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## Twenty-nine World Premiers in Two Hours: The Story of *Powerplus*

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### Abstract

This article considers the effectiveness and implications of the *Powerplus* composing project, in which teenage students were asked to write for a chamber ensemble in preparation for a public concert of their work. The perspectives of all participants are considered, with a view to understanding i) the developing identities of young composers, ii) the effects of combining the musical expertise of players, teachers and students in the project, and iii) the expectations and attitudes of audience members attending the final concert. Empirical data from questionnaires, interviews and observations are used to analyse the attitudes and experiences of participants, revealing a high level of support for the project and for the value of composing in music education. The implications of the project for future research and practice are considered, and suggestions are made for strengthening the professional networks which could better contribute to young peoples' development as composers.

## Introduction

This paper considers the impact and implications of an innovative composing project which was introduced in secondary schools in Sheffield (UK) in 2001. *Powerplus* was devised and directed by Robin McEwan, an Advanced Skills Teacher and experienced composer, conductor and music educator<sup>1</sup>, to target Year 10 students (aged 14-15) embarking on the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in music. The students were commissioned to write music for an eleven-piece band formed of members of the Northern Chamber Orchestra. Students received support in this task from the project leader, the orchestral players and their school music teacher. Selected student compositions were then performed at a public venue alongside the contemporary pieces used as models during the preparation term.

The *Powerplus* project was unusual in bridging a number of problematic gaps in current music education provision: 1) its leader was an established teacher in a local school, offering 'outreach' between similar institutions rather than from an arts provider to a school; 2) it brought together students from diverse musical and educational backgrounds, fostering connections that were potentially beneficial for staff and students; 3) it required students to compose for a specific performance goal, thus providing their GCSE coursework assessment with a more authentic musical focus than is normally possible. As a focus for research, it offered insight on the experiences of students, staff and parents in encountering novel composing opportunities and challenging their expectations of 'school music'. This article considers the significance of the project for wider practice and research in composing, focusing on the attitudes and experiences of the participants, and considering the extent to which the project successfully connected the students' composing with the broader musical world.

## The Research Setting

When this research into *Powerplus* was carried out in 2003-4, the project had been running for three years in Sheffield as part of the UK government-funded Gifted and Talented Strand of Excellence in Cities, a scheme designed to foster the aspirations and skills of high-achieving students from all socio-economic backgrounds.<sup>2</sup> Robin McEwan, an Advanced Skills Teacher with responsibilities for developing music education across the city, had devised the project with financial and administrative support from the Local Education Authority. Participating schools used their Gifted and Talented budget allocation to buy into the project, with most deciding to include all their GCSE music students, rather than only those identified as high achievers.

The format of *Powerplus* had developed in response to schools' feedback during the project's lifespan, but its essential elements had remained constant. Participating schools received a briefing visit from Robin McEwan, in which the students were told about the line-up of the band which would play their pieces at the end of the project; based on the Steve Martland band, this features three saxophones, trumpet, trombone, violin, piano,

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<sup>1</sup> Robin McEwan has agreed to be named in this article: all other teacher, parent and student responses are referred to by an anonymous code assigned at the point of data collection. I am grateful to all the *Powerplus* participants who gave their time to reflect on their experiences for this research project.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/sie/eic/> for details of these government initiatives.

marimba, drum kit, guitar and bass guitar. The students' task was to compose a piece for any combination of those instruments, and they were given a briefing sheet that included advice on idiomatic writing. The composition's structure and style could be determined by the students, and the musical stimuli presented at the start of the project reflected this broad brief: students heard pieces including 'Principia' by Steve Martland, and film music from 'American Dream' by Thomas Freeman, both of which demonstrated the available ensemble, and showed the potential of composing using 'loops' of repeated musical material. These pieces, along with 'Remix' by Steve Martland, were included alongside the students' work in the public concert at the end of the project.

During the term preceding the concert of students' music, players from the Northern Chamber Orchestra visited the schools to provide guidance on writing idiomatically for their instruments. Support was also provided by the students' regular music teacher, and, where possible, by additional visits from Robin McEwan. Students were encouraged – where school facilities permitted – to use Sibelius software for their composing, and were guided in preparing a musical score with dynamics and other performance instructions. On the day of the concert, students attended the rehearsals for their own and others' compositions, and were then invited to bring their parents and other interested parties to a public concert, held in the local university concert hall or the city's studio theatre. The project was novel in offering sustained contact between the students and the players, and between teachers across the city and the visiting Advanced Skills Teacher. For all participants, it offered a broader framework for their composing, inviting staff and students alike to look beyond the demands of GCSE assessment and consider the students' developing identities as composers.

Students involved in the *Powerplus* project would usually have acquired some competence in composing during their previous school music education, although composing individually with a public performance in mind was likely to be a novel experience. Having opted to take a GCSE in music, students would have performing skills ranging from intermediate to advanced levels; some of these acquired through individual or small group lessons, and others through more informal, self-taught strategies (cf. Green, 2002). Their experiences of formal music education would have varied according to the facilities and ethos of their school, with *Powerplus* covering a wide range of schools in Sheffield, from the well-equipped to the seriously under-funded. Music in lower secondary education in England is ordinarily allocated around one hour a week in the timetable, which for some of these students would have been supplemented by participation in extra-curricular activities, such as the choirs, orchestras and other ensembles that flourish in schools with sufficient staffing and resources. This variation in provision and resources occurs across the country, and is most evident in cities such as Sheffield, where schools with strikingly different populations and resources might only be a few miles apart.

