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Popular music and the classroom; student teacher reflections in Singapore

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Abstract

In the current syllabus for the General Music Programme for Primary and Secondary schools in Singapore, use of the keyword *popular* appears with reference to the repertoire in second stage, namely popular songs leading to the ability to [a]ppreciate the use of technology in creating the varied identity of contemporary music (e.g. loops in dance music) (MOE 2008, pg. 8) by the third stage until at Stage 5, involves a discussion of the role of personal and group (read cultural and national) identity in music (MOE 2008, pp. 8-10).

Evident in the GMP document therefore, is the potential and value of working with popular music: beginning with composing, improvising and recreating extending to identity formation either as individual and/or group identities which speak positively of the multiplicity of identity negotiation. An approach involving popular music is very much in line with current broader educational aims to develop individuals with the capacity to be creative and imaginative and socio-culturally well-tempered and that popular music has an important educational role to play in this respect.

This paper discusses a pilot project involving a group of undergraduate Music student teachers who opted to offer popular music as one of their ensemble options during the January through April 2011 semester. With leading questions to facilitate reflections of their learning journey in popular music, this paper examines their reflections of first-hand engagement with musical and extra-musical resources with implications for the place of popular music in education policy.

Introduction

Popular music's *significance* has provided much for Willis' contemplation, albeit the context in England but arguably transposable worldwide, on the tensions between policy and practice in contemporary discussions which includes schools and students:

Young people are unconscious foot soldiers...involuntary and disoriented conscripts in battles never explained... students are rendered by state-mandated education into compulsory living materials of future imaginings and moldings...without the rudiments of a sociological or ethnographic imagination...Power brokers and policy planners are transfixed by...their 'top-down' practices and initiatives; however, they fail to ponder the frequently ironic and unintended consequences of these practices and the creative cultural ways...'bottom-up' responses are often informed by quite different social perceptions, practices and assumptions (Willis 2006: p, 507).

The mis/matching of outcomes between top-down and bottom-up trajectories, Willis argues, is most keenly felt among those at the formative stages of both school and workplace:

Schools are one of the principal sites for the dialectical playing out of these apparent disjunctions and contradictions,

which while misunderstood, underlie some of the most urgent education debates – from traditionalism versus progressivism to the canon versus multiculturalism (Willis 2006: pp, 507-508).

Expressing the need for a social understanding of education to *consider top-down practices and bottom-up responses and the ways in which they interact ‘on the ground’ to produce the complex eddies, waves and flows of modernisation* (Willis: p.508, emphasis in original), Willis describes three waves of cultural modernisation ‘from below’:

Cultural responses to Universal schooling

Responses to the Postindustrial Society

Commodity and Electronic Culture (Willis 2006: pp.508-515, emphasis in original)

The point of Willis’ observations is that the school *is the direct instrument of the first wave; it suffers disorientation from the second wave; and is an important site for the playing out of the third wave of modernisation* (Willis 2006:519). This third perspective, on the multiple uses of popular culture and media by youth, is a phenomenon Willis calls *common culture*:

All school students are drawn in to the field of force of popular culture provision...commodity-related expressive consumption – or common culture – does not take place in a vacuum or simply repeat the exploited meanings of commodity production...In the school, this points to the importance of understanding popular cultural consumption with respect to previously existing themes of school conformism, resistance, disaffection, variations and points between them (Willis: p.517).

Given popular culture’s pervasiveness and propensity for *use/r* value, Willis argues:

Popular culture should be understood in relation to the strong urge of young people to make and maintain a viable informal cultural identity acknowledged by others in shared social space...The school is a crucial site for these grounds where an over-mapping of distinctions takes place, with common culture positions and identities mapping onto distinctions within the school and these distinctions themselves mapping onto wider social distinctions....perhaps it is the singular nature of the modernist school where people of the same age are forced into a common arena that compels individuals and groups to find a place within a single complex matrix (Willis 2006:518).

