Another Perspective : Struggling toward Wholeness in Music Education

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Struggling toward Wholeness in Music Education

By Bennett Reimer

The 2007 MENC Centennial Declaration reiterated the long-standing ideal of our profession: "It is the right of every child to receive a balanced, comprehensive, sequential music education taught by qualified teachers."[1] This aspiration has stood the test of time quite well. It is likely that few music educators would question its continuing relevance.

Ideals, when as ambitious as ours, are seldom achieved completely. Realistically, the criterion of success is not so much full accomplishment as satisfactory progress. We must pause now and then to consider our status in this regard. Are we moving ahead to fulfillment of our hopes in ways adequate to their compelling vision?

Events over the past several years yield a tentative yet positive outlook. In many ways, we can be impressed with the energy, the imagination, and, yes, the courage being demonstrated by new initiatives we are now witnessing. A critical mass now might be leading us toward achieving a more complete and variegated professional posture.

What Would Wholeness Consist of for Us?

Being whole entails our active engagement in and support of all or at least most of the many ways people in our culture and others around the world actually interact with music. These ways are manifold. For practically all people, the role of listener is foremost, across the continuum from professionals in music to casual partakers. In addition, some choose to play the role of performer of composed music or to be improvisers. Others choose to compose it. Still others concentrate on theoretical investigations of its structures; on its history; on its social, cultural, political, and spiritual influences and implications; on critical judgments of pieces and performances; on the sociological functions it serves; on its interfaces with other arts and nonarts domains; on the teaching and learning of it; on a variety of ways to research it, philosophize about it, and apply its uses as therapeutic; on business-related opportunities it presents. On and on.

Is it realistic to think we can include all these and many more dimensions of music in our school programs, each offered by teachers qualified in the particularities of skills, understandings, and ways to teach that their aspect of music entails? Can or should all this be available to students whose enthusiasms cause them to seek authentic education in their diverse choices of ways to be engaged with music?

How whole, after all, is whole? A realistic answer can only be "When becoming more and more whole."

That we seem to be becoming so is exciting. It is also sobering, in the challenges it entails and in the resistances to those challenges by the continuing defense of what now exists as being all we can expect. Given that we are not exactly at the center of the education enterprise, how ambitious can we hope to be? Why not circle our wagons and continue to do what we do so remarkably well and with sufficient support to keep limping along in the hope that we will not soon disappear?

Our Expertise in Performance

At the secondary level, we have put practically all our eggs in the basket of performing music in large ensembles and have had admirable success at it, with the support of the small minority of students who have chosen that opportunity and their enthusiastic parents who often come to our rescue when cuts are threatened. Especially when times are tough for education as a whole, let alone for us at the margins, should we not curb our dreams and hunker down with gratitude for where we are, insufficient as that is? Is modesty the best policy?

The answer is clearly no, if we intend to not only survive but also continue to make progress toward our ideal.

Our Protected Status

Ironically, our position outside the mainstream of what are currently considered "the basics" (pretty much the three *R*s, science, and technology) protects us from the mad scrambles to achieve acceptability in even those few subjects. No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, aspects of the Common Core Standards, and all the rest of the craze for training and testing fuels present-day conceptions of what "education" consists of. This keeps even those at the center of the curriculum so off-balance as to feel that they are toppling. Being under the radar of all that protects us from such constricted goals; our marginalization frees us from those limitations. Would we really prefer to be participants in playing the games of coercion toward narrowness

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of curriculum and equal narrowness of diverse learning capacities and individual needs now being pursued in the politics of education?[2] Would that fulfill our potential for achieving the riches our art makes available to human lives?

I propose that we devote our energies to making lemonade out of the lemons our subordinate status has always burdened us with. Being largely free from the heat at the center enables us to attend to our long-standing desire to be comprehensive. That, along with our fast-growing expertise in a great variety of musical roles we are now cultivating, is empowering us to embrace real change. Just when education as a whole has become alarmingly impoverished, we in music education are feeling the excitement of new possibilities for affluence.

Lemonade awaits us if we grasp the opportunities to serve the musical enthusiasms of *all* students in addition to those who, we must hope, will continue to opt for our traditional offerings. Every movement in the direction of diverse musical service will make us that much more whole, that much more relevant, that much more central to education rather than as peripheral as we have always been. We also become stronger, as we add support by students and their families who are as devoted to their particular involvements as we are now devoted to those we have so capably offered. Every additional musical interest met successfully equals a new group of people who will insist on its continuation. This is genuine advocacy, for sure.

