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“How does music education in schools prepare students for any further education in music at college or university?”

This dissertation will concern the topic of music education in schools today, and whether or not it prepares students for further education in music. I will split this dissertation into five chapters which will focus on music theory, grades, music as a core subject, lack of popular music education, and instrumental instruction.

Music theory for example, is not taught in most schools, and instead, students are taught musical concepts (Accelerando, Rallentando, Crescendo, Diminuendo etc). This can be argued to be more of a modern language class than a music class. Also, music theory is very important to students who want to go into further education in music, thus schools aren't properly preparing them. Theory is important to every musician, whether it's learning key signatures, scales, or basic rhythms.

The grades in school have also recently been lowered. To pass advanced higher music, students only need to be at Grade 5 on their main instruments. There is a huge gap in education here, as most universities would expect their students to be coming in at Grade 8. Students must look to private tuition in order to learn an instrument to the proper standard, and not all students can afford external instrumental instruction, which brings us to the next point.

Instrumental instruction in schools is very limited. Only certain instruments can receive tuition, and students can only be taught one of their instruments. If a student chooses for example, bass guitar, this isn't widely taught in schools, and students would have to look to their classroom teacher for support, who know as much about the instrument as they do.

There is also a lack of focus on popular music, with education focusing on classical and traditional folk music. Popular music isn't seen as worthy to study, and so students aren't learning type of music that interest them, many lose the desire to become a musician. Music education could be improved by looking at popular music, as it would interest more students, and it is also a very important part of education for

many students who will go on to further education. Music as a subject is also not thought of as a very important subject, and so schools don't really encourage students to take it up.

This dissertation will contain five chapters in which I will be focusing on music theory in schools, music as a serious subject in schools, popular music as a part of the course, instrumental tuition for students, and the issue of the grade that students need to be at in order to pass their exams. This dissertation will also contain the views of music professionals and teachers, and the opinions of music students. I will use this information to determine whether or not music in schools adequately prepares students for a college or university education in music.

Chapter 1 – Concepts vs Music Theory

Music theory is one of the most important things a musician must learn, especially if they intend to go on to further education. Whether it be learning which notes you can play in a certain key signature, or knowing what rhythms can be used in a certain time signature, theory is important to anyone. Why then, is this overlooked in schools?

Music Theory is the foundations of all music; it's the rules that make music work. Many argue that it's possible to play in a band without knowing any music theory and without knowing how to read music at all. While this may be true, music theory helps every musician to learn how music works, and hence makes them more musically aware, and much more creative. In *Why you Need Music Theory*, Gary Ewer says:

'While of course it is possible to develop a career as a performing musician without being able to read a note of music - you need to know: your knowledge of music theory will open doors to a world that was previously closed to you. Used correctly, music theory will help you not only *understand* your music, but will allow you to *communicate* your musical ideas, and to explore music in ways you have never experienced before' – Ewer, G
– *Why you Need Music Theory* (Musictheory.halifax.ns.ca)

While it is also argued that a study of music theory would not allow musicians to be any more creative, Ewer also points out the counter-argument to this by saying:

'Sometimes musicians will claim that they don't want to study music theory for fear it will stifle their creativity. They equate increasing theoretical knowledge with diminishing artistic sense. And nothing could be further from the truth. The world's greatest composers were all masters of music theory: J.S. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms- all had a keen understanding of the theoretical constructs of the music they composed. They spent years studying, in minute detail, the music of other composers, analyzing compositions to gain a greater understanding of how music worked. This understanding certainly did not stifle their creative abilities

- it *enhanced* them! Far be it from any of us to claim that Mozart's musical abilities were stifled by his highly-developed understanding of theory - such a claim would be extraordinary!' – Ewer, G – *Why you Need Music Theory* (Musictheory.halifax.ns.ca)

In schools, students are instead taught musical “Concepts” like Allegro, Crescendo, and Acciaccatura. The Curriculum for Excellence describes what students learn as “Terms that describe the ingredients of music, such as repetition, harmony, major key, and syncopation”. Out of those four examples, repetition is the only one that would make sense to someone who does not know music theory. Harmony could only be taught to students as the opposite to unison, Major key (Happy sounding) could only be taught as the opposite of a minor key (Sad sounding), and syncopation must be a hard concept for young students to learn if they cannot read music.

