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# What Are Music Educators Doing and How Well Are We Doing It?

By David A. Williams

*Traditional large-group performance may not be the best goal of music education when the way society experiences music is changing.*

**A**nd school music programs, which traditionally have given students the precious opportunity to hear what real instruments sound like from both a player's and a listener's perspective, are in the toilet."<sup>1</sup> I came across this statement in *Mix* magazine, a publication dedicated to audio and music production, and it made me think. What does Paul Lehrman, a man involved with professional audio production rather than K–12 music education, know about school music programs? And then it hit me: maybe he knows more than many of us in the profession know—or at least want to admit we know.

Some within the profession have voiced similar concerns. In a paper presented at the International Music Education Policy Symposium, Bennett Reimer suggested that "music education as we know it today ... is facing a potential crisis of irrelevancy."<sup>2</sup> Lee Bartel edited several reviews that are critical of the present state of music education.<sup>3</sup> Is our profession really "in the toilet"? Just what are we doing, and how well are we doing it?

## Impact of the National Standards

As for what we are doing, there has been an increase in attention paid to our National Standards for Music Education and stan-

dards-based teaching since 1994, when the present set of standards was established. Reading these standards, one would assume the profession is involved in a comprehensive musicianship approach to music teaching and learning, in which students are involved in sequential, structured activities in performance, listening, composition, improvisation, analysis, notation-skill acquisition, and associations with the other arts as well as fields outside the arts.

Although the National Standards have had more than ten years to influence the profession, it's questionable how pervasive their implementation is in music classrooms day-to-day. My position as an instrumental music educator takes me to a large number of K–12 schools each year, and in personal observation I see very little attention paid to the standards, especially at the secondary level. Aside from the traditional practices of singing, playing instruments, and reading notation, I sense that performance-based music teachers lack respect for the National Standards. Many elementary general music teachers seem to have a greater investment in covering the standards, but even here the performance and notation standards are given the majority of class time.

Research seems to confirm these observations. Norma Kirkland evaluated South Carolina K–12 music programs to determine

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what achievement levels of the National Standards were being met and to determine what ratings music teachers gave the standards as goals for student achievement. Results showed that students met the highest achievement levels for the performance-oriented Standards 1 (singing) and 2 (playing), which were also rated by the teachers as the highest goals for student achievement. Standards 3 (improvising) and 4 (composing) were ranked lowest in achievement levels and in teacher ratings.<sup>4</sup> Evelyn Orman examined use of class time in elementary general music classes in relation to the National Standards. Results indicated that while elementary music specialists spent class time on all nine standards, less time was devoted to those standards requiring creative or artistic decision-making skills. Singing, playing instruments, and reading/notating were the most prevalent National Standards addressed across all grade levels.<sup>5</sup>

Al Holcomb<sup>6</sup> investigated the perceptions and practices of Connecticut music teachers toward the state's Discipline-Based Professional Teaching Standards for Teachers of Music, standards for teachers modeled after the student-outcome-based National Standards for Music Education.<sup>7</sup> Respondents—public school music teachers, music administrators, and music teacher educators—were asked to rate the standards according to how frequently they were observed. Three standards were reported as being infrequently implemented: skills for teaching students to create music, skills for teaching students to respond to music (analyze, evaluate), and leadership and music advocacy in the school and community. The two rated highest were development of a positive learning environment and the development of performance skills. Among the subgroups, elementary general music teachers were found to implement the standards for teaching more often than the secondary performance teachers.

Harold Abeles and Rob Horowitz asked public school music specialists from eight states to specify the percentage of time they spent on each of the National Standards. Findings indicated that elementary specialists believed 40–50 percent of their time was devoted to singing and playing instruments, and 11 percent to reading and notating music. None of the other standards was



Photo by Mark Regan

**Is large-group performance in school the best way to prepare students to be functionally musical adults?**

believed to have taken more than 7 percent of classroom time.<sup>8</sup> Susan Byo found that for all the standards except performing and music reading, music teachers felt less able to effectively implement the standards than their training indicated. She also discovered that, generally, music specialists did not believe they had enough time to cover any of the National Standards adequately.<sup>9</sup>

While future transformation is possible, it seems that the standards movement, at least so far, has not really changed much of what music teachers do. Earlier studies, completed before the National Standards were written, indicate similar findings.<sup>10</sup> The multiple experiences demonstrated in the National Standards notwithstanding, the profession appears to be stuck in a performance-and-notation-skills paradigm.

