

Post-War Modernism and the Music Classroom

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Background

During the late 1960s, music educators introduced the idioms of post-war modernism (otherwise known as the avant-garde) into British classrooms. As a result, creative music making, composing and improvisation, became an established part of the curriculum. However the actual idioms of musical modernism have largely vanished from schools. The writer explores the reasons for this decline, while acknowledging that some positive features of modernism may still have much to offer teachers and pupils.

Introduction

At the Novello awards ceremony in 2006, the composer Harrison Birtwistle addressed a speech to his fellow recipients, most of them rock musicians. His words, as reported by American music critic Alex Ross [1] went something like this: 'Why is your music so effing loud? You must all be brain-dead. Maybe you are. I didn't know so many clichés existed until the last half-hour. Have fun. Goodbye.' We might question the logic. (If you weren't aware that something existed until 30 minutes ago, how do you know that it's a cliché?) We might also find it strange to hear a protest about unrelenting loudness from a composer whose music many regard as unremittingly dissonant. Nevertheless, Birtwistle's words did raise issues that have troubled music and education for a long time:

- The fraught character of modernism and its relationship with a potential audience.
- The limited horizons of popular styles that are locked in conventions, not least of which is a complete absence of light and shade where volume is concerned.

What role can schools and teachers play in solving these conundrums?

Efforts to Promote Modernism in the Classroom

Some 50 years ago, music educators, many working in teacher training colleges, started a concerted drive to promote what was then seen as the 'cutting edge' of music in British school classrooms. These were the styles and techniques of an ambitious and aggressive group of European composers who, together with the influential American John Cage, emerged immediately after the second world war. They were generally known either as 'post-war modernists' or the 'avant-garde.' At the same time, there was a painful awareness that music was not a popular classroom subject, particularly among adolescent children. The educators saw the promotion of 'creative music' based on mid twentieth-century styles as a way of tackling the two challenges simultaneously.

Previously, composer-educators had shown how modes and pentatonic scales could build a creative musical vocabulary and syntax

in a linear fashion. 'Every normal child would improvise if he were allowed to', said Kodály [2], who, with Carl Orff, played a pioneering role in developing music education for every child, as opposed to merely nurturing the gifted. Working as a school teacher between 1959 and 1962, the composer Peter Maxwell Davies, another modernist and contemporary of Birtwistle, encouraged students to explore atonal and serial techniques in their compositions. However, he stressed the importance of exploring diatonic harmony as a starting point:

It would be useless to deny the basic chord patterns at the very roots of our musical experience, which form the basis of so much of our musical communication. If, in order to create a freedom from traditions, as certain elements would have it, we deprive our pupils of the common denominator of experience and communication, they have no common ground from which to start out, reassured, towards a natural individuation [3].

The influential music educators that followed Davies in the late 1960s, however, did not see a need to build learning in quite such a cumulative, systematic way. Three publications stand out from this era. One was *Experimental Music in Schools* by Brian Dennis [4], who declared 'This book is written to help teachers who would like to introduce truly modern music to their classes.' Another was *New Sounds in Class* by George Self [5]. Both books comprised a collection of pieces for class ensemble written in the idiom of 1950s modernism, using a simplified graphic notation appropriate to the sounds and patterns used. Self saw *New Sounds in Class* as making:

A link between contemporary music and instrumental work in the classroom ... Pupils often leave school with little knowledge of the serious music of their own time [5].

-and stressed inventive work as one of his aims:

since the music of today is more concerned with tone colour and texture than was the case with earlier music ... the simplified notation has many advantages, enabling the children to venture among a range of sounds and rhythms with considerable freedom to improvise ... with simplified notation it is possible for average children to compose music and almost this alone would warrant its introduction [5].

In his notes on the notation and performance of the scores of *New Sounds in Class*, Self sees 'seriousness' as avoiding anything as humdrum as a rhythmic pulse:

the regular beat plays no part in the early exercises and pieces ... A series of sounds heard at regular intervals is an uncommon feature in the music of today ... and it would be wrong to begin with an exception. In studying the music of the past the regular beat is indeed the basis; but at the present time it is more connected with light music and pop music than with serious music [5].

- or as commonplace as diatonic pitch relationships:

As the diatonic scale plays little part in today's music we begin with all available sounds, i.e. all the sounds of the chromatic scale at as many pitches as are available together with sounds of indefinite pitch. To limit the sounds to those of the major scale is to train for the past and for pop music ... the composer of today may use any combination of pitches; to limit oneself to diatonic triads and their derivatives will act against the intended purpose of making the music of today with all the means available in the classroom [5].

