Society for Music Analysis

ISM CORPORATE MEMBER

NCVO MEMBER 2020

Questioning the gap in music literacy in England:

Defining a role for the Society for Music Analysis in preparing students for music degrees in higher education today.

A summarised version of the final research report by

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March 2021

Contents

Acknowledgements

This project was commissioned by the Society for Music Analysis (SMA). Thanks are due to the Society for making it possible to carry out the research and for the sustained interest of the Trustees.

Esther Cavett, one of the Trustees, remained a valuable critical friend throughout. Special thanks for her continuous support and insightful comments.

The Institute of Musical Research and the SMA provided funding for the Study Day, so many thanks for making the day possible. Hilary is very grateful for those who assisted with or contributed to the Study Day, including participants. I would like to thank Oliver Chandler for his invaluable help before and on the day. Thank you to the speakers, Julian Horton, Rebecca Berkley and Majella Boland, to Kenneth Forkert-Smith for taking the time to attend, and to Robert, Hannah, Kelvin and Cindy for their assistance.

Finally, I would like to thank all those who participated in this research and who offered their thought-provoking responses to questioning the gap in music literacy.

1 Executive summary

Background to the project

The Society for Music Analysis commissioned a project to investigate a perceived gap in the knowledge and skills required at higher education level, with specific reference to music literacy for the purpose of music analysis. The research project was limited to education in England, given the amount of funding and time available.

It is no doubt the case that every sub-discipline within a discipline, in this case music, likes to think its skills are essential. As curricula develop and change, someone somewhere will perceive a "gap". It is suggested that music theory and analysis do not have the attention they previously enjoyed in education in England. The SMA trustees were concerned about a gap, founded on the assumption that music analysis in higher education requires students to be more musically literate than is often the case.

1.1 Aim of the project

The aim of the project was to ask stakeholders in the music and creative industries, working at all stages of education:

- If they agree with the SMA trustees' assessment that there is a gap
- What they consider music literacy to be
- What they consider a desirable level of music literacy might be on entering higher education and on graduation
- What links there might or should be between music literacy and music analysis
- What resources, if any, stakeholders would like the SMA to provide or contribute to.

1.2 Research questions

A set of questions was predetermined by the Society for Music Analysis. The main research questions were:

1. To what extent do stakeholders in music education agree with the proposal that students have reduced musical literacy compared to the past and that this has created a gap for those applying for higher education music courses?
2. What role might the Society for Music Analysis have in supporting music education, for instance, by offering resources?

1.3 Literature review

An extensive, systematic literature review was carried out relating to the different aspects identified as relevant to the project.

- The value of music education including music literacy and music analysis
- Definitions of music literacy and the language it refers to
- The landscape of music education
- Music curricula and pedagogies in England

1.4 Methods

A mixed methods approach was applied. Data were collected through surveys, interviews and a study day.

There were two online surveys created for the project, one for students over the age of 16 and one for music teachers, which included anyone with experience of teaching music in any educational context. 165 teachers and 68 students completed the survey. Thirty-four interviews were held with a wide range of

stakeholders in music education. Additional data were collected from the Music Literacy Study Day held in July 2020.

1.5 Key findings

There was general agreement that traditional musical literacy knowledge and skills have declined, including being able to read and write notation. More contentious was whether that is important or should be remedied in schools if an inclusive curriculum is to be offered rather than one based on a narrow or restricted definition of music literacy. Different versions of what social justice would be in music education were evident.

Any gap, either between GCSE and A-level or between school and university, is reduced for those experiencing a rich curriculum with high expectations as well as having private instrumental lessons.

Higher education institutions have already addressed a potential gap through widening access, offering alternative degree programmes and/or offering additional support prior to or during a degree course.

Expectations for applicants to music degrees included being able to read at least one clef and write music at a basic level. Music teachers had higher expectations of students being able to use technology to create music and to sing than students.

Musical literacy is not an essential component for a music degree according to the QAA Benchmark Statement for Music. Institutions can set their own standards for what music literacy students should have both on entering and on graduation.

Musical literacy and music analysis were seen by many as interrelated, although dependent on the definition of music literacy and the type of music analysis. There was concern about non-Western art music being analysed inappropriately using WAM concepts in schools.

There were a number of suggestions for resources, some of which are beyond the scope of the SMA. There are many resources already available, although there was demand for high-quality, freely available guides to music literacy and analysis. The SMA's expertise was seen as a potentially valuable resource, although the majority of interviewees had not heard of the Society.

