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# The Music Curriculum as Lived Experience: Children's "Natural" Music-Learning Processes

By Lucy Green

special focus  
Reconceptualizing Curriculum

*Students in music classrooms can learn to make music using the informal music-learning strategies of popular musicians.*

**M**usic educators in many countries have attempted to close the gap between two musical worlds: that of pupils' musical culture outside school and that of the classroom. However, while the former musical world, represented by various popular musics, now makes up a major part of curriculum *content*, the informal learning practices of the musicians who create these musics have not normally been recognized or adopted as teaching and learning *strategies* within classrooms. The gap between the two musical worlds has, in that crucial sense, remained unbridged.<sup>1</sup> This article discusses a current UK research project that aims to investigate the feasibility and possible benefits of bringing at least some aspects of informal music-learning practices into the high school music classroom.

## Informal Popular Music-Learning Practices

Informal popular music-learning practices involve two main approaches, both of which take place largely in the absence of adult supervision or guidance. The first is solitary and usually occurs in the home. It involves learning music aurally, stretching from experimentation with instruments to copying from record-



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Popular music involves learning practices that are different from the approaches that are most common in school music classes.

ings, loose imitation, improvisation, and composition. The other main learning practice takes place in groups and involves conscious peer direction and unconscious learning through peer observation, imitation, and talk.

*Young popular musicians can develop relatively advanced aural, improvisatory, compositional, and technical skills and, in some cases, theoretical understanding.*

At both the individual and the group level, listening, performance, improvisation, and composition are integrated. All the activities revolve around music in which learners are thoroughly encultured and with which they strongly identify. Through these practices, young popular musicians can develop relatively advanced aural, improvisatory, compositional, and technical skills and, in some cases, theoretical understanding. These musicians typically value personal qualities of cooperation, responsibility, and commitment. They place more emphasis on musicality or “feel” than on technical prowess. Most significantly perhaps, they respect a wide range of music, including classical music, and display high levels of motivation, commitment, and enjoyment in music making.<sup>2</sup>

Learning practices of these musicians differ from the teaching and learning strategies associated with formal music education, insofar as they involve the following:

- Learning based on personal choice, enjoyment, identification, and familiarity with the music, as distinct from being introduced to new and often unfamiliar music

- Recorded music as the principal, aural means of musical transmission

and skill acquisition, as distinct from notated or other written or verbal instructions and exercises

- Self-teaching and peer-directed learning, as distinct from learning with adult supervision and guidance, curricula, syllabi, or external assessment

- Assimilating skills and knowledge in haphazard ways according to musical preferences, rather than following a progression from simple to complex

- Integration of listening, performing, improvising, and composing throughout the learning process, as distinct from their increasing differentiation

### **The Current Research Project**

An initial study took place over six weeks in an inner London school, followed by a pilot study lasting around one term in three schools in West London.<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing, I am still collecting and analyzing data drawn from a third study in Hertfordshire. The research this article describes is very much a work in progress relating to the first four schools only. In each school, the focus was on one class of thirteen- and fourteen-year-old students. Four experienced heads of music and two newly qualified teachers were involved. The work was ethnographic and sought data from observation, field notes, audio and video recordings, teacher interviews, pupil interviews, and lesson observation forms completed by teachers.

Many practical challenges are involved in curriculum innovation, including the usual space, time, equipment, and staff limitations. However, all the teachers who have taken part in the project so far have agreed that these difficulties are not insurmountable. In this article, I will focus on some of the more interesting and substantial issues that are arising.

### **Stage One**

First, pupils were asked to bring in their own choice of music. Not surprisingly, students enthusiastically brought a large array of CDs to class, all containing music that had recently been in, or was still in, the UK Top 40 charts. The project was intro-

duced with a brief discussion of how popular musicians learn. Interestingly, this turned out to be something that pupils in all four schools had not thought about before, and they appeared to be unaware of the informal practice of learning from recordings by listening and copying.

*What happens when a group of thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds are sent into a room with several of their own CDs, a CD player, and a set of instruments and told to copy a chosen song in any way they wish?*

Pupils then formed small friendship groups, ranging in number from two to seven. Being able to work with friends is a crucial part of informal popular music-learning practices, so as much freedom as possible was given. Across the four schools, twenty-two groups were formed. Each group then went into a practice room with their CDs and a CD player and spent about one whole lesson (from fifty minutes in one school to ninety minutes in another) choosing a song to copy without any guidance from teachers. Acting as observers, the teachers and I considered all groups to be “on task.” They spent the time listening, discussing features, difficulties, and possibilities of a range of songs, and beginning to organize who would play what.