Less dogmatic, and wider in its cultural reach was *Sound and Silence* [6]. While self and Dennis set out explicitly to promote modernism, Paynter focussed on the experience of pupils themselves. He seemed genuinely interested in what they came up with and the book contained intriguing examples of children's compositions, made up both by individuals and groups. *Sound and Silence* also discussed the nature of musical learning and its place in the curriculum as a whole:

It might help us to find answers to these questions if we begin by looking at the essential differences between general and specialist forms of education. Apart from those of us who are concerned solely with certain clearly-defined skills such as the techniques of playing musical instruments, the work of most teachers in schools is essentially a contribution to the general education of children. Even if a teacher finds himself working in a school as 'the music specialist' or 'the science specialist' he must not let this cause him to forget his first duty: the education of the whole person. He makes a contribution to this 'total education' through the medium of his own subject. Moreover, he must not gear his work only to the abilities of the gifted few, but should find ways of using his specialist knowledge to serve the education of all the pupils in his classes [6].

Paynter saw how the aims of modernism linked with those of different cultures, such as Indian music. He was not at all dismissive of pop and rock. One reason that *Sound and Silence* has stood the test of time rather better than some other publications was its attractive presentation: imaginative black-and-white photographs featured throughout the book, conveying a persuasive message about how music connects to the visual world, to the imagination and to nature.

During the 1970s, further effort was put into promoting the idioms of post-war modernism, culminating in the Schools Council Project Music in the Secondary School Curriculum, directed by John Paynter at the University of York from 1973 to 1982. The Project emphasised composing as a normal musical activity that all children could try. Its influence led to its inclusion in the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and later, the British National Curriculum. However, the question remains: how much influence did modernist idioms eventually have on the teaching and learning of music? How much influence and relevance do they still have for today's pupils and teachers?

The Continuing Problem of Modernism and Audiences for Music

The pioneers of post-war modernism undoubtedly put composing on the classroom agenda, but the styles and techniques that prevailed in the late 1960s are today conspicuous by their absence from classrooms. During the past 10 years (2004-2014) I worked as a teacher trainer visiting students in schools in England and Wales. I observed 271 music lessons. In only three was there any reference to the content and style of post-war modernism. One made a passing reference to John Cage and his silent piece, *4'33"* [7] and the other two (co-

incidentally) referred to Cathy Berberian's *Stripsody* [8] for solo voice. Granted that these were beginner teachers, it is nevertheless safe to assume that the content of these lessons reflected the interests and enthusiasms of both the trainees and the departments in which they were working.

This lack of popularity among teachers parallels the continuing lack of box-office success of post-war modernism. Many developments in music have taken place since, of course. There is now a growing chorus of voices weary of the 1950s avant-garde and its continuing failure to engage the listening public. One of the first to challenge its prestige was the composer Christopher Small [9], who had previously contributed a graphic score entitled 'Black Cat' to the progressive classroom repertoire in 1969 [10]. In the 18 years that intervened between this and his book *Music of the Common Tongue* [11], small underwent a volte-face:

Most concert goers shun the offerings of contemporary composers, preferring to hear pieces that are the work of dead, and usually long-dead, musicians; we need now to investigate more fully this phenomenon and the reasons for it... It is not possible to invoke any 'inevitable timelag' which is supposed to be required for the assimilation of new works... Those who champion 'the new music' await its assimilation into the repertory much as the early Christians awaited the Second Coming, greeting each new performance as the first rays of a new dawn... The virtual freezing of the repertory has had the consequence that a concert very rarely furnishes any new musical experience at all [11].

Small had by then concluded that 'truly modern music' was to be found in African-American genres: the blues, rock and gospel styles that the modernists despised. He was joined by others writing in the same vein, such as Lerdahl [12], Earle [13] and Goodall [14]. However, the coup de grace was administered by the high priest of modernism himself at the 1999 Edinburgh Festival:

Questions were invited from the audience. Someone asked Boulez why it was that of all the hard-line modernist works produced in the post-war period so few were played today. 'Well,' said Boulez, 'perhaps we did not take sufficiently into account the way music is perceived by the listener' [15].

What has Happened in Music Classrooms since the 1970s?

Since the heady days of experiment in the early 1970s, much change has been wrought in music education. Many influential advocates of creative experiment remained antagonistic towards pop. Prominent among these was the composer Murray Schafer, who sought to promote the ideas of modernism in Canadian schools and universities:

On the other hand, there has arisen an equally disappointing tendency, particularly in America, to substitute for impossibly high standards none at all. The introduction of pop music in the classroom is an example of this slovenliness ... This is a controversial subject, but my contention is that musicianship, sociology and the money business do not benefit by being jumbled together, which is to say that it is impossible to analyse a pop song until it is ten years old, by which time why bother? [16].

