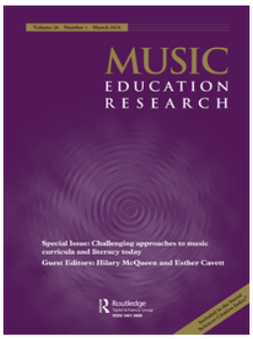

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The shifting sands of UK secondary music curricula: problematising relationships between aural training and music literacy

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ABSTRACT

This article, which is intended as a contribution to wider conversations around music literacy, explores current conceptions of music literacy within the UK, using the area of aural skills training as a focus. Specifically, it considers the nature of music literacy and aural training in secondary (ages 11–18) music curricula and the role of aural training in supporting the development of music literacy. Contemporary secondary music courses now explore a far wider range of musics than their historic counterparts, yet the ways in which these are taught, practised, and assessed continue to be driven by pedagogic models that were designed to develop music literacy within a narrower range of musics associated with a specific tradition. This is compounded by the fact that contemporary secondary music courses have become somewhat diluted in terms of their focus and the main curricular components (performance, composition, and listening/appraising) are unnaturally separated into disconnected areas of practice to conveniently be assessed in isolation. This article concludes by proposing potential enhancements that educators might consider as they look to develop a student-centred approach to aural training and how this might better support the development of multiple forms of music literacy within their curricula.

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Introduction

Recent decades have seen a significant shift in the ways in which people engage with music education, the types of music they engage with, and their motivations for engagement. In many parts of the world, it is now common within formal music education for pupils to be permitted to engage with musics that would until recently have been considered as vernacular, or even too 'low brow' to be worthy of study in such contexts. Scholars like Green (2006) have long been advocating for a push towards progressive approaches to music education that would be more engaging for learners and would also encourage educators 'to broaden what and how they teach to create more authentic music-learning environments, such as new alternative music classes and existing classes infused with popular music and IMLP [informal music learning practices]' (Vasil 2019, 299). Finney (2019, 229) notes that 'the past fifty years have seen classroom music education striving to be more inclusive, accessible, and responsive to cultural and social change' but also cautions that

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school music education 'is sponsored by the state and national policies frequently play a significant part in mediating the way classroom music is formulated and practised'. Although an issue of key importance in wider discussions about curricular music education, consideration of governmental policy is beyond the scope of this article. However, we will be considering issues pertaining to secondary music curricula which do have roots in policy. Our starting point is the grateful acknowledgement of the gradual striving towards diversity within school music education, however imperfect the results may be. We applaud colleagues who enable students to engage with a wide range of musics, practices, and modes of 'musicking' (Small 1998), and offer this article as a critical, yet celebratory and encouraging contribution to conversations about how we can strive to make secondary music education as meaningful, relevant, and inclusive as possible for all learners.

Given the shifting sands of the landscape of secondary music education and the diversity of participants, musics, cultures, and modes of engagement, we believe that it is important for scholars and educators to discuss the ways in which curricula, content, pedagogy, and assessment interact and impact on the musicianship of learners in these contexts. Influenced by the work of McQueen (2021), our consideration will use the conceptual lens of music literacy as the basis of our discussion and will focus specifically on aural training as one aspect of curricular music education that we deem to be a particularly problematic area within contemporary secondary music curricula in the UK. As such, this article explores the relationship between aural training and the development of music literacy (both discussed in detail below) and how, within the somewhat changeable, increasingly musically diverse landscape of secondary music education, it is important to be critical of the ways in which curricular design, pedagogy, and assessment practices interrelate to undermine and diminish the power of secondary music education as a site for the development of the types of music literacy for which we advocate.

