

## A critical examination of cultural context in relation to music teacher training

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### ABSTRACT

With the introduction of the new Arts curriculum in New Zealand, students are expected to not only perform music to a high standard but to have a grounding about the origin and meaning of music within a culture. How can this be achieved? If students are simply given only a thumbnail outline of the country, and a basic geography lesson, they may simply revert to the stereotype that they have received from their own culture about another. In other words, Samba might be described as music for an "African" dance adapted and modified in Brazil as a ballroom dance. The purpose of this project entitled, "Free Samba" was twofold: to learn another music, assess the transferable musical skills and examine what if any understanding of cultural awareness resulted from this experience. The outcome of the research raises the question of how we develop an understanding of cultural context without teaching this as a discrete subject.

### A critical examination of cultural context in relation to music teacher training

"Free Samba" was a title given to a year long project with first year teacher trainee music students at the University of Exeter in South West England. This community based programme, involved students working with an expert animateur in samba before they took on the role as community musicians themselves. The project involved three schools with students aged between nine and fifteen. These were elective activities for the older age groups that took place outside of class time and a class activity for the youngest children. The culmination of Free Samba was a concert at which music by university and school students was performed. After the concert I interviewed the university students to see what if any change they felt had occurred in their thinking as a result of the project'. Many of these students were unsure about music from other cultures, so I was interested to find out if there was any change in attitudes and perceptions as a result of this musical encounter.

### Essentialist view of music

Before outlining the project it is useful to consider the background to "world music" in education and some of the positions taken by music educators. Amongst commentators on music education there is considerable support for the provision of music from cultures other than the West European in the curriculum. Both ethnomusicologists and music educators including Blacking (1976), Elliott (1989) and Swanwick (1988), have written on the value of "engagement" in music from other

cultures. There is however, within large institutions such as the conservatoires and universities a resilience regarding "other" musics. This view of "high" or "great" art as opposed to "lower" order or inferior art has become a kind of "meta-narrative" in Western culture. This thinking has come not necessarily from popular acclaim but a fundamental set of philosophical beliefs.

This view of music derives from absolutist views that developed in part as a result of philosophers such as G. W. F. Hegel. Hegel's views stemmed from a belief system that saw history as being part a rational process of development. This "rational" view reflected a religious purpose in the way the world was conceptualised and hence absolutes of how the world could be seen. Hegel believed like Plato before, that music was an "absolute idea" and had a power that was beyond description "inaccessible to human cognition" (Bowman, 1998: 95). This fundamental thinking led to Hegel's view that music had a spiritual dimension and could be held as true music or be seen as inferior and of little consequence.

Hegel's ideas have recently been challenged by the philosophic tradition labelled "postmodernism". The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1984) has argued by making a comparison with scientific research where individuals seek to define their "knowledge" that is "speculative" (Lyotard, 1984: 34). Lyotard's argument posits that the "essentialist," or Hegelian, notion of one way of seeing or meaning is not as we really are, or how we see the world. The application to music is that we can see music from many different vantage points accordingly not just one as proposed by the Hegelian or essentialist school of thought.

This manifestation of a "postmodernist" outlook allows for many different kinds of musical perspectives. The two belief systems - that of singularity and diversity - underlies much that is propounded from either camp in relation to the way music is to be taught. Knowing the context of music is not a new idea but expressed in philosophic terms, this pushes at the boundaries of practice. This revision of the "meaning" of music within a culture as opposed to a definition of music as performance alone has important implications for how we teach.

How then do we reconcile the two seemingly contradictory beliefs, those being a belief in absolutes or fixed meaning and a variety and of experience, yet at the same time accept that to be a good performer does requires long and dedicated hours of study? It is in accepting that in a pluralistic society there are many different voices that can be heard and not excluded that we can achieve this position. As Swanwick (1988) states, it is a question of accepting that skill at one instrument should be maintained but not at the expense of all else or all other cultures and ways of looking at and experiencing music. Musicians such as Evelyn Glennie demonstrate this multifaceted way of working in music.

She will perform a demanding new work that has been commissioned for her, and yet can play in the batteria<sup>1</sup> at the Sambadromo in Rio. She has the ability to move from what is described as "high art" to what is acknowledged as music of the "poor" people in Brazil.

