

# **MAKING THE BEST OF THE MMC – THE CHALLENGE: Towards a strategy for action Robert Bunting April 2021**

Many of us are angry about the MMC. It seems to discard, even trample on, things we have given our lives to. But there are dangers in presenting ourselves as bug-eyed radicals bent simply on tearing it down. And I don't think we need to. We can see it positively, as a challenge and an opportunity.

I guess most of us feel positive about at least some of the ideas introduced to the NC by the MMC; for instance

- performing for an audience
- promoting aural memory
- revisiting listening repertoire year-on-year
- introducing young people to living composers.

There are other areas where we may be happy with the MMC's general position, but don't like the tone, the over-emphasis on conservative cultural values. For instance, the listening repertoire seems acceptably varied, yet we might feel there's a hidden agenda about the superiority of the 'Western Classical' tradition.

Still, there's wiggle-room to work inside the frame: we're encouraged to adapt the repertoire to suit our own circumstances.

Similarly with composing. We can at least be relieved that it has a secure place in the MMC. But we can be very unhappy about the prescriptive approach to teaching 'technique', and the staggering lack of awareness of what's been going on in classroom composing. 50 years of development in expressiveness and inventiveness, in dialogic teaching, building on cultural awareness and thinking about young peoples' own musical values, have been just ignored! But again – we're not forbidden to follow our own path! Perhaps we could find ways to incorporate some at least of the MMC's treasured 'technique' within our preferred way of working?

The MMC's fundamental flaw is the assumption that the chief aim of the music curriculum is to produce cohorts of dedicated musicians. This is a naive unexamined assumption, but it isn't actively evil. The MMC means well; it's just banal, mediocre, ill-informed, that's all.

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Some teachers will embrace it. But others will feel that in order to meet these requirements they will have to dumb down, so they might as well stop searching for anything better. So – is there space to support teachers in adopting the ways we believe are best within the MMC framework? Or are there deal-breakers, things we'll never be able to stomach?

Here are some acid tests. Do we agree:

1. that all young people should have some experience of 'classical' styles and techniques along with other styles and genres?
- that focused 'audience listening' in the classroom can be a valuable experience?

- that all young people should have some understanding of the concepts of pulse and metre, how scales and modes work in different traditions, and how tonal harmony works?
- that all young people should understand the purpose and the basic principles of stave notation, and how it impacts on styles of composing and performing?

If we do, I suggest we could accept the MMC framework. Those who wrote it may interpret these issues very differently from us, but we could use their language for our own ends. We could position ourselves, not as determined to tear down the MMC, but as aiming to make it work well, to bring it some quality, imagination, originality, and cultural awareness.

In the process we might significantly modify the values of the MMC, but we might be able honestly to say:

- ***The MMC gives us a good base to build on. We aim to help teachers and other practitioners bring out its full potential by drawing on the wide range of current classroom practice that emphasises critical and creative thinking and draws on children's own funds of musical knowledge.***

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Such a position would give us scope to engage with a wide range of teachers. Some we may never move, but there are plenty who will respond. It would also enable us to build bridges between the MMC and those composers, performers and instrumental teachers who are asked to work within its boundaries.

A coherent curriculum for such an approach, progressing stage by stage from Y1 to Y9 and blending creative with formal, is perfectly feasible. ***But the advocates and practitioners of this sort of approach to music education have not as yet produced such a curriculum.*** This may be because much of their (often outstanding) teaching takes the form of brief interventions and highly individualised ways of working – workshops, residencies etc. – rather than sustained year-on-year teaching and a community of shared

practice. If we want young people's musical education to reflect the best practice available today, we must buckle down and remedy this lack. Until we do, the authors of the MMC cannot be wholly blamed for falling back on the only curriculum model available.

The first challenge is to develop an approach that marries 'formal' with 'creative' in a way that more traditional music specialist teachers are happy to embrace. The second (and even greater) challenge is to make at least some of this approach accessible to non-specialist Primary-phase teachers. Both of these challenges call for a community of practice, with shared language and pedagogy, sustained by a strong model of progression and some agreement on what constitutes quality of achievement.