These preliminary musings are crucial to our paper because of the need to contextualize both aspects and situate them in the educational landscape in Singapore insofar as they pertain to popular music education – as policy and practice – in schools for students aged seven through sixteen. The current General Music Programme (GMP hereafter) for Singapore schools (MOE, 2008) identifies six objectives for engaging in music creating, performing and responding:

Sing and Play Melodic and Rhythmic Instruments Individually and in Groups

Create and Improvise Music

Describe and Evaluate Music through listening

Develop Understanding of Music Elements/Concepts

Discern and understand Music from and of various cultures and genres

Understand the role of Music in Daily Living

The keyword *popular* in the policy document appears with reference to the repertoire in second stage (from age eleven onwards), namely popular songs leading to the ability to [a]ppreciate the use of technology in creating the

varied identity of contemporary music (e.g. loops in dance music) (MOE 2008, p. 8) by the third stage until at Stage 5, involves a discussion of the role of personal and group (cultural and national) identity in music (MOE 2008, pp. 8-10). Prefacing this policy document is a preliminary handbook for school music coordinators which exhorts music teachers, through their coordinators to include *popular music and technology in the implementation* of the syllabus (MOE, 2007, pp. 1-2).

Evident in the GMP policy document therefore, is the potential value of working with popular music: beginning with composing, improvising and recreating extending to identity formation either as individual and/or group identities which speak positively of the multiplicity of identity negotiation in and among Singapore's diverse communities. An approach involving popular music is very much in line with current broader educational aims to develop individuals with the capacity to be creative and imaginative and socio-culturally well-tempered and that popular music has an important educational role to play in this respect. A logical outcome of this holistically developed self was given attention by Minister for Education Heng Swee Kiat in his opening address where he noted how:

Many of you have asked for support to be more student-centric, to see to the total development of the person rather than to build up just the academics. You also want to see a more collegial and collaborative environment among schools. And you want to know how we can bring parents and the community with us. Our schools and teachers will need time and space, to engage in the more demanding type of educating – values and 21st century competencies (Heng 2011, p.5 point 36).

The 2008 GMP syllabus document therefore captures in policy, the place for popular music in school-based curricula through the six objectives and five stages for engaging in music creating, performing and responding from the primary through the secondary levels.

Recalling Willis' concerns about matching top-down and bottom-up trajectories, are teachers teaching music in schools in Singapore *apprised of or prepared for* popular music practice as articulated in the GMP syllabus? Are music-specialist teachers equally prepared to meet expectations of popular music in the GMP syllabus in form and content? Considering how many music graduates possess specialisation in Euro-American art music traditions and instrumental skills of these traditions, can such a graduate become equally conversant with popular music in the music classroom? If so, what measures have been put in place to support or sustain such advocacy? If not so, what forms of training have been put in place to enable the teacher through professional development towards the teaching and learning of popular music in the classroom? And are there resources and materials to support and sustain the teaching and learning of popular music in schools? Where are these support-systems, and what are the means of sustenance and how are they sustained?

Considering how popular music is, *following Kellner and Denzin, a lived curriculum, one which has suffused young people's lives in ways that belie the kinds of formal and distant identifications we might expect from more traditional educational practices* (Dimitriadis 2009, p.160), how does one prepare students for engagement in lived and living curricula? What conceptual frames and questions should they be presented with to sharpen their sensory imbibing of popular music in education? What opportunities are there to assess and evaluate these aims and objectives? This paper begins this plethora of questions with a decided focus on reflections by student teachers on their understanding of the place of popular music in the classroom.

Context

Within the undergraduate Music programme at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, all music specialists are required to offer their main instrumental study as well as two other music ensembles, one of them a world musics ensemble and another from a selection of performance based ensembles (Percussion, Gamelan and Shakuhachi ensembles, Classical Guitar, Choir and Symphonic Band ensembles) or independently-formed ensembles ranging from Recorder, Piano, Ukulele, Pop through even ICT-based ensembles such as the *I-band*. Initially, almost all of the Music students opted for the 'Popular Music' ensemble; bringing their own impressions of popular music repertoire as well as popular music they were able to replicate/cover. The first of these sessions began in the January 2008 semester. While much of the discussions and negotiations with the students revolved around their choice of repertoire, rationale for inclusion for performance, the idea of having programme notes and rationale for inclusion in their school-based curriculum, their primary concerns remained quality of performance of repertoire they were presenting at this inaugural concert in April 2008. Following this, a group of final year students then decided to form their own ensemble in 2009 calling themselves "The Yellow Tees".



Fig 1. Poster of the Yellow Tees concert in November 2009

This was because they had previously been part of a music ensemble where they found themselves submitting to agenda not commensurate with their expectations:

In pop music everyone has to have ownership...in the first band we weren't given ownership at all...It is only within our band that each of us had a role, maybe not equal all the time, but all our voices are heard. We felt that we were given more say in what we wanted (Wu 2010).

