

Susanna Eastburn - Music Mark Keynote 22 November 2019

Good morning everyone, it's wonderful to be here in Sheffield with you and thank you so much for the invitation to speak today.

I've been asked to speak today about the importance of composing in music education, and about how collaboration and partnerships can support innovation in how we ensure that our young people can compose and create their own music.

Both aspects of this topic are incredibly important to me. Firstly because collaborations and partnerships are absolutely integral to everything we do at Sound and Music – whether it's our Summer School at the Purcell School, or our Listen Imagine Compose action research project with Birmingham City University and Birmingham Contemporary Music Group.

And secondly because at Sound and Music, everything we do is about new music and the people that create it. And as part of that, we want to know where the next generation is coming from.

This topic is also very timely. Last month we launched our Can Compose report. This was based on a survey of national music educators that we undertook last year about the situation of composing in music education.

Before I go any further, I'd like to define 'compose' and 'composing' in terms of what I'm talking about today.

For us at Sound and Music, composing means creating new original music or sound, in any style or genre. So it encompasses electronic music, grime, notated music, improvised music, singer-songwriting or any other kind of original music.

Also for us it's an activity that can take place both in and out of school.

Can Compose itself is a massive achievement of collaboration since it brings together and presents the views and experiences of over 550 music educators, from head teachers and chief executive of arts organisations to teachers and musicians working on the front line, all of whom took the time to tell us about their experiences. We heard from people from all around the UK, from Penzance to Inverness. I'm sure that many of you in this room today contributed. THANK YOU. I know how busy you are and I can assure you that your contribution was completely vital.

Can I just ask you to put your hand up if you're aware of that report?

If you haven't, then you can find copies of the report at the back of the room and at the Sound and Music stand, and it's also available on the Sound and Music website.

We undertook the survey, and created the report that presents what people told us, because we wanted to find out what was really going on with composing in music education, to get a clearer and more evidenced picture of what is actually happening and how people view it.

We were thrilled that there was pretty much unanimous agreement from our respondents that creating and composing music should be a core element of music education

Also 97% of people agreed that it enables children & young people to develop their identity and wellbeing.

However

There was also almost unanimous agreement that there was a deficit of opportunities for young people to do so.

And many barriers (in fact our respondents between them identified over 600 barriers facing young people who want to learn more about creating their own music).

You'll be relieved to know that I am not now going to list all 600 and something barriers as that would be quite a downbeat keynote speech.

But I AM going to talk today about the changes that need to take place at policy level. And I'm also going to talk about what we can do ourselves, working together, to make things better.

Our Can Compose survey, and the amazing insights that educators all across the country shared with us, confirms that there are serious structural deficiencies in how young people are taught to create their own music. We have the evidence and we now know what we're dealing with – we can work together to put things right.

The roots of the problem are complex and interwoven, but point clearly and compellingly to the need for changes in perceptions, provision, practice and policy.

And the biggest challenge is policy, so I'm going to start there.

Taking a step back for a moment. There are more and more reports – from academia and from industry, from academia and industry working together – that say irrefutably that the skills that will be most needed in the future are creative skills. There are many drivers for this but they include the growth of

artificial intelligence, and also the increasing sharing and consumption of creative content online. In the future, people will thrive on the strength of their imagination and their ideas, and the resilience that comes from being able to think flexibly around a problem.

I'll mention just a few of these reports:

- In 2017 – NESTA The Future of Skills
- The CBI's report just published on the creative industries
- Just last month – the Durham Commission, which looked at creativity across the whole of the education sector

I thought it would be interesting to share the Durham Commission's definition of 'creativity':

"The capacity to imagine, conceive, express, or make something that was not there before."

They argue that whilst much has been achieved in our education system to improve academic standards, this has been at the expense of nurturing the creativity of our young people, and neglecting the development of the skills, knowledge, understanding and experiences which they will need in the world beyond schools, and which our economy, culture and society need to flourish.

The Durham Commission links creativity to 3 themes that underpin an individual's life:

- Identity and community (creativity contributes to the development of the individual and it supports social engagement)
- Mobility (creativity offers opportunities for individual growth, and it helps to develop skills that can respond to the challenges of rapid technological development and automation)
- Wellbeing (creativity contributes to our wellbeing, and it supports young people's mental health. It also helps young people have a positive relationship with technology)

The Durham Commission also identifies that young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds have the fewest opportunities for creativity and that if creative skills are the ones that will be most useful in the future, this reinforces unfairness and division in our society.

I strongly suspect that none of that will be a surprise to you!

But all of us working in music education and passionate about it, have somehow found ourselves in the situation in this most creative of artforms, that the most creative act of all is neglected.

Please believe me when I say firstly that in no sense whatsoever is this a criticism of educators working on the front line. I know about the squeeze on funds, the squeeze on time, and the squeeze on children themselves regarding how they spend their time.

Also I know that there is some brilliant work going on out there – I'll come back to that later.

However, composing is almost invisible in public policy.

The current National Plan for Music Education, in the introduction signed by Michael Gove and Ed Vaizey, mentions the following composers:

Thomas Tallis, William Byrd, Edward Elgar, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Peter Maxwell Davies, Thomas Ades, Howard Goodall, Adele (token woman!) and Tinie Tempah

(In fact, these are the only artists mentioned in the introduction)

But, despite this introduction, the National Plan itself has only one instance of the word 'compose' or 'composer' compared to 54 instances of the word 'perform' or 'performer'.

And what activity there is, is often fragmented, in isolation, and with no progression or signposting. From what you told us in our survey, we learnt that only 27% of educators are signposting young composers to external opportunities

We also know, from what you told us, that although composing is part of the national curriculum, it is the area where teachers feel least confident and supported.