Dealing with Impediments

But all this is not going to be accomplished without significant struggle. Reality rears its ugly head. Although we are largely protected from the crises facing the basics, we are nevertheless subject to a variety of intraprofessional challenges to expansion, entailing obstacles we will have to overcome.

First, and most obviously, is the anxiety that the existence of additional offerings could threaten our well-established strengths in ensemble performance. Given the virtual monopoly of musical opportunity that currently exists at the upper grade levels, it is no surprise that alternatives to it might be assumed to weaken what we now have available. There have been some other popular offerings that have not seemed to drain from the ensembles, such as guitar classes. Perhaps this is because they have been sectioned off into the underworld of "secondary general music"—a strange land defined only by being "not band, orchestra, or chorus." Guitar class, for example, is not general music. It is a specialized elective, just as the established

ensembles are, and is a valuable, realistic addition to our wholeness. Ditto all the other particular ways people can pursue music and a musical education. The opportunities we offer at the secondary levels are likely to be these kinds of distinctive electives. We need to represent them as such, and build a rich, diverse selection of them. Each represents a specialized immersion within one of the many musical pleasures our students in those grades pursue so eagerly outside of school and would pursue in school if we made them available.

While we must continue to support the particular musics and musical engagements that so many of us professionals, because of our special backgrounds, are so capable of and devoted to serving, we must also support the musics and musical involvements of most of our students. Our musical preferences are not to be ignored, nor are theirs. "Theirs" and "ours" are not a zero-sum game. Both deserve their rightful place as sources of musical value available to be enhanced through our efforts.

It is long overdue for us to widen our purview dramatically. Our current expertise in performance education remains essential. It is not, however, sufficient for wholeness. When it sucks up as much of the energy of the music education profession as it always has, it leaves all the rest gasping for recognition, let alone comparable expertise. Our choices now are whether to stand pat, comfortably yet dangerously narrow and with increasing irrelevance to the real musical lives being lived by our clientele, or to open ourselves with confidence to a world of new musical/educational perspectives. The burgeoning competencies we are developing in areas such as the teaching of composition, of improvisation, of a broad range of concern with issues of social justice, of expertise in adapting ourselves to the latest music-making and music-disseminating technologies, and of accepting a world of diverse musical genres and practices as having genuine value and quality—all are signs of life-sustaining, relevancy-enhancing opportunities for wholeness that we need to support with urgency.

What about General Music?

Are there comparable challenges related to our general music offerings? The ideal general music teacher is as much a specialist as those devoted to particular elective offerings must be. But here the specialization is breadth rather than depth. All the musical roles mentioned previously, and all the many others not mentioned, are the basic fare of general music. The general music teacher's job includes opening as many musical doors as possible for students.

Two goals are central to a general education in music: first, internalizing in each student's experience a wide understanding of what the domain of music consists of in its many manifestations. That knowledge of music's diverse potentialities enables learners to incorporate in their lives the types and aspects of music of personal meaning and delight.

The second is making possible the discovery of an individually compelling musical role that might lead toward commitment, toward identification as being "who I am." That discovery enables a shift toward specialized involvement based on a broad perspective, rather than making choices from a limited understanding of what is available in the wider world of music. When personal choice of concentration is based on the breadth of a successful general music education, the genuineness of individuation is achieved; that is, there is movement toward wholeness of selfhood that all humans should expect to attain by their education.

An exciting aspect of the need for expansion in both the music electives and general music is the clear necessity for each to support the other—an idea exceedingly rare, if it exists at all, in our history.

General music education specialists, as portals to possible life commitments, need the assistance of adults who have made those commitments and can represent them honestly and accurately to students of every age at which general (inclusive, expansive) study in music is offered, from preschool into college. Music specialists in a broad diversity of elective offerings in a school system would be the logical and (being teachers themselves) most capable sources of such enrichment. They would be strong allies for the general music program, adding, at strategic times, the perspective of what living their particular musical life entails.

