

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

We all have memories of how we were taught music when we were at school, and some will of course be happier than others. But how much do we know about how music is taught in other cultures around the world?

I've been lucky enough to travel around the world listening to, playing along with, and watching music being taught in places as diverse as Andalusia and Zimbabwe, and I believe that the different approaches to learning music used in other musical traditions can help us reflect on our own teaching as well as revealing insights into the workings of other musical minds.

I am assuming that the majority of the people reading this article will have been brought up in what we might call the 'Western classical art' tradition of musical education, where we learn major and minor scales, Western stave notation and all of the occasionally complex conventions of classical music theory. Because of our upbringing, our brains may even become hard-wired to consider this type of music, and the types of sound it generates, to be the norm. Similarly with rhythm, if we've been raised on a diet of Western music, we tend to expect the strongest beats to be at the beginning of bars or musical phrases, that some time signatures (such as four beats to the bar) are normal, and that the same beat should be maintained throughout a piece of music. Pop music would be a good example of this 'normalised' thinking.

Tuning, rhythm and even timbre can be quite different in music from other cultures – for example, the gamelan from Indonesia or the North Indian raga – and so when we encounter this music it can sound unusual to our ears. Ethnomusicologists sometimes call this the 'otherness' of the music of different cultures. But had we been born into and brought up in one of these other cultures, the music would feel as normal as Western music does to our Western ears. The way we are first introduced to music can so shape how we listen



Gamelan students in Bali

Musician, educator and leading authority on teaching world music Andy Gleadhill explores the benefits of understanding how music is taught in different cultures around the world

to and appreciate it for the rest of our lives that I believe as teachers we have a great responsibility to help young people become familiar with and understand a broad range of music, and to open their ears and minds to a wide range of musical possibilities.

IN THE COMMUNITY

A few things in particular have struck me from watching music being taught and learned around the world.

Very often a country's traditional music is not something that is taught in schools at all, but is instead learned in the local community, in family groups or in places of worship. I remember being surprised when talking to the head of music of a large school in San

Paolo, Brazil, when he told me they do not teach samba and that this was taken care of by local community groups.

I spent some time in Salvador, a large city in the north of Brazil, and was impressed by the amount of time the young musicians spent practising their instruments there. But it was not what we'd call 'practice' in the UK. The players all played together in what have become 'communities of practice', where they not only practise their technique but also help one another, discuss the music, improvise among themselves, and generally bounce ideas off one other and positively comment on their playing. Nowhere did I see an individual practice room or a musician practising alone – very different from what we tend to see as 'proper practice'.

On the other side of the world in Indonesia I observed gamelan groups rehearsing in public schools, as well as older students at the Indonesian Institute of the Arts – and even the first adult all-female gamelan ensemble in Bali.

One of the strengths I see in the way that gamelan music is taught is that all the players in the group learn to play all of the instruments in the ensemble. This, I believe, gives the players a much fuller understanding of the way the music is structured, and it has made me wonder how much the players in our own youth orchestras would benefit if each section of the orchestra understood more about the music and the challenges of the others.

Perhaps one of my most memorable experiences of learning music from another culture was back in the early 1980s when I was learning about music in Africa. I was in the Okovango Delta in the remote north of Botswana and had hired a local San bushman to take me out into the swamplands in a hollowed out tree-trunk canoe called a mokoro. We had paddled for a few hours admiring the wildlife when we camped up for the night on one of the Delta's small islands. My companion disappeared into the bush with his bow and arrow and soon returned with our supper. After the meal, as we sat round a campfire, he picked up his bow and placed the string horizontally along his teeth. He then struck the string vertically with an arrow

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and adjusted the tension of the string with his other hand. This produced a wonderful harp-like tone, which he then sang along to. I thought to myself how lucky I was to be listening to music so ancient that it had never been written down, and to my knowledge never recorded. Without any shared language he then taught me the techniques to be able to play the bow and arrow instrument. This was done without words, written music or any resources apart from the bow and arrow itself, yet my tutor managed to relate to me tone, timbre, rhythm, pitch, tempo, dynamics and melody. And there you have, in a nutshell, the power and potential of 'world music' for teaching and learning. So let us further explore the advantages of this 'learning by playing' approach.


ACCESSIBILITY OF WORLD MUSIC

Because most instruments from 'world music' traditions are quite simple in their construction and not technically difficult to play, they can be a much more inviting prospect for students who haven't played an instrument before.

This accessibility helps those who may have a barrier to learning an instrument and it also means that an ensemble of beginners can quickly produce good, musical sounds. Nothing succeeds like success, and the speed at which pupils can play fully developed pieces of world music as part of an ensemble helps to enhance their sense of achievement and the enjoyment of their lessons.

Last but not least, most styles are naturally differentiated and have easy and difficult parts. This enables the teacher to ensure that all pupils can play at the same time and that all are engaged throughout the music lesson. No one need be left out or left behind.

There are other, non-musical advantages to learning music through a world musical style, as it supports a range of cross-curricular activities throughout the school. Historical, cultural, geographic and even economic elements are involved in the study of world music, and many schools have followed up world music ensemble lessons by developing contacts with schools in the country of the music's origin.

The best advocates for learning music in this way are of course the young people themselves, whose enjoyment and sense of achievement is clearly displayed in their enthusiasm. I am not of course suggesting that the only music education our young people receive should be delivered through world musical styles, but as a way of giving every pupil a greater understanding of music and of the world around us, it's certainly hard to beat. 

Andy Gleadhill: 'The way we are first introduced to music can shape how we listen to and appreciate music for the rest of our lives'



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Andy Gleadhill will be presenting his workshop-seminar 'Teaching Music – International Perspectives' at the Music & Drama Education Expo | London on 22 February 2018 at Olympia Central.