The description above illustrates the ways in which *Powerplus* offered a research opportunity that amplified some aspects of British music education while remaining congruent with typical practice. The project was rooted in the traditions of creative music education, in which composing is seen as a central way to gain musical understanding and skills – an approach which is integral to the GCSE (see Pitts, 2000 for an historical account of the examination's aims and implementation). It was unusual, however, in focusing explicitly on performance as an end product for composition, by organising concerts more frequently and publicly than would be possible for teachers working in isolation.

## Research Context and Questions

The central place of composing in the musical curriculum has long been recognised, and the persuasive campaigning of early advocates (Schafer, 1965; Paynter & Aston, 1970) has been replaced by more reflective consideration of the ways in which engagement with sound materials helps children towards an understanding of musical processes and products (Paynter, 1997; Elliot 1995, 2005). Research in recent years has begun to focus more closely on the experiences and inventions of young composers, although many of these studies have concentrated on the early years (e.g., Davies, 1986, 1992) rather than mid-secondary education and beyond. Understanding of the musical strategies that children bring to their composing is therefore increasing (cf. DeLorenzo, 1989; Burnard & Younker, 2002), but little attention has so far been paid to the attitudes of young composers, and the role which they see for composition in shaping their musical development and confidence.

Tracing the development of an individual child's musical work is an intriguing but time-consuming process. Bunting (1988) writes of the frustrations of researching the week-by-week progress of students who 'often made giant strides between one lesson and the next, or darted off in unexpected directions, drawing on resources of which [the teacher and researcher] had been only dimly aware' (pg. 271). Wiggins (1994) solved these methodological difficulties by focusing on two children for a five month period, using audio and video recordings to monitor the children's strategies for composing with peers. Likewise, Younker (2000) used multiple research methods to track the experiences of young people composing using technology, noting that previously-held assumptions about age-related changes in approaches to composing (e.g., Swanwick & Tillman, 1986) were complicated by other factors, including children's ability to reflect on and evaluate their work.

The *Powerplus* project could have offered another such opportunity to trace the development of individual compositions in depth, but constraints on the available time and funding for the research made this impractical. Nonetheless, researching *Powerplus* provided insight on students' attitudes to and evaluations of their own development as composers. The decision was taken to focus on these verbal responses, rather than tracing the musical processes and results of the students' involvement. The first research question identified for the project therefore concentrates on the students' experiences: what does *Powerplus* reveal about students' developing identities as composers? Burnard's (2000) work with 12 year old students offers some points of comparison, since she has investigated the emerging musical identities of young adolescents by probing their understanding of the relationships between composing and improvising. Burnard notes the importance of providing a conducive environment for children's creative work, stating that 'children should be encouraged to ... identify themselves not only as music makers but as music creators [and] to reflect on what it is to improvise and compose' (pg. 21). The *Powerplus* project was well-placed to fulfil those goals, and investigation of the students' experiences of the project inform the evaluation of its effectiveness in contributing to their growing musical confidence.

There are useful parallels in the literature between *Powerplus* and other kinds of 'outreach' or 'partnership' project, established by orchestras, opera companies and other musical organizations over the past twenty years (cf. Winterson, 1994, 1996; Knussen, 2003). Such projects offer valuable connections between the 'real world' of arts production and the more closed school environment, thus helping to address York's (2001) accusation that 'school music culture tends to be introverted and avoids looking for models of current practice from the art of music' (pg. 1). However, while such

interventions may have an immediate and highly beneficial impact, sustained relationships are not often possible, and the effects on long-term musical development cannot be guaranteed. *Powerplus* was designed to provide ongoing source of support for participating schools, and in its first three years had recruited a number of returning schools to build on work carried out with the same pupils over several projects. These features prompted investigation of a second research question: what were the effects of combining the musical expertise of players, teachers and students in this way? Several writers on composing have suggested that connections with audiences and professional musicians are valuable to young composers' development, by allowing them to 'engage with the questions of how their music is heard by others and how it communicates' (Glover, 2000, pg. 132), and by encouraging them to 'generate, realise and edit their compositions, in a manner that approaches the way a professional composer works' (Berkley, 2001, pg. 135).

Researching *Powerplus* also presented the chance to investigate a novel perspective on music education – that of the parents and wider public who attended the concerts and experienced the end-product of the project, the students' compositions. The desirability of parental support for musical development is well-established (e.g., Davidson *et al.*, 1996; Hallam, 1998; Borthwick & Davidson, 2002), but research in this area has previously focused on musical instrument learning, and little is currently known about parents' expectations of young people's compositions. The final research question for this project therefore addresses this perspective: how were the expectations and attitudes of audience members, including parents, revealed and changed through their attendance at *Powerplus* concerts?

## Research Aims and Methods

Three related research questions were identified in the previous section:

1. What did *Powerplus* reveal about students' developing identities as composers?
2. What were the effects of combining the musical expertise of players, teachers and students in the project?
3. How were the expectations and attitudes of audience members, including parents, revealed and changed through their attendance at *Powerplus* concerts?

