Make Your Mark: Notes on Music Education

Series 2 Episode 2: Pedagogy and Learning Techniques

[Intro music]

Yusef Sacoor: Hello! It's episode 4 of 'Make Your Mark: Notes on Music Education'. This week, we're doing pedagogy – How do we teach Music? Is there a 'best' approach? What techniques help educators and those learning music access the most intellectual growth, musical progression and happiness? They're the questions that we're asking today, and we're asking 3 amazing experts, so let's hear from them.

Jennie Henley: I'm Jenny Henley. I'm director of programmes and professor in music education at the Royal Northern College of Music. So I look after all of our degree programmes, our junior work, and access and participation. I've just written a book called Inclusive Pedagogy and Music Education, which is really exciting. My background is in flute teaching, ensembles, etc. And I still do a little bit of flute teaching on a Saturday morning because I still teach our students how to teach.

Andy Shoniker: I'm Andy Schoeniger. I'm a professional drummer based in New York City. In addition to playing a lot, I do a lot of education as well. I've written four books on drumming. I do master classes in clinics and private instruction. I also developed an app called Sync, which it's a customisable rhythm sequencer that you can program any rhythm you want to do the uptake of practicing much more efficiently.

Adam Whittaker: Hi, good afternoon. My name's Adam Whitaker. I'm Associate Professor in Music at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire and there I lead our pedagogy strand. So all of our students have some pedagogical training as part of their degrees. And so I have the great privilege of working with the next generation of music educators and helping them to take some of their first steps into what we feel will be a really worthwhile and valuable career.

Lucy Davies: So obviously we're going to be talking about pedagogy today. No surprise there. But just for a bit of context setting, really. What is a specialist pedagogical

approach and how does it differ for you from sort of casual exploration of music? So just picking up a guitar and showing somebody how to play a chord, for example.

Andy Shoniker: Okay, so I take a very structured approach to practicing and teaching education. One thing that is utterly overlooked, in my opinion, being a drummer is rhythmic fundamentals and foundations. So I really drill that into any student of any age, whether they are six years old or 60. Everyone's a beginner till they're not, in my mind. It's easier at a younger age, but if you still have the work ethic and the right sources to do it that I think anyone can build that strong foundation at any stage of their life. So what I do is I have three unique practice methods that I've developed that I use with people. One would be you practice the same exercise 20 times in a row, then you take a break.

And then you repeat that three times. So that's one method. Another one, whatever tempo you're playing at is how many times you have to repeat the exercise. So if you're playing at 120, you have to play it 120 times. So it's really good for cognitive and as well for like physical getting in your dexterity and the most challenging yet the most rewarding, I call it the best of 10, which you take a pattern and you repeat, you play it once, you stop and you repeat that 10 times. And if you could do that, you now you go on to playing it twice, stop 10 times. So those are just things I've developed that work wonders with the people I've taught over the years.

Lucy Davies: That's great. Thanks, Andy. What about you, Jenny?

Jennie Henley: Yeah, it's a good question. I think it depends what you understand pedagogy to be. And it's one of those words and terms that mean different things to different people in different places. So over the years, I've been trying to understand what this is. And the way I understand it now is, pedagogy is the way that you apply your, your technique strategies, you know, those sort of common methods and approaches a bit like Andy was was articulating there, but it's how you work with the individual or the group of individuals that you're working with. It's about the application of those techniques. So when I'm working with our students, I very much get them to sort of think through how you construct your own learning. What tasks do you give to somebody that helps them build their own understanding?

So I guess it, well, in the most simple terms, it's the way somebody is working with somebody else in order to build learning. And I think I would probably argue that pedagogy is present in any kind of learning. I don't know what, Adam, you think about that.

Adam Whittaker: Yeah, I'd agree. I'd agree, Jenny. think it's I think this is a really fascinating question. It's such a rich kind of topic. I think that there's a really important thing about the meshing of, I suppose, teacher experiences, because as musicians, we all have different kinds of experiences that we've had throughout our learning journeys, our professional careers, you know, had the privilege to work in all sorts of different

kinds of contexts. I bring that experience to any teaching interaction, but also the learners or the participants that I'm working with, they have really rich, specialised musical experiences. And the way I see it is that there's a fantastic opportunity for really effective specialist pedagogies to bring these together and to mesh with the context where something is happening too.

This is, I think, something that's also important to consider in any of these kind of discussions of pedagogy too, in that there are such a wide range of approaches that you could take in any kind of teaching interaction exchange. And sometimes something will be absolutely the right thing to do in one case, and sometimes it's worked perfectly well here, but in another place it doesn't work quite so well. And this is one of one of the fascinating things about developing our pedagogical expertise is that it's never finished. And I'm sure Jenny and Andy would probably agree with me here that we're all still students. We're all still learning. We're all experimenting. And that is what I think helps to keep the work that we do really fresh and vibrant. And our learners respond really well to this, you know, it's continuing to hone our pedagogical expertise. And that's something that I think is, you know, is always an ongoing project. I'm continually learning. I'm continually fascinated by the things that my students teach me in the course of, you know, any teaching and learning, but also that, you know, I hope that some of the experiences I've had can be helpful to them as well. So I see it as this sort of fantastic site to sort of mesh lots of different kinds of perspectives together.