Also that the way composing is assessed in exams does not encourage "*The capacity to imagine, conceive, express, or make something that was not there before.*"

This would be unthinkable in other art forms!

In visual art and English, creative originality is prized and cherished. It is understood to be absolutely fundamental to learning about the subject. Just think about all the messy blobs stuck to fridges everywhere, or all the poems written. Why can't we have our children's music playing in our homes?

Why does this matter? What's at stake here?

Firstly – we need to be nurturing and supporting the next generation of talented composers from across all parts of society, not just the privately educated. This is vital to the future of our culture and society, let alone essential for the success of the creative industries.

But secondly - we have already heard that creative originality - the ability to have an idea, to develop it, to wrestle with it, to have the resilience not to give up on it, to use your imagination to find a way through and to express something individual, distinctive, original and clear – these skills, this creativity, is what our young people will need in the future so that they can thrive in and navigate an increasingly complex, changing and automated world.

These are skills which learning to compose and create your own music can uniquely nurture.

So what needs to change?

- We need to change PERCEPTIONS – at all levels from government to parents – that music education equates to learning to play an instrument or sing. Music education can be much richer, more creative and engaging than that alone.
- We need to change PROVISION – with better access to information, resources, examples of good practice and signposting. Also better training and support for using Digital tools and technology, which more young people are engaging with and which present a tremendous and accessible opportunity.
- We need to change POLICY – there should be a wider recognition and understanding embedded in policy, that composing and creating music is an integral part of every child’s music education, with plans, data collection and funding to support that

In fact composing – as you told us in our survey - needs to be one of the fundamental building blocks of a music education, alongside performing, singing, listening and reflecting, and this should be reflected in our PRACTICE.

And what are we doing about it?

Sound and Music is a charity. We don’t have members who we have to represent. We have no stake in this other than our mission and passionate belief that composing and creating new music should be at the heart of music education.

But we are a national organisation, and we have a growing community of people who can help and who care passionately about this.

So our first commitment is to continue working tirelessly to raise the profile of composing as a core part of music education.

How are we going to do that?

Everything we do is with other people! Without you, we wouldn't know any of this for sure. We wouldn't have any of this insight and evidence. We want to continue to work with you to make things better and help with the challenges we're facing.

We commit to working with colleagues from across the sector to ensure that the needs of young composers are recognised in the forthcoming National Plan for Music Education. This means that we will be working with Bridget and her fantastic team at Music Mark to do this, as well as our colleagues at the Arts Council. And we will be targeting the Department for Education, and whoever is running it when the time comes!

Government policy is one thing but we also all know that things will only change if we work together to share information and provide pathways that cross geography and organisations. We've done this in the past with a number of you I see here today and we'd love to do more!

So here are some more commitments, to things we would like to work together on:

- We want to share information about what's going on. We know it can be difficult to find out what is going on elsewhere because there currently isn't a central place where you can look for information and resources – we want to create that central hub.

In our survey, you told us about over 250 unique opportunities for young composers around the country – that's amazing! For example, right here in Sheffield we heard about the fantastic work with young composers done by the Sheffield Music Academy and Ensemble 360 as well as the creative workshops run by Folk Factory. All under the aegis of the wonderful Sheffield Music Hub – thank you so much! It is really inspiring. Although I did have a question about your strapline Learn Sing Play Enjoy – how about Create in there as well?

- Actually these examples lead me to our next commitment, which is that we want to shine a spotlight on where there is good practice – We want to be generous about sharing fantastic examples of things that are going on – we have a newsletter, social media, a website – we want to use these channels to share the great work going on.
- And Next year we are going to launch an Alliance for Composing in music education. This will be a national network of organisations thinking strategically together about how we support young composers of diverse backgrounds and with a range of interests and needs. This network will enable the sharing of information and resources, and create a better network of progression routes across the country for young composers. We will launch this next year and are looking for strategic partners across the UK.

If any of these commitments sound like something you want to get involved in, then get your phone out now, go to our website and sign up.

Hopefully you might also be asking yourselves, what else can I do?

Ask us to help you! We have resources, we run CPD sessions – if you need support we can point you in the right direction. If you're looking for something to help build your confidence, we have resources that can help you, and before you know it you'll be inspiring even more of your students to create their own music.

Ask your hub or leadership team – what are they doing about composing? There are huge benefits to supporting composing – it's a way to reach more schools, and engage a wider range of pupils.

Ask yourself – what more could you be doing?

And with that, I'd like to end with a little something about me. I grew up in Cornwall in the 1970s. I went to a comprehensive school and benefited massively from the amazing provision of what was then Cornwall Music Service. As a shy and socially awkward child and teenager, I found in the many orchestras, ensembles and choirs that I was part of a way to connect with my peers. But I never learnt to compose, either in or out of school. I loved music, and went on to do O Level (that dates me!), A Level and then a degree in Music at a fancy university. I arrived and was surrounded by all these people who had been to private school and knew how to compose and I literally had no idea how I might begin to do that. So it remains something I have never done and that is a source of lasting regret to me. And probably why I do what I do now.

That regret isn't really about the masterpieces that I might have composed. But I'm naturally quite an inflexible thinker. I've had to work really hard to deal with that as I've progressed in my career and it hasn't been easy. I feel sure that the ways of thinking that composing encourages, the different ways to approach a situation or problem, would have been incredibly beneficial. I care so much that young people have this opportunity that was not available to me.

So let's work together to make sure that our next generation of leaders has the creativity, imagination and flexible thinking that we're sure as hell going to need.

Thank you.