Sound Reflections: The influence of acoustic ecology on classroom composition

Jonathan Savage: (j.savage@mmu.ac.uk)

Mike Challis (m.challis@appleonline.net)

Starting Points

In the United Kingdom, despite a long and distinguished history of innovation, there is considerable confusion about the place of composition within music education. The National Curriculum documentation (DfEE, 2000) includes composition as one of three principal activities within its Programme of Study. So politically, at least, it has equality with the other activities of performing, listening and appraising music. A recent publication, *Composing in the Classroom: The creative dream* (NAME, 2000), presents a huge range and variety of classroom practices. Perhaps this ought to be celebrated, but there are nagging doubts. Classroom composition has become divorced from the personal musical experiences of young people outside the formal curriculum. If this was not bad enough, it is also at odds with models of compositional practice utilised by composers in a technological age. The resources for new models of composition are becoming available within UK schools but where are the new ideas and working practices that exploit them?

It was against this backdrop that two innovative projects were completed at Debenham High School, a rural Suffolk comprehensive school of 450 pupils aged between 11

and 16. Curriculum themes that drew on a range of unusual and stimulating compositional models were designed that empowered pupils to reflect on their own sound worlds and environments.

The pedagogical and compositional dimensions of these projects - *Dunwich Revisited* and *Reflecting Others* – have both been described elsewhere (Savage and Challis 2001a & b). The purpose of this short article is not to revisit these ideas but rather to investigate and comment on the positive influence of acoustic ecology within classroom composition.

Project Descriptions

Introduction

Dunwich Revisited used environmental stimuli to create a piece of programme music, whereas *Reflecting Others* used the actual sounds (and images) of two contrasting environments as raw material.

Dunwich Revisited

The place of Dunwich has a rich and fantastic history. During the early part of the second millennium it was a major port on the east coast of Suffolk, enjoying considerable wealth and

prosperity. But due to a number of environmental changes, including the emergence of a new river further up the coast and the consequent silting up of its own river mouth, Dunwich lost its place as a premier port. Its prosperity declined and the city itself eroded. Over the next few hundred years most of the city was subsumed beneath the sea. Early last century All Saint's Church gradually fell from the top of the cliffs into the sea.

[Insert Fig.1 All Saints Church, Dunwich © Dunwich Museum]

The project involved the whole lower school (approximately 280 pupils) and the Year 10 GCSE music group (a group of 15 pupils who had chosen to study music at a more advanced level). Some of the pupils had visited Dunwich with their families but it was difficult to arrange a whole school visit, so a range of pictures, writings, photographs and other resources were assembled on a large wall display. These enabled pupils to explore environmental stimuli that reflected the two states of Dunwich; firstly, the ambience of the sea, wind and reed beds and, secondly, the occupation of this environment by humankind. Using vocal sounds, instruments and sound processors pupils designed 108 musical responses to these environmental stimuli. They chose the best ideas, structured them together and performed the final piece at a local concert hall. A key feature of the project was the use of sound processing technologies. These allowed pupils to produce an increased range of sampled, vocal and instrumental sound ideas.

Reflecting Others

Reflecting Others was a digital arts project that featured a collaboration between the school, an arts agency and a high security unit of young offenders at a local prison.

Using themes of self-identity, community and environment, pupils and young offenders collected audio and visual material. This raw material was stored on hard disks and then swapped, each group creatively editing and manipulating the material of the other environment. Finally, an installation was designed that contained this sonic and visual material.

The principal technologies used in the project were digital video and audio software on iMac computers, digital video cameras and minidisc recorders. Fig. 2 illustrates the project's main stages.

[Insert Fig.2: Diagram representing the exchange of information]

Project Processes

Dunwich Revisited

In the first lesson, pupils were played Mike Challis' piece *Dunwich*. This piece charts the changing landscape of Dunwich through its ternary structure. Its environmental sounds, combined with medieval instruments and dance tunes, paints an evocative picture of the

town's gradual evolution and dissolution. Pupils were told that this was a piece of programmatic music but not told what it described. In response to a series of questions, they described the atmosphere and emotion of the piece very imaginatively. When they were told the title of the music some pupils outlined its metaphorical allusion to the changing history of Dunwich. They responded holistically, in the sense that the place and their association with it affected them on a number of levels – intellectually, emotionally and aesthetically. All pupils sensed the emotion of the place, and were able to express it in descriptive language that went beyond mere descriptions of geographical changes to the moods and feelings expressed within the music.