Self and Schafer failed to notice the phenomenal outburst of creativity in the popular music of the 1960s. However, the generation of teachers who grew up during that decade were aware of it and appreciated its merits. They understood how the performing practices

of jazz, blues and pop had the potential to be just as creative, allowing scope for improvisation and interpretation as well as composing [17,18].

Pop has stood the test of time: the Beatles did not go out of fashion as was widely predicted! Many pop albums recorded in the 1960s are still available after 50 years, a time scale much longer than the 'ten years' to which Schafer refers so contemptuously. The advent of composing in the GCSE from 1986 provided ample evidence of children's ability to work with fluency and inventiveness in popular styles, creating accomplished original songs and arrangements [19].

Two developments in the 1990s changed the landscape further. One was the National Curriculum. The other was the advent of electronic keyboards in schools. William Salaman [20] plotted the inexorable rise of this piece of kit:

Many of the in-service training courses in the uses of keyboards covered the uses of computers in music lessons as well. Undoubtedly, the medium was the message. No established composers or distinguished educational thinkers threw their weight behind this development, so practice arose from the wisdom of comparatively anonymous individuals based in higher education or commercial firms. It appears that keyboards have found their way into music classrooms almost by default [20].

Salaman noted the absence of leading figures stimulating genuine thinking about musical learning through keyboards. The literature (often produced by the same companies that supplied them) lacked vision; its texts resembling 'the methodology used so many years ago with recorders.' Salaman also felt that, compared to classroom percussion of the 1960s, keyboards were relatively inexpressive:

One of the great delights of teaching music is the expressive development of pupils. Even the youngest can learn to play a glockenspiel sensitively. Quite soon, they develop their personal styles of playing, moving from clumsy exploration to some delicacy in phrasing and tone. The same applies to the recorder and even to classroom percussion instruments. In contrast, the tone and articulation of a keyboard will be identical for all of its operatives [20].

Keyboards are therefore a mixed blessing. There is no reason (in theory) why they cannot be used creatively; after all they offer an unprecedented range of synthesized timbres. However, perhaps because these timbres are ready made, and the rhythmic 'pre-sets' available tend to be stereotypical, keyboards would seem to do little to stimulate children to use their imaginations in a spontaneous way. My observations during the past 10 years have rarely seen teachers or pupils using keyboards to exploit the range of timbres possible.

What has Post-War Modernism to Offer Today's Classrooms?

There is a tendency now to see post-war modernism and its infiltration into the classroom during the late 1960s as failed projects, well past their sell-by dates. In a fascinating book on recent developments in group music making in schools, Lucy Green is scornful of the modernists' claims to be 'progressive' and 'child-centred':

For rather than starting with music that pupils were familiar with and enjoyed, it introduced them, through compositional stimuli and other means, to musical styles that they would be unlikely ever to come across in the world outside the school. This mainly focused not so

much on the mainstream of classical music as on atonal or other modernist twentieth-century music of many varieties. The distance of this music from pupils' existing musical tastes, knowledge and skills made it difficult for pupils to connect their learning with their lives outside the school [21].

Well... not quite! Green's final sentence above actually spells out a rather good reason for including this music in the curriculum.

The utopian tunnel-vision of some of the 'experimental' educators of the late 1960s may now seem preposterous. But these people were also provocative and often inspirational. They may have stirred controversy, but they made teachers think and encouraged pupils to ask questions about the nature of music. Despite what, with hindsight, now seem absurdly dogmatic assertions about what counted as 'truly modern' or 'serious' music, there was much stimulation to be had from these books which, in my view might be profitably revived today. It is worth spelling out what these pioneers did manage to achieve:

They encouraged children to listen to really quiet sounds, including those that can emerge from silence.

All the books cited contain useful preliminary exercises in listening that any class teacher would find useful. Here is an example of such an exercise, inspired possibly by Cage's '4'33" suggested by Brian Dennis:

Sound out of silence

At all moments in one's life sound is continually present even if one is not aware of it. Finding out just how many sounds one can detect at a given moment can be highly instructive. It is this simple basic idea which I have chosen to act as a starting point for this first series of exercises.

