorised. Indeed, such formalised arrangements and procedures may in some cases far exceed the levels of formality which tend to pertain between a teacher and a learner in an average Western institution. In the light of such examples, it is helpful to disentangle what we mean by ‘informal’ from what we mean by ‘aural’.

Furthermore, although formal in the above senses, the teaching and learning that goes on in traditions such as these, is often exceedingly *different* from the teaching and learning that goes on in most Western or Western-influenced music education. As Peter points out, merely being brought into contact with a way of learning or teaching which is quite different from anything one has experienced before—whether it is formal, informal, aural, notated or any other—is in itself an educational experience; or in his words, represents a ‘critique’ of students’ previous music-learning experiences or their ongoing teaching practices. In my current research project I am working with instrumental teachers in a one-to-one teacher-student setting. I am using techniques derived from informal learning, but the balance is towards the aural more than the informal. Students are learning to play by copying music aurally, and the teacher takes a slightly less directive role than usual, but gives guidance when needed. The teachers who were involved all said they found new aspects to learning and

teaching through the project. To quote one of them: 'I am finding this absolutely fascinating, and it's already having an effect on the rest of my teaching too, just in a general way; and *it's reminding me that there is more than one way to learn*, you know, what a middle C is'. I believe that coming into contact with ways of learning and/or teaching that may be new or unfamiliar is likely to widen not only knowledge but also the imagination.

It seems all the authors in this special journal issue are agreed, implicitly or explicitly, that 'formal' and 'informal' ways of learning cannot usefully be conceived as mutually exclusive, or even as having clear boundaries between them. Nor is it always relevant to make distinctions between 'place' and 'type' of learning—for example, the idea that formal learning goes on in a school, and informal learning goes on outside a school, is too simple. If a child is sitting in a classroom whilst a teacher is teaching, certainly there is formal *teaching* going on, or at the very least an attempt at formal teaching; but there may be no learning of any kind going on; or there may be *informal* learning going on, since instead of listening to what the teacher is saying, or watching what s/he is doing, the pupil may be thinking of a favourite tune in his/her head and trying to work out what the notes are. To the observer, this would be invisible; but it would be an example of informal learning—as I think all the authors would define it—going on inside a formal educational situation.

As Jean Downey, Carlos Rodriguez and others discuss, the formal and the informal realms are interlinked, rather than being clearly distinct. We could say that they share the same pole as each other, and are situated at its opposite ends only in extreme cases. The same must be said of 'aural' and 'written' forms of musical transmission. Other concepts such as 'vernacular', 'traditional' and 'classical' learning and teaching practices also need to be thrown into the balance. There are no clear dividing lines between any of these terms or their associated places and practices. As I suggested earlier, we need to be specific about what kinds of music, and which teaching-and-learning contexts and practices we are talking about at any one time, in order to respect the complexity of these matters.

As many of the authors point out, despite transferable elements, there are also some notable differences between popular music learning and other types of informal, aural, vernacular or traditional learning. For me one of the most important ones, which is particularly relevant to school children and young people, is that popular music learning has, until very recently, been the province mainly of young people themselves, and has taken place often in the almost complete absence of adults. This applies also to more recent

developments in digital areas, as discussed by Lauri Väkevä. By contrast, many of the musical traditions referred to in this special issue—including Balinese gamelan, Irish traditional music, African musics and jazz—involve a community of practice that usually includes adults in one way or another. It seems likely that more and more popular musics may gradually be included within formal music education over the next few decades, along with a corresponding increased ‘informalisation’ of teaching and learning strategies. In such circumstances adults will start play an increasing role in popular music learning. However, new types of music, and new types of learning to go with them, will no doubt develop afresh outside the formal framework, through the activities of young people continuing to operate in the absence of adult supervision. Again, digital music cultures are a very likely forum for such a development. This is something which to my mind should be celebrated as a reflection of music’s continual renewal. Music has always developed and refreshed itself outside the paradigms of formal educational institutions, and I do not think that is about to change!