How though does this broader vision of music education encompassing many different musical experiences translate into practice in the classroom? Swanwick (1988) suggests three ways in which unfamiliarity with other musics can be overcome: through "constant playing and trying out ideas . . . imitation of the music and ... guided listening". He adds that we become aware of the structure of music through listening and experimenting. While acknowledging the problems of accessing music of other cultures, he suggests we should see the potential for development of understanding and development through ownership. Swanwick (1988) advocates an emphasis on imitation of another music by students creating their own cultural interpretation or "version" of what they hear.

### **Creating a version or an individual response.**

For Swanwick music can be thought of as having an "autonomy" that allows it to be fashioned according to the culture in which it is reworked. Giving as an example what occurs in popular music

and Blacking 's (1973) findings with the Venda,<sup>2</sup> Swanwick alludes to the way in which cultures take and appropriate other musics. This allows us to "break out of the moulds made by local cultures and our own personal limitations" (Swanwick, 1988: 6). Warning of the need for teachers to accept the challenge and to move forward towards a curriculum that is inclusive of all cultures he adds: "These sets of sounds might include scales but also might have note rows,<sup>3</sup> rags, drones, so that these ideas can be explored interculturally not in the purely abstract".

Best (1986) concludes his argument on the value of experiencing another art by looking at the effect on the individual, which might challenge a pre-conception of what art is. At the same time he defines this process as extending and developing awareness which in turn "involves extending one's conception of the character of one's own thoughts and feelings, and thus in an important sense, of one's own character"<sup>4</sup> (Best, 1986: 42). This extension of knowing is fundamental to Best and is relevant to the reaction of many students to this challenge. He advocates: "It is through the experience of another art that one explores, with humility, the relevant activities of another culture, in terms of one's artistic conceptions" (Best, 1986: 42).

## Researching free samba

To investigate these ideas I undertook a research process based on interview with the university students going through the same list of questions repeating or expanding them if necessary. All of the students were aware that the information might be used for publication and were happy to go ahead with this given that confidentiality was maintained.

The interviews took place, the week following the samba concert. The questions included:

- What did you do in the samba rehearsals and performance?
- How successful were the rehearsals and performance?
- What did the children and you gain musically from the samba project?
- Why work in samba?
- What is your understanding of cultural awareness? (vi) Should we teach the context of the music as well or not when teaching music of another culture?

## Free samba

This is a report of the project as it took place chronologically with the results of the student interviews. The "animateur"<sup>5</sup> was able to visit the students on a fortnightly basis from September to December. The class remained voluntarily and was designed as such. In the second term the animateur was able to meet all the students with teachers from the local schools for an intensive weekend and several evenings of workshops. Everything went well with half the students attending the voluntary rehearsals and teachers committing themselves to the project. A timetable was sorted out by the students with the teachers for visits to schools. My role was to co-ordinate the work with the animateur, produce a pack for the project and maintain links with the students and schools.

In the third term from April to July, ten weeks were spent in regular rehearsals. During this time I decided on the make up of the student groups and allocated students to schools. I had informal discussions with the students and visited them on several occasions during rehearsals. I did not interfere in the rehearsal planning or the stage management of the event. This was left to students, as were all the arrangements for the concert. Throughout the project the students made their own assessments of how the rehearsals were progressing. In late June pupils, teachers, friends and parents converged on the Exeter Arts Centre for a combined performance. The concert was well received by teachers, children and students. I made a video of the event for students and sent copies to all the schools.

## Student interviews

In the evaluative interviews I wanted to see if the students had developed a better understanding of another culture and what musical skills they felt they had gained from the experience. Did they have any opinions on children knowing the cultural context of a music education project of this kind?

*What did you do in the samba rehearsals and performance?*

In each case the teaching was left to the students. The teachers thought they had as much experience as the students and it was agreed that they would lead the sessions. Most of the students reported on dividing up the teaching between each other at first though later on one student took on the leading role in two of the groups. In one group the task of leading was shared more equitably. In addition to the experience in workshops, students and teachers were given a pack<sup>6</sup> with the different styles written out in full. This was as support for the students and information for teachers.

*What did the children and you gain musically from the samba project?*

Most of the students remarked that they had to listen more carefully to each other when playing samba, something they felt they were not necessarily achieving in their jazz or classical music. The transferability of the experience between classical playing and performing samba was observed:

Well I mean I'm certainly able to feel a pulse more out of it. I find that's so difficult, even playing a piece of Mozart or something, I have dreadful trouble counting, getting my rhythms. It's helped me a lot by being able to pick up the pulse, pick up the beat, be able to do off beats and things like that and complicated rhythms, it's given me a feel for beats in music.