Each pupil should be given a sheet of paper. The entire class should then be asked to preserve as complete a silence as possible; each pupil must restrain himself from making any intentional sound whatsoever. Instead the class must listen carefully for any noises which are at all audible during the given time interval; identify the noises and write down everything that can be detected. The period of silence should last about 10 minutes. Sounds can be identified and divided into four categories as follows [4]:

1. Unintentional sounds made by the pupil himself
2. Sounds from inside the classroom
3. Sounds from inside the building as a whole
4. Sounds from outside altogether

Similar exercises can be found in Paynter [22] and Schafer [23]. The aim is 'de-familiarisation' - making pupils hear the everyday in new ways.

They fostered sensitivity to colour and dynamics: While the words 'timbre' and 'dynamics' often appear on posters that adorn school music classrooms, teachers rarely encourage children to explore these in practice. Yet with a little effort, and stimulation from the musical gurus of the late 1960s, this need not be the case.

For example, in comparison to the meagre resources available to music departments in the 1960s, most schools now have drum kits, with a variety of cymbals attached. Children often come with preconceptions about what a drum kit is for and how it should be played. Good teaching has the potential to raise awareness and to get pupils to think about instruments in different ways. In discussing a

pupil's composition entitled 'Music for Cymbals' Paynter [6] provides a transcription of a recording he made of the performance. The players involved use soft sticks, wire brushes to caress the cymbals, and a 'cello bow to produce the most unearthly tone-colours imaginable. The dynamic level ranges from pppp to ffff, giving the pupils involved experience of the full spectrum of dynamic gradations.

They promoted the exploration of the acoustic properties of voices, instruments and other everyday objects: During the 1960s, almost no classroom instruments were powered by electricity. Children could see, hear and feel the acoustic properties of instruments and understand how it required effort and imagination to explore and produce interesting sounds. Brian Dennis [4] saw the value of exploiting the sounds of everyday objects such as bottles, glass chimes and plant pots. He even suggested a trip to a breaker's yard to collect hub caps!

They encouraged teachers and children to venture outside their musical 'comfort zones': One mindset that the post-war modernists challenged most successfully and provocatively was defining rhythm:

But rhythm is something more fundamental than 'beat' or 'pulse.' Rhythm is the underlying current, the sense of forward movement that carries a piece of music ...on an inevitable journey to a distinct point of arrival... Music without a strong sense of pulse is still rhythmic; it will still possess a feeling of movement onwards even though the heartbeat may be almost stopped [22,24].

Another concerned the nature of silence

A Project on Silence

- Using percussion instruments (tuned as well as untuned) together with any other instruments used percussively, create a piece of music which makes extensive use of silence.
- Using the same resources makes a piece of music 'about' silence (i.e. to convey the feeling of silence) [6].

They created unprecedented opportunities for children to be musically creative: This was one of the success stories about classroom music in the 1970s, and we need reminding of it. The poet Wendy Cope [25] worked as a primary teacher during the 1970s and recalls with affection how the ideas of post-war modernism encouraged pupils and teachers to be open to sounds of all kinds:

Those music inspectors, employed by the late lamented Inner London Education Authority, were an inspiration. I went on courses where, as well as learning new songs, we worked in groups to compose our own music, with a view to enabling our pupils to be composers too. I found this work tremendously stimulating. A supportive head teacher gave me the funds to assemble a wonderful collection of tuned and untuned percussion instruments. The children enjoyed themselves and discipline was no problem because they knew that anyone who messed around wouldn't be allowed to play an instrument. One day some boys found an old piano that had been dumped somewhere in the neighbourhood. The head and the school keeper wheeled it into school and the school keeper dismantled it. We ended up with a horizontal piano frame on wheels. It was brilliant. You can make fabulous sounds on exposed piano strings. We bounced ping-pong balls on them. We stroked them with sticks, spoons and strings of beads. It was loud. The tolerance of teachers in the surrounding classrooms was astonishing.

A timely piece of evidence about how inspirational that era was turned up recently in the form of a CD of pieces performed and

composed by schoolchildren during that time [26]. Made with limited resources before the advent of computers and digital recording, the 24 short tracks display an astonishing variety of accomplishment. Over half were original compositions, either by individuals or through children collaborating in groups. The influence of post-war modernism can be heard in the explorations of serialism and of musique concrète using open-reel tape recorders. One particularly atmospheric track features a class chanting the words of a collectively created arrangement of the 'Lyke-Wake Dirge', accompanied by the unearthly sound of gongs being struck and lowered slowly into a trough of water. Together with 'Music for Cymbals' and 'Autumn', the performances on this album show how teachers can make children realise how compelling soft sounds can be at the limits of audibility, even when created by everyday instruments, objects and materials. My observations in schools during the past decade saw numerous instances of inventive composing, arranging and improvising in lessons. However, these tended to reflect the everyday musical vernacular of diatonic harmony and 4/4 time, the world as Lucy Green (above) put it, of 'the music that pupils were familiar with and enjoyed.' Again, in only three lessons did I witness teachers fulfilling the hopes of self and Dennis and encourage children to venture outside these limitations to explore sounds in the variety of ways that modernism had opened up in the 1950s.

