

# **Music making in the classroom: possibilities for Czech music education**

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Creativity in arts education

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The history of making music in the classroom project stretches back some half a century in both North America and Europe. In that time the matter has been discussed by renowned composers and music educators alike at many conferences all over the globe, and been the wellspring of a slew of inspirational related books. And yet, across numerous parts of the world, composition is essentially viewed more as an alternative to the primary thrust of music education, rather than its natural extension. While a child's creativity in art is stimulated by figurative painting, abstract paintings, objects and performances, in the field of music original creation is often viewed as the exclusive purview of high art, or those who have a proven catalogue of work, peaks seemingly unattainable to pupils and students down in the lowlands of introduction to basic composition. If it may be taken as a working hypothesis that virtually every child has some degree of music education, then practically the entirety of that education, both activities and skills developed, is focused on reproduction, whilst production is a ghostly presence, ill-defined and flitting round the edges. The pinnacle of creativity in music education is that which leads to the simplest musical expression. A similar situation exists in the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, the current Framework Education Programme (*Rámcový vzdělávací program*) for all levels of schooling employs criteria such as creativity, co-operative tasks with teachers and fellow students etc., and the conception of music education is predicated on the hierarchy of sing-listen-instrument playing- musical movement activities, which leaves no apparent place for students to create music.

## **Music education and composition in the Czech Republic**

Now we're going to talk about the project which, for some ten years, has offered an alternative, in the Czech Republic, to the mainstream model of music education. In contrast to Britain or the US, there is no current methodological composition component to music education at any level of general education. The sole extant exception in this field is the *Slyšet jinak (Different hearing)* project. Through its multiple means, students evolve from their prior status as semi-detached observers of music and unaffected conduits of the flow of feeling and information concerning the composers and other guides in the sonic scene, into willing experimenters in whom the wellspring of music is tapped.

Starting in the 1960s, a nucleus of Czech music educators undertook projects spurred on by those of Norman Dello Joio, John Paynter and Peter Aston, as it were picking up the gauntlet.<sup>1</sup> At that time, however, prevailing political conditions here were "not favourable", to put it mildly, and the sole significant survivor by the end of the 70s was the Czech version of Orff Schulwerk. Nevertheless, as early as 1969, we can discern, in the national view of music education, the appearance of a movement towards the incorporation of components of comprehension of production activities, along with compositional ones.<sup>2</sup> John Paynter's endeavours in Britain in the 1980s to assimilate composing as part of the National Curriculum in Music, were clearly not truly mirrored here in the Czech Republic for another 20 years, at which point we began, at least, to offer schools and students alternative, creative music education programmes. The new framework educational programmes for all levels of education, which have come into force here in the Czech Republic, make no explicit reference to composition as part of the curriculum, but do leave a space where it might be slotted in. Since 2006, *Different hearing* programme has followed two pedagogical streams.<sup>3</sup> Besides engaging in arts practice there is the study of artistic works, wherein students come to know an existing work through composition, and endeavour to overcome problems like those encountered by the original author, so that they do not hear the full piece until they are already, by their own efforts, conversant with it.

### **Different hearing**

The "*Different hearing*" programme is primarily focused on children and young people ages 5 to 18, and was tried out on a wide spectrum of students from primary schools through special needs schools to music schools.<sup>4</sup> At present it is used in tandem

with “standard” school music education, with the consequent aim of, in a complementary manner, appending composition to existing music lessons in primary and secondary schools. For this reason, the form of the several-day courses are so designed as to allow their employment by faculty of education and tertiary performing arts school students alike, in other words our future teachers and composers. We hope to expand in future to encompass current pedagogues through life-long learning programmes. The programme seeks to achieve three parallel primary goals, known as the 3Cs.<sup>5</sup> The first is the discovery, development and stimulation of creativity in children, the second supporting powers of concentration in the field of sound, composition and audience, and the third is strengthening communicative capabilities and social behaviour in the collective. A secondary aim is an audio-visual transition linking sonic presentations to visual counterparts – graphic displays of sound or similar simple improvisational and compositional activities.

### **Incitements to creativity**

The project is predicated upon the priority of all participants being able to start from the selfsame point, with no prerequisite knowledge, even “general”, of singing or playing an instrument.<sup>6</sup> It seeks to base itself in utterly unfettered musical education, to erase the borders and barriers – often found in the younger classes at school – between children, based on the chasm between those with existing skill and knowledge of singing or playing an instrument etc., and the “musically challenged (MC)”, for whom music lessons are generally a seemingly endless source of frustration, recalled with bitterness years later. These MCs, as the project shows, embody a remarkable musical imagination and originality, wandering completely from the paths of established musical certitude, based on acoustic and vocal talents rigidly defined, a narrow way which excludes any once identified as an MC, labelling them unteachable. The bringing down of such a barrier is the essential grist to the project’s mill. For this very reason a variety of non-traditional musical “tools”, from everyday objects through toys to items constructed by the kids themselves, are employed. Along with stones, chippings, eggshells, plastic bottles and containers, cellophane sheets and even desiccated lemon peel, accompanied by body parts and toddler toys, all combine to express the constant creativity and intertwined visual and auditory abilities of children to bring something new into the world.

