

BEFRIENDING THE IMAGINATION: CHILDREN, MUSIC AND PLAY

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What is a musician? Or should I ask *who* is a musician? We tend to think in such essentialist terms because our ideas of art are steeped in Kantian aesthetic idealism and its quasi-religious interpretation of art – especially, since Schopenhauer, where the art of music is concerned.¹ In Europe, a highly sophisticated elite form blossomed in their lifetimes and their German culture. That retains a dominant place today – not only here, but in societies as different as China, Venezuela and South Africa. Even its name, ‘classical music’, highlights its pre-eminence. This is, it seems to say, simultaneously the source and the summit of our culture.

In this imagination, musicians are born, not made. Their talent and – we hope – their genius is innate, though it needs training to blossom. Formal musical education, in and beyond Europe, is still rooted in that vision of music, despite the social, cultural and pedagogical upheaval of recent decades. We train children – and *train* is the operative word² – to acquire the highest degree of technical competence and formal knowledge of Western art music they can achieve, always looking out for the exceptional talent who will go beyond her teacher to become a star in the firmament of the next generation.

This system is effective. Great musicians replace one another on our concert platforms, keeping alive the extraordinary musical culture that blossomed during the European Enlightenment. Through it, we find what we look for: *born* musicians.

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But at what cost to our musical life and to the vast majority of children who are not born musicians? At what cost even to the majority of natural musicians who dedicate years of their childhood to repetitive practice in this system, only to find at the age of 17 or 21 or 26 that they do not have the final gram to make them a soloist, or even a first violin? And what cost is paid even by those who do go so far?

My intention is not to disparage European classical music, which I love and value, nor even the system of training and education that ensures it is passed on to new generations. It is a high point of human culture and we would be rightly blamed by future generations if we allowed it to wither through ignorance or indifference. Still, being human creations, neither the music nor its systems of transmission can be regarded as beyond criticism. They are not, at the risk of contradicting Schopenhauer, separate from life.

More importantly, in the context of my theme here, classical music is only one form of human musical expression, the totality of which is so vast, rich and diverse that, if it were possible to know it all, one would know humanity itself. The status of classical music – and its support from public institutions, charitable foundations, business and education – can obscure the value if not the presence of other musics in our culture. Rock, pop and jazz, hip-hop and electronica, reggae, soul and blues, traditional music and music from beyond Europe – these and countless more are central to the lives of billions of people. Are they of such little account in our thinking? And, what is most relevant here, do the many and varied pathways they have created for passing on musical technique, knowledge, judgement and pleasure to the next generation really have nothing to offer an education system so committed to the training methods of classical music?

Perhaps we should begin by questioning the idea that musicians are born rather than made. There is some truth in it, of course. The theory of multiple intelligences has been widely accepted since Howard Gardner first proposed it some 20 years ago.³ It has found acceptance because it coincides with our experience. Children – people – are not the same. We think, understand, feel and make sense of the world in different ways. That's not simply a matter of culture, although it adds complexity and variation. It is a universal and consistent aspect of the human mind: for biological, psychological and experiential reasons we do not think the same.

Musical intelligence is one of the most obvious expressions of human genius and one of the earliest to manifest itself. Gardner writes, 'of all the gifts with which individuals may be endowed, none emerges earlier than musical talent'.⁴

What do I mean by musical intelligence? It's hard for someone like me – with a primarily linguistic intelligence – to be sure, but here's how I see it. A child with an innate musical intelligence does not simply like music: she *understands* it the first time she hears it. She understands it the way that I understand language. Music, of course, is also a language that flourishes in the interplay between intellect and affect. A child of only two or three may distinguish not only pitch and rhythm in music, but keys, patterns and structures.⁵ Like most children, she gains pleasure from the experience but, however unconsciously, she also recognises its essential *organisation* in ways that most of us miss, at the same age and probably always. It makes sense to her. She does not even need to think consciously about this, though there is evidently a vast body of knowledge and experience to acquire in the years to come. The difference is that she is in her element.

