COMMUNITY MUSIC - PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE PUT TO THE TEST

Ben Higham
Project Director, Community Music East Ltd.

The first of the questions offered by the Commission for discussion is in three parts: "what are the community's needs? Who decides what they are? Who determines the training musicians get?" And the second question asks "What skills and qualities does a community musician need and how can these be developed?" I propose to address these questions in the context of Community Music East's experience over the last seven years.

I would like to quote part of John Cage's reasoning for his refusal to fix his works in final form.

> "Art instead of being an object made by one person is a process set in motion by a group of people. Art's socialised. It isn't someone saying something but a group of people doing things, giving everyone (including those involved) the opportunity to have experiences that they would not otherwise have had." [1]

This theme underpins the approach that will be outlined in this paper.

So, what are the community's needs? The community is made up of many individuals with immensely various musical experience. Some are highly trained musical practitioners in a range of traditions, some are keen amateurs, some are teachers, some are self-taught in some style or other, some are avid listeners with a spectrum of tastes and knowledge. Some are disabled either mentally or physically, some are disadvantaged socially, economically and culturally and some are frustrated in their attempts to express themselves creatively. Almost all are aware of the power of music of many kinds and most have a desire, often secret, to participate actively in music but believe they have not the skills or aptitude, due to lack of educational facilities or the kind of musical training on offer, or that they were not "meant" to be musicians.

These people come from many different ethnic, cultural and social environments and have a huge and varied concept of what music is. The issue is to find a way of involving so many concepts and levels of ability and confidence in a learning process that is practical, stimulating and joyful.

We need to find a way of exploring the common language of music that does not deny culture, tradition or facility and yet develops ability, understanding, creativity, knowledge and communication. To achieve this aim we have to approach the task from the point of view of the individual - of all individuals. Therefore community music has to be about access to the fundamentals of all music, those that embrace all abilities and musical skills and relate to all cultures, in order for participants to gain an insight into their "received" cultural knowledge and to share all "new" cultural knowledge with each other. By "received" cultural knowledge I mean the conscious and unconscious influence of the cultural environment in which an individual has developed. By "new" cultural knowledge I mean the growing awareness of an individual in the light, in this instance, of participation in community music.

A philosophy which embraced these aims with proven practical application had been developed by jazz musician and composer, John Stevens. It had informed his performance and teaching work both in the community and in educational institutions over the fifteen years previous to the establishment of 'Community Music' as an organisation in 1983. This organisation responded to a perceived need to develop musical and performance skills and options across the spectrum of users in the community. Because of his pioneering work John Stevens was invited to become Musical Director of this new project and his philosophy, called "Search and Reflect," became the basis of the training of our tutors and the work we carried out in the community.

The success of "Search and Reflect" lies in its focus on the development of fundamental musical skills and an improvising language that, together, allow participants to further their knowledge from any starting point as part of a performing group. The workshop tutor's skill is directed towards encouraging an exploratory attitude through the use of a vast repertoire of pieces and structures that develop specific aspects of listening and playing techniques in

an atmosphere of growing self-awareness. Many of the skills learnt in this way are not explicitly taught in most formal teaching methods and therefore there is a lack of awareness of the potential breadth of application of such knowledge. Also it is not commonly recognised that all traditional musics and composing systems stem originally from improvising activity and the realisation of such concepts can be profoundly useful in identifying the common musical language of music of different kinds, cultures and times.

This philosophy and its techniques, applied to the creative needs and hopes of many different community groups, help to focus on ability and on any need to develop it, on the broadening of experience, understanding and confidence and on the awareness of what other, more specialised forms of music study there might be and, if appropriate, how to pursue them. They can be directed at particular areas of musical activity, for instance instrument-specific or technology workshops, the emphasis always being on the creative nature of the work and the need for that creative impetus to be maintained by the participants through the subtlety of the tutor's approach.