Following the “Yellow Tees” newly-acquired voice and confidence, one among them decided to reflect on their practice and submit her findings in a research paper which was accepted to be read at the 29th ISME conference in Beijing (Wu 2010). Her questions for reflection were as follows:

How do the trainee teachers feel about their engagement in popular music ensemble as part of their teacher education in NIE?

What are the benefits that trainee teachers gain by engaging in popular music ensemble?

How do the attitudes of these trainee teachers change after participating in popular music ensemble?

To what extent does the engagement in popular music ensemble change how they are going to teach secondary school general music in the future?

How important is this informal learning experience for trainee teachers as part of their teacher education in NIE?

What does this imply for future trainee teachers who are going into NIE?

(Wu 2010)

Wu's (2010) research on her own group's involvement in Pop Band Ensemble was clearly cognisant of and corroborated with findings in Green's (2002; 2004; 2008) writings on popular music in education; specifically informal imbibing of musical patterns and conventions as well as musical behaviours involved in the learning process. The “Yellow Tees” very first exploration of engaging popular music as educational engagement among the disguises the fact that all of them began their undergraduate studies as musicians trained in the Euro-American art music practice (even though one among them specialised in the yangqin [dulcimer] in the Chinese Orchestra practice) which put a premium on performing ‘covers’ at the highest level.

Many of their reflections therefore, prioritised musical challenges beginning with choice of repertoire (Nobody by Wonder Girls, Apologise by One Republic, Poker Face by Lady Gaga and Viva La Vida by Coldplay) which was eclectic, current and included Asian repertoire:

Our repertoire this time around is very current and more difficult compared to the past few years. It can show our progress. We are putting ourselves at a lot of risk also because we are playing popular songs (Wu 2010).

Other concerns involved the extent to which the repertoire was *recreated*, interpretation and level of individualisation of co-opted repertoire, groove and feel, quality of performance, sensitivity to sound quality (amplification, mixing and overall balance), level of musical interaction among group members, ensemble blend, processes involved in rehearsals, musical techniques, feedback on performances, intensity and frequency of facilitation, negotiating uncertainty (trial and error) through performance.

When prompted for pedagogical values of engaging in popular music, the group reflections by the *Yellow Tees* were indicative of a change in musical diet, and therefore prioritising of musical dimensions in the repertoire:

As a general music teacher, if we didn't join pop band, we will be missing out a lot, go into schools being very narrow minded, very ignorant, we will think pop music is forever some young people's music...and we cannot connect with our students at all...it should be something that we should constantly keep up...just as we had done our own rendition of the songs so they can also do their own...know something about pop culture...the students language...it's like a

learning environment for us (Wu 2010).

Thus far, discussions of engaging their own classroom students at this stage amounted to making their students aware that they as classroom teachers had direct engagement and first-hand experience playing and learning popular music and popular music instruments. Given the prioritising of musical techniques and concerns in popular music ensembles, what place was there for socio-cultural engagement and holistic, lived experiences in popular music? How should student teachers prepare their musical learnings in educational contexts and curricula to support the learning of popular musics in schools as future teachers?

Methodology

Wu's (2010) research questions in relation to the Yellow Tees, prompted further questions which were posed in an email (January 16, 2011) to the present batch of undergraduate students in relation to their participation; in this instance popular music:

How has participating in this ensemble helped (or not helped) with your roles as future teachers? Offer concrete examples from your participation in this **Pop Band** project. You may of course cite prior instances in previous semesters.

Given the mixed modes of transmission - of the direct engagement, in/formal learning and un/written instructions - in learning of this musical practice (**Pop Band**), what are your views about these modes of learning and knowing? How is that exchanged?

It is one thing for a learner to know of the in/direct engagements but how much of that in/experience involves ways of knowing only about the **Pop Band** soundscape?

How can learning be ingratiated through intensified reflection on engagement beyond just psychomotor skills?

What are the possibilities for you-as-learners benefitting from by singing/playing music in this course? Problems? Prospects?

Where did you/have you taken your ideas from? Please cite details of, if any, public events/concerts or web-based re/sources-as-repertoire in the details of your reflections. Have you listened to any selections from CDs or other sources?

What are your views on microteaching with **Pop Band** and its possibilities for music learning as focus? Should it happen in your ensembles? Why? Why not? How?

How will your participation in this project have been realised as lesson plans for students?

