



AGAR TRUST

Supporting young musicians
in rural Scotland

Report No 2

Perspectives on music education from youngsters in rural Scotland. A future for blended learning?

Students as researching artists - Music, technology and musicianship, Latimpe Platform May 13-14 2020

Janet Macdonald, May 2020



The Agar Trust supports young people (8-21) resident in rural Scotland who demonstrate exceptional musical ability and potential and wish to further their musical education beyond their local area. It was established in 2014, since when it has made 340 awards.

Dr Janet Macdonald, who founded the Trust, worked previously for the OU in Scotland and has a research background in the use of online media for learning and teaching. She has applied this interest to her discussion of an appropriate strategy for blended learning and teaching in music.

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Background

One of the few positive outcomes of the present Covid crisis is that it has driven a wide variety of online initiatives, bringing music into people's homes. This includes streaming of concerts, whether from home or more historical concert hall performances, offers of online masterclasses, recorded clips from professionals about life as a musician, or advice on technique, and initiatives to "bring people together" by encouraging folk to submit pre-recorded parts of singing or playing, and then splicing them together to form a composite performance. It has certainly raised the profile of these applications with the potential to support education. It raises the question in what context might these applications be appropriate in "normal" times for the education of youngsters in rural areas? Certainly, the lockdown has given everyone the opportunity to experience a sense of isolation, so potentially we have a better understanding of one of the challenges of studying in rural areas. But in what contexts is online learning going to be the way forward for supporting young musicians in rural areas?

This paper discusses previous work on the use of online media for education in rural areas, and then goes on to describe a study of youngsters from rural Scotland and their perceptions of a variety of educational activities which they have undertaken. It proposes a model for making decisions on what in future might take place online and what needs to continue to take place in-person.

How and why is online tuition used for music education in rural areas?

The literature on the use of online for music education in rural areas is primarily concerned with music tuition to groups of youngsters in schools. We discuss here why it has been used, and how various innovations have contributed to enhancing levels of *interaction* between tutor and students. We note a balance between the levels of interaction achievable and the costs of implementation.

In an early study of online music education in northern Finland (Maki 2001) student teachers from the University of Oulu set out to support educational equality by providing tuition to youngsters in a secondary school some 600 km away, in a village where there was no music teacher. The project worked well, although in common with other projects, careful preparation was needed and teachers needed to be flexible during lessons in order to accommodate regular technical failures. A similar study of distance teaching in Arctic Scandinavia using videoconference (Brändström et al 2012) was focused on tuition for groups of children in a remote school classroom. In both cases, the opportunity for online tuition arose in a school where there were few alternatives, because of their remote geography and it seems likely that this fact contributed to the acceptability of the approach.

A project from Indiana university (Finney, L.M., 2017) involved the online teaching of guitar to groups of beginner students in two rural schools. Locally based classroom assistants were employed to help interpret the instructions and to run regular break-out groups in which students had an opportunity to try out techniques which had been taught online. It seems to have been a successful model: both staff and students were positive about the experiment, and we note how the use of locally based staff increased the possibilities for interaction.

Probably the most extensive recent study of online music tuition to rural areas comes from the Connect/Resound project in rural England (King et al, 2019; Savage, 2017). The project, which is still ongoing, involves a combination of instrumental tuition, streaming of live performances and CPD for teachers (www.nymaz.org.uk/connectresound). Initially working in rural areas of North Yorkshire, tutors operating from music hubs gave lessons in clarinet, guitar and violin to primary schools. There followed a roll-out in Cornwall, Cumbria, Darlington and Durham, and the East Riding of Yorkshire. They report significant savings in the travel budget and students were enthusiastic about their lessons. They noted few differences between online and in-person tuition, in the use of a range of activities, including asking questions, giving advice, feedback, demonstrating and modelling, and pupils playing. However, accompanying by the tutors was very difficult and rarely attempted and this is a common problem with the present use of domestic broadband for music tuition.