1.6 Recommendations

- In terms of resources, the recommendation is to review what is already available for the purposes of quality control and, if appropriate, recommendation. A number of suggestions were made to add to the resources available, including progressive guides to develop music knowledge and skills, and high-quality analyses. Members of the SMA could be a resource and act as mentors for music teachers.
- Given the lack of knowledge of the SMA, it would be helpful to make the Society better known through outreach, such as contributing to the journals and magazines read by other institutions, including schools, and reviewing the content of the SMA's website and journal to ensure it appeals to a wider audience.
- The SMA could contribute to a debate about the meaning of social justice in music education, with the aim of bridging the gap between the opposing views currently held.
- The SMA should consider its scope and purpose to decide the extent to which it is a lobbying organisation.
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Note about this project

The term 'music teacher' is used throughout to mean anyone involved in teaching music. It includes peripatetic teachers and lecturers.

This project is based on music education in England. The views expressed and examples given may or may not be representative of all music education inC England, the UK or elsewhere.

2 Introduction

Music analysis is an integral part of many university music degrees. A review of 47 English higher education institutions' course details indicated that 33 refer directly to music analysis, more often in the second year. What is studied at degree level can be assumed to represent higher order thinking skills, including a more nuanced understanding of what constitutes knowledge, and the more, or most, advanced level of actions, such as music performance. The expectations for music courses in higher education are set out in the QAA's Benchmark Statement for music (2016).

What is the 'right' level for study at university or indeed prior to that? What is more appropriate to a master's degree or doctorate compared to an undergraduate degree or diploma? All those who work in education have studied themselves and bring with them an understanding of what should be learnt and, perhaps, how it should be taught based on their own experience. Some favour their own experience, others rebel against it. Either way, there are decisions to be made about what to include in any course of study that assists learners in pursuit of future goals or expectations. The guidance or statutory requirements, depending on the stage of education, have been created in consultation with subject specialists and educationalists who will have their own understanding of appropriate content and required skills. Organisations and educators must also respond to government initiatives. In addition, changes in the field of education, either new knowledge or ideas or developments in technology, are embraced or questioned as courses are evaluated.

Music education has been under scrutiny and opposing viewpoints aired. A very recent cause of controversy has been Philip Ewell's criticism of the white racial frame of music, including music analysis (see e.g. Ewell, 2020). A similar view has been expressed by Adam Neely, whose YouTube video about white supremacy in music education posted in September 2020 has already attracted over 800,000 views and 75,000 'likes' (Neely, 2020). On similar lines was an article in the Guardian (Gill, 2017) entitled 'Music is now only for the white and wealthy' proposing that music is too elitist. She said: music is 'a cryptic, tricky language – rather like Latin – that can only be read by a small number of people, most of whom have benefited from private education'. The article prompted a letter to the Guardian ('The romanticisation of music illiteracy is risky') countering Gill's viewpoint with (at the time of writing) over 700 signatories (Pace, 2017). Acknowledging that a range of skills is required, not just reading music, the letter proposes that 'Gill's position could serve to make literate musical education even more exclusive through being marginalised in state schools yet further'.

There are concerns, therefore, about the curriculum but equally about the number of young people who opt to study music at levels 2 and 3 (see section on Music Qualifications). The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Music Education in collaboration with the University of Sussex and the Incorporated Society of Musicians (ISM) produced a report in January 2019 called Music Education: State of the Nation (Daubney et al., 2019). The foreword refers to 'the crisis facing music education in England in particular' and to the 'serious decline' (2) in general terms. 'Music education in England will be restricted to a privileged few within a decade' (ibid.). The future of music education is perilous, with serious implications for the sustainability of music degrees as they are currently offered. If there are fewer people who are musically

literate in the way they once were, then there will be a reduction in teachers who have the knowledge and skills, which are feared to be declining, in order to support future learners and thus, ultimately, there will be even fewer music degree students. The question, then, is how to keep literacy and associated degree courses alive of the kind currently available, if that is desirable.

With these concerns in mind, and as a result of informal discussions amongst some of the trustees of the Society for Music Analysis, a research project was commissioned with the aim of investigating a concern about a perceived gap in knowledge and skills that students bring with them to their higher education studies from previous learning opportunities in music. In short, students appear to be less musically literate.

