

Knights on White Chargers

Channel 4's "Don't Stop the Music", featuring James Rhodes and his campaign to invigorate a music education in schools with otherwise bleak musical landscapes, made for stimulating and thought-provoking viewing.

Not many would disagree with Mr Rhodes' aspiration for every school in the country to provide a vibrant music education, rich in real musical opportunities, with pupils learning to play real musical instruments, and being real musicians. In fairness, the programme did allude that many schools do, indeed, do this. But of course it chose to focus on a couple of examples of the far too many schools who don't, and some might argue that of course it would - a Knight on a White Charger leading a crusade to save the musical day is much more interesting television.

It would be tempting to have a protracted debate on the merits or otherwise of the programme's passionate call to arms to donate unwanted or unused musical instruments so that many more children in schools can learn. Some may view it as a worthy initiative, high in moral tone and helping address a chronic shortage of instruments available to young people. Others may view it as less than practical, only touching the surface of the issue and even sensationalist. Whichever is held, it should be acknowledged for the extent to which music professionals, the music industry and communities have engaged enough to support it, put their names to it and done something about it.

It would be tempting to have a lengthy analysis of the success, or otherwise, of the National Plan for Music Education and of the music education hubs created as part of it. Both were identified and discussed in the programme. And indeed they are important discussions to have, particularly in the context of the huge budget cuts that hubs have had to deal with over the last few years, their constitutional turmoil, wholesale staffing reductions and redundancies and an, as yet, undetermined national approach to judging their quality. As an aside it was interesting to note that the fund holder and accountable body for hubs inferred that more partnership working was the best way to tackle the problems raised by the programme.

The much more important debate to be had, however, is on the very issues that induce the bleak musical landscape in some schools in the first place.

For too long we have meandered around the central question of "what are schools for?"

Successive Secretaries of State, bathed in rhetoric and choosing to take on their own Knight on White Charger apparel have implemented a bewildering number and range of "initiatives" in schools and in the wider education sector; many highly politically charged and some with dubious benefit for children and young people.

We have an education system that is deeply politicised; autonomous schools that appear to be increasingly factories of data and measuring children primarily by

“progress through sub-levels”; schools that are driven by literacy and numeracy targets and utterly beholden to, and fearful of an inspectorate that judges success on the narrowest set of indicators. Is it any wonder that some headteachers feel compelled to concentrate all their efforts and priorities to meet these targets at the expense of music? Yet at the same time employers increasingly ask for the teamwork, creativity and application which high quality music learning gives to young people.

It was heartening to hear that, in one of the schools featured in the programme, the headteacher was clearly impressed with the impact that Mr Rhodes’ input had made on not just musical outcomes, but also young people’s overall learning and progress in literacy and numeracy. For those of us who have been involved in music education for some time this will come as no surprise. There is a huge canon of academic research that demonstrates and exemplifies this. And yet it is frustrating that, in 2014, we still have an education system that too often seems to ignore it.

Yes, music education needs thousands more musical instruments. But music education first needs much higher national and local priority by government, by schools supported by music services and music education hubs. It needs curriculum priority, it needs a serious approach to professional development of the workforce, it needs an unremitting focus on the quality of teaching, learning and progression, not just the quantity of participation, and it needs a significant increase in national and local government funding to enable the National Plan for Music Education to truly come to life and to provide music’s true potential in the development of children and young people..

It needs an inspectorate to listen to the needs of schools and employers and the aspirations of young people themselves as well as the guardians of a civilised society and not just to the politically inspired debates on league tables, locally, nationally and internationally which sometimes produce cynical and deeply uneducational responses from the very schools charged with delivering a broad and balanced curriculum.

Knights on White Chargers are fine. But they last but a moment in the eon of time. They are of their day. Some may save the day; some may leave a trail of unfulfilled aspirations or even devastation in their wake.

And that’s the problem. Music learning takes time; a lot of time. Quick fixes never work in music. It needs long term, sustained commitment - on behalf of the learner - by the teacher, the school, the music service, the music education hub, the local community, the government.

Music Mark - the UK Association for Music Education, and its members, are committed to the sustained development of high quality music education in and out of schools. We welcome the media spotlight Mr Rhodes and his programme has brought.

But we ask that the debate for, and improvement of music education is focused on the strategic development of provision for all children that is of the highest quality, enables

best musical progress and supports highest possible attainment, through policy initiatives that are educationally robust and financially sustainable for the long term.

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