In a similar vein, a project in the Western Isles of Scotland, e-Sgoil, (<http://www.e-sgoil.com/>; pers comm 15/04/20) provides weekly music tuition to schools in other parts of the islands. They give lessons online for two weeks and face to face sessions for the third, which allows for any misunderstandings between tutor and students to be resolved and increases the level of interaction achievable. In common with the work on the Connect/Resound project, they report significant savings in the travel budget, which have been diverted to the paying of instrumental tutors.

Clearly the use of online for music tuition has brought significant economic benefits to organisers and the possibilities of opening new doors for students who live remotely. It is also a sustainable, low carbon solution. In terms of the interaction which it supports, there is scope for the tutor to talk and play to the youngsters, and for them to play to the tutor, either individually, or as a group. However, there are certain limitations. While tuition to individuals, or groups of students at schools is commonly in use in some areas, any project which might involve groups playing together over a distance is currently difficult to implement because of the challenges imposed by technology, in particular latency, which is the time delay between the sound and visual signals.

Recent developments have made it possible for professional musicians to play together over thousands of kilometers. There have been a number of successful projects using this technology and it could have great potential for joining groups of young musicians to a wider community in other parts of the country, effectively “levelled out social distance” (Crump & Twyford, 2010). This audio-visual streaming system called Lola has so far been concentrated on centres which are connected to a university network, where network speeds are high. It is not technology for reaching students’ homes and is probably more suited to occasional events which involve groups of students, because of costs and infrastructure.

Davies (2020) describes a study which focused on the effectiveness of LOLA (LOW Latency), for distributed music practice. She describes rehearsals, masterclasses, coaching and performances with distributed groups. This included jazz musicians working between Edinburgh Napier university and Maastricht Exhibition and Congress Centre, as well as a masterclass involving musicians from Hebrides Ensemble with James Macmillan working together with students in the Royal College of Music, London and Tartini Conservatory, Trieste. Students had access to musicians they would not otherwise get to meet; and they were able to rehearse and perform with remote colleagues.

In Norway, students at Trondheim and Oslo universities are currently undertaking a joint Master’s programme in Music, Communication and Technology, working at a distance of 500km between campuses (Fasciani et al, 2020). Permanent studios have been set up on both campuses and over the last 18 months of daily use, both students and teachers report being able to collaborate and perform together almost as if they were on the same campus.

Redman (2020) who is a postgraduate research student at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland has been assessing responses of both students and staff to the use of LoLa and other tools to mediate instrumental music lessons. By using LoLa between the conservatoire and Edinburgh Napier University he successfully played drum duets with a distant partner, whilst making only modest demands on the network. A demonstration to teaching staff at the conservatoire in Sept 2019 showed how guitar lessons could be given from the conservatoire to students at Napier University. He comments: *“The teacher was able to play at the same time as the student, to assist with phrasing, timing and articulation and to give commentary during the performance.”*

There is great potential here for opening the doors for rurally based young musicians to wider communities beyond the local area. But inevitably, it is challenging for these options to provide as rich a level of interaction and reciprocal energy as in-person contact can achieve, and it is a question of balancing this against the practicalities.

Music education in rural Scotland

Scotland contains some 9% of the UK population which is dispersed over an area which amounts to more than one third of the total UK land mass, including four major clusters of inhabited islands. Over 90% of Scotland’s landmass is classified as rural. While overall the population density is low, two thirds of the population live in urban areas (pale green and blue). The Scottish government has a useful map (Fig 1) which provides a graphical illustration of urban and rural areas. The dark green areas are those which are most remote.