It is our hope that this article will be of interest to music educators working in schools and further or higher education settings; while the focus of the discussion is centred on UK secondary music courses, the topics and challenges explored will be recognisable in comparable settings in other parts of the world. Although there is slight variation across the four nations of the UK, secondary schools typically provide education across a broad range of subjects for young people between 11 and 16 years old (or 18 if there is a sixth form, years 12-13) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and young people between 12 and 18 years old in Scotland (S1–S6). During the early stages of their secondary school years, pupils study a broad and general curriculum which typically involves engagement with English, mathematics, modern languages, social studies, sciences, physical education, and the arts. As pupils progress through secondary school, they are required to specialise in fewer subjects in which they are subsequently examined.[1] For example, in England, Wales and Northern Ireland students can typically take examinations in schools and colleges, offered by a range of external examination boards/awarding bodies, at three stages (GCSE followed by AS-level and finally A-level, however, there are also a range of vocational awards – such as BTEC – available to learners). In Scotland, students typically study four levels of qualification (National 4, National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher) that are all administered by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA).[2] In this article, we do not focus our critique on any specific qualification, award or examination board/awarding body, nor do we intend to comment on regional or national differences. Although we draw examples from awards offered across the UK, we are not concerned with the idiosyncrasies of any qualification. Instead, our intention is to focus on the striking similarities that exist across this range of provision and make more general philosophical critiques of some of the ways in which music literacy is developed at this level, particularly the way in which assessment-driven pedagogy impacts on the way music literacy is conceptualised. A wider consideration of the ideas we discuss in this article would naturally include deeper analysis of classroom pedagogy, however a meaningful contribution to this area would require an in-depth empirical study which goes beyond the scope of the theoretical focus of this article.

We, the authors, come to this work from a range of perspectives and somewhat diverse musical backgrounds. Although this article is effectively a philosophical discussion, rather than an empirical

study, we approach it with a keen understanding of our reflexivity. We are conscious of our positionalities and inescapably mindful of the weight of our experiences, values, and subjectivities as scholars and educators and believe it would be instructive for readers to have a brief overview of such.

Author 1 is a flautist and pianist primarily from a Western Art Music (WAM) background who is currently studying for a PhD in music education. Through her PhD research, experience of teaching in HE and her own experience as a secondary pupil, she observes that secondary music provision offers limited scope for progression within specific musical idioms due to the generic nature of current qualification courses. She is a firm advocate for a model of secondary music provision which can support the development of multiple forms of music literacy, thus creating an appropriate platform for progression into higher music education.

Author 2 is a drummer from a popular music background who is currently an Associate Professor in Music. As an educator, researcher and curriculum developer, he has found himself in the privileged position of being able to influence the learning experience for those studying music at many levels. Having accessed HE music study in a non-traditional way he is acutely aware of the multitude of pathways learners follow to access HE music study and the challenges they face as they do so. He believes that secondary music education should be based on inclusive student-centred learning experiences that cater for the needs of anyone who decides to study the subject, whilst also providing the opportunity for learners who wish to progress into HE music study to develop and demonstrate a depth of knowledge in the areas of music study important to them.

Author 3 is a saxophonist from a popular music, jazz and free-improvisation background. His motivation as an educator comes from a deeply rooted belief in the liberatory power of education. He believes that education should be a site of justice and equity and not a breeding ground for the social, cultural, and economic injustices that characterise the contemporary *status quo*. A great deal of formal music education, he believes, is problematic and rife with such injustices, evidenced in the form of colonialist curricular design, dehumanising pedagogies, and oppressive arbiter-led assessment practices – yet it could be so much more. His scholarship and educational practices are focused on the humanisation of all those with whom he works, in the hope of developing sustainable autonomous learners who can read the world, understand (and change) their place within it, and collaboratively strive for a better future.

As educators, we have experience working with learners of all ages, from young children to adult learners in formal, non-formal, and informal contexts so, as an authorial team, we do not approach this article from any single standpoint. We are, however, unified in our belief that secondary music education, when considered from a range of functional, ethical, cultural, and economic perspectives, faces a range of problems when considered as an area of provision in which music literacy can be fostered.

Defining the terrain: music literacy and aural training

McQueen's (2021) Music Literacy Report indicates that the term music literacy is far from straightforward to define and is to some extent ever-evolving owing to the continuing expansion of areas of music studied in secondary, further and higher music education curricula. While some (arguably, narrow) definitions of music literacy focus specifically on the ability to read Western-style staff notation (e.g. Bowyer 2015; Mills and McPherson 2016) others, such as Shouldice (2014), refer to music literacy in a broader sense, with attention given to the ways in which this term may relate to differing styles of music. Encouragingly, some more inclusive definitions refer explicitly to the relationship between music notation and aural training (International Kodaly Society 2014) and others focus on the potential for familiarity with music technology to be conceived as a form of music literacy (Dorfman 2017; see also Louth's contribution to this Special Issue).