The directions and connections made by all the authors implicitly or explicitly raise one of the most urgent issues confronting contemporary music education: that of multi-culturalism or inter-culturalism. To my mind, an inevitable disadvantage of a multi-cultural or inter-cultural music education, would be the idea that children can be multi-musicians, or the idea that it would be feasible or sensible to attempt to educate children in a vast range of music from all over the world. The reasons for this are well-discussed in the literature, and include questions about teacher-knowledge, tokenism, lack of authenticity, lack of time and resources, and many others. Here I think it is helpful to distinguish between what kinds of skills are involved when people engage with music as producers (performers, composers, improvisers, directors, arrangers, sound engineers and so on, all of which *include* listening); and what happens when they engage with music *solely* as listeners who are not simultaneously involved in production.

As producers, some musicians manage to operate proficiently in two, three and in rare cases, even four different styles. For example someone who is a Western classical musician may also play jazz and popular music, but it is unlikely that the same person will also be a confident Balinese gamelan musician, say, or African drummer. Proficiency in any more than a handful of styles would, in most cases, be just too much to ask—rather like asking busy people to speak five, ten, fifteen languages. If we stay with the language analogy for a moment: we would think it ridiculous to introduce children to Russian in week 1, Portuguese

in week 2, Malayalam in week 3 of the curriculum, and to carry on like that for a whole year. However, unless we are clear about our aims as multi-cultural or inter-cultural music educators, we may run the risk of attempting something not dissimilar. I firmly believe that we need to offer learners the opportunity, as musical *producers*, to get to grips with the inter-sonic meanings and materials of a *limited* number of styles. (Whether those styles involve popular musics, jazz, Balinese gamelan, African, Irish, Western classical, or any other musics, is at this point, a different question, and will depend on the context.) The point I would like to make here is that it is only as *listeners* that we can realistically ask learners to engage in wider range of musics.

These two sides of musical engagement—producing and listening—are of course intrinsically related. To me, pupils' engagement as producers—in whatever style of music—is the key to opening out their ears as listeners, most particularly when production involves an amount of aural work. Once learners have been inside musical production through aural learning, their listening skills and appreciation of music increase. As their listening skills and appreciation increase, so their prejudice and incomprehension diminish, and a wider range of musical styles becomes available to them as listeners. This at any rate is what I found in the research for *Music, Informal Learning and the School*, when we introduced pupils to the music that they themselves had declared was most unfamiliar and most disliked—Western classical music.

As Greg Gatién suggests in his article, definitions of different musical styles are always subject to change, and categories 'might break down when listeners become "doers"'. Lauri Väkevä also attends to the related idea that the 'ideological constraints' associated with certain styles of music in the minds of pupils, 'may be mitigated when one is given a free hand to make music in a way that is intrinsically motivating'; or in other words, where it is the learning practice rather than the music produced through it, that is authentic. This is indeed, one of the main messages I was trying to get across in the book.

Lauri takes me to task a little for using the concept of 'natural' music learning. I appreciate his concerns, and indeed the notion of what is or is not a 'natural' practice regarding music (or anything else) demands an entire book to even begin to do any justice to it. However I do think it is a good idea not to be too afraid of employing the concept of the 'natural'. I would like to suggest three aspects that may helpfully be attached to it. The first aspect comes back again to the issue of being grounded, and the necessity of being grounded

before we can generalise. For one way of conceiving of learning as being ‘natural’ is to say: if we can observe practices happening across a range of different contexts (grounds), in which the participants have had no contact with each other previously, and in such a way that their practices transcend the contexts, then those practices must be occurring naturally. A second aspect concerns the idea that ‘natural’ practices involve things that occur ‘by themselves’ without conscious or formal intervention. The third aspect is that ‘natural’ practices involve things that occur right through human history without exception.