When music is taught in this way, it becomes more of a language study than a music study. If students can learn the Italian words for use in music, then they can pass their exam without really knowing how the music works. What students need to learn for a modern language such as French or Spanish, is not too far off what they need to learn for music. A study of musical concepts is not fully a study of music theory.

Of course, learning concepts will help musicians when it comes to reading classical music; terms such as *accelerando*, and *diminuendo* appear in many pieces, and musicians will need to know this. But what about musicians who want to study popular music instruments, such as the guitarists, the keyboardists, and the drummers? These musicians have little or no need for musical concepts, and must be taught the theory of their instruments in order for their creativity to flourish.

In the Higher Music course, music theory does make a small appearance. However, the Higher Music course looks at such a small part of music theory, and takes up just one question in the exam. Also, it is not referred to as music theory, but rather, music literacy (McGowan). In *How to Pass Higher Music* (2006), Joe McGowan highlights exactly what students need to know to pass this section of the exam:

‘On examining (at sight) the notation of a piece of music, you should be able to:

- Describe the **interval** between two notes as a semitone, third, fifth, octave etc.
- **Transpose** part of a melody up or down an octave
- Identify **chords, cadences, scales, ornaments** and musical symbols (including articulation marks such as **slurs, staccato** dots and **accents**)
- Give the meaning of basic Italian terms (e.g. Dal Segno, Da Capo, a tempo etc.) which appear on the score
- Identify and correct rhythmic errors and incorrect bars
- Identify where the main beats and up-beats are.

Upon hearing the musical excerpt for which you have been given the music notation, you should be able to:

- Write any notes, rests and/or musical rhythms which are missing from a particular bar
- Identify where certain events occur in the music – for example, where a specific instrument starts playing. You will normally do this by placing a cross (**X**) above the relevant note or bar.
- Insert missing **time signatures**
- Identify any special features relating to musical concepts you have studied (for example the **style** or **texture** of the excerpt).’ McGoven, Joe – How to Pass Higher Music, page 19, 2006.

The music theory found here is only a very small part of what a student would be expected to know in further music education. In fact, students could pass this part of the exam without even listening to the piece of music, or understanding the meaning behind the answers they are giving. For example, when the student is to describe the interval between two notes, it is simply a matter of physically counting how many lines and spaces separate the two notes on the stave. The student will not know what this interval sounds

like, or how to use this interval in his or her own compositions (Which is also part of the Higher Music syllabus). Most of this section of the exam simply relies on the student being able to look at the music and remember what the symbols mean, or being able to correctly identify simple rhythms.

McGoven goes on to give examples of these sections in the Higher Music exam (See appendix 1). In one of the easier examples, the student does not have to think too hard at all. The first question asks the student to state the time signature, which is simply a matter of counting how many crotchets or quavers are in one bar. The student must also give the meaning of *sf*, and a passing note, which goes back to their memory of music concepts. The next question asks you to place a cross above the note where the timpani enter; it would be very hard for someone to get this one wrong. The transposition question is simply a matter of counting eight lines and spaces, as it asks to transpose a section of the music down one octave using the same clef. The remaining questions are again a matter of remembering what certain symbols mean.

All of this feels less like a study of music, and more like a study of language, simple numeracy, and a test of memory. In the same way that a parrot can learn to repeat words it does not understand, a Higher Music student can remember the names of the symbols written in musical notation, and not understand what these concepts actually mean, and how they really affect the music. In fact, it is entirely possible for someone to have no knowledge of how to play an instrument, and have the ability to pass a Higher Music exam.

The lack of music theory in Higher Music will really have an effect on an important part of the course which the students must pass in order to gain their qualification: Composition (McGoven). Students are expected to compose a piece of music, not only with as many concepts as they can think of thrown in, but with chords, scales, and key signatures. It's quite confusing that the students are expected to add music theory into their compositions, when theory is not part of the Higher Music syllabus.

It has indeed been shown that Higher and Advanced Higher students haven't been coping well with their compositions. In the SQA 2008 Music Report, it is stated:

‘Misunderstanding and inappropriate application of composing levels was in evidence; this resulted in some candidates having been presented at the incorrect level.

Candidates should show convincing control of all five areas of melody, harmony, rhythm, structure and timbre in at least one composition.’ – SQA 2008 Music Report

It’s hard to grasp the fact that the SQA doesn’t understand why students aren’t passing their compositions when musical notation isn’t explained or even widely used in schools.

