

## **Introduction to assessment in music education**

Assessment is a key topic in education today. As a part of the debate concerning assessment and its role, those involved in the teaching and learning of music are having to address a wide variety of issues. Assessment in its broadest sense touches all areas of music education, yet the implications of more recent understandings of its role in teaching and learning have still to be felt in some quarters. There is a long tradition of assessment within music education, and in many ways, ‘. . . music has been the most assessed of disciplines, both in the school context and beyond’ (Philpott 2007: 210). However, it could be argued that it is only a specific aspect of music which has traditionally been assessed, namely performance, and that within this only a limited range of instrumental skills have been looked at. For this reason it is safe to say that practices which may have been historically appropriate are now being questioned, and at the same time newer ideas and techniques are finding their way into the daily activities of classroom music and instrumental teachers. Views concerning assessment in music education are hotly debated. These range from those who say assessment is impossible, and should not even be attempted, to those who want to establish an encyclopaedic series of competencies which need to be measured. In between these extremes are many varying shades of opinion, including those who say that it is only the personal response which matters, and those who affirm that technical issues are the only assessable thing.

It is against this constantly changing and complex background that this book was conceived. Its purpose is to investigate assessment from a variety of perspectives concerned with learning and teaching in music. During the course of this book a number of topics of interest to classroom teachers, peripatetic instrumental teachers, studio music teachers, trainee teachers, researchers, legislators, pupils, parents, and many others, will be investigated, discussed, analysed, and commented upon.

We know that for many involved in the teaching and learning of music, assessment is thought of as problematic. ‘Whether it is in teaching or research communities there always seems to be considerable unease about the how and

why of musical assessment. Formative or summative, process or product, quantitative or qualitative, teacher or pupil based, the apparent opposites represent a picture of uncertainty' (Savage 2002: 38). And, as Keith Swanwick observes, '... why is it that assessment in education and especially in the arts appears to be problematic? It is when we find ourselves moving away from informal assessment that things start to get tricky. For assessment ranges from making instantaneous choices in our daily life to the relative formality of analytical reporting' (Swanwick 1999: 71).

It is the proliferation of what Savage refers to as 'apparent opposites' which causes problems for music education practitioners, rightly concerned as they are with developing the musical learning of their own pupils. To try to get beneath the surface of this problem, let us begin by thinking about what variety of constructs, concepts, and activities are encompassed by the terminology *assessment*.

## What is assessment?

The word 'assessment' carries with it a number of different shades of meaning. There is some debate as to the origin of the word itself. The Oxford English Dictionary traces it from the Latin *ad sedere*—to sit beside—where it was originally a term used in jurisprudence for one who advised a judge, often with relation to fines or levies. Turning to education, most meanings of assessment are along the lines of '... to judge the extent of students' learning' (Freeman & Lewis 1998: 9). 'To judge' involves making an informed evaluation of a situation, and this is an action which places one person literally in judgement over another. It is this complex relationship which forms the heart of many of the discussions in this book.

There is a common, but erroneous, belief that assessment is synonymous with marking and grading. Allied to this notion, another error is to believe that only formalized tests or testing regimes count as assessment. There are many reasons why formal assessments take place, ranging from external certification of achievement, via the imperative of teachers having to provide schools with assessment data, to teachers using the results of in-class tests to develop learning programmes. These formal assessments represent specific moments in time during the teaching and learning process. One of the issues at stake here is that teachers in general, and music teachers in particular, have long viewed assessment as being a process external to their teaching. A potential cause for confusion which arises from viewing assessment as involving only marking and grading is that the meaning of the word 'assessment' becomes unnecessarily restricted, so that only external assessments assume

any importance. This ‘folk view’ of assessment needs unpicking somewhat in order to try to undo its pervasive influence.

## A folk view of assessment

The folk view of assessment is that it happens separately from a course of teaching or instruction, and represents a series of fixed points which demarcate the progression of a learner. This view of teaching, learning, and assessment can be represented diagrammatically as in Fig. 1.1.

In this way of thinking about assessment, it can be seen to *only* happen separated from teaching. This can be characterized as being the way that graded examinations in instrumental music have traditionally taken place. It is also the way in which, in the UK at least, some aspects of General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), Advanced Supplementary (AS), Advanced (A2), and other externally organized examinations occur. A feature of a number of these forms of examination is that the assessment is not only separated from teaching, but also that it is undertaken by an unknown third party who has had little or no contact with teacher or learner either beforehand, or afterwards. This way of assessing learning in music detaches assessment from teaching, the learner from the learned, and the teacher from the taught. What it does is to prioritize such that the only thing that counts is performance at the appointed hour of the assessment itself. The learning process that has been gone through is subsumed within the presentation of that which has been learned.

