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Why composing matters for disadvantaged young people

Malmberg, Isolde [Hrsg.]; Petrović, Milena [Hrsg.]: *Music & meaning. Rum / Innsbruck : HELBLING 2024, S. 179-192. - (European perspectives on music education; 12)*



Quellenangabe/ Reference:

Anderson, Anthony; Fautley, Martin: Why composing matters for disadvantaged young people - In: Malmberg, Isolde [Hrsg.]; Petrović, Milena [Hrsg.]: *Music & meaning. Rum / Innsbruck : HELBLING 2024, S. 179-192* - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-329797 - DOI: 10.25656/01:32979

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-329797>

<https://doi.org/10.25656/01:32979>

in Kooperation mit / in cooperation with:



<https://www.helbling.com>

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Why Composing Matters for Disadvantaged Young People

Introduction: Barriers to Composing for Musical Meaning

If composing is as important as music educators say it is (Sound & Music, 2019), then thinking about how all young people can access composing opportunities matters too. This chapter discusses the place of composing in an English educational context, seeking to delineate some of the barriers to composing that prevent young people from discovering musical meaning through composing activities. It looks at difficulties with traditional approaches to composing and explores how young people from all backgrounds and demographic groups can discover this kind of meaningful musical expression. It specifically discusses children who are at a disadvantage due to material benefits, disability or perceived gender bias. It is these considerations that framed the project *Go Compose*, which sought to engage with groups of young people who may not otherwise have had access to in-depth composing opportunities. The overarching aim of the project was to work with young people from a variety of challenging circumstances, in order to foster an interest in composing music. Our discussion concludes by considering implications for future composing projects with young people from challenging circumstances and why composing is an entitlement for all young musicians.

In England, composing is undertaken by young people both in and beyond schools. It has been part of musical life in classrooms for many years, but became regularised as a normal part of teaching and learning when it was established as an essential component of the General Certificate of Secondary Education in Music examination, taken at age 16, in 1988. Following this, in 1992 it was enshrined as a statutory part of the National Curriculum, which was followed by all children in state schools. Composing as a vehicle through which young people express musical meaning, therefore has a well-established tradition

and history in the English educational system. It has also, of course, long been enjoyed as a means of self-expression through songwriting, although this has oftentimes been done on an informal basis.

Although composing enjoys a privileged position as part of the curriculum in England, what it lacks is a network of formalised progression routes. Such progression routes have long existed for performing. In England, the graded music examinations of the ABRSM and Trinity College London form one highly visible aspect of this in terms of performance. Performing opportunities also exist in the well-established local area bands, choirs, and orchestras, which form joined-up progression trajectories, from local, to regional, to national. For the young composer, it is a postcode lottery as to whether any provision is available for them.

What this means is that whilst for the young performer there are clearly understood and well-established trajectories to develop and further their performing career, for the equivalent developing composer this is not the case. Of course, it is highly likely that the emerging composer is also an instrumentalist or singer, and so there may well be informal opportunities in their various ensembles for them to develop their craft; nonetheless, the underlying mechanisms of tutoring and support may well not be there in the same way. One consequence of this is that opportunities to develop an understanding of musical meaning through composing can be restricted and hampered by barriers of various kinds; not placed deliberately in the paths of young composers, but there by omission. This can be a real issue for those children and young people who wish to develop this aspect of their music-making.

Additional Barriers to Composing

Alongside these challenges for composing, further potential barriers also exist for young people facing challenging personal or domestic circumstances. Such barriers may consist of a variety of factors, which can mean that children are denied access to opportunities to compose music, even when this is something they enjoy, and with which they wish to engage. Problems accessing composing opportunities may be caused by financial restrictions, regional offers, or availability of suitable tutorial guidance.

Lack of funding for composing projects and their patchy availability has been identified as problematic not just in England, but across the UK, where unequal access to resources is a significant barrier (Sound & Music, 2019). Such inequity of access has also been noted in international contexts, such as South Africa, where town planners have been accused of creating “cultural deserts and 24-hour economies” (Schneider, 2022, p. 104), but where international cultural exchanges which include creative dimensions are growing despite funding challenges (Schneider, 2022). Project funding for working with professional

composers, or which is performing orientated, continues to be the most common means of access to musical experiences in some parts of Europe too (European Commission, 2021).

