

EDITORIAL ARTICLE

U-turns in the fog: the unfolding story of the impact of COVID-19 on music education in England and the UK

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Introduction

As the biggest health crisis for many generations continues to wreak havoc around the world, we consider the impact COVID-19 continues to have on some aspects of music education, although the impacts are far wider than we are able to highlight within this article. Whilst drawing on international evidence, it is written from a UK (mostly English) perspective, although many of the points raised may resonate globally. It draws out the challenges and changes since our previous editorial article, which was written at the time the pandemic was starting to really bite in the UK, and highlights the flexibility that all who are involved in music education have needed in order to keep going throughout this very challenging period. It is ironic that it has taken a global pandemic to shine a spotlight on the importance of music and music education in people's lives; the many examples we see on the news and social media are often personally connected to the idea of music being at the centre of our ways of finding meaning, our bid to communicate and collaborate, but are sharply juxtaposed with our stark and sudden recognition of the ways in which we miss it.

If somebody had said at the start of 2020 that in just one year's time government rules in England would state that 'you must not leave, or be outside your home except when necessary' (U.K. Government, 4.1.21) then we probably would have thought they were joking. This is, after all, the UK and such enforcements are generally something we watch on the TV as events unfold in other parts of the world, not here. If they then went on to say that the 2020 cohort of examination students would progress to the next level of education, or into employment, based on the predicted grades from their teachers (known as Centre Assessed Grades, CAG) and not examinations, we probably would have thought that another whole level of hilarity had been reached, given the often measurement-focussed policies of the current Conservative government. Yet this is the stark reality, along with many other previously unconceivable changes throughout 2020 which are continuing into 2021.

Learning music anywhere

After entering a first Nationwide lockdown on 23rd March 2020, with England being the last of the UK jurisdictions to implement remote education, learning moved away from predominantly classroom settings and instead became a hybrid model, with the children of key workers and those who were vulnerable still able to attend schools and early years settings, whilst other children learnt at home, whether through packs of work sent home, live online lessons, remote learning or a combination of all of these. Music teachers quickly worked to adapt to new and often unfamiliar models, and we have no doubt that a plethora of research on the impact of this is currently underway. Towards the end of the summer term, primary schools in England reopened to the youngest and oldest year groups, whilst secondary schools in England expected those taking public

examinations in 2021 to return to face-to-face teaching. Schools across the rest of the UK remained shut for most pupils. Yet, as we highlighted earlier in the year (Daubney & Fautley, 2020) resourceful music teachers embraced different working modalities and people across the world found new ways of making and creating music on their own and collaboratively.

For music education in particular, the challenges were (and continue to be) significant, and guidance from the UK Department for Education (DfE) was often given late, or was hazy and vague. A global literature review produced by the Incorporated Society of Musicians (ISM) (Williams & Underhill, 2020a) brought together international research on important considerations such as COVID-19 transmission in performance and education spaces when those in different age groups engaged in a wide range of musical activities, risk management, instrument hygiene and how to mitigate the risks. This was updated over the summer (Williams & Underhill, 2020b) as more research was developed around the world. That the research showed there was 'still no clear consensus as to the role that children play, the transmission paths and the implications for the full return of schools' (p.17) was worrying for many music teachers.

UK DfE guidance issued for the start of the new academic year had only limited detail about music teaching; specific updated guidance for music education was not issued until a few weeks into term and has been subject to frequent change as the restrictions in different geographical areas of the UK have been adapted and now tightened. Regular updates from professional organisations including The Musicians Union¹, The ISM² and Music Mark³ remain vital in helping those working as music teachers in a wide variety of roles in schools, community settings and from home to keep up to date with the changes and to interpret them in consistent and safe ways.

