Practically speaking: a conceptual model for encouraging music participation for all ages

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Abstract

This paper makes the case for a conceptual model for music making in school and in the wider community based on practice developed over more than a decade. Its basic organising feature is known as the *Music Outreach Principle* which developed from an alternative form of social-altruistic music participation focussed on encouraging engagement and the will to engage others. Two associated concepts have emerged from research and practice. *Common Artistry* refers to the widely accepted theory that human beings are, by nature, artistic and musical. *Selective Mutism for Singing* relates to the generalised fear of singing, a basic form of human musicianship no longer widely practised in general social interactions. These three concepts provide a model that is easily understood and a clear platform for its wide range of users to reflect on their own music making and the way in which that music making is encouraged, or otherwise, in society.

Keywords: conceptual model; music making; music engagement

Introduction

This paper makes the case for a conceptual model for music making both in school and beyond based on practice developed over more than a decade. Its underlying organising feature is known as the Music Outreach Principle which emerged from social-altruistic music sharing. Application of this principle contributed to the development of two broader related concepts: Selective Mutism for Singing, and Common Artistry.

These concepts provide a non-threatening theory for non-music-specialists and specialists alike, creating a closer match between practice and philosophical underpinnings and helping to overcome

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the barriers between academics and practitioners[1]. The approach did not begin with a well formed theoretical perspective; in fact it emerged through moving away from already established methodologies; nor did it take its cues from any particular educational philosophy. However, as the practice evolved – taught, evaluated, and influenced by its many users of all ages – it has developed a model that addresses the fears and beliefs of teachers and other adults who may feel disenfranchised from their musical roots. At the same time it provides a means whereby those with musical training can reflect on how that training might help or hinder their own musicianship, as well as their ability to help others both musically and socially.

The conceptual model described here was developed in what is now known as the Music Engagement Program, a program of some 25 years standing, designed and developed in a conservatorium and university context funded by local government. It began as a small, elite training program in a public elementary school for potential young musicians based on the Kodaly Method. While a small number of highly skilled young musicians emerged from this model of the program, problems also became apparent, both for those highly skilled young musicians and for the many who were excluded from the program. Some of these problems, summarised below, could be seen to be more universally applicable; they were not just problems relating to this particular program. At the same time the solution that emerged was not designed as a solution to any 'problem', in the first instance. The rationale given here has evolved over time as a series of concepts that may have broader applicability in both conceptual and practical spheres.

The basic position

The Music Engagement Program (MEP) offers a philosophy of social music making that is designed to overcome a range of problems that affect music making in Australia. Some of those problems may be seen to be broadly based. The MEP emerges from practice and is designed to be non-threatening to teachers and other users in terms of its musical structure and its intellectual

position. Its basic position is that active music making is the most important goal of any music learning and that the *lack* of widespread active music making is the most important problem to overcome. The concepts brought together in this paper as a means of addressing these issues embed a range of related ideas:

- The most important outcome for any form of music engagement or learning is active participation.

- All humans are innately musical and want to participate.

- We don't need to teach children to participate in music making; we simply need to avoid sabotaging their natural inclination to do so.

- Lack of participation, fear of participation, concerns regarding 'quality', 'talent' and/or skill are all socially constructed and can, therefore, be de-constructed.

- Any skill development or learning that reduces the basic will to participate is not of value.

- The cheapest and most convenient (although not exclusive) means of participation is singing.

- All music participation should be voluntary.

- An individual does not need to learn anything about music in order to engage in making music.

- Placing music in a social context and encouraging participants to focus on helping others participate reinforces its social role and de-emphasises skill development and a 'talent' focus.

- Increasing and maintaining participation provides ongoing opportunity for skill development as suits the needs and aspirations of each individual involved.

The problem

Despite the best efforts of music education advocates, countries such as Australia and the US still have low rates of engagement in active music making[2]. Even our best estimates of participatory

music making can be seen to be less-than-adequate if we take into account the accepted wisdom that, special abilities notwithstanding, we are all supposed to be music makers, not just music consumers[3].

