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Musical collaboration outside school: Processes of negotiation in band rehearsals

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Abstract

This paper presents a study of a series of band rehearsals run by five young people as they practised for a gig together: preparing new songs as well as developing their existing sets. The analysis specifically explores the ways in which the band members collectively develop and evaluate their musical ‘works in progress’. Their interactions were distinctive: with evidence of emotive, highly critical and sometimes conflictual dynamics in places. Within and through such processes the band members constructed a musical ‘shared knowledge’ which resourced the negotiation of their emergent band identity.

Keywords

Identity; collaborative creativity; non-formal learning; adolescent music making

Introduction

When considering music education as a site for collaborative working, it is not surprising that many of the examples that are most readily cited are found within formal music education settings such as schools and

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conservatoires (e.g. Barrett, 2005; Wirtanen & Littleton, 2004). However, in this paper we argue that there is a need to examine and analyse the collaborative musical activities which take place outside these formal settings – most notably in the bands that young people set up and run themselves – to understand more about the processes of collaboration that occur in these contexts where there is no formal ‘educational’ agenda at all, but where the activity is undertaken for the pleasure of collective engagement in this shared passion.

It is important when considering music education to recognise some of the difficulties with formal education practices that have been documented in recent years. In relation to school contexts, the inclusion of music as a foundation subject within the National Curriculum in 1988 was seen as a radical step by the music education community – not only as a recognition of the importance of the subject area, but also, more importantly, for the emphasis which was placed on musical *activity*. In addition to the more traditional music education, based around listening and appraising, the Curriculum included active music making for all children through performing and composing. Active musical experiences were seen as a means of helping children develop a deeper understanding of music, *and to become musicians themselves to some degree* (Durrant & Welch, 1995). These ideas have a long historical tradition in music education literature, based on the ‘performing-composing-listening’ model which dates back to Aristotle. What was new in the 1988 curriculum was the entitlement for *all* children to experience these active forms of music making.

‘Music can change the way children feel, think, and act... Music enables children to define themselves in relation to others, their friends, colleagues, social networks and to the cultures in which they live... The teaching of music... introduces pupils to different forms of music making and response, both individual and communal, developing a sense of group identity and

togetherness... It is a route to an ever-increasing range of music-related careers' (QCA, 1999: 162).

However, work by Lamont (2002) suggested that taking formal instrumental lessons outside school is the critical factor in children and young people claiming the identity of 'musician'. Half of the children she studied described themselves as 'non-musicians' because they did not have this formal tuition, even though they *did* play instruments within general class musical activities. Lamont also found that, in schools where there is a considerable amount of extra-curricular musical activity, if children cannot (or choose not to) become involved in these activities, then they are *more* likely to develop a negative musical identity, through a process of social comparison. This was seen across the entire age-range, from 5 to 16 years of age. So, whilst the official school curriculum is in favour of inclusive musical activities, the extended programme of optional extra-curricular musical activities seems to be more influential in shaping children's identities as musicians.

In accordance with the findings of the 'Arts Education in Secondary Schools: Effects and Effectiveness' research published by the NFER in 2000, a sample of 20 13–16 year olds we interviewed (MacDonald, Miell & Wilson, 2005; Miell, MacDonald & Littleton, 2002) were disenchanted and disaffected with their experience of music in the secondary school:

(a) Tim: I've always been playing music but I've never really enjoyed it in school, my music teacher wasn't particularly wonderful and I don't think I'd really get anywhere by doing it.

(b) Researcher: What did you think of the music lessons there in your old school?

Andrew: um terrible.

(c) Connor: I don't know how to describe how awful it was, we spent like about a month stood by the mirror continuously on the keyboard.

This was an almost unanimous view of school music. The young people in our study criticised many things about it, including the way in which the teaching never got to grips (in their view) with the different ability and experience levels in the class (where some have been having keyboard lessons for more than 8 years and are working with others who have never had a chance to play). Perhaps as a result, the music lessons were characterised as a site for 'larking around' and 'a bit of a doss'.

Just as young people seem to become disenchanted with formal school music lessons; however, their engagement with music activities generally is often increasing, and listening to, talking about and playing music are clearly pervasive aspects of many of their lives (Ashley & Durbin, 2006; Carlton, 2006; Lamont, 2003). They can be seen to be exploring and developing their sense of identity through music as well as developing a range of musical skills and learning not only about particular techniques but also about the genres that interest them and their friends (Ivaldi, 2006; MacDonald *et al.*, 2005; Saarikallio, 2006). Such non-formal contexts provide sites where both personal and collective musical practices and literacies can be constituted and appropriated outside school. Some of the literacies developed in these settings may not be valued in the school. It is important that as researchers we examine the collaborative processes taking place in a range of settings for music learning and working, including young people's own bands, if we are to gain a fuller understanding of the ways in which they can engage with music (Green, in press).