3 Literature review

3.1 Defining music literacy

According to Heath (2005: 1), 'there is no literacy without language', which could apply to music equally. With uncertainty about what the language of music is and whether it can be called a language at all, a definition of music literacy is even more problematic. When the language of music is referred to, it often means the symbols that represent music rather than the words used to describe it, although both of these are relevant and both can be challenging to understand. Gill's comment about music being a 'cryptic, tricky language' (Gill, 2017 online) exemplifies the former. An example of the latter is a chart from an early music treatise (requiring a 'few words of explanation' [Hamm, 2013: 6]). Hamm's explanation refers to pitch, sustained, voice, interval, solmisation syllable, hexachords (hard and natural), psolambanomenos, and d-re, e-mi, g-sol. However, the language of music technology can be equally complex. Dorfman (2017) makes the point that technology has a visual component so it is not just a case of sound before symbol; 'we can develop literacy with other kinds of information that represent musical events, such as MIDI regions, piano scroll editors, and audio waveforms' (400). The language of music technology is extensive. An online magazine for audio recording (https://www.soundonsound.com/sound-advice/glossary-technical-terms) includes a glossary from A to Z. On the first page alone, under A, are definitions for A-Type Plug, A-Weighting, AC, Accent Mic, Acoustic Foam and so on, through to Azimuth. The music literacy derived from this language would be quite different from relying on musical scores or recordings of music.

There is no definition of music literacy in the Oxford Dictionary of Music (2012). According to the Dictionary of Music Education (Collins, 2013), being able to hear the sounds when looking at notation is 'the mark of a literate musician' (143). Grove Music Online refers to literacy in several articles, the implication based on the context of the entry is that it refers to being able to read and write music.

Music literacy is not easy to define, as Mills and McPherson point out. They prefer the phrase fluency in musical skills. Although their chapter is entitled Music Literacy, they say: 'Ask anyone who uses the term "musical literacy" to say what they mean by it, and they will often speak - in effect – of the ability to function fluently as a musician' (2016: 178). It is likely that many view music literacy as being able to read and write music notation using conventional symbols including Italian and other terms and signs. That is apparent from the titles of books where music literacy is synonymous with music theory. Just as the meaning of literacy has developed, so too has that of music literacy, which for some 'can mean multiple concepts in multiple contexts' (Barton and Woolley, 2017: 46). With the idea of multiliteracies comes the possibility that someone could be literate in some but not all aspects of music yet could still be seen as musically literate.

A number of books are entitled ‘music literacy’. However, very few directly address its meaning. An exception is Broomhead’s book, What is Music Literacy? (2018). The others are guides to learning about music, including what is traditionally referred to as music theory.

Table 2 sets out definitions of music literacy drawn from the literature reviewed (in alphabetical order). These definitions range from a narrow one focusing on reading and writing notation to much broader and more complex ones that are more in line with critical pedagogy and the idea of multiliteracies.

Source	Definition of music literacy
Bartholemew, 1981	Ability to comprehend but not necessarily read - meaning is enhanced by extralinguistic factors such as gestures, vocal inflections, pauses
Bowyer, 2015	'the ability to read and write notation and create music' (70)
Csikos and Dohány, 2016	'culturally determined systems of knowledge in music [and] music abilities' (3)
Dorfman, 2017	Difficult to define but suggests 'technology-enhanced creative literacy' rather than music literacy (401)
Giles, 1972	Includes aural perception, reading, writing and comprehending notation at a reasonable level
International Kodály Society, 2014	'the ability to read and write musical notation and to read notation at sight without the aid of an instrument [and] a person's knowledge of and appreciation for a wide range of musical examples and styles' (online)
Levi, 1989	'understanding the intentionality of written marks, recognizing music as an open system permitting the generation of meaning, risk taking, social action, the interrelationship between text and context, demonstrations of literacy, and organizational responses' (39)
Mills, J. and McPherson, 2016	Using notation (including reading, writing, understanding and interpreting staff notation), making music, reflecting on music played, heard or created, and talking about music to make judgements
Philpott, 2015	'a complex and socially constructed concept' (193) so 'literacies' – includes technical and analytical aspects
Pugh, 1980	'the ability to convert musical sounds into signs and musical signs into sounds' (29) is the 'minimum level' (30)
Shouldice, 2014	Adds the word music to the UNESCO definition: '[Music] literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute [musically], using printed and written [music notation] materials associated with varying [musical] contexts. [It] involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their [musical] goals, to develop their [musical] knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their [musical] community and wider society.' (266)
Shuler, 2011	'…more than the ability to read and write Western musical notation. True literacy is the set of skills and understandings that enable us to think and function independently.' (7)
Tremblay-Beaton, 2015	Involves signs and symbols but also 'the cultural and critical facets of knowledge' 2579.
Undercofler, 1997	(with reference to US national standards) ability to sing and play, place in a historical context, analyse forms and styles, compose and improvise and relate music to other subjects
Vriend, 2009	'the ability to identify musical ingredients, follow their progress and make sense of them within the context of a composition.' 8