Thinking of assessment as happening separately from teaching in the way represented in Fig. 1.1 can create problems for both teacher and pupils. Indeed, many view this way of thinking about assessment as needing attention: ‘. . . assessment and instruction are often conceived as curiously separate in both time and purpose’ (Graue 1993: 291). This notion of formal assessment being ‘curiously separate’ is one which downplays other aspects of assessment, and has itself come to be challenged by many current views, and is discussed in more detail in later sections of this book.

## A wider view of assessment

In comparison with the folk view of assessment, involving only formalized assessment routines, a contemporary counter viewpoint states that informal



**Fig. 1.1** Teaching and assessment

assessments take place all the time, and form a constant background against which any teaching and learning encounter takes place. Viewed from this perspective, assessment becomes an essential and integral component of every lesson. Teachers make judgements all the time concerning what to do next, what topics to include, which pieces of music to perform, what starting points for composing are appropriate, and which pieces to listen to. As the lesson progresses the teacher also makes judgements as to how fast or slow certain aspects need to be worked, whether all, most, or some of the pupils have understood the learning objectives, whether certain specific pupils need more help with some aspects of the lesson, whether other specific pupils have thoroughly grasped the topic already and are ready to move on. All of these judgements are assessments. However, it is the case that all too often these informal judgements are not recognized by practitioners as being assessments: it seems that for many only formalized testing is important enough to carry the weight of this terminology. The important area of assessment for learning, with its focus on improving the learning process, is but one example that proves this narrow view is not the case.

The folk view of assessment carries with it the commonly heard phraseology employed by teachers 'I will be carrying out an assessment next lesson'. A side-effect of this folk view is to unintentionally downgrade teachers' judgements when compared with external 'curiously separate' assessments, yet it is the teacher's judgements which are essential to making progress in music. This downgrading can be seen to create a false dichotomy, as during the course of every lesson the teacher will be carrying out hundreds of informal assessment judgements necessary for her to help her pupils to progress, and for the lesson to proceed. The assessment judgements of teachers *do* matter, they are important to the successful development of every child in learning music, and, as a number of recent initiatives observe, every child matters.

Viewed from this altered stance, it becomes impossible to separate assessment from teaching. Indeed, as Swanwick observes '... to teach is to assess' (Swanwick 1988: 149). Considered in this way, assessment becomes an integral part of teaching and learning, perceptions shift '... so that it is used to help students learn and to improve instruction rather than being used only to rank students or to certify the end products of learning' (Shepard 2000: 31). This shift in perspective has the effect of moving assessment from its 'curiously separate' location as external to teaching, and has placed it as an integral component of the teaching process. This shift can be represented diagrammatically by redrawing Fig. 1.1 to include assessment within teaching, as in Fig. 1.2.

This altered perspective, where assessment is integral to teaching and learning, runs like an *idée fixe* through many of the subsequent sections of this book.



**Fig. 1.2** Assessment within teaching

## Assessment, recording, and reporting

Assessment, recording, and reporting, sometimes referred to as AR&R, are three different links in the chain of assessment events. It is important not to confuse these terminologies, as assessments do not solely exist in the recording of their marks. *Assessment* refers to the first link, the process of gathering evidence about something, and this includes a wide range of information gathering techniques: ‘... the term “assessment” refers to all those activities undertaken by teachers, and by their students in assessing themselves, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged’ (Black & Wiliam 1998b). The term *recording* refers to the second link in the chain, the way in which information from assessments is notated, stored, and saved for future retrieval. The commonest form this takes is still the teacher’s mark book, but there are, as we shall discuss in later sections, other alternatives for this. *Reporting* is a third link in the chain, and refers to the ways in which information gathered from assessments is promulgated. This can be in grades given to pupils, school reports, examination mark sheets, or many other more or less official forms of documentation. It is worthwhile to note that for some internal purposes, where only teacher and pupils are aware of comments, marks, and grades, that it might not occur formally at all.

## Endnote

There are many aspects appertaining to Assessment as it occurs in teachers’ daily practice. As well as those of formalized testing, and the more infrequent external assessment regimes, there are also the judgements made, and decisions taken during the course of every lesson. Investigating teaching and learning from the perspective of assessment requires thinking about what assessment is, and what is contained in a lesson or learning encounter in music. In order to begin to address this, the next chapter focuses on the terminologies which are employed when discussing assessment, and explores ways in which they can be of value to the music teacher.