What, in your view, is a teacher's role in this learning journey? (yours, your colleagues in this endeavour, anyone else you co-opted)

Responses considered

Responses were received around April 2011 after their popular music ensemble concerts, albeit selective responses to questions posed. Many of the responses echoed if not replicated the sentiments and views of the Yellow Tees in terms of diversifying and intensifying musical objectives and outcomes. *The opportunity to create, improvise and make music*, the first and second objectives found in the GMP document, was a common outcome. Respondents also conveyed connections these two objectives had with the third and fourth objectives – developing an understanding of music elements and concepts as well as describing and evaluating music through active and participatory listening, as well as mention authentic experiences:

Widened my knowledge on the experimentation with different instrumentation and pop music styles...helped improve

my improvisational (and aural) skills as well...Complementing each other's strengths and weaknesses without compromising the standard and quality of performing outcomes reminds me of a real live classroom situation... which required trial and error, willingness to learn from mistakes, accepting other's critique and feedback and being open and teachable (Amy Tham).

Widening the knowledge base and repertoire for Jwen not only prompted the connection with the fifth objective in the GMP (Discern and understand Music from and of various cultures and genres) but an entirely new world of performance practice:

I was tasked to sing a Japanese song (Yuki No Hana). Singing in a popular style was not an easy feat. The breath control, clear diction in words, articulation, expression, pitching, and many more aspects of singing...plagued me the most throughout the ensemble practices...because it required a broad range of vocal techniques and musical expression. Nonetheless, these challenges were my biggest takeaway from this music ensemble, particularly learning to sing in another language – Japanese, memorizing the lyrics and understanding it so as to express it better (through an English translation) (Jwen Lim).

For Charmaine, being involved in popular music ensembles precipitated a personalised engagement (not dissimilar to Jwen's reflections) which translated conspicuously as *intrinsic* motivation and was most infectious judging from her reception:

This other group [who performed the previous week] appeared to really enjoy what they were doing...I could feel the enjoyment and musicality...Watching them really put a smile on my face. Their performance felt so natural and warm...made me realise what matters is that you are enjoying what you are doing...Pop Band made me learn numerous 'lessons' and given me many insights on how it is like to experiment with new, different musical styles and timbral textures...writing programme notes, we take home other life lessons from Pop Band, such as meeting and working with different people as a 'long-term' group, learning to give and take with each other, which could come in handy when we head out to work in the future. (Charmaine Goh).

Equally powerful for Eileen was the notion of peer-to-peer teaching, learning, collaboration, feedback and assessment when engaged in Popular music ensembles:

Being in the Pop Band heightened awareness of my own musicality...compels us to be more discerning and critical about our practice...also reinforces the skills of cooperation...Pop Band highlights group effort, group goals and completion of those goals. Peer-directed learning made up a substantial portion of the informal learning process in my band. For example, there was a conscious sharing of knowledge and skills or even explicit peer teaching, through demonstration of rhythm or chord by one group member for the benefit of another. Peer feedback was also beneficial in helping me improve on my skills on the bass guitar (Eileen Liew).

Another authentic example of peer-directed interaction in popular music was offered by Celestine:

Participating in this ensemble has allowed us to realize that we have different expectations and take-aways...made me realize the importance of goal setting. As a future teacher, we should allow our students to set their own goals then we will work with them on achieving the goals instead of imposing our ideals and hopes on them. Teachers are facilitators and should not be driving them towards [teachers'] own goals (Celestine Koh).

For Natasha, being en/abled to facilitate and lead by example was a crucial element in her evaluation of being engaged in popular music ensembles:

Popular music is part of everyday lives of students...Stage 2 (P5 onwards). However, teaching popular music practically (not theoretically) would need me to learn how to play the instruments...as popular music is one of those genres best learned hands-on...demonstrations, imitation...learning and assessment in an authentic setting (Natasha Afandi).

Other reflections viewed musical performance where sensory and sensual imbibing of repertoire in popular music ensembles were extended towards the sixth objective which involved an understanding of music in and everyday lived and living experience:

My experience in Pop band gave me a taste of Authentic Assessment (where assessment aims to emulate real-life circumstances and have real-life relevance). As I engaged in music making with my Pop band and worked on my Research paper topic (Authentic Assessment in the GMP classroom)...I was deeply appreciative of the opportunities given to us in Music to grow us not only as future educators but also as, musicians. Pop band gave us a platform to explore a genre that real-life performers perform for gigs in the real world and thus allowed us to explore and shine in our individual unique ways...as a teacher, I would like my music students to also benefit from such an authentic experience...help me tailor my future assessment methods better (Sharon Ho).

