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SPIRITUALITY, MUSIC, AND THE CLASSROOM

I am writing this in the foothills of the Himalayas with some of the mountains of the Annapurna Range, spectacularly gleaming in the sun, visible from my window. I have come to Nepal to find out the significance of music in Buddhist and Hindu worship, as one step in my research into the links between spirituality and music. Defining spirituality would be a natural place to begin this article, but the more I question people the more I realize that there are probably even more definitions of spirituality than there are of music. Many definitions of spirituality include some reference to the ultimate meaning and purpose of life; others approach it from a more mundane perspective, and see it in terms of anything that is outside of the normal, practical, materialistic aspects of existence. I accept both these views but would rather leave it open ended and go along with this quote by Priestly:

"There is a clamouring for definition all around us but the traditional symbols demonstrate clearly why, as a matter of principle, definition is a nonsense. It would be to bottle the wind, to extinguish the fire and to damn the flowing stream." [Priestly in Erricker, Clive. & Erricker, Jane. (2000): *Reconstructing Religious, Spiritual and Moral Education*, RoutledgeFalmer, Page IX]

My interest in this subject stems from a desire to promote spirituality in the music classroom, so I will begin by explaining why I think this is important and then tell you what I believe spirituality in this context should not be about. The U.K. National Curriculum requires that education "*promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society*" (1988, *The Education Reform Act*). Despite this ruling it is apparent that the "*spiritual*" aspect gets scant recognition in the day-to-day life of most schools. A daily act of worship is also still the official dictum but in our multi-cultural, multi-religious, and multi-layered society, this too is rarely adhered to, except in faith schools. So one starting point for me was that I believe there is a spiritual element to music, and that through music we can offer pupils experiences they might not come across otherwise.

An equally important element in my choice of this area to research stems from what I see going on around me in our society. Note, I do not add "*today*" because in my opinion the lack of religious practice in the majority of the population has little to do with what goes on, and has gone on, for the less well off throughout history. I am talking about the many pupils who appear to



have little reason for living, not to put too fine a point on it. Our streets echo with the sounds of noisy youth who are either already unemployed, or are sitting out their days until they can leave school because they see no value in education. And not to limit it to boys, the girls who at fourteen, or younger, are already mothers while still only children themselves. All this sounds rather melodramatic, and I would not blame you for thinking it has more to do with communities of practice than music, but the more people I talk to about music, the more I realize that life can be changed by it. And, incidentally, this spiritual element that I am talking about does not have to have anything to do with religion.

In defining spirituality I said that I would talk about what it is not, or rather, what it need not be. There is a huge debate going on in the theology and philosophy fraternity about whether spirituality needs to be rooted in religion. For some people there is no question that the two are indisputably linked. For others, even people who profess a religious belief themselves, there is room for maneuver. For still others, they know that they experience spirituality even though they are agnostics or atheists. My view is that although spirituality does not necessarily need to be identified with religion, it is important, at the very least, to acknowledge that spirituality is an essential element of religion and therefore not something to be dismissed out of hand.

The National Curriculum goes on to talk about "*spiritual development*" and it is here that I run into difficulties. What does this mean? How can we "*teach*" spiritual development? Is it different from "*moral development*" or learning about values? My answer is yes, it is different. I see it as no part of a music teacher's job to try to "*teach*" spiritual development, or to add it to the many things we already have to assess. It is for this reason that I am discussing music in the classroom and not the curriculum. In fact I am not advocating teaching spirituality at all. My purpose is two-fold: first, to offer pupils experience of music that they would not come across otherwise, in an atmosphere where they are not necessarily required to do anything with it or about it; secondly, and really as an off-shoot, to present music from other countries as it is linked to the religious culture. The reason for this is that we frequently teach music as if it is secular when it often has considerable spiritual significance for the communities taking part in it.

How, then, is this to happen? Again it is easier to talk in negatives: it is not to do with brain-washing, the accusation that most teachers fear if they enter into the realms of spirituality, and it is not to do with pupils having to describe the emotions they feel when listening to music, although this might be something some want to do. Some people advocate teaching pupils to meditate, and although this is probably a worthwhile exercise it is not something I am suggesting, or that most teachers would feel competent, or comfortable, to undertake. But there are other ways of creating an atmosphere which may encourage a deeper way of listening or a feeling of inner calm.

I taught for some time in a boys' boarding school which specialized in behavioral and educational issues. The art teacher and I worked together to



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provide a safe environment to display emotion. We would take the boys into the school hall and get them to lie down in a space where they were not touching anyone. I would then do some simple relaxation exercises with them before playing a short extract of music. This would be repeated four or five times with music of very contrasting styles. In between each piece they could either stay lying down or respond to the music in some way. Various different types of paper and charcoal, paint, crayons, pencils and so on were provided, and they were encouraged to express how they felt. On more than one occasion a boy went to sleep and this was also fine; if sleep was what they needed, this too would help them feel better about themselves. If a pupil got engrossed in their piece of art work they did not have to go back and lie down.

In a music classroom these art materials would probably not be available, but the same idea could be used. Pupils might want to compose or improvise an idea, some more musically educated might want to notate something. Some might want to draw a picture or others write something. Or it might be an exercise in its own right that does not need to be followed up. With one class in a girls' comprehensive school I used this as a way of calming them sufficiently to be able to teach them anything at all. It was also common practice before the drama club I ran after school; the girls would come in and lie down and allow themselves to unwind from the day's exertions.

So, to get back to the subject, what has this to do with spirituality and music? I would argue that it presents the opportunity for pupils to be transported to that place in the mind, or soul, where it is possible to appreciate that life has something to offer beyond the grim reality of everyday toil: an opportunity to find a way to escape, possibly; an opportunity, at the very least, to find stillness. In my experience there are very few pupils who do not eventually feel that this is a better way to spend their time than to disrupt the class.

References:

HMSO (1988): *The Education Reform Act*, London, England, United Kingdom
Priestly in Erricker, Clive. & Erricker, Jane. (2000): *Reconstructing Religious, Spiritual and Moral Education*, RoutledgeFalmer, London, England, United Kingdom, Page IX.



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