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14. The Value of Music Research to Life in the UK

Katie Overy (University of Edinburgh)

Music in daily life

The powerful role of music in human experience is indisputable. Throughout history, daily musical experiences have included lullabies, children's play songs, rhythmic work songs, courtship songs, dance music, and music for religious and ritualistic ceremonies. With current technology, our daily musical experiences include music on the radio, television music, film music, advertising jingles, music in restaurants and music in shops. We are no longer restricted to hearing music in homes, pubs, concert halls, schools and on village greens – we can carry our own music library around with us and hear it on buses, in cars and on walks in the country. The fact that the music industry contributes so significantly to the UK economy is no accident. People love music and use it on a regular basis to relax, to entertain, to exercise, to socialize, and to share their tastes and experiences.

Music is thus a powerful way to bring people together. This is particularly evident in situations where people gather for special occasions, such as at weddings, sporting events and important ceremonies, but it is also evident in everyday situations such as in nurseries, primary classrooms, nightclubs and pubs. Music seems to have a special capacity to reinforce the social group; to create a sense of shared experience in which relationships are strengthened. At the same time, music can be deeply personal, stimulating strong individual emotions and memories; a familiar piece of music can trigger a memory and immediately take us back to a particular moment, place or relationship. We can also develop strong personal musical preferences and even prejudices, which help to define our individuality as well as our social group.

A key aspect of daily music-making is its extraordinary potential for self-expression and creativity. With just a voice or a pursed pair of lips, an individual can experiment with ideas, try out new sounds and begin to compose. The incredible diversity of music from around the globe and across different periods of history is a tribute to such human creativity and to the way in which we respond to social conditions and technical constraints. The drive to push conventional boundaries, and create experiences that are fresh and exciting, has led to everything from pianos, electric guitars and synthesizers to vast musical works requiring enormous orchestras and multiple choirs. While humans continue to feel the creative urge to express themselves musically, music research will afford valuable insights into the nature of the human condition and its relationship with society.

In this short essay I present some of the ways in which music is currently researched in UK universities and discuss the value of this research to daily life in the UK. In order to identify specific examples of the work of individual scholars, I refer to staff and students from the University of Edinburgh throughout the essay. The examples presented should thus be taken as a fraction of the work in the UK, reflecting similar research activity in similar institutions.

Music scholarship

Traditional scholarly, intellectual and professional understanding of music takes a number of different forms of inquiry. The Western classical music tradition has developed under royal patronage, state patronage and the church, highly influenced by religious practice, artistic movements, social change and the development of new instrument technologies. The context in which a piece of music is written thus has significant implications for our understanding of the work itself, and a great deal of historical research examines the social, religious, political and economic conditions under which musical styles have developed, sometimes within strict limitations and at other times with great freedom. Critical analysis of the works themselves also plays a strong role in music scholarship, in understanding the developing styles of individuals, the appearance of new musical techniques and ideas, the development of trends and fashions, the influences of composers on each other, in addition to the influences of composers' personal experiences and their engagement with artistic movements such as romanticism, nationalism, expressionism and modernism. Informed performance also plays an important role in such music research, with an emphasis not only on technique, interpretation and repertoire, but also on understanding the particular instruments and techniques in use at the time of composition, and how to interpret such works today.

Complementing such core scholarship, research into the history of musical instruments examines how instrument-makers developed the tools of their trade, what social factors influenced the design of musical instruments, how specific instruments have influenced the composition of different historical periods and how composers have driven the demand for new musical instruments, with their desire for wider expressive possibilities. Composition itself can also be conceived of as an expression of musical scholarship, based as it is upon extraordinary musical expertise and creative musical thinking, including deep working knowledge of various musical styles and techniques, the possibilities of different musical instruments and their orchestration, in relation to current artistic trends and personal responses to specific commissions, events and social/political circumstances.