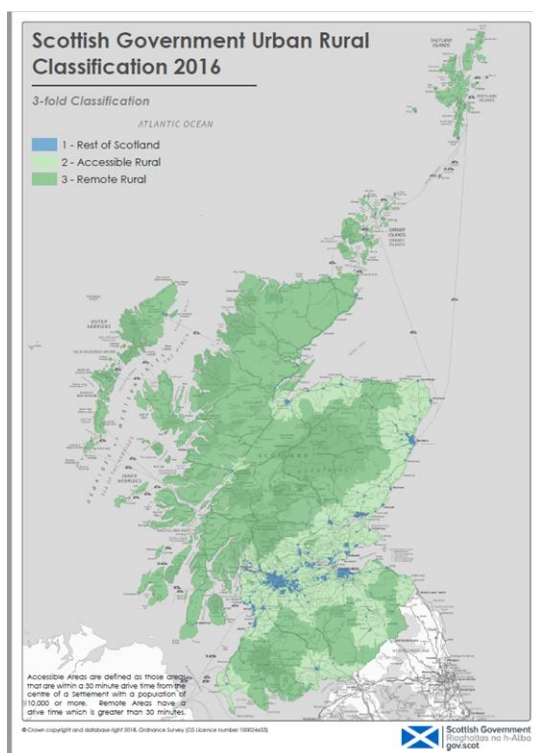


Fig 1: Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification (2016)

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-government-urban-rural-classification-2016/pages/2/>

In specialist musical education there has, not surprisingly, been a concentration of services in the urban areas, where more people live. And sadly, high-speed broadband services are not yet widely available to mitigate the challenges of living remotely.

The Agar Trust

The Agar Trust was set up in 2014 to support the educational progression of young musicians (8-21) in rural Scotland who have had lessons near home and wish to take up additional specialist educational opportunities which are not available locally. Whilst application is open to all ages within this range, the majority are in their mid-teens, from 12-16. Attending such opportunities commonly involves extra days off school, as well as long journeys and extra nights in hotels. Over the last five years the Trust has made a total of 320 awards to 194 individuals, primarily to cover the additional travel and subsistence costs in attending these educational activities. Many youngsters have returned to us year on year, as they progressed with their study. The map in Fig 2 shows where the latest award holders from 2019 are located.

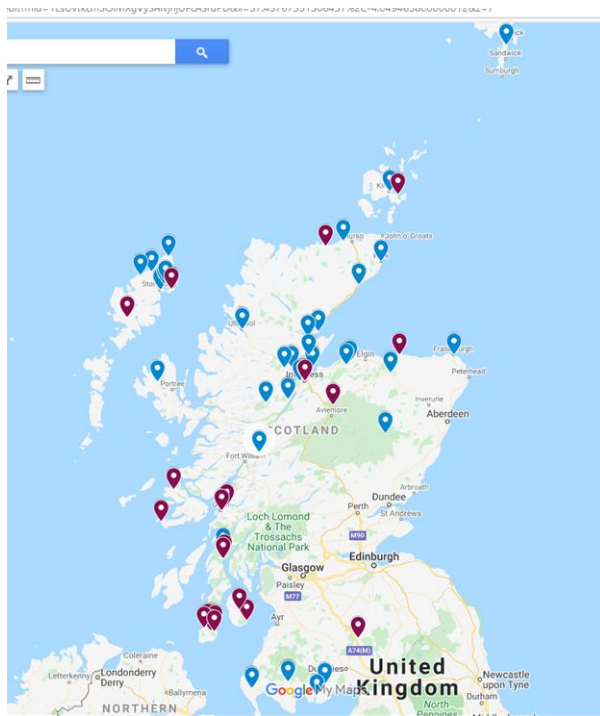


Fig 2: Agar Trust awards 2019

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1LsUvtkcm5OiMXgVySAivjhjUPcASrdPD&usp=sharing>

Methodology

The findings described here provide a case study of award holders' experiences of living remotely from educational opportunities in music, and their experiences of the events to which they travelled. Our data is drawn from a combination of quantitative data from our records over the last five years and qualitative data from around 300 completion reports which award holders are required to submit after they have attended the educational opportunity, together with ad hoc comments from parents and music tutors. One question in the completion reports is "How did the award help you?" and this has provided the responses illustrated here.

By repeated reading of the completion reports it was possible to identify a number of common trends in behaviour and attitudes. The aim was to derive as full a picture as possible of the variations in perspectives of award holders, based on the principles of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), contributing a rich picture of students as researchers.