Community Involvement

In addition to specialists in electives, people in the community who represent a variety of musical roles need to be recruited to lend their insights and experiences as to what their particular musical role entails. These would include parents who are professionals or competent amateurs. Real musical lives being lived, with all the pleasures and challenges they comprise, brought into school as well as explored outside school in the various places specialists do their work, can help ensure that the general learnings come to life. This infuses students with the understanding that what is being learned in class is *real*—that it is what exists in reality outside the walls of the classroom. This enables students who identify with a particular musical practice to discover a life that makes sense, which might be *their* life if the opportunity is pursued.

Reverse this scenario. One of the expectations in the original music content standards was that in each specialized offering, there would be possibilities for attaining a broader background that would enrich the necessary focus on the ways to think and act particular to each. Yet if the specialist teacher has not been prepared to meet that need (a band director expected to introduce and pursue learnings related to composing, improvising, theory and history, criticism, philosophy, and so on), this will not happen. It can indeed be achieved to a modest extent by many ensemble teachers. However, with the help of general music teachers and community members who are able to provide a good deal of the breadth that would make the specialization more firmly grounded, it has a much better chance of being accomplished. The obligation to be of assistance, then, works both ways, from the special to the general and from the general to the special.

Every movement toward such coordination adds to wholeness, both for students and for their teachers. And every parent and person from the community recruited and coached to assist in these ways will become—count on it—a devoted advocate for the music program, a welcome step toward security and centrality.

Other Issues

What else needs to be accomplished if we are to achieve this expanded vision of music education that we are now able to glimpse?

One obstacle in particular needs attention as to its pervasive influences. I refer to the overwhelming dominance of the conception, both inside and outside music education, that performance is the central if not sole way to be genuinely musical. This conception has powerful and positive effects, in our magnificent provision of opportunities to be a performer, especially of the musics and genres we ourselves prefer. Many students who start their journey of performance in the upper elementary grades remain engaged through high school and some in college, even if not as a major. Those who do declare as music majors spend four years (sometimes more) in concentrated individual and communal performance instruction in an atmosphere in which excellent performance ability is seen as the emblem of highest achievement. Performing, therefore, occupies a major if not *the* major commitment of time and effort in their college years.

Inevitably, most devoted performers will face the sober reality that only a tiny percentage will ever see their devotion come to fruition in an actual living-wage job. An alternative, such as becoming a music educator, becomes attractive (whether with sorrow or relief). And, of course, some or many hold the goal of being a music educator from the start, so come to regard the lion's share of the time in college spent on performing as being preparation for a career as a music educator. That means, of course, being a teacher of performance, certainly in electives at the secondary level and as a primary focus in general music classes.

What makes any of this a problem? Not the life spent primarily in performing. Not in opting for music education even if, for many, that is not the first choice. These are admirable, fulfilling involvements. Music educators' long years of engagement in performance have been rich in opportunities to hone their craft and musicianship. The payoff comes in the high levels of success they are able to achieve in their work as performance music educators. This extensive and deep preparation provides a model that those in all other specializations, including those who specialize in general music, would also be privileged to have experienced as fully in their own particular specialty.

No, the concern about the predominance of performing does not reside in our admirable accomplishments in the performance aspects of music education. It resides in its inadvertently having put all other aspects of music so far in the shade as to have become almost invisible. The achievements of performance make starkly clear that every other way to be prepared to teach music has to take the same or at least a similar route toward expertise if it is to match the major attainment of our profession. This challenges us to broaden our competencies dramatically, enabling us to provide, finally, a program approaching genuine wholeness.

Needed Actions

How do we protect and continue to improve our present strengths while including all the others we have largely ignored? That we are beginning to see efforts in that direction should fill us all with hope for a better, more secure future—one in which our influences are as wide and deep as music itself.

One basic step is to admit into music education degree programs students who are committed to musical roles alternative to or additional to performance. We need applicants devoted to all the roles enumerated earlier (and others), discovered by their learnings about such involvements in general music and in their out-of-school experiences. All of them need to have the same depths of background we have provided so generously to performers. Each music specialization is challenging and arduous in its own ways, needful of long absorption in its intricacies if it is to become integrated in thinking and acting, enabling the teaching of it to be as well grounded as it must be—not, unfortunately, able to be picked up in a summer workshop or two, or another methods course in the already overpacked teacher education curriculum. That only assures dilettantism, just as an ensemble director's preparation would be if it were as limited.