New year, new challenges

The new academic year commencing September 2020 hailed a return to face-to-face teaching across the UK, albeit with a staggered start. The summer months, coupled with the spring lockdown and other socially distancing regulations, drove infection rates down sufficiently for a 'new normal' to be established. Getting all children back to school was considered by Prime Minister Boris Johnson as a 'moral duty' and 'the national priority' (U.K. Government, 24.7.20). Head teachers continued to be faced with an onslaught of changes and challenges, with new government guidance being issued at the 11th hour on many occasions. Hand washing became a timetabled activity, along with accompanying songs (and Matt Lucas's offering 'Thank You Baked Potato' stormed the UK charts). Teachers, adaptable and resourceful as ever, made significant adaptations and worked out what an inspiring education could look and sound like. Risk assessments were carried out so that appropriate safeguarding remained in place regardless of the mode of delivery of music education, with the results that schools, music organisations and music education hubs had varied successes in having music as part of the curriculum, as noted by the school's inspectorate (Ofsted 2020a). Perhaps unexpectedly though, despite all their hard work, the Christmas term was dogged with disruption and constant change. Moving to the present, DfE guidance for out of school provision (UK Government, 8.1.21a) continues to support some music teaching in adapted ways even through the current national lockdown.

Despite rallying under the banner of the hashtag #CanDoMusic⁴, and the positive attitude that prevailed in many places, actually 'doing' music was by no means universal. The ISM report 'The Heart of the School is missing' (Underhill, 2020) provides a sad overview of the devastation wreaked across all aspects of music education throughout the UK during the Christmas term. Based on survey responses from over 1,300 music teachers, the report demonstrates the considerable drop in music teaching in schools, through instrumental lessons and the usually buoyant extracurricular opportunities offered by schools, hubs, music education organisations and communities. Some of the headline figures include:

- 68% of primary teachers and 39% of secondary school teachers reported a reduction in music education taking place as a direct result of the pandemic,
- No extracurricular music at all was taking place in 72% of reporting primary schools and 66% of secondary schools,
- During the 2020/2021 academic year, face-to-face instrumental lessons are not continuing in 35% of primary schools and 28% of secondary schools.

The challenges highlighted were mirrored in an Ofsted Survey report published a couple of weeks later (Ofsted, 2020a). Given that these findings relate to a period before the 2021 national lockdown was imposed, the situation for the provision of music teaching in England and the UK will now be even more grave.

Music's position as a subject in a broad and balanced curriculum in English schools was already precariously balanced before the pandemic (Daubney *et al.* 2019; Bath *et al.* 2020). It will be important to ensure that the devastation and disruption to teaching and learning exacerbated by COVID-19 are only temporary and to bring back and strengthen music in its many guises as a vital part of education and learning across the lifespan as soon as the situation allows.

Across the rest of our lives, we are urged to abide by the '2-metre rule', and if we cannot manage that, 'one metre plus' is essential, these being the distances we could place between ourselves and the next person. Yet in classrooms, we know social distancing is normally unattainable in most situations. Some changes in schools were made to mitigate social mixing, such as staggered start and finish times, no mass gatherings for assemblies or extracurricular groups in small spaces, and cancellation of parents' evenings and in-person celebration events. In many schools, 'bubbles' were created of youngsters who could mix with each other; however, problems were noted when in some schools a single bubble could involve an entire year group of 300 or more students.

Teachers in the ISM study reported significant changes and challenges; there were reports of having to teach other subjects, and 86% of secondary music teachers reported that their curriculum had to be re-written. This is unsurprising given that access to instruments, rules around singing and playing some instruments (which vary across different UK countries) was limited, and access to specialist rooms, equipment and teachers was also reportedly challenging or not permitted. Whereas in normal times, schools would have dedicated music specialist rooms, with the limitations on movement tales emerged of nomadic music teachers, having to transport whole sets of classroom instruments with them around the schools, negotiating stairs and long corridors, as the pupils stayed put in one room, and the teachers travelled between them, an inversion of the situation as it normally appertains in schools.