Where composing opportunities for disadvantaged children do exist, support for composers and music leaders who are working with such groups can be sparse. Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for teachers has received some attention (Hallam & Burns, 2017; Fautley & Whittaker, 2017), however, this is much rarer for teachers and music leaders facilitating composing, and training for these practitioners is not widespread, although identified as an area requiring development (Fautley, Anderson, Kinsella, Devaney & Whittaker, 2021); this contrasts with the widespread availability of CPD for performing pedagogies. One recent report suggested that of its 551 research participants, only 41 % had received composing-focused CPD in the previous five years of their careers (Sound & Music, 2019). Offering meaningful composing opportunities for disadvantaged children will be hindered where there is a neglect of development in the music education workforce; after all, as Stenhouse (1975, p. 68) long ago noted, there can be “no curriculum development without teacher development”. This is a significant issue which may disproportionately affect children whose access to composing may come from a sole provider, rather than the experiences of children from more affluent backgrounds who are likely to have the opportunities to access a wider range of music educational offers through schools, Music Education Hubs (an additional mediator of government funding for music education in England) and community groups. Lack of funding, regional opportunities, and music education workforce development can therefore lead to lack of equality for disadvantaged children and perpetuate systemic structures where access to out-of-hours classroom spaces and community composing opportunities where musical meaning can be both created and heard, are therefore difficult to acquire; concomitantly, facilitating composing opportunities for children in challenging circumstances is especially problematic.

Factors Impacting Access to Composing for Young People

As discussed above, composing is a statutory part of the English National Curriculum for all school children from ages 4–14. The Key Stage 3 National Curriculum in Music (ages 11–14) requires children to “improvise and compose; and extend and develop musical ideas” (Department for Education, 2013, p. 2). The *Model Music Curriculum*, a non-statutory government guidance document, also talks about composing, asserting it should be part of a sequence of learning, describing it as a “creative process” (Department for Education, 2021, p. 10). The New National Plan for Music Education (NPME2) which, if its predecessor document is anything to go by, will set the tone for music education in England for the next decade, also includes composing within its remit. Whilst this too is non-statutory policy, it is likely to govern aspects of governmental funding for music education and has been

debated in the English parliament (Hansard, 2022). NPME2 states that composing “should be explored from the start of a child’s school music education” (Department for Education, 2022, p. 31). In England, composing is central and should be the heart of music education but, despite this, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds may not have equal access to this form of musical expression. Why is this?

Part of the answer may lie in what the English policy documents outlined above do *not* say. Although NPME does discuss disadvantage and the importance of children having equal access to opportunities, this tends to be expressed in terms of accessing instruments, being given the chance to sing, and to progress. There is no specific mention of composing in this disadvantaged context and, as a result, children can miss out on musical experiences in composing. The *Model Music Curriculum* and *National Curriculum* (op. cit.) do not mention disadvantage at all; it is the lack of discussion of such important areas in these central policy documents that can lead to opportunities in composing for disadvantaged children falling by the wayside, or in some way being seen as non-essential.

Outside of the formal curriculum offer in English schools, it is already known that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are able to access fewer opportunities. A report from the Social Mobility Commission in 2019 found that “nearly 3 times as many children from the highest income households take part in in music activities (32%) compared to the lowest income households (11%)” (Social Mobility Commission, 2019a, p. 1). This same report makes specific links to composing, quoting from research interviews with young people who could not conceive of careers in music, despite their love for the subject: “[...] something like being a composer or something would be, like, amazing, but I can’t really see it happening” (Social Mobility Commission, 2019b, p. 23). Extra-curricular provision involves important moments of access for children, which can lead them to consider future pathways and directions in music, and this is something which children from disadvantaged backgrounds appear to be able to access and pursue less frequently than their more affluent peers. The implications for composing becoming neglected in educational experience, despite evident aptitude or ability, is concerning.

Systemic structures such as curriculum policy documents or extra-curricular offers may therefore, perhaps unintentionally, be organised in ways that reserve access to composing for those with financial resources and initiative to do so. Such systemic inequalities can be hidden, and not perceived by organisational leaders and policy-makers, so it is particularly important to highlight them and to ensure they are part of music educational discourse.

Performativity cultures in schools provide further examples of moments where “terrors of performativity” (Ball, 2003, p. 1) can impact composing opportunity for all. Composing, as with other creative modalities (such as painting and drawing in art) can be challenging to fit into school perceptions of what should and should not be included in the curriculum. A fear that composing may be difficult to justify can also lead to its neglect;

the omission of composing from music curricula due to the complexities of conforming to a whole-school outlook can be difficult to reconcile, but can also lead to significant educational inequalities. Likewise, whole-school structures for assessment can require assessment to “fit neatly into axes of content taught over time” (Booth & Anderson, 2022, p. 2), which may in turn mean that composing drops off the end of a school ‘conveyor belt’ which is already full of other educational commodities. Composing can therefore be under threat due to systemic constraints and notions of what is acceptable in school culture and learning paradigms, and this can ultimately mean that access to it becomes shrouded and opaque, and difficult for children from disadvantaged backgrounds to locate.