Dunwich's history is a rich source of inspiration for composers, poets, artists and choreographers. Pupils drew on a number of these materials as they began to express their feelings about Dunwich in musical ideas. These included poetry, picture and photographic evidence of the town as well as their own experiences of visiting the remains of Dunwich. They read composition material produced by Mike Challis for his original piece, together with choreographic notes and illustrations from Pamela Harling-Challis for whose dance (*States of the Sea*) the music was written. These notes showed the direct influence of the environment on the original composition work. For example, Pamela Harling-Challis talked about her initial stimulus for the dance:

I grew up in a desert, a kind of sea filled with waves of sand, howling wind, masses of sky and immense distance. *States of the Sea* [the original dance] is about a desert, where water comes between sand and sky. It is about time,

change and the relentless pressure of the elements. The desert, the sea, the imagery of the Beaufort Scale, Dunwich Heath and the photographic remains of All Saints Church are all sources of inspiration.

Sound processors provided a way for pupils to develop, extend and refine a range of sounds throughout the project. Pupils made significant references to the impact of these processors, including a number of comments related to how they used various effect parameters to recreate appropriate atmospheres:

Playing the flute on its own was OK, but to elaborate on the eeriness that I was trying to create it really helped with the echoes and carrying through the sound. (Year 10 girl)

It makes things less plain. When you just sung it all alone it sounded really weird and plain, lifeless really. When you have the echoes it makes it sound eerie and it adds a kind of feeling and a depth to it. (Year 8 girl)

The words of this song were a textual response to the environmental stimulus. Using a sound processor with a small amount of reverberation, a group of five Year 8 girls composed these words, a melody and basic accompaniment. This song became an important part of the piece's middle section, representing the occupation of the natural environment by humankind.

A new world is coming and we don't know

Just where we're going next.

A new world is coming and we don't know

Just where we're going next.

The old world is gone,

And never to be found,

The past is in the past,

The past is in the past.

Say your prayers and say good-bye,

Say your prayers and say good-bye,

Say good-bye.

The wide variety of inspirational material enabled pupils to draw together and cross-reference ideas from diverse sources. Composition functioned as a metaphor for the putting together, organising and layering of ideas from a wide variety of experiences and domains, many of these not directly from the musical field. As a result pupils began to identify with the place very strongly. One Year 10 girl commented that the range of material "gave you a picture in your mind of what Dunwich would have looked like."

Reflecting Others used sonic and visual material taken from the pupils' and young offenders' actual environments, inspired by reflections on three starting points: self-identity, community and environment. Early project work included getting pupils and young offenders to consider and interpret each of these words in light of their personal experiences. Subsequent work included a range of creative writing tasks designed to get pupils and young offenders to think about each other, their likes, dislikes, hopes and dreams. These narratives and poems were recorded and used as source material.

After collecting digital audio and video material, the hard-disk disks were exchanged. Pupils and young offenders watched and listened to the material collected by the other group. A number of things became particularly interesting at this point.

Firstly, pupils were clearly shocked by some of the sounds and images from inside a real prison. This was despite comments from a probation officer describing how pleasant the surroundings and facilities of the secure unit were in comparison to other adult prisons. But the obvious audio and visual references to bars, gates slamming and keys jangling made a significant impact on the pupils.

[Insert Fig 3: Photograph of prison corridor through bars]

The Year 10 group were very interested in the sonic material. Small things, like the variety of young offenders' accents, were picked out as being of significant interest. The

material content of some of the words and phrases was commented on. One prisoner read, with obvious difficulty, a piece of narrative prose that he had written. Year 10 pupils received this with quiet and sombre appreciation.

The audio material collected by the young offenders showed the more resonant acoustic of the prison environment. The constant noise of the air conditioning was a feature. Prisons are seldom quiet during the day but the young offenders commented how eerily quiet the prison is at night.