We strongly prefer a definition of music literacy that moves beyond the requirement to read a score. Although there are obvious parallels between traditional conceptions of music literacy and

general literacy, not least the links to reading, we believe a contemporary definition should refer to a more diverse range of practices and competencies. We therefore propose a definition that combines two existing views of music literacy. Firstly, Csíkos and Dohány suggest that music literacy refers to an understanding of 'culturally determined systems of knowledge in music and to musical abilities' (2016, 3). In other words, they consider music literacy to involve many different kinds of engagement with and knowledge of music in a particular culture, which of course could include traditional score-based practices. Secondly, Broomhead (2010) describes music literacy as the 'ability to interact (perform, listen, contemplate, and create) appropriately with musical texts' (70). Notably, he emphasises the notion of *appropriate* interaction with musical texts. Our definition of music literacy is therefore as follows: the ability to meaningfully engage in a diverse range of musical activities involving culturally *appropriate* interaction with musical texts representative of the music(s), people(s), and culture(s) under consideration.

Having explained our preference for a broad definition of music literacy, we note that we aspire to all levels of education in music literacy to be inclusive, in the sense of involving people with different backgrounds in engaging in different kinds of music. However, a full exploration of the curricular implications of our conception of inclusive music literacy far exceeds the scope of this article. Instead, we will focus our attention on one specific area of secondary curricula that most acutely reflects the tensions between traditional concepts of music literacy and more inclusive ones: aural training. Following on from our definition of music literacy, we propose that aural training should facilitate the ability to engage with, articulate an understanding of, and respond musically (in whatever context) to aural stimuli. Unfortunately, our experience with secondary music courses in the UK – from our perspective as scholars, researchers, educators, and learners – suggests that curricular areas that offer aural training are much more limited in scope, tending to focus only on certain musical features most readily dealt with through score-based communication. Our misgivings are not to do with the influence of score-based practices, nor the implicit links to, or hegemonic effect of, traditions of WAM. Our argument is not 'anti-score', 'anti-WAM', or antagonistic to classical music traditions in any way. Instead, we are concerned with the misalignment, and thus unsuitability, of many contemporary pedagogic practices with the diverse musical contexts they purport to represent, as well as the vision of music literacy that we seek to champion.

Current secondary music courses have largely developed from models dating from the mid to late twentieth century, which were designed to enable pupils' wider musical development within the context of WAM and to facilitate their progression into higher music education. Owing to the centrality of score notation in such early courses, aural training and music literacy were conceived of, taught, and communicated primarily in relation to staff notation. Although the requirement to be able to read staff notation is now a less prominent feature of secondary music curricula than in previous decades, there has been little change to how aural training has been taught. It generally fails to take account of the different musical practices that are now studied, the different groups of people now engaged in music education, and the artistic and technical subjectivities of learners. The following overview of some key developments in UK secondary education since the mid-twentieth century provides historical and cultural context for the current discussion.

Overview of curricular changes in secondary music education: 1950 to the present day

Since the 1950s, wide-ranging changes to examination specifications have occurred within the UK secondary music sector. Approximately seventy-five years ago such curricula were firmly rooted in repertoire drawn from, and training practices associated with, WAM (Legg 2012; Whittaker 2020). At that time, the primary purpose of secondary music certification courses was to prepare pupils to study music at university or conservatoire level (Lynch 2003). At the secondary or further level, qualification courses (such as A-levels) emphasised the development of skills associated with university and conservatoire entry requirements, and were therefore characterised by components such

as instrumental performance at an advanced level, sight reading, sight singing, harmony, counterpoint, dictation, and music history (Lynch 2003; Ross and Sloggie 1985). Thus, secondary music courses were underpinned by the cultivation of skills which laid a foundation for the advanced study of WAM. Correspondingly, the skills training, including aural training, undertaken in this context naturally pertained (either explicitly or implicitly) to score-based practices, thereby providing a broadly appropriate pathway into higher music education, for which such skills were deemed essential.