### **Other Desired Outcomes**

In addition to the standards, the profession advocates many other outcomes in music classrooms. The following are claims for the benefits of music taken from MENC's own Web site and links from MENC.<sup>11</sup> Music instruction can help

- Improve spatial-temporal reasoning
- Enhance abstract reasoning skills

- Enhance reading for meaning
  - Develop the eye-hand coordination needed to learn to write
  - Advance reading comprehension and spelling skills
  - Improve performance in reading and math
  - Improve understandings in science, geography, history, language arts, foreign language, and physical education
  - Develop critical and creative thinking and higher-order thinking skills including analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and problem solving
  - Define listening skills
  - Improve communication skills
  - Increase self-esteem and self-discipline
  - Promote faster growth in physical, mental, emotional, and social areas
  - Build the kinds of teamwork abilities and conflict-resolution skills required for success in the modern workplace
  - Increase student attendance
  - Reduce dropout rates
  - Raise IQ scores
  - Raise grade-point averages
  - Produce higher SAT scores
  - Reduce disciplinary problems
  - Create a decline in lifetime substance abuse
  - Enhance general brain function.
- Take a deep breath!

While it is possible that some, if not many, of these claims are realistic, there is a need for additional research to help refine what we are actually doing through music teaching and learning activities. Many times we make claims for music education based on research done outside our regular classrooms, in settings far different from what we do in schools. Regardless, it appears we are caught up in an advocate's whirlwind. We seem to be so busy advocating for what we do that we no longer pay enough attention to what we are doing.

## Expectations for Performance Groups

Of course, specific classroom activities vary from state to state, from city to city, and even from school to school, but some basic activities seem to be common throughout the profes-

sion. At the elementary level, they include students singing, playing recorders and other instruments, and learning to read standard music notation. At the secondary level, students typically can choose among choral and instrumental performing ensembles. These ensembles, which rehearse and perform music based on the Western European concert tradition, are expected to be large in size and to perform well and often.

At both the elementary and secondary levels, pressure to maintain both the size and quality of performance groups is often similar to the pressure athletic coaches experience. Partly because of these expectations, K–12 music teachers historically have had very little motivation to modify programs that haven't changed in any substantial way since the early 1900s.

If large-group performance is what music educators do, how well are we doing it? While exact statistics are hard to come by, we know that the percentage of secondary students not enrolled in music courses far exceeds the percentage of those who are. In 1989, Bennett Reimer suggested that "some 15 percent or so of our secondary school students choose to participate in ... our performance offerings."<sup>12</sup> There is also evidence that enrollment in music courses has been decreasing for several years<sup>13</sup> while the number of children in public schools has been increasing.<sup>14</sup> One might expect a profession as established as ours to be more pervasive, especially since music is enjoyed by and is an important part of life for practically every K–12 student.

## The Downside of Large Performance Groups

I suggest that our fascination with large-group performance has limited our access to students, and at the same time has cut us off from multiple other involvements with music that many students might find exciting. The potential for drawing students into secondary music programs is great, but we have to be brave enough to offer opportunities presently only scarcely available—opportunities that students might find more interesting and relevant. To date, the profession seems uninterested in broadening its

secondary offerings beyond the traditional bands, orchestras, and choruses established over the past century. The current system that both prepares pre-service teachers and maintains in-service teachers appears intent on preserving the status quo.<sup>15</sup> We could be protecting the very thing that is destroying us.

Our claim to fame has long been the quality of our large performing groups, and certainly if we were to point to our single greatest accomplishment, it would be the level of proficiency in group performance our profession has achieved. Even in the previously mentioned paper, Reimer focuses on this area as one of success.<sup>16</sup> But in making this blanket statement about our accomplishments, we are ignoring some important issues associated with large-group performance.

First, even in the best of ensembles, not all students develop adequate performance skills. Many learn how to get by with very modest performance proficiency, sometimes even less than modest. Most often, large performing groups are not about individual learning—they are about the sum of the parts. Such a measure of success would never be accepted in other academic settings.

Second, the number of students who drop out of performance courses has been shown to be in the neighborhood of 50 percent.<sup>17</sup> Investigating problems with retention in performance ensemble settings has a long history.<sup>18</sup> In addition to the many students who never enroll in music courses beyond elementary school, we lose countless numbers of those who do enroll. The reasons students leave our programs are many, but the fact remains that we have a difficult time keeping students interested in our programs, with many dropping out well before they reach any level of musical maturity.

Finally, we have to be honest about what is taught and learned in the vast majority of performing ensembles. Generally, it has little to do with musicality, but more to do with performance technique and skill, abilities that are of little use to the majority of students after they leave high school. The pressures of performance preparation



keep many students from receiving anything resembling a rich music education. I would suggest that our model of music education, as large performance ensembles, has failed and continues to fail.