Having chosen a song, each group selected instruments, ranging from electric guitars and keyboards to glockenspiels and maracas; the groups then set about attempting to copy their songs from the recordings in whatever way they saw fit. The class teacher and I made it clear that we were available to offer help if requested, but that otherwise we would not be teaching them. This

stage lasted between three and six lessons, varying from school to school for a number of practical and pedagogical reasons.

What happens when a group of thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds are sent into a room with several of their own CDs, a CD player, and a set of instruments and told to copy a chosen song in any way they wish? The teachers and I didn't know how things would turn out. We were pleasantly surprised. One group in one school did have particular difficulty and was considered "off task" most of the time during this stage of the project. At least two other groups, each in a different school, also did not apply themselves consistently. However, in general, all the groups, including those mentioned above, seemed more motivated and enthusiastic than usual; over half appeared to be entirely on task throughout the entire project; and, with the exceptions mentioned, the others were usually on task, despite the lack of teacher direction.

The most interesting data are in the audio recordings and pupil interviews. One example is evident in my annotation from a recording of a group of five boys in their third lesson (presented in the Music from Chaos sidebar). They weren't aware of being recorded at the time (though they later gave their permission for the recording to be used in research), and there was no teacher in the room.

In the early moments of the recording, the boys were making what sounded like random noises. Eventually, a melody copied from their chosen song emerged, and the boys began to work together. At the end of the lesson, the group gave a performance to the rest of the class in which the drum kit played a sixteen-beat opening in a quasi-rock style, finishing with a crash on the ride cymbal. Along with this, the guitar played the melody made of the opening notes indicated in the sidebar. At the ride-cymbal crash, the piano entered and repeated the melody in unison with the guitar. There was hand percussion throughout, except for some pauses at appropriate structural moments.

Members of Michael and Nicholas's group are apparently mucking around. It sounds like chaos. Someone is playing something on the piano that has nothing to do with the chosen song. The radio is turned on. There is random drumming and talking.

Ten minutes later, Michael and Nicholas's group still has had no teacher input. Something is emerging; Nicholas is working out the notes of the song on the piano (D E D E D E D E in a syncopated rhythm in the right hand, with a downward-moving bass in the left hand). Discussion is occurring. Someone is singing along to the piano pitches.

Twenty minutes later, you can hear the guitar, and the opening has been organized. There is percussion using floppy sticks on the rim of the snare. Listening and counting are evidently occurring, as in the following exchange:

*Nicholas:* How many beats are there?

Inaudible discussion.

*Michael:* Hey you guys, I'm playing it now.

More inaudible talk.

*Adimbola:* Hurry up.

*Nicholas:* How many beats, how many beats are there?

*Adimbola:* Sixteen.

*Nicholas:* It's either sixteen or thirty-two.

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There was a sense of vitality in the playing, and I observed an air of serious concentration on the faces of the boys, who afterwards expressed considerable pride in what they had achieved. The class spontaneously applauded, and the head of music murmured, "Very impressive, very impressive indeed." After the lesson, the class teacher said, "When the individual groups performed, the whole class listened a lot more closely and a lot more carefully, in comparison to what they do in ordinary music lessons. Definitely." I don't wish to pretend that such successes occurred at the end of every lesson, but similar celebratory moments did arise during class performances in all four schools.

How did these students move by themselves from apparent chaos to something musically organized and celebratory? Many answers emerge, from which I have picked just two strands to introduce in this article.

*Strand One.* This strand concerns beat, structure, and the notion of a "natural learning process." In several

groups, the percussion played along with the rhythm of the *vocal* line or main melody line during the very first stages of attempting to copy their chosen song. For example, in another concealed recording of a group of five girls, the kit drummer can be heard attempting to play the rhythm of the lead vocal line of Jennifer Lopez's hit "My Love Don't Cost a Thing." During the second lesson, an explicit beat emerges, then disappears. At one point, there is some discussion of whether the drums ought to be playing a beat. Gradually something approximating a rock beat emerges. By the end of the third lesson, the drummer is playing a basic rock beat with an occasional habanera rhythm inserted into it. She plays with sensitivity to the overall structure of the song, marking structural moments with an upbeat figuration and enhancing occasional climactic moments with a hit on the ride cymbal.

The idea of a beat and the use of the drums to mark structural features seem to have come to this group

## Enthusiastic Harmony

In this exchange, students gradually discover that they can play a riff they are copying from a CD in harmony.

“Oh look, look, look, look, look, look, look!”

“Look, D and B-flat!”

Demonstrates.

“Then B-flat and G, yeah?”

“Where’s C and E?”

“Oh yeah!”

They continue playing the two tracks, now in three-part harmony, out of time.

“I know it’s easy to play it together.”