How will we be able to recognize that we are well on the way toward wholeness? Two overlapping accomplishments will provide the basis for that judgment. First, an open market of elective opportunities will exist in a variety of the important ways people interact with music, taught by qualified music educators and others who are steeped in their specialization. Second, general studies in music will be closely related to the magnificent heterogeneity of ways to be musical, taught at every level by specialists and others who assist them in their explorations of the many delights of the musical world.

To the extent we bring about these conditions, we can claim that our ideals are beginning to be met. When cows jump over the moon? Yes, this all might seem just as likely. We must remember, however, that important change entails efforts accumulating over time. Our obligation is not to achieve an expanded vision pronto. Life does not seem to work that way. What we *can* do is what everyone else in education is obligated to do: to make progress toward achieving our goals.

That progress faces still another challenge—the existence of a daunting gap between theory and practice. We have advanced astoundingly and quickly in many central aspects of theory related to and indispensable for music education: research, psychology, philosophy, sociology, social justice in a variety of "isms," spirituality, and so forth. Yet we remain, uncomfortably, all theoried up with nowhere to go. Our current delimited

structure of general music and electives provide meager (if that) space in which the richness of our theoretical work can come alive in practice. We remain bereft of possibilities for getting all the theoretical gains applied to where it is all supposed to reach fruition—in the teachings and learnings of students in schools and other educational venues.

Yes, there have been some signs of progress in selection and preparation of music educators on a broad rather than narrow spectrum, and even in jobs available for nontraditionally prepared new teachers and rehabbed older ones. Yet, breaking through the insufficient modes in which we carry out our work will require even more courage and, crucially, skills of applied innovation if we are to do more than tinker at the edges.

We have a generous bowlful of lemons, many more remaining unmentioned. Also, however, we have an impressive capacity to squeeze them into lemonade, sweet yet tangy, gratifying yet nutritious, refreshing yet substantive. We are becoming ready, it may be, to reach never-before-attained dimensions of wholeness.

Notes

1. Janet R. Barrett, "Introduction: Realizing the Goal of Universal Music Education," in *Music Education at a Crossroads*, ed. Janet R. Barrett (Lanham, MD: MENC/Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2009), 1. [As of September 2011, MENC became the National Association for Music Education (NAfME).]
2. The constricted, one-size-fits-all mentality of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has begun to unravel at its seams. Even one of its major proponents, Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education, has recognized the deleterious effects it has had on the lives and education of students and teachers. On C-SPAN's *Newsmakers* in August 2011, Duncan signaled a retreat from the previous simplistic educational stance, recognizing that it was erroneous. He announced that he would release a proposal to update the NCLB law the next month. He said it is "punitive" in its current state and that schools need more "flexibility" and "autonomy" on how to educate children.

   Therefore, he is allowing schools to apply for waivers to exempt them from repercussions of failing to meet student proficiency requirements, the central component of NCLB. Teachers and schools, he said, should still be held accountable, but not all the weight should be placed on high-stakes testing. The "waiver package" will allow teachers to "breathe a sigh of relief," he pointed out. (At this point, practically all states have become engaged in the development of programs not wedded so tightly to a restricted number of subject-matter requirements assessed through test scores.) That these embarrassingly obvious corrections needed to be made demonstrates the folly of the previously touted policy that Duncan and so many others had perpetrated. But it will take time for that battleship to turn around and to chart a supportable direction for the improvement of education, such as that being suggested here for music (and as applicable to all subjects). See http://www.C-span.org/History/Secretary-Arne-Duncan-Dept-of-Education/10737423592/.

   Another head-shaking reversal of belief was made by the influential education theorist Diane Ravitch, who whipsawed from supporting the identicality of learning expectations as in NCLB to a realistic recognition of the existence of, and need to honor, diversity. In comments on the punitive treatments of schools struggling to raise all students' test scores, and the rise of charter schools as seeming to be the royal road to do so, she admitted, "On our present course, we are disrupting communities, dumbing down our schools, giving students false reports of their progress, and creating a private school sector that will undermine public education without improving it. Most significantly, we are not producing a generation of students who are more knowledgeable, and better prepared for the responsibilities of citizenship. That is why I changed my mind about the current direction of school reform." See Diane Ravitch, "Why I Changed My Mind about School Reform," http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704869304575109443305343962.html, and her book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

   For us, there is an important lesson to be learned in these necessary philosophical turnarounds. It is to treat diversity of opportunity as our desire and goal, brought to reality in programs cultivating the broadest possible engagements our field of music offers for individual wholeness.

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