This view was expressed by another student in different way: "Say I'm practising, and I'm struggling with the rhythm, and if my teacher plays it to me I think, Oh, I know, and then I can play it from listening which I don't think I could have done as easily before". Both students considered that their ability to perceive and maintain rhythms in their instrumental playing had improved. They referred to listening and a sense of pulse and being able to cope with more complex rhythms. Although they were performing samba on Latin American percussion instruments yet they felt the skill was transferable. It is curious to think that Mozart improves as a result of samba! Another student made the point in relation to listening when performing in a samba group:

I listen more, can't tell you how much I listen, before it was just, I'd play my instrument in my own world and you just play around me. But now it's maybe I should listen to the bass guitar over there? I certainly enjoyed it, because of that I've enjoyed it more!

Others described what it was like keeping rhythms and holding the group together:

I feel I have a better sense of rhythm, cross rhythm, counting where the one and the two and the three and the four is. At first I was just missing it and then being told you've got to actually know where the first beat is because you've got to be able to stop it or take certain instruments out means you can't just do it anywhere it's got to be on the first beat. Awareness of all the instruments together was another thing because the tamborims<sup>7</sup> were playing a completely different pattern that doesn't end one two three four it goes over two bars! So it's an awareness developing and I suppose it's getting away from your own playing say solo, to actually thinking about a whole ensemble playing together. It's touching on directing and that side of it which has definitely developed in me.

Again it's a case of listening and being aware of different lines of music being performed simultaneously. Directing without a score has required the student to change the texture by stopping, or by taking out instruments one by one the way the students described keeping rhythm as he

did so, counting in his head where to take out or put in patterns in the piece. A Brazilian “sambista”<sup>8</sup> wouldn't think like this in one, two, three, four, but would listen out for cues and watch for directions that happen in any given performance.

### *Why work in samba?*

By asking this question I was posing another by implication: "what does samba offer that past musical experiences may not have offered?"

The responses showed that the students enjoyed taking more control in their musicmaking:

What I found previously was that classical music was so regimented you learnt that piece off by heart then you learnt that piece. There's so much freedom and improvisation with samba. If they wanted to dance around they could! By the end one of them was just making up his own rhythms, which I thought was really brilliant, because they were fitting in no one was saying, 'Oh that's not correct you haven't read the music!' I think, to make up their own dances, to make up their own rhythms so it they had a lot of freedom, which I think, they respected.

The response reflects the student's joy at breaking down the order and sense of "having" to do certain things that may come from a previous musical experience. As a first-year undergraduate student, this accords well with a simple desire to break out, although rules are acknowledged when the children are being taught.

Another student perceived a freedom in the music:

I think it's freer. I prefer it like that and I think there's more scope for improvisation. I like doing that, as it's not so confined! I mean it can sound wrong if people are out of time, but if you decide to put an extra note in, an extra beat and (it fits) then it's not wrong. It adds to the performance.

Like the previous student, this response shows how extra freedom in making music and allowing for individuals to put their own mark on the performance are perceived as new and special. Another interesting outcome is a sense of musical democracy that is perceived through the experience.

### *What is your understanding of cultural awareness?*

The course had begun with video of the carnival in Rio de Janeiro and in Salvador da Bahia. The pack handed to the students explained the context of samba in Brazil. What, I wondered, was the impact of this on the students in the way they were working with the children in school? Did they feel there was any value in giving the children an introduction to samba by explaining the context of the music? It was pointed out to the students that they might explain the context of the music to the children first. One student was convinced that this was appropriate:

A child having cultural awareness is of them being aware of what else is going on in the world and how other music works. Over here we're so refined we've got to do it like this, we've got to do it like that. Over in Brazil it seems to be very laid back. It's a totally different way of life. The spirit of the people, like the black identity songs, shows it completely. They are a whole different race of people. I think it just opened up the children's eyes to a lot of things that go on in the world.

The student has an idealised notion of Brazil and is convinced of it being "laid back". There is a global overview here, however, in that the student considers an empathetic response to the idea of samba. The comments reveal an extraordinary affinity with the idea of "difference". He perceives how ways of looking at music can be taken from different perspectives by looking at the binary formulation of Western music as determinate and unchanging, as opposed to a view of the world that is to be seen from another or different vantage point. This touches on Derrida's conception of deferred meaning, where the notion of meaning changes as the definition of meaning changes for each individual. This articulation derives from the students' comparison of his experience as he tries to link his knowledge of music in a community and the role that samba plays in another. As Mansfield summarises

pointing to Cherryholmes (1988), "For Derrida meanings are scattered throughout language and deferred in time which suggests that 'structures of meaning', are mere illusions." (Mansfield, 2001: 312).

