

WIDER OPPORTUNITIES HOME AND AWAY

It is a surprising thought that people from all over the world visit the Federation of Music Services website www.federationmusic.org.uk to see what is happening to music services in the UK.

I was delighted to receive a message from Ian Russell (past National President of AUSTA ESTA) who is a Head of a Music Service in South Australia. The news of the revolutionary new approach to instrumental teaching in the UK had reached the antipodes and had made quite an impact. Wider Opportunities or, more snappily 'Whole Class Vocal and Instrumental Tuition' was now officially the way forward in South Australia.

Ian was understandably concerned. In a nutshell, the plan driven by the politicians in his region is to abolish the small group model over the next five years and replace it totally with Wider Opportunities (yes, I still prefer that title), based on the UK model but using a single teacher with classes of 30.

Ian wanted confirmation that we still delivered small group tuition in the UK. Here is an edited version of my response:

'Yes, you are absolutely correct, we do have small groups of up to four pupils as the standard model and we are slowly rolling-out wider opportunities as a way to involve more students in the early stages of delivery. We also still have a reasonable element of individual tuition in many authorities.

It is great that we are involving more children in music. It is also good that we give pupils a chance to see how they would take to an instrument rather than use aptitude tests to try to predict whether they might succeed.

However, "wider opportunities" tuition is an introduction to the world of music and a first step in the process of learning an instrument.

Whole class instrumental teaching experiences are often short-term projects that can work very well with some of our best teachers. I have seen some excellent string projects and some very effective African drumming sessions.

Still much to be said for starting on the descant recorder

There are health and safety issues with samba bands and some local authorities now issue hearing protection to teachers and students where these are undertaken indoors. Not very many teachers undertake whole class brass teaching and the noise levels in certain rooms even with half-classes again require ear protection.

In all honesty, it is still early days here for whole class instrumental teaching and we are in the process of training more staff to cope with it.

We do not see this as replacing one model with another one.

Let's keep in touch over this one; politicians need to understand that the world of music education is surprisingly well connected.'

There is little doubt that violin teaching and African drumming can be very successful in groups of 30 with the right teacher or better still, the right partnership of teachers. Firstly, these instruments are now fairly cheap to buy in batches of 30. Secondly, even in groups of 30, they create a manageable level of volume.

Trinity Guildhall in partnership with the Open University is providing some excellent specialist training so we are doing everything possible to share the considerable expertise that has already accumulated in the UK with practitioners on a wide variety of instruments.

Yet there are still significant challenges for music services who want to offer whole class opportunities. A number of less obvious instruments have gained in popularity because they address some of these challenges. The ocarina, ukulele and even the mouth organ have been taught in whole classes. Whilst these instruments undoubtedly have their merits, is that what David Blunkett intended when he said that "every child who wanted to should have the opportunity to learn an instrument?" There is, of course, still much to be said for starting on the descant recorder even if it does seem traditional, and singing remains an obvious way in to music for many children.

Brass instruments and woodwind instruments may cause issues with dental development for younger pupils. Playing a wind instrument can cause teeth to move and this was a popular area of research in the dental profession some

40 years ago although that was mainly with older children.

In the woodwind family, there are more choices nowadays. Potential flautists can begin on the fife, aspiring clarinettists can take up the Lyons C clarinet and budding bassoonists can use the mini-bassoon. Whilst the reduced size and weight of these instruments helps to make the task more manageable for small hands, we do need to consider whether everyone in the class is ready from the dental aspect.

And, in any case, does it really benefit every child to start on a wind instrument as soon as he or she can reach all the keys?

Rather than debate the pros and cons of these choices, we should remember that the key benefit from wider opportunities is the chance for every pupil to engage with music – the instrument needs to be the vehicle rather than the obstacle.



Graham Standley