Teachers, it seems, are not like other humans. They might catch COVID-19 in a reasonably busy supermarket whilst wearing a face covering or anywhere else where they spend even short periods of time with other people, but in a classroom (although not in a staffroom) they were deemed to be at no more risk than other adults (those who spend their lives socially distancing from all others and avoid being with all but their closest family). This changed on 12th January 2021 when, having repeatedly denied that teachers were being put at risk despite union protestations, the English Home Secretary Priti Patel acknowledged that teachers were at 'occupational risk' of COVID-19 (TES 12.1.21). As key workers, the question now is whether the vaccine priority list will be amended so that teachers receive it earlier than they might otherwise have done. Whilst face coverings have been mandatory in enclosed indoor spaces since early summer 2020, government guidance in England for teachers has consistently been there should be no need to wear a face covering in a classroom because 'other COVID measures are in place to keep them safe' (although it is not entirely clear what these entail).

On the basis of current evidence, in light of the mitigating measures education settings are taking, and the negative impact on communication, face coverings will not generally be necessary in the classroom even where social distancing is not possible. There is greater use of the

system of controls for minimising risk, including through keeping in small and consistent groups or bubbles, and greater scope for physical distancing by staff within classrooms. Face coverings can have a negative impact on learning and teaching and so their use in the classroom should be avoided. (U.K. Government, 8.1.21)

Clearly, there is a lot to consider over the coming months to keep the music education workforce safe, as well as their pupils.

By the end of term (December 2020), DfE figures show that the absence rate in English primary and secondary schools was rising, and that some students had missed a considerable amount of in-person teaching during the term, due to either having been infected or told to isolate, as the body 'Public Health England' had advised their school to send certain children home (sometimes for more than one period of time) due to exposure to the virus. Whilst many schools in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland had been closed for extended periods of time at points during the previous term as part of 'circuit-breaker' exercises, schools in England remained open. Even in the final week of term, with a new variant of COVID-19 circulating, particularly in London and the South East of England, schools were told to remain open; the London Borough of Greenwich instructed their schools to close from 15th December (4 days early) only to be threatened with legal action by the government if they did not cancel this instruction (BBC News, 15.12.20).

Music education in a new lockdown

A new term, a new set of changes and challenges. Secondary school leadership teams in England spent their 2-week Christmas break sorting out the logistics of mass testing pupils and teachers (with very limited access to telephone support being given, of all people, by the army), having been handed this announcement as schools closed at the end of the previous term. It was initially optional, but at some point over the break testing pupils for COVID-19 became mandatory. Schools were ready to welcome pupils back for the new term – primaries right from the beginning and secondaries a week, and then 2 weeks later. With new, harsher tiering restricting which areas of the country people were allowed to do various things, and restrictions in place from Christmas night onwards, it was announced at the last minute that most of London and a few areas of the South East would not return to schooling (apart from online) for two more weeks. What followed was 24 hours of chaos; effectively a stand-off, on the one side the teaching profession, represented by teacher unions and other similar organisations, and on the other side the government, all of which resulted in governmental guidance changing five times (known locally as 'U-turns', after the manoeuvre of turning a car through 180°) in 24 hours. The first of these was to introduce remote learning in all schools in London for 2 weeks – a relief for those in Greenwich no doubt, as they were one of the handful of boroughs instructed that their schools must open at the start of term despite having higher COVID-19 case rates than other authorities that were not opening schools.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson appeared on the BBC's flagship current affairs programme 'the Andrew Marr Show' on the first Sunday morning of the new year and gave the following message, having repeatedly said that keeping children in school was a 'moral duty' and 'the national priority':

Schools are safe. It is very, very important to stress that. The risk to kids, to young people is really very, very small indeed. The risk to staff is very small . . . I understand people's frustrations, I understand people's anxieties but there is no doubt in my mind that schools are safe and that education is a priority. (BBC News, 3.1.21)

And so the new term began on Monday 4th January with millions of primary school children in England going to school, whilst those in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales learnt from home and with the teaching unions locking horns with the government. But at 8pm that evening, after just 1 day in school, the Prime Minister announced, in another U-turn, a new national lockdown in England, stating that all learning in schools and universities (but not early years settings) would be take place remotely, with the exception of key worker and vulnerable children, for whom schools would remain open. In this address to the nation, he also admitted that ‘The problem is that schools may nonetheless act as vectors for transmission’ (U.K Government, 4.1.21), yet another U-turn from what had been announced previously.