These questions encompassed the impact of the project on all its contributors: the students who participated, the teachers involved and their wider school communities, the parents and friends who attended the final concert, and the players who made school visits and performed the students' compositions. The experiences of the various participants were addressed through a two phase investigation:

### *Phase 1: October 2003 – January 2004*

Students and parents formed the focus of this study, which followed the project in two schools: the 'home' school of the project leader (School A), and a school which had also been involved in the project the previous year (School B). Both schools were visited during the course of the project, and observations made of class sessions and performer visits. Informal discussions with students and teachers took place, and were written up as fieldwork notes immediately after each visit.

At the *Powerplus* concert in January 2004, questionnaires were issued to a random sample of the audience, asking for their expectations and impressions of the concert, and for their broader views on the role of this project and of music education in general. Twenty-two questionnaires were returned, giving a return rate of 53%. A different questionnaire was designed for the participating students, focusing on their self-perceived confidence and abilities in composing, and their experiences of the various aspects of the project. Thirty-five questionnaires were returned from School A (a 100% return rate), but those from School B were lost in the mail and so could not be included in the research.

*Phase 2: March 2004 – July 2004*

Nine more participating schools joined *Powerplus* in Spring 2004, at which stage the research was widened to consider the impact of the project on teacher development and collaboration, using interviews, visits to School C and teacher questionnaires. In order to investigate how the project was received by students in different school communities, the student questionnaire from Phase 1 of the research was also issued to the new participating schools. As this research took place towards the end of the school year – a very busy time for staff and students alike – the return rate was predictably low: three schools out of the nine (Schools D, E and F) returned their teacher and student questionnaires, giving a total of 35 student responses and 3 teacher responses for the second phase of the research.

For this article, schools have been coded to protect the anonymity of participants. Details of the research participants are summarised in Table 1 below:

*Table 1*

**Details of schools participating in the research**

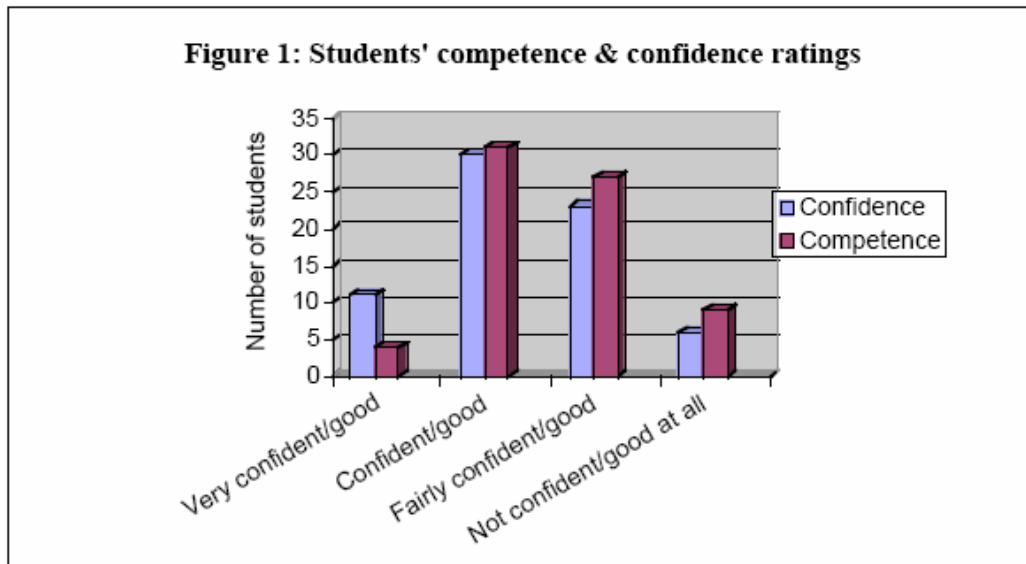
<i>Phase</i>	<i>School code and type</i>	<i>Research data collected</i>
1	<b>School A:</b> 11-18 comprehensive (Project director's 'home' school)	Observations from school visits 35 student questionnaires
1	<b>School B:</b> 11-16 comprehensive	Observations from school visits
2	<b>School C:</b> 11-16 comprehensive	Observations from school visits
2	<b>School D:</b> 11-16 comprehensive	Teacher questionnaire 2 student questionnaires
2	<b>School E:</b> 11-16 comprehensive	Teacher questionnaire Teacher interview 18 student questionnaires
2	<b>School F:</b> 11-18 comprehensive	Teacher questionnaire 15 student questionnaires

Data were analysed through repeated readings and the identification of common themes and priorities amongst the responses, and data collection ceased once it was clear that a representative range of perspectives had been gathered.

