

Poly Victoros

WestFocus seminar report: *Teaching resources for recorded music*

October 1 2005, King's College London

The first of three one-day seminar organized by CHARM within the WestFocus knowledge transfer network, this event focused on the use of recordings in schools, primarily at secondary level. The seminar's aims were succinctly outlined in the publicity material produced prior to the event:

Current practice in music teaching favours a practical, 'hands-on' approach emphasizing performance and composition; the use of recorded music as a teaching resource has tended to take a back seat. Yet recordings are the predominant vehicle of musical experience today, and students are expert listeners to recorded sound. Moreover, major developments in the access to – and presentation of recorded music are opening up new educational possibilities. Targeted primarily at school music teachers, this one-day seminar covered a variety of issues on this topic, ranging from the production and engineering aspects of recorded sound to on-line music libraries and teachers' experiences of using recordings in the classroom.

The seminar stimulated a great deal of discussion among delegates and those present found it useful, though attendance was disappointingly small: it is hard to say whether this is confirmation that 'the use of recorded music as a teaching resource has tended to take a back seat', or simply reflected the unseasonably fine weather.

Nicholas Cook (Director of CHARM, Royal Holloway) introduced the seminar by briefly talking about the early recordings of Alessandro Moreschi – made in 1902 and 1904 – and the extent to which recorded sound can provide an insight into other times and places. Leaping forward by a century, he outlined the diverse roles that recordings could play in today's music education: reflecting the predominant mode of consuming music, he said, students are highly skilled in listening to recordings even though they may not necessarily have musical skills as conventionally defined.

Norton York (University of Westminster and Rockschool Ltd, <http://www.rockschool.co.uk/index.asp>) spoke on 'Recordings and the curriculum'. He argued that music education is out of touch with the outside music scene and needs to reflect the tastes of young people. He gave a fascinating overview of how music education got to its current state by highlighting the Newsome Report (1963) and the view that 'pop music isn't good for you – listen to good music!' which was reinforced at that time by the BBC and academia. Norton praised the example set by Paul Farmer (former Head of Music at Holland Park School, London) who developed the first examination in popular music. Reflected by the media and radio, the overwhelming British contribution to music is pop music and this is the music most kids like, yet this is not reflected in music education: students need to feel that the music they like has value. Norton further noted that many music teachers are no in tune with the kids they teach. For example, although Brit Pop is an option in GCSE Music, few teachers take it up simply because they do not have the skills or training to teach it.

Norton highlighted numerous ways that recordings could be used in music education:

- to encourage young people to bring in their own recordings and to talk about them
- to use historical recordings as a way of highlighting different ways of recording the same piece of music
- to produce a live recording
- recordings to develop performance – record students' performances to assess progress and achievement
- a way of celebrating the end of a project – a permanent record.

Anna Rees (Head of Music, Monk's Walk School) focused on *The Musical Futures Project*, an approach to music teaching that fosters innovative and imaginative ways of encouraging secondary school children to engage with music (<http://www.musicalfutures.org.uk/>). Music is compulsory in schools for years 7-9 (key stage 3, ages 11-14), but Anna argued that there is a gulf between the musical 'elite' and 'the rest'. Reflecting the way we consume music, the instinct for many students and parents alike is to talk the moment music is heard. Of course, this is acceptable and indeed the norm with pop and rock music, but not so much with jazz or (particularly) classical music. Obviously this can have a negative impact when trying to teach classical music: the teacher feels that he or she is stifling a natural physical response – head banging, dancing and suchlike. Then there is the stock response by kids, 'I hate classical music!' – often before they know what they are going to hear. Technology also plays a role in conditioning or encouraging this response; with the iPod and so forth you can simply fast-forward to the bit you want to hear.

Teaching techniques at the heart of *The Musical Futures Project* include:

- informal learning – no more teachers behind the desk! Relaxed supervision
- working in groups – friendship and peer support
- encouraging children to choose instruments of their choice
- getting children to copy and emulate their favourite songs and perform them.

How does one encourage children to move beyond the 'I hate classical music' stage? The pilot results of *The Musical Futures Project* confirmed the efficacy of these techniques: the children had already copied and performed their favourite pop songs, and this 'hands-on' approach was then transferred to classical music. Children are familiar with classical music from an array of sources such as TV adverts; building on their increased motivation, they were encouraged to copy their favourite tracks – Handel's 'Sarabande' was an example. Children were encouraged to listen to classical music in new and exciting ways through listening and copying by ear. Benefits of this approach included:

- increased motivation
- children stayed on task
- enhanced listening skills
- kids that you would have thought weren't interested in music really stood out
- non-participatory kids got involved
- enhanced student-teacher relationship
- peer coordination
- fun with music!

Timothy Day (Curator of Western Music, British Library Sound Archive, <http://www.bl.uk/nsa>) spoke on 'Listening to history', focussing on how recordings

could be used to foster an historical understanding of music. He argued that students have largely been taught to realise the original intentions of the composer (Bach should not be played on the piano!), yet each generation will make what they will of the music. Performance is a creative process and that is why performance style is subject to constant change.

Why should teachers take notice of recordings? Recordings – specifically historical recordings – are a valuable resource to illustrate changes in performance practice to students who are studying, say, A-Level music, in particular because they demonstrate that there are always different options in performance. There are many ways to acquire old recordings:

- downloading
- on-line resources
- British Library Sound Archive
- reissues on historical labels.

What is classical music for? Timothy ended his presentation with an excerpt from Classic FM – classical music has become synonymous with relaxation and calming the nerves.

Jim Barrett and Mike Howlett (University of Glamorgan) spoke under the title 'The music industry and school music education: connecting the signals'. They discussed the role that music technology can play in music education, arguing that it is particularly important to get music education right at key stage 3 (11-14 year olds, years 7,8 and 9) and illustrating the use of the technology as they talked about it. They argued that film music and computer games music are particularly fertile areas for music education because of the integration of music in a larger multimedia context.

Finally Chris Turner (Broadchart Ltd, <http://www.broadchart.com/Playtime/Playtime.htm>) demonstrated Playtime – an on-line digital library based on the outstanding and comprehensive sound archive formed by Phil Swern. The library contains millions of tracks including the complete UK Top 40 hits since 1952, the US Hits 100 since 1954 in addition to non-chart pop, jazz, country, classical, film soundtracks, stage shows and comedy music sections, all with full copyright clearance. For an annual fee, the library is available to all schools and universities in the UK and constitutes a key resource for music education.

The seminar concluded with a roundtable discussion which examined key issues raised during the day:

- is the perception of music as a study not as widely appreciated as other subjects?
- in terms of knowledge learnt, how can one address the discrepancy between music graduates and music teachers?
- how can one encourage a two-way exchange of information between the student and teacher?
- why do we categorise music in education?