Also of central importance to music research, are approaches that address music from a range of different perspectives. Ethnomusicology research

brings fascinating and invaluable insights from the enormous variety of musical styles and musical instruments from other cultures, including detailed examination of the varied social roles of music in those cultures. Musical acoustics research examines the physical properties of musical sound, exploring the harmonic resonances of historic and modern instruments, the acoustics of rooms and concert halls, and more recently, the synthesis of new, electronic musical sounds. Music technology research explores the development and refinement of recording and production techniques, compositional software, sound reproduction systems and the design of electronic studios. Aesthetics research considers music from a philosophical, theoretical viewpoint, in terms of music's relationship with the mind, with humanity, with physical reality, with time, with emotion.

Combined and integrated, these different approaches to music research lead to rich insights into the nature of music in society, and the contribution of such scholarship to musical life in the UK is immeasurable. Ripples of knowledge and influence spread quickly and easily via concerts, music festivals, recordings, compositions, reviews, books, lectures, editions and new musical instruments, amongst other forms of communication. Taking a few specific examples from music scholars at the University of Edinburgh, Dr John Kitchen gives regular organ and harpsichord recitals throughout Edinburgh, Scotland, the UK and Europe, always programming the appropriate historical style of music for the particular organ or harpsichord on which he will be playing, as well as considering the particular concert venue and audience. Dr Noel O'Regan has conducted the Edinburgh University Renaissance Singers for twenty-four years, recently touring historic buildings around the east of Scotland, singing early Scottish music and explaining to audiences the religious and political context of the original compositions. Prof. Peter Nelson has directed the innovative concert series, ECAT, for the last twenty-nine years, bringing major national and international contemporary ensembles and experimental new works to Edinburgh. Prof. Simon Frith has been a pioneer in the sociology of popular music, regularly engaging with the UK music industry and chairing the judges of the Mercury Music prize since it began in 1992. Dr Elaine Kelly has recently gained original insights into the role of music in the former German Democratic Republic, and is currently editing a multidisciplinary book on this topic. Dr Darryl Martin gives regular tours for visitors to the Edinburgh University Collections of Early Keyboard Instruments, and builds harpsichords in various historical styles, according to commission requirements. Dee Isaacs organizes large-scale, multidisciplinary arts projects in the community on an annual basis, involving local musicians, artists, schoolchildren and students. Dr Martin Parker is a founder and director of 'Dialogues', an annual electronic music festival that brings local and international performers, sound designers and digital artists to numerous venues around Edinburgh. Prof. Nigel Osborne is known primarily as a composer, but also works internationally in

Figure 14.1 Examples of some of the ways in which University of Edinburgh music scholars disseminate their scholarship

situations of postwar conflict using music as a way to bring people together; work for which he was recently awarded the Bosnia-Herzegovina Peace Prize. These examples represent just a fraction of the various ways in which music scholarship in Edinburgh has an impact on daily musical life.

Perhaps even more important than this kind of knowledge dissemination is, of course, university teaching. Through lectures, seminars and tutorials, original musical scholarship is shared immediately with young people, who soon graduate and take their depth and breadth of knowledge into an ever greater variety of influential roles. Taking the University of Edinburgh as an example again, graduates have become performers, conductors, composers, producers, studio managers and sound engineers. They work in the media as presenters, producers, researchers and critics. They enter the teaching profession, working in primary schools, high schools, special needs schools and prisons. They become music therapists and community music practitioners, working in hospitals and as freelance *animateurs*. Matthew Peacock, an Edinburgh music graduate, founded an opera company for the homeless, Streetwise Opera, and was recently listed as one of 'Britain's Everyday Heroes' by Gordon Brown in his book of the same name. All of these roles have a direct impact on many different aspects of society in the

Figure 14.2 Examples of some of the roles in society played by Edinburgh University music graduates

UK, and the quality of that impact is directly influenced by strong, innovative research scholarship.

Interdisciplinary music research

An entirely different but equally valuable aspect of music research lies in the natural connection between music and other disciplines. The Pythagoreans considered music to be a branch of mathematics (along with arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy), while today music is generally classified as an art. The laws of physics are fundamental to the transmission of musical sound, and are crucial in the development of new music technology. Music is written for film and is used in education and therapy. The UK music industry is influenced by economics and the rules of business law. The history of music has been subject to the forces of politics, religion and philosophy.