## Results and Discussion

### 1. Powerplus and Students' Identities as Composers

Baseline data on students' existing attitudes to composing were gathered through the questionnaire issued to students, which asked them to rate their levels of competence and confidence in composing, before reflecting on the extent to which *Powerplus* had affected these levels. Results across Schools A, D, E and F (a total of 70 responses) were as follows:



The bar chart shows that the students' self-perceptions of their confidence and competence in composing were generally clustered around 'good' and 'fairly good', with a small proportion feeling notably more confident (16%) or less competent (13%). Distinguishing between competence and confidence might seem to be a finely-tuned task for teenage students, but the differences in results confirm that they were able to discriminate between these elements in their self-evaluations. At all levels except the highest, the collective rating for competence was higher than for confidence, suggesting that this group of students required support in developing their self-worth as composers as much as in developing their skills. Their evaluations at the end of the project noted the effects of *Powerplus* on both aspects of their growing composer identity, and also highlighted the additional factor of effort, with a number of students stating that they felt inspired to work harder at composing as a result of the project:

Questionnaire responses from teachers supported the view that the project's combined effects on students' skills, confidence and motivation were beneficial:

'Writing for live musicians and for an actual concert gave the students impetus and enthusiasm. This in turn led to more analytical compositions and gave the students the confidence to experiment.'  
[Teacher D]

Table 2

**Effects of the project on competence, confidence and effort**

	<b>Representative questionnaire responses</b>
<b>Effects on competence</b>	<p>'It has made me think about different styles of composing and made me more aware of how different people write music' [A3]</p> <p>'It has helped me to learn how to make a long piece using build up of instruments' [A22]</p> <p>'I can use effects on the guitar such as bend and gliss which I didn't use before' [E14]</p>
<b>Effects on confidence</b>	<p>'It is my (our) first composition to be performed in public, and thus has contributed to our confidence' [A5]</p> <p>'I'm generally not that good at composing but <i>Powerplus</i> helped me look at composing in a different light and made it easier for me' [F2]</p> <p>'I find the concept of composing less overwhelming than before' [F10]</p>
<b>Effects on effort/motivation</b>	<p>'Having my piece performed in front of others encouraged me to work harder at it' [A4]</p> <p>'It was really encouraging to hear that your piece can sound good when played by professionals' [F7]</p> <p>'I have decided that I need to try harder' [A1]</p>

Teachers also valued the opportunities afforded for pupils to gain independence as composers [Teacher D], and to gain insight on the life of a professional musician [Teacher E]; in general both felt the project gave students a boost at the start of their GCSE course and that this would have lasting benefits. The teachers felt that the project helped even those students whose pieces were not performed (an event that was invariably the result of the composition not having been finished in time). While the student questionnaire responses sometimes showed more muted enthusiasm from the composers not included in the concert, the learning effects of the project were still evident, with those students noting the ways in which they could have developed their pieces further for performance:

'I would have added more to the marimba section' [A21]

'I would have repeated the main riff more' [A25]

'I would have written down and kept all my ideas. I would have thought about it more deeply and worked harder at it' [F2]

At School E, the teacher had attempted to avoid potential disappointment by ensuring that all 18 of his students' pieces would fit into the 15 minutes allocated to them in the concert. This led inevitably to complaints of a different kind:

'If I had a longer time slot for my piece I would have extended it' [E16]



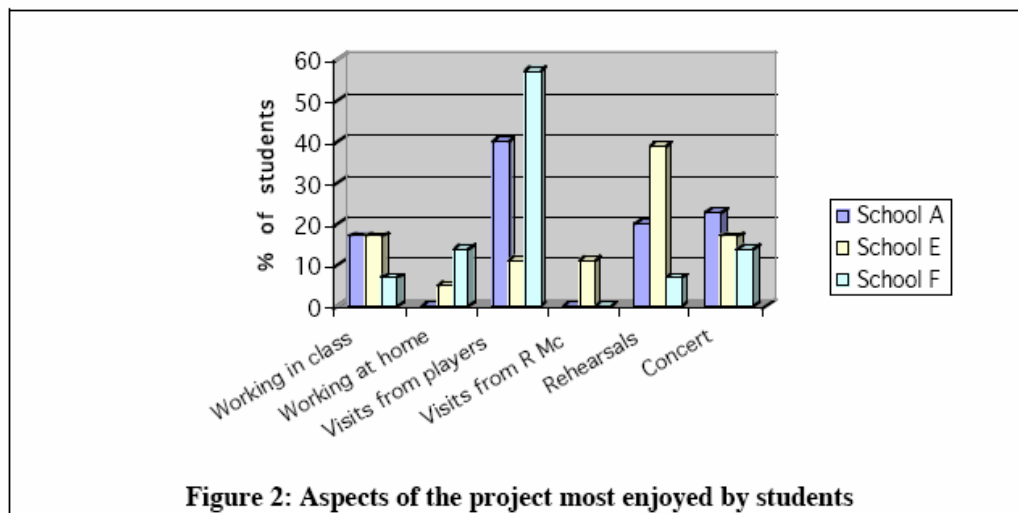
‘I think the performers should have had more time because in the actual concert ours went wrong. It was upsetting!!!’ [E18]

The students at School E, many of whom had participated in *Powerplus* before, appeared to have high expectations of the project and of themselves as composers. Across all of the student responses, there was evidence of commitment and involvement at all ability levels, with very few students claiming not to have enjoyed the project. There was also a striking absence of concern about the teacher-defined ‘success’ of conventional assessment, as students’ energies were focused exclusively on benefiting from players’ visits and producing work that was to be played by professional musicians.

