

MUSIC COMPOSITION AND EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE

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This article is part-manifesto, part-reflection on my experiences of teaching composition in higher education (HE) in the UK to undergraduates. I am interested in how composers learn in HE, not because I believe it is the only time or place that they may learn to compose, but because this is where I encounter them. What I describe in this article are ideas that I hope can and will influence my educational approach now and in the future, but may not have yet reached their practical implication. Indeed, in my more recent career I have found myself focusing more on critical topics than composition. This is both an effect of my current employment and perhaps a latent result of some of the dissatisfaction that I express in this article. Nevertheless, I hope that these ideas have the potential to influence the widening of the compositional situations in which students participate and the approaches to compositional education that those working in HE feel empowered to draw upon.

Throughout this article, I refer to an unspoken and often implicit discourse around composition in HE: not all composers who work in this context think or believe these things, but these ideas and their implications are frequently embedded in the structures that are inherited in this context and are sometimes explicitly promoted, although rarely in writing. This discourse situates knowledge in composition within a relatively small canon of examples that are linked to a small number of primarily Western art musical traditions; it assumes that a master-apprentice model is the best way for students to learn and achieve competence in this canon of examples; and also that this should be the precursor to the development of their own, independent compositional voice, which can only proceed from this learning. For example, Schoenberg writes that ‘no beginner is capable of envisaging a composition in its entirety; hence he must proceed gradually, from the simpler to the more complex’,¹ and, in the proposal to his *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, ‘I have realized that the greatest difficulty for the students is to find out how they could compose without being inspired. The answer is: it is impossible.’² Schoenberg argues that his technical method enables students to compose out of necessity—which is a requirement of their university learning—rather than

¹ Arnold Schoenberg, *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, ed. by Gerald Strang and Leonard Stein (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 2.

² *Ibid.*, p. 215.

out of creativity. Aspects of these assumptions, underpinning the method Schoenberg proposed and those like it, persist in many compositional educational situations today. Below I outline how this is possible even where an expanded approach to the pedagogy of composition is offered.

In a presentation on ‘Teaching the Unteachable’, the North Macedonian dramatist and screenwriter Goran Stefanovski claims that ‘only the impossible is worth teaching.’³ This could be taken as a direct challenge to Schoenberg’s statement; rather than consider technique as the counterpoint to inspiration, Stefanovski asks how students might achieve the impossible. He also explains the mechanism by which this can be achieved: ‘if politics is the art of the possible, then surely art is the politics of the impossible.’⁴ Stefanovski contrasts scriptwriting with musical composition as a discipline that does not have a canon of technical exercises. Here I question whether composition could be more like scriptwriting than expected, if composition education could function without such a canon. I frame this as a question of epistemic justice, one that considers the composers themselves as individuals prior to the technical exercises that they may undertake. I describe why I believe that epistemic justice is a concept worthy of consideration in creative education in composition, alongside the ways that current models of composition pedagogy might unintentionally cause students to experience epistemic injustice within their education, ending with some suggestions about what a model of hermeneutic epistemic justice might look like as a pedagogic model. I consider how the impossible might be achieved within a compositional educational context and how teachable ‘craft’ may be ‘pushed beyond its unteachable limits’.⁵

Epistemic justice

Epistemic justice is a concept from ethical philosophy that has most commonly been associated with the understanding of witness testimony, both in a legal context and within social life. Miranda Fricker makes the distinction between ‘testimonial injustice’ and ‘hermeneutic injustice’, the latter occurring prior to the former, ‘when a gap in collective interpretative resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making

³ Goran Stefanovski, ‘Teaching the Unteachable’, paper delivered at *A Virtuous Circle?*, Centre for Practice-Based Research in the Arts (Canterbury Christ Church University, 30 June 2015) <<https://youtu.be/xdX9YLBjy-E>> (last accessed: 13 January 2022).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *ibid.*

sense of their social experiences.’⁶ Fricker claims her approach asks ‘first-order ethical questions in the context of socially-situated accounts of our epistemic practices’;⁷ she writes that, ‘the only way to fully understand the normative demands made on us in epistemic life is by changing the philosophical gaze so that we see through to the negative space that is epistemic injustice’.⁸