When she is performing or listening to music, she is like a fish in water. I do not have a musical intelligence. I cannot recognise a key or even understand what that concept means except in a vague, abstract sense. I am, in the words of Otto Karolyi, writing in 1965,

'Like the tourist who goes abroad for his holiday, enjoys the landscape, the gesticulations of the natives, and the sound of their voices, but can't understand a word of what they say. He *feels*, but he can't understand'.⁶

Still, I do *feel*. I have always loved music: I listen to and think about it frequently. It has given me deep pleasure and shaped my sense of self, of others and the mysterious experience of living. So perhaps, after all, I *am* musical, not in being able to understand, explain or make music very well, but in my love of music and the place it has in my imagination. I recognise though that it is not my element. I can swim, but I am not a fish. A hippopotamus perhaps, bathing in this element that transforms the experience of a body used to lumbering about on land. Musical intelligence, I think, may be less a matter of degree than some other forms of intelligence. It's more black and white. You get music, as a language, or you don't. Inside, or outside. Water or land.

It's important to say too that musical intelligence is not the same as musical *aptitude*: not everyone who understands music has the physical and other capacities to become a good performer. Nor do they all have the desire to make music: listening to it may be more than enough. European concert halls depend heavily on such people for their audiences – those with an innate musical intelligence, with a love and understanding of music, but with no desire or capacity to make it themselves.

Nor does musical intelligence necessarily make someone creative. Our culture has placed increasing value on both the arts and creativity in the post-industrial age, for reasons that need not detain us here. In doing so, it has often confused the two, but they are different. Creativity is a key resource of all artistic practice, but it is equally important and equally available in other fields of human endeavour such as science, education, diplomacy and agriculture. Creativity is the desire to go beyond current practices and assumptions, coupled with the imagination to make productive new connections. Curiosity is one of its salient features. Many artists, many musicians, are creative. It is the restlessness of a Beethoven, a Miles Davis, a Bob Dylan – and of millions of other men and women of less titanic stature – that takes music forward as a living manifestation of changing human circumstances.

But for other artists, including many musicians, standards of expression come before creativity. They have a deep understanding of tradition, form and process, and a technique developed over decades of training and practice. They do not seek to create new sounds but to recreate existing ones to the highest standard in the present context. This is not a lesser art. If we see it as such, it is because we have false expectations about both art and creativity. Most art is the recreation of familiar ideas and experiences.⁷ That is why it gives us pleasure. It confirms and supports us in our existing values – and that is something that all human beings need. The political and social upheaval being seen in Europe, North Africa, the Middle East and the United States is at least partly a consequence of people feeling that their cultural values, and the sense they make of the world, are under threat.

Now here's the problem: the world of music, including the key field of musical education is, naturally enough, run largely by musicians or, to be more precise, people with a musical intelligence. And I suggest that, if you have always understood music as a natural element, you struggle to understand how people who do not share your gifts relate to it. A fish cannot understand how a hippopotamus experiences water because the fish has never been out of it. A hippo, on the other hand, is aware both of the pleasures of water and his own limitations in it. He cannot understand what it feels like to be a fish, but nor can he be unaware that it must feel very different.

If that is true, it may be expected that music education is conceived and delivered principally by people with a musical intelligence and that it therefore suits children with the same intelligence very well. But even then, argues Hans van Regenmortel, the demands of conventional music teaching stifles or ignores the child's individual musical personality and desire for expression:

‘Most children have so many problems dealing with the technical difficulties of their instrument, deciphering scores and accepting imposed technical and stylistic norms, that they too often just copy the symptoms of musical expressivity that their teachers explained to them.’⁸

Those with less or no musical intelligence – the very large majority – struggle even to get as far as being able to copy what was explained to them.