Overall, the project allowed the students to develop their identity and confidence as composers by learning from one another and from the visiting players, as well as from their teachers. As one student noted after the concert, ‘It was satisfying knowing it was my piece—there was a good atmosphere and it was interesting listening to others’ compositions’ [A17]. Their verbal responses, as well as the effectiveness of the musical outcomes, illustrate the positive effects of the project in making the students think and behave as composers, and in supporting their growing confidence and skills.

*2: Sharing musical expertise: interactions between players, teachers and students*

In the questionnaire, students were asked to select from a given list to indicate the aspect of the *Powerplus* project that they most enjoyed. Figure 2 shows student preference from Schools A, E and F (School D having been excluded since the number of responses there was too small to convert to percentages):



The novel aspects of the project—visits from players, rehearsals and the concert itself—were prominent as its most preferred features, which is quite understandable given the higher impact of these unusual opportunities. Figure 2 shows the single greatest preference identified by each student, but when they were invited to ‘tick as many as you like’ in nominating all enjoyable features of the project, composing in class proved to be popular with 95% of students at School E, and more widespread support for the players’ visits, rehearsals and concerts was also evident across the schools. However, separating the various elements of the project perhaps distorts its integrated nature, since the

pleasures of composing in class, for example, may have been heightened by the anticipation of a public performance of the students' completed work.

The qualitative comments from students who completed questionnaires shed further light on their preferences and experiences. For instance, see Table 3 for responses to the request to 'choose one aspect [of the project] and explain what you particularly enjoyed about it'.

Table 3

**Students' preferences for each aspect of the project**

	<b>Representative questionnaire responses</b>
<b>Preference for composing in class</b>	'Working in class on my composition as it was all a free composition, you could do what you wanted.' [A18] 'Working in class as I learnt the most and I enjoyed it.' [E1]
<b>Preference for composing at home</b>	'Working at home because I enjoy composing all the time.' [F1]
<b>Preference for visits from players</b>	'I enjoyed the visit of the drummer. He helped me with my drum part and showed us different styles.' [A6] 'I enjoyed visits from players because I got to see instruments such as the marimba being played live.' [E14]
<b>Preference for visits from Robin McEwan</b>	[NB: not applicable in School A, Robin McEwan's own school] 'Having Robin come to start us off was a big help!' [E16] 'His advice about compositions and other things were very, very helpful.' [E18]
<b>Preference for rehearsals for concert</b>	'I enjoyed rehearsals for the concert because I enjoyed listening to other people's compositions and seeing how it was performed.' [A13] 'You could learn about what can and can't be heard and hear your piece live for the first time.' [E3]
<b>Preference for concert performance</b>	'I love watching live music and it was especially exciting to hear our own composition played by professional musicians.' [D2] 'I enjoyed the concert itself because we got to hear other compositions created by people the same age.' [E4]

The students' responses emphasise the pleasure of having their compositions taken seriously by experienced, professional musicians. This kind of contact between students and 'real world' performers establishes a different working relationship than generally exists between teacher and student, where the performing or composing expertise of the teacher is unlikely to be acknowledged to the same extent. The novelty of a visiting musician had the potential to focus the students more effectively than a 'normal' lesson, and while one student admitted that he enjoyed the visits *'because we got to miss other classes'* [A24], most saw more specific benefits in receiving advice and attention from experienced players.

### **Communication During Player Visits**

Since many of the students had selected the school visits from players as the highlight of the project, I returned to my fieldwork notes to analyse the characteristics of the visits

I had observed, namely those of the drummer and the guitarist to School A. Brief case studies of each visit are presented below:

Case study 1: The drummer's visit

The drummer's style was informal but highly focused, and as he demonstrated a range of rhythm patterns he frequently asked questions of the group and encouraged them to respond; 'If you don't understand, just shove your hand up'. Students were given guidance on specific aspects of composing, such as the advice that notation should be 'simple on the part so that the drummer can put in the little inflections'. This player clearly had an awareness of standard teaching methods: photocopied handouts were given out to clarify some of the points he made, and the use of whole group clapping and singing exercises helped to keep the students interested and involved. His manner was never overtly 'teacherly', though: he addressed individual students as 'mate', and was careful – here and in the rehearsals for the concert – to speak to students directly rather than filtering his comments and criticisms through their teacher. In an unassuming way, this player gave a great deal to the students, and his contribution was recognised in their questionnaire comments, when they reported that '*I can now write properly for drum parts*' [A6] and '*the drummer helped me with my piece*' [A7].

Case study 2: The guitarist's visit

The guitarist's visit was eagerly anticipated by the self-styled 'rockers' of the class – long-haired lads who spent the majority of each lesson improvising together on their guitars. They had come to the lesson having prepared pieces to perform in the hope of gaining some individual advice from a professional player. The guitarist addressed most of his demonstration to these students, despite promptings from the project leader that 'there are of course quite a few people here who are not guitarists'. Towards the back of the room, groups of girls engaged in conversation and made little attempt to respond to the guitarist's questions. After around ten minutes of demonstration, the guitarist announced 'That's it' and Robin McEwan again intervened to suggest that some of the boys might like to perform. These performances were met with mixed encouragement and some suggestions about playing more rhythmically. Comments such as 'Do you think that's a regular pulse? Well it's not' seemed to leave these fairly confident students undaunted at the time, but they were clearly unimpressed: '*When the players came in, I think I learned a lot, apart from the guitarist*' [A25].

