

# Assessment with Orff-Schulwerk Pedagogy in the Chinese Junior High School Music Classroom

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the necessity and applicability of the Orff-schulwerk approach as an assessment principle to Chinese music classroom assessment. Previous research has focused on discussing how Schulwerk-based instruction appropriate for formative and summative assessments. However, the combining of the Orff-Schulwerk pedagogy with the assessment mechanism of the Chinese junior high school music classroom has not been more discussed. This article criticizes the summative assessment of music in Chinese junior high school, and highlights the fact that the Orff-Schulwerk approach is able to provide Chinese music practitioners with an inner direction featuring creativity at the heart of assessment.

**Keywords:** *Music education, Assessment, Orff-Schulwerk, Chinese junior high school, Creativity*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Assessment plays a crucial role in successful, thoughtful, regular music teaching. Assessment informs both teachers and learners about student progress and forms a guide for teaching practice [11]. In China, the teaching system is influenced by an exam-oriented habitus, the result of which is that the music classroom has long used summative assessment to assess learning outcomes [21]. Evaluating the effectiveness of music teaching has been a focus of attention in Chinese music education theory for some time, with the debate focussing on the use of scores and grades as criteria for evaluating students' musical ability, or teachers conducting personal evaluation based on their subjective judgement. Lingli (2008) points out that neither of those options reveal the essence of music evaluation in secondary schools. Consequently, Chinese music educators have been searching for a more feasible and effective method of conducting music assessment. From a global perspective, the Orff Schulwerk approach is a long revered pedagogy by music educators around the world, being regarded as essentially aesthetic education; an interdisciplinary approach that goes beyond easily assessable musical performances, celebrating the creative connections between music, movement, and speech [11]. Combining these phenomena, this essay focuses on the principles and methods of assessment

according to the Orff Schulwerk approach, providing a critique of the summative assessment of music in Chinese junior high schools.

The first part of this essay provides a reflection on the essence and philosophy of the Orff Schulwerk approach and the necessity of applying assessment principles centred on that approach to the assessment of music classroom teaching in Chinese junior high schools. The second part then analyses the notion of a combined formative and summative assessment approach based on Orff Schulwerk teaching in terms of its applicability to Chinese junior high school music classrooms. The final section focuses on assessors in Orff-based approaches, and the professional demands placed on teachers in the context of this assessment mechanism.

## 2. UNDERSTANDING ORFF-SCHULWERK

Orff Schulwerk, named after German composer Carl Orff (1895 – 1982), is a creative approach to movement and music education which involves singing, instrumentals, speech, and movement activities. Tens of thousands of music teachers throughout the world implement Orff-Schulwerk pedagogy to engage their students and promote creativity [11]. In his speech at the opening of the Orff Academy in Salzburg, Carl Orff mentioned that he strongly encouraged his students to activate their creativity by playing their own music, that

is, by improvising themselves. At the same time, Orff did not want to train them on highly developed artistic instruments, but rather on instruments that were preferably rhythmic, relatively easy to learn, primitive and uncomplicated for the students [15].

### **3. PHILOSOPHICAL IDEAS**

Johnson (2019) asserts that the Orff-Schulwerk approach is full of philosophical wisdom and, in essence, is itself aesthetic education. What is very striking is that Orff's pedagogy combines music, instrumental music, movement and language. He believed that music, movement and language were not separate entities in themselves, but that they formed a unity [11]. This interdisciplinary approach goes beyond easily assessable musical performances and celebrates the creative bonds of music, movement, language and speech [12].

One of the hallmarks of Orff-Schulwerk is its focus on elemental music; by focusing on the basic elements of music, Orff conceptualised his method as a traditional approach to teaching music. Orff's approach, as an alternative to studying an established vocal or instrumental repertoire, focuses on making music with the body, such as through movement and body percussion, using phonics and phonology (for example, rhythmic patterns in spoken language), singing folk songs, and playing specialised classroom instruments (e.g., xylophones, bells, and metal organs). The pedagogy using movement and body percussion emphasises active music making while reducing the influence of musical notation [13].