Original Research

I asked a number of students who study music for their thoughts on music theory lessons in schools. The students are a mixture of my own pupils from the music school I teach at, and students who are studying standard grade or higher music in schools. The pupils filled out a short questionnaire (See Appendix 2), which will be brought up now, and in other chapters of this dissertation. In total, thirty four students completed the questionnaire.

One of the questions that the students were asked was “Do you feel that you learn enough about music theory in school?” Surprisingly, nearly half of the students said that they did, with a result of fifteen pupils. The other nineteen said they felt that they didn’t learn enough about music theory (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 – Question answered by standard grade and higher music students about music theory.

However, I had the opportunity to ask some of the fifteen students what they felt they understood about music theory. Some of them had answered that they knew some music theory from instrumental tuition, but others replied that they knew about a lot of musical concepts. From this I can draw the conclusion that some of the pupils who have answered questions about music theory may be a little miss-informed as to what music theory actually is, therefore, the information drawn from my questionnaire might not be completely accurate.

I will now present some of these students exact answers to these questions, as some of them have expanded on their points:

‘We learn a lot about Italian terms such as Concerto and Poco a Poco. We also listen to some musical excerpts and answer questions on what we have heard in the music.’ – Student A

‘I’ve learned a wee bit about time signatures and key signatures in my piano lessons, but it doesn’t seem like the same stuff is taught in school. They mention compound and simple time signatures but don’t explain what different types there are. They also talk about major and minor key signatures but they don’t go into any specific key signatures.’ – Student B

‘I think they teach some music theory but not really enough. I know about quite a few concepts, but I’m not sure if this is proper music theory, so yes and no.’ Student C

Another question was “Do you think music theory should be included as part of your final exam?” The result of this question was nearly unanimous, with thirty three students replying yes, and just one student saying that they think music theory should not be included in the final exam (Figure 1.2)

Figure 1.2 – Another question answered by students about music theory.

The same question was included in a separate questionnaire which was filled out by music educators (See appendix 3). This was a mixture of music teachers and instrumental instructors. The survey was sent out to fifty schools, with just twenty two coming back, and another four were filled out by instrumental instructors that I know personally (twenty six in total). The answer to the question about music theory being a part of the final exam was a resounding yes, with all twenty four teachers agreeing with the majority of students (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1 – Question answered by music teachers.

Another question which was answered very positively from both teachers and students was “Is music theory important to the development of a musician?” All twenty six teachers answered yes, and twenty nine out of thirty four students replied yes (Figures 2.2 and 2.3). Again, there may be some confusion among the students about music theory and musical concepts.

Some comments from music teachers on this question included:

‘Yes, music theory is important for students to understand the ins and outs of his or her instrument. Music theory is the tool and the knowledge required in order for musicians to grow and learn more.’ – Teacher A

‘Music theory is an understanding of music itself. Without any knowledge of theory, even in its simplest form, some musicians are clueless to the potential they can achieve.’ – Teacher B

‘Of course! Not only should it be a part of education, the students should also be assessed on this in the final exam. Without testing the students on what they know, how are we to know that they have the tools necessary to create beautiful and interesting music?’ – Teacher C

Figure 2.2 – Answers from teachers about the importance of music theory.

Figure 2.3 – Answers from students about the importance of music theory.

To conclude this chapter, it can be said from all the information presented, that students do not learn enough about music theory in their lessons, and that this is a major flaw in the education and in their development of becoming musicians. From the original research presented, it can be seen that music educators feel that more music theory needs to be included in the curriculum, and that it should also be a part of the student's final exams.

Chapter 2 – Taking Music Seriously

Music as a subject in schools today is not thought of as a serious or important study for students. Much focus is instead on other subjects like Maths, English, and Modern Languages. Of course, these are extremely important subjects, but they should not overshadow other important studies such as music. The very fact that music is not considered important may also be one of the reasons that the music course itself is quite weak.

This does not stop at high school however, as the study of music in general is considered unimportant and a waste of time. Julian Lam sums this up in the following quote.

‘Many people associate universities as institutions of higher learning – places where one can achieve one’s full potential in an array of applications, all of which benefit mankind at large.

But of course, while it’s easy to include “Physics”, “Mathematics”, “Engineering”, and the like, “Music” is never among them. I’m not saying that universities are stooping lower in order to accommodate “lesser” subjects (and I put those in parentheses specifically), but quite the contrary, I consider the study of music to be on par with any of the other subjects one can study at university.’ Julian Lam - kareeser.com.

