

# The Elephant in the Room

**Abstract:** Practically all teenagers find pleasure in music, yet the majority are not involved in traditional school music ensembles. College requirements, the quest for high grade point averages, scheduling conflicts, uncooperative counselors, block schedules, students with too many competing interests, or the need to work may limit participation in music classes. While there is little music teachers can do to overcome many of these hurdles, the elephant in the room is the very model we use for music education in the schools. The large performance ensemble was established as the model for music education during the early 1900s and has remained relatively unchanged for a century. Is this model a significant part of what is causing so few students to enroll in school music classes? Recommendations are presented that must be considered as the profession moves forward.

**Keywords:** alternative, curriculum, ensemble, high school, junior high, learning style, lifelong learning, schedule

There is a growing concern about the future of American K–12 music education programs, and much of the anxiety involves enrollment in traditional large ensembles.<sup>1</sup> The concern is so great that we spend considerable time trying to convince others of the importance of music through advocacy efforts. In the introduction to her chapter on advocacy in *The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*, Liora Bresler suggests that “the contemporary arena of school music often resembles a battleground, concerned with survival.”<sup>2</sup>

Why do so few students take part in traditional secondary school music ensembles? Practically all teenagers find pleasure experiencing music, yet we know the greater majority are not involved in school music offerings. Recent data from Florida reveal a troubling trend. Not only are music enrollments low, but they have been dropping as well. According to Florida Department of Education data, 16.45 percent of high school students were

enrolled in music classes in 1985. This number dropped to 14.9 percent by 1995 and 11.67 percent by 2005.<sup>3</sup> If we were to project a 2025 figure based on these data, enrollment would fall to under 7 percent. While this is just for the state of Florida, there is little to suggest such trends are not similar in other parts of the United States.

The extent of the problem is actually masked here. To arrive at these figures, enrollment for every music class is added together, so individual students enrolled in more than one music class are double-counted (concert band and jazz band, for example). This suggests that the actual percentage of students enrolled in music classes is smaller than indicated. Additionally, these data include all music classes—not only traditional ensembles. We can expect that more alternate music classes (technology, keyboard, world drumming, etc.) existed in 2005 than in 1985, meaning enrollment in traditional ensembles may have fallen even more dramatically than is implied here.

*The large ensemble may be one of the biggest impediments to wider access to music education in public schools in the United States. Will music educators adapt in time?*

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## An Outdated Model

While there is little music teachers can do to limit the aforementioned hurdles, there is at least one issue that is too often ignored, and that few within the profession seem willing to discuss. This elephant in the room is the very model we use for music education in the schools. The large performance ensemble was established as the model for music education during the early 1900s and has remained relatively unchanged for a century. Is it possible this model is a significant part of what is causing so few to enroll in school music classes?

In many respects, this model has been quite successful. The performance level of our ensembles has been envied by music teachers in several countries. It has served important roles of public relations for and service to our schools. It has sustained the profession and has become a prominent part of the secondary school experience. The large-ensemble model has, in fact, become synonymous with music education in schools—so much so that it is difficult for most music educators, as well as preservice music teachers, to consider changes to the status quo.

The model is so pervasive that new concepts introduced into music education are usually first thought of in terms of how they can be added to current ensemble offerings. Recent examples of this include multicultural music and technology, both of which function better apart from traditional ensembles as separate classes dedicated to the particular topic. Certainly there are advantages to adding digital technology into a large ensemble, although the true profit for students can be realized through new types of classes devoted to contemporary technologies. It is the same with musics from other cultures: in certain circumstances, using elements of other musical traditions can offer meaningful activities in traditional large ensembles, but again, the real reward for students would be through a specific course devoted to a particular style of music.

So all-encompassing is the large-group performance model that alternatives introduced as separate classes, most



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Certainly there is no single reason that accounts for the situation in which the profession finds itself. It is evident that, in the push for academic excellence, some students opt to enroll in multiple honors and advanced placement courses in hopes of raising their grade point averages and increasing the likelihood of admission to preferred colleges. Additionally, students

who have tested poorly in areas such as reading and math may be forced into extra remedial courses. In either case, these students would have fewer, if any, opportunities to elect music courses. Then there are scheduling conflicts, uncooperative counselors, block schedules, students with too many competing interests, or the need to work.

notably, guitar and keyboard courses, are often approached and taught in ways that closely resemble the design used in traditional large ensembles—with neat rows of students, reading notation, performing the same piece at the same time, while being conducted or led by the teacher. Since this is the model we know and understand, it becomes the template for new courses as well. It is quite likely there are better, more authentic paradigms for these types of offerings.