Yusef Sacoor: Fantastic. What you said about sort of contextual changes, making a big difference to the effectiveness of certain pedagogical approaches. What kind of context might that be?

Adam Whittaker: I mean, you know, teaching work, all music education takes place somewhere. So, you know, there are values, there are kinds of inherent rules of the game. If we want to use that kind of terminology with any kind of space, if you imagine, you know, a peripatetic music teacher who's visiting a school. They may only be in the school for a short period of time. They may not have the opportunity to engage with the wider staff body. Their activity might be tucked away a tiny room. Now, this is the context. And what happens is sometimes that we have to make changes to how we would like to teach or the ways that we sort of envisage something working based on the context we're working with.

Similarly, sometimes we and I've had this experience myself, you know, that I've arrived to do a workshop in a school and I've been expecting a group of participants with, you know, skill levels or experiences of particular types. And then, actually, in the course of a conversation, a few minutes before you're delivering this, suddenly you realise that actually that may not entirely be, you know, sort of where things are at. So you have to, you have to make, make that, make that change in the moment. These are things that you know, effective pedagogues we try to think about as we're doing it. that we are,

that's why I saying, know, about the sort of meshing with the context and thinking about the people that you have that you're working with and the kind of, you know, the kind of longevity of, the longevity that you'll have to work with them. You know, if you have the opportunity to see something develop over a longer period of time or with specific kinds of aims in mind, then that might change how you approach those interactions too. So,

You know, I think all of these things are important contextual factors to consider, but I don't know what Jenny and Andy think.

Yusef Sacoor: Well, I was going to say, Jenny, obviously you've done a lot of work around inclusivity and I wonder if those words are particularly prescient in that area.

Jennie Henley: Yeah, I was just thinking that actually, as Adam was talking there. I think it's really interesting because the first thing is everybody's different, right? So context changes every single time you're working with somebody different. And when you're working with a group, having a new person in the group changes that group. And that's really important to remember because quite often people don't remember that. if somebody new comes into the group and you expect them to fit in with you, but actually everything has to adapt and change. So I think that's really important.

I think the other thing is there are some things that will change and that impact the way that you're working with people based on the context and the particular social conventions, you the rules of the game, as Adam said there. But there are other things that don't ever change. And one of the things that I've observed over the past 20, 25 years or so is that when people are working in a context that they deem to be an inclusive context, somehow their expectations change and they sometimes lower their expectations. And I came across this in an approach, Lainey Florian's approach, inclusive pedagogy in action approach, I think it's called that in special educational needs, quite often you lower your expectations based on the group of children that are in front of you. But as soon as you do that, you're becoming exclusionary because you're not then going to give the opportunity to reach where other children might So I think, you know, that whatever context you're working in, having really high expectations and providing a real aspiration for those people.

Andy Shoniker: I can jump on to what Adam was talking a bit earlier about having to adapt based on the circumstance or the situation. I was doing, back in the fall, I was doing a bunch of drum clinics and things like that. And one weekend I was up in, I think it was in Grand Rapids, Michigan or somewhere like that. And it was a 12 hour day of drumming. It was a long, long day of drumming. And everyone came and you know, their 45 minute, hour long clinic. And I was starting off with this one in 10 and I saw the glazed overlook of the audience. So I had to pivot like, like, like that just to get them engaged. It was the same concept, but a different application. So it kind of brought them in,

adapting based on the person, the circumstance, like I think that's a you know, part of the game.

Yusef Sacoor: That's really interesting thing to talk about really. And I suppose leads on really well into our next question, I suppose, a sort of challenge, because obviously a lot of teaching in practice is kind of thinking on the spot and changing the shape of what you're doing at the last minute. So I suppose, how does that counter with the idea of sort a set idea of what pedagogy looks like and why is it important I suppose, to have a pedagogical approach to teaching and educating? And I'll leave that open to both of you.

Adam Whittaker: Well, I don't mind sort of taking this on. You know, are some things which I think are kind of core values to all of us as teachers and artists that are things that we feel are really, really important. And because something doesn't appear to work in one place or whatever, doesn't mean that it's necessarily flawed or problematic. It just may actually be that the circumstance isn't quite right for that kind of interaction. And I think this is why as musicians thinking pedagogically in all of the stuff that we do is so important because I think it helps us to sort of make visible or sort of make concrete, I suppose, some of the things which we take for granted and we just we think, well, I just do it like this. It forces us to question, well, why do I do it like that? Should I do it like that? Maybe I could try it a different way. Why is that working for me? Why is that leading to this outcome? And this is also, I think, important for understanding the kinds of, know, the expectations and the aspirations that we have, you know, in lots of settings for all of the young people, you know, the students that we work with, that we want to, we always want to provide a really high quality music education. I don't think any any teacher goes into a teaching interaction and says, actually, you know what today I think this is a low quality lesson. Every teacher wants to make them all as good as they can.

