

Music is Integral to Culture and Heritage, Why Have We Forsaken It?

A few years ago I was celebrating a friend's birthday in a restaurant in Amsterdam. When cake was brought out, everyone in the restaurant joined in to sing 'Happy Birthday' and to share in the celebration. After a couple of notes, we all started looking around at the people in the room wondering if we had somehow stumbled upon a professional choral group or some such thing. The singing was sensational. Everyone in the room was singing on pitch, people were singing in various harmonies and the strength of the voices was stunning. However, apart from our large group, which did include a few professional musicians, the restaurant was full of normal people, small groups and couples, having dinner as usual after work on a weeknight. The Dutch among us were amused by our utter shock at the quality and joyful commitment to such a public musical utterance. For them it was normal.

So why was this such a shocking and unique experience for us? The UK has one of the most highly acclaimed music industries in the world and a well-developed choral culture. The Royal Academy of Music, Guildhall and the many other fine musical institutions of this country train musicians to the highest levels, yet singing the octave leap in Happy Birthday is beyond the capability of the average person.

One reason for the difference is likely in the approach to music education. In England, it seems that music education exists primarily to identify, select and train a select group of musicians for possible future professional careers. Usually music is taught as a separate subject and is optional, being available more to students who have a particular talent or aptitude for it. The Dutch, on the other hand, situate music education within a context of education in art and culture. In their curriculum guidance, it clearly states that at primary level, 'music education cannot be seen as an isolated domain or subject', and music is compulsory at secondary level and is supported by and integrated with language learning and other arts and culture education.

Although they were intended to improve music education, the implementation of music hubs has been detrimental to music provision. After their first year, Ofsted conducted a survey that found that 'music hubs, working at their very best, can challenge and support school leaders to bring the numerous benefits of a good music education to all pupils, not simply the few who choose, or who have the resources, to specialise in the subject or an instrument. However, Her Majesty's

Inspectors found few examples of such good practice.' And it doesn't appear that there has been substantial change since then.

The hubs have filled some of the gaps in terms of specialist knowledge and practitioners do their best to improve the musical situation. However, in most cases, hubs consist of external organisations that schools hire in to provide instrumental tuition and their influence on school-wide music provision is limited. In some cases, whole class instrumental provision is offered and in other cases, small group lessons are offered, often at a cost to parents. Although the educators and organisations involved do a great job given the constraints, the model is problematic. Often pupils must leave their other classes to attend their lessons and since the provision often is isolated from their other studies, there is no context or support for their musical training. In many cases, due to time constraints, the instrumental training is done by rote, and no foundation for musical literacy is put in place.

A recent report, *Music Education: State of the Nation*, put out by the Incorporated Society of Musicians has looked at the current situation of music provision and has found that the challenges within the system are not new, 'but that they have become so serious that they now challenge the very existence of music education.' These include a squeeze on funding and pressure on the curriculum due to accountability measures being the primary the cause of this crisis. Other issues of note are, not surprisingly, 'Irreconcilable tensions between a rich and broad curriculum, and implementation of the EBacc', as well as a lack of subject knowledge by teachers at all levels. The report concludes that 'music education in England is in crisis' and that it is imperative that action is taken quickly to remedy it.

To remedy this situation, action is needed. Teachers need to be trained to incorporate music into the curriculum and the curriculum needs to value music as an important element of educational development, not just an add-on subject that students can do 'for fun' after school or during breaks. Music is not just an activity that belongs to the talented few—it is a crucial element of a society's culture and heritage. By removing and limiting access to music education, we're not just depriving our young people of the joy of music making and specific subject knowledge, but of the opportunity to share in culture and cultural creation.

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