A second central, albeit more esoteric, feature of Schulwerk is the humanising effect it instils; Schulwerk promotes a sense of community with far-reaching humanising effects by sharing, exploring, discovering, and creating sound and movement [15]. Dawei (2011) also notes that subjectivity, practicality, and individuality are all well represented in the Orff-Schulwerk pedagogy.

### **4. CHINESE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL MUSIC ASSESSMENT**

In China, I have experienced music being excluded from examination subjects and being viewed as the least important subject. The assessment of learning music which does take place is more oriented towards knowledge and skills. According to the Index System for Assessing the Quality of Arts in Chinese Primary and Secondary Schools (2015), the index content of the academic indicators is divided into two aspects: basic knowledge and basic skills. Schools are also required to assess and grade students on the basic knowledge of general music knowledge, musical works and related genres and musicians, as well as the basic skills of vocal singing and instrumental performance that appear in the music textbooks for grades 7, 8 and 9. Often, a paper test

is given or a set number of songs are sung by the student, with the student's merit then being determined by the score [21]. In Yaqi's (2018) survey on music classroom assessment in three junior high schools in China, it was mentioned that the percentage of teachers who had received theoretical knowledge or courses related to professional teaching evaluation in the three secondary schools was 28.1%, while the remaining 71.9% of music teachers did not receive theoretical knowledge or courses in this area. In addition, only 31.3% of the music teachers had developed specific music assessment criteria for their classes, and 68.7% of the teachers did not have specific assessment criteria for their classes. At the same time, the questionnaire data showed that 21.9% of teachers used the results of regular tests as the main basis for students' academic performance; 40.6% used the results of final exams as the main basis for students' academic performance; 12.5% used the results of various art activities as the main basis for students' academic performance: after combining the three types of results, the percentage of teachers who used them as the main basis for students' academic performance The percentage of students whose academic performance was evaluated based on the three types of results was 25%. From the questionnaire, it was found that Chinese music teachers do not have an explicit understanding of the ways and means of assessment, and the system of music teaching assessment in China has great defects and problems [29]. Although Chinese teachers have considerable autonomy in music assessment, the lack of assessment criteria to stimulate students' interest in learning and the excessive focus on students' learning of basic music knowledge and skills in the assessment process can easily lead teachers to neglect students' individual differences and students' emotional experiences in music learning.

The General Offices of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council issued guidance titled 'Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving Aesthetic Education in Schools in the New Era' on the 15th October 2020, stating that music will be included in examination items included in the Chinese Examination. The new regulations set out that music be assessed through a combination of a written test (music literacy) and a practical test, with the written test comprising of 60 points (including 30 points for the audio-visual test). As such, summative assessment has become the major form of assessing music in junior high schools in China, with students taking written exams, sight-reading and listening tests [21].

The excessive focus on paper-and-pencil tests by schools and teachers can lead to an overemphasis on knowledge and neglect of the assessment of students' aesthetic sensibilities, artistic expression, and cultural understanding during the learning process [29]. An alternative form of assessment would be peer feedback and self-feedback, which are synergistic effects of the feedback loop which is so essential if learners are to

experience authentic and complex learning environments [15]. While summative assessment is a natural outgrowth of formative assessment, it should not be the only criterion for assessment. When teachers, administrators, or schools over-emphasise summative assessment, educational matters and the all-important formative assessment necessary for the feedback cycle become side-lined, leading to music 'learning' becoming an abstract concept about music, aimed only at training students in technical, notational, and aural skills, or completing levels. Thus, music education becomes discipline-centric as opposed to involving a continuous, harmonious process that integrates learner and disciplinary experiences, as is found in eudaimonic teaching, learning, and assessment [6]. Summative assessment is overly purposeful, and this fixed pattern as an assessment system has a great impact on modern middle school music teaching. Schools and teachers ignore students' process performance and use result-oriented as the criterion of judgment, which itself carries a strong discriminatory mentality. Such evaluation methods only seriously lead to increasing differentiation of students [30].