### **Impact of Music Education Beyond High School**

It's perplexing that the majority of students who choose to participate in school music ensembles stop performing music on any regular basis after leaving high school and that precious few continue after college. Our society is littered with adults who played a musical instrument once upon a time. As for notation skills, visit your local mall and randomly ask passersby to identify simple musical symbols. You might hear statements such as, "I used to know what that was." It's likely you would find that the general population knows little of music notation, and very few people have retained anything close to a functional knowledge of written music.

Few adults find use for their school music training after leaving school. We don't seem to have made much of a societal change in what the general population knows about—or how they participate in—musical activities. It seems we have failed our society on two fronts. First, while our ambition has been to produce performers, we have been successful only to a very limited extent. We are basically producing a small supply of classically trained professional musicians, while having no real impact on how our society experiences music. Second, while concentrating on performance, we haven't addressed the real needs of our society in preparing students for a lifetime full of music-listening experiences, to say nothing about providing them with skills to approach music interactions in any creative way.

Our lack of societal influence can certainly be attributed, in part, to the low percentage of students we reach at secondary levels. The large majority of students, who have their last formal musical training in fifth or sixth grade, cannot be expected to be functionally musical as adults. Beyond the large number of students who elect not to enroll in secondary music courses, the main issue may be what

we do with the students we have in our secondary music programs.

Even with all our efforts to promote musical performance, it's not an important part of the lives of many people. In the early 1800s, performance was the primary musical involvement in the United States.<sup>19</sup> After Edison invented the phonograph, musical performance increasingly gave way to listening as the way our society enjoyed music; today, listening is the predominant musical activity, and only select individuals perform

It's possible that, given time, these technologies will have as vast an influence on our society as the invention of sound-recording equipment did. How our society experiences music is changing before our eyes, and I worry that our profession will continue to keep its eyes closed. More so than at any time in our history, students can now do more musically at home without us than they can at school with us in most traditional music programs.

Of course, there are many more questions than there are answers.

*“Students can now do more musically at home without us than they can at school with us.”*

music on any routine basis.

This marked decline in music performance activity has been all but ignored by the music education profession. When music was first introduced into the school systems of this country in the 1830s, it was logical to concentrate on performance and notation-reading skills since that is what people needed—it was the way they experienced music. But as society gradually changed, music education did not evolve to fit the changes. As a result, we are totally out of touch with the musical needs of our society, to the point where students find us irrelevant and unconnected to their lives.

### **Music Education for Today**

Today we are witnessing another societal shift—one that our profession is not prepared to react to, nor seems to care to address in any serious way. Accompanied by rapid advances in digital technologies, we are entering an era when interactions with music are becoming more complex. The lines between the traditional roles of listener, performer, and composer are blurring. Thanks to digital technologies, it's now possible to become the composer, the performer, and the listener at the same time—and much more accessibly than at any time in history. Additionally, with the help of technology, music is becoming more multisensory as it becomes increasingly associated with visual stimuli.

Change does not come easily, and change in education tends to be even more painful. I firmly believe that, as a profession, we must begin to offer substantial opportunities for students beyond the traditional large ensembles. While there are myriad possibilities, including new types of performing groups, one important discipline would involve the new instruments and sounds made available through digital technologies. I see vast potential in multimedia programs where music and other art forms (video, for example) are incorporated through digital technologies that allow students opportunities to create, perform, and experience, all facilitated by the music teacher. In such a setting, students, alone and in groups of varying size, would have ongoing opportunities to explore, experiment, and create with aural and visual materials. With guidance from teachers, students would be making decisions about organizing and creating art.

One such class might have students working on computers, with input from a music keyboard and guitar, video and still camera, a scanner, and a writing tablet. Suites of software such as Apple's iLife and iWork would be used. Students would also sing, act, dance, and play other instruments along with their digital creations. Such a class could include large doses of listening to and viewing these creations and a healthy amount of dis-

cussion regarding these experiences. The potential seems unlimited.

But where to begin change is a dilemma. Should K–12 teachers scrap traditional programs to offer new programs for which they may not be trained, and that principals and communities might be hesitant to support? Should universities add offerings to train future teachers in new types of music programs, even as degree programs are already overburdened with too many required credit hours?

I believe the answer is a little bit of “yes” to both. We need leaders in the K–12 schools to step up and begin to offer programs more relevant to students—programs that embrace everything digital technologies, as well as other relevant alternatives, make possible for student learning. At the same time, innovative universities must begin to address the needs of our future teachers. We need pathfinding programs in the delivery of relevant new pedagogies, as found in digital media, so tomorrow’s teachers will be prepared for the societal realities they will face. Perhaps then we can look forward to a time when music in schools will be truly applicable to the society we serve. In the meantime, perhaps we can rethink what we are doing and begin to do it better.

## Notes

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