There are a range of reasons put forward for the low rates of music making. The argument proposed here is based on a study of the relevant literature, coupled with experiences in the Music Engagement Program, including both the reports of its users and the observations of its practice. Three factors merge to bring about the disenfranchisement of the general population from active music making: first, there is the gradual decline of the 'scaffolding' that allows individuals to engage in music making at all sorts of different levels within society[4]; secondly, there is our increasing reliance on and awe of specialists who display extraordinary skills or 'talents'[5]; thirdly, there is the inclusion of music as part of the formal education process, ostensibly to support the development of music skills but which may well contribute to the opposite[6]. The commitment to a model of skill development in music is possibly created by, and certainly maintained, through formal education which requires outcomes and assessment, and aids the perception of music as something to be studied at school, and discarded thereafter[7].

The MEP model suggests that this music education paradigm is itself flawed, and actually contributes to a lack of *appropriate opportunity* for participatory music making that could contribute, in the first instance, to a lifelong pattern of engagement and, in the second instance, to the spontaneous development of equally appropriate (for each individual) development of skills that support that engagement. In this model, the appropriateness of both engagement and skill development is decided by each individual and mediated through social, active music making that is voluntarily chosen by each participant.

The expert model of music making that is prevalent in our society creates a problem for the average citizen who believes him/herself to be less than competent either through virtue of innate

ability or lack of training or a combination of both. The person in the street, if they think about music making at all, professes disinterest, lack of confidence or downright fear[8]. The lack of confidence of those charged with teaching our children music is documented, particularly when discussing generalist teachers[9]. Even professionals can suffer from quite severe anxiety – indeed, the great Pablo Casals believed it was *more* likely to be a problem for those at the top of their professions[10].

In academic literature the subject of Performance Anxiety is usually discussed in relation to professionals[11]. The fact that one makes music at a level that professed non-musicians find awe-inspiring does not preclude one from feeling fear. Music Performance Anxiety is portrayed in the literature generally in two related ways: first, it is presented as being normal[12]; secondly, it is presented as being helpful, at least in its milder forms[13]. Since it is portrayed as normal and often helpful, there is no literature that questions the need for such anxiety – discussion is usually to do with modifying behaviour, either through psychology or chemistry, to  lower the degree of anxiety to so-called helpful levels.

One element that appears to be lacking from much literature on the subject is the questioning of the actual need for anxiety at all. Could we perhaps consider that music making, whether by experts, novices, amateurs or a mixture of those with different skill levels, be enhanced and increased if there were less anxiety around it? Might we look at the ways in which we teach music to those of different ages, skill levels, and career aspirations to consider whether the anxiety in the music making is increased or decreased by our methods? And even if we can make a case for experts, or potential experts, feeling anxiety as a necessary concomitant of high level playing, does it follow we need to accept such a situation for the less musically exalted?

Perhaps we might reconsider the subject of anxiety like some other aspects of the traditional paradigm where, for example, it is perfectly acceptable for a student to be encouraged to practice

when he doesn't want to in order to help him develop skills he might need in the future. Even when not explicitly stated, this idea of rigour, of sometimes needing to push through problems to arrive at some higher and better place, is understood to be part of the music education paradigm[14], often creating an 'identity crisis'[15] for music education as it tries to meet the needs of the many and the needs of the few. The MEP presents a different viewpoint, one in which there is no skill development, no level of coercion, that is worth the sacrifice of the *will to engage*. Anxiety that sabotages participation or turns participation into a trial to be endured rather than a social engagement to be enjoyed is seen similarly.

Through its social model of engagement, the MEP relies on three related concepts to summarise its position in a way that has shown to be helpful in re-engaging adults in active music making, and thereby influencing the music making of children. They are: Common Artistry, Selective Mutism for Singing, and the Music Outreach Principle. They were developed in reverse order but are presented here in a way that builds an argument for an approach to overcoming lack of music making in our society.

