AI and Unconscious Bias – October 2024

Music Education Council – Inclusion and Equity Seminar Series

As artificial intelligence moves rapidly into classrooms, rehearsal rooms, and creative industries, questions around bias and representation are becoming impossible to ignore. The latest discussion in the Music Education Council's Inclusion and Equity seminar series explored how AI might both challenge and reinforce inequalities in music education — and what the sector can do to ensure that new technologies amplify inclusion rather than entrench discrimination.

Chaired by Sharon Jagdev Powell, the session brought together Barry Farrimond-Chuong, Michelle James (CEO of Sing Up), Wizdom Layne, Nate Holder, and Helen Hines for a far-reaching conversation on ethics, creativity, and the human role in a digital future.

AI is often portrayed as a neutral tool, but as Sharon Jagdev Powell reminded the audience, "When we talk about unconscious bias in the context of AI, we're really talking about who trains the systems, whose data they're built on, and whose perspectives are missing."

Every dataset carries traces of human preference — from the accents represented in voice recognition software to the musical genres prioritised by recommendation algorithms. If left unexamined, those biases become baked into the systems that schools and cultural organisations increasingly rely upon.

Barry Farrimond-Chuong argued that inclusion cannot be an afterthought. "If we don't have disabled and neurodivergent creators inside the system from the start, we'll build tools that unintentionally exclude them," he said. "AI doesn't fix bias; it scales it."

From the perspective of a music-education leader, Michelle James described AI as both a liberating and a limiting force. "AI could give every child a creative assistant — a tool that adapts to their voice and their curiosity," she said. "But it could also narrow what counts as a 'good' voice if it learns from limited data."

Her message was clear: educators must act as ethical interpreters of technology, not passive adopters. “If our tools don’t make children feel more seen and heard,” she added, “they’re not serving the purpose.”

Helen Hines echoed this warning, pointing out that many AI systems are trained primarily on Western, English-speaking, male-dominated datasets. “The danger is that AI reproduces a single cultural narrative,” she said. “In music education, that has real consequences for how young people perceive belonging.”

Nate Holder turned the conversation towards assessment, asking how bias already shapes what counts as “good” music. “If the dataset thinks Chopin and Coldplay are the gold standard,” he said, “the algorithm will reward conformity. What happens to a student drawing on drill, Afrobeat, or grime influences?”

Wizdom Layne brought an artist’s perspective: “AI is trained on what’s popular, not necessarily what’s powerful. We need systems that recognise authenticity, not just analytics.” He called for culturally responsive datasets and for transparency about how musical material is sourced and labelled — especially when technology draws on the creative labour of under-represented communities.

The discussion repeatedly returned to ethics and empathy as the twin pillars of responsible innovation. Farrimond-Chuong proposed that AI tools should undergo “diversity testing” in the same way that websites undergo accessibility testing: “We run screen readers to check accessibility; we should run cultural readers to check representation.”

Hines suggested that educators need dedicated training not only in how AI functions, but in how it can unintentionally reproduce social inequality. Without that critical understanding, she warned, teachers could perpetuate bias through automated lesson planning or content generation tools.

James agreed, linking the debate to music education’s wider wellbeing mission: technology, she argued, should expand human connection rather than reduce it. “The goal isn’t to automate creativity but to amplify empathy,” she said.

The panel also explored how algorithmic bias intersects with issues of race, disability, gender, and class. Layne highlighted cultural ownership: “If we’re going to feed culture into the machine, we’ve got to own the rights to our culture. Otherwise, the system profits from our stories without giving back.”

For Holder, the antidote lies in critical literacy — equipping young people to question how algorithms shape what they see, hear, and value. “Understanding bias isn’t about blaming the tech,” he said. “It’s about empowering young people to decode it.”

The seminar closed with a collective acknowledgement that artificial intelligence is here to stay — and that, used wisely, it can be a powerful ally in education. Yet, as the speakers made clear, the sector must approach it with both curiosity and criticality: understanding

how AI generates content, questioning the data that feeds it, and recognising that bias is built in. Only by taking active steps to counteract that bias can educators ensure that technology serves inclusion rather than undermines it — helping all young people to see themselves, and their creativity, reflected in the tools of the future.