But actually what constitutes high quality in these different settings is could be really variable. And in terms of what is actually done in that moment, you can have a fantastically high quality music lesson that that might actually not appear on some sort of criteria to make all that much progress, but it could be transformative for the student that you're working with. And so this need to be sort of adaptive or responsive, I think is crucial as musicians. This is anybody who's ever played in any ensemble, this is what you have to do in the moment. It doesn't matter how much you've rehearsed it or if you've rehearsed it in a particular way, something happens in the in the performance, there isn't the time to say, OK, everybody, let's just stop and have a chat about what happened here. In the moment, you have to respond and make those those decisions. And so this is why I go back to my previous point that I think that thinking pedagogically is so essential for developing our sense of musicianship and musical identity as we go through our careers. And it's never fixed.

But you can have these sort of core pedagogical values. You may not even realise that they are so important to you, but actually the process of thinking through those and thinking about where your assumptions, your priorities lie and thinking about the aspirations that you have for the people that you are working with and what aspirations they have too from working with you.

Andy Shoniker: Yeah, so I'll jump in. I kind of go back to thinking about, I was fortunate to have some fantastic teachers when I was developing, ~ which are now like dear friends of mine. And they kind of combined structured approaches and methods, but also with that adaptive cater to the student based on their, goals, their needs, their skill level, their interests too. Not everyone wants to play the same kind of music or has not everyone wants to be an Afro-Cuban musician or a death metal musician. There's room for everything in the wheelhouse. So to find a teacher that's willing to, first of all, work with you on your goals, but still give you that foundation, which you can build yourself upon, is huge.

I do a lot of kind of You know, fine tuning drummer friends of mine if they're like, my time is bad. I'm like, well, let me see how your body is working and I'll see like what their feet might be doing. Maybe if they're taking their foot off a pedal, that's affecting their balance and therefore it affects their everything. But the other guy might want to be like, I want to get around the drum set faster. So then you'd have to cater all the time. And it's, it's really fun, know, just to kind of try to solve the puzzle, I guess.

Yusef Sacoor: Yes, thank you.

Jennie Henley: I think it's really important to have some principles underpinning what you do because that's what you value and what you're trying to achieve. I think that's really, really important. I was just listening to Adam there talking about quality and how sometimes progress looks different. And that's absolutely right. I think having an understanding of how learning occurs and then using that to underpin what you're doing is really important.

As Adam was talking, I was thinking of an example of a, you know, we had a sort of showcase of some beginner P-bones, some work that we're doing with a local school. And if you judged what they were doing on the basis of, their intonation correct? Are they hitting the right notes, et cetera? You would think, gosh, what is going on? But those kids, they started and stopped at exactly the same time. Their rhythm was impeccable. And that was really high-quality beginner learning. And there was real progress made. So it's not necessarily, I don't think I ever go into a lesson thinking having a really rigid idea of how I'm going to approach things. You've got to have that flexibility and adaptability. But the principles that underpin that are everybody's different. That's really important. And you have to work with with who you're working with to try and find the

best approach for them. So you draw on all of your kind of experience and resources, find out what resources they have and meet in the middle, I guess, which could be that could be the same as feeling around the people around you, isn't it? And that you have to collaborate. That's really important that working together, whether it's working with, know, seeing yourself working with the people that you're working with or finding out what other music that they're doing and working with them, that's really important as well.

Meeting them at their starting point, really fundamental. I guess, you know, if you're trying to sort of unpick what is a particular approach to pedagogy, I think it's really personal, but I think there's principles that underpin that.

Yusef Sacoor: That's really interesting because the next thing that I was going to ask, and I do think that some of you have probably alluded to this a little already, but what are your principles? What are the things that you think you come into consistently ~ in terms of teaching and learning? And I'll go straight back to you, Jenny,

Jennie Henley: Yeah, so you've got to go in. You've got to know who you're working with. That's really important. There's two things when I'm working with our students at the RNCM, there's two things that I say to them. Firstly, you've got to remember that not everybody wants to follow your path, that's really important. Everybody's pathway is different and everybody's pathway is valid. And if somebody they want to do the same thing week after week after week, if that's what they want to do, and if they're getting enjoyment from that and they feel that they're, you know, expressing themselves in that way, then that's fine. So not everybody wants to follow your own path. And the second thing is it's actually a real responsibility to step out of being a musician and into being a teacher because when you make that transition, you're no longer the most important person in the room. And that's a very, very difficult thing to hear. I'm a musician, I play, I perform, you know, but when I step into that teaching space, I'm in a different kind of mode and they are the most important people in the room. And you'll see that when you're, you know, watching sort of showcase performances or seeing people play. You can tell whether a teacher understands that or not. It shows through, I think. I guess those are the two things. There's lots of other values that I have, but I think those are the two things that are really important.