Common Artistry

The term Common Artistry[16] derives from working with adults, particularly teachers, who are afraid of music making because they believe themselves to be unmusical. As the name implies, Common Artistry means that artistry is common to and in all humans: it is a universal attribute that may be more or less realised in each individual. This idea is based on evidence from academic literature and, to a certain extent, on popular media as well, although in both cases there is mixed information. Even academic literature may display aspects of the confusion evident in popular media where messages about the common nature of human artistry can be mixed[17]. On the one hand, we claim that artistic behaviour is normal human behaviour. On the other hand, our educational methods seem to suggest that artistic behaviour requires serious training and possibly

special talent as well.

One may ask why the term Common Artistry? Since the term developed in relation to observation of a problem in music, particularly singing, why not Common Musicianship? Or, if the problem relates specifically to singing, why not Common Singing, or the like? The answer lies in the experience of working with adults afraid to sing. Usually an adult's opinion of his/her vocal ability has its roots in childhood. A child's belief in his internal ability to improve himself gradually mutates into a belief in the fixed nature of his skills[18] – being a 'bad' singer becomes an unchangeable part of his identify. We cannot alter his belief about his singing voice by telling him he has a good voice. Trying to help individuals overcome their lack of belief in their musicianship or singing ability through, as is often the case, exercises designed to 'improve' one's ability to sing is part of what I label 'buy back' into the very problem we are trying to overcome. In the first instance, we not only don't need exercises to 'fix' people's voices – we need not to focus on 'fixing' the voice at all. First, we need to help each individual begin to understand that he is an artistic person in general, and that his artistry may be expressed in any number of ways. If singing holds particular fears, there are other ways of being artistically expressive. Indeed, each individual may already be, or see themselves to be, artistic in other ways. Linking that sense of artistry with the possibility of artistry in music builds on a strength rather than a weakness. If other forms of artistry are, for whatever reasons, less frightening than music, particularly singing, then starting with those forms is a step in the right direction.

Common Artistry, then, is designed to indicate that human beings are artistic in range of ways including, but not limited to, musical ways. We cannot insist that every adult actively attempts to be musical and the more we might focus on such a goal, the less likely we are to achieve it. If, however, every adult can accept their basic artistic compulsion and behave artistically in some way, any way, we are already having an impact on his/her view of him/herself, which might, in time, lead

to musical behaviour as well. We use the term Common Artistry because it is designed to be less confronting to *all* our fears of artistic and creative behaviour.


Selective Mutism for Singing

The concept of Selective Mutism for Singing[19] is derived, as the name implies, from the recognised psychological condition Selective Mutism. An original definition of the latter – 'the child's speech and language abilities remain intact but are not used in particular circumstances for psychosocial reasons'[20] – is altered to provide a related definition for the former – 'the individual's singing ability remains intact but is not used in particular circumstances for psychosocial reasons'[21]. One of the signs of SMS, as I am defining it, based on the evidence for adult participatory music making, particularly singing,  is that it takes an opposite trajectory to SM. The latter, Selective Mutism, is considered to more prevalent in children[22] while the former, Selective Mutism for Singing, is more prevalent in adults[23]. Both have in common, however, their situation in the broader field of anxiety disorders – in this regard, SMS may also be considered a form of Social Phobia like SM[24] where individuals will function in appropriate and normal ways except when placed in situations that give rise to the phobia[25].

 Two important points emerge from the concept of SMS. First, it is easy to function as a 'normal' adult in Western society without ever having to be heard to sing. Secondly, it is perfectly possible that even those who consciously refuse to sing publicly, may  inadvertently break into some sort of musical behaviour in private situations where they believe themselves to be alone. If we accept that Common Artistry represents a compulsion to behave in artistic ways, particularly musically, then it would not be surprising to find that no-one is completely mute in SMS. At the same time, cultural considerations suggest that no-one is completely free from it.

