

**‘Venda Music is all about ‘The Whole’, Mike!’:  
Decolonising Instrumental Music Teaching in England**

**Michael Davidson, SOAS, July 2020**

*John Blacking famously contrasted how the Venda of the North Transvaal made music to build community and citizenship with his own marginalised and individualised experience of learning music in an English boarding school. Blacking compared the ‘universal value’ and progression narratives of Western classical music with the contingent values of Venda collective musicality, and its use to ‘dissolve the other’. The following auto-ethnographic notes describe how a Youth Music funded musical inclusion development project drew on Blacking’s work with the Venda to begin to decolonise instrumental music teaching within English music services. The project identified alternative values and progression routes for learning instrumental music in schools, and proposed decolonisation of the purposes of instrumental music teaching.*

‘(I...) want to distance myself from an anthropological empiricism that would see other citizenship practices as different, exotic and thus not part of ‘the real story’...The kind of empiricism I have in mind is one that starts with a picture of the shared, co constructed Global entanglements, not their difference or exoticness.’

Martin Stokes, ‘How Musical is the Citizen?’ IMR Distinguished Lecture series 2017

‘Music is everywhere, and it helps us with everything!’

Mark Howe, Community Musician, 2016

Tags: Educating educators, pedagogy, compositional practice, inclusion, widening participation

## 1, 'Venda Music is all about 'the Whole'

I interview my 'First Access'<sup>1</sup> instrumental music teaching colleague Akonaho in the grounds of our music service central office.

He grins as he sits me in the shade, 'on account of your pale skin, Mike'

As Akonaho describes how he learnt music in the village where he grew up, I realise with surprise that he is describing the Venda of the North Transvaal.

Akonaho tells me he learnt English from Bob Marley records, and traveled to England to train to become a music therapist. He'd heard of John Blacking as a child, but first read *How Musical is Man?* after finding it in a second-hand bookshop in Brighton.

But music is not divided into performance, community and healing traditions in Venda music-making; within our music service, Akonaho is presently running creative music nurture groups for children identified as vulnerable through First Access. He'd like the service to promote them widely, but is not sure how they fit in to our business plan.

'Venda music is all about 'The Whole' Mike...the dance, the sun, and the dust...I don't think the music service is ready for Venda music Mike!'

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<sup>1</sup> 'First Access' began as Wider Opportunities, a new labour initiative for children to learn an instrument in a group, free of charge. The scheme changes name with each government, and is now officially termed Whole Class Ensemble Teaching ( WCET).

## **2 “Pure Music Education”**

When I first started teaching for the music service, colleagues put up copies of their own grade 8 examination feedback on the office wall of the music centre. 30 years later, grade examinations are still the main benchmarks of progress in instrumental music teaching. A review of music education in England calls instrumental music teaching ‘pure’ music education; a ‘romance with the aesthetic’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2014) rather than personal and social outcomes.

Even when instrumental music tutors do teach genres from non-western cultures, these are largely benchmarked by the values of classical music, overlooking the original context and purpose of musical practices. Community music practice can become ‘othered’ as essentially different, of less musical value, and only worthy of short-term funding within music services; as Martin Stokes suggests, ‘not part of the real story’ of musical citizenship within music services.

Some colleagues speak, (half jokingly), about ‘proper instruments’ and ‘proper music’; they want more young people to learn orchestral instruments so they can progress into our county orchestras. Our publicity describes these as ‘the tip of our pyramid of opportunities’. From here, some go on to study music at university or music college, often returning to teach for the service.

### 3, 'Well, who wants to learn the ukulele anyway?'

A conversation with a manager from another county music service at an early stage of the development project. I'm attempting to persuade her to develop a family music project as a more participatory experience, rather than inviting families to listen together to an orchestra.

'They play proper instruments, not jam jar lids!' she counters, in response to the community music approaches we've been discussing.

In my eagerness to progress the project I push a little too hard, and as the conversation ends uncomfortably she comments...

"Well, who wants to learn the ukulele anyway?"

In response, we design a workshop<sup>2</sup> that uses ukuleles, Venda hockets and community music pedagogy to teach instrumental technique, improvisation and composition. But it also helps us train tutors to manage their groups better to include children at risk of exclusion. Schools begin to value sessions as a means to prevent school exclusion at an early age, and the hockets help us to train tutors to deliver creative musical nurture groups in primary schools.

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<sup>2</sup> For a longer description of this workshop, please see [http://www.rhinegold.co.uk/music\\_teacher/pulling-together/](http://www.rhinegold.co.uk/music_teacher/pulling-together/)

#### 4, Inclusion Builds Music

A local rapper, a son of a Windrush ex-pat, Robert gave up learning trombone after he realised he wasn't learning to play in a reggae horn section. Instead he learnt to rap by toasting over a sound system at night long 'Blues' parties at his parents' house in Hitchin.