Young people, working together in their own band, are, through collaboration, developing a range of competencies such as transposition, instrumental skills and rhythmic understanding. In this paper, however, the focus is on specifically how they negotiate the development of an agreed

composition and the genre of music they see as their particular speciality, including how the band's musical identity relates to wider musical styles and cultures.

In this paper we present a study of one such band's rehearsals. The band had been together for at least a year when we began the study and regularly performed at school and other gigs. We analysed extracts of the members' talk and joint musical activity taken from an extended period of filmed rehearsals to explore how they collaboratively evaluated and developed their compositions, and through this, negotiated their identity as a band.

Methodological and analytical approach

An earlier study (MacDonald, Miell & Wilson, 2005; Miell, MacDonald & Littleton, 2002) explored the musical tastes and experiences of 20 young people aged 13–16 through a series of in-depth interviews. The young people were all involved in music at school, but also took part in a range of other voluntary musical activities such as being members of bands, musical theatre and choirs in their spare time. They also spent a considerable amount of time listening to music and talking about it with their friends and family. They were contacted and recruited to the study through notices in youth clubs and music centres, and were interviewed individually about their musical tastes and interests, their views about school music lessons, and their involvement in musical activities outside school.

One of the young men in this sample discussed his experiences of collaborating with fellow band members on musical activities at considerable length in the interview and expressed an interest in being involved with his band in further research on young people's collaborative music making. As a result, all the members of his band were contacted and the proposed study was explained and their participation sought. All five members (four males and one female aged 15–16) agreed to take part. They are referred to here as Jack (the band leader and participant in the previous study), Dan, Matt, Leah and Harry.

Discussion with the band established that they had a gig coming up in 6 weeks and were planning to write some new material to play at that gig alongside some of their existing material. The band were provided with a digital camcorder and asked to film all their band rehearsals leading up to and including this next gig. These rehearsals involved them not only bringing some pre-composed material to practise and/or develop but also using the sessions to compose new material collaboratively. The rehearsals mainly took place in Jack's house but some were held at other band members' houses. Most rehearsals involved all members of the band. The band were encouraged to leave the camera recording throughout each session to capture the periods of both talk and music playing, and also to discuss (to camera in video diary style) their views of how the rehearsals were going and of the how they were working together to write and develop the material.

Once all the recordings were complete the authors examined the 18 hours of recordings in detail to identify all passages where the group were working, musically and/or through dialogue, to evaluate and refine their performances together, especially those where these appraisals were linked to broader considerations of their emerging distinctive sound. The dialogue from these passages was subsequently fully transcribed in order to support a detailed analysis of the collaborative processes which were taking place. Analysis involved both a close re-reading of each transcription and repeated viewing of the associated video extracts.. The analytic process was multi-faceted focussing on a range of themes, however only material relating to their joint evaluations of performances are considered in this paper.

Results

Analysis of the interactions between the band members revealed that throughout their rehearsal time they were continually engaged in sustained joint evaluation and appraisal of their musical output and songs. This was achieved through a complex transactional process in which they would play and replay songs and sections of songs, voicing both their opinions on how

particular pieces were working and offering ideas for improvement, often musically, through playing alternative versions.

Critiquing performances

As exemplified in Extract 1, the band members were often very frank and critical in their assessments of the performances. Immediately prior to the discussion presented in this extract below, the band had been rehearsing a song that they had played before but with the inclusion of a new riff written by Jack. Jack had stopped the band playing, saying that Matt (the drummer) had made a mistake. They had then tried again, but Matt had missed his cue which made the rest laugh. The band then started the song again, but the roll Matt played did not fit with the beat. Matt had then played through a number of possible rolls, offering alternatives musically for the others to consider. The band then tried again from the start and this time Matt's new roll worked. This extended period of collaborative experimentation is followed by a more sharply critical phase: they had just stopped again when the dialogue in Extract 1 followed.

Extract 1

Jack: (To Matt) That thing didn't really work did it?

Matt: No it sounded crap.

Dan: It sounded shit

Matt: Why don't we just come in after 4?