I first began to think more seriously about the limitations of how we teach music in 1996, when I undertook a case study of the *fèisean* movement in Scotland. *Fèis* (plural *fèisean*) is a Gaelic word for festival. In the early 1980s, the Gaelic language and culture were at a low ebb in Scotland, spoken by about 80,000 people, mostly in the Highlands and Islands.⁹ But there was a growing interest and a small, passionate body of Gaels committed to ensuring that it did not finally disappear. On the Catholic island of Barra, at the southern end of the Outer Hebrides, a group of locals set out to interest the youngest generation in their heritage of music, song and language. The first *Fèis Bharraigh*¹⁰ was held in 1981, during the summer holidays, when many families return to the island to visit grandparents. Its success set the model first for *Fèis Rois*¹¹, launched in 1986 with the support of the local council in Ross and Cromarty, and subsequently for many more. Today there are 47 *fèisean* in Scotland, all independent, all different and all dedicated to teaching Gaelic music to thousands of children and young people who take part.¹²

During 1996, I spent time with *Fèis Rois*, *Fèis Bharraigh* and other *fèisean*, interviewing children, tutors and organisers, observing the sessions, and even joining in at the *Fèis Rois* adult weekend. My research was published later that year and it’s not necessary to go through the findings here.¹³ What I do want to mention though – and it isn’t much stressed in that report – is the happiness I witnessed time and again among both children and adults involved.

Success has enabled many *fèisean* to establish regular classes throughout the year, at its heart a *fèis* is an intensive week of work, a festival. The one I got to know best was *Fèis Rois*, whose Junior *Fèis* was already attracting more than 150 children aged between 7 and 11, for the first week of the Easter holiday.¹⁴ I watched them arrive in Ullapool by car and bus on a chilly Monday morning. Some ran off to catch up with friends, while others hung back with a parent, nervous and unconfident. During the next five days, they would spend every moment together, learning and playing music in the school and lodged in hotels and guesthouses that had not yet

opened for the holiday season. Each child chose three different instrumental classes as well as taking part in the Gaelic singing sessions. By Friday night and the grand ceilidh in the Leisure Centre, these children from towns and villages across the northern Highlands had been transformed into a happy, chattering, energised group ready and able to perform for the parents who had returned to collect them and the wider community of Ullapool. Recalling the sometimes unsure children I'd seen on Monday morning, I had the impression that they'd grown a couple of centimetres in five days. And every child took the stage: I well remember the beginner's fiddle class playing the lovely tune 'Mairi's Wedding' together, each child miraculously holding up and being held up by all the others.

There was traditional music teaching in Scotland before the *fèisean*, of course, but it tended to be just that: traditional. The passing on of a body of cultural knowledge with a 'correct' way of handling it. A national gathering, the *Mod*, provided a focus for this culture and, like the Welsh *Eisteddfod*, it was rooted in competition. To win a prize at the *Mod* is not just a great achievement: it can lead to national recognition and a long, if not necessarily well-paying, career as a Gaelic singer or musician. The *fèisean* transformed that approach with its commitment to inclusivity. There is no competition here, except perhaps with oneself, as each child tries to learn what they can do. Rather than *mastering* an instrument, they learn to *befriend* it and, by extension, to befriend their own musical imagination. There is not a fixed external standard to which they must aspire only to find, in most cases, that it is beyond their reach. There is instead an imaginative landscape to discover. It is peopled by musicians past and present as well as by family members, all encouraging the child to explore and find their own place, for itself and the joy it can bring them and others. One child, with experience of both *Mod* and *fèis* explained the difference in these terms:

*'The Mod is an ending, everything leads up to that moment. The fèis is a beginning, an opportunity from which everything is possible. It's the starting point.'*¹⁵

That year, at a ceilidh near Lochboisdale in the Western Isles, I had one of the most memorable musical experiences of my life. A hundred people had gathered in the community hall, sitting around a central space into which, between 8pm and 11pm, they moved in turn to perform a song or two or an instrumental piece on the fiddle or the bagpipes. The atmosphere was serious – only tea and juice were taken – and yet somehow joyous. And I observed children as young as four and five sit still and attentive during this long evening: some of the performers were not much older.

Above all, perhaps, there was no distinction between audience and performer, musician and listener. This was a moving instance of a community affirming its values and sense-making through the expression of a common culture.

It is true that a remote context, relatively homogenous demographics and a shared heritage all combine to give the *fèisean* their distinctive character. But everywhere has its unique conditions: specificity is intrinsic to our creation and enjoyment of culture. The success of the *fèisean* lies in how they have responded creatively to their specific circumstances, not in those circumstances. In the poorest fringes of Paris, culture, demographics and social structures could hardly be more different. And yet beneath these differences, the values and approach of *Banlieues Bleues* is strikingly similar to that I have just described.