A more recent example of a composer who understood the link between musical modernism and early learning and creativity was the Hungarian Georg Kurtág. In his preface to *Játékok*, [27] a set of piano pieces for learners, Kurtág beautifully summed up his philosophy:

The idea of composing *Játékok* [Games] was suggested by children playing spontaneously, children for whom the piano still means a toy. They experiment with it, caress it, attack it and run their fingers over it. They pile up seemingly disconnected sounds, and if this happens to arouse their musical instinct they look consciously for some of the harmonies found by chance and keep repeating them.

Thus, this series does not provide a tutor, nor does it simply stand as a collection of pieces. It is possibly for experimenting and not for learning "to play the piano". Pleasure in playing, the joy of movement - daring and if need be fast movement over the entire keyboard right from the first lessons instead of the clumsy groping for keys and the counting of rhythms - all these rather vague ideas lay at the outset of the creation of this collection. Playing is just playing. It requires a great deal of freedom and initiative from the performer [27].

They introduced children to graphic notation: For many children, as part of music in their general education, graphic notation might be a useful step in the road to the whole of musical notation. In the 1970s, many teachers saw its relative simplicity as a means of opening practical music making to all children, not just to those who had outside tuition in playing instruments. Here is Kurtág again, stressing as always that learning musical notation, like other aspects of musical study, should always be 'fun':

The graphic picture conveys an idea about the arrangement in time of the even the most free pieces. Let us tackle bravely even the most difficult task without being afraid of making mistakes: we should try to create valid proportions, unity and continuity out of the long and short values - just for our own pleasure! [27].

They created opportunities for music to be explored and learnt in a 'lateral' rather than a conventionally linear way: Musical learning, like many other kinds of school learning, is conventionally seen as a uniform progression. One concept leads to another. The theory and

practical examinations for the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM) work like this. The music educators of the late 1960s challenged this 'linear' approach. Each chapter in, for example, *Sound and Silence* explored music in a different way, without necessarily being linked to its predecessors in a 'progression' of the kind that is traditionally assumed to be appropriate for a cognitive subject. This approach to learning applies equally in other subjects: 'I had no plan to my reading, I was just gobbling at random,' said the former poet laureate, Andrew Motion [28], recalling how he caught the literature 'bug' during his teens. Some educators have even questioned a strictly 'linear' approach in mathematics:

Learning does not have any close or intimate connection with logical organization. The order in which children come to understand a pattern is not by following that logical order from the beginning ... We all agree that there is a body of connective ideas and propositions we call mathematics. Nobody has ever written it all down but it's there; all the logical connections that exist among all the ideas in the area we agree to call mathematics. There isn't any linear order among them. They're connected in a very complex sort of network and you can make your way through them along thousands of paths... You can get into it in many different ways [29].

As Sir Ken Robinson, the distinguished former Director of The Arts in Schools Project said on a recent broadcast of *Desert Island Discs* [30]:

You don't do literacy first and then do creativity. If you want people to read and write well, you engage their imaginations and teach them creatively... These are not polar opposites. I wrote a piece [31] in response to our current education secretary, Michael Gove, who was suggesting that you can't be creative in music until you've learnt all your scales. It's simply not true. It sounds plausible, but it's just nonsense ... When [the Beatles] kicked off they only knew two chords. I remember Paul McCartney saying 'this guy in Liverpool knew a third chord' and they got on the bus and met him and he taught them the third chord and they went home and started the Beatles. And by the end of it, they knew an awful lot more than that, but [with] real creativity, you need control of the materials and that grows as your passion for the work increases.

Conclusion

The late 1960s were a watershed in music education. Many positive developments stemmed from this era. Practical music making, group work, composing and improvising began to feature in lessons, inspired by the advocates of what were seen as advanced and progressive styles and techniques. The subsequent loss of influence of many aspects of modernism is to be regretted. Re-visiting some of the ideas might refresh teachers who want children to step outside their listening habits and develop sensitivity to a wide range of sounds and use them creatively. Any curriculum that sees learning as inexorably linear conveys a false picture of 'progression'. That is not how we learn music, or for that matter, anything worthwhile. Above all, the post-war modernists did something that all teachers should aim for: they gave children experiences that they might not meet otherwise.

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