Table 1 Definitions of music literacy

The term 'true literacy' has been used to express the idea of independence (Shuler, 2011) or empowerment (Warrican, 2015). It is also used by Kodály practitioners to mean either reading and writing music as well as performing, appreciating and creating music (Burnsed, 1999) or being able to hear what is written and to write what is heard (Bridges, 1997). Being able to 'hear' music in the absence of sound waves is known as audiation (The Gordon

Institute for Music Learning, 2020). Gordon (1975) distinguished basic audiation (the inner-hearing of music akin to thinking in language) from notational audiation (hearing what is written). Bartholomew says the goal of music competence should be silent reading of music, therefore learning to read music is a given. "The question is not whether giving people the opportunity to learn music reading skills should be part of the music curriculum, but rather how can people's comprehension of music be improved by these skills?" (Bartholemew, 1981: 75).

4 Aim and research questions

The overall aim of the project was to explore the extent to which stakeholders in music and creative industries agreed with the SMA trustees' assessment that those applying for or studying a music degree are less well prepared than in the past to study music at higher level. The researcher was asked to find out the following:

- If stakeholders agree with the SMA trustees' assessment that there is a gap
- What they consider music literacy to be
- What they consider a desirable level of music literacy might be on entering higher education and on graduation
- What links there might or should be between music literacy and music analysis
- What resources, if any, stakeholders would like the SMA to provide or contribute to.

5 Primary data collection methods and sample

5.1 Research design

The design was mixed methods consisting of interviews and an online survey. An online music literacy study day was held on the 15th July 2020 funded by the IMR. Where attendees' permission was granted, recordings or notes were taken from the small group discussions that were based on some key questions relating to the project.

5.2 Sampling and participants

There were two online surveys created for the project, one for students over the age of 16 and one for music teachers, which included anyone with experience of teaching music in any educational context. 165 teachers and 68 students completed the survey. Thirty-four interviews were held with a wide range of stakeholders in music education. Additional data were collected from the Music Literacy Study Day held in July 2020.

6 Review of findings

6.1 To what extent do stakeholders in music education agree with the proposal that students have reduced musical literacy compared to the past and that this has created a gap for those applying for higher education music courses?

There was general agreement that musical literacy has declined, particularly if a narrow definition of musical literacy is applied. Some knowledge and skills have increased with the increase in the use of technology to create music. Aural learning has increased, although the link between what is heard and more traditional music theory is not necessarily made. The gap is partly a result of changes in the way that music is taught, in a bid to make music more relevant to all students, where higher education music courses retain expectations of a certain level of traditional music knowledge. Even so, the music teachers in this project had slightly higher expectations of the use of technology to create music than students and much higher expectations of students being able to sing than the students themselves.

The gap is narrower or non-existent for those who have experienced the best that the traditional music landscape has to offer. However, it has been narrowed in a number of ways. Firstly, a number of higher education institutions (HEIs) have widened access by altering their entry requirements. Secondly, some HEIs offer catch-up modules or produce additional material to help students to learn what was once considered more common knowledge among music degree applicants. Thirdly, alternative degrees are on offer with a reduced requirement for traditional music knowledge and skills.

HEIs can specify their curricula to a much greater extent than those working in schools, although what is on offer in schools varies very considerably. The QAA's Benchmark Statement for music is quite open, with phrasing such as 'some form of notation'. Compared to the statement for English, the expectations are much broader and could be interpreted in many ways.

A gap was noted between level 2 (typically GCSE) and level 3 exams (typically A-level). However, this would be less apparent if the music education offered in primary schools laid consistent foundations for further study. However, a review of qualifications might be necessary, unless a radical reform of the music education system is forthcoming. Any reform should be clear about issues of social justice and what that means, with consequences for the curriculum and associated pedagogy.