Authentic assessment and real-life experience and experimentation fed directly back into the use of technology in musicianship:

Technology played a huge role in our learning and self-assessment. From the very first practice session, we initiated the use of electronic recording devices ranging from MP3s to laptops and cameras to record our practice sessions such that we could get both audio and visual aid on how we fared each practice...illustrated blind spots we would never have realised...we could also check on the timbral quality of our music and the overall sound balance...upload some of our recordings on the social networking site to comment and critique constructively (Sharon Ho).

Technology for Joyce also meant another feedback loop, this time for the students:

In school where technology is pervasive...it is crucial for students to see the relevance of what they learn in music lessons...to engage them in something that they like and can identify with...developing their skills through learning techniques adopted by popular musicians...Letting them participate in pop band ensemble is a good platform but as music educators, we can go beyond...cultural and societal factors...students have to recognize the fact that popular music is deeply embedded in the society that produces it and hence a 'context' approach to learning popular music is essential as well to provide a complete music educational program. (Joyce Chen)

The authenticity of learning experiences and experimentation not only fed musicianship but also led directly back to self-reflection as music teacher. At a more intense level of engagement, Tasha advocated *negotiation* musically and metaphorically:

Students' minds are...the negotiation of musical decisions between the teacher and the student...which happens very frequently in the process of pop band...I chose to focus on the "wordscape", meaning of the lyrics and context in which the lyrics were written...If one learns only through psychomotor skills (the act of doing), a momentary experience, it's hard to gauge whether learning has even taken place. Intensified reflection on engagement is useful as the rigour allows one to analyze and monitor ones musical actions in the pop band ensemble. Pop band in music classrooms allows real learning to take place; students negotiate decisions, take the lead, learn humility and sharing without me telling them to do so...playing in pop band could help at-risk students. (Tasha Lynn).

Gideon's reflections are contrasted with the others because of his experiences playing in jam bands as a rock guitarist before enrolling as an undergraduate. Participating in the popular music ensemble in the Music programme at NIE allowed him opportunity for deeper reflection as an *insider*:

I was surprised to discover that "pop band" was accepted as an "ensemble"...my prior experiences playing in a rock band in Secondary school and JC were [experiences] seldom seen or heard in music lessons or at school functions...

something “outside the system”...from a pedagogical point of view, I can reach out to students passionate about popular music but not fortunate enough to have learning experiences because it is not treated as a legitimate form of music taught in the classroom, and lack of training, understanding and/or experiences in it on the teacher’s part. My role in pop band is not only of a musician but also a person mindful of the intricate details of learning and teaching from one another...although we’re all music students, my group mates have very different perceptions of music and different learning styles...all tuned in to different soundscapes that reflect our musical upbringing..the same problem could be presented to us as future teachers in the classroom. From my own experiences with members in popular music ensembles, I am against the notion of segregating and stereotyping musicians according to whether or not they are a “pop” or “classical” musician...differences should not hinder anyone from expressing themselves musically – the only barriers are the ones students place on themselves (Gideon Tan).

Concluding thoughts

Student reflections across the undergraduate programme reveal a diversity and variety of extra/musical concerns and priorities in their engagement *in* and *through* popular music. Given the positive interaction among all Music students, the breadth, depth and range of extra/musical learnings *in toto* augur positively for a holistically prepared teacher of popular music in school. The challenge however, remains that these most keenly desired ‘holistic’ preparations have not as yet appeared *in toto* in a *singular person*.

How should this holistic awareness of a teacher of popular music be inculcated and encouraged in each of our student teachers? What does it take for a teacher in the current and future music classroom to be prepared for popular music teaching and learning through the activities of creating, performing and responding? What are crucial qualities for a requisite temperament of such a music classroom teacher, extra/musical abilities or aptitudes and attitudes? Are the questions posed to the students sufficient provocation and prompts for their sensual imbibing of popular music as learners and teachers? How does this affect a popular music learner-as-teacher-as-musician whose efficacy is intertwined with agents and agencies ‘*on the ground*’ of the music classroom as well as education policy as designed and articulated in the General Music Programme for Singapore schools?

If we are to engage learning *in* and *through* popular music as lived and living trajectories in music classrooms to persuade students to *author/ise* their own narratives, perhaps the most appropriate strategy begins with adopting and adapting mindsets; which recalls the message from the Yellow Tees, *it’s like a learning environment for us* (Wu 2010).

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