These sessions provide contrasting illustrations of the distinctive communication style that can develop between players and students. With little or no pedagogical training, players were dependent on their intuitive notions of how to communicate with young people, and at times seemed less than comfortable in front of a tightly-packed classroom of variously attentive teenagers. The students showed themselves to be adaptable and receptive as they adjusted to the longer sessions and different styles of the players' visits, and overall seemed to value the sense that their composing had been taken seriously by professional players. But contact with 'real world' musicians brings risks as well as benefits. For instance, while it could be argued that protecting students from the blunt criticisms voiced by the guitarist would do them few favours, it is clear that the students were disappointed by the experience, even if their confidence was apparently unaffected. This aspect of *Powerplus* clearly needs careful management, with perhaps the opportunity

for students to engage in ongoing evaluations of the usefulness and effects of their experiences.

### Communication During Rehearsals

Rehearsals for the concert were ranked highly as an enjoyable aspect of the project by a large percentage of students at School E (see Figure 2), and were written about with enthusiasm by individuals at other schools. Students valued the chance to discuss their work with the musicians: *'it was good how we got to talk to the players and tell them how we wanted our piece to be played'* [E2]. Opportunities for such interactions were limited by time, since the rehearsal schedule was tight and Robin McEwan was forced to concentrate principally on his role as conductor of the ensemble, rather than directing the students towards the educational potential of the session. Despite this, the students' responses show their willingness to learn from the musicians and their peers, viewing the rehearsals as a last chance to develop their compositions: *'I enjoyed the rehearsal, because it gave me a chance to change things in my composition and get a feel for the sound in real life rather than on a computer'* [A33]

The members of the band varied in their willingness to address the students directly, many preferring to communicate with the conductor/project leader, who would either make decisions himself or call on the composers for a quick response. The marimba player and drummer, both of whom had made school visits, were most likely to speak out into the audience, and several times arranged to talk with composers at greater length during breaks in rehearsal. After the first concert, the marimba player told me that this had been one of the greatest pleasures of the day: one student had checked with her that she had made a change discussed earlier and she was *'impressed that they could hear that in the thick texture'*. A genuine interest and pleasure in the students' compositions was evident from the ensemble as a whole, and while individual players joked with each other about the difficulty of some the written parts, all rose to the challenge and played with commitment and sensitivity.

At rehearsals for the second and third concerts of the year (June and July 2004), there were fewer participating schools and the reduced pressures of time allowed more opportunities for careful communication between players and composers. The teachers accompanying the students played a valuable role in ensuring effective dialogue, with one teacher working as an enthusiastic translator as she discussed ideas with groups of students and fed them back to the players on the stage. Some other staff tended to speak for their students and so limit their engagement with the performers. Renegotiating teacher-student relationships for this new context clearly challenged some staff more than others. Several teachers also noted problems with the rehearsals not running to schedule, *'which was inconvenient for staff and unprofessional'* [Teacher F]. While the students welcomed the opportunity to be out of school, it was perhaps harder for the teachers to leave behind their other commitments, particularly at the end of the academic year when assessment and report writing is at its most intense.

### Further Opportunities for Communication

When asked what – if anything – they would change about *Powerplus*, students overwhelmingly asked for more time with the players, demonstrating the value they placed on the opportunities to communicate with professional musicians. Teachers, too, felt that this aspect of the project could be further developed, and the teacher at School D suggested that students *'would have welcomed more time to meet with the players for a more*

*informal chat about their work*’. The teachers clearly viewed the professional players as valuable role models for their students, and desired that their expertise should be more explicitly sought. There was a potential drawback of the ensemble in this respect, not noted by any of the respondents: only one of the players was a woman, so limiting the extent to which female students were likely to identify with the performing role. Discussion with players of the kind suggested by Teacher D could perhaps bring the gender and ethnicity imbalances of the music profession into the open for these students, although this would of course need sensitive handling by teachers and players.

Another valuable aspect of the project noted by the teachers and students was the opportunity for communication within the student group. In the majority of participating schools, the project was targeted at Year 10 students in their first year of GCSE music, but School E had discovered the advantages of including Years 8, 9 and 10 (12-15 year old students) and developing a network of peer mentoring:

‘The knock on effect is that if I’m busy working with another student, I can say “Well if you ask so-and-so they can help you with that problem, they’re just as good at solving that problem as having me there”, so it’s kind of encouraging the students as well to take a little bit more responsibility, a little bit more involvement in passing down the skills that they have gained from it, especially those in Year 10 that have had the three years’ experience of it now as well.’ [Teacher E interview]

Teacher E’s strategy encourages a responsibility amongst the students to share their skills and experiences with others; another instance of them being treated as ‘real’ composers, and so boosting their self-esteem and confidence. Similarly, he spoke of the possibilities of running a ‘home-grown’ version of the project, with students composing for a band formed of students who had recently left the school. Working with older students or recent school-leavers would have the advantage of using role models closer to the students’ current experience, but would place additional pressures on teachers to fulfil the organizational and editing tasks usually carried out by the project leader with administrative support from the orchestral management and the Local Education Authority. In its observed form, *Powerplus* left teachers free to concentrate on its educational and musical aspects, and also allowed students and teachers from schools across the city to make contact through a shared activity. Robin McEwan acknowledged that the opportunities for cross-school communication offered by the project had yet to be fully explored. No mention was made by teachers or students of a desire for stronger communication between different schools, although it was clear from observing the school visits that many teachers welcomed the contact with Robin and enjoyed discussing their teaching practice and the particular challenges of their school.

