

Examining Teachers' Attitudes towards the Use of Popular Music in Formal Music Education

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Abstract

Using Green's (2002) book: *How Popular Musicians Learn: A Way Ahead for Music Education* as a conceptual framework, this paper investigates teachers' attitudes towards the use of popular music in formal music education. The main research question: "What are the views of selected secondary school music teachers regarding the incorporation of popular music into formal music education?" was examined through semi-structured interviews with four secondary school music teachers. Three central themes emerged from the data analysis: the justification of popular music in formal music education; elements of teaching practice affected by this inclusion; and the idea of tradition and authenticity in different styles of music. This paper summarizes the conceptual framework, methodology, analysis, and results used to produce these three themes.

Introduction

This research study is an initial investigation of music teachers' attitudes towards popular music for pedagogical use. Within the paper, popular music is defined as music belonging to any number of musical styles that are accessible to the general public and distributed commercially; classical music refers to music of the Western classical canon. Further, the term popular music can refer to many sub-genres including pop, rock, dance, rhythm and blues, alternative, reggae, rap, hip hop but it stands in contrast to the genres of jazz and Western classical music.

The inclusion of popular music into formal music education represents a change in thinking for many music educators. Perhaps as a response to this change in the music field, various popular music styles, which had been neglected in formal music education and by most institutional forms of music teaching, have been granted a voice of increasing importance in the curriculum of music education (Björnberg, 1993, p. 69). For example, MENC: The National Association for Music Education in the US, began to link its national standards for music education to include popular music by providing exemplars of popular music lessons for music teachers on its web site.

MENC is of the opinion that: "teaching with popular music becomes part of a broad-based effort to include more of America's children in a balanced, sequential music education program (Schmid & March, 2002)." This change may have been sparked by the Tanglewood 1967 mandate: "Music of all periods, styles, forms, and cultures belongs in the curriculum (Cutietta, 1991, p. 27)." The shift to include popular music in formal music education is not supported by all music educators in North American schools. In much of the literature on popular music in formal education, we see examples of this negative bias. For example, the title of a 1991 article from the Music Educators Journal reflected this negative connotation in the use of the phrase: "Popular music: an ongoing challenge." Incorporating popular music into the music curriculum represents a shift in philosophical views for many music educators. In his chapter in the MENC publication on popular music and music education, Wayne Bowman (2004) outlines this idea:

"Taking popular music seriously will change the role of the music educator, who can hardly presume any longer to be an authoritative purveyor of factual insights...What students bring to the educational experience will of necessity become much more central (p. 43)."

Rationale

The research topic for this study evolved from my interest in the incorporation of popular music in my own classes as well as some of the ideas presented in recent research on the informal learning styles of popular musicians by Green (2002) in her book: *How Popular Musicians Learn: A Way Ahead for Music Education*. Green's hypothesis is that young musicians who acquire their skills and knowledge more through informal learning practices such as listening and imitating, rather than formal education, may be more likely to continue playing music, alone or with others, for enjoyment in later life (p. 56). Her research involved in-depth interviews over the duration of eight months with 14 popular musicians in London, England. The musicians in Green's (2002) study were involved in the rock music genre of popular music defined as "Anglo-American guitar-based pop and rock music (p. 9)." Her study dealt with many aspects of popular music learning; however, Green also outlined some of the attitudes and values that the musicians observed in learning to play popular music as well as the methods of acquiring skills and knowledge used by popular musicians.

Green (2002) defines formal music education as educational institutions or conservatories dedicated to the teaching and learning of music, which include such aspects as written curricula, professional teachers, systematic assessment mechanisms and a body of literature (p. 4). In contrast, Green (2002) uses informal music learning practices to describe young musicians who teach themselves by listening to, watching and imitating musicians around them (p. 5). Green's conflicting views plus much of the literature in the field of music education led me to my main research question: What are the views of selected secondary school music teachers regarding the incorporation of popular music into formal music education?

Methodology

Research design

The goal of this study was to gain more insight into teacher attitudes towards the inclusion of popular music in formal music education. As a secondary school music teacher, I was very careful not to allow my own attitudes and biases on this issue to enter into this qualitative study. Research methods included gathering data through recorded interviews with four secondary school music teachers. The interviews were semi-structured interviews in that each teacher was asked the same 23 interview questions but, as the interviewer, I was permitted to clarify questions or further probe any topics of interest that were raised in discussion. The questions were all fairly open-ended and indirect to facilitate unstructured responses. The questions were also developed in a way so as not to lead interviewees in any specific direction in their answers and not to delineate either positive or negative connotations.