What educational opportunities did they attend?

Since the focus of the Trust is on supporting youngsters in educational progression, the majority of courses attended include national youth orchestras, brass bands, choirs, pipe bands, or a wide variety of other courses organised by Junior conservatoire, universities, or independent charities. Most of these opportunities are held in the Easter and summer holidays. They commonly involve a variety of activities, including whole group work, individual tuition, sectional rehearsals, performances, masterclasses and sometimes exams. These activities offer different levels of interaction: while some involve a tutor talking or playing to an individual or a group, others involve youngsters in playing together.

Other educational opportunities attended, for example Junior conservatoire, music schools or conservatoire, provide a similar range of activities, but since they involve continuous attendance during the term, they can provide opportunities to study at greater depth.

Ed opportunities attended by award holders 2019	Percentage of award holders attending
National orchestras, bands or choirs	49%
Other short courses	21%
Music school/conservatoire	10%
Junior conservatoire	8%
Private lessons	5%
Auditions/exams	5%
Regional orchestras	2%

Fig 3: Educational opportunities attended by award holders in 2019

Where are the challenges?

A number of common challenges are faced by youngsters and their families. First and foremost, there is journey time to educational opportunities, which may involve extra time off school. There may also be additional accommodation for family members who accompany their children, all of which incurs an associated cost. For this reason alone, short courses or music school which include accommodation are very much appreciated. It also means that attending one day events, such as masterclasses, may simply not be feasible.

Living on a small island taking part in all these engagements meant two days of travelling each time, and also arranging accommodation. It meant travelling on ferries, buses and trains. (Juliet, voice, national youth choir)

.. to use the Benbecula-Glasgow flight would mean I could reliably attend practices without taking extra days off school for travelling.. (bagpipes, national youth pipe band)

The absolute cheapest way we can go is to take the ferry and drive. We have to stay overnight as to drive all the way is dangerous (8 hours). We spend the day in Glasgow and stay with relatives before driving home on the Sunday, taking the evening boat back home. Unfortunately, we can't do this all year as over the winter the weather is too bad to take the ferry and she gets sick, so we have to fly. (parent, re. attendance at RCS Juniors from Orkney)

These award holders would never have started their musical journeys without tuition near home. It has given them a foot on the ladder and inspired them to work harder. However, for more advanced pupils it can be challenging to get tuition from a specialist teacher as they may not always be available locally. As ever, we have heartfelt admiration for the parents who make these journeys possible.

*Although I'm his double bass teacher, I'm actually a cellist.
(Cello tutor)*

National orchestra courses are the only time I get tuition from a specialist tuba player as my school tutor is really a trombonist. (Harriet, tuba, national youth orchestra)

I attend regular singing lessons. But each trip involves a 250 mile return car journey... (Jake, voice, individual tuition)

Others have commented on the lack of local opportunities to make music with other youngsters having similar interests, or abilities at a similar level.

Coming from a small village in Argyll there are hardly, if no opportunities to play in any orchestra of any type... (Gavin, tuba, conservatoire)

*She is the only one of her age group that plays an instrument to this level
(Violin tutor)*

Locally based orchestras, bands and choirs, where they are available, play a significant role in providing experience in playing and singing with others. It can be very challenging to audition for a national orchestra, band or choir unless there have been opportunities to gain some experience by playing with a group nearer home.

In spite of these challenges, many families do make the journey, and there is so much enthusiasm from the youngsters, as the following account describes.

What do they value?

One of the commonest observations by award holders is the growth in **skills and confidence** which they experienced, whilst attending a short course.

The two performances improved my technique drastically and the whole experience playing with such a talented orchestra left me wanting to go back.. (Edward, cello, national youth orchestra)

By playing in a trio I had to do more in the music as I am playing the melody as well as covering the chords, this was very challenging, but it was a great push for my playing. (Neil, pianist, national youth jazz orchestra)

This has been the highlight of my year so far. I loved playing accordion before but now I feel more confident in everything about how I play, how I sit, how I hold my arm and even my facial expression while playing. (Darroch, accordion, short course)

The development of skills and confidence is probably the most commonly cited outcome of music education, regardless of where students live. However, there were other, more emotive experiences reported by these youngsters. Many commented on the value of **community**: how important and enjoyable it was to meet, and make music with, other youngsters with similar interests to their own.