*Should we teach the context of the music as well or not when teaching music of another culture?*

Having explained in some detail the background to the music, a student commented on the benefits to children on knowing the context as well:

They should learn something about this culture from across the other side of the world. They should know how these people live because it breaks down barriers of prejudice. Also I think it's good because in their community, if they do it [perform samba], then other people get to learn about it. It makes them understand what their place is in the world, and why they do this, and why they do that, and it's good.

This incisive answer analyses not only the value that learning a particular music might have, but also the effect of "breaking down barriers" in teaching the background to the music. In addition, the point is made that music within the community should allow others to see the value of other musics. This was experienced by those involved in the project as the children performed to their parents, who became an interactive audience as the concert proceeded. This is again an articulation of knowing and finding a place in a world that constantly shifts. By perceiving "difference" the student relates to how a child can know where they are in the complexity of the world of multiple meanings and realities.

Others were less concerned about the value of the context in the work, and were even dismissive of the value to them:

The children were aware of where the music comes from and the background behind it. They know what the resources were; the type of country it was; whether it was rich or not. They could also have been told the types of materials they've got there to make these instruments.

This answer demonstrates how the student regarded the context as simply one of handing out factual information that the children might find useful. It makes no reference to questions of cultural awareness or understanding. This view was found in another response:

Well if they don't do that much humanities they seem to get on all right without. But it's quite a good idea I think, though samba is quite good by itself as music. When I did it I didn't do the humanities and I found it really good so!

Students in relation to their experience of music hold this point of view frequently: the music works so why worry? As a means of teaching the children about another culture one student remarked:

Well if you're talking about culture it's a far more practical way rather than giving them a load of textbooks. If you give them some music to listen to, they actually get involved with it. I think it's a far more practical insight really.

The engagement on the part of the children was something that was noted, though learning about music by simply performing it was the point being made. Somehow, this experience will teach them all they need to know. Another student put it this way:

Looking at what other cultures do and what you do makes you look at yourself, and what you do. You really start to look at yourself and think, 'We don't do that here in this country, because it's not right!' Well why isn't it right? You question yourself. I don't know if that makes sense or not ...

This shows a marked sophistication as the student is thinking through the whole process as it unfolds. There's also consideration of how the act of looking at another culture influences his own thinking, so he starts to make comparisons and to rationalise his own values.

## Results of the evaluative interviews

This aspect of taking and developing ownership and understanding can be vividly traced in these answers. The students went about their work in the community knowing that there was a sense of "democracy" about the musical experience. They were aware of not always being told what to do and they could perceive opportunities within a group to develop their own ideas. As defined by a student reflecting on her less than democratic experience of music making to date: "... we're so refined we've got to do it like this, we've got to do it like that, like over in Brazil it seemed to be so easy and so laid back and just getting into it type of thing". This underlines Best's thinking where he refers to "... the extension of one's conception of the character of one's art and feelings and thus in an important sense of one's own character" (1986: 42). The point is made by Swanwick (1988) that "local cultures" take and appropriate music from other cultures thereby breaking the "personal limitations" we may find ourselves in through music making in only one cultural tradition.

These students were developing a new sense of what it was to be making music together. But what of their cultural awareness? Did the students see samba as a means to looking at cultures or indeed to looking at samba through a Brazilian cultural perspective - a point made by Nettle (1992). The question of why we have different music in different cultures is actively pursued in the minds of some of the students.

In this quotation the student manages a very good definition for how he sees the value of cultural awareness for school pupils:

A child having cultural awareness is of them being aware of what else is going on in the world ... a different outlook on life. I think the fact that they [Brazilian sambistas] are within the same world, a different race, opened up the children's eyes to a lot of things that go on in the world.

When discussing cultural context, there was a mixed response amongst students. One student responded by listing the factual information, of what the country exports, the physical geography of the country and the natural resources available and whether it was rich or not! Another felt it wasn't necessary, for her, the project wasn't even concerned with the background to the music, but the music itself. She "really enjoyed it" so why should there be this preoccupation with the context of the music? Others were interested in coming to terms with this diversity and questions raised in connection with context. One answer seemed to encapsulate much that Nettle (1992) must have been striving for in his rationale. "Looking at other cultures in relation to what you do really makes you look at yourself and your music".