## **5. JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**

Eccles et al. (1984) state that a large number of young adolescents develop heightened negativity towards both school and themselves following the commencement of junior high school. Learners' anxiety about school increases [7] and at the same time their intrinsic motivation towards study drops [Harter, 1981; Harter et al., 1987]. Furthermore, at that age learners have lower ability self-concepts in comparison to younger learners [27]. The special age-specific characteristics junior high school students have during their transitional period into adolescence involves their psychological condition, behavioural patterns, and ways of thinking undergoing vital and significant changes [31]. Xiaozhong (2019) further points out that when Chinese students enter junior high school studies there is a sudden rise in academic pressure, including an increase in the number of examinations, leading to high emotional fluctuations.

Indeed, adolescence is a critical age requiring research, and music is highly relevant to emotion regulation, especially in adolescents. Most intense music-related experiences take place during adolescence and early adulthood [Gabrielsson & Lindström Wik, 2003]. This period of life is also a transitional period which involves a multitude of developmental challenges which can lead to emotional instability and as such, increased demands on emotion regulation [22]. Consequently, turning music into an examination subject which causes stress in junior school students at a sensitive time would be a complete departure from the original purpose of learning music. While written examinations generally do test students' mastery of

knowledge, summative written examinations as music assessment falls short in terms of stimulating students' interest in music and enriching their creativity and may also make them avoid music learning to avoid examinations [32]. Not to say that summative assessment is without merit, but the approach of assessing students exclusively through examinations or summative assessment as the only assessment mechanism is ill-advised.

In contrast to the above, the aesthetic education of Orff-Schulwerk is strongly aligned with the nature of music education, especially for young people. Orff-Schulwerk focuses on the rhythmic movement of the body, emphasising the active creation of music as opposed to the passive reception of knowledge [10]. The Chinese context has involved students having been in an exam-driven educational environment for a long time, passively receiving knowledge and reciting it back as their main way of learning [31]. The Orff-Schulwerk emphasis on creativity can increase students' self-expression and allow for the harmonious development of the whole personality [1], which is at the core of the adoption of the Orff-Schulwerk approach for assessment. If Orff-Schulwerk can be used to assess students' musical abilities, it may be a more practical and effective assessment method for Chinese junior high school students. The following section proposes a combined formative and summative assessment method, based on Orff-Schulwerk teaching, for application to the Chinese junior high school music assessment system. This is intended to be done without deviating from the core values of Orff-Schulwerk, and is done through an intrinsic analysis of the teaching method.

## **6. THE ORFF-SCHULWERK IN ASSESSMENT**

The primary task of music education in middle school is to provide a basic music education foundation. Elliott and others put forward that basic music education includes a focus on effective, democratic reasons for, and civic education about and through, music for performing, improvising, composing, arranging, and performing/leading music [6]. As such, basic music education enables students to make and listen to music for their own and others' meaningfulness, well-being, self-worth, and musical satisfaction. However, excessively strict classroom discipline in China constrains students' behaviour and limits their opportunities to express their creative thinking. Educational evaluation criteria are overly homogeneous; the admissions examination system is measured by the same criteria, featuring an excessive focus on the evaluation of results, with that evaluation being heavily focused on grades [9]. Creativity is a core aspect of Orff-Schulwerk and developing students' interest in music and

nurturing their motivation to actively participate in musical activities are essential aims of the approach [12].

The American Orff-Schulwerk Association (AOSA) developed the Basic Pedagogy component of the Level Orff Schulwerk Course, which comprise of six musical elements and eight learning outcomes.