While Selective Mutism rarely includes a complete cessation of speech, it is possible to

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conceptualise Selective Mutism for Singing as having a range of possible 'levels', up to and including complete cessation of singing. The ultimate 'test' for SMS is the absence of any anxiety when singing alone in front of a room full of adults, since this scenario appears to be the ultimate fear for most adults. While singing in groups is an excellent mechanism for group music making (and central to the Music Outreach Principle described below) it is possibly to be a fluent and enthusiastic choral singer and still harbour fear of having one's voice heard. Yet few five year olds have such a fear: indeed, the experience in the MEP is that even children who might suffer from Selective Mutism may be perfectly willing to sing alone. Within the concept of Common Artistry, having one's singing voice heard is considered important and as 'normal' as having one's spoken voice heard, not necessarily as a means of exhibiting skill but as a means of expressing one's full self in the world.

It may be argued that defining a 'condition' like SMS would feed into the fear problem, thus creating more of that problem, rather than relieving it. Experience suggests the opposite, particularly when the term is used in conjunction with the basic operating principle of the MEP, the Music Outreach Principle, discussed below. The problem of SMS is one that everyone can relate to – not just those who lack musical training. The competitive nature of music making, where level of skill is assessed and tested in exams and competitions at all levels, creates a hierarchy which can influence all types of music making, even those designed to be non-competitive. The concept of SMS provides a level playing field, particularly with regard to singing. The experience in the MEP is that accomplished musicians will admit to their discomfort with singing, even to the point of suggesting that playing an instrument allows them to avoid singing, particularly singing alone.

And if one were to ask what we do in order to solve SMS, the answer is simple: we just sing a song. If even that feels too difficult, we suggest that the singing is for someone else, using what the MEP calls the Music Outreach Principle.

The Music Outreach Principle

As indicated above, the Music Outreach Principle did not emerge as a fully formed idea, nor was it introduced in order to solve any particular problem in music education or music in society more generally. It is a practical intent that can transform behaviour and lead to a re-casting of one's musical views resulting in a closer affinity between the 'talk' of our innate musicality and the practical 'walk' that does not always encourage the flowering of that musicality.

The Music Outreach Principle considers the social outward-directed nature of music making to be its most important characteristic. Every music maker becomes a facilitator of the music making of others. The sentence used to describe this process, which can be understood by people of all ages is: 'I make music in order that you will make music, for the mutual benefit of all.'

The Music Outreach Principle is certainly built around the idea of participation, as opposed to listening, but does not preclude listening. It certainly focuses on the outward, altruistic sharing of music but is not limited to that domain. It does not necessarily encompass a full music curriculum although it certainly can. While it provides a non-musical reason for musical engagement, it does not do so a utilitarian sense (for example, in order to create civic-mindedness) although it has demonstrated a positive impact on some 'at-risk' students. It is not performance-based although it can certainly be used to create impressive performance-like events.

The Music Outreach Principle taps into the social underpinnings of music making as a means of human bonding, but gives it a interpretation that offers a non-musical excuse to engage based on the will to help others, combining the benefits of music making[26] with the benefits of helping others[27]. It caters for individual needs within a group model and also removes discrimination based on skill, age, ability, or disability. Rather than being *inclusive*, its very nature precludes any form of *exclusivity*.

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Teachers respond particularly well to the Music Outreach Principle, possibly because they have entered into the teaching profession with an aspiration to help others. To suggest to a teacher that their engagement with music making, through the Music Outreach Principle, may help the children they teach avoid the very fear the teacher harbours in relation to singing, is a strong motivating factor.

At the same time, both children and other adults working with a teacher are motivated to help in return since the Music Outreach Principle is multi-directional: it does not flow from teacher to student, or from musical expert to novice. It combines two very human qualities: the desire to make music and the desire to help others. The 'help' includes, but is not limited to, helping others to make music. The music itself may offer 'help' of various sorts, but that help is not defined precisely. Just as the impetus to make music is vested in each individual and cannot be enforced, the help given, and the effect of that help, is for each individual to decide for him/herself. Each individual looks to his/her intent and allows events to unfold from that perspective.

Putting it together

This trio of concepts, built on practical application, provide a context for musical behaviour that encourages active engagement. It is immaterial whether an individual believes he/she has the skill and or ability to engage in music. This type of belief is difficult to alter and will not change simply by being told one has a 'good' voice or has 'talent'. Rather than try to convince an individual that she is skilled, or try and give her the skill, we ask her to step away from her own beliefs about herself and her musicianship altogether. We ask her instead to believe:

1. You are human therefore you are already musical (Common Artistry).
2. You may have some fear of making music, which is not uncommon, but unnecessary (Selective Mutism for Singing).