Yusef Sacoor: Be less Jack Black is what I'm hearing. But yes, Andy, do you have anything to say on this?

Andy Shoniker: Yeah, I would say kind of core principles I have would be I'm pretty demanding of my students, but I'm also incredibly supportive of my students at the same time. I don't kind of sugarcoat if something isn't going well, but I'm also trying to make them encouraged to keep going and like give real feedback so that way they know, you know, why it isn't working or why it is working and leave them laughing. Cause I think

humour is a huge part of, of teaching. I very supportive teachers that would make sure you left feeling better than you walked in. Even if you couldn't perform something to the standards that they were expecting, you still left going, I'm going to get it this week or, whatever it is and come back. Cause I think if you encourage someone, they're going to want to keep going. Once they get discouraged, that's when the real, real, um, challenge to how do they get them back? I guess. And I've seen a lot of, a lot of, a lot of friends of mine, you know, had, you know, didn't necessarily have the right teacher for them at that time in their life. And they, took them a long time to like, kind of sort that out. And then maybe going back to that same teacher 20 years later, different head space, different stage of life might be a better fit. But at a certain point, you know, I've definitely know some people that like, I wish I studied with this person and not that person because it was shiny in the catalog, but it didn't really work for them at, their time period. That makes any sense?

Yusef Sacoor: Absolutely. It's a bit like trying to find a therapist really. It's sort of someone fits at a certain point in your life. How does your app sort of fit with that and the approach of setting, I suppose, why did you make an app and why do think that it supports that kind of learning?

Andy Shoniker: So we'll go way, way, way, way back to the end of the nineties. ~ I was, I was going to music school and we were working out of a really dense rhythmic book called Rhythm and Metered, by this great drum teacher named Gary Chafee, and we had to do playback, all these reading exercises, but none of us knew what these rhythms actually really sounded like. They were all broken quintuplets and septuplets and things with lots of rests and no metronome really played that back. And so was, you kind of was like, guess we're like, think this is what it sounds like, but there was no real way of really knowing, so I was always wishing that something was available to do it.

And this is way before apps even existed. And I kept it on the back burner and then, you know, around the time the iPhone came out, ~ I just happened to know some of that worked in the video game industry and they said, ~ why not make an app? And I was like, what's an app? I had no idea. Like, you mean on your phone? And then that became the, the kind of the starting point. And it was about two years of meetings and whiteboards and writing everything out of how I wanted it to work and the functionality. And the goal behind it is for students and teachers to be able to customise rhythms that they're working on so they have real-time playback so that way there's no guesswork and you can you know manipulate the tempo obviously you can change the note rates and break up the rhythms and time signatures and you know you can get pretty in the weeds but I kind of made it with a goal to really help musicians you know with that uptake and also just a fun way to challenge yourself as a person that still likes to practice a lot. I still practice quite a bit because you know, I'm, I'm, drummers are weird. I'll just put it that way.

Yusef Sacoor: I couldn't possibly comment. No, I was just I was mainly thinking when you talk about rhythms, how how much I could never be a drummer because I could never keep up with all the poly rhythms and various complicated time signatures. Adam, do you do you sort of have any any guiding principles? And I suppose there's maybe an interesting thing here is do you I mean, Jenny and Andy have both alluded to sort of fitting things to where they saw they see gaps in the people that they're working with, or even hypothetical gaps. Where a young person or any person might respond differently to a different kind of teaching. I was wondering aside from that if there's any principles and potentially if there's any principles that ~ I'm not anticipating would go against those principles but are different or ~ a more diverse approach I suppose,

Adam Whittaker: I mean, yeah, I mean, I think for me, respect is something that is very important in any of the kind of interactions that we might have. Because if we're having a 30 minute lesson, an hour lesson, particularly in a one to one space for that person that you're working with, this could be the highlight of their week. They could have had the worst day leading up to it and now, yes, I'm doing my music lesson. This is great. It's their time. They are the centre that we focus on. But as teachers, should be aspirational for our students. And also, we shouldn't make assumptions either about, I suppose, the types of music that they might be interested in just because of where they grow up.