Kristie Dotson makes a further distinction that she terms ‘contributory injustice’. She claims that this

is caused by an epistemic agent’s situated ignorance, in the form of wilful hermeneutical ignorance, in maintaining and utilizing structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources that result in epistemic harm to the epistemic agency of a knower.⁹

Morton Fibieger Byskov further explains five conditions that contribute to the occurrence of epistemic injustice: the disadvantage condition, the prejudice condition, the stakeholder condition, the epistemic condition, and the social justice condition.¹⁰ These conditions are partial—meaning that they need to be met in some combination for epistemic injustice to be present—and might also be hierarchical: that is, where some other power conditions are met for an individual, one can observe that they are protected from the effects of epistemic injustice by that power or privilege. Byskov writes that

the concept of epistemic injustice has the potential to elucidate and clarify several aspects of socioeconomic injustice and is thus an important concept not just for ethical and moral theory but also for political theory since it concerns the exercise of power, the design of public institutions, such as schools, universities, courts, healthcare, as well as public discourse,¹¹

thus highlighting this as a concept that those working in education ought to take note of.

⁶ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

⁹ Kirstie Dotson, ‘A Cautionary Tale: On Limiting Epistemic Oppression’, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2012), p. 31.

¹⁰ Morton Fibieger Byskov, ‘What Makes Epistemic Injustice an “Injustice”?’’, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol. 52 (2021), p. 118.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

It is possible to see how some number of Byskov's conditions could be met in educational situations, resulting in epistemic injustice for students. What is helpful about the articulation of these conditions is that although prejudice might be one condition for epistemic injustice, it is not the only condition and is not essential for a situation to lead to epistemic injustice. This clearly highlights that epistemic injustice is possible even in situations where there have been attempts to eliminate prejudice, which might include education. Fricker writes that 'general loss in epistemic confidence might result in an ongoing failure to gain knowledge',¹² implying that the effects of the experience of epistemic injustice could endure far beyond the moment of its experience, affecting future learning as well as the experience that it interrupts. She describes a 'situated hermeneutical inequality': this occurs when, 'the social situation is such that a collective hermeneutical gap prevents [the subject] from making sense of an experience which it is strongly in their interests to render intelligible',¹³ resulting in 'exclusion from the pooling of knowledge'.¹⁴

In music composition epistemic injustice may occur where a student's prior and current musical knowledge and experiences are situated outside of the institutionally described discipline of 'composition'; their creative acts and articulations are devalued if they do not in some way conform to the institution's or teacher's frameworks and epistemic models of music composition. This has the potential to be far-reaching and also to include situations and activities where teachers may believe that learning activities have been designed to include and facilitate student choice. This is important to consider if tertiary education in music composition is to be addressed not only as a part of the work of gaining qualifications but as an ongoing part of students' social lives and of their lives in music beyond the university and beyond their period of study.

In particular, I believe in music composition we should be concerned about epistemic injustice as something that denies students' lived experiences, invalidates their (autodidactic) self-expression, and underpins what they may come to see as narrow parameters in the definition of creativity. This may be part of what could be described as a 'hidden

¹² Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, p. 49.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 162–36.

