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Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

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Citation

Bartlett, Ian. 1977-1978. 'Review of *Pop Music in School*, Eds. Graham Vulliamy and Ed Lee'. *Contact*, 18. pp. 26-28. ISSN 0308-5066.

Reviews and Reports

POP MUSIC IN SCHOOL, edited by Graham Vulliamy and Ed Lee
Cambridge University Press, 1976 (hardback, £5.50; paperback £2.25; reel to reel tape, £4.50 + VAT; cassette tape, £3.50 + VAT)

IAN BARTLETT

'The exercise of taste for its own sake makes for dubious criticism: it is more valuable to suggest the terms of a discussion in which various and even conflicting judgements may reasonably be argued. Evaluation is more cogent and convincing as a by-product than as a goal or even a starting-point of criticism.'¹

These observations of Charles Rosen, made by way of introduction to a consideration of the aesthetics of Schoenberg's music are equally apposite to the central theme of this book. Graham Vulliamy and his team of contributors are concerned to question the validity of applying to pop music standards of taste based on criteria established with reference to the great central European classical tradition. Jazz and a great deal of pop music — however urbanised or dependent upon European harmonic structures they may have become — should be judged in terms of musical principles derived from the black Afro-American folk tradition. At the same time, the authors assert and demonstrate through musical illustrations and recorded examples the beneficial role which pop music can play in the context of school music, if it is approached with discrimination and sensitivity.

It is evident, however, that a profound *distaste* for many of the musical characteristics of pop, not to mention the extra-musical values rightly or wrongly associated with it, has motivated the more vociferous opponents of its use in education. The manner in which their point of view has often been presented may be illustrated by the following quotations:

With the prevalent commercial pop at the extreme of vulgarity, primitive repetitiveness and excessive volume, some misguided people have introduced it in school classes. For what purpose? To encourage the equivalent of dropped H's? ... No real musician can present pop to a class with honesty. It is the equivalent of a teacher of literature instructing a class to write dirty words on a lavatory wall...²
Pop is not music. It is a commercial product with two aims — the making of money and the deliberate corruption of young people.³

Some common tendencies may be observed among those who feel the influence of pop music to be wholly pernicious. (1) 'Pop music' is used as a generic term, irrespective of the many different styles and degrees of musicality subsumed by it. (2) Crude commercial interest is identified as the main driving force behind the music. (3) Pop music is assumed to cause, or at least to encourage, the betrayal of moral standards and to set out deliberately to exploit the innocent and vulnerable. (4) Rational analysis and careful appraisal are largely abandoned in favour of instinctive evaluation and rejection. (In psychological terms, strong defensive measures seem to come into operation here. Notwithstanding the importance of spontaneity in the performance of much pop music, and of intuitive response on the part of the listener, it is still felt to be totally unacceptable.)

Unfortunately, no musician seems to have attempted to emulate David Holbrooke who has developed, mainly but not exclusively from a literary point of view, a serious critique of the values and standards of pop culture in general. Yet the problems generated by the existence, not to say the ubiquitousness, of pop music demand careful examination by music educationists, for interactions of complex psychological, sociological and economic as well as musical factors are involved. *Pop Music in School*,

without in any sense ignoring or minimising the wider implications of the subject, represents a cool, balanced and carefully reasoned attempt to establish the terms in which we might begin to make sensible judgements about pop music in its various forms, and hence to justify its inclusion in the curriculum. Particularly in view of the increasingly multi-racial nature of many schools, especially in the larger conurbations, the significance of the questions raised by this book cannot be overestimated.

A major factor inhibiting the use of pop by music teachers is the difficulty of gaining a clear historical perspective on the subject, let alone keeping up with the latest trends. Moreover, the knowledge that some pupils are likely to be more expert than the teacher tends to increase the sense of insecurity. Dave Rogers' introductory chapter on 'Varieties of pop music: a guided tour' provides a succinct and (as far as it is possible to be) orderly account of the potentially bewildering developments which have taken place since the advent of rock 'n' roll in the mid-50s. If this outline is used in conjunction with the extensive and carefully organised bibliography and discography, determined newcomers to the field should soon be able to orientate themselves. Recordings are listed under no less than 26 categories so that recommended examples of styles such as Motown, Soul, Country and Western or Rhythm and Blues can be readily identified.

From the practical standpoint, there can be no question that considerable expertise and experience lie behind the advice offered by Tony Robins on 'The presentation of pop music'. Teachers who have not participated in pop music as performers themselves will benefit especially from his ideas on the purchase and use of electronic equipment. On the tape which accompanies the book, Robins' 'Choral and Instrumental Group' of senior pupils gives highly polished performances of skilfully arranged items from their repertoire of light and popular pieces. A wider range of issues and practical problems is covered by Ed Lee in 'Pop and the teacher'. Though he might be accused of taking an over-optimistic view of the consequences of attempting to give guitar tuition in large groups, his observations are generally perceptive and helpful. Teachers with an exclusively classical background may also find his 'Note on conventions of notation in Afro-American music' useful.