During the 1980s, notable changes took place in the secondary music sector in line with wider changes made to secondary education during this decade. The academic and vocational secondary qualification sectors across the UK, previously functioning as two separate qualification tracks, were unified in the late 1980s (Raffe et al. 2001). Within the secondary music sector, this change led to the implementation of qualifications including the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), still in use today (Byrne and Butcher 2021; Wright 2002). In music, the GCSE was designed to include components taken from the WAM-oriented O-level qualification as well as components taken from the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) that focused more on the study of popular music (Wright 2002). Thus, in the music GCSE, we see one of the first examples of a course in which the range of music studied is broader than that derived from the WAM tradition.

The range of musical styles studied on UK secondary music courses has increased considerably since the 1980s; they typically require the study of WAM, popular music, folk music and some non-Western musics. These courses, without exception, present aural skills (which, following the terminology used in these courses, we will refer to as 'listening/appraising'), performance, and composition as discrete areas of musical study and most emphasise their aim of providing an integrated musical learning experience by highlighting connections across different areas of musical study (AQA 2019; Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment [CCEA] 2016; OCR 2023a; Pearson Education 2021; SQA 2023a; Welsh Joint Education Council [WJEC] 2019).

In contrast to the historic versions of the courses described above, the purpose(s) of contemporary secondary music courses are difficult to define. This is, in part, due to the diversification and expansion noted above, but is also related to the laudable aims of making music education more accessible for all pupils, with entry-level music courses generally designed to be accessible to pupils with limited prior musical experience and which often do not require candidates to be able to read staff notation fluently (AQA 2019; CCEA 2016; OCR 2023b; Pearson Education 2021; SQA 2023b; WJEC 2019).[3] However, several A-level, Higher and Advanced Higher course descriptors promote these courses as a pathway into post-secondary music education, notably universities or conservatoires, while simultaneously including statements that suggest the courses may be studied by all students irrespective of their prior level of musical experience. For example, the music A-level specification for Northern Ireland states that the course:

> … provides an appropriate body of knowledge, promotes understanding and develops skills as a sound basis for progression to higher education (CCEA 2016).

Simultaneously, however, it states that:

> Students do not need to have reached a particular level of attainment before beginning to study this specification (CCEA 2016).

One reading of this information might suggest that the supposed purposes of such courses are contradictory. It is our belief that the above statements are not inherently contradictory, and we applaud the apparent openness, potential for accessibility, and opportunities that this presents for young people to engage with music. However, owing to the necessity of ensuring these courses are at an accessible level for all pupils, those who progress (or aspire to progress to) tertiary music education often face significant disadvantages (Donn 2018; Moir and Stillie 2018). Therefore, although not inherently contradictory, the reality of the situation is that there are pedagogic complications inherent in these curricula. It is important to mention here that a notable exception to this

rule is the selection of A-levels offered by exam boards in England since they have retained a stronger focus on WAM and a level of challenge closer to that of the first year of a WAM-based music degree.[4]

We suggest that the ambiguity surrounding the purposes of aural training in these courses reflects the ambiguous purposes of the courses in general. Because these courses are not sufficiently concentrated within any one musical style to provide the depth of study characterising courses offered in the past, the basic course components (performance, listening/appraising, composition) are conceptualised in a supposedly generic manner, attempting to deal with multiple musical styles simultaneously, yet effectively undermining musical styles, cultures and practices by trying to generalise and approach everything through a diluted or reductive WAM lens.[5] It is therefore difficult to determine how aural training can be meaningfully developed and assessed within this (comparatively) broad context when the listening/appraising aspects[6] of these courses continue to be conceptualised using a WAM-inspired conception of aural training.