Dan: Yeah

Jack: What do you mean?

Dan: Just go like 1, 2, 3, 4 and then come in

Matt: Yeah

Jack: Cool let's try that

On this, as on other occasions, a strongly critical reaction to what they have just played – in this case that it sounds ‘crap’ and ‘shit’ – is followed by an immediate period of reappraisal in which the band considers ways in which the piece can be made to work. The members of the band were evidently continually striving to establish agreement and consensus about their performance, ensuring that everyone was happy with how a piece was working (although, as can be seen, the ways in which they achieved this were more critical and direct than particularly careful and polite as it might sound when we describe the process as one of ‘establishing consensus and agreement’).

In Extract 2, the band had just completed playing through the ending to one of their songs and they have moved into a phase of review and evaluation.

Extract 2:

Matt: That sounds cool with the ending bit like that.

Jack: (To Harry) What do you think we should do anything to that?

Dan: No

Matt: No it's cool

Jack: Should we play it right through?

Dan: What about that bass line at the end?

Jack: Yeah it's good.

Dan: What about the harmonic bit?

Jack: Yeah that was cool I liked that. So should we go from the beginning?

Matt: Yeah

Jack: (To Dan) So you're in with Matt after 2, right?

Having established that the ending sounds 'cool' and that there is no need to do anything to it, the band engage in a discussion in which they go through a number of different aspects of the song. Only when all are agreed that they should 'go from the beginning' do they accept that the piece is right, and decide to rehearse it as it now is.

This continual engagement in critical reflection, interwoven with the marshalling of agreement regarding the re-working of sections, is frequently used by the group as crucial driver for the development of their songs. This can also be seen in Extract 3 where Jack has just played through a new song he has written for the band and, as it ends, the band start to discuss it.

Extract 3:

Jack: That's how it ends.

Leah: Cool I like that.

Jack: It is cool, we need to sort it out.

Leah: I like the little bit in C.

Jack: Yeah yeah. But I don't know about (plays the riff and then another one). Just try that instead.

(She tries what Jack has suggested).

Jack: Yeah it's better, I think that's better.

(Leah keeps playing the riff. She then stops and they go from the beginning).

Jack: That's basically just something like a second part of the first song. See this is work in progress.

Leah: Which first bit do you want me in on?

Jack: (plays the part) Well I don't know, we'll have like a little gap. The two beats from Matt and then in.

Leah: Cool. Ahhh! Yeah that's really cool.

Early on in this extract, Leah ventures that she likes the 'little bit in C', which Jack also acknowledges with a 'yeah yeah' of agreement. But he swiftly moves on to discuss the riff he is not sure about. He then plays two different versions of the riff, the original version and a new second version. Leah tries the new version of the riff and plays and replays it, with Jack deciding that that is 'better', although he still characterises it as a 'work in progress'. He is marking the new version of the riff, and its fit in the song, as something provisional that can be improved and refined further but which is already an instantiation of some aspects of the band's desired 'sound' towards which they are working in the rehearsal. It is as if the riff has become a musical tool to think with – simultaneously embodying some of the progress they've made but also providing a focus for necessary future work.

The suggestion that Leah comes in after the two beats from Matt, is greeted with agreement and a positive reaction from Leah who feels it is 'cool... really cool'. Here we see how the shared sense of having recognised that something works and is 'cool' is often hard won and can be quite fragile, and it may become unevenly felt by the collaborators. Such 'breakthrough moments' in their collaborative creativity seemed to arise after quite lengthy periods of musical experimentation – where alternative versions are tried repeatedly – interspersed by intense, often emotive, phases of debate and evaluation.

Whilst the interactions between the band members were oriented towards achieving agreement and consensus concerning the 'sound' of particular songs, they were nevertheless often highly emotive and confrontational, with particular individuals sometimes being singled out for direct criticism. This

confrontational dynamic can be seen particularly in Extract 4 where the band is working through a new piece and Dan is defending himself against Jack's accusatory comments that he is 'playing the wrong notes' and 'starting off on the wrong notes':

Extract 4:

Dan: Did you say I was playing the wrong notes?

Jack: Well yeah, maybe it just didn't sound right.

Leah: Play it through just the two of you.

Jack: Let's just play it...

Dan: I'm sure I was playing what I was playing before...

Jack: ...and I'll tell you if it sounds right.

Dan: No it's not the tuning, it must be the notes but I was playing what I was playing before...

Jack: ...Well you can't have been man...

