Electronic Keyboards and Instruments in the Classroom

NAME Conference Report by Andrew Eales

In my presentation ***Electronic Keyboard and Instruments in the Classroom*** at the NAME conference 2002 I raised two similar but separate questions:

- How can electronic keyboards be used within classroom music?
- How can electronic keyboards be taught to classes?

The first of these questions relates particularly to the classroom teacher while the second is concerned more with the peripatetic instrumental specialist.

In seeking to address these questions I examined:

- The relationship between classroom music and specialist instrumental tuition – exploring three models
- Converging curricula – ***A Common Approach 2002*** & ***National Curriculum for Music (1999)*** compared
- Electronic Keyboards in the classroom – creative uses
- Electronic Keyboards in the classroom – Musical Challenges and Solutions
- A model for large group electronic keyboard teaching, and its benefits
- Keyboard Ensembles – KeyBand

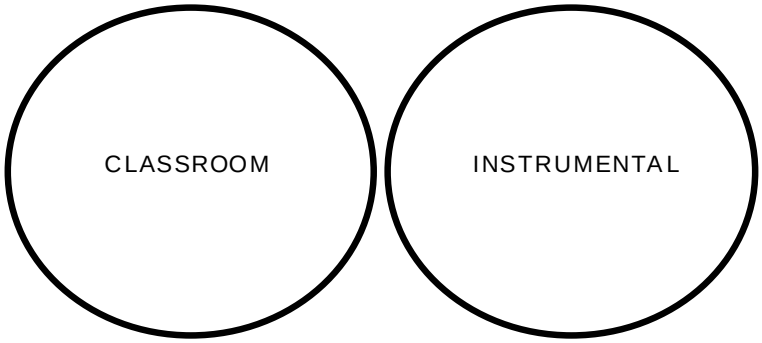
In response to articles written in ***Music Teacher*** magazine in recent months I began by setting out and clarifying the following fundamental points:

- Portable Electronic Keyboards, while undoubtedly a useful resource in the classroom, were not originally or primarily designed specifically for classroom use, and their use cannot address all the many challenges of classroom music
- Portable Electronic Keyboards are not a suitable substitute for the piano, even though they are sometimes (misleadingly) marketed as such; the techniques involved are quite different, as are the musical results
- Portable Electronic Keyboards are however legitimate and popular musical instruments in their own right, which can be taught and played expressively and to a high level of musical accomplishment

The relationship between classroom music and specialist instrumental tuition

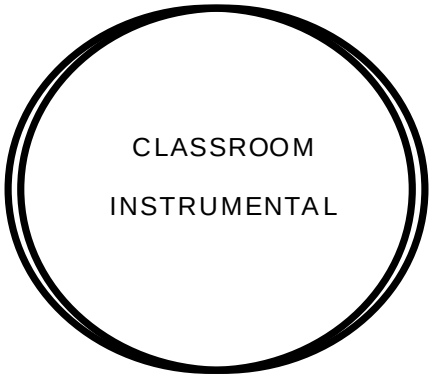
We explored three models dealing with the relationship between classroom and instrumental music. This relationship was considered in the context of the area of work covered by each and the working relationship between the parties involved in the delivery of the teaching.

Model 1.



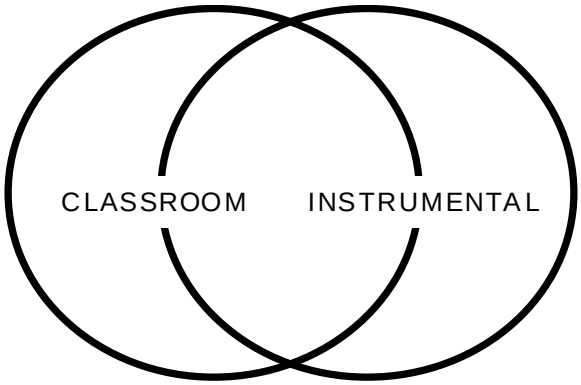
In this model, music teaching in the classroom and through instrumental tuition are quite separate entities, each with its own agenda and approach. Where children receive instrumental tuition outside of their school environment (e.g. with a private teacher of at an external music school or junior conservatoire) it is possible that the only connections made between the two will be those made by the pupil him or herself. While this may not be considered ideal we must recognise that within the present educational system in the UK many of the best young musicians are taught in this way.

Model 2



In this model the overlap between classroom and instrumental teaching and learning is almost complete. Little distinguishes the two. This can happen in cases where (for example with students preparing for GCSE Music) instrumental work is seen as part of the "coursework" required of a student. Instrumental tuition may have been arranged for the students and even paid for in full by the school, but is valued only in so far as it supports the classroom agenda.

Model 3



In this model classroom music and instrumental tuition have clearly separate functions and identities, but common ground is shared between the two. I suggested that pupils benefit when classroom teachers and instrumental tutors liase with each other to maximise the connections between the two while honouring the distinctive features of each. All can benefit from shared expertise.