curriculum’,¹⁵ described by Giroux and Penna as ‘unstated norms, values and beliefs transmitted to students’.¹⁶ Aside from a lack of recognition for students’ prior experiences, this may mean maintaining a canonic attitude even around an expanded palette of examples—one that, for example, only represents the ‘right’ women and/or non-western composers—and a projection of a narrow definition of ‘composition’ that might be interpreted as elitism. By ‘elitism’ here, I do not imply that certain forms of composition are already elite and should be avoided, but rather consider how they are presented in the curriculum. For example, it could be argued that the opportunity to compose for string quartet is one that is not readily available to all composers and so its inclusion in the HE curriculum provides students with a set of learning circumstances that makes their degree study of value. On the other hand, students might believe that composing for such an ensemble is considered by their teachers to be a definition of compositional success or achievement and its requirement in the curriculum might therefore unintentionally devalue students’ post-HE experiences and achievements if they fail to meet this bar, even if this has nothing to do with the musical situations in which they find themselves. So I don’t argue against composing for string quartet; instead I argue for allowing students to determine the meaning and value of the string quartet for their own practice, that composition education should support this as a primary goal and that rejection should be recognised as an outcome. If learning opportunities for students are not to be lost or invalidated when they don’t fit into assumed frameworks, educators must ask what it currently means to compose, what it should mean, and why it matters at all what the definition of ‘composition’ is.

Models of teaching composition

The majority of people teaching composition in higher education in the UK are familiar with the apprentice model of composition teaching, probably because it is one of the main ways that they themselves have learned. Many students of composition have appreciated working closely with a particular teacher at a particular time, even if they also had negative experiences of such lessons. This was my experience of compositional education, and it was one that—at the time—I expressly valued. I was interested in learning about the canon of contemporary Western art music that formed the basis of the teaching I received and I

¹⁵ See Tim Hinchcliffe (ed.), *The Hidden Curriculum in Higher Education* (Advance HE, 2020) <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/hidden-curriculum-higher-education> (Last accessed: 13 January 2022).

¹⁶ Henry A. Giroux and Anthony N. Penna, ‘Social Education in the Classroom: The Dynamics of the Hidden Curriculum’, *Theory and Research in Social Education*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1979), p. 22.

perceived that my compositional choices were expressly promoted and valued within those pedagogical relationships. Both of these experiences—that of learning something about which I felt passionate and that of being supported in my compositional aims and goals—are ones that I believe should be accessible to all students of composition, regardless of their backgrounds, interests, or current artistic practice. While this is certainly possible in the master-apprentice model, as was my experience, it is not clear that this is the current reality for all students, and this observation has led to many recent changes in the delivery of composition education.

Changes to this teaching practice in universities in recent years have broadly taken two forms: ‘decanonisation’, which might be better understood as widening the compositional canon; and workshop-based learning. Decanonisation refers to reducing the reliance in the curriculum on a small number of examples of primarily white, male, figures in music history. This may also involve a focus away from Western art musics or from a core group of examples. The positive aspects of this practice are in providing students with more models from which to work and potentially acknowledging a wider variety of their musical interests and wider musical practices as starting points worthy of study. The limitations in this practice have been that examples from the original canon are retained, often remaining central, or that this widening pool of examples is limited to demonstrating the concepts that were present in the original canon: whether they learn it from Schoenberg, Webern or Lutyens, students still all learn twelve-tone technique.

This is different from what, for example, Juliet Hess, proposes as a decolonised or ‘rhizomatic’ music curriculum, in which, ‘we can [...] explore Western music as simply *one* music among many and its use of notation and Western constructs such as dynamics and tempi as *one* way of learning music’.¹⁷ I note this particularly since in some areas of the UK higher education music curriculum the term ‘decolonisation’ is being used to signify this expanded canonic practice as opposed to a more radical challenge to the values underpinning the curriculum. Following Tuck and Yang’s description of decolonisation as ‘a distinct project from other civil and human rights-based social justice projects’,¹⁸ I prefer the term

¹⁷ Juliet Hess, ‘Decolonizing music education: Moving beyond tokenism’, *International Journal of Music Education*, vol. 33, no. 3, (2015), p. 344.

¹⁸ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, ‘Decolonisation is Not a Metaphor’, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2012), p. 2.

‘decanonisation’, since an expanded pool of examples does not yet meet the need to examine a decolonised curriculum's ideological relationship with the institution.