I made a lot of friends and we all share the love of music. It was amazing to be able to sing with them and all the other girls, and to be able to create such an amazing sound and feeling together. I am so pleased I could go to the course and I wouldn't swap it for the world. (Charlotte, voice, national youth choir)

Being able to play with other young musicians from all over Scotland, I have improved my technical skills and musicianship. I have also made many good friends and have great memories from rehearsing, performing, living and playing with them during my courses. (Sam, oboe, national youth orchestra)

I realised that there are a lot of teenage boys like me who like singing. There aren't many here and it gave me confidence to enjoy my singing and keep going with it. Sometimes I have been tempted to give up my singing, but I won't now. (Oscar, voice, national youth choir)

It gave me the chance to meet new friends and to gain more confidence and see a glimpse of the outside world. I had so much fun and have made friends for life. Do not be put off if none of your friends are going because you make new friends and there are so many different people from all over. The time away from home gives you a sense of independence. (Merryn, violin, regional orchestra)

Not only does meeting other young musicians feed their enthusiasm, and encourage them to practise more diligently, it also challenges them, provides a shift from the familiar and gives them an opportunity to measure their skills against others. And it may be an incentive to return to the course in the following year.

The importance of belonging to a community which involves others with similar interests is a reflection of early work by Wenger (1998) who comments: "While a neighbourhood is often called a community it may not be one unless there is mutual engagement, and joint enterprise and a shared perspective." In rural areas, this may not necessarily take place for those with a particular area of interest. While the joy of making music with others is a vital part of music making for any youngster (see for example Kokotsaki & Hallam, 2007; Bartolome, 2013) it may have even more significance for youngsters in remote areas, who may otherwise be studying on their own.

Youngsters also commonly remark on the **inspiration and excitement** they have received from attendance at these educational activities. It is very much part of the encouragement to work harder and achieve as much as they are able.

The end concert in the big hall was brilliant as I have never played in a big orchestra before. It was amazing to hear all our week's work coming together. I would love to have the opportunity to come again and I have talked to my friends about my week: next year they want to come too. (Jazmine, violin, short course)

I was able to learn from some amazing musicians and hear so much different music. ...and I enjoyed the challenge of playing new pieces with different band members. (Cara, flugelhorn, national youth brass band)

Getting to be tutored by an amazing cellist such as Su-a Lee was something that has widened my view on the world of a professional musician and has inspired me to try as hard as I can to get to that level. (Sandy, cello, national youth orchestra)

This is very much about experiencing new horizons: something which might arise from meeting and hearing a professional in the field, or perhaps the new experience of being part of a large performing group.

How might online learning contribute to meeting these needs?

To what extent might the use of online media help to alleviate the challenges, whilst supporting the values our youngsters describe here? Whilst there are clearly considerable economic benefits to institutions in adopting online tuition, it is also important to consider equity in provision between urban and rural populations when planning any provision which includes students from all areas. There is certainly a danger of discriminating by provide online “options” which do not give those from remote areas an equivalent experience to those living in more urban areas. At the same time, the use of online media can open up opportunities to join with other communities beyond the local area, and generally to deconstruct, and plan educational provision in new ways.

There is a strong argument for considering what learning presently takes place, before considering in what ways this might be supported by technology or by in-person interaction (Macdonald, 2008). As Beetham & Sharpe comment: “*We should be in the business of locating the new technologies within proven practices and models of teaching*” (Beetham & Sharpe 2007, p3).

We suggest it may be helpful to focus on various *activities* in order to re-consider the level of *interaction* which each involves, as well as the *value* youngsters place on these activities. In many educational organisations this process has already begun, with the onset of home schooling propelled by Covid and the necessity to consider new options. We have referred here to a few activities as examples: individual tuition, as well as group work, sectional rehearsals, performances, masterclasses and sometimes exams.