Curricular ambiguities

Clearly, there is something of a collision between the entrenched pedagogic practices of secondary music curricula that have crystallised during their development over many decades and the contemporary need for curricula that meaningfully develop a more diverse and culturally-relevant music literacy. A wide range of non-WAM music is at least superficially engaged with in these courses, yet it is being considered using a pedagogical framework that, essentially, remains rooted in WAM-based practice. Given this tension, it is difficult to determine what the purpose(s) of courses such as these may be and how they help with the development of music literacy of any kind. It is our belief that the result is culturally inappropriate, superficial engagement with school music, which is compounded by often anachronistic, WAM-derived pedagogy and assessment practices applied in contexts for which they were not designed. Therefore, while aural training continues (rightly, we believe) to be considered a key aspect of music literacy and broader musicianship within all musical traditions, the specific characteristics of and terminology associated with the traditions studied are not sufficiently acknowledged by the current aural training framework. Equally, while the presence of this WAM-inspired framework might suggest that WAM-based music literacy is supported, it is significantly undermined by the much-decreased emphasis on score-reading which has occurred in these courses in recent decades.

There is a multitude of factors at play that have led to the current situation. Firstly, and as noted above, there is a historical basis to many of the practices and values that remains embedded in current examination requirements for aural training. This historical basis creates something of a disciplinary inertia that is difficult to break owing to entrenched practices including an ideology that considers aural skills should be developed and tested as a fundamental, yet isolated, component of musical practice. If music literacy should be integrated, contextualised, and not assessed in an isolated, positivistic manner (Broomhead 2010), then it follows that the purpose of aural training in contemporary secondary music curricula should be to develop a fundamental pillar of music literacy in a way that is useable, actionable, and fundamentally integrated within other modalities of musicking. As Csíkos and Dohány (2016, 3) note, 'the assessment of such a complex phenomenon requires diverse approaches in regard to what and how to assess … '. We need to develop curricular and pedagogic environments in which the knowledge, understanding, and skills that young people must demonstrate are meaningfully and authentically derived from the characteristics of the music studied and not artificially separated into arbitrary and disconnected curricular areas, such as performance, composition and listening/appraising.

Aural training and measurable assessment practices

Our discussion so far has examined the origins of common approaches to aural training in secondary music curricula in terms of the musical traditions from which they are drawn. However, we also

suggest that much can be learned about the purposes and origin of these approaches by discussing them in relation to assessment practice in music more generally. Bhachu (2019) has drawn attention to the fact that WAM-based music education is often strongly associated with assessment practices in which skills and knowledge are tested in a positivistic manner based on correct/incorrect answers. When the elements of historic music curricula are examined, it becomes clear that many of the WAM-based aural skills that increase proficiency in traditional WAM-based music literacy are skills that can be decontextualised and tested in a quantifiable manner. For instance, the skill of sight-singing will develop 'coordination of the eye and ear' (Priest 1993, 104) to enhance pupils' understanding of score-based music, but, in addition, this skill can be easily assessed in a quantifiable manner on the basis of a correct/incorrect reproduction of a score excerpt. Skills such as dictation, sight reading and some approaches to harmony and counterpoint can all be assessed in this manner. In contrast, other aspects of the course such as instrumental/vocal performance and music history will be examined using criteria and judgement, rather than a correct/incorrect approach, with results relying on the assessor being able to measure the pupil's ability to interpret and/or reflect on music.

While the cultivation of aural skills such as dictation or sight-singing supports the development of score-based music literacy, it does not necessarily follow that these should be assessed as separate areas of musical competence. If, as Spruce (2016) argues, the purpose of deconstructing music into its component parts is to develop an understanding of how they work in combination, we must question the value of assessing facets of aural training separately rather than within the context of (for example) a performance. We suggest, therefore, that the complex and multi-layered nature of much WAM has been exploited to create measurable assessment practices. Accordingly, many of the aural tests traditionally characterising secondary music curricula may also originate in attempts to teach music in a way that mirrors the way other school subjects are taught, creating a convenient system for measuring pupils' academic performance. It is also significant that such a strongly positivistic mode of assessment may undermine pupils' appreciation of the reflective and interpretative dimensions of score-based music literacy.

Regarding the assessment of aural training within contemporary secondary curricula, we note that many of the types of questions included in exam papers allow for the assessment of pupils' knowledge efficiently and at a mass scale. Examples are the frequent use of tick-box questions and questions asking for written descriptions of musical elements. In the future, this type of assessment may well become more common because it can be automated. Furthermore, in some cases, certain musical features appear to be included because they can be easily recognised within a very short musical excerpt rather than because they have musical significance; 'glissando', 'pedal' and 'drone' are common examples of elements falling into this category, and they are found in many GCSE/National 4/5 syllabi.