The young offenders viewed the pupils as "little rich kids." They also found their accents interesting, commenting on how plumb they sounded in comparison to their own. The only contact that young offenders have with the opposite sex, apart from family visits, is with female professionals. There could have been problems with female images within this male-dominated environment and several comments were made. These initial reactions were tempered by the words and thoughts contained within the pupils' audio samples. These turned the raw images of females into the individual characters of real pupils. As the project continued there were positive changes in some of the prisoners reactions to these visual materials.

Pupils' attitudes towards the young offenders also changed during the project. Many began to empathise with them:

By the looks of things it looks worse that I thought 'cos I expected they would be able to go outside and do more normal activities like we do. But

they're trapped in there never seeing proper sunlight, trapped between walls,

bars, gates and doors, trapped in Hollesley Bay for so many years and never

going outside. They're looking at the same things day in, day out for years. I

think this is wrong. And one boy's poem about the prison backed this up. No

crime deserves to do this to a child. (Year 9 boy)

In some areas there were similar responses from the two groups. Examples of sonic

and visual themes explored by both groups included:

- sports hall games, including basketball, badminton and squash;

- sounds of the cafeteria or lunch hall;

- weight and fitness rooms;

- recorded CD extracts popular dance music.

But there are stark differences in the groups' environments. The young offenders

inhabit an internal space, with hardly any view of the outside world that they are seldom

allowed to spend time within. The pupils collected a much broader range of environmental

material.

The dissociation of the audio and visual elements was a feature of the project work.

This was an artistic decision taken for practical and aesthetic reasons. Practically, different

groups of pupils could work on the two different elements and collaborate by sharing ideas

occasionally. Aesthetically, working with the sound material separately from the video

enabled the sonic material to be developed into musical ideas without the distraction of the visual image.

Conclusion

> There is a great need for more soundscape-orientated activity and
>
> awareness within the music education sector.… Using computer and recording
>
> technology we are able, not just to listen and appraise the sounds around us,
>
> but to sculpt with this sonic material. (McGinley 2001, 72)

As music educators we are constantly searching for new ways to motivate and inspire our students. In the United Kingdom soundscape and acoustic ecology approaches to composition have been under-researched and utilised by classroom practitioners. These projects show that such a creative approach to curriculum planning gives students the opportunity to reflect sonically on physical places, their own and others environments in powerful and authentic ways. The innovative uses of technologies in the classroom gives all students a voice for these expressions, regardless of 'traditional' musical ability or skill. These projects represent an attempt to implement technological and pedagogical strategies that have enabled "our young people not only to have the opportunity to become soundscape researchers, but [also] soundscape designers" (ibid., 73). Acoustic ecological approaches within classroom composition bridges the gap between the demands of the formal curriculum

and the personal values and experiences that pupils bring with them to the classroom. At the heart of the *Reflecting Others* project was a process of reflection with digital media. Young people's ability to reflect on their own lives and the lives of others inspired creative responses.

So what does the future hold for this kind of compositional approach? Kushner warns of the dangers of placing new wine in old wineskins. New ways of composing demand new ways of researching and reflecting on experience. If music is a vehicle for the expression of humanity, then "The more we talk with children and teachers the more music becomes entangled in lives and the more its significance fades in the light of experience. The closer we look at music events in schools the more we see that music is the pretext – life is the text" (Kushner, 1999).

In other words, there is a need to redefine models of classroom composition for the 21st century and transform them within the digital age. And, most importantly, to build models of classroom composition work that engages our pupils in a more meaningful way with life itself.

Bibliography

DfEE (2000) *The National Curriculum for England: Music* London, DfEE.

KUSHNER, S. (1999) Fringe benefits: music education out of the National Curriculum, *Music Education Research*, 1(2), 209-218.

MCGINLEY, R. 'Stockholm Soundscape Project: New directions in music education' in UKISC (2001) *Sound Practice: the 1st UKISC conference on sound culture and environment,* 69-73.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF MUSIC EDUCATORS (2000) *Composing in the Classroom: The creative dream* High Wycombe, NAME.

SAVAGE, J. and CHALLIS, M. (2001a) 'Dunwich Revisited: Collaborative composition and performance with new technologies' *British Journal of Music Education* 18:2, 139-149.

SAVAGE, J. and CHALLIS, M. (2001b) 'A Digital Arts Curriculum? Practical ways forward' (to be published shortly in *Music Education Research*).