

David Ashworth considers...

MUSICAL LEGACIES

2011 was certainly one of our more eventful years in music education: a year in which everything changed – and nothing changed. Much uncertainty surrounded the anticipated outcomes of National Music Plan (NMP) and the Curriculum Review, and both these issues continue to fuel speculation regarding where we are going with music education in the UK. Sadly, the year was also one in which we lost two important figures in music education. David Bedford and Christopher Small both died before either of these reports were published. I wonder what they would have made of them?

It is probably easier to imagine what Christopher Small might have thought, as he had a lot to say about music education. By the time he had worked through his arguments in *Music, Society, Education* (1976), he was firmly of the opinion that we needed to take music education out of schools altogether and consider more radical, community-based alternatives. Nothing happened since that time to cause him to change his opinion. In his afterword to Ruth Wright's *Sociology and Music Education* (2011) he wrote:

'Music education, as we have understood the term, gives way to getting together and playing, and music educators, as we have understood the term, become leaders and pacemakers in the communal world of musicking. If music teachers can come to think of themselves in that way then I believe they can find a new and enormously expanded and infinitely more satisfying role, not within the narrow and frustrating confines of school and classroom but in the wider setting of the community as a whole.'

There are strands in both reports that Small would have found encouraging, and it is probably true that his seminal books have



played a significant part in changing and shaping contemporary thinking. For instance, he was driven by an overriding idea that music is always a social activity – as advocated in the NMP in the form of community-based partnerships. And thanks to him, most of us accept that music is not to be regarded as a body of external abstract knowledge, and that we only learn to understand music by doing it.

Speculating on David Bedford's likely reactions is harder, since his ideas were projected through his music rather than in writing. Nevertheless, we can make some informed conjecture. Bedford's *The Odyssey*, *Stars End* and *Instructions for Angels* are all fine works that combine an eclectic mix of classical, experimental and contemporary influences. One of his great strengths was the ability to see beyond the confines of a purely musical world and use his interest in legends and myths, ancient sites and the cosmos to provide structural foundation and inspiration for his extended works. He would have thoroughly approved of any suggestion to work across subject disciplines – and been disappointed to see this area completely overlooked in both the NMP and the Curriculum Review.

Bedford never forgot that 'music is about getting excited by sounds' – and this took him into musical contexts way beyond the confines of the conventional orchestra. Electronic sounds, found sounds, folk instruments, vocal sounds – all were grist to his mill, and he did not subscribe to any particular hierarchy of sounds. When I was working with him on his last major work, *The Wreck of the Titanic*, he was quite happy to have a seven-year-old primary school pupil scrunching a sheet of cellophane in front of a (heavily amplified and electronically processed) microphone – spraying some 'nasty' sounds over the top of a beautifully written passage for an ensemble of professional orchestral players. The NMP's assertion that technologies can and should be used 'to bring a wide range of sounds and resources into classrooms' would certainly have met with his approval.

As with sounds, in Bedford's work there is often no hierarchy of musicians. I suggested that he should be interviewed on the compositional thinking that went into the making of his *Titanic* piece for the CD Rom (visit thewreckofthetitanic.com for more information), and these illuminating video clips indicate that the contribution made by primary and secondary school musicians to this large-scale work was just as important as anything else. He would, therefore, have thoroughly approved of the NMP's recommendation that schools should work more closely in partnership with external music organisations and musicians.

The legacies of these great men will continue. We are now at a point where music teachers are being actively encouraged to engage in the debate, work with hubs and be proactive in advocating for better music education. There are some promising signs. Ofsted tells us that it wants to see schools teaching music musically. If we are to make music education in schools more inspiring, engaging and relevant, we will need to absorb and implement the thinking of people like Christopher Small and David Bedford.

Inspired to respond?

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