This approach is not without its problems. Often they occur in the expectations of participants and organisers. Some participants expect to learn a specific style or skill, perhaps Reggae or sight-reading, and this misconception is often due to a lack of understanding of the purpose of the workshop by the organisers. It is very important that realistic goals are agreed for a course and that there is a high degree of involvement and enthusiasm from the organisers as well as the group. We have worked with a huge range of people, from many different cultural and social backgrounds in the community: public activity has included work in schools, youth clubs, community centres, festivals, conservatoires and arts centres. We also work in many "closed" settings including prisons, probation hostels, residential and day centres for people with disabilities both mental and physical, and for people with mental illness, and in centres for the treatment of drug and alcohol abuse. In all settings we are pursuing a process of music education that aims to integrate all people in society. This policy of integration also applies to all our training programmes. We acknowledge the therapeutic aspect of our activity and the development of social and life skills such as confidence, communication and coordination but believe these aspects to be implicit in all our work. We are committed to the reclamation of music by the individual in an active spirit of affirmation.

Parts two and three of the first question ask "who decides what the community's needs are?" and, "who determines the training musicians receive?" Basically all of us, as music educators, make these decisions whether we are instrument teachers, school teachers, community musicians, administrators, masters of ethnic musics, college professors, maestros, prima donnas or rockstars, and those needs in turn are defined by our attitudes and fears.

We have the power of the public's perception of us as specialists and we must be wary in case it is those attitudes and fears just mentioned, rather than an objective and informed view of community need, that form our perceptions of what is music and therefore what should be taught. It is an issue worthy of investigation, for often it is the defensive attitude to the nature of music that can breed fear in some would-be musicians and arrogance in others. As Christopher Small says in his book Music, *Society and Education,* "composers and performers alike strive for, and many reach, more and more dizzy heights of technical proficiency; an increasing number of competitions for young (musicians) . . . produces crops of young hopefuls armed with technical equipment . . . who, despite the fact that occasionally one or two actually shows signs of real musicality, in their understandable pursuit of the social and financial rewards of fame, in most cases do much to destroy the musicality of the ordinary person." [2] A frightening scenario for music as a high art form - let alone as a community expression!

I do not wish to deny any musical tradition or culture but I would propose that a greater universal understanding and tolerance in teaching attitudes can only enhance the potential for more musical activity and a larger and more knowledgeable audience. Frequently the exclusivity of music is maintained by the mystery that surrounds it through the use of terminology that creates a "foreign" language. Such languages are often unintelligible by highly skilled masters of other musical cultures but at least they are probably sympathetic to their use because they have learnt the value of their own system or "language." When learning to communicate as children we go through a series of levels of understanding at which we appreciate and develop our vocabulary and grammar based on our ability to grasp certain fundamentals and build on them. What if we were to be more flexible in our use of confusing and mysterious language with community music students? What if we were to develop interest and understanding by working from concepts and terms that are familiar? What if we were to actively encourage an atmosphere of greater freedom and openness in musical activity and how would that affect the training of community musicians and tutors?

Practically we, as an organisation, train musicians of all backgrounds and interests and it is the success of this catholic approach that makes our tutors sympathetic to the differing aspirations and needs of the groups they work with. During their training students learn to re-examine the knowledge and skills they brought with them and apply these in a much broader musical context. This is a positive process that encourages them to teach themselves, to set their own problems and resolve them; to explore harmony, for instance, not in the context of concords and discords, for these are external restraints, but as sounds made simultaneously, and then to refine their own judgement with regard to their qualities. As Christopher Small says, in this case in reference to Balinese music but at the same time expressing a fundamental principle of our approach, "activities in general are carried out not as a progression towards some desired but deferred goal, but as inherently satisfying in themselves." [3]

It is not possible to deny our influences; in fact it is probably not possible to define them, they are so many and so diverse. But it is possible to review our "received" experience by exploring the fundamentals of music. This is a process that enhances our appreciation of what we know and our expectation of what we do not know.