Dan: ...Well I am...

Jack :...We would have heard man...

Dan: ...I swear, I swear.

Jack: You start off with a wrong note

Dan: I'm not!

Jack: That's fucking... well it doesn't sound right does it!

Dan: Well that's what I was playing before

Jack: Well we've got to do something new

Dan: Play it right the way through

Jack : It sounds shit man.

The band tries the same song again from beginning. They stop again, but later on this time.

What is interesting here is that despite the critical and strongly disputational tenor to this interaction, it does not break down. Rather than withdrawing in the face of Jack's vehement criticism, Dan both defends himself, highlighting that he was playing what he was 'playing before', and keeps engaged in the process of working out why it 'doesn't sound right'. It is Dan who encourages the band to 'play it right the way through' again. Very frequently, disputation between group members in formal educational settings can result in the breakdown of group activity (Mercer & Littleton, 2007) and one can speculate as to why this did not happen here. One possible explanation is that it was the strong collective commitment to getting it 'right' and improving the overall performance that enabled members to work through disputes such as this. It may also be that the established relational history between band members – they have successfully worked and played together for some time – meant that disputes such as the one reproduced here were contextualised by the longer history of friendship and positive working relationships between them. This strong relationship provided a safe context within which to play out 'lethal confrontations' (Storey & Joubert, 2004) creatively which, in other contexts, might have damaged or jeopardised a continuing collaboration.

Negotiating a collective musical identity

It is not just the new parts of the set that got scrutinised, evaluated and re-worked; elements of the band's established musical repertoire were also continually re-visited and discussed. This process is illustrated in Extract 5.

Extract 5:

Jack: That used to be our best song but it isn't anymore but it's still quite cool.

Dan: Nah it's wicked. The little like middle bit.

Jack: Did you like that bit?

Dan: Yeah but I wasn't sure of my bass line.

Jack: Ok let's sort it out.

They are trying to sort out the bass line of one of the parts of the previous song. Jack plays his part, Dan works out the bass line. They play the song again from the beginning with the reworked bass line then stopped the recording.

Here Jack suggests that whilst a particular song they had just played was 'still quite cool' it no longer represents their 'best'. Dan, however, disagrees – claiming that it is 'wicked', drawing attention to 'the middle bit' to support his claim. Picking up on Dan's reference to that part of the song, Jack explicitly asks if Dan likes that 'bit'. Dan's affirmative response, together with the qualifier that he wasn't 'sure' of his 'bass line', leads the boys to enter into a further phase of activity in which they 'try and sort' the bass line, with Jack playing his part and Dan experimenting – playing and replaying parts of the bass line until finally they play the song all the way through. Although this particular track was a well established part of the band's regular set, they still took time to work on refining sections that they were unsure of.

The playing and refining of songs is a multi-faceted process within and through which the band members negotiate a sense of their characteristic sound and construct a distinctive collective musical identity as a band. A sense of the 'vibe' and 'mood' of the band inflects their appraisals of particular renditions of songs. For example, in Extract 6 Jack is concerned

that a 'bit' of a track they have just played is 'just not sounding right'. His feeling is that it is almost too 'funky'. Matt is also uncertain and suggests that it 'changes the vibe a bit' and alters the 'mood of the band' which he and Jack agree is not necessarily a good thing.

Extract 6:

Jack: That bit's just not sounding right... It's sounding a bit too, like, I don't know a bit too funky almost, in a way.

Matt: I don't know, it changes the vibe a bit

Jack: Changes?

Matt: Just the mood of the band

Jack: I know but that's not necessarily a good thing.

Matt: Yeah I know

Rehearsal thereby emerges as a performance context which is crucially implicated in identity work. The members' sense of the band's 'sound', its musical identity, both places constraints on and resources the development of a song. Songs or 'bits' of songs are judged and considered in accordance with the members' understanding of what is and is not congruent with their band's distinctive sound. The band members are thus engaged in a process within and through which they continually construct, negotiate and re-negotiate a shared understanding of the qualities of their sound – a kind of 'musical common knowledge'. What is at work, then, are interdependent, mutually constitutive processes whereby a sense of the band's musical identity directly enters into appraisal of a song, with the 'sound' of a song resourcing or problematising the group's claim to a particular, distinctive musical identity.

This claiming of a distinct sound is very important to the band. They are keen to talk about the key influences on their work, recognising that their

sound embodies a fusion of influences, but being careful not to appear derivative (see Extract 7 below).

