

Reviews

***Pop Music Education in the UK.* By Norton York, 2021. 415pp. RSL. ISBN 978-1-78936-346-3**

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This book is something of a curate's egg. It mixes searing critique with an at times overbearing self-justification. The result is more polemical than it is detached, more anecdotal than analytical.

The story the author wishes to tell is one of a music education establishment devoted to the Western classical tradition, but which grudgingly comes to accept that a wider area of study is necessary. There is much truth in this and York is right to point out that the main developments in the teaching of popular music in the UK took place outside of its longstanding universities, something illustrated by my own research (Cloonan and Hulstedt 2013).

The book falls into three parts – School Music and the myth about music education, Formal Pop Music Education and the Future of Music Education, and Pop Music Education Alumni. In the first part, York outlines what he rightly sees as an inadequate response by 'traditionalists' in music education – from schools to universities – to developments in popular music from the 1960s on. He begins by looking at how fewer students are taking music GCSEs and A-levels, and more what he calls Formal Pop Music qualifications, including B-TEC courses and those of his own company, RSL (Rockschool Ltd). He justifiably castigates UK Music for concentrating on the former and largely ignoring the latter (p. 17). He characterises school music education (which the early part of the book concentrates on) as being based on the (separate) work of John Paynter and Keith Swanwick and ideas of creative music which became embedded in the National Curriculum (p. 20). Amongst many criticisms, York points to a 'lack of ethnic diversity encouraged amongst the new generation of trainee teachers of music' (p. 27) and the fact that, from the 1960s on, 'mainstream music educators' promoted 'an aesthetic bias that ran contrary to the social and political changes that were taking place' (p. 49). As an academic pursuit in schools, music remained a minority interest firmly located in music before the era of rock 'n' roll.

York goes on to argue that the model promoted by Paynter and Swanwick was about a creative music aesthetic, in which pop was seen as peripheral. He sees the myths perpetuated by such approaches as being that popular music was simple and 'other' to UK traditions, and that it was primarily learnt informally. What becomes apparent here is the longstanding divide between the study of music in and of itself and the study of music in its context, although York is less clear on *how* pop should be studied. Throughout the book, little is revealed about the content of the courses York admires, and there is precious little on assessment.

York also notes the dissenters to the traditionalists' approach, largely coming from within academia and community education. The combined work here leads

to what Norton calls Formal Pop Music Education, which is discussed in Part 2 and forms the bulk of his book. The three sections here deal with disparate local initiatives in the 1970s and 80s, the emergence of Formal Pop Music Education in the 1990s, and further education community music and government initiatives. The work of many individuals is highlighted, with York lamenting that:

If music education's traditional establishment had not been blinkered and prejudiced about the transformation of British musical culture, these individuals and the organisations they created would not have been needed. (p. 159)

York praises the UK's Musicians' Union – often seen as a bastion of classical music – as being very innovative from the formation of the Musicians' Union Rock Workshop Unit in 1972. He examines a number of local initiatives, giving praise to those seemingly fighting against the music educational status quo. Many such people's stories are told and here the phrase 'In his interview for this book' is annoyingly overused. In addition, much of the content here is anecdotal, when more analysis of *why* these things were happening would have been useful. However, he is correct to note that innovation in pop music education was far more prevalent in further and community education, than it was in higher education.

York says that he is highlighting his own work simply in order to be pragmatic, as he know it best (p. 161). He credits his own Brighton Rock initiative of the early 1990s as pioneering Formal Pop Music Education, but also notes that the University of Salford and the new universities of Westminster and Thames Valley were innovative within higher education. He also notes the formation of the University of Liverpool's Institute for Popular Music (IPM) in 1988, although the IPM's research focus is somewhat underplayed in a book which largely focuses on teaching. Within research, Derek Scott emerges as a key figure, in particular for his pioneering work in establishing the Ashgate series of academic popular music books. Westminster is particularly praised for attracting ethnic minority students and establishing the Black Music Research Unit under the stewardship of Mykaell Riley. The Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts is described as 'Without doubt, the most public profile initiative in pop music' (p. 263), although this rather downplays the importance of the IPM as *the* centre for popular music research in the UK. York does give the IPM some credit here, but rather undermines his own case by claiming that International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM) is based there, which it is not.

Accounts of organisations such as the Academy of Contemporary Music, the British and Irish Music Institute and the BRIT School follow, but these remain largely at the descriptive and anecdotal level, ultimately becoming somewhat list-y, without any of the critique characterising earlier sections. Whereas the traditionalists are critiqued, no such critical lens is applied to the newcomers. However, York is correct when he argues that the entry of several providers of the sort that York describes into international markets means that 'Pop Music in Higher Education is now part of a globalised commercial education investment environment' (p. 284). Whether this is a good thing or not is not commented on.