Lam goes on to point out exactly why music is important by discussing that while doctors play a more important role in society, music still contributes some very important parts to society. He discusses what would happen if nobody played an instrument, and says if this were to happen then we would all lose an important part of culture and history (kareeser.com).

You need only to look towards great educators like Sinichi Suzuki and Zoltan Kodaly to see exactly how important music education can be. The Orff Schulwerk approach for example, helps children learn important skills which can be used in various other subjects (aosa.org).

Music educators will argue that music is a hugely important part of a child's education. One educator explains that children do not even need to be taught about music for it to be of importance their development; they need only be exposed to it:

'The importance of exposing children to music at an early age is supported and validated by neurological evaluations of children who have been exposed to music prior to the age of three. Spatial reasoning is enhanced by early music exposure and the cerebral cortex is greatly stimulated by inundating the listener with beautiful sounds to process. That is all with just exposure and not even teaching the children.' – M Roland – Helium.com

It is argued not just by Roland but by nearly every music educator in the world that teaching music to children can greatly enhance their learning of every other subject in school. For example, if children learn about the different notes on a staff, they have already begun to familiarise themselves with letters, and in turn to learn something of the alphabet, and of reading. Children can get a great head start on maths by learning to read music too, especially if they are learning a percussion instrument. The maths needed to learn about different rhythms, patterns, and even some basic time signatures can be greatly beneficial when it comes to learning about adding and subtracting in school (Helim.com).

Roland also argues that children can even learn something of history and geography when a study of the musical periods is introduced (Helium.com). This idea is shared by Catherine Hillard on essortment.com. She agrees that music can act as a foundation for every other school subject. She also goes on to write about how music is considered unimportant because it is a fun subject:

'Music is very important in our lives. It is frequently underestimated and thought of as "easy" or "play time," but it's not that at all. Students frequently appear to be having fun while they are [making music](#) because music IS fun (though not easy). Music can portray any mood, and it takes a special, interested person in order to make it good. Music is very important to education.' – Catherine Hillard – essortment.com

A separate article on essortment.com by an un-credited writer talks about the social benefit for children who are learning music:

‘Music allows our children to work in teams to create music as a whole. By enrolling your children in music classes in [school](#), you allow your child to learn how to cooperate with others for a common goal. These classes allow children who normally wouldn't associate with each other to cooperate and promote unity. A sense of belonging is very important in our culture today. Especially important to those who grow up in environment which constantly plague on their emotions. [Studies](#) show that music classes enhance self-esteem in their students. Music education may also be an important step in reducing the incidence of violence in our school by bringing the students together.’ [Essortment.com](#)

While music isn't thought of as being as important as other subjects in schools, it is argued that music contains elements of other subjects in itself. Elements of science can be found in a conductor's score which indicates such things as frequencies, intensities, dynamics, complex melody, and harmony. Maths can also be found in music where rhythms are based into subdivisions of time which are worked out straight away instead of being worked out on paper, or using a calculator ([musicmagic.wordpress.com](#)).

As discussed in the previous chapter, music is also a foreign language. Most of the terms are in Italian, and German and French can also be found throughout musical scores. The study of music theory itself is almost a study of language. The symbols on paper represent ideas that must be followed in order for music to work. Music also has History; it reflects the environment and culture of its time, and even the country ([musicmagic.wordpress.com](#)).

There are even elements of physical education in music, especially with the study of classical music, where extraordinary co-ordination of the fingers, hands, arms, lips, cheeks and facial muscles in addition to control of the stomach, back, and chest muscles. Music is academic and requires research, and of course, music is art. It is highly creative, and allows people to take all the techniques they have learned and use them to create emotion ([musicmagic.wordpress.com](#)).

Original Research

In both of my questionnaires, I asked the question “Is music an important part of education?” The answers

to this question were mixed between the students and the teachers as highlighted in figure 2.1 below:

Figure 2.1 – Mixed results to question posed to students and teachers. “Do you think music is an important part of education?”

As with previous results, all twenty six teachers were united in saying that they thought music was an important part of education, while there was some disagreement among the students. Only twenty three students thought that music was an important part of their studies.