### **3: Audience Members’ Expectations and Experiences of Powerplus Concerts**

The concert in January 2004 offered the first opportunity to gain parents’ perspectives on the project. A questionnaire issued to audience members was designed to elicit both expectations and experiences of the *Powerplus* project. Respondents were asked to comment on their reasons for attending the concert, their impressions of the event and suggestions for change, and the impact of the project on the young composers involved. Most were found to be attending the concert to support a son, daughter or friend (68%), or out of a general interest in young people’s composing (27%), and had limited

experience of listening to young people's compositions. As a result, expectations of the concert were often rather low (see Table 4).

Table 4

**Audience expectations of student compositions**

	<b>Representative questionnaire responses</b>
<b>Low expectations</b>	'Not very high as clearly these young people have not had time for much composing, but perhaps a basic idea of form and the concept of repetition/variety.' [Aud 2] 'Pretty dire.' [Aud 8] 'Lacking in substance, simplistic, not developing fully from beginning to end, snapshots.' [Aud 19]
<b>Open-minded</b>	'All agog but no idea what to expect.' [Aud 11] 'Had no expectations as never been involved in music before.'
<b>High expectations</b>	'Reasonably high, as I felt there was some genuine talent amongst the composers.' [Aud 21]

Without exception, the audience members found the quality and variety of the pieces to be greater than expected, noting the following factors as contributing to the success of the performances (see Table 5).

Table 5

**Factors in the success of the concerts**

	<b>Representative questionnaire responses</b>
<b>Character and imagination of the compositions</b>	'The energy and imagination that shone through much of the music, and a very strong rhythmic quality throughout.' [Aud 2] 'The overall freshness and vivacity of the young compositions in general.' [Aud 8]
<b>Enthusiasm and professionalism of the players</b>	'Sharing children's creativity – professional musicians taking the children seriously and performing brilliantly.' [Aud 10] 'The sometimes simple idea made to sound very impressive by the musicians.' [Aud 18] 'The musicians, while serious, mostly seemed to enjoy the experience. It gave students much more feel for their own work and how others approached it.' [Aud 19]
<b>Supportive atmosphere</b>	'Atmosphere – everyone joining together – an achievement.' [Aud 1] 'Whole inclusive/non-threatening/supportive/encouraging atmosphere.' [Aud 6]

Suggested changes to the concert were entirely practical: several suggested a '*microphone for the conductor – he was hard to hear*' [Aud22], and others would have welcomed brief program notes, feeling that '*a little more background to the various compositions would have been interesting*' [Aud11]. Beyond these small suggestions, the response of the audience was overwhelmingly positive, and the benefits of the *Powerplus* project were keenly felt:

‘What an experience it must be for these students to work alongside professionals, get guidance on how to write for specific instruments and then hear their compositions played. I wish I’d had that chance!’ [Aud2]

‘Inspirational! Raises self esteem, children start to take their composing seriously. The professional musicians are valuable role models.’ [Aud10]

‘It gives them something to aspire to. This is a unique opportunity and it gives the youngsters very positive messages about their work.’ [Aud20]

From parents in particular there were strong expressions of hope that the project would continue: ‘*I welcome every opportunity for my children to see professional musicians at work. Feel very lucky my son was involved in Powerplus*’ [Aud19]. Several felt that the project could have more long-term benefits for participants, seeing it as ‘*an invaluable experience [that] could be sufficiently motivating to encourage interest in AS/Alevel/university/career in pupils currently undecided*’ [Aud13]. These longer term outcomes had not been mentioned by students, although many of them had predicted continued involvement in music beyond GCSE. Parents were able to give an additional perspective on the students’ views of *Powerplus* by commenting on the extent to which the project had been mentioned in conversations at home:

‘Quite a lot. Excitement about having a piece performed led to (probable) increased enthusiasm/effort about the composition.’ [Aud12]

‘She has mentioned the project on several occasions and organised tickets etc, transporting other youngsters to hear her piece!’ [Aud20]

‘Not at all – he’s a 15 year old boy!’ [Aud22]

Despite the limitations of teenage conversation skills acknowledged in the third quote above, parents attested to the musical commitment and enthusiasm shown by their children in their school and home lives:

‘An important aspect of his life, particularly his singing – but keeps some things quiet from peers as some of it is “not cool”.’ [Aud9]

‘Music is a central part of my daughter’s school life and her free time. It has given her a real opportunity to contribute.’ [Aud20]

Given the extent of their children’s involvement, these parents are likely to have overheard individual practice and attended school concerts over many years, and so the strong impression generated by the *Powerplus* concert is even more striking. Clearly the concert offered an insight on their children’s work that they had not experienced before, and parents seemed to value the public celebration of their child’s work and that of their peers. Of course, those parents who did attend the concert were the supportive ones and so the questionnaire responses perhaps give a misleadingly positive picture. The

teacher from School B told me that one of his participating students had missed the concert as her parents were out playing Bingo for the evening and she had been required to stay at home and look after her younger brothers. In giving equality of access to students from across the socio-economic range of Sheffield schools, *Powerplus* was effective in levelling the opportunities available to students from different backgrounds, but a project of this kind could not single-handedly compensate for a lack of the parental support that is vital to musical participation in the school years.

