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Trying Out Popular and Informal Music Learning Approaches
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As a part of an international collaboration with researchers from eight countries, Australian music psychologist Gary McPherson and I studied United States teenagers' motivations for learning music.¹ The good news was that these American youth reported more interest in music than any other learning activity (except athletics, which they valued equally to music) when participating in it outside of school. The bad news is that these same students reported low competence beliefs, values, and interest in music when it was a subject they learned *in* school. Our findings were similar to studies of adolescents in other parts of the world, who as a whole valued music and art less than any other subjects they learned at school.²

What is the difference? Why are youth apparently more eager to participate in music when learning it outside of school? As Gary and I compared our findings with those of other scholars,³ we reasoned that, among many other potential factors, students were in need of music learning experiences that provided them with more opportunities for autonomy, personal connection, and ownership. We concluded:

Providing more extensive, enriching, and more varied musical experiences at school may make music more accessible to a larger and more diverse population of students, and help students to experience first-hand the value that music can have in their lives.⁴

What can we do as music educators to meet the needs of a larger population of students in our schools, particularly those of general music students? In addition to helping students understand the intricacies and beauties of the Western classical canon – an art form that, as an orchestra conductor, I value very highly – how else might we foster a love of music making and lifelong musical engagement in all of the youth we teach?

Trying Out Popular Music

This past spring, my Secondary General Methods students at Boston University and I experimented with one way to answer these questions: We explored popular music learning approaches. As a cellist with extensive training in classical music, I found broaching the world of popular music to be extremely intimidating. However, I was inspired by the stories of other teachers who had let go of the need to be an “expert” in front of their students and, instead, to learn with (and from) them about ways to become more comprehensive musicians.⁵

My students and I read and discussed Lucy Green's text *Music, Informal Learning, and the School: A New Classroom Pedagogy*⁶ while also learning the ukulele together and trying out some of the informal learning approaches that Lucy Green recommended. Our experience was fulfilling and inspiring, as the students and I had breakthroughs in musical creativity, innovation, and connection in ways that we had previously not experienced – or, in some cases, had long forgotten.

Lucy Green's Informal Music Learning Approach

As a classically-trained musician herself, Lucy Green developed an informal learning approach through extensive research about how popular musicians learn.⁷ Her method is more about learning than about style; therefore, it is not only useful with

popular music but with any genre, including classical music. The five main tenets of Green's informal learning approach⁸ are as follows:

1. When first learning music, students should *start with music that they have chosen themselves*. This way, students can begin the music learning process with materials already familiar to them, and with music in which they are personally invested.

2. Students will primarily learn music – and musical skills – by *copying recordings by ear*. This strategy is similar to that of the Suzuki approach⁹ and is much the same way as we learn how to speak: by listening to others and trying out various sounds until they resonate with what we hear.

3. *Students will learn music alone and with friends, having very little adult intervention*. This is the facet of Green's approach that is most difficult for the control freaks among us (myself included): What if they get it all wrong? What if they goof off? What if they develop bad habits? Lucy Green has similarly faced such fears from teachers with whom she has worked. However, after time, these teachers came to not only trust their students to figure things out on their own, but to do so with a level of musical depth and insight that they had not previously developed when simply following the teacher's instructions.¹⁰ Ruth Debrot similarly describes in her doctoral dissertation how she has learned to allow her students more musical freedom, and how the students have also learned to turn to her for guidance at times when they truly needed her.¹¹

4. *Learning occurs in "haphazard, idiosyncratic, and holistic ways."*¹² While much of traditional music education follows a linear, step-by-step method, Green's approach allows students to try out music performance skills at an individual pace and in ways that are best suited for their learning needs and level of musical awareness. Green cautions us that this can look "messy" at first, and takes a tremendous amount of trust in the students' individual learning abilities.¹³

5. From the very beginning and throughout the process of learning a song, students *integrate skills of listening, performing, composing, and improvising*. As students work out the details of songs on their own without direct instruction, they are compelled to "try things out" and make mistakes along the way – mistakes that, Green has found, students typically work out on their own.

In our forthcoming book on music performance anxiety, my colleagues and I discuss how a performer's sense of expressive freedom can be hampered by a fear of making mistakes – something that commonly arises from perfectionistic goals – as well as an imbalanced emphasis on technique over musical communication.¹⁴ With Green's approach, students can practice using their musical voice while emulating what they hear from others, and develop confidence in their abilities to create music in ways that can become as fluent to them as spoken language.

Perhaps an informal music learning approach might be one means of bringing a broader population of students on board with the music they learn in school, and open up a larger variety of musical possibilities in which students can participate. My students and I are convinced. As one student reported at the end of our project, "Now I remember why I fell in love with music in the first place."

¹ Gary E. McPherson and Karin S. Hendricks, "Students' Motivation to Study Music: The United States of America," *Research Studies in Music Education* 32, no. 2 (2010): 201–13.

² Gary E. McPherson and Susan A. O'Neill, "Students' Motivation to Study Music as Compared to Other School Subjects: A Comparison of Eight Countries." *Research Studies in Music Education* 32, no. 2 (2010): 101-137.

³ See, for example: David J Hargreaves and Nigel A. Marshall, "Developing Identities in Music Education," *Music Education Research* 5, no. 3 (2003): 263-273; Adrian C. North and David J. Hargreaves, "Music and Adolescent Identity," *Music Education Research* 1, no. 1 (1999): 75-92; Bennett Reimer, "Reconceiving the Standards and the School Music Program," *Music Educators Journal* 91, no. 1 (2004): 33-38.

⁴ McPherson & Hendricks, "Students' Motivation to Study Music," 210.

⁵ See, for example, Randall Everett Allsup's recent MEJ article: "Another Perspective: Our "Both/And" Moment." *Music Educators Journal* 102, no. 2 (2015): 85-86.

⁶ Lucy Green, *Music, Informal Learning and the School: A New Classroom Pedagogy* (London: Ashgate, 2008).

⁷ Lucy Green, *How Popular Musicians Learn: A Way Ahead for Music Education* (London: Ashgate, 2002); see also Lucy Green, *Hear, Listen, Play! How to Free Your Students' Aural, Improvisation, and Performance Skills* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁸ Green, *Music, Informal Learning and the School*, 10.

⁹ Shinichi Suzuki, *Ability Development from Age Zero*, translated by Mary Louise Nagata (Miami, FL: Summy-Birchard, 1981).

¹⁰ Green, *Music, Informal Learning and the School*; Green, *Hear, Listen, Play!*

¹¹ Ruth A. Debrot, "Social Constructionism in the Middle School Chorus: A Collaborative Approach" (DMA diss., Boston University, under review).

¹² Green, *Music, Informal Learning and the School*, 10.

¹³ Green, *Music, Informal Learning and the School*; Green, *Hear, Listen, Play!*

¹⁴ Casey E. McGrath, Karin S. Hendricks, and Tawnya D. Smith, *Performance Anxiety Strategies: A Musician's Guide to Managing Stage Fright* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, in press).

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