On the other hand, workshop-based experiential and embodied learning practices have the potential to centre students’ lived experiences to a greater extent, depending on their focus. These may be student-centred, in the sense that the students bring the materials, and are often described as offering transferable and employability skills since students also engage in communication and collaboration through workshops and often respond to a brief. There are broadly two types of workshops: students may engage with peers to co-create work, or they may work with professionals who—to some extent—represent the capabilities of instrumental or other types of practice in their area. The value of this second model, as well as its employment of soft/transferable skills, is often located in the possibility for students to gain high-quality recordings of their work, network with music professionals and learn from a wider variety of contemporary musicians. ‘Decanonisation’ might widen the pool of examples in the curriculum and workshop-based learning serves to widen the pool of ‘masters’ from whom student-apprentices learn. They may gain feedback and validation from musicians whose praise they aspire to but, depending on the format, they may also still experience the centring of particular canonic practices already mentioned. This form of learning is, for the student, dependent on the success of and/or perceived approval within the one-to-one relationship with a teacher, even where there is some choice within study and even where this one-to-one relationship becomes one-to-many over a period of study, because of the encounter with other instructors through workshops or other learning practices.

It is also worth stating that the majority of these observations come from practices of teaching acoustic instrumental or chamber music, which is most commonly called ‘composition’ in UK higher education. Historically, ‘Composition’ has seen students’ competence progress from solo works, to small ensembles, to their eventual aspiration to scoring for orchestra or—more recently—the addition of electronics. This definition is another area in which students experience difference within musical practice. Examples could be cited where students may follow a different learning path, but these examples usually come with a qualifier. For example: ‘electroacoustic composition’ (or ‘sound art’), ‘commercial composition’, ‘media/film composition’, or ‘songwriting’, are all module titles on offer at UK universities at this time. However, it is almost exclusively students whose compositional practice falls

within western art and experimental music who find their work does not require a qualifier to be recognised as ‘composition’. This may well be an unintended hierarchy but it is ever-present. Pragmatic solutions to this problem are to offer options under the title of ‘composition’ or to offer undergraduate students the option of a practice-based dissertation in which ‘composition’ is possible, but not defined. These solutions variously give students opportunities to understand their compositional activities as craft, research, and/or creative practice, and to choose their own focus proactively. However, this model may still require students to subscribe to labels and implicit hierarchies and assumptions through the modular system: fluidity even across these many approaches does not yet seem to have a clear expression in a majority of cases.

Perhaps the term ‘composition’ itself, as a title for educational activities, should be questioned. Many undergraduate students, on arrival at university, report dissatisfaction with the experiences described as composition at A Level, finding them prescriptive, limited, removed from their own musical experiences, and assessed by an opaque set of criteria that are fundamentally uncreative. These students have already concluded that they are ‘not able’ to compose, or that ‘composition’ is an activity that will exclude them. These beliefs often persist and many students imagine that in ‘composition’ they will be judged against an inaccessible set of aesthetic criteria and the stylistic preferences of their teacher, even when those staff present them with evidence to the contrary. On many occasions, students describe ‘composition’ as a musical practice that is elite and out of their reach.

If it is difficult to control for the previous educational experiences of students on arrival at university, one might consider it possible to recognise when and where composition occurs in so-called ‘real life’—in the creative futures and lives in music that students may take up beyond their studies—and thus engage students as collaborators in the work of teaching composition. I don’t necessarily mean engaging a model of ‘employability’ but rather to ask the question: ‘who composes?’ If educational practices only model composition in some of its most public-facing forms (music for concert halls and films, for example), the curriculum risks overlooking the way in which composition is a part of the musical lives of many musicians. Instrumental teachers compose studies for their pupils, liturgical musicians write music for the services they conduct and ensembles they direct, community musicians work with groups to create and co-create original music, sound designers often go unrecognised in their musical contributions in the theatre. These musicians are engaged in skills that could be

described as ‘compositional’, alongside other musical practices that they might name for themselves prior to that of composing: conducting, orchestration, arranging, re-working, facilitating. To allow for this type of development teachers of composition may need to recognise that, although they have subject expertise in music, they also need and should have a subject expertise in education that allows them to scaffold and facilitate the approaches that students take towards success in their chosen areas of creative practice and their development within creative practices that they identify as relevant to them. I welcome the increasing professionalisation of the work of university lecturers—including in composition—since it supports and underscores our work as teachers, rather than seeing our positions as part of the recognition of our success as composers.