I also limited the sample size to four secondary school music teachers due to monetary and time constraints and the four Toronto-based secondary school music teachers represent a variety of teaching experience and gender. Two of the teachers are female and two are male; as well, the scope of music teaching experience of these teachers ranges from 3 years to more than

10 years. All of the teachers have similar experiences teaching vocal or instrumental music at the secondary level in either the private or public system. Each of the four teachers was interviewed once for a 45-minute period between February, 2005 and March, 2005.

The interviews were all audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Analysis of the data, the transcribed interviews, included coding with predetermined coding categories such as “negative reference to popular music” and “positive reference to popular music” as well as coding categories that emerged from the data. These codes and categories led to a clear outline of central themes in the data and thus, in the attitude of these select music teachers, referred to as Teachers A, B, C, and D. Within the following body of this paper, I provide the results, first with some background information of the participants, and then each theme with direct quotations to help illustrate the teachers’ voices in the text.

Three main ideas

Many sub-themes were generated from analysis that can be categorized into a series of nine central themes or attitudes expressed during the interviews. These central themes have been further grouped into three clusters of ideas for discussion: (a) justifications of popular music in formal music education, (b) elements of teaching practices, and (c) tradition and authenticity of different styles of music.

Justifications of Popular Music in Formal Music Education

Relevance and appeal

All of the music teachers in this study made reference to the justification of the inclusion of popular music in the formal music education curriculum. Their reasoning was that popular music has a great appeal and relevance to their students. Thus, this category reflects the relevance and appeal of popular music to youth, including music students. Teacher A refers several times to the appeal of popular music as a justification of incorporating it into the curriculum:

I think probably I use mostly popular music just because I can illustrate certain concepts of form and counterpoint. The same way that I would with early music but maybe in a way that kids are a little more familiar with. If there’s an example that I can play from a popular piece of music, then I will use that because, as I say, it’s a little bit more relevant to the kids. So I tend to use more pop music (personal communication).

The idea of embracing popular music because of the enthusiasm that it generates among the majority of students who are familiar with it is not a new one. Pembroke (1991) outlined this idea as well as stating that students are not only familiar with popular music, but that they prefer it to other genres. The other teachers in the study echoed this idea in their various comments.

Aesthetic Norms: “Good Music” versus “Bad Music”

The decision whether or not to include popular music in the classroom curricula or concerts should be based on the same criteria used for any other genre of music (Pembroke, 1991). All of

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the teachers in this study alluded to this idea of choosing “good music” of any style as opposed to giving preference to only one certain style of music as a didactic tool. Teacher C’s response illustrates this idea:

We talk about the fact that there’s good rap, there’s good pop, there’s good folk, there’s good alternative, there’s good classical, and then we talk about the fact that there’s very poor music in all of those categories and that we’re only interested in pursuing good music (personal communication).

Ginocchio (2001) further confirms that it does not matter what style of music we are choosing to teach, but that great musicians can be found in many unlikely places and groups.

Educating the Consumer

Using popular music to educate youth as listeners and consumers was the final grouping of themes. In Alf Bjornberg’s (1993) discussion of popular music in the university music department, he outlines the justification of educating youth in a critical manner as consumers of popular music used in manipulatory purposes (such as TV advertising). His rationale is that music education should try to provide the student with the ability to interpret these meanings presented in popular music and popular culture (p. 70). Teacher C questions the appeal behind popular music and the need for students to analyze all possible meanings of the music:

But what is it about it [popular music] that appeals? Sometimes it’s a message that’s clear and that’s fun and that’s just immediate and it’s disposable. [The students] need to be able to analyze that sort of thing. And it’s good for them to analyze it and realize that some of it is targeting them as consumers. It’s a marketing ploy. And also to be able to just enjoy it for what it is. So, as a consumer and as a listener, I think it’s great, definitely. If you ignore it, you’re really out of touch, I think (personal communication).

This idea of critically examining the function of popular music in the media was referred to several times by two of the four teachers involved in this study. Teacher A also brought up this idea and felt that students should be educated as analytical listeners of popular music.

Elements of Teaching Practices

Collaboration

The theme of group learning and collaboration came up several times in the interviews of the four teachers. One reason that this theme might have recurred was that there was a specific interview question on independent group work in the music classroom; however, this theme was also mentioned outside of that response by several of the teachers interviewed.