This is something that I find sort of continually fascinating is that when going around to talk to see projects or whatever, sometimes people leading the sessions say, the young people here like this kind of music. And immediately the researcher in me is going, well, how do you know? That's what's going on. It's a well-intentioned and well-meaning statement - we're trying to respond to the kinds of music that the young people may be interested in. But actually, you know, young people have really complex musical tastes and musical interests. And that we make assumptions about that as our peril, actually, that, you know, this is where we can, I think we can be really aspirational for students and also be, I think as a teacher, be humble to be able to say, actually, you know, you appear to be really, really interested in this over here. And I want to signpost you to this other opportunity or to this activity. And that can that can feel like a slightly odd thing to do as a teacher. But actually, you know, if a student has a real musical interest that they want to pursue and we, know, as an educator, you don't feel well equipped to support that, it's more important that you signpost that aspiring young musician to say, well, actually, this is a great opportunity for you. You could try this.

And I think this is where as educators, it's really important for us, particularly if we're working across lots of different kinds of settings, that we have an understanding of the kind of wider networks and wider opportunities that might be available to a young person, because we may be employed to deliver that one 30 minute one-to-one lesson or 20 minute lesson or a small group lesson, whatever it may be. But actually for that young musician, they may be thinking like, right, I absolutely love this thing and I want to

do more. How do I do more? And the student may not actually be able to articulate that. And as teachers, we could try to encourage them to explore lots of different kinds of musical musical opportunities. that's why, you know, I use this word aspirational and I've talked about high quality in that sense, because, you know, we may see ourselves that we are teaching them to play an instrument or to sing, you know, teaching voice, but actually this is part of a sort of whole suite of activities that form the totality of a musical experience and a musical education. We can have a really significant influence on that. some of the teachers that I had when I was learning, had really positive influences on me. And there were also some that had negative influences on my whole perception of musical activity.

But I think this is a really important thing to sort of keep in mind when we think about this as a kind of sort key pedagogical principle is that you know, as a teacher, lot of lot of, you know, a lot of investment is put in us as the expert, but the expert doesn't have to be absolutely everything in all circumstances to everything. Right. You can say, look, this is the expertise that I have. But actually, you know, you're looking to develop this kind of, know, this, this musical interest in this kind of area. Like I can't, that's, that's not in, that's not something that I'm an expert in. So, but I'm going to help you navigate to find a way to help take up that opportunity. And these things are not mutually exclusive. You know, it can be about expanding and widening an educational horizon.

So, so that's why I, you know, I sort of go back to that principle of respect, essentially to treat the student that you're working with, whatever age that may be, they could be six years old, they could be 86 years old, and, you know, be aspirational for them and help them help them to spot those gaps. They're not shortcomings, they're great opportunities for them to develop.

Jennie Henley: I think you're really right, Adam. And do you know what? I often say this, we don't teach music, we teach people.

And that's so important to remember. And, you know, I teach on a Saturday morning at home and I've had a busy week at work and, you know, X, Y and Z. And I think, I'm going to teach on a Saturday morning now. And I am energized by the end of it. I love my teaching, my flute teaching. And I think it's just, it's the interaction with people that is so very, very important. And I think what you say in there, reminds me that actually, and this this is kind of the pedagogical approach that I've built at the RNCM actually through all of our junior programmes is that it isn't just the music. It's not just that musical development, however you define that to be, but it's a combination of that, the social development and those pro-social skills of, you know, knowing how to work with each other and collaborate and be kind and take turns and all of those kinds of things.

But then also the metacognitive aspect your self-regulation, knowing what you can do, what you can't do yet and how you're going to get there. So that whole combination,

those three elements are all all in together. And I think if we just think all I'm doing is teaching the flute and this person's got to get to this grade and this person's got to get to that grade, then you miss out all of that personal development, the emotional development and when I talk about emotional development, I'm not talking about knowing what's happy and what's sad. It's about being in control of your emotions and, you know, young children have to develop that. We have to, you know, regulate that as we get older. When you're working with people with different neurodivergences, people have different connections in different ways. So I think if you're looking for a sort of an explanation of the process, that's what I would say. It's those three things together. And so our teaching activities have got allow development in all three of those areas.

Andy Shoniker: I have a question for the group, guess. How much mental approaches do you think have to go into a good teaching practice? Like the meditative side of things, the getting out of self-doubt, all that stuff that comes along with studying music that gets in people's way a lot of the time.

I was turned onto a book, I'm sure everyone is familiar. they're not, they should definitely go check it out. It's called Effortless Mastery by a pianist and Kenny Werner. And it was almost like the Zen Buddhist guide to being a musician. It really helps you get out of your own negative thoughts, self-doubt. It's kind of a you know, a spiritual guru for any aspiring musician to check out. So I just always think about the mental side of things when I'm, when I'm, you know, approaching teaching and how many students, walk in kicking themselves because they don't sound like their favourite musician. And then you're like, it's not, don't worry about that guy. Worry about you. Like it can only be one Michael Jordan. Don't worry about like just play basketball, that kind of

Jennie Henley: I know, it's really interesting, isn't it? So I think going back to the conversation about context, I think this feeds into here because I think if children and young people have had a particular educational background, they've almost got an inbuilt confidence and an inbuilt ability to sort of move beyond that kind of self, you know, those self thoughts. And when we're working, I I grew up on free school meals, I'm on the social, you know, and that's my background. And going back to thinking about assumptions, Adam, people don't really necessarily equate that with me with what I do and my job and all that kind of thing. so this is very familiar to myself. But when I'm working with young people from particular backgrounds, sometimes you can tell somebody if you keep telling them that they're good, they won't believe you. And you've got to, you know, it's a very kind of difficult thing actually to build somebody's confidence.