In a surprise announcement, the Prime Minister also said that General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) and advanced level (A-level) examinations would not go ahead this summer; the government in England had been under significant pressure on this point since examinations were cancelled in Scotland and Wales during the previous term. School music examinations have been subject to significant upheaval throughout the pandemic, as demonstrated below.

Assessment and qualifications

GCSE and A-level examinations usually mark the end of the final two phases of statutory education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Whilst in many countries there is only one set of school-leaving examination, these exams at 16 and 18 years old have remained in place despite protestations that reform is urgently needed if we are to have a system that is fit for purpose. An open letter published in the Sunday Times on 26th September 2020 urging the government to overhaul the assessment system was signed by prominent educationalists from state and independent schools, universities, academy chains, the head of the Chartered College of Teaching (a professional body for teachers established with government funding until it became self-sufficient in 2019), and even Kenneth Baker, the former Secretary of State for Education under whose watch the examination reforms in the late 1980s took place. It would be incorrect to assume that the current global pandemic brought about this rethink, although it may have served to amplify the cause.

The main examination series in UK schools takes place in the summer term each year. The most recent music examination reforms in England took place in 2016 when GCSE examinations with a new numerical grading system that replaced the old letter grades were introduced, and the A-levels were reformed. Changes at this time removed flexibility in the balance between composing, performing and listening in the GCSE examinations, introduced an upper limit of 60% for ‘non-examined assessment’, which was formerly called coursework, and for the listening examination now fixed at 40%, whereas previously it was between 30 and 40% depending upon the syllabus chosen. A requirement was introduced for areas of study to include Western Classical Music, controversially defined as music composed between 1650 and 1910, although in reality the previous specifications already included this. A limited number of vocational qualifications are also included in the English Performance Tables, although the numbers of students taking such qualifications in music are far fewer than GCSE and A-level, which themselves are in decline (Bath *et al.* 2020).

With schools across the UK closing for face-to-face teaching by 23rd March 2020, the question of what would happen to the awarding of grades quickly became an important focus. Wales cancelled the summer 2020 examination series on 18th March, with the Welsh Minister for Education announcing that:

Learners due to sit their GCSEs and A levels this summer will be awarded a fair grade to recognise their work, drawing on the range of information that is available. (Government of Wales, 18.3.20)

Written exams in Northern Ireland were cancelled (BBC News 19.3.20), but the oral and practical components in subjects such as music were given a temporary stay of execution until a few days later when these too were cancelled (BBC News 28.3.20). In England, the announcement of schools closing also coincided with the cancellation of exams, with an assurance from the Prime Minister that ‘we will make sure that pupils get the qualifications they need and deserve for their academic career’ (U.K. Government, 18.3.20).

The following day, the Scottish Minister for Education announced that their certification system would not rely on examinations for the 2020 series, stating that:

The chief examiner has assured me that we can put in place a robust and credible methodology that will enable her to certificate the examination system this year. I know it’s different but it has to pass the standard that our independent qualification authority sets for the performance of young people. (BBC News 28.3.20)

The following few months caused considerable stress for students and teachers whilst the details of the grading were thrashed out. Initially, it seemed like the judgement of teachers might be trusted, with the BBC (20.3.20) proclaiming:

Pupils whose exams were cancelled due to the coronavirus epidemic will be given grades estimated by their teachers, the government has said.