Green (2004) discusses group learning as a crucial part of informal music learning for popular musicians. She relates this idea to what is occurring in music education in terms of group work and calls it “peer-directed learning in the classroom (p. 204).” Green also recognized that there are a number of characteristics that differentiate group learning in

informal contexts from formal education contexts, but also that there are similarities and benefits to both.

The importance of group learning also came up in several of the studies and articles in the popular music field, mentioning the importance of building students' abilities to work together in groups (Ginocchio, 2001, p. 42). Teacher A highlights this in his comments on collaborative work in the context of a formal music education class: "I think that it [group collaboration] is a really important skill to learn because that's, well, that's what I do here right now, you know, collaborate with other people and you have to be dependent on people (personal communication)." Group work was recognized as a central idea to popular music incorporation in classrooms as several of the teachers mentioned that popular music would work well either for analysis or performance purposes in small groups within a larger class.

Comfort level in teaching pop music

There is a consensus among the teachers with regards to the lack of comfort or facility in teaching popular music. Music educators faced with leading popular music ensembles or classes may feel that their university or college music methods classes did not train them to teach these types of ensembles in this style. Kuzmich (1991) suggests that the teachers of popular music courses should be able to play without music since rock students do not use written parts. Furthermore, Grier (1991) recommends that in order to conduct popular music properly, teachers need specialized training (p. 56).

Two of the four teachers in this study made references to their concerns about teaching popular music. Teacher A reflects on this sentiment of unease:

Sure, well, not having ever played one of those traditional rock band type of instruments, I wouldn't feel really...I could offer insight into: 'You should try to do this, you should try to do that' but as far as saying 'Ok, you want to play this chord...but look it up, I can't tell you how to play it.' You know? I guess that it's kind of in conflict to what my strengths are and what I've been doing and all of that (personal communication).

Ginocchoi's (2001) reflection is parallel to those of the teachers in this study. When he is asked to start a "rock class" by students, he initially refused as he felt so unprepared to teach a class of that nature (p. 40). These are not always accurate reflections by teachers of their own abilities to teach or incorporate popular music in their music classes, but this perception of popular music being foreign to classically or formally trained musicians comes up quite frequently.

Formal versus informal music education

Green (2002) connects informal music learning practices, such as listening and copying, to popular musicians without completely separating them. Instead, she views them as extremes at two ends of a single pole and not mutually exclusive as learners often encounter aspects of both (p. 6). Yet, the four teachers in this study reflected on the role of formal music education in very different manners. Teacher D describes her perception of the role of a teacher in formal music education and the links to Western classical music as opposed to popular music:

Well, in formal music education, I want to expose students to music that they won't necessarily choose. So, I feel my role as a music educator is to put out there what's not on their iPods and their MP3s, so, for example, when I'm teaching the twentieth century history, I want them to hear Schoenberg, Berg, Webern, Stravinsky, those ones that they might not have necessarily known how to be exposed to (personal communication).

Similarly, Teacher C separates popular music from formal music education when asked about her personal definition of popular music: "I would define popular music as anything that I didn't learn in university." Teacher B, who has the least amount of formal music education and the most performance experience in the field of popular music, finds more of a link between the two:

I think that I've learned more about music in my informal training, I mean, they work together, but I think that it would be very difficult to learn about music just in a formal sense. I don't think that's possible. I think that you have to be out there playing and performing and doing that on top of what you are learning in a formal setting (personal communication).

Teacher B's reflection is the closest to Green's idea of formal and informal music education as not being completely separate.

Tradition and Authenticity of Different Styles of Music

Traditional instruments/traditional ensembles

Traditional ensembles and traditional band instruments was a recurring theme in the data from the interviews and is also an aspect of popular music incorporation that is mentioned in music education literature. Boespflug (1999) summarizes that popular music ensembles as "unique avenues" for students to express themselves musically but should not replace the "traditional ensembles" such as concert bands, concert choirs, and chamber orchestras (p. 37). Teacher B outlined some of the difficulties in finding popular repertoire that works in the context of a traditional ensemble:

I find if you've got all the traditional band instruments and a concert band running, it's difficult to find, you know, well there is some pop music that you can find out there. I find that some of it works, some of it doesn't (personal communication).