Research-led teaching is often an implicit or explicit requirement of university compositional education in the UK and it is reasonable to ask how it is possible to engage in research-led teaching in areas of practice in which one has neither research knowledge nor lived experience. Initially it may seem impossible to uphold this ideal and yet also facilitate any and all student choice, that the two may be mutually exclusive. In addressing this I turn to a model of research-led teaching described by Barbara Zamorski¹⁹ in which students treat research as a source of knowledge, explore the complex and provisional relationships between research and knowledge, develop research skills, learn about research methods, and engage in research as an integral part of their learning.²⁰ These phases could be read as a model for progression or a ladder for students to climb, but they need not be thought of as linear. The concept of practice research in UK universities often deals with process over product and, therefore, does not necessarily situate knowledge in musical outcomes. It should be possible for students to express their own knowledge and processes in the same way, if they wish to do so. Many teachers of composition are able to value writing about such processes in combination with creative acts, to value creative work as its own expression and to acknowledge that reflective writing is a skill and can be a valuable part of the creative process, yet they also believe that assessed writing about individual works is the only way for students to achieve such reflection.

¹⁹ Barbara Zamorski, ‘Research-led Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: A Case’, *Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, vol.7, no.4 (2002), pp. 411–27.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 422–23.

Music itself has structure, argument, concept, presentation, and many of the qualities that are described in learning outcomes. Students are often encouraged to express their own compositional narrative, but a discrete modular approach, where writing and portfolios are demonstrated at regular intervals, may not allow for their individual expressions of this. For example, the disaggregation of reflection from single works or specific moments in time, space to re-visit and revise past practices, and opportunities to consider and express connections between work created and assessed for different module titles and in different ways, without risking the claim of ‘duplication’, might all expand and support the potential variety of such expressions, and communicate their validity. The theatre scholar Kene Igweonu distinguishes between ‘writing up’, as a method of the presentation of ideas and work that are complete, and ‘writing out’ as a practice that aids understanding;²¹ he further explains how ‘writing’ need not mean only text on paper. Identifying opportunities for students to use (and be assessed on) such an understanding of their own work and process might help a composition-pedagogical method to move beyond the demonstration of how pieces of music fulfil the learning outcomes presented by composition teachers, as in Schoenberg’s method. It may be that many teachers of composition believe that this is already possible within their current models, but is this explicitly articulated to their students in these terms?

Propositions Towards Radical Solutions

I have outlined how some current models of the delivery of undergraduate composition education maintain the possibility for students to experience epistemic injustice in spite of an attempt to widen the teaching of composition beyond traditional models. Here I consider what a compositional pedagogy of hermeneutic epistemic justice might look like. I do not think I have the answer to this question, nor that there could be a single answer. Rather I believe that a satisfactory answer will be a process that involves not changes to, or a widening of, the current dominant methods of composition pedagogy within UK universities but rather a radical re-imagining. At the heart of this will be an understanding of how such pedagogy could be decolonial in both its examples and its approaches, and how this might go hand-in-hand with moving towards an understanding of composition that is centred on the lived experiences of students as individuals and not only those of—or adjacent to—the

²¹ Kene Igweonu, Brian Fagence, Melanie Petch and Gareth J Davies, ‘Revealing the Elusive Obvious: Making sense of creative practice through reflection and writing out’, *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2011), p. 235.

careers of teachers of composition or capitalist conceptions of music-making. While many forms of Western art music might be considered anti-capitalist in the sense that they don't make any money, all these forms of practice still revolve around their own system of capital, even where that is, to an extent, cultural.