I thought I would investigate this further, by asking students for reasons for their answers. The following are quotes taken from some of the answers given:

‘No, I don’t think it’s as important as things like maths and English. You need to learn how to count and spell, but you don’t need to learn how to play and (sic) instrument.’ – Student A

‘It’s not important in the wide scale of things. I think universities would take you more seriously if you had higher English and maths rather than higher music. Music doesn’t really require you to do anything intellectual.’ – Student B

‘It doesn’t offer anything that you *need* to know about. In primary school the focus is on learning the alphabet and numbers, with a little bit of history and stuff too. Music isn’t an important part of that process.’ – Student C

Based on this information, it can be seen that some students – although not a majority, a large amount of students – do not view music as an important subject, and therefore are less likely to take it up after school. Of course, the teachers disagree with these students for obvious reasons, but the next question provided more of a divide among the teachers and students alike (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2 – Students and teachers’ responses to “Is music viewed as an important part of education?”

As you can see from the chart, most of the students and teachers believe that music is not viewed as an important part of education. This does not help the case for improving the music course in schools. If the subject really is viewed as unimportant, then it is doubtful that anything will be done to change the course for the better.

I thought it would be a good idea to include in the questionnaire to the students, a question on whether they intend on studying music after school. The result of the question was thirty two no’s, and just two students saying yes (Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3 – students who intend on studying music after school.

From these results, we can see that there is definitely no enthusiasm for studying music after school. This may be due to the fact that music is not viewed as important as other subjects. Although the majority of students said that they thought music was important, most of them also said that it is not viewed as an important subject; therefore, they may not want to choose it so that they don't look like they are wasting their time.

Chapter 3 – Popular Music vs Classical Music

One major flaw in music education today is that popular music is not given the spotlight that it deserves.

Music students in schools are taught mostly about classical and traditional folk music, with little mention of popular music. This not only implies that there is nothing to learn about popular music, but also discourages students to take up music as a subject, because they will not learn about or play music that they are interested in.

When a student learns about music – either classical or popular – the way in which they learn is the same.

For example, whether a student is learning how to master classical harmony or rock guitar, they will still study chords, and how they fit together in the same way. While there are some prominent differences in classical and popular music, they both share many aspects of musical language (Manheim).

In an article on davidvandalstyne.com, James Manheim writes that there are few differences between classical and popular music, and he lists them:

‘One important difference comes in regard to duration. Popular songs are usually brief; most of them are under five minutes long. Classical compositions, on the other hand, range from 20-second pieces to works that last several hours. The average symphonic concert work lasts perhaps half an hour, and this requires a change of perspective for those accustomed to listening to popular songs. How does a composer make such a large piece of music hang together? It's a question worth asking of any piece of music, but for classical compositions it's one of critical importance.

Another difference is that popular music is mostly vocal music. Be it rock, country, r&b, or pop, ballads or dance music, there is usually a singer, and a text that carries a major share of a composition's meaning. But vocal music is only a province, and not even the most extended province, of classical music. Even in the realms of opera and art song, the music is the message.’ – Manheim, J – davidvandalstyne.com.

Of course, one of the biggest critics of popular music was Theodor W Adorno. In his essay *On Popular Music*, he criticises popular music for being standardized, and for using what he called pseudo-individualisation (Adorno). Adorno writes that popular music can be characterised by its comparison to what he called “serious” (classical) music. One of the biggest reasons he called “serious” music so, is because of its structure in comparison to popular music. Classical music has a more complex structure, and popular music in contrast, always has the same structure. According to Adorno, if one part of a popular song was taken out and replaced with the chorus of another popular song, no-one would notice, as it all just sounds the same (Adorno).

Popular arguments against Adorno however, include the fact that throughout his essay, Adorno focuses on Jazz music, and not much else. He also compares everything against what he calls good serious music, igniting the argument that Adorno is simply comparing bad popular music against good classical music. This can be seen in the following sentence from his essay:

‘We are not concerned here with bad serious music which may be as rigid and mechanical as popular music’ – Adorno, T – On Popular Music.

Here, Adorno admits that there are forms of classical music which are “as bad” as popular music. In fact, throughout his essay, he almost doesn’t compare popular and classical music at all, but merely compares popular music to the works of Ludwig Van Beethoven. Adorno’s arguments are flawed, and now perhaps a little outdated. It must be remembered that this essay was written in the thirties, when – compared to classical music – popular was at its very beginnings, and was a developing type of music; classical music has existed for many centuries.

If popular music is to be kept from the curriculum, then why not present materials like Adorno’s essay to students, and let them make up their own minds? A study or comparison of the two types of music would be very beneficial to students, as it can be very academic, and would allow students to learn thoroughly about both types.