Teacher B goes onto discuss the idea of perhaps shifting the focus from the traditional band instruments to such instruments associated with popular music rock bands such as the guitar:

See, that's where I think another part of the education system is set up [problematically] now with the traditional band program, is kids don't relate to these instruments any more. They haven't probably for as long as I've been teaching. They'll relate to things like the guitar, instruments that they like or can relate to in the music of the day (personal communication).

The authenticity of rock music

A few of the teachers in this study mentioned that if one is teaching at a school with a full set of band instruments, it would be difficult to convince the administration to buy sets of guitars, basses, and drums instead. With vocal music classes, perhaps this would not be a major issue; however, there is still the thought of microphones and amplifiers needed to perform popular or rock music with a live band. Teacher C refers to the issue of traditional ensembles imitating rock bands in her comments: "So, there are good tunes that can be incorporated [into instrumental programs], but as far as getting a rock band sound? Only a rock band can get a rock band sound."

Classical or "academic" music

The dichotomy between classical (also referred to as "academic" music) and popular music was also a topic of much discussion. Academics critique the Popular Music Studies program at several universities in the United Kingdom by asserting that this program is not an academic discipline in its own right (Cloonan, 2005). It has also been noted that conservatory tradition biases can affect the treatment of popular music in many older institutions of music education, usually in a negative way (Björnberg, 1993, p. 70). All four of the teachers interviewed for this study referred to classical music in opposition to popular music either purposefully or unconsciously. According to Teacher C, everyone learns the most from "the classics" as they are our foundation. When asked how often he uses popular music in his classroom, Teacher A responded with an analogy that compares popular music to frivolous (and perhaps non-educational) items such as comic books:

I would say not very often [that popular music is performed in class] and that's always a bone of contention with the students: "Can we play music like that?" And it's again a question for me of integrity of teaching repertoire and giving, sort of like that comic book approach to English, you know, if you do that or if you actually have them read Shakespeare (personal communication).

But it is Teacher D who subconsciously seems to emphasize the idea of popular music as being non-academic when describing her use of piano in the classroom:

I only use piano as a tool for myself. I use it as a teaching tool. I use it as an accompanying tool for myself when I'm accompanying pop music. I don't keep my chops up to an academic playing level at all (personal communication).

Conclusions

As previously stated, this study is an initial investigation of teacher attitudes towards the incorporation of popular music in formal music education. However, even in this initial study, several things are readily apparent about the general acceptance of the inclusion of popular music. It is clear that, although there is a general support for inclusion, there are also many

levels of teacher attitude and confidence, which must be addressed if the addition of popular music is going to become a worthwhile contribution to formal music education rather than just a concession to student desires.

In terms of the positive and negative references to popular music in this study, all of the teachers made more positive references to popular music (this includes any aspect of popular music such as song references, style, instrumentation, or learning styles) in their overall interviews as opposed to negative references. This is an interesting finding in that it signifies that none of these four music teachers was completely opposed to the incorporation of popular music into formal music education. Each of the four teachers identified elements of popular music that would work well in their programs or in formal music education in general.

Of the several areas for further research that one could undertake from this study, there were two that emerged as perhaps most significant: The first area is the juxtaposition between popular music and Western classical music and teacher attitudes towards both types of music in terms of their perceived value and use in formal education institutions. This could also lead to further examination and perhaps re-evaluation of the roles of traditional instrumental and choral ensembles in music education as well as even traditional band instruments verses rock band instruments (guitar, bass, drums, microphones) in school music programs. There are many areas to further research and explore from both the educator and student perspective; The second area for further examination is the pedagogical comfort level of formally (or classically) trained teachers in teaching popular music courses. This area of study could lead to the further exploration of the link between informal popular music learning styles and formal music education, as defined by Green, or of music teacher training.

For the field of music education, this type of thinking is a step towards a more inclusive curriculum for formal music education programs of all types, from secondary schools to universities and conservatories. More than a decade ago, it was rare to find any programs that looked at popular music as having unique musical qualities to offer in formal music education (Cutietta, 1991). Of course, music educators will never all have the same opinions and attitudes, but the positive references towards popular music have outweighed the negative references in this study and that could indicate a step towards the acceptance by a select number of teachers of popular music in secondary schools.

Music educators need to begin embracing programs or techniques that have been adapted to include popular music in a way that allows it to have musical integrity and authenticity (Cutietta, 1991). To quote Teacher A from this study: "A popularized music ensemble is something that's just going to continue to grow and keep evolving and just be something that anyone and everyone can relate to." The field of music education will certainly also continue to grow and evolve as more and more students discover and relate to a passion for music of all styles.

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