The project is made up of a number of interconnected activities. First of all there are the warm-ups or starter activities. These are intended to get the creative juices flowing,

open up the imagination, and promote communication in its multiplicity of forms and aspects, arising naturally out of a synchronicity of movement and sound, and hopefully dispel any lingering nervousness attendant upon “public performance”.

The second activity is to discover and develop individual sounds, finding a place for them in collective improvisation, whether entirely freeform or somewhat structured – usually with some kind of conductor, a role in which the children can rotate and acquire a completely different skill set made up of simple gestures. Any given “piece” of improvisation can be repeated, with or without a conductor, and is almost certain to produce entertainingly different results each time. Improve, however, whilst a near ideal medium for concentration and communication, is less suited to exploring principles of composition to do with constructive rational thought and a feeling for shape and form.

## **Animation**

From the forest primeval of compositions created by children another path may emerge – a path based on becoming familiar with existing works by professional composers. Although the outcome may prove similar, the procedure is clearly considerably different. Composition itself becomes a means by which a new sensibility with regard to music may be evolved. In a manner reminiscent of the combined 1980s British-German *Response* project or the London Sinfonietta educational project,<sup>7</sup> *Different hearing* likewise uses composition for helping students become familiar with music. Through play, training and musical experimentation – ideally using objects prepared by the composers of the piece being used – children become acquainted with similar principles and approaches, form and content level, on the basis of which recognition of composition is predicated, without necessarily needing the children to hear them or assemble theoretical information about them.<sup>8</sup>

The teaching team (music educator and composer) selects, in the context of such projects, and sets pieces, on the basis of analysis from known works and a set of basic principles, concepts and compositional-interpretative exercises, which are specifically adapted to the chosen composition. These modify or supplement the compositional exercises with suitable approaches and acoustic materials. The precise order of tasks will obviously depend on the level of difficulty sought, the musical parameters (from rhythm to musical structure), and extra-musical ties (subject, symbolism, historical significance etc.), demonstrating a sequencing whereby students, in the course of several lessons (the precise number depending on the complexity and parameters of the project) collectively

create a composition of their own, which is an animation of the original work. Thus they get to know the piece only when they have composed their own. A range of materials and devices may be used in this scenario to create home-made instruments, including the fruits of scavenging, recycled materials, or even items employed in the animated section of the task. The collective approach applies here also, and is designed to foster team-work. Both pieces – the original work and the students' "reflection" - are then performed together in concert.

The entire *Different hearing* project is, in its current manifestation, designed around team teaching – the collaboration between a composer, who provides experience with improve and compositional principles, and a pedagogue, who may supplement and as necessary assume the role of project leader. Each activity depends utterly on the co-operation of educational and cultural institutions, together with artistic departments. This applies above all to the animation aspect, but also in the ultimate claim of the project to be a part of the syllabus for music education in Czech primary and secondary schools.

### **From animation to research**

The findings from the *Different hearing* project are likewise a starting-point for further research in the field of the use of compositional techniques in music education. Hitherto, research has focused on the methods of assisted group composition (Burnard,<sup>9</sup> Fautley<sup>10</sup>), on comparison of experimental approaches (Plummeridge)<sup>11</sup> and on the development of musical creativity (Auh)<sup>12</sup>. The most comprehensive materials to grapple with these themes tend to be by British (Ruth,<sup>13</sup> Dennis,<sup>14</sup> Paynter,<sup>15</sup> Aston,<sup>16</sup> Odam<sup>17</sup> et al.) or North American (Schafer,<sup>18</sup> Kashub,<sup>19</sup> Norman-DeWitt et al.) researchers. Some German and Austrian theoreticians (Koch, Schneider<sup>20</sup> et al.) have discoursed on the reaction to British composition programmes.

The research team from the Palacký University, Olomouc and the Janáček Academy of the Performing Arts in Brno, the authors of this contribution, are currently "road testing" post-indeterministic compositional and improvisational methods and procedures, both from a creative point of view with regard to musical composition and acoustic objects, and likewise considering their use in music-animation programmes employing extant works and classroom composing. The project, which is funded by the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic, tests selected compositional and improvisational methods, procedures and means of use, assessing their value musically from historical, analytical, aesthetic and pedagogical perspectives. Beyond the pure analysis, comparison

and commentary of contemporary sources, the project strives to evaluate musical pedagogical research focused on composition in music education. It can only be hoped that the outcome of this research will lead to the establishment of musically creative activities within the framework of Czech music education.

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