'Man, it was so loud, even I would have complained!'

After a successful performing career, Robert helped us develop a song-writing project that runs in pupil referral units<sup>3</sup> and youth clubs, engaging young people who haven't wanted to learn instrumental music.

Producing both praxial and high-quality musical outcomes, Songwriter has now become established as an alternative creative music progression route to orchestras and ensembles. Songwriters perform songs written from their lived experience alongside performances of the classical cannon by ensembles and orchestras at our biennial gala at the Royal Albert Hall<sup>4</sup>. Some have progressed to study songwriting, musical development, or ethnomusicology at HE. Some have returned to work as a workshop leaders, bringing songwriting pedagogy to the nurture groups. These are creating new social values for instrumental music teaching in schools, some of which had previously disengaged from the service<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Pupil Referral Units or PRUs, educate young people who have been excluded from school.

<sup>4</sup> Please see video of an early performance at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgk898oC\\_a8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vgk898oC_a8)

<sup>5</sup> For a video and more information, please see <https://network.youthmusic.org.uk/how-can-music-services-help-prevent-school-exclusion-through-nurture-groups-lessons-action-research>

## 5, ' We need to give people these opportunities for joy!'

Head of Music Jane runs an annual community music concert in the school hall of a rural comprehensive, over a weekend at the end of the summer term. After school exams have finished, the individual tables at which young people have been sitting to write exam scripts are pushed together to form cabaret style tables. A PA and rock backline is set up on the stage. Weeks of rehearsals culminate in a joyful musical celebration of the end of the school year, which for some also marks the end of school life. Pupils started the concert 40 years ago, bringing the music they'd been making in the town youth club onto the school stage, playing rock songs alongside school staff. 40 years on, older pupils continue to learn music leadership by leading rehearsal sessions for younger pupils; some have returned to teach instrumental music in the school. The concert offers an alternative progression route to grade exams, helping tutors teach differently. Players of orchestral instruments play alongside rock instruments, and learn to improvise and play by ear. The concert feels like an alternative, collective musical rite of passage to balance the individual exams by which young people progress to adulthood, and by which schools are now valued within government league tables. Jane's summing up captures values beyond economic citizenship, a collective experience 'of becoming' that recalls Blacking's description of the Venda using music to 'dissolve the other'.

'We need to give people these opportunities for joy, for shared experience that goes beyond words...in a way it's almost like an out of body experience...they happen in this subject,, music education...it's hard to replicate that, you can't have it everyday, but you can aim to have some music that will speak to people in a way that words cannot and give people a chance to build their identities and to see who they are...and who they want to be'<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> For a longer interview with Jane, the pupils and tutors, please see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DzEdsjP4vQM>

## 6, Origin Myths

Whilst invoking the Venda risked, appropriating, exoticising and 'othering' a culture, in practice, drawing on Blacking's ethnography of musical systems for 'fieldwork at home' encouraged both reconsideration of how and why music is learnt locally beyond the institutions of music services, and a revision of services' origins.

Anna Bull (2014) describes how a new profession of instrumental music tutors developed in the later C19th to prepare young people to progress into orchestras and conservatoires. Many began to use grade systems that measured development of technique, and which became global measurements of musical value through conservatoire colonial outreach (Johnson-Williams, 2020). These also became the core rituals of music service teaching, as services formed around a government agenda to democratise 'high watermark' arts after 1948. However, our music service began as Rural Music Schools, a community music organisation that used music to help repair fragmented rural communities after World War One. Like other participatory music traditions, learners progressed into music leadership as well as performance; learners and tutors played together for dancing, with a strong sense of social inclusion. The daughter of Quakers, founder Mary Ibberson envisioned the project as a form of musical life-long social care, to parallel Beveridge's vision to the National Health Service, but was forced to 'water it down' to get it into schools. Nevertheless, revisiting this original purpose of the music service suggests contingent, praxial holistic values of music-making beyond aesthetic outcomes and the performance levels we report back to our main funders. As my colleague Akonaho notes, music is all about 'The Whole'. Might enabling all young people to make music for life-long social inclusion offer social and musical values beyond focus on an ever-narrowing pyramid of opportunities?

## Biography

Michael Davidson has worked for a music service for 40 years, initially as an instrumental music tutor, before developing and project managing musical inclusion projects.

Supervised at SOAS by Angela Impey and Lucy Duran, his doctoral research explores how diversifying instrumental music teaching can build alternative forms of citizenship in England.

Michael is currently lead teacher/researcher within Musicnet-East Changing Tunes, a partnership of Youth Music, Music Mark and Hertfordshire Music Service, and one of 13 founder members of AMIE, the Alliance for a Musically Inclusive England.

The partnership runs a National Music Services' Working Group for Inclusion and funds action research projects for members to research and share the challenges, enablers and benefits of embedding musical inclusion practice within their core work, rather than as short-term commissioned projects.