

Can students tell if they have musical ability?

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Introduction

“Human abilities, particularly exceptional ones, are vital resources for the well-being of all cultures.”

(Howe, 1990:1)

To date, very little New Zealand research has attempted to identify musically gifted students, or the educational needs of the musically gifted child. This is a concern to those educators wishing to nurture and develop giftedness in music. The present study sought to address this concern. In particular, it explored how music students evaluate their musical ability, and on what value-basis they assess their giftedness. For example:

- (i) Do they measure themselves against a performance standard dictated by peer group, parents or media image?
 - (ii) Do they measure themselves against their innate musicality in some way?
 - (iii) Do they measure themselves on the western tradition of ability to read music?
- The study also investigated whether the students' self-concepts reflected a cultural bias, and influenced their attitudes and motivation to learning and achieving in music.

Method

Data were collected from 18 Form 4 students (mainly 14-year-olds) who were taking Option Music course in a male, single sex secondary school. This school was chosen because the students represented a mix of ethnic backgrounds. Of the eighteen students, nine were European New Zealanders, four were Maori New Zealanders, three were Pacific Islanders, and two were Indians. All students were either learning an instrument or taking vocal lessons as part of their music programme. During two separate one-hour periods, the students (i) filled in a questionnaire concerning self-perception of musical ability, and (ii) were administered the standardised Bentley Music Test which identifies and measures their musical ability through aural processes.

Results and Discussions

The Maori, Pacific Island and Indian students comprised the majority of students who scored very high or high on the innate musical ability test, which suggests

that these students operate well within an aural tradition. This concurs with ethnomusicological findings.

Only a small proportion of the students' self-perceptions matched their innate ability scores. Most of these perceptions were by Maori and Polynesian students, which suggests that they may be more able than European New Zealanders to perceive their musical ability accurately. Overall, however, the results showed that students rate their competence below their actual ability. It is particularly significant that none of the students who scored very high on the Bentley test perceived their ability accurately.

Another interesting finding was that many of the students did not rate aural skills, such as playing by ear, to be of particular importance when rating musical competence. Rather they considered musical performance to be the most important criteria. Performance, of course, is often used as a key measurement tool because it is visible, so perhaps the students accepted without question this 'message' from their social environment. What is clear in the study is that musical self-perception ratings based on performance are not necessarily an accurate measure of finite musical talent and potential.

The above issues, and others raised by the study, have implications for curriculum developers. The move to include performance in the current prescription is obviously sound, judging by what appears to be the most relevant goal for the musical youth sub-culture of today. However, rather than having some students turned off by difficulties with traditional notational methods, there is perhaps good reason to broaden the syllabus to include retrieval skills most appropriate to the genre the students are performing in. This would mean traditional notation for Western composition retrieval, but aural/technological retrieval and manipulation for the contemporary commercial scene.

These implications would mean reeducating those music educators who presently can think only within the confines of the dominant culture's western notation system. Aural retrieval methods need valuing in their own right. Long term, this could have a significant impact on music education at the secondary level. It could also mean that a wider group of versatile musicians with skills adaptable to the musical world of today's adolescents may be eligible to train for specialist music teaching.

Reference

Howe, M.J.A. (1990) *The origins of exceptional abilities*. Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell.