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**IAN PACE: POSITION STATEMENT
'QUESTIONING THE GAP: DEFINING A ROLE FOR THE SMA IN
PREPARING STUDENTS FOR MUSIC DEGREES IN HIGHER EDUCATION
TODAY'**

**Roundtable, Society for Music Analysis Annual Conference, Southampton
University, 30 July 2019
Chaired by Hilary McQueen**

Abstract: In light of inevitable and by no means undesirable calls for music education to reflect a more diverse range of backgrounds and cultures, many more traditional approaches to learning have had to compete for time with others. The net result has been an increasingly heterogeneous educational background amongst those who have studied music at primary and secondary level, and consequently a more amorphous range of fundamental musical skills. Without wishing to oppose music-educational diversification, I believe strongly that various basic skills are still important for young people of many backgrounds. Amongst these are music literacy in the narrow sense of familiarity with staff notation. Whilst such a practice has its roots in European traditions, and has developed most prominently over a millennium in Europe, nonetheless it has proved the most enduring of all notational schemes, with many applications for a plurality of musical traditions. Undoubtedly young people should also be exposed to other literate traditions and notational systems. However, a tradition of musical education which is purely aural and kinetic may be worthwhile for *making* music, but is not necessarily so valuable for studying *about* music, other than in a very general sense. Some musical educators have responded to this situation by placing greater emphasis on sociological, ethnographic and other approaches to music which require minimal emphasis upon the sounding content, but I fear that this will lead to music's being subsumed into a marginal position within other disciplines.

In any type of music education, whether to do with making music or studying about it, one activity is primary, in my view: listening. The defining aspect of music is sound, and listening is above all an engagement with sound. It is of course also possible to study the sociology of music making, the social or cultural functions of music, musical reception, biographies of musicians, the role of technology in music-making, and so on. Charles Rosen has written of the study of music reception that:

As long as the history of reception concentrates solely on the attitudes of the general public and on journalistic criticism, it chooses to ignore the central forces for change in the history of music.

I would say the same about these other approaches – they supplement rather than replace the study of music.

Laudan Nooshin has decried what she calls a 'fetishist focus on music as sound', advocating instead the study of 'music in all its diversity and beauty: as physical movement, as behavior, as ideas – something that people think and talk about and that plays a central role in and shapes their lives' (see a position statement from a debate in 2016, at <http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/14817/> – my response can be read at <http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/17483/>, while the original debate can be viewed at <https://ianpace.wordpress.com/2016/07/22/video-of-debate-are-we-all-ethnomusicologists-now-and-responses/>). In fact, none of these subjects are at all new

to traditional forms of musicology (nor various other disciplines), but they supplement and enhance the study of sound rather than replace it. The study of physical movement without sound is theatre or dance. The study of behaviour without sound is psychology. The study of ideas without sound is philosophy. All of these are highly sophisticated disciplines in their own right; few scholars could plausibly claim mastery of all of them. 'Interdisciplinarity' (a term which musicologist Mark Everist said made him 'reach for his revolver') can certainly be extremely valuable, for sure (and is nothing new), but to enhance a field of study, not to compensate for lack of real expertise in *any* one discipline or artistic field, or to satisfy those who hold the study of art in low esteem.

There were a range of quite severe critiques published by continental European scholars in the journal *Musica scientiae* in 2001 of Nicholas Cook's book *Music: A Very Short Introduction*, to which Cook responded in quite an intemperate fashion in two different articles. Anne Boissière talked about Cook's hostility to the idea that music could embody 'a critical analysis of consumer society', in response to which Cook associated her 'the attack on capitalism and consumerism that developed throughout the German-speaking countries in the 19th century (where it was associated with the nostalgic values of an idealised rural past), and fed ultimately into the Nazi creed of 'blood and soil'' (Nicholas Cook, 'Writing on Music or Axes to Grind: road rage and musical community', *Music Education Research*, vol. 5, no. 3 (November 2003), p. 257). Rosanna Dalmonte questioned the value of an introductory primer which did not involve any musical rudiments, to which Cook argued that 'I think a lot of useful thinking about music can be done even if you don't know what a dominant seventh is, and that's why the book *is* written in such a way as not to require such knowledge' (Nicholas Cook, 'On qualifying relativism', *Musica scientiae*, Discussion Form 2 (2001), p. 168). A book which does not require such knowledge prior to being read could of course attempt to teach it, but Cook's does not do this.

Cook's approach has been influential, like those of many of the contributors to the volume *Rethinking Music*, published two years previously. Another related case is the book *Musicology: The Key Concepts* (2005, rev. 2016) by David Beard and Kenneth Gloag, in which there are entries for cultural studies, literary theory and subject position, but none for harmony, counterpoint or rhythm. The possibility that these will be read by students with no knowledge of the latter is very real. It is time for a reevaluation of these developments, and a wide range of distinguished contributors will be doing so in a volume which I and Peter Tregear are editing, entitled *Rethinking Contemporary Musicology: Interdisciplinary, Skills and Deskillling*, for which will be a roundtable involving four contributors to the volume at this year's RMA conference.

But I do not believe notational or analytical skills should be divorced from aural skills, and think any type of analysis which does not entail experience derived from listening (or imagined listening where no performance or recording is available) is impoverished. However, why are some so dismissive towards technical understanding of music, visual art, poetry, and so on, and wish to relegate what have long been fundamental skills to a secondary or non-existent position – what I have described elsewhere as musical 'deskilling' (<http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/13713/>)?

In his 2013 book *The Quilting Points of Musical Modernism*, Paul Harper-Scott has described as ‘crypto-capitalist’ some work done under the auspices of modern ethnomusicology, popular music studies, recent historical and ‘new’ musicology and empirical musicology, for its relativist tendencies and consequent reduction of music to a commodity, in opposition to which he advocates a *democratic materialist* approach, entailing Slavo Zizek’s evocation of ‘the radical-emancipatory (communist) politics of truth’ (p. xiv). Ben Watson has made similar argument in his critiques of the work of Georgina Born, Simon Frith, Sara Thornton and others (see his 2011 collection of essays *Adorno for Revolutionaries*). Above all, such an approach as either Harper-Scott or Watson advocate is rooted in engagement with musical material, believing that to do otherwise is to render music a commodity. Such musical commodification, when made manifest in education, conveniently coincides with the writing out from curricula of fundamental musical skills.

I would also draw your attention to a further model provided by Paul, that of ‘the E→G→N short circuit’ (Europeans → Germans → Nazis) model (*Quilting Points*, p. 12) whereby some musicologists, like Cook above, also like Richard Taruskin and plenty of others, so easily equate many things continental European to being German, and then associate it with the Nazis. This type of quite extreme xenophobia may have attained a new modishness at a time when we may be heading for a No Deal Brexit. But this model is frequently used to denigrate music analysis, which is presented as a discipline with fundamentally Germanic roots, and so reflective of Germanic hegemony, in opposition to which plucky Brits or Americans who saved-your-ass-or-else-you’d-all-be-speaking-German-now have sought to promote approaches to musical education which do not require it.

Some would or have dismissed my and other arguments about deskilling by pointing to the need for diversification of musical education, and developing new skills to deal with other musics beyond the Western art tradition. In principle, I can certainly accept this idea, and recognise that distinct types of aural, rhythmic, notational skills are often more appropriate for engagement with plural traditions. But in my experience, the removal other skills in music theory, analysis and notation is very rarely replaced by a meaningful equivalent engineered towards other traditions. Rather, the tendency is to push concrete engagement with musical material almost entirely to the sidelines. A decline in the number of students entering tertiary education with basic skills in harmony, counterpoint, basic analysis and so on has not to my knowledge led to a growth in those able to write meaningfully about ragas and maqams.

I have encountered students at all levels (including doctoral students) who are utterly at sea when it comes to writing anything about sounding music, unable to identify very basic things on the basis of either aural or textual information. Happily, at my own institution we are considerably enhancing the role of musicianship in the curriculum – my colleague and fellow SMA trustee Shay Loya has been taking a lead on this. This is to deal with the fact that many are coming to university with the barest of musicianship skills. This is in part simply through cuts to musical education provision at primary and secondary level, but even some of those who have had a reasonable provision can have serious deficiencies in this respect.

In terms of Western notation in general, my basic attitude is ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’. I am fully aware of the limitations which have been posited about this notational

system, especially with respect to the notation many rhythmic and other nuances of performance, but have seen little evidence that other notational systems are necessarily more apt for describing such things (I adhere to the model from Charles Seeger of ‘descriptive’ vs ‘prescriptive’ notation). Writing about music without some form of notation is possible, but only rarely have I known those who do so to produce much other than rather basic generalities. Other graphic devices can be useful, but Sonic Visualiser, say, is not so strong for rendering pitch or rhythmic relationships in an immediate form. Western notation has developed over around a millenium and proved durable and valuable; while this system must remain dynamic and open to new developments and modifications, to abandon it just for being ‘Western’ amounts to a petty politics of resentment.