## Conclusions

This research fulfilled its evaluative aims in identifying aspects of the *Powerplus* project that were effective, and those which could usefully be developed further. Responses from all three groups of participants showed a high level of satisfaction with the project and an enthusiasm for its continued development. Inevitably, this continuation is dependent on funding, and at the time of writing the future of the project was uncertain. This makes it all the more imperative to draw broader practical and research implications from the project, analysing the reasons for its success and the contributions it made to students' skills and confidence in composing.

## Practical Implications

The potential for developing the *Powerplus* project has been outlined in the course of the discussions above, and consists mainly of extending its various elements: increasing the contact between students and players, and between teachers in different schools; broadening the musical scope of the project to incorporate locally available performing groups; and making more explicit the players' function as role models for aspiring young musicians. Of the few changes recommended for the smooth running of the project in its current form, several were implemented in later phases, including the provision of a microphone for the conductor at concerts and the increased communication between players and students during rehearsals.

In seeking ways to engage students more fully as composers, schools without access to *Powerplus* can still learn from its aims and practices. School-based versions of the project, as suggested by Teacher E, offer one way to increase opportunities for students to hear their work performed live, which has been shown through this research to be a great source of confidence and motivation. Since this approach limits the contact between schools which was also valued by teachers, perhaps another way forward would be for several schools to organize joint concerts, sharing the resources and expertise of their recent school-leavers or more experienced students. Imitating the project by holding concerts in a public venue would add significance to the event, and make the achievements of the students accessible to members of the public, thus connecting them more closely with the 'real' world of musical performance.

More important than replicating the practices of *Powerplus* is fostering a broader discussion of its aims and approaches. Each group of participants commented on the inspiring experience of professional performers taking students' work seriously; in other words, treating students *as* composers, rather than merely requiring them to compose. Students were provided with an authentic musical goal in the form of the concert, and a clear musical task defined by the available instrumentation and the structural models offered at the outset. While the contribution the project work would make to students' GCSE composition folios was inevitably prominent in the teachers' minds, students were



temporarily relieved of concerns about assessment by being encouraged to focus on musical criteria rather than evaluation. These two approaches need to be combined to ensure successful completion of the GCSE course, but the focus on the music itself was valuable in fostering students' enthusiasm for composing at the start of their course.

### Research Implications

The project also holds implications for future research, having contributed to understanding of students' experiences, anxieties, and ambitions as composers. The extent to which the students were able to critique their own work and identify strategies for improvement was striking, and there is potential for further investigation of the musical and descriptive language that young people employ in these processes. Investigating students' attitudes towards composing might also help to shed light on past research on young people's general views of music in the classroom, which have often been portrayed as more negative than was the case in this project (cf. Harland *et al.*, 2000). There is also work to be done in tracing the longitudinal effects of this project and similar initiatives, since little is known about the extent to which positive experiences of music in schools lay the foundations for musical participation in adult life (cf. Pitts, 2005). The majority of these students predicted continued involvement in music, but were often unsure about what form this might take when they moved beyond the educational structures that were familiar to them. Ensuring these connections between school musical life and the wider performance culture was demonstrated to be a valuable effect of *Powerplus*, and is an aim that should be more frequently heard in educational debate.

While the particular perspectives of participant groups came across clearly in the research, there was clearly potential for more detailed case studies, in order that the experience of individual students, teachers, parents and players could be compared with the general findings. With orchestral players increasingly being expected to contribute to educational projects, it would be interesting to investigate the extent to which they feel prepared for this, and the changes these roles have brought to their musical identities (cf. Rogers, 2002). Similarly, 'outreach' or 'partnership' projects bring a challenge to teachers' professional and musical identities, requiring them to renegotiate teacher-student relationships to accommodate the presence of additional experts in the teaching and learning process. Since it is well established that many teachers are already anxious about the teaching of composing (cf. Berkley, 2001; Younker, 2003), a closer examination of the effects of community projects of this kind might help to generate ways of increasing teacher confidence and building supportive professional networks.

The students involved in *Powerplus* referred often to hearing their compositions in 'real life' – contrasting this with their more usual experience of hearing their work through computer software or attempting to play it themselves. Their words point to an important feature of this project and others like it: the forging of connections between 'school' music and the broader musical world, both through contact between professional players and educators, and between the young people as composers and their parents and friends as a public audience. It has been several decades since the sociologist Howard Becker (1982) raised the challenge to make the arts in schools part of the 'art world', and so avoid the danger of them becoming something separate and unsustainable in children's lives. *Powerplus* illustrates one way in which that challenge can be met: researchers and practitioners in music education all have a role to play in recognising and developing other such projects, in order that young people's musical competence and confidence can flourish.

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