So a lot of the work that we do is, it's got to be bespoke, it's got to be right for that person, it's got to be the right opportunity for the right, at the right time, because you can put somebody and you can push somebody into a situation and if they, you know, if they haven't got that self-efficacy, that self-belief, that can be more damaging than you

might think, well, it's a great opportunity, but for them it could be, you know, really destructive in a way. It could send them on a path to giving up and all sorts of things. I think that has to come into everything that we do, just thinking about the person and how they're feeling, how they're feeling about certain things. And of course that changes.

What we do is we do, this is going to sound very psychological, but we do a thing where we measure judgments of learning. So how good somebody thinks they're to be at something. And then we measure their ease of learning. So how good they thought they've done. And then over time, these two things should come together. So that's a way for us to tell whether somebody is kind of either over-emphasising what they're doing or under-emphasising what they're doing. And then we can try and look at what it is and put something in place to help them with that. But I think the, again, it goes beyond this while I'm teaching you how to play a B, A and a G, you've got to understand that there's a process involved and understand what success looks like for you. And I say it at our open days when, you know, people are coming to look at the RNCM, don't look at everybody else around you, just focus on you. But of course, that's not easy for everybody to do that. And you're right, Andy, it's a real sort of delicate process of taking somebody through that.

Yusef Sacoor: This is really interesting. maybe you think, do you think that there is something unique to music and approaches to music that differs from other subjects or is the approach consistent across the board in terms of that?

Jennie Henley: I think the uniqueness of music is that we do it together. I don't know of very many other subjects where you actually create with somebody. And people, you know, they use sport as an analogy, but your sports coach isn't with you on the field. They're not running down the track with you.

Whereas, you know, as an educator, I've worked with music centres and you're conducting and you're with, you're part of the music making. So I think that is a uniqueness of music. I think it's really difficult to say that music is the only subject that does X, Y and Z. But understanding what it is about music that lends itself to, you know, all of the development of these skills. And I think it's because you do it together. You know, the teachers making the music with the student.

Andy Shoniker: Yeah, I mean, I've been doing a lot of improvised shows lately around New York. And so the thing with that is it's real time problem solving. You have no idea what's going to go on. Different people show up with different backgrounds. The other week I was playing with an Indian percussion player I'd never met before. And then all of sudden now we're trading drum stuff because the band leader wanted that to happen. That wasn't rehearsed, but we're like, it's having a conversation and respecting each other, giving the space and the freedom to succeed and to fail, honestly, when you're

doing that kind of on the tightrope kind of thing. And I talked to someone just as music as a whole, in my opinion, there's only two things that like evoke nostalgia in its music and like smell. Like when you're in someone's home and it smells like your grandmother's cooking, or you hear that song that reminds you of when you're 17 and you were at a house party or whatever it was.

But not many other things really kind of hit that part of your brain. So think music is definitely beyond the education side of things. Music as a whole, it's something really, really, really like part of us, I guess.

Adam Whittaker: I agree with all of that. It is this, our lives are incredibly musical. We're surrounded by music all the time. It's there from the earliest stages of our lives and stays with us forever. But there's such diversity across those kinds of experiences. And there is there is an immediacy of communication between two people or between people in a group that means that there can be fantastic interactions straight away. And as educators, if we essentially sort of remove all of that from our practice and say, but actually I'm here to teach you this very, very narrow slice of this kind of approach, actually you're at risk of sort of decontextualising it. So it just becomes a sort of quite abstract area of study. It's not connected to a sort of real experience.

Music is unusual in a way, particularly from a sort of Western European art music perspective. When we talk about music, quite often there's a physical manifestation somewhere. It's a score, there's some notation or something. But actually, when we think about musical experiences and musical interactions. It's so much more than that. you know, the idea of music-ing as a sort of active verb is, you know, is helpful. It's helpful here. And there is this wonderful opportunity as teachers to be in dialogue with our students in a really interesting way. And to also, I suppose, you know, use that as a way to to help think about progress over the longer term as well.