Accepting this model gives a strong logical foundation to pursuing an approach to music education where classroom music teachers and peripatetic instrumental specialists work alongside each other in delivering musical teaching and learning opportunities to students within schools. The model was presented and accepted as the most desirable of the three.

Converging curricula – *A Common Approach 2002* & *National Curriculum for Music (1999)* compared

The distinctives and the common ground between classroom music and instrumental tuition were further considered by comparing the areas of study covered within the classroom and instrumental curricula. During the workshop, the delegates discussed the following comparative chart in three groups, each tasked to report back on a different aspect of comparison.

- What can classroom music teachers discover from studying the approach to keyboard teaching taken by instrumental experts, and what areas of study are particularly the preserve of the instrumental teacher?

- What can the instrumental specialist learn from studying the work done with keyboards in the classroom?

- How can classroom teachers and instrumental specialists co-operate in seeking to deliver those aspects of the curricula which clearly overlap?

Area of Study	A Common Approach 2002 (the Keyboard Framework)	National Curriculum For Music (2000) *KEY STAGE 3*
	Pupils should be given opportunities to express their musical ideas and feelings, use their creativity, imagination and intuition, develop their skills, knowledge and understanding, and reflect on and evaluate their progress through the interrelated areas of:	***Pupils should be taught how to:***
Listening and Internalising	Listening to music with concentration in and out of lessons, building on their experiences	*4a: listen with discrimination and to internalise and recall sounds*
	Having a clear aural perception of music to be played	
	Recognising and discriminating between musical elements of pulse, pitch, rhythm, tempo, dynamics, texture and tone colour	*4b: identify the expressive use of musical elements, devices, tonalities and structures* *4c: identify the resources, conventions, processes and procedures, including use of ICT, staff notation and other relevant notations, used in selected musical genres, styles and traditions*
	Recognising and conveying structural elements in their playing	
	Making links between sound and symbols when using notation	
Making and Controlling Musical Sounds - Developing Technique	Posture & freedom of movement	*1b: perform with increasing control of instrument-specific techniques*
	Registration	
	Articulation & Fingering	
	Right Hand (techniques)	
	Left Hand (techniques)	
	Co-ordination and Balance	
Creating and Developing Musical Ideas	Improvising expressively	*2a: improvise, exploring and developing musical ideas when performing*
	Applying their instrumental skills in composing	*2b: produce, develop and extend musical ideas, selecting and combining resources within musical structures and given genres, styles and traditions*
	Interpreting music, developing a personal response	*3a: analyse, evaluate and compare pieces of music*
		3b: communicate ideas and feelings about music using expressive language and musical vocabulary to justify their own opinions
		3c: adapt their own musical ideas and refine and improve their own and others' work
Playing Music	Working out how to play music by ear	
	Repeating musical patterns and phrases accurately from memory	
	Playing pieces in a variety of styles with fluency, expression and understanding	*1a: Sing unison and part songs developing vocal techniques and musical expression*
	Memorising pieces that have been learnt	
	Reading and playing music at sight	
Playing Music with Others	Listening, watching, responding and leading	*1c: practise, rehearse and perform with awareness of different parts, the roles and contribution of the different members of the group, and the audience and venue*
	Contributing to collective decisions, including interpretation	
Performing and Communicating	Interpreting and communicating the character of the music	*1b: perform with increasing control of instrument-specific techniques*
	Evaluating their performances and making improvements	*4d: identify the contextual influences that affect the way music is created, performed and heard*

In reporting back the first group drew attention to the technical aspects of making and controlling musical sounds. It was suggested that classroom teachers might make more of an effort apply and teach basic techniques rather than allowing bad habits to develop.

The second group drew attention to the emphasis on analysis and understanding within the National Curriculum, and suggested that in the classroom students should encounter a broader range of music than they are likely to through learning an instrument, because of cultural considerations and breadth of available repertoire.

The third group pointed to the strong similarities between the two curricula, and suggested that joint planning should be encouraged in some areas. Where Music Services, LEA advisors and schools are working in co-operation in the delivery of music teaching, management have a significant role to play in facilitating a more "connected" delivery.

Electronic Keyboards in the classroom – creative uses

The following practical suggestions were offered as ideas that could be used by classroom teachers from Keystages 1 and 2 onwards:

- Use keyboards to recreate sounds (traditional and synthesised); compare with "original" and "acoustic" equivalents where available
- Use keyboard auto-accompaniments to produce contemporary-sounding backing for songs (either playing "live" or pre-recording)
- Develop musical activities involving rhythm and pulse supported by the keyboard's auto-accompaniment
- Use keyboard auto-accompaniments to expose pupils to a wide variety of contemporary musical styles from around the world
- Help pupils understand more about music through keyboard activities which access the visual relationship between the notes and the stave
- Use keyboards to help pupils develop an aural awareness and understanding of chords and basic harmony
- Use keyboards to demonstrate musical sound when discussing, attack and decay, timbre, tone-quality, articulation, duration, etc
- Keyboards enable pupils of a wide ability span to compose to a standard which would have been thought unachievable prior to their introduction
- Use the record function (if there is one) so that pupils can listen back to compositions and performances instantly for appraisal (in conjunction with the use of ICT specified in the National Curriculum)
- Introduce the basics of playing the keyboard properly (with correct hand positions, fingering, etc). This particularly motivates pupils who have little-used keyboards at home, and stimulates them into extending their classroom experience into their own time.