“Yeah but what two are we playing together?”

“Or, or, we two can play together.”

“Look, I can play it together.”

“Imran, Imran, listen, we two can play it together, like quadruple!”

“Yeah!”

“Yeah!”

“Play it.”

almost “naturally” and certainly without any teaching. This raises several questions, including whether children in general would tend to hear the relationship between percussion, melody, beat, and structure in a similar progression.

*Strand Two.* The second strand concerns ensemble skills and the notion of progression. In several groups, the children started off by playing and singing well in time together, but they later went out of time. Often they played and sang out of time for long periods, even for an entire song, but they kept going without appearing to notice anything wrong.

In such situations our tendency as teachers is probably to feel that they are getting worse, not progressing, and to offer help to get them back on the right track. One of the strategies adopted in this project, however, was *not* to teach in the normal way but to spend more time observing before offering advice. Indeed, on one occasion when the head of music and I failed to stand back, it became clear that our intervention did not serve its purpose—the group appeared to get more out of time the more we “helped” them. During the next lesson, they got

themselves perfectly in time without any help whatsoever. I made several other audio recordings of groups going through similar processes of being in and out of time with each other at different stages. In this way, the project calls into question whether progression always goes along straight paths and whether our help is always helpful.

### Pupils’ Views

At the end of the activities described above in the three West London schools, I interviewed pupils in the same small groups that they had worked in during the lessons. Again, I have picked out just two emerging strands.

*Strand One.* I asked pupils what they thought of the fact that they were “thrown in the deep end” without any help from teachers. This led to three categories of answers. Everyone generally agreed that not being taught was part of the fun. Some pupils did say it would have been nice if they had gotten more help from the teachers; however, at least an equal number had the alternative view, that not being taught was beneficial. This perspective came through in comments like, “You can learn more by yourself; you can experiment; there’s

no one telling you it’s wrong; you can’t do nothing wrong,” and “We can learn by trial and error ... ’cos you learn what mistakes you made.”

Several students suggested that similar approaches should be taken in other curriculum subjects. Some said that the ideal situation would be for the teacher to help them only as and when they felt they needed it (which is indeed what we had aimed for). Study participant Adimbola liked this approach and said, “I think that’s a better way. So, we tried to handle it ourselves, but if we can’t do it, someone will help us.”

*Strand Two.* I asked pupils, “Since you’ve been doing the project, have you noticed any differences in the ways that you listen to music, say if you’re watching *Top of the Pops* [the most famous UK charts show] or something at home?” Some looked bemused and shook their heads. Several immediately and forcefully said yes, sometimes elaborating with comments like these:

■ Natalie: “Yeah. I think I have because I’ve been listening to music recently and I’ve, like, kind of picked up the different rhythms and stuff.”

■ Sharon: “Ummm ... I think I listen more to the instruments now than the actual words?”

■ Ellie: “Yeah. I listen more to the beat more than the lyrics ... I think [inaudible] we were really concentrating on the, like, rhythm and the beat of that song, and now, to me, like, in songs, the rhythm and that stands out more than ... I don’t really take any notice of the words.”

### What Happens Next?

Stage Two of the project took place in the three West London schools only and lasted three or four lessons. It retained the central task of copying music aurally from a CD. However, pupils received more help, as the music had been chosen for them and was broken down into fifteen separate tracks of about one minute twenty seconds, each containing a single repeated riff taken from the song.

The song was a riff-based instrumental version of a funk song with a high level of repetition over a four-chord cycle, so it was well suited to

the task. The first CD tracks were very easy to copy and play, involving only three notes in stepwise movement at the rate of one per bar. Then the tracks became progressively more demanding. For example, some tracks were the same as the easy ones, but with a more elaborate ending; others were fast, involving continuous eighth notes; others contained octave leaps; one started on the second beat of the bar, and so on. Some tracks, such as the earlier ones, could be played together in harmony by two players taking one riff each, by one player using two hands, by one player using two or three fingers of the same hand, or in any mixture of these approaches, depending on the players and the instruments being played.

A worksheet accompanied the CD, giving the note names for each riff but no indication of pitch contour or rhythm. The riffs could be played in any order and for any number of times, so each group had the opportunity to make its own song out of the given materials.

My hope was that pupils would transfer the listening and copying activity from their own choice of music and their own approaches in Stage One to this more structured and teacher-directed task, so they

would understand the point of it and feel they had ownership of it. At first, there appeared to be less enthusiasm from some pupils, who groaned when they saw a written worksheet and learned that the teachers had already chosen the song. However, this feeling quickly gave way to enthusiasm and, in most cases, a huge amount of observable enjoyment, as students took charge of organizing their groups, sharing riffs, switching riffs around to fit smoothly together, and realizing that they could play riffs in harmony, as in the Enthusiastic Harmony sidebar.