Yet in the intervening months between teachers carefully deliberating over the grades and going through internal and sometimes external moderation processes, the process of awarding grades was changed. Instead of being guided by the CAG, an algorithm was developed, taking into account the historical performance of examination candidates in each centre, and each candidate’s placing in a rank order determined by each school. This algorithmic method was supposed to avoid grade inflation and mean that the grading could be more comparable with previous years, yet the problems with this in relation to fairness were glaringly obvious.

In Scotland, the academic year starts and finishes earlier than in the rest of the UK; examination results are also released earlier. Their release caused a furor, with an estimated 125,000 grades being downgraded. This resulted in a swift U-turn and an apology that the Scottish government ‘did not get it right’ and the predicted centres assessed grades were promptly awarded (BBC News, 10.8.20).

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, A-level grades are released a week before the GCSE grades. Despite having seen the chaos in Scotland, the release of the A-level grades went ahead as planned, with a significant number of students being given grades much lower than they were expecting, and with those from the poorest socio-economic backgrounds being disproportionately the worst affected by the algorithm results. Further U-turns followed a few days later in Northern Ireland and Wales, with an advance announcement that GCSE results in these countries would also revert to the best of CAG and the standardised grades (BBC News, 17.8.20).

In England, the Prime Minister defended the A-level results, describing them as ‘good’ and ‘dependable’ (ITV News, 13.8.20), and the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, similarly defending the process as being ‘fair’ and ‘robust’ (Sky News, 13.8.20), despite nearly 40% being downgraded from the CAG. Schools Minister Nick Gibb stated that using CAG alone would ‘create its own injustice’ due to grade inflations (TES, 17.8.20) and Ofqual, England’s regulatory body, noted that using the CAG would ‘undermine the credibility of students’ grades’ (ibid). This despite many other Ofqual-regulated qualifications not relying on examinations, and instead, trusting teacher judgements based on evidence of work, often over an extended period of time. The report released by Ofqual on A-level results day (Ofqual, 2020) described teachers’ predictions as ‘generally optimistic’ and based on what each student would get on a ‘good day’. England was the last to do a U-turn on this issue, with the problems being attributed by the

Prime Minister to a ‘mutant algorithm’ (iNews, 17.8.20), having withdrawn the appeal process within a few hours of announcing it (The Guardian, 16.8.20). GCSE grades awarded were whichever was the highest of the CAG or the algorithm; given the use of historical centre data by the algorithm what this meant in practice was that some pupils were awarded higher grades than those predicted by their schools and colleges.

The initial awarding of A-level grades caused huge disappointment to many young people, who were unable to take up a place at their choice of university. The U-turn on A-level grades, along with the government’s guarantee that all students would now be able to go to their first choice of university if their grades met their offer, caused significant issues for the higher education sector, and the impact of this is multi-layered. In terms of our main focus of attention, music results, data from the DfE used by FFT in their analysis show that the graded results for GCSE and A-level music both rose in 2020. The generally small group sizes meant that in many schools and colleges the CAG were employed, as the algorithm was not applicable (FFT Education Datalab, 2020); therefore, there were fewer changes applied to music when A-level results reverted to CAG. Candidates unhappy with the grades awarded were offered a ‘resit’ in the mid-year series; for music, this was only based on the listening examination, which is typically the weakest component for many candidates (AQA, 2019) and therefore not necessarily offering a realistic picture of their competencies as a musician. It is unclear what the position is with this now that exams are once again cancelled.

As for vocational qualifications such as BTEC, Cambridge Technicals and Music Practitioner qualifications, these were also subject to significant disruption and uncertainty. Some of these are more modular in nature and some aspects of the assessment may have already been submitted, but not all, offering an incomplete picture of a candidate’s final work and grades. This led to uncertainty for teachers and pupils, which was not helped by the announcement the day before the results were due to be released that these were being delayed by a week (BBC News, 19.8.20). In the end, the same solution as GCSE and A-levels was implemented, but the delay meant that A-level students had a head start on the scramble for university places.