6.2 What role might the Society for Music Analysis have in supporting music education, for instance, by offering resources?

The majority of participants interviewed were unaware of the SMA's existence. Any suggestions made for the SMA's role in supporting music education should be seen as tentative, given limited knowledge of the Society's aims and scope. Certainly, there was some suspicion aired that the Society's aim is to preserve an elitist music education. However, a number of organisations expressed interest in talking to representatives of the SMA about how the Society might contribute to the music education sector in England.

The Society could offer expertise, either by creating resources as outlined in the report, notably online ones, or by members being included in a directory available to educators. There are many resources already available, some of which offer high quality learning opportunities to students. However, resources vary widely in quality. There was interest in resources that were accurate and offered clear progression through musical concepts and skills.

6.3 Review of project aims

The aims of the project specified in the brief were to investigate:

- if stakeholders in music education agree with the SMA trustees' assessment that there is a gap in musical literacy
- what stakeholders consider musical literacy to be
- what a desirable level of musical literacy might be on entering higher education and on graduation
- what links there might or should be between musical literacy and music analysis
- what resources, if any, stakeholders would like the SMA to provide or contribute to.

The first aim was to find out if there was agreement about a gap in musical literacy. In general, there was agreement (see 7.1 above). However, it depends on the definition of music literacy and musical allegiances, including what is valued in music education. For some, there is a gap to be closed. For others, any gap is irrelevant or reduced if widening access and widening participation are embraced.

The second aim was to explore the meaning of musical literacy. The majority of those in the survey offered a narrow definition that included being able to read and write music, which was true of students as well as teachers. The interviewees either offered a narrow definition, albeit with some concern that it might seem elitist, or a broader one encompassing what might be seen as musicianship, or a combination of both. Music theory is often used synonymously with musical literacy in literature. Definitions of musical literacy included visual, aural, oral and physical aspects. Some strongly resisted a narrow definition and concurred with objections expressed in literature to those with strong music skills beyond reading and writing notation being called musically illiterate. The notion of musical multiliteracies is relevant to a definition, which involves multiple musics and many forms of representation. These serve different purposes but should be seen as equally useful in developing musicality. Based on work in language and literacy, a multiliteracy approach to music education could or should avoid the extremes of traditionalism and progressivism.

The third aim was to find out what a desirable level of musical literacy might be. Inevitably, this depends on one's definition of musical literacy. The findings indicated that being able to read at least one clef and to write music at a basically level were an expectation of both teachers and students. Music teachers had higher expectations of using technology to create music than students. That finding could reflect the students who participated in the research, who were mostly learning classical instruments and studying A-level rather than music technology. The findings also suggest that singing, in some schools at least, has declined. Whole school or whole class singing, and using notated copies, provided more

equal access to one aspect of musical literacy. The level of musical literacy expected on graduation is dependent on the requirements of an HEI, since there is no requirement set out in the QAA Benchmark Statement. Students found out for themselves what they needed to know more about and where their education might have left a gap, often through comparing themselves with other students. No mention was made by participants of HEI music departments setting out how musical literacy is defined by an institution or what the expected level would be on graduation. That could be a useful exercise, the outcomes of which might be shared with students.

The fourth aim was to explore the links between musical literacy and music analysis. Many participants saw these as mutually dependent. Given the GCSE and A-level specifications, it is not necessary to have deep knowledge of musical literacy for analytical purposes. A-level analysis is sometimes taught by rote rather than relying on musical literacy skills. Other literacies are developed, including aural skills and performance. Music technology creates a different form of literacy and requires a different approach to analysis. Currently, WAM analysis is applied inappropriately to non-WAM music, including technologically produced compositions.

The fifth aim is addressed in 6.2 above, with the proviso that resources should be both free and freely available.

7 Concluding comments

7.1 The English music education system

The project has highlighted a number of difficulties in the landscape of music education in England. It is no easy matter to revise or create a new music education system that is inclusive, opens up opportunities for all, meets the demands for education for employability and fits some kind of national framework. Suggestions for improvements involved a top-down, policy approach as well as a bottom-up, practitioner or more localised impetus for change, or both.