To these, the following ideas could be used from Keystage 3 and at GCSE level:

- Keyboards allow pupils to access music in (to them) an exciting and stimulating way, bringing music into a current social and cultural context.

- Keyboards can be used (including auto-accompaniments using single-finger or full “fingered” chords) both for individual performance and within ensembles

- Keyboards help pupils to develop their understanding of harmony and feel for idiomatic chord progressions, as well as the relationship between melody and harmony notes, dissonance and resolution

- Keyboards remain invaluable for composing and recording work

- Using MIDI interfacing pupils can explore music technology using sequencer equipment and computer applications such as Cubasis, Logic and Sibelius, enhancing the potential for composition work and its’ presentation

- Pupils can record simple chord sequences and then use them as the rhythmic and harmonic foundation for individual and/or group improvisation

Delegates again formed discussion groups to consider how these ideas might be adapted and integrated into an holistic approach to teaching and learning

Electronic Keyboards in the classroom – Musical Challenges and Solutions

Using portable electronic keyboards in the classroom can present a number of challenges, a few of which were specifically addressed:

CHALLENGE	SOLUTION
Pupils pay little or no attention to instrument-specific technique, specifically correct hand and wrist positions	Ensure that you have tables/chairs at a suitable height, as a correct sitting position rectifies most other aspects of the player's physical engagement with the instrument. Schools are usually well aware of the need for suitable furniture and fittings in their ICT suites; music departments may need to raise awareness and point out that similar considerations apply where electronic keyboards are to be used in the classroom
Pupils are easily distracted when working at keyboards	Don't overuse headphones – most pupils dislike them and work better in the classroom if they are engaged in group activities.
Pupils can't find the notes on the keyboard	Don't use stickers or marker pens to write letter names on the keys – this prevents the students from effectively learning their way. It is a simple matter to teach pupils to recognise the pattern of keys, and wall charts can also be a useful aid
Pupils attempt to read stave notation but struggle to do so	Don't allow students to write letter names over the notation, or unnecessary fingering – these distract the visual focus away from the notation itself, and learning is postponed.
Electronic Keyboards produce a sound quality that is generally neither musical nor inspiring	Only cheap ones do; the best models produce a stunning range of sounds which can be controlled using a wide range of instrumental techniques and on-board music technology. Ensure that you purchase equipment that is suitable for encouraging high standards of musical attainment.
Some pupils hate keyboards	So do some adults! Provide opportunities for a wide range of musical instruments to be used in the classroom, not just keyboards.

A model for large group electronic keyboard teaching, and its benefits

Turning attention to the peripatetic keyboard teacher, I used the example we have developed within Milton Keynes Music Service as one model for larger group keyboard teaching that can be adopted.

Beginners and intermediate players who attend lessons at our Saturday Music Centre learn in large groups of about 20 pupils. Sessions last for a full hour, and are taught by two adult teachers supported by two of our more senior students, who act as helpers/apprentices.

The sessions always begin with corporate activities for the whole group, which include note-finding, pitch flash card recognition games, clapping, playing and improvising using rhythm flash cards, finding registrations, playing by ear, and so on. Later the pupils divide into smaller groups to work on pieces suitable for their current level of attainment. These are usually played individually and as a group, often including improvisation. At the end of the hour, the smaller groups perform together and to each other.

The particular benefits of large-group tuition for the electronic keyboard include:

- Generating shared enthusiasm with the atmosphere of a "club" setting
- Shared experiences through which students help each other to generate a faster learning momentum
- A longer lesson length that remains affordable to all, allowing for a wider range of activities and learning strategies to be introduced
- Wider access to electronic keyboard tuition
- Enhanced opportunities for performing in public concerts
- A closer link between learning experiences in the classroom and through specialist instrumental tuition

The more advanced players join in our keyboard ensemble programme, "KeyBand". The KeyBands each have 8 members who play in four parts, two to each part. Short pieces scored in four parts (two to a part) form the basis for extended group improvisation following the format of a jazz ensemble. The "leader" of the group controls the auto-accompaniment.

The workshop concluded with a sequenced demonstration of the KeyBand piece ***"Electro Energy",*** copies of which were distributed to delegates. The piece, together with a detailed unit of work describing the KeyBand approach, can be found in the electronic keyboard edition of ***A Common Approach 2002***.