

ARTICLE

Practicalities of a spiral-inspired approach

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Abstract

Swanwick and Tillman set out three levels at which their “Sequence of Musical Development” may implicate music teaching: *general curriculum planning*, *individual development*, and *the role of the teacher*. From the perspective of a practitioner working as a secondary music teacher in England, this article critiques the practicalities of adopting an approach inspired by Swanwick and Tillman’s theory. Although recognising the challenges that music teachers face in the current context for music education, this article argues that educators should carefully consider how musical learning is structured, both in curriculum planning and approach.

Keywords: Spiral; curriculum; musical development

A challenging landscape

Across the teaching profession in England, staff recruitment and retention prove problematic, with high workload, low job satisfaction and low levels of autonomy contributing to a high turnover of teaching staff in schools (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020). Music teachers, many of whom work in one-person departments and commonly hold teaching responsibilities outside their subject areas (Daubney & Mackrill, 2018), face a range of challenges within the current context for school-based music education in England. The position and purpose of music as a subject in state-funded schools has become contested as government policy shifts to favour “core” subjects as part of a knowledge-rich curriculum (Bath et al., 2020). Moreover, a decline in the hours of curriculum music taught in schools, together with the falling trend in GCSE and A-Level music entries (Daubney et al., 2019), indicates a precarious status for music within the curriculum. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating effect on music provision in schools, with significant curriculum changes, alongside a lack of support from school leadership teams negatively impacting many teachers’ health and well-being (Underhill, 2020). Although the current landscape for music education in England presents a range of difficulties for its workforce, many of the strong community of music teachers remain ambitious about rebuilding music provision within their schools (Daubney & Fautley, 2021). However, a key challenge for music teachers is determining how to approach curriculum design amid “relatively brief guidance” (Anderson, 2021a, p. 2).

A spiral-inspired approach

Whilst research investigating music teachers’ approaches to curriculum design is limited (Anderson, 2021b), it is thought that many consider a spiral curriculum (Fautley, 2015). Bruner (1997, p. 119) explains the idea of a spiral curriculum, that:

you begin with an “intuitive” account that is well within the reach of a student, and then circle back later to a more formal or highly structured account, until, with however many more recyclings are necessary, the learner has mastered the topic or subject in its full generative power.

Bruner describes how the use of the Spiral rests on the notion that “any domain of knowledge can be constructed at varying levels of abstractness or complexity” (1997, p. 119). Within music education, spiral curriculum models are “well established” (Fautley & Daubney, 2019, p. 5). An example from the “Manhattanville Music Curriculum project” (Thomas, 1970, p. 31) recognises the importance of students’ prior musical experience:

The sequence of information as presented by the Spiral is born from the observed logic of the student. It recognises that the student has had thousands of hours of exposure to Music before he comes into the music lab, and has acquired a vast store of information which, while it is often not formalised, is a strong personal resource for the student in this comprehensive curriculum.

Additionally, Fautley and Daubney’s (2019) spiral model, designed to inform curriculum planning and assessment, is built upon six overlapping and interrelated strands: singing, composing, improvising, playing, critical engagement and SMSC (social, moral, spiritual and cultural), which require revisiting with increasing challenge. Overall, a range of spiral models exist in music education, with the use of a spiral inferring learning that is experiential.

The Swanwick-Tillman Spiral (1986), arranged as an open-ended helix (Swanwick, 2008), is based upon the theory that “processes of musical development appear to lead us through four fundamental transformations” (1986, p. 331). These transformations, characterised by developmental modes, are linked to age ranges, although these ranges are not rigid (1986). Descriptions of the developmental modes include observations from Tillman’s music classes and suggest progression in areas including technical control, expression, identity, and philosophical approach. The theory of development also includes the idea that when introduced to a new or unfamiliar musical scenario, we may engage initially from the sensory mode or even choose “the layer in which we function” (Swanwick, 2008, p. 229). This notion establishes the importance of individualism within the theory and expresses the complexity of musical development and progression, which may be experienced and exhibited differently from person to person. Overall, the Swanwick-Tillman Spiral infers that musical development takes place in a particular order; however, the area of the Spiral in which we function at any given time changes depending on the familiarity or approach to a musical situation. Thus, adopting a Spiral-inspired approach involves curriculum planning that carefully considers the structure of musical learning alongside recognition of the complexity of musical development, including how it is exhibited.

Curriculum planning

Curriculum planning is undoubtedly at the forefront of discussion for all involved in music education in England following the Department for Education’s (2021) Model Music Curriculum (MMC) publication. Swanwick and Tillman’s (1986) historical description of formal music education as “somewhat arbitrary” (p. 335), in addition to their observation of differing expectations for children of different ages, demonstrates contemporary relevance regarding recent debates around the suitability of the MMC (Lydon, 2021). Although there is agreement amongst musicians, music teachers, and academics that children should benefit from regular music lessons as part of the curriculum, opinion on the purpose and approach to these lessons is far from universally shared.

Swanwick and Tillman advocate an approach whereby learning focuses on “broad aspects of musical development” (1986, p. 335); however, the current context for music education, including less music curriculum time and fewer music specialists (Daubney et al., 2019), may limit the extent to which this is achievable within the classroom alone. School-based secondary music lessons in England are often taught as topics that change on a half-termly basis (Kinsella et al., 2019; Anderson, 2019). However, the effectiveness of this model has been questioned by Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education), who describe instances of schools failing to consider how projects are sequenced to support musical progression (Ofsted, 2012). Moreover, carousel models (whereby curriculum music rotates on a termly basis with other subjects) have been identified as becoming more widely used in schools (Daubney & Mackrill, 2018) despite limiting the opportunity for sustained musical engagement. With research suggesting evidence of GCSE assessments contributing to KS3 (11-14) curriculum “washback” (Devaney, 2018) and accountability structures dominating music teachers’ performance management discussions (Anderson, 2019), schools may be failing to consider the complex nature of musical progression, prioritising improving test scores over the broad musical development of their students.

