



# Chances and Choices

*Exploring the Impact  
of Music Education*

Stephanie Pitts

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OF MUSIC EDUCATION

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## ABOUT THE COMPANION WEBSITE

<http://www.oup.com/us/chancesandchoices>

The companion website for *Chances and Choices* features detailed analysis of the musical life histories in this book, including the coding system that was used to generate the quantitative aspects of the analysis and so to guide the focus of the qualitative discussion. Profiles of all the life history respondents are also provided, with a table of their quoted materials that helps to connect comments from across the book's chapters, and to link these with the formative musical experiences and current activity of the respondents. The summary of initial findings (referred to in Chapter 1) that was sent to participants in the first phase of research is also available, offering both a brief view of the research and an illustration of the consultation with respondents that formed part of the project.

Readers are also invited to contribute their own musical life histories through an online forum hosted at the University of Sheffield, which is intended to form the next phase of this research. Perspectives from all backgrounds—musical, cultural, and geographical—are warmly welcomed, and it is hoped that this online collection of life histories will become a resource for all researchers and practitioners with an interest in the impact of music education.

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## Chances and Choices



# 1 | Investigating the Impact of Music Education

## 1.1 Whose Story? Defining and Interpreting Musical Life Histories

GETTING AT THE “TRUTH” of what happens during a school day is no easy task. Parents ask their children what they have done at school and are told “nothing much” or “it was fine”. Quality assurance inspectors compile statistics on pupil attendance and attainment and make observations of teachers, whose stress at the inspection process causes them to behave unnaturally. Researchers run focus groups, distribute questionnaires, interview students and teachers, but still gain only an outsider’s perspective on the multiple experiences of education in any classroom. The students themselves, meanwhile, might perceive the intentions and even the content of a lesson quite differently from their teacher, relating their school experience to their wider social world in individual and unpredictable ways. The experiences and effects of learning in school are understood differently by all involved and are recalled through many layers of interpretation in later years.

Harder still, then, is to understand the impact of what happened during those school days upon later life experience, attitudes, and ambitions. The influences of childhood are closely intertwined, such that the attitudes of an encouraging (or discouraging) teacher are mediated by the response (or lack of) in the home to news of successes (or disappointments) in school. Parental experiences of education and their life ambitions and social values—as well as their genetic material—shape children’s expectations of school and

teachers, heightening or limiting a child's responsiveness to the stimuli that are deliberately provided or accidentally encountered in the course of everyday life. In their adult lives, the same children will look back on their school years with a mixture of gratitude, blame, or indifference, interpreting the intentions of their teachers, the attitudes of their peers, and their own behaviour in ways that make sense of their adult identities and destinations.

This book uses retrospective accounts of formative musical experiences to examine the long-term impact of music education and to evaluate its place among the many influences upon children's motivation to engage with music throughout their lives. As respondents reflect on events that occurred sometimes as long as 70 years earlier, the day-to-day details of lessons, people, and activities will inevitably be partial, but amongst the blurred memories will be significant moments that have come to form part of that person's musical and educational narrative. These stories are subjectively factual: they offer not so much a record of how music education has changed across generations—though this is certainly evident in the responses—but of how it has been experienced, understood, and acted upon by the individuals involved. Through the stories and selections offered as part of a life history, the highlights, regrets, and opportunities of a range of musical childhoods become apparent, and their long-term effects can be traced through to adult musical lives as teachers, amateur players, concert-goers, and parents, offering a new perspective on the many valuable reasons for embedding music in childhood and in education.

The process of constructing an autobiographical narrative makes its own contribution to identity, affirming and making sense of those aspects of past life that are most helpful in rationalising current experience, and allowing storytellers to present a coherent account of themselves to their listeners. In telling their stories, "people selectively appropriate aspects of their experience and imaginatively construe both past and future to construct stories that make sense to them and to their audiences, that vivify and integrate life and make it more or less meaningful" (McAdams, 2001, p. 101). Several writers have suggested that "musicians may be predisposed to interpreting their childhood as one full of music and/or longing for music" (Gavin, 2001, p. 59), sometimes placing too much emphasis on early experiences as determining "everything that will happen later, what we can be, what we can do" (Holt, 1978, p. 4). While John Holt agrees that "musical people are particularly prone to talk this way" (*ibid.*, p. 4), life stories collected from influential scientists show that musicians do not have the monopoly on this: "I always replied, when asked the standard question, that I was going to be a scientist when I grew up" (Brockman, 2004, p. 92). Helen Gavin's study, in which she

compared the childhood recollections of musicians with those who did not pursue music in adulthood, offers a nice counter-example to the belief that early influences necessarily have a life-determining effect: she reports a professional flautist recalling how her parents “bought me a flute when I asked, so I suppose that set me off to where I am today, but they also bought me a bike, and I’m not in the Tour de France” (Gavin, 2001, p. 57).