The musical elements that pupils are asked to identify are often derived from score-based music, despite their subsequent application to the analysis of other non-score-based musics. A typical example of this can be found in the OCR GCSE Music specification; this specification presents a list of musical terms almost exclusively derived from score-based traditions before stating that: 'learners will study music from the past and present, from the Western tradition and other world cultures' (7). Similarly, the concept list in the Scottish National 5 course specification includes features such as 'polyphonic', 'contrapuntal', 'whole tone scale' and 'trill', alongside a small number of elements specific to some styles beyond WAM. Somewhat remarkably, however, the musical styles which appear in the concept list include 'classical', 'gospel', 'Celtic rock' and 'Indian' (SQA 2023b). Some course specifications do provide separate lists of musical elements in relation to different musical styles but there is typically a statement to the effect that many elements can also be applied to other styles of music, meaning that schools can still choose to focus on WAM in their teaching (WJEC 2019). Stillie and Moir (2021), for instance, note that the study of features central to other musical traditions, such as the study of tone and timbre, are less commonly taught or examined.

Aural training and 'atomistic' listening

The inclusion of music beyond WAM in secondary music curricula has clear connections with wider educational aspirations to broaden the curriculum in order to make it more accessible to students from different backgrounds. In music, there has of course been important progressive work from scholars who intend to ensure that music education is stylistically and culturally relevant (Green 2006) as well as more practical steps taken to increase the popularity of music as a school subject by allowing students to study music deemed relevant to their interests (Ross 1995). Despite these changes, lack of pupil engagement with the listening/appraising area of secondary music curricula remains an issue, and research has drawn attention particularly to the negative effects of an aural training context where the primary focus is on identifying and describing individual musical elements (Green 2006; Spruce 2016; Whittaker 2021).

As noted above, secondary music listening/appraising exam papers focus overwhelmingly on identification of individual musical elements within short musical excerpts. The overemphasis on such an approach and its use outside of appropriate contexts appear to be one of the reasons for the dissatisfaction shown by many students within this area of the curriculum. Spruce (2016) has drawn attention to how aural training is typically approached within secondary music curricula via what he refers to as 'the atomistic and distanced analysis of the elements and structure' (148), where students are trained to isolate different musical components and describe their specific characteristics before reflecting on how they are combined within a particular piece of music. As he explains:

> Musical knowledge and understanding are understood here as the ability to aurally deconstruct the music into its discrete "elements", explore the character of these elements separate from the musical whole and finally "reconstruct" the work to see how the musical elements "fit together". (148)

Spruce acknowledges that this approach is a useful learning tool in the process of learning to compose music, and in developing a deep understanding of the construction of certain types of music, but he is also concerned that its limitations when used as an exclusive approach to developing aural perception have not been sufficiently explored. Spruce argues that this approach derives from score-based music-analytical practices, and that its overemphasis or application in the wrong context can hinder pupils' enjoyment of listening to music within a classroom setting because it does not reflect the way listening to music is experienced in everyday life. He argues that while the study of separate musical components has merit within specific learning contexts, these components are not naturally processed separately during the act of listening to any type of music. He concludes that:

> … whereas people *can* listen to music atomistically in terms of the musical elements or musical structure if *required* to do so, few (even "trained" musicians) do so as a matter of course. (149)

Owing to the difference between this approach and the usual experience of listening to music, Spruce suggests that students often become disenchanted with their own preferred music/musical styles when they are required to engage with them only as required by school music curricula. This phenomenon has also been explored by Green (2006), who comments that when pupils she observed during a study were given the opportunity to study some popular music they enjoyed listening to outside of school, they were resistant to engaging with it in a classroom setting as a result of the approach taken. Green also discusses the advantages of using informal learning methods to develop positive pupil attitudes towards listening to music (of any type) within the classroom. It is evident that, when applied in the wrong context, such an approach to the development of aural perception can act as a significant barrier to the development of music literacy associated with popular music and, by extension, other styles in which the use of a score is not of central importance. Like Spruce, Stillie and Moir (2021) also assert that the way aural training is approached in secondary music curricula today is often directly analogous with the analytical study of score-based music.