It is probably less controversial to suggest that it is natural for people to learn to talk, than to learn to make music. The particular language that is spoken, the ways in which it is used, the different levels of complexity adopted by different speakers, the existence of different dialects and so on, are of course culturally specific. But the *fact* of learning to talk *per se* fulfils all three of the suggested characteristics of natural learning practices above. Firstly, learning to talk occurs across all human cultures. Secondly, the fact of learning to talk has gone on throughout all human history. Thirdly, learning to talk comes about without conscious or ‘formal’ intervention—in other words, the baby is not consciously or formally *taught* to talk, but so long as he or she is brought up in an environment where others are talking, then in almost all cases the baby will learn to talk.

It seems feasible to suggest that music-making is a ‘natural’ practice in the first and the second terms suggested above: firstly, music-making occurs across all human cultures, and secondly, it has gone on throughout human history without exception (even in societies where it is officially prohibited). However, at this point it becomes necessary to distinguish between *music-making* and *music-learning*. For whilst it is unproblematic to say that *music-making* occurs across all human societies and throughout all histories, this does not mean that *every individual child* within each society learns to make music. This is because in some societies, the particular individuals who learn to make music are selected by various means, and some individuals do not learn to make music. However, on closer examination we would have to admit that this applies only to certain types of music-making. If singing a nursery-rhyme, whistling a tune or tapping one’s foot to a beat are conceived of as making music—which, literally, they are—then it becomes possible to see how in fact, music-learning is, after all, a ‘natural’ practice in the third term suggested: that although babies are not consciously or formally taught to make music, so long as they are brought up in an environment where others are making music, then in almost all cases they will learn to make music. To me, the

idea of music-learning as ‘natural’ is a critical idea: because in many aspects of Western society, we have become alienated from what is ‘natural’; and as I say using different words in the book, it has therefore become necessary for us to re-learn what is naturally ours.

One very important issue, as discussed by Carlos Rodriguez, Peter Dunbar-Hall, Jean Downey and others amongst the authors, concerns practical teacher-development. It seems uncontroversial to say that bringing unfamiliar musics and moreover, unfamiliar approaches to music-learning, into any education system is going to require new approaches to teacher-education. First of all teachers will need to understand the new musics in order to be able to make judgments about them and about how they occur in their ‘real’ or authentic contexts. Beyond that, as Carlos points out in relation to informal learning practices, teachers ‘must become experts in helping students make things happen for themselves’; and this requirement does, as he puts it, ‘drastically redefine what it means to prepare music teachers’.

As in the paragraph above, I have used the word ‘real’ in various parts of the book. Again Lauri Väkevä expresses concern about this, and I do appreciate his reasons, as well as the fact that I am indeed rather vague about the term, as he points out. The notion of ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ is another one demanding a whole book, and of course there is a large literature already on the concept of musical authenticity in particular. Lauri helpfully suggests that ‘in Green’s account, “reality” seems to be at the same time something that frames music in advance as an object of study and something that can be used as a criterion of the authenticity of its learning—that is, at the same time a property of musical context and its learning’. He is quite right to point out, in a critical vein, that ‘what the students do in class seems to be as real as any song on a CD that they are listening to...’. True, but I still believe it is worth keeping hold of the concept of ‘real’ music as an objective category existing independently of the students’ actions or indeed, their ideas. Of course everything that exists, if it exists, is by definition ‘real’. But that should not prevent us distinguishing between music which is ‘real’ in the sense that it exists in the world *beyond* education, as well as, or instead of, the world *of* education. Coming from a slightly different angle, Minette Mans points out that there seems to be an oxymoron in the very idea that ‘real’ music can be learnt in ‘real’ ways in schools; yet she concludes, in a way that I think resolves the issue, that this did indeed happen in the project. (And of course it may well happen in many classrooms where different kinds of approaches are occurring.)