I know I said earlier about being aspirational for our students, but music is not necessarily just an additive thing. It's not like, you can play three notes, and now you can play four notes, therefore you've progressed x number. I work in a conservatoire. I hear students practicing long tones all the time to refine their tone. This is something that is very difficult to sort of quantify. And yet it's something that is sort of searched for. And so, you know, the fact that music has all of these different facets and all of these different kinds of ways that, you you can as a listener, as a player, as a creator, as a pedagogue, you know, work across these leads back to that thing I was saying that as a music educator, you know, we may have a role in teaching a young person or a student to play a musical instrument, but that's not the totality of it. The instrument in some ways is the vehicle to help unlock and open up these wider kind of dialogues and discourses that a person can access through musical engagement.

Lucy Davies: So it's been really interesting to hear from all of you about all of your different kind of approaches and things you think about when you're kind of dealing with pedagogy in or out of the classroom, as it may be. If you were speaking directly to an educator, why do you think they should be actively thinking about how they approach pedagogy in their teaching? And are there any glowing recommends you have for anything they should be reading or any, you know, bits of research they should be looking at perhaps. I'll start with Jenny.

Jennie Henley: Yeah, so it's a good question. I think it's, you know, when you speak to people about their teaching, they automatically tell you about what they're teaching. They automatically tell you about the materials, the methods, etc, etc. And actually, how they're teaching is more important in some ways. And I think to sort of like shift your thinking away from materials to how you're working, you have to think a little bit differently and the types of when I'm, you know, when I'm working with various different teachers, educators, etc. I get them to think about things like the questions that they're asking. That's really important. I get them to sort of think about what kind of thinking are they trying to instill? Are they asking people to remember things? Are they asking people to understand? Are they asking people to analyse or to evaluate? So questioning is a really, really important thing.

And I have this conversation, I had it a couple of weeks ago, actually, with somebody I've been working with, and they thought I was a bit daft to tell them to think about the questions that they're asking. And I gave them some resources, there's all sorts of various different things that you can find on asking good questions. I relate it to Bloom's taxonomy, which is quite an old sort of way of thinking, but all it does is it just makes you think about different types of thinking. And I saw them about a week later and they said, you know what, I was observed. And they said, you ask some really good questions. And I said, I thought you was a bit mad when you were telling me to think about my questioning. But it's really important because that's the difference between you telling somebody something and you asking them to work it out. So I look at questions, I look at things like musical development, what does that mean? And actually the kind of resources that I use, I use these in my students, I look at ‘A Common Approach’ and I've used ‘A Common Approach’ since it came out in 2000/2001. And I still use it now with the students and I get them to look at it and look at the different areas, you know, and think about what does teaching holistic mean? know, are you have, is there some creativity there? Is the, you know, are you getting them to respond? Are you getting them to talk about the music? And I think you can look at that and you can look at you can look at how you're going to teach those activities, thinking about the questions that you're asking, the tasks that you're setting up, how you're kind of thinking over time, what are you trying to achieve? So yeah, I still use that very much now and our students like it because it gives them some concrete ideas on how they expand their teaching out

from Now you're going to do your scales, Now we're going to play the piece from list A, et cetera, et

Andy Shoniker: I'll jump on that from, just from a, you know, a drummer's perspective, cause you know, all I do is, is drumming. don't play any other instruments. I've noticed that drummers specifically, it doesn't matter about the genre that they're trying to play. They all have the same kind of things they want to work on or need to master to get, to be able to create on the instrument which really comes down to a physical side of things. The body can do two things, whether you're a drummer or not. You can do overlapping limb positions where either two or more limbs strike at the same time in different combinations or alternating. That's all your body can do. So if you master all the possibilities of what the body can do just from a, I CPU level, making music afterwards becomes way easier because you've worked through that coordination.

So then you can shift your focus to the art of learning the language. Say you're trying to learn West African music or, you know, bebop or whatever. You've worked through the minutia of, you know, what the body can do. So you're not kicking yourself like, why can't my foot do this or my hand do this or, because you've already worked through the very sterile, you know, stuff. So.

The human body can do 50,256 overlapping limb positions. And I worked through all of them. And it took me six months at 30 minutes a day. And I wrote down in a book so I didn't lose my mind. But I obviously lost my mind somehow in the process of doing that. Or maybe I never had much of a mind to begin with. I don't really know. But so I do think that that's one side of it is getting that mechanical side. And then the other side of it is the opposite. It's. Practice playing and not practice practicing. Cause a lot of people get, you know, they end up playing verbatim stuff that they've learned in a book. But when they go and actually play with people there, now they have to like that other part of the brain has to kick on. And now it's like what you spend all that time in a practice room working on it's lost somewhere in the recess of your brain as opposed to, Now let's go.

Adam Whittaker: And if I can sort of just come in on that, think something that is all too common across education more widely is, mean, Jenny said about searching for a solution, it sometimes calls what works. And just because it works somewhere doesn't mean it works everywhere. And I think this is crucial to remember because there are lots of studies that say, well, this led to this impact. And I'm not doubting that. It probably did lead to that impact in that space. But just because it happened there doesn't mean that it's replicable.