Two propositions for a creative work that sits outside of capitalism also formulate ideas of the avant-garde in different ways. Nicholas Bourriaud's conception of the 'exform' is one that, through Althusser, describes art practice that in some ways engages with 'waste', or, 'anything that is not at work in capitalism'.²² I have previously used this concept to explore what a contemporary idea of the avant-garde could or might be.²³ As a pedagogic practice, this might imply finding ways to enable students to work with the 'at hand' and to prioritise their personal realisation of their ideas over doing so with the tools that their teachers and institutions are able to hand them. It might require a culture of the creation of work that is permitted to fail on its own terms rather than those of the institution.

A contrasting example is articulated by Caroline Kennedy in her 2017 PhD thesis *Towards Models and Strategies for Post-Capitalist Art Making*.²⁴ She writes that

[t]he critique of the idea of an avant-garde world of art, or of a 'frontier' in art, strikes at the heart of much of our imagining about what contemporary art is, and yet our addiction to newness and material improvement is deeply problematic in many ways.²⁵

For Kennedy,

a post-capitalist methodology of art making sits within [the] broader arena of enquiry into the efficacy of art as a tool by which to gain political purchase or with which to express political positions – and it sits within an emerging world where politics is expressed more intimately in potential post-capitalist arenas, as relationship.²⁶

²² Nicholas Bourriaud, *The Exform*, trans. by Erik Butler, Verso Futures (London: Verso, 2016), p. 9.

²³ Lauren Redhead, 'The Avant Garde as Exform', *TEMPO*, vol.72, no.286 (September 2018), pp. 7–16.

²⁴ Caroline Frances Kennedy, *Towards Models and Strategies of Post-Capitalist Art Making* (unpublished PhD thesis, Monash University, 2017).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

This position also suggests moving beyond what students make, and what they make it with, towards enabling them to use their creative practices and processes to achieve aims that may be both creative and social, linked to their learning and development but also to their lives within and beyond the university. It echoes Boris Groys who describes both modernist and postmodernist approaches to art practice as (suspiciously) utopian in the ways that they prioritise newness, or novelty, in different forms, even where this novelty is the claim of the ‘radical renunciation of the new’.²⁷ Both Bourraïud’s and Kennedy’s positions move closer to that of Stefanovski’s articulation of art as ‘the politics of the impossible’.

More broadly, these approaches suggest centring tacit knowledge over propositional knowledge and reproducing spaces and places for students to create as opposed to a repertoire of learning experiences or teaching moments. Corey Mwamba has similarly written about re-defining composition in embodied ways that stem from the learner and not the teacher, drawing on his own experience of musical practice:

The vibraphone is my mouth. It has its shape, it has its sounds. Some heard by you, some only by me and it. It and I are the vibraphone. We are organs that form the mouth. I cannot say what we are the mouth *of*: I can only say that it is my mouth and I am part of the mouth. Maybe my body is made of other bodies.²⁸

In accessing and searching for such insight about personal practice students may wish to see themselves reflected in their teachers, but also may become the teachers of each other, providing multiple models of music and creativity that are themselves also multiplicities. To allow this to happen in university learning spaces will require the redefinition of what is ‘learned’ and how it is assessed, what it really means to compose or to create, and how and why this is considered a valuable part of musical life. It requires the decentring of teachers, to make space for students’ knowledge and lived experiences. For Fricker, this is a ‘hybrid ethical-intellectual virtue’,²⁹ one that might concurrently achieve educational goals as well as those of social justice.

²⁷ Boris Groys, *On the New* (London, Verso, 2014), pp. 1–3.

²⁸ Corey Mwamba, ‘The Second Masking’, *Jazz Research Journal*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2018), p. 238.

²⁹ Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, p. 176.

In place of a conclusion I offer a brief list of the features of a pedagogy of hermeneutic epistemic justice for students. Such a pedagogy:

- begins from and is situated within students' lived experiences;
- values musicking as a primary part of creating;
- moves from 'workshops' of music by single authors to collaborating and co-creating;
- enables students to work in partnership with peers and tutors to become experts in their own practice;
- engages performance as a co-creative act rather than one of realisation;
- prioritises peer support and the radical acceptance and support of the self and others within and beyond creative work;
- identifies a destination rather than a dimension of work as a(n interim) goal.