3. The best way to engage with music and overcome your own fears is through helping someone else (the Music Outreach Principle).

4. The help for self and for the other is a song.

The concept of Common Artistry declares that humans are all artistic and, therefore, all musical. While this basic fact might seem obvious to academics, it can come as a revelation to teachers and other adults, particularly in relation to music. The broad nature of the concept allows adults who feel disenfranchised from their artistic selves to imagine themselves as artists, in the first instance, and then specifically as musicians. Such imaginings are not problematic, of course, for children. For a child, there is no question of whether one is an artist and, therefore, a musician; in an appropriate environment, children simply behave as both artists and musicians as a matter of course.

If we can help an adult see that he is an artist already, by virtue of his humanity, then we can begin to suggest that he is also a musician. If he is already a musician, or has no problem seeing himself as such, we can suggest he is also a particular type of musician – a singer. We can then discuss the concept of Selective Mutism for Singing. Focussing on singing does not preclude or belittle instrumental playing: it simply provides a cost-effective means by which everyone can immediately behave musically and, coincidentally, develop confidence and skills without requiring any equipment or particular highly skilled assistance.

This concept is useful precisely because, as noted above, it provides a 'level playing field' from which everyone can reconceptualise his/her relationship with self, music and other. The *non-musician* can understand his lack of music making not as a function of faulty genes but of either lack of opportunity or experiences that sabotaged the musical impulse even while attempting to encourage it. The *musician,* whether professional or amateur, might consider both the degree to which her own musicianship has been compromised by her training, while also considering the

means by which she relates to the non-musician or the trainee musician. The *instrumentalist* might consider the extent to which playing an instrument is a substitute for using the voice; which is not to say that instrumental skill is to be discouraged but rather examined in light of the instrumentalist's relationship with his/her voice. The trained singer might consider how the concept of SMS relates to her own level of performance anxiety in professional situations, as well as how it relates to non-performance or educational settings. For every person the basic question is: what is my degree of SMS and how does it impact upon my musical relationship with self and others? Even if the answer to the first half of the question is, 'I have zero SMS' there is still a question to be answered. In a society where there is a high number of individuals with a high degree of fear around their singing, anyone who has no fear is in a position to examine the extent to which he/she inadvertently encourages the fear of others, or helps alleviate it.

Finally the Music Outreach Principle suggests that the best way to utilise one's musicianship is through helping others to exercise theirs, both in order to allow more individuals to engage actively in music and to help them through the music, whether they choose to engage or not. Importantly the Music Outreach Principle revolves around individual choice: any sort of coercion is unlikely to produce a will to participate that can be sustained over the long-term. Everyone engaged in music making in this model helps provide appropriate music making opportunities to encourage maximum engagement on an on-going basis. There is no need for stress since the goal is not exhibition through performance. Continued enthusiastic participation provides a richer musical environment in which those with special interests can reach their desired potential while everyone benefits in a range of ways from higher levels of active engagement.

Conclusion

The end result of this conceptual position is that all we really need to do is sing a song with the intent that it will reach out to others, so that those others will join in singing with us. Singing a

song is the starting point from which all else will follow. If all our advocacy was focussed on this aim, where might we arrive? If everyone sang willingly, happily, without stress, as we are meant to do, and as most children do, we would already be far in advance of where we are at the moment. We would *all* be more skilled musically, as well as more relaxed with our basic musicianship and, possibly, less stressed precisely because our musical self was allowed release. If we regularly sang for and with others, within and beyond our schools, what other learning might be embedded for our students, musical and otherwise? If we all continued to want to make music both in school and beyond, not just for ourselves but for others and with others, what might arise in terms of music, in terms of musical skills, and in terms of our development as a humane society? If we all believed we were artists; if we all gave up our fear of singing; if we all sang to help each other and engage with each other where might it end?

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