Community music as it is practised by us involves all kinds of interest, skill and style. Therefore, with reference to the last question in my brief, the skills and qualities needed by a community musician are experience and confidence in a particular musical form coupled with a desire to actively encourage and enable people to make music. Given these starting points it is our function as trainers to provide students with general and specialist workshop skills, a vast repertoire and most importantly a sound philosophical approach that will enable them to be creative, flexible and responsive in their work. We achieve this by exploring the repertoire first. It is almost exclusively an aural repertoire of varied musical structures that are consistently approached as performance pieces. This process allows the individuals to come to terms with and then extend the limits of their own knowledge and ability and to appreciate the value of a mutual learning situation. It is important to establish concentration, commitment and spontaneity as key elements to a successful workshop.

At this point it is necessary to address the workshop skills needed, both general and specialist. The fact that we provide workshops rather than lessons or classes is essential to our approach for it is the collaborative nature of our work that maintains the enthusiasm of participants. This is achieved by the subtlety of the tutor through participation, the identification of technical, physical and conceptual problems experienced by individuals and the resolution of such problems with humanity and without humiliation. Many of the groups with whom we work are not familiar with formal teaching approaches, many more have found such circumstances unsatisfactory and ineffective and our aim is to create an environment that they find constructive and friendly and which enhances their capacity to teach themselves through collaboration. Specialist skills include ways of working with groups that may have special educational and/or social needs. Such groups include people with mental disabilities, people with physical disabilities, the mentally ill, prisoners, and drink and drug abusers.

I must stress that we are not music therapists - that is a highly specialised profession - but that we provide community music education and our success reflects the scale of the needs for which we cater. In the context of work within the mainstream education system our approach is viewed with growing interest and we are actively involved in direct work in schools and as part of specialist music teams; we also provide in-service and initial teacher training. Experience of Community Music techniques has also proved to encourage a positive and open attitude among school students to the music of other cultures.

Before I conclude my presentation I would like to attempt a performance of a popular workshop piece. This piece investigates the rhythmic relationship between three relatively common units of time; 3 beats to a unit or bar, 4 beats to a unit and 5 beats to a unit. If we split the audience into three groups, the left hand group is counting in 3, the middle group in 4 and the right hand group in 5.

The metre or pulse of the beats is common to all groups. Each group will clap only the first beat of their unit. Therefore: (/23), (/234) and (/2345). If all the groups perform their sequences simultaneously, after a common count of four beats to establish the pulse, a point will occur where all the first beats of the units will come together again and we will stop there.

The whole sequence is sixty beats long and the common beat we hear is the first of the next sequence. Each sequence divides into 20 units of 3 beats, 15 units of 4 beats and 12 units of 5 beats. (At this point I would normally get each member of each group to invent their own rhythmic pattern for their unit, thus creating a complex rhythmic pattern for each beat group.) After a common count of four if we all come in with our patterns performed the appropriate amount of times we shall have composed the basic structure or "verse" of a piece called *3 4 5*.

These "verses" are often linked with rhythmic activity over a prescribed number of beats and allow solos to be played by individuals in each group, creating an interacting trio performing in different time signatures over a strong rhythmic structure. A simple idea thus develops into a very complex and exacting piece involving a high degree of individual creative input.

To conclude, Community Music's approach results in considerable musical activity that is stimulating, contributes to a greater participation in creative music-making and skill development and generates a lot of interest in the wealth and breadth of all musics in many and varied areas of the community. If it were embraced by more community musicians I believe it would generate enthusiasm for active participation in music of all kinds, as it is complementary to all traditional teaching methods and would threaten none.

I will finish with two insights. The first was made by Harry Partch, the American composer, who having reviewed the history of western music over the last two thousand years in one chapter of his book *Genesis of a Music* found it lacking in the qualities *of* being "vital to a time and a place, a here and now," of being "emotionally tactile." [4] Secondly, it was Henry Thoreau who said "if a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer, let him step to the music which he hears, however measured and far away." [5]

[1] John Cage, *A Year From Monday*, (Calder and Boyars, London 1968) p151
[2] Christopher Small, *Music, Society and Education*, (John Calder, London, 1977) p163
[3] Christopher Small, *ibid*., p47
[4] Quoted in Jonnathan Cott, *"Partch, the forgotten visionary"*, Rolling Stone, April 11 1974 p20
[5] Quoted in Christopher Small, *op. cit*., p132