But I see the following situation blight music teaching, in an age in which students are seen as consumers. When there are sufficient modules in popular music studies, film music studies, doing soundwalks, very elementary ethnography, cultural studies, etc., many of which do not require basic musicianship, then it is possible for students to get a high-level degree without ever gaining it. Many of these students will go onto teach music in primary and secondary schools, and perpetuate this lack. Some even gain music PhDs without any real ability to engage with music; unsurprisingly, these are often amongst those who push for the removal of core skills when they are involved in teaching and curriculum design.

Now, as various of you will know, there was an article published in the Guardian by Charlotte C. Gill in 2017 (‘Music education is now only for the white and wealthy’, *The Guardian*, 27 March 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/mar/27/music-lessons-children-white-wealthy>), in which she argued that, over and above very real cuts to musical education, one of the major problems was that music was taught in ‘a far too academic way’, and entailed both sight-reading and the study of notation, which she described as ‘a cryptic, tricky language – rather like Latin – that can only be read by a small number of people, most of whom have benefited from private education’. I and others organised a response which was published in the newspaper on 5 April (‘This romanticisation of musical illiteracy is risky’, *The Guardian*, 5 April 2017 – at <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/apr/05/this-romanticisation-of-musical-illiteracy-is-risky>) and generated around 700 signatures - <https://ianpace.wordpress.com/2017/03/30/response-to-charlotte-c-gill-article-on-music-and-notation-full-list-of-signatories/>

There was another smaller counter-response, with 93 signatories, which took exception to the Guardian letter. This was sent to the paper but not published, but remains available online - <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfLW6GQ9n4gBTM7eGrOcfRhNCOYzt0yes8GFyxTXXjzwnZyw/viewform?c=0&w=1>. The argument here was not very clear, but it seemed to disdain any implied criticism of lack of notational skills in the absence of some type of universal design. I think we would have some time to wait for this.

I followed up with an article for *The Conversation* (‘The insidious class divide in music teaching’, 17 May 2017 - <https://theconversation.com/the-insidious-class-divide-in-music-teaching-77574>), arguing that the eschewal of teaching of notation

and other music theory was putting those at state schools at a disadvantage (as the privately educated will always have access), and thus exacerbating class divides.

Above all, I believe in the importance of preserving music and musicology as a separate discipline. If it becomes just one small branch of cultural studies, sociology or anthropology, it will practically disappear, as it will if it becomes thoroughly divorced from practice

There is of course another conception of musical literacy, not to do with notation or theory but simply being 'literate' about traditions, repertoires, etc. Personally, I am unapologetic about the importance of teaching Western music history – including jazz, popular and vernacular traditions – as we do live in the West.

Once again, I am quite shocked and dismayed at the ease with which certain skills and varieties of learning are not only summarily dismissed, but sometimes actively opposed. This has been the case with the teaching of repertory. Any teaching of repertory will be selective, and as such will inevitably reflect or play a part in forming some canonical tradition. This process is frequently deplored in hyperbolic language, as has been the case since the unfortunate book on *Disciplining Music* edited by Katherine Bergeron and Philip Bohlman appeared in 1992. In part as a result of this, in some departments students will learn about the evils of various composers supposedly part of a canonical tradition before having heard almost any of the music. What does it mean to evaluate the role of Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony in terms of developing 'heroic' topics and ideologies which permeated much of the nineteenth-century, the work's relationship to the iconic figure of Napoleon and the drastic transformations he and his armies made in Europe, and so on, when you have the situation described to me recently in one leading music department (not my own), in which not one of the third-year music undergraduates even recognised the piece? Expanding, revising, diversifying canons is one thing; eschewing the teaching of repertory in general is to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

John Gingell and Christopher Winch have argued, in their 2004 book *Philosophy and Educational Policy: A Critical Introduction*, that an excessive focus on pure 'creativity', rather than appreciation, is limiting. They believe that schools are 'places where pupils do, or should, learn about the achievements of Shakespeare, Wordsworth or Milton. They are not places where we can produce a Shakespeare, a Wordsworth or a Milton, for this we do not know how to do.' I would say the same is true of a Bach, a Stravinsky, a Miles Davis or an Ali Akbar Khan.

In conclusion, I propose that we need a stronger core music curriculum at primary, secondary and tertiary level, and a clearer list of pre-requisites for something to qualify as a music degree, or to be qualified to teach in a school or indeed a university, and the SMA should be involved at all levels in helping to define these. I do not believe anyone without at least basic notational and aural skills should be teaching in any of these, nor should anyone be able to graduate before them. For those who might teach sociology of music in a sociology department, or anthropology of music in an anthropology department, the situation is different, but even there I believe the teaching and associated research would be disadvantaged without some such knowledge.