They argue that while a greater variety of musical styles are now represented, the styles are still approached through the long-established practice of examining musical elements such as pitch, rhythm, and texture separately. They also argue that the origin of this approach to aural training has not been sufficiently examined and that this has led to a situation in which this method continues to underpin aural training today. In a similar vein, Priest (1993) also asserts that aural training and the development of aural perception is normally conceived of as intricately linked to the art of score-reading within many educational settings:

> … emphasis on tests has been tied inextricably to notation. "Aural" has usually meant writing. An assumption of literary skills is always present, with "co-ordination of ear and eye" given as the most useful skill of a musician. (104)

It is clear that aural training is taught in a way that reflects some aspects of score analysis associated with WAM, and both are designed to develop the ability to relate sound to the way it is represented in staff notation.

Concluding thoughts

As discussed, UK secondary music courses (such as the A-level or Scottish Higher offered during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s) were initially designed to support the development of a form of music literacy applicable to core practices associated with the study of WAM. As these courses have developed, diversified, and become more inclusive, both musically and in terms of attracting students with diverse backgrounds and skills, the content and pedagogy, including approaches to assessment, have become problematic in many ways. This, we have argued, is the result of two key factors: firstly, the inclusion of other musics and modes of musicking; and, secondly, the ways in which traditional literacies have been neglected owing to the, albeit laudable and socially important, attempts to increase pupil engagement in the subject. In turn, contemporary secondary music curricula neither support the development of the type of broad and inclusive literacy that we would like to see, nor do they provide requisite developmental support for engagement with WAM, in any meaningful way. The curricula could be said to have become so vague and directionless that they fail to provide any real basis for the development of deep, critical, and artistically driven musicianship. Instead, they function primarily as vehicles for the demonstration of technical instrumental proficiency, disconnected theoretical knowledge, and concept-driven musical invention.[7]

Contemporary secondary music curricula in the UK suits a massified approach that has undoubtedly opened the subject up to a wider audience. In so doing, however, the need for a one-size-fits-all approach to pedagogy, including assessment strategies that necessitate efficient consideration of discrete musical activities, has – in our opinion – undermined the potential of the qualifications to be legitimate sites for the development of music literacy in the sense of a literacy that has any useful function beyond satisfying examination requirements. More functionally, it is also the case that many music students studying in higher education feel dissatisfied with the relevance and depth of learning that they experience at the secondary level. For example, in the context of the Scottish Higher qualification, Moir and Stillie (2018) found that the lack of curricular specificity in any area of musical study within secondary courses left students with varying musical interests craving the opportunity to specialise more deeply within their areas of personal interest.[8]

Given the prevailing paradigm of massified, curriculum-driven, educator-led pedagogy at play in much secondary music education, it is difficult for students to specialise and focus on their own areas of interest. This may suggest – as Moir and Stillie (2018) allude to – that separate qualifications, or streams, for different musical traditions (e.g. popular music, jazz, classical, etc.) could be offered at this level to support the transition into tertiary music education for students who aspire to progress in any given specialism. However, we believe this solution would be merely a short-term 'sticking plaster' for the problems that we have identified. Although the separation of areas based on musical tradition might help to ensure that students engage with content that they find musically,

stylistically and aesthetically interesting, we do not see great value in the siloing of different musics and are not convinced that arbitrarily separating musical traditions is conducive to the development of well-rounded, well-informed, contextually-aware musicians.

A detailed proposal as to how this situation could be resolved is beyond the scope of this article. However, we close by commenting in a broad way on two changes of approach that might mitigate some of the key contradictions and tensions that currently exist. First, we advocate for a shift in pedagogic focus away from transmissive approaches to one that centres the student as an autonomous individual artist and, second, we advocate for an integrated approach towards the development of musicianship and music literacy, centred on authentic musical practice, rather than sterilised, isolated simulations of musical activity. Each of these changes of approach would require a fundamental reconstruction of the school curricular and examination syllabuses as well as the training and development of teachers (both in-service and pre-service).