The learning objectives organised by six musical elements are:

1. Time, Rhythm, and Meter
2. Melody
3. Accompaniment Texture
4. Form
5. Timbre
6. Expression

[American Orff Schulwerk Association, 2013: 2; cited in Johnson, 2019]

Learning Objectives:

1. Speech
2. Performing Body Percussion and Playing Unpitched Percussion Instruments
3. Singing
4. Playing Pitched Instruments
5. Playing Recorder
6. Movement
7. Improvisation, Composition, Orchestration
8. Pedagogy

[American Orff Schulwerk Association, cited in Johnson, 2019]

The purpose of assessment in school music education is to stimulate students' participation in musical activities through assessment mechanisms rather than measure students' musical level or learning [15]. The assessment objectives linked to the learning outcomes in the Orff – Schulwerk approach can greatly help teachers improve their assessment, and in turn help them improve their teaching skills and enrich their teaching content. Assessment methods and teaching methods cannot be discussed in isolation due to their interconnectedness resulting from the washback effect, which also cements the organic linking of assessment mechanisms and learning content [14]. That is to say, it is difficult to discuss teaching, curricula, and assessment in complete separation, as all three are closely integrated in the learning-teaching feedback cycle of education. Should assessment be carried out using the Orff-Schulwerk approach, the eight learning outcomes mandated in the pedagogy become the goals teachers need to work towards, meaning their classroom behaviour and

classroom activities will harmonise with those assessment requirements. Orman (2002), in a study of the classrooms of 30 experienced teachers, 26 of whom had attended Orff training, found a lower rate of off-task behaviour in fast-paced and energetic teaching environments, with the proportion of students actively engaged in music making higher in those classes. Furthermore, teachers' behaviours were also found to be closely associated with the musical activities. Positive musical behaviour creates a positive learning environment for all participants [2].

The benefits are not limited to teachers. Johnson (2003) found that Year 4 and 5 students who received Orff-based instruction focusing on melodic and improvisational discrimination were able to achieve higher levels of auditory discrimination and had more positive emotional responses. Orff-based instruction also led to a significant increase in kinaesthetic accuracy in fourth graders doing rhythmic tasks when body percussion was used to demonstrate a given rhythm. Further evidence comes from Johnson (2011), who reports Year 5 students who received Orff-based instruction showing significantly higher response scores in music listening experiences when compared to students receiving parallel instruction.

### **6.1. Improvisation and Composition**

Seidenberg (1986) made two important recommendations:

- 1) Composing should be a basic part of the musical curriculum
- 2) Grade six (students aged 12 years old) is an appropriate level to introduce composition

Improvisation is perhaps one of the most challenging tasks for teachers from a pedagogical and assessment perspective, with researchers in agreement that modelling can be an effective teaching strategy [24]. However, assessing improvisation is a further point of disagreement; students must demonstrate learning intentions even when their efforts do not lead to sustained achievement [Janovjak et al., 1996]. This paper suggests that improvisation and composition be assessed by a combination of summative assessment and student self-assessment.

Under the proposal of Seidenberg (1986), I suggest that Chinese junior high students' improvisation and composition skills can be assessed at the end of each semester by students being given a certain amount of time to complete assessment on their own, rather than through in-class assessment. Individual compositions are used as a criterion for final assessment, with students asked to present their compositional inspirations in short words during the last lesson of each semester. Their best pieces can be exhibited, and other pieces will not be

marked, but instead given a textual evaluation offering students advice and guidance on how to develop. Assessment in text form enables students to reduce the stress associated with grades and help to stimulate students' interest in composing.

Richardson (1983) states that there is a low correlation between teachers' assessment of creativity and examinations. Although teachers may be reluctant to admit it, the Guilford (1959) found no necessary correlation between students' musical creativity and teachers' evaluations. As such, student self-reflection is a more effective form of creativity-related assessment.

## **6.2. Singing and Playing Instruments**

Singing should not be overlooked in school education. Adolescents suffer general embarrassment about singing, which stems in part from their vocal cords being a vulnerable part of the adolescent body, affecting their ability to sing; most secondary school students relate adverse reactions to singing activities, further putting them off singing [1]. As such, this paper does not recommend singing as a component of summative assessment in junior school music assessment (e.g., having students sing a song in class for a final grade). Performance anxiety is a very real problem for a large proportion of musicians across all age groups and abilities, and negative summative assessments can exacerbate such anxiety [8]. Therefore, this paper considers it desirable for singing and playing an instrument to be used as formative assessments, which should contribute to alleviating the pressure on students to perform.

