

Editorial

What would an ideal music education look like? All too often in education research and practice, our vision of how music education *might* be is constrained by how it *is*; by the practicalities of funding, teacher expertise, student motivation and curriculum status. Several of the authors in this issue ask us to forget those concerns momentarily, and consider what Dawn Bennett calls a ‘musotopia’ – the ideal that music education might aim for in engaging students with music and preparing them for lifelong involvement. Bennett’s interest lies with students in higher education, whose ‘musotopia’ involves adequate preparation for a musical career, rather than the sole focus on instrumental excellence which has characterised past conservatoire models of teaching. Whilst this might be thought of as idealistic, it contains a strong element of realism, with Bennett asking conservatoire tutors to address the diverse skills needed by the next generation of musicians, rather than focusing solely on instrumental excellence.

Evangeline Cheng and Colin Durrant pose similar questions in relation to instrumental tuition: what constitutes effective teaching, and what are its effects? They use a case study of a string teacher whose practice is acknowledged by colleagues to be effective, and analyse her teaching strategies and approaches to see what can be learnt from them. The teacher demonstrates that effective instrumental teaching and learning is not solely to do with teaching pupils to become professional performers or to gain examination success, but needs to address learning in a more holistic way. But the teacher is not placed upon a pedestal: Cheng and Durrant point out the ways in which she deals with classroom realities with varying amounts of success.

The complexity of student–teacher communication is addressed by Helena Gaunt in her paper on breathing and oboe playing, relating to a fundamental aspect of wind playing. While once again there is no straightforward solution that will suit every player, Gaunt shows how reflective learning can help to increase students’ and teachers’ understanding of the tasks in which they are engaged. Angela Major, too, is interested in developing understanding through talking: as pupils describe and evaluate their own compositions, they both demonstrate and increase their musical understanding, and Major suggests that teachers could facilitate this further in the design of composition tasks. Enabling children to talk more confidently about their composing also develops their critical thinking and appraising skills, perhaps with a greater sense of ownership and engagement than when listening to established repertoire.

The inevitability that imaginative music teaching brings a departure from a standard model is illustrated at national level by Antonia Forari’s article on Cypriot music education policy. Forari illustrates the ways in which curriculum documents are interpreted and realised in the classroom, showing how the distinct ideologies of teachers and policy makers are resolved in practice. School music takes its place as one influence among many on musical development, and a hermetically sealed curriculum is an illusion maintained only at policy level. Michael Webb acknowledges this by proposing some teaching ideas which accommodate the cross-media listening in which young people are increasingly skilled.

He demonstrates that music video studies and film music studies can help reconceptualise music education, to take account of such new modes of listening.

These papers, therefore, return us to the complexity of educational practice, in which the pursuit of an ideal music education is constantly compromised by everyday realities. They share, though, an optimism that musical learning is worthy of investigation and development, and between them the authors offer some useful strategies for understanding students' experiences and improving communication. Pursuing the ideal in music education, although elusive, can be a motivating force for change and development, and may be not such a bad goal to aim for after all.

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