Adopting a Spiral-inspired approach requires considering students’ prior musical experience in developing a curriculum that enables learners to progress. Within an accountability-measure focused education system, teachers may need to acknowledge further the complexity of curriculum design (Anderson, 2021a), considering curriculum beyond lists of topics, reflecting upon how learning is sequenced to allow for broad musical development. Furthermore, understanding the effect of transition points and improving continuity across the curriculum may help to ensure school music promotes sustained musical development for individuals throughout their primary and secondary music education (Marshall & Hargreaves, 2007, 2008).

Learners as individuals

Swanwick and Tillman (1986) describe how teachers should identify where students are on the Spiral, recognising how “although we teach classes, people develop as individuals” (p. 336). The pair further explain how awareness of learners’ next stage of development will assist teachers in aiding students’ musical progression in that interventions will have “personal meaning and consequence for the individual” (p. 336). Despite this, the statement that “asking the next question depends on having an idea as to what possible developments might be ‘round the corner’” (p. 337) highlights the importance of knowing learners well and drawing on subject-specific teaching experience to aid interventions that promote students’ musical development.

A challenge for secondary music teachers remains accommodating a potentially wide range of students’ musical experience in the classroom, in part due to a postcode lottery of access to music education (Daubney et al., 2019; Savage & Barnard, 2019). Consequently, in the scenario of a new Year 7 (first year of secondary school) class having their first secondary music lesson, students will be interacting with musical scenarios from a range of perspectives. Research (Leveridge, 2020) exploring Year 8 students’ prior musical experiences at an inner-London secondary academy describes a wide range of perceived access to primary music lessons and whole class ensemble tuition (WCET). Notably, although some participants in the study took part in several WCET projects alongside regular curriculum music, others’ first formal engagement with music education was their first music lesson at secondary school (Leveridge, 2020). Consequently, the task of forming an understanding of where students are functioning on the Spiral may have its complexities, especially in contexts where large class sizes mean that time for meaningful interaction with students on an individual level is limited.

Teachers providing regular and meaningful interventions to aid students’ development requires time and is arguably challenging to achieve in the classroom alone, especially when

comparing the high student-teacher ratio of curriculum music to instrumental tuition; however, school-based music lessons are a vital part of students' general education. In the national context of declining entries to GCSE and A-Level qualifications (Daubney et al., 2019), barriers to music education (Savage & Barnard, 2019; Leveridge, 2020) may mean that studying music beyond KS3 is inaccessible to many pupils. Despite this, there are examples of secondary schools increasing the allocated time for curriculum music and providing students with their own instruments, which is perceived to have led to a growth in enthusiasm for school music, alongside an improved uptake of music qualifications (Johns, 2021). For schools to further remove barriers to curriculum music across the national context, it seems essential for the government to move away from current accountability measures such as the English Baccalaureate (Ebacc), which are widely perceived to have negatively affected students' access to music within the curriculum (Daubney et al., 2019). However, further discussion is also required regarding the future of school music, including the role of classroom music teachers in England.

Role of the teacher

Swanwick and Tillman (1986) discuss the importance of the role of the teacher, notably that regardless of the prior experience of a class, a new musical project requires the teacher to ensure "the first stage of sensory is properly entered" (p. 337). In practice, Swanwick and Tillman suggest the Spiral influences the teaching approach, ensuring adequate time for exploration and engagement with the sensory stage in the initial phase of a new musical project or concept. Despite this, they clarify that teaching should not restrict learners to a particular developmental mode, describing how "the transition from one mode to the next is often so smooth as to be almost unnoticed" (p. 337). Educators may need to carefully consider how new musical concepts are introduced, ensuring learning continually builds upon learners' prior experiences. Furthermore, investment in teachers' professional development may ensure they are prepared to "ask the right kind of question" or "suggest a more relevant possibility" (p. 336). A further consideration for music teachers is their role in developing the learning environment in their schools. Swanwick and Tillman (1986) recognise that where the environment is rich, "the sequence may be followed more quickly" (p. 338), although where this may be neglected, "development is likely to be minimal" (p. 338). Although per-pupil funding in many state contexts is limited (Sibieta, 2020), access to instruments, technology, space, and time to experiment is important in creating a musical environment that allows students to develop. Furthermore, complexities may also include reducing the barriers to music education and improving the authenticity of school music (Swanwick, 2012), which may require making explicit links between students' prior formal learning, informal and non-formal musical learning, however, and will be crucial to improving the relevance and accessibility of school-based music education.

Conclusion

Although the challenging landscape for music educators persists, it seems now more than ever an appropriate time for educators and policymakers to reflect on improving school-based music education in England. The implications of Swanwick and Tillman's Spiral are still of much relevance 35 years on from the publication of their original BJME article. Music educators' consideration of students' longer-term musical journey is important; however, as many teachers only teach pupils for a small proportion of their musical journey, improving continuity in the curriculum requires forming an understanding of pupils' prior musical experiences and structuring learning to build on these (Marshall & Hargreaves, 2007; Kokotsaki, 2017). Overall, developing an environment where learners can benefit from sustained engagement

and interaction with music throughout their schooling remains a crucial role for music educators working in school-based contexts. How they may remove barriers to musical learning within their environments needs further consideration as although school-based music education faces a range of challenges within the current landscape, classroom music is an essential part of students' education which for many is their only opportunity to access and engage with formal musical learning (Leveridge, 2020).

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