Difficulties in Traditional Approaches to Teaching Composition

Traditional approaches to teaching composition can make participation for children from disadvantaged backgrounds more challenging. Teachers report lacking confidence in enabling composing for young people (Berkley, 2001), and this can mean that they use specific musical styles and formats with which they are more familiar and comfortable (Devaney, 2018). Such styles may rely on conventions, notation traditions and formats which children from disadvantaged backgrounds may have been less likely to have experienced themselves, due to lack of opportunity and resources. Teachers may also have had limited access to technology in their own development and understanding of composing, and this may limit their experience in suggesting possible pathways, and composing potentialities (Devaney, 2019). Such challenges in teacher confidence and experience can be problematic in seeking to enable young people to engage with composing who may have diverse profiles as musicians.

Alongside these pedagogical considerations, which are influenced by teachers’ identities and experiences, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are sometimes impacted by practitioners’ perceptions of what must be learned before composing can begin. This assumption rests on the idea that children cannot create music because they are not fully literate (Birch & Taylor Ellis, 2016). There are, however, many studies which challenge these assumptions and indicate that very young children *are* able to create their own music in diverse forms (*inter alia* Swanwick & Tillman, 1986; Burnard, 2000; Major & Cottle, 2010; Veloso, 2017). Just as age is not a prerequisite for composing, neither does disadvantage mean that composing is unappealing or inaccessible for young people. Where the composing gateway has been closed to young people by virtue of their experiences in school and beyond, acknowledging that this is the case and flinging the composing door wide open and wedging it in place can be more complex to realise. This is because of misconceptions about what children from disadvantaged backgrounds can achieve but such amelioration is well worth facilitating. It is into this context and from this perceived

need that the *Go Compose* project emanated, with its overarching aim of enabling young people from all social backgrounds to access composing opportunities.

Case Study: *Go Compose*

Go Compose was a project that sought to enable young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to compose, providing them with the resources to do so over a sustained period of time. It was organised by the music education charity *Sound and Music*, whose self-described mission is to “maximise the opportunities for people to create and enjoy new music” (Sound & Music, 2022). It was funded by Youth Music, and was researched by the Birmingham Music Education Research Group (BMERG) from Birmingham City University, UK. *Go Compose* provided an opportunity to better understand some of the issues that disadvantaged young people face in accessing composing and to gather a range of research evidence as young people engaged with these different experiences. The two-year project ran from 2018–2020, aiming to foster an interest in composing and to develop different composing voices.

Go Compose was formed of three distinct centres in England, addressing different areas of composing need, each with a different composing partner. The first centre was the *Yorkshire Sound Women Network* and the *Department of Music and Drama at the University of Huddersfield*. This centre focused on offering a series of music technology workshops for girls and young women. The second centre was based in Liverpool and Organised by *Drake Music*, a music charity which works with disabled young people. This aspect of the project sought to enable young people with additional needs to find and express their composing voice. The third centre was situated in London and was organised by *Community Music*, a youth and community music organisation which offers a programme of courses, events and training in aspects of the music industry. This arm of the project focused on providing opportunities in composing for young people not in education, employment or training, in partnership with Pupil Referral Units or those offering alternative educational provision to mainstream schools.

In evaluating these activities, BMERG’s research methodology adopted Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick’s (2006) four-stage model, looking at how project participants reacted, changed, behaved differently and thought about the final outcomes of *Go Compose*, and whether young people from a variety of challenging circumstances had been enabled to foster an interest in composing music. The modality of the research was mixed methods and consisted of online surveys for organisations and project leaders, discussions with music leaders and participants during site visits and observations of project sessions. Analysis of surveys used techniques that looked for thematic strands, following detailed study of the research data. Ethical approval was sought and obtained from the *Health, Education, and*

Life Sciences Faculty Ethics Committee at Birmingham City University in accordance with the British Educational Research Association's (2018) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research. In total, 219 minutes of interview data and 212 minutes of focus group data were collected, whilst 17 sessions were observed as part of research fieldwork during the project.

Project Centres and Composing Activities

The three case study centres varied widely in their approach and demographic of the young people they were each working with. In order to give a full picture of the *Go Compose* project, their distinct approaches and activities are discussed individually here.