This breaking and remaking of ideas has been a fascinating process to observe. Yet the points that have been made by the students have come from their own thinking without being prompted in seminars or discussion of these issues. What they offer are their thoughts after their first experience of teaching and performing samba. However despite the response being very positive it remains an "empathetic" response to questions of understanding places, music and the cultural context of music. What do the students know of the country and the meaning of music in Brazilian culture?

## Conclusion

Though I agree with Swanwick (1988; Nettle 1992) on the need for students to have acquired excellence in one music in particular, the effect of a preoccupation with examinations and a small choice of musical encounters narrows the outlook of students. Sadly within the university /conservatoire system the essentialist cycle of thinking obsessed with a Euro-centric view predominates. The gain for the students in realising musical experiences from beyond their own cultural confines can be tremendous for their musicianship as well as their experience of other cultures. Though what do students take in terms of understanding the context of the music? Is the

*experience of the music sufficient* as some of the students seem to suggest?<sup>9</sup> Is it enough just to empathise or should we teach the "cultural context"<sup>10</sup> of the music?

How can the cultural context be taught however, without the music and humanities departments working together at every level of education? There is -much to be done if we are to see the gap between what educators, ethnomusicologists and philosophers say should happen and what teachers and lecturers can reasonably be expected to achieve. If we are to fulfil Nettl's proposition that the context should be learnt about as much as the music, can this ever be done, given the knowledge gap in the education system and the lack of readiness to try out ideas in higher education plus lack of time availability in schools?

With teacher trainee students if we do not address the context of the music in the sense of seeing how the music operates within the culture too easily the hierarchy of "essentialist" thinking pervades. I propose a rethinking in terms of how we address learning the "cultural context" of music in the light of the demands of the new Arts curriculum. As Wassell Smith (1997) has elaborated:

Music arises out of the culture of the place and the musicking activity of communities who inhabit and live in those places. White Europeans have particular explanations of the condition in economically developing countries like Brazil. These cultural constructs commonly seek "natural" explanations e.g., poverty arises out of a lack of resources in the environment. The agenda for learning the humanities is to offer evidence that challenges culturally constructed explanations. These predominantly "natural" explanations whitewash the role of colonisers and of the economic forces that maintain and intensify disparities in welfare between economically developing and developed nations. It is my contention that unless we carefully audit and acknowledge pupils and students' prior views and knowledge about questions of development we may reinforce stereotype or fail to challenge simplistic explanations which are based on a deficit model of other peoples and places.

In perpetuating a system that remains focused on one musical culture alone, the opportunity to utilise music as a means for challenging existing notions of racial superiority is lost. There is a need for those entering the teaching profession to have a wider musical repertoire which might include knowledge of the aesthetic traditions of other cultures as they are expressed musically. To accomplish this we must go beyond the tokenistic frames of reference and as a community, decide whether children and teachers should know the cultural context of music to inform their understanding. With the political and social division in New Zealand it is an appropriate moment to consider the role music can play in this vital transmission of intercultural awareness. We should endeavour to confront students' prejudices and allow them to see that what they believe to be universal is not. By providing unfamiliar musical practices for the students we should link life values embedded in music directly into the music education we provide.

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## Notes

1. The 'bateria' can consist of up to 300 percussionists playing one rhythm over and over in samba processions in Brazil.
2. John Blacking spent many years observing and analysing the music of the Venda people in Southern Africa see Blacking (1973).



3. Note rows are 12 note compositions by contemporary composers, rags - are Indian melodies constructed in certain scales, drones are continuous notes played on a sustaining instrument such as the bagpipes.
4. The quote refers to the difficulty some people have in trying to move away from their sense of security with art that they know to art that they don't know!
5. Colin Seddon was the "animateur" although he'd recognise himself as lead the samba sessions.
6. The pack was written by the author with Colin Seddon. It gave a background to the samba processions in Rio de Janeiro and outlined in detail all the parts in two samba patterns.
7. "tamborims" - small hand held percussion instruments played with a short flexible plastic beaters.
8. "sambista" - person very well versed in performing in the bateria - an accomplished performer.
9. By the "experience" reference is made to performing samba.
10. The cultural context implies Nettl's definition of knowledge of the time place and meaning of music within its specific context. This is referred to in the New Zealand Arts curriculum as a separate strand that of social context where this knowledge is promoted.

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