Greg Gatién lays out very clearly the kinds of problems that have confronted jazz as it gained a foothold in the education system, and the ways in which jazz education ‘can be seen to have changed the modes of transmission in the jazz tradition’. When something that originated and existed outside of a formal institution, is brought inside, its nature is bound to change. But as Greg suggests, in the case of jazz the changes have had both positive and negative effects. There will always be music outside of institutions (‘real’ music). When bringing ‘real’ music inside, educators will need to be continually alert to the changes the music may undergo. It is a matter of sensitivity to different levels and meanings of ‘reality’ in different places.

I found the concept of ‘ethnopedagogy’ as suggested in Peter Dunbar-Hall’s article, potentially helpful. It seems to incorporate the idea that as teachers, we are all also researchers involved in a type of ethnomusicology. Possibly, after the manner of ethnomusicologists, it may be helpful for teachers to learn to make music in the traditions to which their pupils are closest. Adapting to the role of the teacher in any pedagogy based on informal, aural or indeed any other learning practices that are unfamiliar to that particular teacher, is always going to be demanding. Only after having developed at least some understanding of both the music and its learning practices, can teachers be in a position to develop strategies for incorporating them into formal education. In addition, teachers need to be able to listen to unfamiliar music with understanding; play a range of instruments; diagnose pupils’ needs; offer suggestions about and models of performing, composing, improvising, group work and many more aspects; and take each individual learner a little further on his or her own journey through musical learning. As Greg Gatién points out, the ‘hands-off’ role of the teacher within the informal classroom project discussed in the book, is quite similar to the role that has been taken for many years by jazz musicians in leading their groups and interacting with younger musicians. Possibly teacher-educators could do well to look towards that model for inspiration.

I think the next steps in the development of informal learning in music education should—as in any field of education—involve both research and practice. So far as I’m concerned, and I think this is shared by all the authors in this journal issue, the more research that can be done on informal/aural or other learning practices that have hitherto lain largely outside formal music education the better. But at the same time, and again I think this is shared by all the authors, we should be careful as a profession not to do too much research

which is merely descriptive. To me the point of doing research is not only to describe something that is worth describing, or that hasn't been described before. It is also to ask: what action is needed, and how can we do research which will inform action? To paraphrase a famous statement: the point of research is surely not to describe the world but to change it.

It is also essential that the conversation between practicing teachers and music education researchers continues to be strengthened. There would be no point in having one group of professionals (academics and teacher-educators) researching away about what another group (teachers) is doing, without any communion between the two. One of the joys I experienced in doing the research for the book, and I am sure this is shared in their own work by the authors and many readers of this journal, was that I worked in classrooms not only with pupils but with a range of teachers. I think we all benefited from the professional exchange.

Today music educationalists in general—including both researchers and teachers—seem to be fashioning and embracing a number of new ideas. We are living at a time of great social, cultural, ecological, technological and economic change, not to mention specifically musical change. However, we must take care not to overlook the value of our more embedded and traditional formal educational ways. I am strongly of the opinion that to give children and young people the best possible music education, they need access to both formal and informal realms, both aural and written forms of transmission; and they need to be able to understand music theory and how music is put together at both an intuitive level and a conscious, theoretical level (whether written or aural or both). As Carlos Rodriguez suggests, one area for future research would be to study the 'give-and-take of informal and formal learning systems to determine how they can be mutually supportive'. This enterprise has been particularly well illustrated, I believe, in the article on jazz by Greg Gatién. Jazz entered into formal music education well before popular music, and therefore it already has a history enabling him and other researchers to trace the relationship between formal and informal pedagogy that has evolved through jazz.

The processes involved in the transmission and acquisition of musical skills and knowledge are living social practices that are ultimately as unfathomable and fascinating as music itself. For me, and I'm sure for all the authors here and probably for all music educators, the point of music education goes very deep. Music education is not just about teaching learners to acquire musical skills and knowledge; but about keeping a hold of our

very humanity through an ancient, universal—yes, universal!—yet ever-changing need to organise sound, and respond to organised sound, in a world where our humanity often seems to be threatened.