Extract 7:

Jack: If you take completely different bands like we do and you amalgamate something... then it completely changes it. So if I've got the bare bones of a song and let's say it's in a certain style like in the style of the band called Swans. Then we'll bring it and Dan will bring a certain influence like some sort of post-rock thing which he has been doing and Matt will bring a heavy kind of beat and Leah will bring sort of quirky weird things... and everything comes together

Matt: It's hard to label the sort of music. I mean I don't know, I haven't heard any bands that sound like us.

Dan: It's refreshingly different I would say.

It is important to the band that they are 'refreshingly different' and that they haven't heard any bands that sound like them.

Conclusion

We began this paper by highlighting the striking contrast between children and young people's engagement with music and music making in nonformal settings, as part of their life-worlds, and their relative disengagement with 'school music'. In this context, we argued that there is a need for work that helps understand how young people construct their band performances and work together throughout the rehearsal process.

As our analyses of the young people's talk and joint musical activity unfolded we were reminded how many valuable opportunities for collaborative learning are fortuitous, serendipitous and improvised. That is, they emerge as a consequence of ongoing activity, being precipitated out of

occasions of joint action and interaction (Crook, 2000). The band members we studied rehearsing were highly motivated, repeatedly playing, replaying and reworking songs, both new and old, in an attempt to reach collectively agreed versions and interpretations. Our analyses suggest that this struggle to establish shared musical knowledge and understanding was simultaneously a highly charged and deeply meaningful process – involving the construction and negotiation of not only an agreed interpretation of pieces within their sets but also a broader band identity. Music was thus the medium within which the interdependent processes of collective creative interpretation and identity construction were contested, mutually constituted and negotiated.

The evaluative language used was very direct and frequently blunt, involving critical commentary and frank assessment of the resultant ‘vibe’ or sound. Members often engaged in what Storey & Joubert (2004, p.46) have called ‘lethal confrontations’ in which they were intensely critical of each other’s playing and creative contributions. An illustration of such a confrontation was seen in Extract 4. What is notable is that the collaboration between the band members did not break down in these moments of vehement intensity. Rather, these conflicts were the very sites or moments in which creative breakthroughs seemed to happen, or which fuelled subsequent useful rounds of re-working and re-playing – as can be seen in Extract 4. It has been suggested that collaboration sets up: ‘a safe space to hear criticism, explore ideas that most of the field would consider eccentric, receive encouragement when work is not going well, and both accept one’s personal limitations yet move beyond them with the help of the other’ (Moran & John-Steiner, 2004, p16). What is evident is that this process may not always be uniformly consensual and that collaboration is often not about the absence of tension but may involve the ‘fruitful cultivation of tension’ (Moran & John Steiner, 2004).

The band acted as ‘freestylers’ (Kjeldgaard, 2006) – not looking for any one existing style to ‘fit in to’ but instead switching between styles,

experimenting with and borrowing from them in order to forge and define their own distinctive sound and identity through negotiating their creative conflicts and tensions. This work is at least partly resourced by their repeated musical experimentation and their acknowledgement of versions of a song being provisional ‘musical works in progress’ that need to be developed and brought closer to their desired ideal sound.

Another interesting aspect of the informal learning that we observed was the very immediate and practical focus of the talk between band members during their rehearsals as they exchanged ideas and commented on each other’s work. There were clear differences between this and the commonly found more pedagogic styles of settings such as school music lessons or formal instrumental tuition. O’Hear & Sefton-Green (2004) found similar patterns in their analysis of an online art forum, and as he explained (p.122).

‘The actual critical commentary used by Chavo [the mentor] and other members of the group is also quite different from that used in education – even art schools... language used here was very practical and very direct. Tom [novice] found the discourse helpful and didn’t find it offputting... The fact that this criticism was extremely practical and direct again seems to be more useful than the discourse of evaluation used in more formal educational settings’.

Whilst we have uncovered a great deal of productive work emerging in nonformal interactions, we are not suggesting that formal school music lessons should become completely like the band rehearsals. Instead, we would suggest that young musicians might require exposure to *a range of* creative environments and a mix of different kinds of musical experiences. It is often claimed that a ‘central challenge for educational practice becomes the creation of continuities between existing concerns and new ones that we are asking them to reason about together in classrooms’ (Crook, 1999, p.105). Might part of this challenge also be to sensitively recognise and respect

discontinuities and differences, and find ways of offering young people who are interested in creative music making a range of varied contexts in which to explore and develop their work?

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