Banlieues Bleues is a jazz festival founded in 1984 by local politicians in Seine-Saint-Denis, on the north eastern edge of Paris.¹⁶ This is a tough neighbourhood characterised by massive social housing where people live with high levels of unemployment, poverty and other problems. A large proportion of the population are first or second generation immigrants from the Maghreb, West Africa, Eastern Europe and elsewhere. The idea of creating a jazz festival – and especially one that aspired to attract the well-heeled audiences of Paris to this ill-reputed area – was a bold ambition. At the time, jazz itself still occupied an uncertain place within French cultural policy and it was brave to programme world-renowned stars in out-of-town multipurpose halls. But the combination of political will and a visionary artistic team committed to offering local people the best possible musical experiences has been more than vindicated. The festival has flourished, establishing itself as a leading event in the jazz calendar and building strong audiences and local support. In March and April 2106, 42 established stars and young performers played in various spaces across the district, attracting large, enthusiastic audiences.

In context, this is already remarkable. But what is particularly relevant here is the integration of community education in the festival from its earliest days. A programme of '*Actions Musicales*' is developed in association with the artists who will be performing during the festival, giving young people and adults opportunities to discover musical cultures with which they are rarely familiar and experience working with some of the world's great musicians. A typical example is the project undertaken with the Chicagoan saxophonist and bandleader, Ernest Dawkins.¹⁷ Between September 2002 and March 2003, local musicians, teachers and amateurs worked with teenagers in several local schools, on a new creation that combined texts written by the young people and music composed for the occasion

by Dawkins.¹⁸ The piece was called 'The Last Diaspora' and its focus – like much of his music – was the experience of migration between Africa, Chicago and Paris. It provided a space in which to explore identity, heritage and choice for participants many of whom had roots in Algeria, Senegal, Turkey, Viet Nam or elsewhere. During rehearsals, Ernest Dawkins told the students, through an interpreter:

*'This is a multicultural society. It's your responsibility to establish your own identity and [...] learn how to challenge your energy and channel it in the proper direction. Music is just a means to an end. That's all it is.'*¹⁹

His music created space within his own ensemble for young drummers and singers as well as a brass band of local amateur musicians. After months of working apart, the group rehearsed intensively together in the week leading up to the concert. The teenagers learned about rhythm, singing and jazz as they worked with Dawkins and his band. But the most important learning was not about theory or technique. It was about the joy of making music, of singing their own words, of performing to an appreciative audience that had no idea what they could achieve. It was about pride in their roots and identity and what other cultures have given the world. It was about how a person can achieve dignity, rather than stardom, through musical talent and commitment. And they learned that a celebrated musician valued them and their imaginations enough to spend a week rehearsing and performing with them – not as a favour but because he believed that together they could give a paying audience a night of exceptional, beautiful music.

In the documentary film about the project, there are long sequences shot in the schools where the music was slowly developed in the months before the concert. The contrast is telling between posters of European composers and white men demonstrating how to hold an oboe on the classroom walls and the multiracial group of adults and children assembled to create new music composed of djembe drums, contemporary jazz, and the words of disregarded teenagers. The image speaks volumes about the gulf between approaches to teaching music.

There are huge musical, social and cultural differences between Banlieues Bleues and the fêisean, between the high-rises of outer Paris and the quiet towns of northern Scotland. But there are also similarities in how these projects have opened up music to young people, placing as much emphasis on culture and creativity as on craft and standards. If, for Ernest Dawkins, music is a means to an end, then so is technique. Such an approach is not unusual in community art and informal education, where a focus on creativity, expression and meaning can be a strong incentive

to acquire skills. In both the fèisean and Banlieues Bleues, the sharing of music in performance is the keystone holding everything together. The performance itself need not be spectacular: it is the shared experience and offering to others what has been so carefully prepared that is important. A performance for parents at home can be as valuable as one in a concert hall for strangers, if it is taken seriously and if it is the child who chooses how and when they are ready to share their music.