However, it was clear that there is a clash of allegiances between those who view education as an opportunity to go beyond personal experience and preferences (bearing in mind that the current education system works best for those with experience of, and preference for, WAM, even though they are in the minority) and those who seek to base music education on personal experience and preferences (which at secondary level tends to be more popular music). These are two versions of social justice pervasive in music education. How these can be reconciled needs further consideration.

The widening gap is evident from this research, particularly if musical literacy refers to WAM theory and notation. In seeking to include a wide range of music, there is the danger, as one participant said, of being neither inclusive nor rigorous. Other ‘musics’ are shoehorned into syllabuses or courses, sometimes in a tokenistic way. In doing so there is the likelihood of a curriculum that has breadth rather than depth.

The music education offered in primary and secondary schools varies widely with some excellent examples that demonstrate what is possible. For those learners, the rich

experiences and high expectations appear to override doubts about what is appropriate in the curriculum.

There is no national system for teaching music. Whether that is desirable or not is beyond the scope of this report, but, without that, teaching is more ad hoc than systematic, depending on the knowledge and skills of individual teachers in schools or music organisations, or private instrumental teachers. With very little time devoted to developing primary music teaching, there is dependence on external organisations to support music education, which in turn depends on budgets.

Music hubs are important in offering opportunities. They do support music education but schools are the main source of education for those who cannot afford long-term instrumental lessons.

7.2 Limitations

Although a wide range of stakeholders took part, the views expressed are not necessarily representative of the majority of stakeholders in music education. Nonetheless, a wide range of views was expressed. It was hoped to interview more representatives of exam boards, since school and instrumental music exams strongly influence both curriculum and pedagogy. Stakeholders in the music industry beyond education are also underrepresented. In both cases, participation was sought.

The literature review was carried out systematically. That does not guarantee representativeness or avoidance of bias. Decisions were made about what to include. Similarly, researcher bias might have occurred in the analysis and the selection of quotes. With the researcher's background in music but with greater involvement in education more broadly, it is possible that different emphases would have arisen had the research been conducted by someone else with different allegiances and experience.

7.3 Further research

Instrumental teachers play a vital role in developing music knowledge and skills. However, because of the costs involved, a gap is created between those who can afford instrumental lessons and those who cannot. Instrumental lessons underpin the music education system but are also silent partners, inadvertently adding to the disparity in knowledge and skills of young people. Interestingly, instrumental teachers did not always see themselves as teaching music analysis. Although that may be true directly, much indirect teaching will take place in learning to play compositions. Further research into instrumental teaching in relation to musical literacy and music analysis would be helpful.

With limited participation by exam boards and those working in the music industry, further research into the meaning of and need for musical literacy or literacies would complement the findings from this study.

Although the project focused on England, musical literacy concerns have been raised elsewhere (e.g. Ireland and Scotland). There is scope for collaborative work to assess the situation in different regions of the UK and beyond.

8 Recommendations to the Society for Music Analysis

This research was carried out in part to help the SMA decide how to use funds to address a gap in musical literacy, should one be found. The following recommendations are made for consideration by the SMA, with implications for raising further funds by appealing to a wider audience.

8.1 Resources

There are many resources available already. However, it is not clear what quality control is in place. It would be helpful for an individual or team to review online resources with a view to making recommendations for students and teachers.

If logistically possible, the SMA's members could extend its existing mentoring scheme for women to those working in schools or to instrumental teachers. There could also be reverse mentoring, which could help to inform those in higher education about what would be helpful to their students. One suggestion was a directory of those who could offer support.

8.2 The purpose and scope of the SMA

Evidently, many are not aware of the SMA. It would be helpful for the SMA to consider broadening its appeal to those working in other educational contexts, both on its website and through its journal. It could be fruitful to offer insights into the value of music analysis or different forms of analysis that are accessible to a wide audience. One example is the Music Teacher magazine.

One aspect worthy of debate that the SMA could contribute to is what a fair music education might be and how something like traditional music theory and music analysis can fit into it, if the purpose of music education is to extend beyond personal experience. This could help to bridge the gap between the opposing views of social justice in music education.

It would be helpful to make links with those involved in the development of instrumental teachers, given their role in preparing students for higher education music study. Contributing to the development of a recognition scheme for instrumental teachers that includes aspects of musical literacy and analysis is one possibility.

However, these suggestions rest on the purpose of the SMA. It is uncertain whether it is a lobbying organisation that aims to influence music education or an organisation serving the interests of a specific group or both.

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