Yorkshire Sound Women Network and the Department of Music and Drama at the University of Huddersfield

There were 50 participants at this centre (mainly in the second year), who worked with staff from *Huddersfield University*, leaders from *Sound Women Network* and visiting workshop leaders. These participants came from a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds, some of whom attended with their own youth worker. During 2018, three workshops were offered to the participants which included sessions on: Indian Classical Music; Recording and Remixing; Using a Digital Audio Workstation (DAW). In the course of 2019, six further workshops were offered: DJ-ing; Electronic India; Making Electronic Music; Sound Design for Media; Found Sounds; and Making Music with Light and Electronics. Since the conclusion of the project, this network has received further funding through other sources and has therefore continued to develop music technology projects for teenage girls. *Go Compose* would therefore appear to have a lasting legacy from this project centre.

Drake Music, Liverpool

This centre worked with five participants during year 1 (2018–2019) of the project, and worked with three music leaders and one composer who facilitated composing activity. The composer self-identified as disabled and the music leaders were drawn from a range of backgrounds including music technologists, turntablists and professional instrumentalists. There were 11, monthly, weekend workshops in a studio space during this first year. In year 2 (2019–2020), there were a further 11 monthly composing workshops but, in this iteration, there were 14 participants of an all-female group who self-identified on the autistic spectrum. During year 1 of the activity from this centre, there was preparation for a showcase of compositions at a special school which featured the teenage composers with additional needs who performed their work facilitated by the music leaders and composer. During the second year, there was a further showcase of music at the *Manchester Imperial War Museum*, entitled *Breaking the Silence* which followed the period of silent remembrance

during Armistice Day. This centre featured extensive collaborative interactions between the composers, music leaders and participants and the environment was one of nurturing and co-composing.

Community Music, London

During *Go Compose* this centre worked with 28 participants, many of whom achieved an *Arts Award* or an *Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network* qualification. During 2018–2020, there was a 10-week course on music production which considered approaches to using a DAW, provided opportunities to create music through singing, rapping and songwriting, and offered extension evening classes to enable qualification accreditation, where additional time was required to achieve this. The young people involved in this project had a diverse range of skills, experience and confidence. For some, acoustic instruments were their chosen means of engagement, whilst others used the medium of technology as their instrument for composing. Composing music appeared to be an important part of everyday life for the young people who participated in this *Go Compose* centre.

There are many aspects of composing teaching and learning which are brought to the fore by this project, which we will now discuss.

What Composing Practitioners Working with Young People Can Learn from *Go Compose* Practices to Develop Agency and Engagement

One of the important findings from *Go Compose* was that ownership and engagement by including the choices of the young people was a significant factor in developing composing. The chance to choose was significant for many, and should be seen against a backdrop of the English education system where there can be very little opportunity for pupil voice in curricula provision (McIntyre, Pedder & Rudduck, 2005). Being able to choose, and therefore have agency concerning what was being done, was significant for the young people involved.

Practices to Develop Personal Response

During *Go Compose* it became evident from the interactions observed as young people were composing, that personal responses to musical ideas were very important to encourage. Such responses enabled the young people on their composing journeys, facilitating them to further refine and develop their musical creations. This was true whether the young composers were working independently, or as part of a group. The nurturing and

encouragement of personal composing voices is therefore an important feature in composing and this was something that the research for *Go Compose* observed recurrently.

Music Leaders who worked with the young composers were essential in developing personal responses to composing. Their affirmation and validation demonstrated confidence into the composing experience of the young people with whom they were working and accordingly encouraged these young composers to continue to refine their ideas, aspire to greater composing development and to continue on their composing pathway. Group creativity is important in composing (Sawyer, 2003) and collaborative composing is not unusual and is evident in song-writing teams in some forms of popular music. Some have estimated that half of all song 'hits' are written in this way, describing such collaborative work as "song-craft" (Bennett, 2016 p. 142). This is therefore an important musical experience for young people and one which has authenticity and contextual validity. Individual composing is also important, and complete freedom for self-expression has long been identified in this form (Dunn, 1992). Young people should therefore feel enabled to compose in whichever of these modalities they choose as their personal compositional voice develops. Such varied and personal responses emerged from the *Go Compose* experience for young people and is an important part of a discussion which suggests that compositional opportunities need to be relevant and diverse (Sound & Music, 2019), so that personal response is permitted to emerge.

Practices to Develop Composing Confidence

The *Go Compose* project revealed that young people's confidence in composing could be very low. Many young people were reticent to compose at first and exhibited a fear of failure. This same under-confidence was not evident in other forms of musical engagement during the sessions; young people were keen to share the music they listened to and when preparing for performances of group composition work (such as songs) were evidently at ease. However, the beginning of the composing process, with many unknown parameters, meant that some young people were hesitant, requiring encouragement from project music leaders for the young composers to relax, begin to create, and to share their developing work and ideas. This was challenging at times, as music leaders were often on their own journey of confidence-development in facilitating composing. Although those leading the various project centres described themselves as uncertain about their ability to facilitate young people composing, at the end of the project research surveys and interview data concluded that *Go Compose* music leaders were both confident in teaching composing and in helping young people to develop their musical ideas.