The potential for interdisciplinary research is clearly enormous, and a great deal of such work takes place on a regular basis. At the University of Edinburgh there is a long tradition of collaborative research with Physics, Informatics, Psychology and Scottish Studies departments, which has led to conferences,

seminar series, publications and shared teaching. There is also a growing number of collaborative relationships with other disciplines, particularly within the recently established School of Arts, Culture and Environment. For example, Dr Tom Tolley is an art historian who examines the relationship of music to the visual arts, especially in the eighteenth century. Prof. Richard Coyne is an architectural theorist who works with sound designers and electro-acoustic composers, examining the way people use voice to define spaces, particularly in the case of mobile digital media. Emily Peppers is a PhD student in music and art, examining the social context of the viol in sixteenth-century France, using evidence from the visual arts.

A strong interdisciplinary development in recent years has been the growing appreciation of music as an important topic in the fields of psychology, sociology and neuroscience. The development and refinement of musical auditory and motor skills are of great interest to psychologists, for instance, while the construction of personal, social and cultural identities through music are of interest to sociologists. Music is also a new source of fascination in neuroscience, as brain-imaging technology improves and the surprising variety of brain regions activated by musical behaviour becomes apparent, with potentially significant implications for our understanding of human communication, human intelligence and even human evolution.

Examples of some interesting work in this area can be seen in a recent special issue of the scientific journal *Cortex*, on the topic of the 'Rhythmic Brain' (Overly and Turner 2009). The special issue is the first of its kind, examining the neural basis of rhythm from evolutionary, developmental, linguistic, motor and therapeutic perspectives. Contributions include papers on the rhythmic mating 'songs' of fruit-flies, on the specific roles of the cerebellum and the vestibular system in rhythm processing and on the difficulties that Parkinson's patients can experience with beat-based rhythms. As co-editor of the issue, I found it a fascinating and challenging experience to attempt to reconcile very different conceptions of *rhythm* from a range of disciplines. There is no doubt that further interdisciplinary research of this kind has a great deal to offer our understanding of music as well as our understanding of the human brain, with far-reaching implications for education, medicine and therapy.

Music is thus central to a significant amount of academic and scientific research and is capable of informing a wide variety of other disciplines, as well as being informed by them. It should be noted then, that this interaction is particularly fruitful when the collaborative researchers involved have core knowledge of their own discipline, with no danger of making glib assumptions or surface comparisons. It is crucial that, while expanding in diversity and entering into new disciplinary relationships, music scholarship also retains its independent status and its core essence of history, analysis, performance, composition, orchestration, keyboard skills, harmony and counterpoint. If such scholarship were to be lost, we would lose our understanding of 1,000

Figure 14.3 Examples of current interdisciplinary research relationships within the University of Edinburgh

years of Western musical tradition, severely undermining our ability to understand the nature of musical experience in the twenty-first century.

The Institute for Music in Human and Social Development

While the current increase in interdisciplinary music research is creating important new opportunities for deepening our understanding of human musicality, another much-needed development is research collaboration with those who use music in practice, such as music therapists, music teachers, performers and community musicians. The value of two-way knowledge exchange in this area is immense, since practice can become better informed by scientific theory and evidence, while scientific and theoretical work can become better informed by real-world insights and questions. In 2005, the University of Edinburgh established the Institute for Music in Human and Social Development (IMHSD) with the aim of bringing together research and practice from a range of different disciplines, in order to strengthen the theoretical and scientific basis of therapeutic, educational and social practice in music.

Since 2005, the IMHSD has held regular conferences, workshops and seminars involving neuroscientists, psychologists, music therapists, composers, physicists, philosophers, performers, sociologists, teachers and others. Events have focused on original themes of shared interest, such as 'Interactive Minds', 'Music and Medicine', 'Rhythm, Time and Temporal Processing', and 'Music, Language and Movement', with plenty of time set aside for interactive workshops, questions and discussions. These events

have been extremely well received and have led to a variety of interesting new collaborations, friendships and networks around Edinburgh, the UK and beyond. For instance, a June 2008 Edinburgh-based conference on the theme of 'Dance, Timing and Musical Gesture' (University of Edinburgh 2010) brought together dancers, musicians, neuroscientists, psychologists, composers and dance therapists, amongst many other represented disciplines, to discuss the temporal dynamics, expressive possibilities and communicative power of dance.

