

**Equality of Opportunity?  
Some thoughts on music  
education in the City  
of Plymouth**

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One of the wonderful things, if we believe what we hear on T.V., read in the educational press, and see for ourselves at public performances, is that music is alive and well in our nation's schools.

Indeed, if one looks carefully, one can see some of the finest musicians in the country performing a very high standard of music and if the listener did not know better, he could be forgiven for thinking that he was listening to a professional band or orchestra of more advanced years.

This is good. Nobody can argue to the contrary.

If one digs a little deeper, one can see, however, that the children in these bands come, in the main, from families where a great deal of support is given. When I use the word "support", I use it in its widest sense. From driving the child to lessons, practices and shows, to providing the best environment in the home for the child to study in, and, of course, the money to pay for the best instrument and the most highly qualified teachers.

As a music teacher in Plymouth, I get very frustrated when I see the other side of this story. The children who come from homes where practical music lessons are a non-starter, for the most obvious of reasons. Money.

In homes where the next question is often, who is going to pay the electric bill? or even, when is the electricity going to be cut off? it stands to reason that the high cost of private music lessons is way down the list of the parent's priorities.

This is where the schools should come in. The fact is, though, that they cannot. At least, in the less fashionable schools, they cannot. A single music teacher, teaching in a small inner city secondary school, simply does not have the resources at his disposal to fund much more than a small recorder group or a choir, let alone a large band with instruments costing hundreds of pounds each.

There are ways around this. The county can provide specialist instrumental teachers that will visit schools and give children who have shown that they have some ability and a lot of interest, the chance to find out if they can become good musicians. In some schools, music lessons can be heard going on almost daily with a wide variety of orchestral sounds.

The plain truth is, that the county cannot afford to pay for this service to go into every school. The result of this is that the county music advisors have to decide where to place the money. If you like, they have to play God. Whatever they decide, they cannot win. If they say that School X is to get two hours a week of violin lessons, then somewhere else in the county, School Y is going to "dip out."

If your school happens to have a lot of children whose parents can afford to buy expensive instruments and make certain that the children practice at home, then the chances of your school having the services of a visiting specialist teacher are high.

If, on the other hand, your school is, as my present school is, in an area where money is short, home conditions are not conducive to serious and regular practice, and very often the emphasis is on living from day to day rather than studying an instrument for both enjoyment and perhaps a future in music, then the chances of getting any extra help for willing students is very slim indeed.

One of the ways around this, is that children who do come from less affluent and supportive families can attend a county-funded music centre during the evenings. This is a good plan until one looks a little closer.

Very often, the children who attend the music centres receive their music input from additional places, e.g. private music teachers. Perhaps on another instrument, but even this gives their chances of success a huge boost and proves to be a major source of frustration to children who receive little or no real tuition other than that given by their school music teacher for an ever-decreasing amount of time per week.

If we were really intent on giving all children an equal opportunity for a serious musical experience, then should we be diverting the limited resources the county has to offer to those children who cannot afford to pay?

One can never win this argument. What would you do if you had to direct the county budget? Would you put all your funds into the basket that was going to give you a high return, i.e. the school where the children of the highly supportive parents go, and in so doing create "baby professionals;" or should you put your hard-fought-for funds into the basket that is going to give children who would never get the chance to "have a go" the opportunity to see if they could "do it"? After all, in theory the results should be the same. The danger is, of course, that these children have a very high drop-out rate because of their home circumstances. Neighbours in tiny flats complain, large families with several younger sisters and brothers complain, and there are a lot of other distractions that many people who have never had to live in poorer areas of large cities would

never understand.

I would not like to have to make the choice. Can you imagine the fuss if the county music adviser decreed that all the resources were to be redirected into the less well-off areas?

One of the best ways to keep youngsters out of trouble in inner cities is to keep them busy. Surely an increase in money from the government would be well invested if they were to support the county directors of various activities, including music. Let us hope that the future holds happier news. Until then, I would not want to be a music adviser.