Popular music is important in many other different ways too. A writer on clearlyexplained.com writes that popular music is important culturally, economically, and technologically:

‘Culturally. Popular music forms part of our everyday culture. It provides a way of connecting to ones feelings or associations for the current time. It often represents social or political issues or makes subtle comments about society or even rebels against aspects of a society.

Economically. It is also important from the perspective of being a business enterprise. For example some popular music relies on targeting specific groups.

Technologically. Popular music has an impact on the development of recording and distributing music. For example the development of CDs, MP3s and other digital mediums. Also the development of new types of instruments and variations of old musical instruments.’ – clearlyexplained.com.

Among educators, and musicians generally, popular music is considered as important as classical music. If this is the case, then popular music should be included much more in music in schools. There is a rich area of study within popular music, which would benefit all students, as indicated in my original research to follow.

Original Research

When asked if they thought they learned enough about popular music in schools, only six students said yes (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 – Students feel they do not learn enough about popular music at school.

This is a resounding no from the students. Popular music is something which interests all of the students asked, and by not being able to learn much about it, this discourages the students from taking up the subject at all. Popular music is important to the students, and as shown by another question posed to the teachers of music, it is a very valid matter of study. One of the questions in the teachers' questionnaire was "Is the study of popular music as important as the study of classical music?" The majority of teachers answered yes to this question (Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2 – Answers from teachers about the importance of popular music.

The majority of teachers think that there is as much to learn about popular music as there is about classical music. This indicates that most teachers are willing and ready to teach students about popular music, and that if popular music was introduced as part of the curriculum, then more students would be interested, and more students would also take up music after leaving school.

The fact that classical music is seen as a more important or serious study, also leads students to believe that the study of popular music gives nothing valuable to their education. This is seen in the next question (Figure 3.3), where students were asked which form of music they thought was more important to learn about.

Figure 3.3 – Popular Music vs Classical Music

Twenty Eight students said that they thought the study of classical music was more important than the study of popular music. Again, students were asked for further comments:

‘Classical music has more music theory than popular music, and it’s harder to play.’ – Student A

‘You need to be able to read music to a high standard to play classical music, and you need to know a lot more about how all the music works together, as a whole.’ – Student B

‘There’s just a lot more to classical music than there is to popular music. Popular music can all just sound the same these days, whereas classical music is really complicated.’ – Student C

From these results, a conclusion can be drawn that students feel that classical music is a much more rich area of study. Students have the perception that popular music is not as complicated, far easier to play, and that not much thought needs to be put into it. If the music course in schools gives off the impression that popular music is not worth studying, then less people are likely to want to study music at college or university.

Interestingly, the same question was posed to the teachers, with quite different results (Figure 3.4).

Whereas every student gave a straight popular or classical music answer, some teachers said that both forms of music were equal.

Figure 3.4 – Teachers’ answers to same question.

The opinion of the teachers on this question is divided. Most believe that both are as valid as each other, but nearly the same amount of teachers think that Classical music is more important. However, we can see some very interesting reasons behind this in their answers. The following quotes are taken from the teachers who said that classical music was more important:

‘Popular music is not included very much in the curriculum. The focus is mostly of classical music e.g. Baroque, Renaissance, etc. Therefore, it is more important that the pupils learn about this than about popular music.’ – Teacher A

‘While popular music is still as valid as classical music, the students have to learn about classical music in order to pass the course.’ – Teacher B

‘Classical music is more important for the students to learn, simply because it is what they are required to learn in order to pass their exams.’ – Teacher C

It should be remembered that most of these teachers had earlier replied that the study of popular music was as important as the study of classical music.

Chapter 4 – Instrumental Instruction

Instrumental tuition is available in schools, but it is very limited. With the grades students must be at in order to pass having been lowered (This will be explored further in the next chapter), tutors are somewhat limited to what they can teach their students. Also, most tutors are limited to teaching music prepared by the SQA, rather than choosing what they want to teach their students. One of the main flaws however, is that students cannot receive tuition for both of their instruments, and in some cases, neither of their instruments.

Students are required to be able to play two musical instruments, and for Advanced Higher, they must be at Grade 5 (Curriculum for Excellence). Tuition is usually available through peripatetic instrumental instructors, though this is not always the case, as a tutor for each and every instrument is not always available. Also, free tuition is only available for one instrument, with students having to pay if they need lessons for the other.