And this is where I think the role of resources becomes really interesting because a resource is there to support pedagogy. It's there to support a teacher's activity. But all too often, we find that actually sometimes the resource is driving the bus that actually the teacher should feel confident to actually, you use a resource. Resources can be

really helpful. But if the resource is essentially putting a kind of a structure or putting structures around something that means that, I can't do that because it's not on the resource. Then actually that's inhibiting what you can do rather than supporting what you can do. So this is something why I think it's important for all educators. This is not just the music. think this is educators widely to continually question why they're doing what they're doing. Because it is very easy when you've been doing things for a while to just do it because that's how you've always done it. And not to reflect on actually why am I doing it like that?

I think some, Jenny mentioned 'A Common Approach' and I recommend a common approach to my students too. But also another, I suppose it's more academic text, is ~ the 'Debates in Music Teaching' book and the 'Learning to Teach Music' book. Now, these are often classroom-focused books, but they find the chapters, even though some of the chapters are focused on very specific contexts, prompt you to think about why something is working in a particular way or why something happens.

And, you know, this is why as educators, we have a lot of latitude to test things out, to try things, ~ to be curious and to be creative in our approaches. But also we're working within a kind of bigger ecosystem. And I think that's why this questioning kind of strategy and thinking about a broad range of resources and perspectives on pedagogy beyond music can be really useful because it helps us to, you know, to, I suppose, focus in on the micro detail. We have methods, we have tools and approaches to master the finest technical details in instrumental specialisms, right? And these are incredibly important, but also we need to be able to zoom out to situate the learning with what's going on elsewhere and to remember that there's often a young person, well there's certainly a person who is learning this and it's being sort of, this is part of their wider learning ecosystem and they are being influenced in lots of different ways and that's why I think I constantly encourage my students to question, why are we doing it like that? How do we know that? What can we, you how could we make that better? It's not to say that, you know, we can't celebrate when something goes really well. Clearly we should. When things work, you know, you go great, I'm going to do that again another time. But just because it worked once doesn't mean that it should necessarily be replicated absolutely everywhere and become a kind of, you know, a standardized approach. And, you know, as musicians, all have, we all have, you know, different kinds of strengths and areas of our work where we want to focus and improve. I'm a pianist that doesn't practice enough, so my left hand technique is pretty sloppy. So this is something that I can say that I would need to work on, but another teacher will have different kinds of thoughts about that.

So I would just encourage all educators to be continually inquisitive about the nature of the teaching that they do. Because I think this helps to inspire a love of learning and make visible processes in learning that otherwise we just we don't we often miss and I

think that's that's such a shame because there's such innovation going on all over the country all over the world in music lessons each and every week there's such innovation that we we often don't pause to reflect on that.

Jennie Henley: I jump in on that? The what works thing is so important, isn't it? It's so important. And I really dislike toolkits that say this is how you should do something. And if you do this, it will work. And with my book, I changed publisher because the original publisher wanted me to give a solution. And I don't want to give a solution. If I give a solution, I'm going to contradict everything that I've said in my book about inclusive pedagogy, which is really interesting. But I think it really takes us back to pedagogy because the definition of pedagogy that I use in my book comes from Nicholas Gage. It was written in the 80s. And he constructs a really elegant mathematical proof to prove that teaching is not a science, it's an art. And the reason that it's an art is because there are so many variables involved. And if you want to prove that something works, you've got to control all of the unknowns. And then you've got to experiment, you know, to show that this definitively you can say that this works. But it's completely impossible in teaching because you've got the variables of the people, you've got the teacher, you've got the student, they might act differently on different times of the day or in different situations, you've got everything that's going on on the outside. And I think that reminds us why it's so impossible for somebody to say, this works. And I think you're right, Adam, think that asking yourself, what am I doing and why am I doing it? And is it working for me? is a different question, isn't it? And I think that that can really help us to move away from those materials and think about the ways that we're working with people.

Yusef Sacoor: I think I somewhat naively came into this conversation expecting sort of strong ideological sort of or ideological ideas approaches to learning and actually it's really refreshing to come away with all three of you sort of singing from the same hymn sheet in that everything is different everywhere we go and the thing to do is to think about it and on that amazing note thank you all very much for your time and thank you to our listeners for listening. We will see you next time.

Yusef Sacoor: you know, I somewhat naively cam to this conversation expecting a strong ideological idea/approach to learning from the 3 of you. And actually it’s really refreshing to come away from this all with all of you singing from the same hymn sheet. Everything is different, everywhere we go. Every young person is different, and every classroom is different. What seems to be important speaking to you all is thinking about the people in front of you and what will work best for them and you specifically in order to get the best for their music education. Thank you so much folks, that’s all we’ve got time for. But if you want to hear more or learn more, please head to musicmark.org.uk/podcast