The research aims of the IMHSD have also developed with immediate success, apparently meeting a need in the musical community. One recent project including musicians, physicists, psychologists, children, students and teachers, involved the design of a new musical instrument (the 'skoog') that allows children and adults with severe movement difficulties to create expressive musical performances despite their limited motor abilities. Another recent pilot project, involving speech therapists and community stroke groups, explored the potential of singing to facilitate speech recovery after a stroke and, more specifically, how best to identify any preserved singing skills when speech is severely impaired.

IMHSD postgraduate students are also conducting a range of unique studies, combining pure research with real-world practice and identifying the value of music in the lives of individuals with particular difficulties or needs. For example, PhD student Zack Moir is working with cochlear implant users and identifying new ways to improve their musical listening experiences. PhD student Kirstin Anderson is examining the potential for music classes to encourage young offenders to engage with prison education, with the ultimate aim of increasing ownership of learning and reducing re-offending.

MSc graduate Gica Loening recently piloted an intercultural music project as a way to welcome and help integrate the children of new immigrant families, involving an exchange of music and song from the participating cultures. PhD graduate Katherine Finlay studied patients with acute, post-operative and chronic pain, identifying the conditions under which musical listening can relieve some of the symptoms. PhD graduate Karen Ludke is exploring the potential of singing as a facilitator for foreign language learning, working with children and adults in experimental settings and classroom settings. Taking a more social-historical approach, PhD student Gill French is researching the brass bands of the Scottish border towns in the early twentieth century, examining the contributing factors towards their strong, long-standing support from the local community. These highly motivated and self-directed students have a significant contribution to make to life in the UK, as their research continues and their findings are disseminated and extended.

Conclusions

It should be apparent from the small number of examples presented in this short essay, from just one university, that the value of music research

Figure 14.4 Examples of individuals in society who may benefit directly from current music research in the Institute for Music in Human and Social Development

to life in the UK is immensely far-reaching. Daily music scholarship can be a somewhat elusive and sometimes thankless task, but in between the regular duties of examining, marking, teaching, writing lectures, attending meetings, administering courses, supervising students, reviewing papers, writing references and so forth, academic music scholars do sometimes find time to think, to explore their ideas, write new papers, perform, compose, conduct ensembles and arrange music festivals. This time is especially valuable, since it is in this space that individual expertise, passion and commitment to a particular topic, however small or currently unfashionable, moves to the forefront and progresses. Such passion and expertise needs to be nurtured, supported and respected, if the essence and reputation of UK music scholarship is to remain as strong as it is today.

At the same time, it should also be apparent from this essay that we have only begun to scratch the surface of our understanding of the role of music in human experience. The current explosion of interdisciplinary interest in the musical mind is long overdue, and will no doubt become a central feature of future research into human communication, intelligence, memory, emotion, perception, society, culture and even consciousness. If this knowledge can be tapped, influenced and translated into educational, social and therapeutic benefits for the UK population, then all the better.

What should be most clear from this essay is that music is not simply an artistic, auditory object, but an aesthetic, personal, social and physical experience that gives people joy, intellectual stimulation, creative expression

and some kind of escape from their daily routine. When we listen to music we can forget everything else, or we can be driven to dance wildly around the room. Music can strengthen friendships, facilitate learning and, ultimately, significantly improve our quality of life, throughout its entire course.¹

Note

- 1 Thanks to Simon Frith, Elaine Kelly, John Kitchen, Darryl Martin, Peter Nelson, Noel O'Regan, Nigel Osborne, Mary Fogarty, Jenny Triggs and other colleagues and students in Music, the IMHSD and the School of Arts, Culture and Environment at the University of Edinburgh. Thanks to Tom Howey for the figures.

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