Theories of autobiographical memory confirm that the impact of significant encounters is not predetermined: a discouraging conversation with a piano teacher will motivate some young musicians to practise more determinedly for future success, even while it convinces others that a musical future is not for them (cf. Pillemer, 2001, p. 131). Such tendencies to tell “redemption” or “contamination” stories—the extent to which negative events are interpreted positively with hindsight—are a feature of personal identity and can be a marker of wellbeing, optimism, and satisfaction with life, as well as being influenced by age, gender, and relative distance from the events being narrated (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). Autobiographical narratives are also prone to “self-enhancement” (Bluck, 2003), whereby individuals view their past selves as inferior to their current state, so asserting the implicit belief that they would now behave more effectively in a given situation. In the musical life stories on which this book draws, these traits are all in evidence: the actions of parents, teachers, and other role models are similar across a range of narratives but are interpreted differently as individuals attribute influences and values to particular events and people in ways that make sense of their own musical identities.

Autobiographical reflection offers a particular perspective on educational experiences, one that is shaped by events and opportunities through the lifespan, and by the strength of the storyteller’s sense of self as a musician. Some musical journeys have been recounted many times, perhaps reinforced by parents or others, and so individuals have come to know themselves as people who have always been musicians: “I’m told I could sing before I could talk, but I can’t remember this!” [UK26, aged 52; see Section 1.3 for explanation of participant codes]. Such narratives are full of “self-defining memories” (Moffitt & Singer, 1994, p. 26), in which a sequence of musical goals and achievements is traced from formative years through to adult life. Others present their musical histories as having been more serendipitous, dependent on particular people or opportunities for the formation of a musical identity that is seen as anomalous within the family context: “no member of my extended family is in any way ‘musical’, none could play an instrument or ever went to concerts” [UK19, aged 74].

Within these different kinds of life narrative, experiences of music education are interpreted by the storyteller on two levels: first by their impact at the

time, and secondly by the retrospective contribution they are seen to have made to long-term engagement in music. Both aspects can be profoundly influential on the musical lives of individuals, but the latter is rarely considered in educational policy, debate, and practice, emphasis tending to fall instead on the more immediately evident outcomes of music education—exam results, youthful performing successes, a thriving school musical culture. This book aims to investigate what happens to young people’s musical engagement once they leave school, and to consider how teachers and parents can inspire and nurture musical learning in such a way that it can be sustained beyond formal education.

## 1.2 Aims, Scope, and Limitations

This book has six principal aims:

- To investigate the long-term impact of childhood musical learning through empirical accounts of lifelong musical involvement
- To evaluate the contribution of school music education to lifelong involvement and attitudes to music, considering the impact of teachers, peers, and opportunities
- To consider the influence of other locations for learning, including childhood home and community, and adult learning and activity
- To highlight particular strengths of music education, including opportunities for skill development, inspiration, and self-identity as a musician
- To question the drawbacks of educational systems for music, and the ways in which learning might be inhibited through criticism or perceived lack of relevance or opportunity
- To propose ways in which awareness of the long-term impact of music education might help to shape the rationale and realities of future practice

These are ambitious aims within a relatively neglected area of music education research, and some clarifying remarks about the origins, scope, and limitations of the study are necessary at this point.

The idea of investigating the long-term impact of music education grew from my previous studies of adult musical participation (Pitts, 2005), during which it became evident that people for whom music was a central part of their adult lives often traced their interests back to influential people or

opportunities in their childhood, and particularly to the extracurricular music-making they had experienced in school. The participants in those studies, who included regular concert-goers, singers in Gilbert and Sullivan societies, and composers pursuing an interest in contemporary music, all expressed a commitment to the role of music in education, seeking to share their own enthusiasms with the next generation and sometimes expressing concern about diminishing levels of interest in the genres and activities that they most valued. Some participants evaluated their educational experiences as part of their explanations for why they made music as adults, recalling specific performances, lessons, or teachers as moments in which they realised the importance of music in their own lives. Others expressed regret at not having persisted with instrumental lessons, or encouraged their children to do the same. These hints at the long-term impact of childhood musical encounters offered a fascinating glimpse into a new perspective on music education, which represented a move away from the measurability and accountability of contemporary school life towards a recognition of the lasting effects of learning, and a potentially richer understanding of the contribution made by teachers and parents in shaping future generations of musicians and listeners.