Both projects value the ear, the body and the imagination as much as the intellect in the process of musical learning. As one fèis participant explained '*the passing on of traditional music is largely subjective, with much of the work being done by the ear*'.²⁰ This approach values more forms of knowledge and intelligence than those in tune with musical notation, ensuring that a wider range of young people can find a way into music that suits them. It can also change the experience of all the children in the group because different kinds of insight and other ideas are sparked by this broader context. In Scotland and in Seine-Saint-Denis, the success of the music depends as much on its capacity to nourish the children's imaginations and open up for them key questions of identity that so often concern young people.

Another area of common ground is the central place of professional musicians, alongside tutors and teachers. The example and inspiration offered by Ernest Dawkins in France or, for example, Aly Bain and Phil Cunningham in Scotland are vital to the young people's engagement with music. It's not that teachers are not good at what they do, but a musician brings another lived practice of music making. They show that music is something that people do to live, not simply to learn. With a creative rather than a pedagogical framework, an artist may also make demands that a teacher would not consider. That will not always work but when it does, children rise to meet an artist's high expectations. An artist does not stop making make art because they are working with children.

Both projects also place a high value on children learning together and making music together as a collective art. The result is that every child in the beginners' fiddle class *can* play 'Mairi's Wedding' at the ceilidh and experience the real sense of achievement that comes of sharing something good – better, usually, than it could have been if they had played alone. That collective work requires each child to listen to others and find her place in the whole. The emphasis is positive, in the sense of looking for what someone can, not what they cannot do – and that involves at least as much listening as instructing. This commitment to inclusivity – welcoming

those who want to take part rather than selecting those thought to have most musical potential – is integral to both Banlieues Bleues and the fèisean, where one adult participant told me that:

*'The fèis is very important to me because I am not very musical. I don't play any instruments or sing, so coming to the fèis makes me see how brilliant all the different musical instruments sound, and to be lucky to meet so many talented people. I love having a go on instruments such as the guitar, tin whistle, and I even have a shot at Gaelic singing.'*²¹

A community of musicians that welcomes someone who feels '*not very musical*' as an active participant is clearly interested not just in music, in a narrow and technically proficient senses, but in music as a cultural practice and in the people without whom it cannot exist. It is the culture of living performance in jazz or Gaelic music that enthuses those involved, not the identification and development of a few extraordinarily able individuals.

If the approach to teaching music seen in the fèisean and Banlieues Bleues (and in community music more generally) is not designed primarily to identify and support the most talented young musicians, it does not prevent them emerging and flourishing. When the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland launched Britain's only Bachelor of Music degree in traditional and folk music in 1996, several of its first students had come through the fèisean movement. Fèis Rois has offered work placements to students on this course from its earliest days.²²

Another distinctive aspect of both Banlieues Bleues and the fèisean is the value placed on new music and improvisation. Both Gaelic traditional music and jazz have a vast heritage of composed music that is being continually added to by musicians today. There is no shortage of work to learn and to learn from. Still, especially in jazz with its core of improvisation, there is a great appetite to create new music from the unprecedented interaction of the people present. 'The Last Diaspora' became what it was only because of each musician's input. Performances of the same work by different string quartets might sound very different. Here, who is in the room changes not just interpretation but what music is played. To watch musicians improvise, responding to one another within the rules of a common language, delighting in each contribution, with its own character and inflexion, can be one of the most joyous experiences in art.

It may be surprising that, with their commitment to Gaelic heritage, the fèisean have a similar enthusiasm for improvisation and new music. '*I love the mood of*

creativity and inspiration,' said one teenager during the research, before going on to say that *'Just last night, I wrote a song on the spur of the moment [with] someone I had never met before'*.²³

A willingness to experiment creatively with the source material in order to make something new and meaningful to musicians and audience alike is evident in the Scottish Highlands and the outskirts of Paris. But it is far from unique to them. It can be found in community music projects inside and outside schools across the world and I could have illustrated this talk with reference to the work of Sage²⁴ in Gateshead, More Music²⁵ in Morecambe, Xamfrà²⁶ in Barcelona, SAMP²⁷ in Leira, or of course, Ukelila²⁸ here in Flanders, where I saw children playing music together with exceptional joy and confidence. The list of community music projects transforming not just education by young lives is long and growing every day. For all their differences, they embody a vision of music as a living culture expressed in solidarity. At the end of 'Watch Me!', the film made about Ernest Dawkins' work in Paris, one of the young participants says about the final concert: *'franchement ça a été grand'*, 'honestly, it was great'. What more could a music teacher want to hear from a student?