In one school, the head of music said, "That was a really positive lesson," as the last remaining pupils finally left the room. In interviews afterward, I asked pupils, "If you were to be told now to go back to Stage One, go into a room with your own CD and just copy it, without any guidance, like you did before, do you think you could do it better now?" In almost all groups the answer was a unanimous yes. I asked them if they would like to repeat the experience and got the same response.

At the present stage of research, a number of possible routes for the further development of similar exercises suggest themselves. These

include providing roles for community or other visiting musicians, ideally with scheduled time to break down students' own choices of recordings; using music other than popular styles, including Western classical music, as the recorded resource (How did J. S. Bach learn as a young child?); and introducing composition and improvisation tasks (some of which are already spontaneously creeping into students' work in the current project).

### Some "Concluding" Thoughts

I put the word "concluding" in quotation marks, because, as mentioned earlier, this research is very much ongoing rather than having reached a point of conclusion. I think initial findings suggest a number of questions that would be worth future investigation:

- What are the effects of giving students more autonomy to direct their own learning? What advantages and disadvantages are involved in teachers standing back and being prepared to watch them making mistakes? Do students learn from mistakes, as many of them seem to believe in the current project? How much help do they want? How much help do they need?

- Is children's "natural" approach to listening and copying the most helpful approach? If so, what can we do to enhance it? If not, how can we guide them?


- How important is personal choice of music, and to what extent should we build it in?

- Would repeated listening and copying exercises lead to a significant improvement in students' ability to cope with the task, or would their ability deteriorate?

- How do students organize themselves in small groups, how well do they cooperate, and what do they gain in terms of personal and social development?

- To what extent might such approaches enhance pupils' musical participation in the community and the formation of bands away from the classroom?

Closer observation of such classroom activities might also cast new light on children's musical develop-



## MENC Resources

The following MENC publications offer more information on the relationship between popular music and music education. For more information, visit [www.menc.org](http://www.menc.org) or call 1-800-336-3768. Some journal articles may be available through databases at your local college, university, and public library.

- Rodriguez, Carlos Xavier, ed. *Bridging the Gap: Popular Music and Music Education*. Reston, VA: MENC, 2004. Includes a chapter by Lucy Green. Item #1675.
- Boepsflug, George. "Popular Music and the Instrumental Ensemble." *Music Educators Journal* 85, no. 6 (1999): 33–37.
- Cutietta, Robert, ed. "Special Focus: Pop Music and Music Education." Special issue, *Music Educators Journal* 77, no. 8 (1991).
- Ginocchio, John. "Popular Music Performance Class." *Teaching Music* 8, no. 4 (2001): 40–44.

ment. It is only recently that work has begun to focus on how children, on one hand, and vernacular musicians, on the other hand, learn informally in the world outside the school, or to what extent informal approaches can be harnessed by education.<sup>4</sup> No neat final sentence can or should suggest itself to me—there is much exciting work to be done!

## Notes

1. I further substantiate these claims in Lucy Green, *How Popular Musicians Learn: A Way Ahead For Music Education* (London and New York: Ashgate Press, 2002); and Lucy Green, "From the Western Classics to the World: Secondary Music Teachers' Changing Perceptions of Musical Styles, 1982 and 1998," *British Journal of Music Education* 19, no. 1 (2002): 5–30.

2. Green, *How Popular Musicians Learn*.

3. This work was supported in its second stage by the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation and took place in schools within the London borough of Ealing. In its next phase, it is supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation special project "Musical Futures" and is in partnership with the Hertfordshire Music Service. I would like to thank the two foundations and all the people involved in making this work possible, most particularly the teachers and pupils in the schools.

4. See for example the above, and Patricia Shehan Campbell, "Of Garage Bands and Song-Getting: The Musical Development of Young Rock Musicians," *Research Studies in Music Education* 4 (1995): 12–20; Patricia Shehan Campbell, *Songs in Their Heads: Music and Its Meaning in Children's Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Joanna Glover, *Children Composing*, 4–14 (Sussex: Falmer Press, 2000); Kathryn Marsh, "Children's Singing Games: Composition in the Playground?" *Research Studies in Music Education* 4 (1995): 2–11; Kathryn Marsh, "Mediated Orality: The Role of Popular Music in the Changing Traditions of Children's Musical Play," *Research Studies in Music Education* 13 (1999): 2–12; and Kathryn L. Wemyss, "From T. I. to Tasmania: Australian Indigenous Popular Music in the Curriculum," *Research Studies in Music Education* 13 (1999): 28–39. ■



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