In deciding to pursue this area of research, I began with participants who were similar to those in the *Valuing Musical Participation* (Pitts, 2005) studies: adults who were regularly engaged in music as players, listeners, or teachers, and who were therefore likely to have articulate opinions on their educational experiences and the ways in which these had affected their musical attitudes, skills, and priorities. (Further details of how I recruited these participants and elicited and analysed their musical life histories are given in Section 1.3.) As anticipated, these respondents offered rich, varied stories, by no means overwhelmingly positive in their views of music education, and revealing complex interrelationships between many factors: parental attitudes and expectations, the extent of listening and playing in the home, opportunities at school, instrumental lessons, self-directed listening and learning, the seeking out of performing and tuition in adulthood, and the consolidation of musical priorities and levels of involvement in later life. The analysis of these narratives raised many questions about music education, prompting discussion of the role of the home environment, the characteristics of effective classroom and instrumental teachers, and the relationship between school music learning and longer-term attitudes and engagement in the arts. In other ways, however, the sample was somewhat narrow, being recruited largely in Britain, and amongst those who were musically active—not from the much greater proportion of the population who might judge

their school music to have had little effect on their leisure use and continued personal development in adulthood.

Some of the limitations of the sample were addressed within the boundaries of this study. Firstly, to counter the UK focus of the data, a further survey was conducted in Italy, chosen to represent those central European countries where music has traditionally been taught principally in conservatoires, with more limited provision of classroom lessons and extracurricular music-making within mainstream education (Tafuri, 2001). I had intended to recruit additional participants in North America, where band and choral programmes are dominant in the curriculum, giving young people a different kind of preparation for adult involvement in music (Kelly, 2009). This phase of recruitment was unsuccessful, however, and also raised doubts in my mind about the extent to which I would be able, as an outsider to the educational system, to interpret the life histories as being typical or otherwise, and to relate them to a detailed knowledge of the aims and trends in US music education over recent decades. These doubts apply equally to the Italian responses, leading to the cautious use of these data mainly to illustrate the extent to which this research method might be applied in other contexts, and the cultural and educational differences that are raised by doing so. In the absence of more internationally diverse data, existing research literature is used to draw attention to features of the UK responses that are not universal in music education, and to stimulate debate about the broader applicability of thinking about musical learning from a lifespan perspective.

A second limitation of the participant group was the prevalence of classical musicians, which arose partly from having recruited through professional magazines read mainly by music teachers and classical music listeners (see Section 1.3 for further details), and also because of the conventional educational pathways followed by many of the older respondents. To balance this, I undertook a final phase of recruitment targeted at popular musicians, gaining a small but indicative sample that helped to bring some of the assumptions of the main data set into sharper focus, and to raise new questions about the effectiveness of music education as a foundation for different kinds of lifelong engagement. Once again, though, this expansion of the scope of the study does not fully embrace the range of musical life histories that could be investigated—nor indeed the many potential “non-musical” narratives and the perspectives upon music education that such respondents could offer. I readily acknowledge the limitations of this study, doing so at this early stage in the book in order to invite readers to consider how the stories of these particular participants could illuminate those of other players, teachers, and listeners, and perhaps prompt research in a wider range of



educational and social contexts. Nonetheless, this study makes a new contribution in illuminating the “chances and choices” of ordinary musical lives, showing how small decisions and opportunities in childhood can have a lasting impact, and questioning whether there might be more effective ways of ensuring that the foundations for lifelong engagement with music are embedded within mainstream musical education.

### 1.3 Approaches to Data Collection and Analysis

This project sought to collect retrospective accounts of formative musical influences and opportunities from adults who had sustained an active interest in music throughout their lives. To enable the collection and analysis of a relatively large data set, written responses were used in preference to interviews, and many of these were detailed and extensive. Such accounts were loosely termed “life histories” in my correspondence with participants but did not follow strictly the methods of life history research, which typically features detailed, multiple interviews with a small number of participants (see Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Here, narratives were sought from a larger sample of participants (134 in total), aiming for an exploratory overview of trends in music education experience, as well as individual accounts of formative events and influences. The written form used in this study, whilst offering less interactive opportunity than an interview, was true to the essence of life history research in allowing respondents to “speak for and about themselves” (Atkinson, 1998, p. 5). Respondents constructed their own finished account and submitted this to me when they were satisfied with the story they had told—so, arguably, removing the layer of researcher interpretation and construction that would come with transcribing multiple interviews. Rineke Smilde (2009a) uses the term “biographical narratives” to describe her interviews with professional musicians; those in this book are more properly labeled “autobiographical narratives”, constructed by the respondents themselves and providing insight on those memories that have lasted and become part of a narrative—sometimes newly discovered in the telling, at other times apparently well rehearsed. Throughout this book, the term “life history” has been retained as a readily understood shorthand for the autobiographical data that underpin this study, reflecting my intention to preserve in this larger-scale study the aims of in-depth life history research—namely by “comprehending the complexities of a person’s day-to-day decision making and the ultimate consequences that play out in that life so that insights into the broader, collective experience may be achieved” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 11).