Notes

- ¹ Kant was actually sceptical of music within his aesthetic philosophy because he thought that its abstraction from ideas made it trivial unless it was allied to the other arts. It was in the writings of Schopenhauer that the sacred ideal of music becomes clearly defined. According to Alex Ross *'Arthur Schopenhauer claimed in all earnestness that art and life had nothing to do with each other' and he observes that 'In the nineteenth century, music, especially German music, was considered a sacred realm sufficient in itself, floating far above the ordinary world.'* Ross, A., 2008, *The Rest Is Noise, Listening to the Twentieth Century*, London, p. 234.
- ² *'The education/training dichotomy points to a lack of aspiration beneath El Sistema's utopian rhetoric. Abreu's project marginalises many activities that were crucial to his own musical education, such as creating music and thinking, reading, and talking about it. It has the children on site for 20 or more hours a week; it could aspire to educating them, rather than simply training them how to play great orchestral works.'* Baker, G., 2014, *El Sistema: Orchestrating Venezuela's Youth*. New York; Oxford University Press, p. 147.
- ³ Gardner, H., 2011, *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*, New York.
- ⁴ Gardner, 2011, p. 105
- ⁵ See Gardner, 2011, p.111ff.

Notes cont.

- 6 Quoted in Henson, K., 1999, 'Review of *Music: A Very Short Introduction* by Nicholas Cook', *Music & Letters*, 80(2), pp. 271–274, Oxford: OUP
- 7 The desire for faithful reproduction rather than creativity in music is not confined to the classical field. Bob Dylan has been confronted by audiences unwilling to allow him to perform his own music differently at various times in his career, notably in 1965-66 and in 1979-81.
- 8 Van Regenmortel, H, 2013, 'Expression and Communication as a Cue for Developing Musical Skills', in Proceedings of the 6th Conference of the European Network of Music Educators and Researchers of Young Children, Gehrels Muziekeducatie, The Hague 2013, p. 293,
http://meryc.co.uk/MERYC_2013_Hague_Proceedings.pdf
- 9 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scottish_Gaelic#Number_of_speakers
- 10 <http://feisbharraigh.org.uk/index.htm>
- 11 <http://www.feisrois.org.uk/index.php?lang=eng&location=welcome>
- 12 <http://www.feisean.org/en/feisean-en/about-us/>
- 13 Matarasso, F., 1996, *Northern Lights, The Social Impact of the Fèisean*, Stroud, available at
<https://arestlessart.com/2016/11/27/traditional-music-young-people-and-community-in-the-scottish-highlands/>
- 14 Fèis Rois marked its 30th birthday in 2016, and made a short film featuring 30 different people's perspectives on the experience: <https://youtu.be/1GP4mamLHP4>
- 15 Matarasso 1996, p. 18
- 16 https://www.banlieuesbleues.org/62_association_1_histoire.php
- 17 <http://ernestdawkins.com/bio/>
- 18 Ernest Dawkins (b. 1950) has extensive experience of teaching and making music with young people in the Chicago Public School system, though in this case language differences added further complexities to the process: <http://www.akamu.net/dawkins.htm>
- 19 *Watch Me!*, directed by Xavier Baudoin, for la Huit Production, Paris 2003 at 32m.
- 20 Matarasso 1996, p. 17
- 21 Matarasso 1996, p. 18
- 22 BMus Traditional Music Handbook 2015-16 - Royal Conservatoire of Scotland,
<https://www.rcs.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/BMus-Traditional-Music-Handbook-2015-16.pdf>
- 23 Matarasso 1996 p. 30-31
- 24 <http://www.sagegateshead.com/join-in/>
- 25 <http://www.moremusic.org.uk/Learning>
- 26 <http://xamfra.net>
- 27 <http://www.samp.pt>
- 28 <http://www.ukelila.be>