As a result, many students struggle with music. Classroom music teachers are of course willing to help, but of course, the classroom teacher cannot be expected to be able to play any instrument. This may leave the student having to seek private tuition if he or she expects to pass the course.

Unfortunately, the government and local councils seem to think that instrumental instruction is unimportant, and is usually the first to be cut (Hepburn). One of the most recent incidents was in Fife, where the council had planned to cut 50 per cent of instrumental instructors over the next two years (Hepburn). This shows a complete lack of interest in instrumental tuition for students. Students must play two instruments in their exam and this is a large part of their final grade for music (Curriculum for Excellence). Instrumental tuition then, is very important for students.

This lack of enthusiasm for instrumental instruction means that more and more people are missing out on

the benefits that tuition can provide. Lessons for children can provide important developmental benefits that reach beyond simply learning how to play an instrument. Studies carried out by the Rockefeller Foundation suggest that instrumental instruction enhances intelligence and academic achievement (rockefellerfoundation.org). One of their studies showed that in America, music majors have the highest rate of admittance to medical schools, thanks to instrumental tuition.

Original Research

In my questionnaire, I asked the students whether they are happy with the amount of tuition they receive for their instruments. The result was most students replying “no” (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1 – Students are not happy with amount of tuition

The students provided some interesting comments on this:

‘No, not at all. I am taking keyboard and guitar this year. My classroom teacher helps out with keyboard when she can, but I don’t get any kind of formal lessons. As for guitar, I’ve just been getting my brother to help me out because no tuition is available for guitar.’ – Student A

Drums, but not for bass guitar, and I’m really struggling. I need to play some pretty hard pieces this year, I’ve just had to transfer it to TAB, as I can’t really read the music. If I want bass guitar lessons, I would have to pay for them.’ – Student B

‘I’m not really happy about it. I’ve taken trumpet and keyboard, but I can only get lessons on trumpet. The classroom teacher helps with keyboard but she doesn’t have the time for everybody, it is only 50 minutes a week after all.’ – Student C

I also got some comments from the students who answered that they felt that they were happy with the amount of tuition they receive:

‘Well, I took keyboard and drums, so I’m pretty much sorted. I get drum lessons every week, and the classroom teacher helps out with keyboard. I just need to practice more!’ – Student A

‘Yes, I get tuba lessons once a week, and I’m a self-taught guitar player.’ – Student B

‘Yes, I get instrumental tuition once a week for guitar, and I take private drum lessons at a music school’ – Student C

Comparing these results, we can see that all pupils at least receive some form of help, and in most cases instrumental tuition for one of their instruments. However, no one is receiving tuition for both instruments, unless they seek private lessons, out with their school. Interestingly, the students who answered yes had the same comments to make as the students who answered no. From this it can be said that it depends on the student’s interpretation of both instrumental lessons, and how much tuition they need in order to pass their exams, which determines whether they think they are receiving enough tuition.

The same type of question was asked to the teachers (Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2 – Teachers opinions of instrumental instruction in schools

A unanimous “no” once again from the teachers, bar one, who unfortunately did not comment on this question.

Chapter 5 – Lowering the Standards

In order to pass Higher music in school today, the students must only be at grade 4 on both instruments (Curriculum for Excellence). This was lowered recently from Grade 5, which is now the level students need to be at in order to pass Advanced Higher. Much debate has occurred over this and whether it is a good thing or not. The argument is that it helps students to pass their exams, however, it perhaps makes the course *too easy*, and as touched on in the previous chapter, it limits the level of tuition available to students.

Because the grades have been lowered so much, coupled with the fact that exam music is sent out by the SQA (Curriculum for Excellence), this can limit the level of tuition available to students. Talented students who are more than capable of playing at a level higher than Grade 4 or 5 will be limited to playing music which they will learn nothing from, and this will be extremely de-motivating for them. As a result, many students may be put off music, and may choose not to pursue an education in music, or even keep up with their instrument.

Many talented students will be able to reach grade four within a year of learning their instrument. To reach the end of Standard Grade, they will have completed four years at school, and to reach Advanced Higher, a further two years. With six years of music education, surely students can do much better than Grade 5?

This may however link in with what was discussed in the previous chapter. Many students aren't able to receive instrumental tuition, and so cannot progress on their instruments. The lack of instrumental tuition may be the cause of having to lower the grades. One of the most important reasons in which schools should not lower the grades however, is because many universities will only accept students who are up to Grade 8 on their instruments. Music in schools is failing to prepare their students for any further education in music.