A shift in pedagogic focus to one that facilitates student-centred learning (see, for example, Herrington and Herrington 2006; Pozo, Torrado, and Baño 2022) may provide a way for students to explore the musics in which they are interested, and to develop aural skills as part of a form of music literacy relevant to their own contexts and musical settings. We recognise that this will involve significant developmental work for many educators; however, we propose that this shift begins with exam boards offering resources and training to support teachers in developing an awareness of styles of music and ways of musicking of which they may not have had experience. Teachers need not be experts in all such musics, but should be given the support and curricular freedom to engender musical learning of students in a diverse way. Such a focus would allow for aural training to be conceptualised as a set of activities used to help learning, rather than a set of skills to be tested in a quantifiable manner.

The practice of teaching and assessing aural skills within secondary curricula as a discrete area has resulted in a disconnect between aural training and other areas of musical practice. Aural skills should be a central and integral aspect of music literacy, and this can only be meaningfully achieved if aural training supports the development of musicianship i.e. the development of skills, knowledge and understanding that underpin and are inextricably linked to musical practice in areas such as composition and performance.

For example, instruments are rarely used in traditional aural training, whereas Parkin (2021) highlights how helpful it would be to use instruments so that 'the link between aural and performance can be developed' (31). That kind of approach may have wider benefits for the learner, such as enhancing their ability to improvise, compose, respond to others, and artistically engage with the musical texts they are using. Aural training should also take account of how a pupil listens to music. This has been the approach in some recent higher education music courses, where the starting point for developing aural skills involves listening to music without notation 'rather than imposing extant models onto musical works' (Scheuregger 2021, 59); thus, staff notation as the starting point, or the focus, for *all* aural training-related activities is not assumed.

We recognise the enormity of the reforms we propose but believe that current provision is so antithetical to the meaningful development of deep music literacies that change is imperative.

Notes

1. In addition to subjects such as English and mathematics which typically remain mandatory during the compulsory phase of secondary education.
2. GCSEs and National 4/5s are usually taken at age 16, A Levels and Highers are the standard requirements for university entry, and B-TECs are vocationally-focused alternatives to A Levels. Advanced Highers are considered to be equivalent to the first year of an undergraduate degree (Byrne and Butcher 2021).
3. Courses such as National 5 in Scotland and GCSE in the rest of the UK.

4. Moir and Stillie (2018) found that, in comparison to the Scottish Higher, undergraduate music students they interviewed who had studied A Level Music in England thought this course included an appropriate level of challenge to support progression into a music degree. However, many also felt that it was too WAM-focused to support their own musical interests. GCSE syllabi offered by these exam boards, however, are in line with the level of challenge on other UK GCSEs and the National 5, resulting in an unusually large jump in difficulty between GCSE and A Level (Gibbs-Singh 2018).
5. While it is not the focus of this article, it is notable that the areas of performance and composition are conceptualised in a similarly generic way. For example, the assessment rubric for AQA GSCE Music states that performances will be marked on 'ability to demonstrate technical control, with high levels of accuracy (pitch, rhythm, intonation) and fluency' (AQA 2023) despite stating that performances may be in musical styles which do not use a score. Similarly, compositions must 'demonstrate selection and use of **at least four** types of musical element' such as 'harmony', 'dynamics' or 'form' (AQA 2023), and the marking rubric clearly shows that compositions in contrasting musical genres are marked according to the same marking criteria.
6. As indicated earlier, we use the term 'listening/appraising' to refer to course components in contemporary curricula. We use the term 'aural training' to refer to aural skills generally, which could thus include but is not limited to 'listening/appraising'. There are of course differences between WAM-style aural training and 'listening/appraising' course components.
7. This raises important questions about the usefulness of these courses as they relate to progression into tertiary level music study. If these courses – which claim to provide an appropriate foundation for tertiary level study – do not sufficiently support the development of any specific type of music literacy, how can they support pupils' transition into any type of music degree? It was precisely this kind of concern that led the Trustees of the SMA to commission McQueen to investigate a perceived gap in music literacy between school and university study.
8. Moir and Stillie (2018) found that this was also felt by A-Level students, but to a lesser extent.

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