York goes on to discuss further education, community music and government initiatives. These include royalty in the form the Princes Trust charity, which funded various initiatives. Overall he argues that:

As in Higher Education, the majority of innovation came about either through private individuals building businesses or through community projects each with its own mix of music industry, government or charitable support. (p. 292)

One notable example of a government initiative is the New Deal for Musicians. This started in the late 1990s and attempted to assist young unemployed musicians. Generally neglected within academia, it is credited here with 'helping many people get a foothold in the music industry who otherwise had not received help from mainstream music education' (p. 316), and this scheme certainly merits further investigation.

The book then turns to the future and optimistically suggests that the past has shown that obstacles to popular music education can be overcome. Something of a manifesto follows, with York essentially rightly arguing that it should start from where young people are, rather than where educators might want them to be. His suggestions that music education funding should be 'fairly matched to the economic value to the country of different styles and sectors of music' (p. 358) and that the government should be 'Re-prioritising funding for university research activity in Music (sic) so it reflects the needs of the music economy as it is today' (p. 359) betray a market-based approach which somewhat overlooks music's cultural and social values. They certainly jar with the more art-based approaches adopted elsewhere in the book. The book ends with York outlining his credentials, saying he aims to empower and support those calling for change while also 'demonstrating to traditionalists that now is the time to compromise, understand, re-evaluate and reform' (p. 360).

The list of pop music education alumni at the end of the book is truly impressive, counting Adele and Ed Sheeran amongst its number. However, it should also be noted that the absences show that the majority of popular musicians do *not* undertake Formal Pop Music Education, they seemingly continue to learn *informally*. The chronology of various PM educational initiatives and the list of different qualifications in the appendix are both useful additions.

York is certainly someone with a bee in their bonnet and there are plenty of villains here. Primarily these are 'the musical establishment' who, not unfairly, York characterises as having kept the focus of university music departments on Western classical music for far too long. He also says that government bodies have been too concerned with traditional qualifications (such as GCSE and 'A' levels) and so have missed out on the growth in other qualifications (such as those provided by Norton's own company and others), with the growth in the latter being part of the reason for the decline in the former. Put simply, young people who want to study popular music now have a range of qualifications to choose from – something which Norton attributes to the dedicated work of many individuals, often working in community education.

York says that 'the purpose of this book is to inform and engage policy makers in a debate about the reform of music education' (p. 7). However, it is not clear that a book of this nature will do that. It is overlong and too anecdotal, often at the expense of detached analysis. At times the need for more even-handedness detracts from the justified criticisms being made. So, while York is convinced that he was right all along, he is not so adept at convincing readers of this. At times the writing is just *too* polemical. For example, while discussing the notion of informal learning in pop music, Lucy Green is subjected to 18 pages of what is more like a personal

insult than detached academic criticism, more rhetorical than reasoned. It is, of course, fine to critique people's methods and conclusions, but the attack here verges on vengeance. I suspect that neither will be on the other's Christmas card list.

It is claimed that 'prejudice against Popular Music education is still tangible and is felt in funding priorities from government' (p. 318). York gives examples and suggests that further innovation is more likely to come from the private sector than it is the public. However, his own evidence suggests that a more nuanced analysis is needed, as many previous initiatives were underpinned by the state. Thus, more broadly, what is of interest is that so many initiatives – such as the New Deal for Musicians and developments in further and community education – came from within the public sector, something which York rather underplays.

It should be noted that the book is published by RSL, the company which York founded. Such an approach seems unlikely to produce any critique of RSL itself. The book also has an editing team and York is listed as one of two 'Executive Producers' of the book. To say the least, this is somewhat unusual in academia. Nonetheless, this book is obviously a labour of love – and one which bears some fruit. York is right to think that this is a story worth telling. He demonstrates how popular music education has changed in the UK – and is adept at showing why it needed to. Ultimately, however, this account often betrays its biases and lacks the sort of detachment which is the hallmark of the best academic work. While this is a rather long book, it is still fails to present a full picture.

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Reference

Cloonan, M. and Hulstedt, L. 2013. 'Looking for something new: the provision of popular music studies degrees in the uk', *IASPM Journal*, 3/2, pp. 63–76

***The Cambridge Companion to Caribbean Music*. Edited by Nanette de Jong. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 247 pp. ISBN 978-1-108-42192-8 doi:10.1017/S0261143023000028**

Comprising 13 chapters, each one discussing a specific musical genre from a particular island or community, this volume is a very useful companion to Caribbean music in its many diverse forms, from salsa, son and merengue to rara, konpa, zouk, and reggae. The chapters engage with particular themes – for example, race, transculturation, exile, diaspora, history, etc. – so that each essay may be read individually, as a case study, and as part of the volume's broader attempt to think of Caribbean music globally, as a connected, diverse but unified whole that transmits the experiences of the people of the region and its diaspora. The connections are therefore often complex, hidden or indeed rhizomatic, with tangled, shared roots that meet and intertwine. Fittingly, the book is organised according to an archipelagic principle whereby the chapters 'are presented not in a straight line, but as part of a loop, where essential ideas recur and repeat, to different measures and to different