In 'Definitions of serious music' Graham Vulliamy tackles the theoretical issues with which the book is concerned. In his brief account of the background to the present situation in schools, he seems to have underestimated the extent to which varieties of folk music, exotic as well as indigenous, jazz idioms (even if often in the form of pastiche) and light music of various kinds have already been absorbed into the mainstream of class music teaching. Nevertheless, his exposure of the questionable, if not false, premises on which much of the criticism by classical musicians of jazz and jazz-derived styles has been based is convincing enough. To support his main contention, Vulliamy draws on the work of Charles Keil⁴ who has revealed the limitations of Leonard B. Meyer's concept of 'embodied meaning'⁵ if it is applied to jazz. Whereas in classical music, with which Meyer is principally concerned, the apprehension of precisely-defined formal relationships and harmonic tensions is crucial to its appreciation, jazz relies much more for the communication of its meaning upon elements of improvisation and subtleties of pitch and rhythm that cannot be notated. In order to judge the quality of a piece of jazz or pop (not to mention many other musics relying upon aural dissemination), the extent to which these essential characteristics of the style are successful in evoking responses in the perceptive listener must be taken into account. In Keil's submission, 'engendered feeling' rather than 'embodied meaning' is the essential factor in the evaluation of jazz. Thus a strong theoretical basis is provided for the basic propositions of the book.

The case for teaching from the musical culture of the pupil rather than that of the teacher is presented by Vulliamy in 'Pupil-centred music teaching'. The familiar, and therefore the understood, is made the starting point for the widening of horizons with which all education must be concerned, while invidious comparisons between different kinds of music are avoided. A case-study of the practical application of this approach is provided by the music department of a college of technology. The director of music sees his role as that of guide and organiser rather than leader and instructor. Music flourishes with a wide range of extra-curricular activities from jazz and rock bands and folk groups to a large choral society. As Vulliamy recognises, however, the department can hardly be regarded as a model for secondary schools, very few of which enjoy anything like comparable resources or accommodation.

The account by Malcolm Nichols of his experience in 'Running an open music department' in a 14-18 upper school also has only a limited relevance. In this case, not only are the facilities quite exceptional, but the way in which the department is run is a direct reflection of the unusual policy and organisation of the school as a whole. For half of their time, pupils follow an individualised and optional curriculum. The music department, rather than offering courses with a preconceived content and structure, aims to cater for the needs of any pupil who expresses interest in acquiring or developing further any musical skill. Valuable as experiments like these undoubtedly are, they presuppose and depend upon a considerable degree of maturity and capacity for self-direction in the student. It is difficult to envisage the success of such a scheme in secondary schools catering for a lower age range. Yet it is in these schools which deal with younger adolescents at the most difficult stage of their development that the most intractable problems of music in education are to be encountered. A book such as this stands or falls on the extent to which practice can be shown to validate theory.

The most convincing justification for the views expressed in this book are provided by the two chapters by Piers Spencer. Here is a practising secondary school teacher who has obviously succeeded in integrating pop music into the

framework of his teaching with impressive results. In 'The blues: a practical project for the classroom', Spencer shows how, relying upon normal classroom instruments such as recorders, xylophones, guitars and percussion, jazz and pop music idioms can be utilised creatively within the now well-established techniques of group improvisation originally devised by Carl Orff. Improvisations based on pentatonic melodies in familiar jazz rhythms can take place over ostinato (or riff) bass patterns or simple blues harmonic progressions. In the attractive recorded illustrations of classroom work, it is refreshing to hear the way in which the genuinely musical impulses of individual pupils are given scope for expression in the improvisatory sections. In 'The creative possibilities of pop', Spencer provides further evidence of the musical potentialities of this approach. Particularly fascinating and salutary (in view of the pre-eminence given to the acquisition of musical literacy at the expense of other skills in conventional musical education) is his tracing of the creative development of an individual pupil, who could not read music and had received no formal piano lessons, through the analysis of the songs he had composed.

Controversy over the place of pop music in education has smouldered fitfully for more than a decade now: from at least the early 60s when the Beatles began to be taken seriously in some of our august literary and musical institutions, mainly through the exchange of shortwinded polemical broadsides in the press. Only occasionally have substantial and positive contributions to our thinking illuminated the scene. In this respect, *Pop Music in School* takes its place in an honourable line of succession from Keith Swanwick's eminently reasonable first survey of the issues in *Popular Music and the Teacher*⁶ to Michael Burnett's valuable and constructive series of articles 'Coming to Terms with Pop'⁷ and, of course, Wilfrid Mellers' acute and detailed study of the work of the Beatles in *Twilight of the Gods: The Beatles in Retrospect*.⁸

No secondary school music teacher or student contemplating music teaching as a career can afford to ignore *Pop Music in School*. The fundamental nature of its message is best summed up in the words of Christopher

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Searle, who is aware of the psychological considerations that should be borne in mind. 'Pop music can be used to create a genuine education experience. We have to work realistically within the media that are inevitably forming the symbolic structure of the children's expression, in order to fight to reverse its pernicious effects. Pop music is having an enormous impact on adolescent experience. If we work against that experience, we work against the formation of the child's identity at its most vital social stage.'⁹

NOTES:

¹ Charles Rosen, *Schoenberg* (London: Fontana, 1976), p. 7.

² 'The Use of Trendy "Amplified Pop" in School Music Classes', *Music Journal* [Incorporated Society of Musicians,] Vol. 42, No. 3 (October 1976), p. 17.

³ From a letter to *The Daily Telegraph*, September 6, 1975.

⁴ Charles Keil, 'Motion and Feeling through Music', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Spring 1966), pp. 337-349.

⁵ Leonard B. Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

⁶ Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1968.

⁷ In *Music Teacher*, February to July and September to December 1972.

⁸ London: Faber and Faber, 1973. This has recently become available in paperback and a review will appear in a later issue of *Contact*. (Ed.)

⁹ Quoted by Piers Spencer from Christopher Searle, *This New Season* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1973), p. 112.

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