Original Research

I believed one of the most important questions to ask the teachers was whether they thought it

was a good idea to lower the grades in order to have more students pass. The teachers seemed to all agree that lowering the grades was a bad idea (Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1 – Teachers’ opinions on lowering grades.

Once again, the teachers had many comments:

‘Lowering the grades means that pupils cannot achieve their full potential. It means that they are missing out on a vital part of education, and a vital part of becoming a good musician.’ – Teacher A

‘Lowering the grades is letting the pupils away with playing easy music. It’s great now, they’ll pass their exams, but when they try to go to university they will be denied.’ – Teacher B

‘No, I always encourage my pupils to learn even more than we are to teach them at school.’ – Teacher C

Finally, I asked the teachers whether they thought that by lowering the grades, this limits the level of tuition available to students (Figure 5.2)

Figure 5.2 – Limiting the level of tuition available to students.

As you can clearly see, most teachers believe that this does limit the level of tuition available to students.

For the teachers that answered no, however, I got some interesting comments:

‘No, I always teach my pupils at the level that they are able to reach, no matter what they need to do in their exam.’ – Teacher A (Instrumental instructor)

‘No, I think the instrumental instructors will always do a good job of teaching their pupils to their full potential, no matter what level they need to be at according to the SQA’ – Teacher B (Classroom teacher)

So interestingly, it would appear that some instrumental instructors will teach their students at levels higher than Grade 5 if they see fit to do so. If this is true, it is a breath of fresh air, and an area of music education

which will benefit all.

Conclusion

This dissertation has focused on music education within schools, and how this prepares students for any further education in music within universities. Firstly, I tackled the issue of music theory in schools. I found that there is a lack of music theory being taught, and that any music theory that is learned by the students is either learned in their instrumental lessons, or is simple, watered down versions of theory such as major and minor keys.

My original research found that many teachers and students believe that theory should be included as part of the final exam. Students who are applying to universities will need to know an extensive amount of music theory, and therefore it should be a vital part of music education within school.

I then focused on the issue of music being treated as a serious subject. I found that many places do not regard music as a “proper” or academic study. This de-motivates potential music students, and makes many people uninterested in learning an instrument. I discussed how important music is for both the development of a child, and of course, as part of education as a whole. Students do not simply learn about music through studying it, but a wide range of social, mathematical, and academic skills to name but a few.

Next, I discussed the comparison of popular music and classical music, and investigated why popular music is not included as a large part of the curriculum. I found that many (including the music students who participated in the survey) hold the view that there is much more to learn about classical music than there is about popular music. Many people don't view popular music as equal to classical music, and this is a problem within education. Many colleges and universities offer popular music courses which students may not find interesting due to the lack of this particular subject within school. Many view the study of popular music as un-academic and a waste of time. This also de-motivates students who have taken up music as a result of being interested in popular music.

The next chapter focused on instrumental tuition, and investigated whether students are getting enough of

it, and if they are getting the right level of tuition. I found that instrumental instruction is not widely available, with the usual case being that students will receive tuition for one instrument, but not both. Classroom teachers are there to help, but it cannot be expected of them to have knowledge of every single instrument, and so the students suffer as a result. In some extreme cases, instrumental tuition is not available at all, leaving the students unequipped to pass their exams.

Finally, the last chapter discussed the lowering of grades within schools. Students only need to be at Grade 5 to pass Advanced Higher, which does not prepare them for a university education at all, as most institutes require students to be at Grade 8. This can be linked to the first chapter about music theory also, because a high amount of music theory is needed to reach Grade 8 on any instrument, therefore, schools are not able to prepare students for any further education in music practically.

To sum up, my findings indicate that schools do not prepare students well enough to seek any further musical education. There are massive gaps in the course, as well as some major flaws. Every chapter of my dissertation eerily reflects the other: Music tuition in schools is not widely available, and so grades are lower. Music theory is not taught in schools, and so students cannot reach a higher grade than Grade 5. Music is not thought of as a serious or academic study, and even more so, popular music etc.

I have found that the music course in school needs to re-shape in order to properly equip students so that they can enjoy a future music education once they have left school. This is not down to the teachers - most of which are very inspiring and talented - it is down to the SQA and the people in charge to finally care about music education, and to change the course so that we can see many more inspiring and talented musicians, and more people leaving college and university with degrees.

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