Moving forward to the new academic year, the first pupils back into schools and colleges were often the examination pupils. Despite the considerable ongoing disruption to schooling during the first term, with some students and teachers quarantining at points, off sick, learning in a variety of ways in school, remotely, online or a hybrid of many of these, the GCSE, A-level and vocational examinations and assessments in England were still expected to go ahead, despite already being cancelled in Scotland and Wales. A consultation by Ofqual led to the publication of changes from the start of the autumn term to GCSE, AS and A-levels for 2021 candidates (U.K. Government, 3.8.20). For music, these included reducing the length of performances and compositions and delaying the examination series by 2 weeks. However, the lack of changes to the content or assessment expectations for many of the EBacc subjects once again highlighted a hierarchy of subjects. Schools were encouraged by the Head of Ofsted to think carefully about whether it was appropriate that all pupils continued to study all of the subjects in which they were planning to take examinations, or whether they should drop some subjects to focus on others, especially ‘English and Mathematics’ (TES, 3.7.20). Towards the end of term, another round of Ofqual consultations ensued, and more changes were made to exam expectations to mitigate the circumstances arising in the previous term. For music education, one of the changes announced was the removal of the need to study jazz music and the Courtney Pine set work in the Edexcel A-level – ironically the only black composer on the syllabus, and at a time when the need to decolonise the curriculum has been brought sharply into focus.

The recent ISM report (Underhill, 2020) highlighted the significant ongoing challenges to pupils accessing instruments at school and home, having access to appropriate technologies and specialist teaching; the inequality of access and opportunity also noted by Ofsted (2020) and Youth Music (2020) was laid bare. The ‘level playing field’ that the DfE desires is far from a reality across the country, and perhaps even more so in the case of music education. Yet the

importance and power of music education, particularly for young people in non-selective state education, go far beyond music alone. A recent report from Cambridge International Examinations (Gill, 2020) which analysed results from the DfE national data set, shows that pupils in non-selective comprehensive schools taking a GCSE music qualification or graded music examination at grade 4 or above scored better overall results across their GCSE subjects, whilst for those in selective schools there was no significant effect. Whilst caution is needed when interpreting this data, it is nevertheless a robust study into an area that merits further investigation.

Whilst the government in England has been consistently clear that its policy is that ‘exams and other assessments should nevertheless go ahead . . . because exams are the best and fairest form of assessment’ (Gibb, 2020), we have reached a point where even they have conceded defeat this academic year. As we enter the spring term, 2021 exams are now cancelled, although it is unclear at the moment what will replace them; neither is it clear what is happening with vocational qualifications, as these are expected to continue for now ‘if possible’. The Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, recently stated that the government ‘will put our trust in teachers, rather than algorithms’ (Williamson, 2021). Time, as they say, will tell. Perhaps the silver lining in all of this is that it will open the door to creating opportunities for genuinely musical assessment across music education in the future of a post-pandemic world. Maybe giving this responsibility to the teaching profession, as well as putting our trust in them to hold communities together, educate young people and feed families in the most challenging of times, will bring renewed respect for the profession and herald the implementation of positive changes across education, holding on to some aspects of these enforced changes and seeing them in a positive light.

Forging a way forward: #CanDoMusic

In the meantime, the work and compassion of incredible music teachers and practitioners across the world, weaving their extraordinary magic through schools and communities, continue to shine through and their resourcefulness and adaptability are greatly appreciated by all. In the most challenging of times, we need to celebrate small successes, and in 2021 #CanDoMusic is music to our collective ears.

As we know, not all superheroes wear capes.

Notes

- 1 Musicians Union. Coronavirus Guidance. <https://musiciansunion.org.uk/COVID-19>
- 2 Incorporated Society of Musicians. COVID-19 advice for musicians <https://www.ism.org/advice-centre/coronavirus-listing>
- 3 Music Mark. Music Unlocked. <https://www.musicmark.org.uk/resources/music-unlocked-guidance-for-schools-and-music-providers/>
- 4 #CanDoMusic <https://www.candomusic.org/>

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