Turning now to the student experience, they are clearly hugely appreciative of the opportunity to play or sing with others, and there is certainly evidence here of the value they place in building skills and confidence. Closely associated with this is the importance of community: learning from fellow students and also of being inspired by excellence, whether from fellow students or from professionals. It is very possible that many of the values described here by youngsters from rural areas are shared by youngsters from all geographical areas, though we suggest that they may be even more important to those from a remote background. Arguably, these values may not be equally important for all activities: for example, some activities may provide inspiration, whilst being of limited value in building skills and competence.

Finally, it is probably useful to assess the level of interaction which online alternatives could afford, for each of these activities. For example, while learning about technique, a video could provide basic help (fairly minimal interaction), but in order to check that the student had actually put the technique into practice, the tutor would need to see them, and comment (considerably richer interaction).

These decisions will also depend on the technology which is available: whilst distance tuition to youngsters in one school can be achieved using broadband, any activity involving groups playing together over a distance would need to make use of more sophisticated technology. For example,

there might be scope for making masterclasses more widely available to include remote groups, or for arranging some online rehearsals involving remote and more urban groups, combined with in-person rehearsal, if suitable technology were in place to support this. Lola and similar innovations are “waiting in the wings”. And of course, online can be used in combination with in-person sessions, where friendships and community can be built. We do need to remember that no online solution presently available can support the richness of interaction which is possible when meeting in-person. All these considerations leave us with a difficult balance. The elements which may need to be considered are summarised in this diagram.

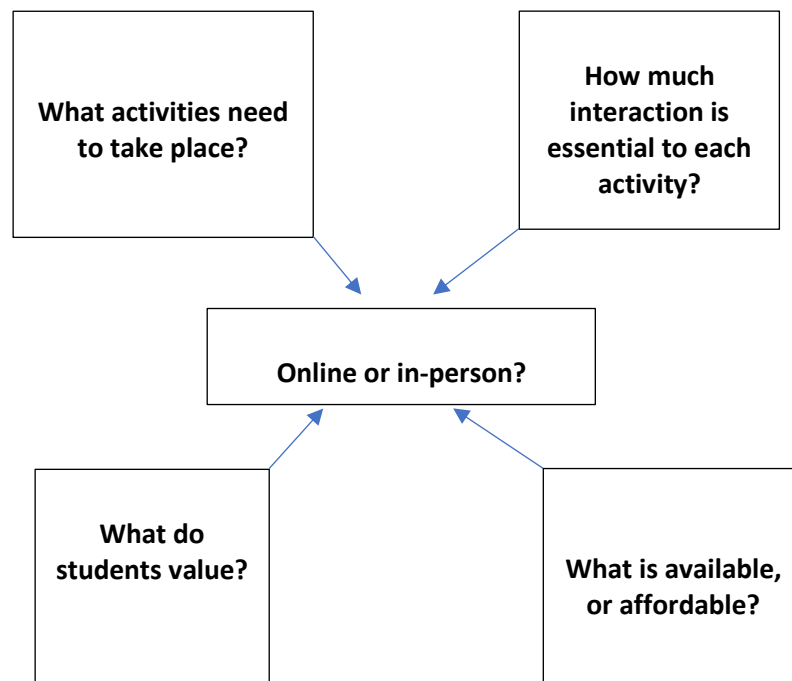


Fig 4: Planning a blended strategy for music tuition

One of the most exciting things about using online media for music tuition is that it challenges us to reflect on areas of practice which have long been familiar. In particular, we have to think about the contribution of the online component to a blended approach, where some of the traditionally accepted benefits of classroom teaching may be taking place in other ways. It remains to be established how many of the values described by our “students as researchers” from remote Scotland can be realised in this way. Finally, this study may serve to remind us that in-person interaction makes a very considerable contribution to the development of young musicians and always to the joy of studying and playing music with others.

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