The confidence of young people in composing did, however, develop during the project, for a variety of reasons. Practitioners working alongside the young people was part of the *Go Compose* methodology, meaning that work with the young people was a collegiate, cooperative, and purposeful endeavour. Such an approach was based in discussion

and musical interchange, enabling young people to give a voice to their own decision-making, facilitating both personal and collective agency. Examples of this approach included working with a musical facilitator in a small group, playing and discussing ideas in different parts of the room, realising ideas in pictures and diagrams, improvising in groups and as individuals and at each stage discussing what the impact of each musical event might be. These kind of musical interactions in developing confidence in composing were part of the nurturing environment of the *Go Compose* centres, which has already been touched upon, and it was not only the music leaders who were affirming of the musical ideas which emerged. Young people encouraged each other to participate in the sessions too, and when confidence was low, offered supportive comments to each other in a consistent and positive manner.

The *Go Compose* project enabled social development and this is a significant finding for instigating practices to develop composing in other contexts too. Young people told us that the quality of their lives improved, and increased collaboration between the young people in their composing activities was also observed during the latter stages of the project and this had not been there before. Confidence in composing is able to develop at critical biographical moments, especially when young people are able to hear their own work in a more disembodied manner. This was evident when composing practitioners listened to the young people's work with them as part of the project and mutual interchange of ideas were observed between the composing practitioners and the young people. Development was more limited without these dialogic moments, when the young people were able to listen without simultaneously performing their music. This also happened through audio recordings, rather than in the midst of the creative music-making, or video-recordings of their composing work as they were developing it. These kind of events, when young people are able to develop their awareness of their own compositions, were powerful in building confidence and increased composing esteem for both composing practitioners and young people, were specific research findings from the project. As a result of hearing their own music in this way, compositional agency was reinforced and this formed a memorable and developmental composing experience for the young people in *Go Compose*.

Composing Spaces, Opportunities and the Place of Composing in Schools

Composing is a complex construct to embed in teaching and learning, whatever the age or stage of the learners involved. Amongst the many things observed in *Go Compose* was that composing requires a specialised approach, time to embed, and time to flourish. The young participants from this project did not always have the opportunities to continue their composing journey after the project finished. Within the context of the English music education system, we have described many of the reasons for this. However, there seems

little doubt that England is untypical in this regard, and it seems likely to be the case that, in countries in and beyond Europe, composing pathways and progression routes are not always apparent. Another aspect we can note from this English research is that composing does not engender the same supportive responses from non-specialist educators as, say, performing does. Although composing is given less emphasis in English policy documentation than performing (Department for Education, 2022), *Go Compose* highlights the difference that composing can make to the life of a child when given composing opportunities, and our findings show that composing can raise musical aspirations, promote self-esteem and develop self-confidence in artistic expression.

Thinking about Composing Differently: A Vision for the Future

The creation of new musical works is important, and nurturing the next generation of composers, in whatever style or genre, is an important thing for music education to nurture. With retrenchment in music education taking place in many jurisdictions, thanks in no small part to neoliberal stances on education such as the performativity agenda outlined above, the place of composing as a normal part of the education of all our young people can be seen to be in jeopardy in some instances. It seems unfair that barriers to composing opportunities exist, and those young people who live within a bus ride of major urban centres are more likely to be able to access this than those in remote communities. Likewise, those whose parents have sufficient cultural capital (Beadle, 2020) seem to be at something of an advantage in pursuing creative outlets.

Composing music is predicated on musical thinking and music-making, and so there are multiple simultaneous ways in which the compositional development of young composers needs to take place alongside their general musical progression. The place of music education in schools is rightly a matter of concern for the European Association for Music in Schools (EAS), and it is important to think about and enact ways in which composing can be embedded into practice, alongside the more established routes for performers and performing ensembles. Whilst composing is recognised and valued in the academy, its position and status in schools is far less clear. What would be helpful for England, and by extension for many other countries too, is for proper and significant routes for compositional development to be put into place, which can exist alongside extant trajectories for performers. This requires some thinking, and quite a lot of activity, but music should not descend into only being what Lydia Goehr (1992) referred to as being an “imaginary museum of musical works”. This will not serve our young people, or the future of the art.

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