After teaching correct singing posture and method, it is recommended here that for group practice in the classroom, teachers combine pitched instruments and rhythm instruments with singing. This combined activity can be a form of formative assessment, meaning teachers should be able to identify any difficulties or problems which arise when students sing, allowing them to adjust their teaching methods and progress in a timely manner.

In the Orff-Schulwerk approach, a song is not sung in class simply because it is worth learning, but more because it is fun and sounds good to sing [23]. When singing is not viewed as a task or a form of summative assessment in the music classroom, students will be more likely to fully engage in classroom singing activities.

## **6.3. Teacher As a Facilitator in Assessment**

The Orff-Schulwerk Approach to teaching music to children consists of music and movement, both of which come naturally to children. Orff-Schulwerk does not constitute a specific teaching method but is instead offers more of a philosophy of music education; the Orff-Schulwerk teacher can take ideas from the pupils and is

thus given plenty of scope for improvisation and invention [18]. Since assessment was not an integral part of the original Orff-Schulwerk, teacher assessment takes many forms. Teacher educators and Orff arts scholars can guide teachers towards authentic, organic assessment of students through both formative and summative forms without straying too far from the core of Orff's teaching [11]. Which means that the teacher is not a dictator but a facilitator when using the Orff- Schulwerk to assess. It requires giving students space and a sense of ownership of their own learning. So, teachers have a great deal of flexibility and students have a similar degree of autonomy. In teaching and assessing using the Orff-Schulwerk approach, teachers should aspire to be fully creative and critical in assessing students authentically and effectively through a variety of formats.

In Orff-Schulwerk, as singing is integral, so too then is the teacher's self-awareness of their own voice. Music teachers are often graduates of professional music schools, although they specialise in different instruments (as opposed to singing). While they may well all be excellent musicians in their own right, singing may not be an area of fortitude for any of them. The Orff-Schulwerk approach promotes singing for everyone, regardless of their voice condition or quality. Music teachers do not need to sing as well as a professional singer, but they must not deprive their students of the right to sing simply because they (the teachers) are less competent singers [23]. This is particularly true of musical activities in Orff-Schulwerk music classes, as singing gives students the opportunity to be musicians - whether as singers, performers, or dancers [23]. Therefore, music classrooms in which the Orff-Schulwerk approach is used in assessment, teachers must be aware of their own voices and be adept at using singing to teach music.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

Elliott et al. (2019) state that the philosophy underlying music education emphasises that music-making should include active reflection and critical reflexive action dedicated to supporting and promoting human flourishing and well-being, the moral care of others, and the positive transformation of people's daily lives.

Assessment in education cannot, and perhaps should not, be fully standardised. Education is, or should be, about learning how to solve human and educational problems in an environment which values mutual discussion, expression, intrinsic motivation, intersubjectivity, respect, and self-efficacy [5]. So, while skills and theoretical common sense do have a central place in these processes [5], the role assessment actually plays in classroom teaching and learning must be considered. Noddings (2007) reminds us that: "many

bright creative people are not good test takers and children develop at different rates" (p.68).

The long-term goal of assessment is to focus broadly on the learning process and to facilitate students in making progress over a longer period of time. Summative examinations focusing only on the learning outcomes of students in a particular semester or period neglect that future development and progress over time. The many different musical styles in the world today, the musical communities, the musical idioms, and the musical habits that we prefer are all testimony to one truth: music exists to tell us to focus on the 'different', so the purpose of music education cannot be to make all children the same.

When teaching and assessing practice in Orff-Schulwerk, the development of appropriate assessment measures is challenging. This is because fundamentally, assessment practice is not considered separately in Orff-Schulwerk. Instead, the Orff-Schulwerk approach is more about providing practitioners with an inner direction featuring creativity at the heart of their assessment, meaning teachers can build a range of creative practices around this.

Orff-Schulwerk based assessment in Chinese junior high school music classrooms is designed to promote the development of students' creativity [12]. Teachers can innovate and modify the assessment method during implementation according to the students' situation and school conditions. However, one must never lose sight of the core of the Orff-Schulwerk approach and its intrinsic motivation, creativity.

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