## Other Alternatives

Other countries have made considerable strides regarding alternate models of music education. A recent special edition of the *British Journal of Music Education* contains a series of articles describing both research and practice in England,<sup>4</sup> Sweden,<sup>5</sup> and Greece.<sup>6</sup> In a study published in 2000, researchers Charles Byrne and Mark Sheridan reported on three decades of change in music practices in Scottish schools, where the inclusion of a wider range of instruments and musical styles with alternate teaching methods has resulted in a marked upturn in the numbers of students studying music.<sup>7</sup> In research printed in 2006, Göran Folkestad studied different aspects of learning (including the situation, learning style, ownership, and intentionality) in societies outside Western cultures.<sup>8</sup> Author David Price, in articles published in 2005 and 2006, detailed the Musical Futures project in the United Kingdom, which, beginning in 2003, set out to devise new and imaginative ways of engaging young people in school music activities.<sup>9</sup> Teachers in this project reported that Musical Futures had a positive effect on student participation and retention, student attitudes, self-esteem, and on-task behavior and that students developed a greater range of musical skills and were able to demonstrate higher levels of musical understanding.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, it is little wonder that the large-ensemble model of music education remains so ubiquitous in the United States. It is, after all, the model that practically all current music teachers experienced as students. It is the only model

in which most college music education majors participated during their secondary school years, as well as throughout their undergraduate experience. It is, in fact, the model in which most in-service and preservice teachers not only participated but also excelled. Bringing to others the same triumphs we experienced is quite gratifying, and is an aspiration that drives many to become music teachers. When we are passionate about something, as many in our profession are about traditional performance ensembles, it is easy to assume everyone else is similarly infatuated. This is unfortunately not true. We know that the greater majority of students choose not to participate in our traditional offerings, and most of them do not because they find this musical participation uninteresting. Even many of those who do participate are less than enthusiastic about the experience. We must do better. We can do better. It is essential that we offer interesting, relevant, and meaningful musical experiences for all students that also allow them to develop lifelong musical skills.

## Opportunities to Consider

There are several possibilities that are worthy of serious consideration as we look to the future of music education in the United States. Change is a worthy goal, but we have to be brave enough to venture into some unknown territory. We must be open to possibilities. Toward this end, here are several opportunities that are available to us to improve the situation in which we find ourselves. Opportunities, when taken in combinations, could help us realize interesting, relevant, and meaningful musical experiences for students.

### 1. Class Size

Large performing ensembles are an important goal of the present model, and increasing class size is often a badge of honor for music teachers. Educational psychology suggests that large class sizes are not educationally sound. Twenty students in a high school math class is almost always better than fifty.

An eighty-member ensemble might look good from an advocacy standpoint, but not from an educational perspective. It is essential that new models of music education allow for reasonable class sizes equivalent to those found in other academic areas. The issue we face is creating demand for a sizable total enrollment in music courses, but this enrollment does not have to be in one class.

## 2. Student-Centered Learning

The large-ensemble model places complete control in the hands of the teacher, a concept borrowed from professional orchestras where the conductor is in command, and the main goal is excellent performance. In schools, where the main goal should be student learning, this model seems outdated in light of the wealth of research concerning constructionist learning theory and inquiry-based learning.<sup>11</sup> Such control over the classroom is important in the large-ensemble model, although not necessarily conducive to the best student learning. While many school music programs involve solo and small-ensemble experiences, which can allow individual students some level of control, these tend to be short-term extensions to the real business of the full ensemble. New models of music education should allow control over the educational environment to be extensively shared inside the classroom by allowing students to experience self-directed learning, and peer-directed learning.

## 3. Musical/Creative Decisions

In addition to control of the learning environment, the teacher in the large-ensemble model is most likely making practically all the musical and creative decisions. In this educational design, students are most often reduced to technicians, simply carrying out the creative wishes of their music director. Again, educational research challenges this model.<sup>12</sup> While control of creative decision making is important for the large-ensemble director, new models of music education

would benefit from allowing students to learn from their own creative decisions. Additionally, students would benefit in models where creative decision making plays a much more important role in the process of learning, where composing/arranging/improvising are at least as important as performing and listening.

#### 4. Formal Concerts

Following the professional model, school ensembles focus on public performance. The educational goal becomes performing an outstanding concert or obtaining an exceptional rating at a contest. In this model, the group result takes precedence over individual needs, and the evaluation of individuals is usually reduced to whether or not students can perform their part. The assumption that musical learning takes place through large-group concert preparation is not documented. When the measure of success remains at the group level, there is no assurance that individuals within the group are developing musicality. New models of music education need to focus on individual student musical learning where formal, public performance is significantly reduced, if not eliminated, and replaced with a variety of methods where classroom activities can be shared with others in more meaningful ways.

#### 5. Instruments

School instrumental ensembles have employed the same instruments for over one hundred years. The string and wind instruments used in school ensembles were once popular in our society. Beginning in the 1970s, the use of these instruments began to decrease in general, and especially in youth culture, to the point where they have practically disappeared today. More students gain personal satisfaction and meaning from performing instruments that appeal and intrigue them, and new models of music education must make use of newer technologies and instruments that are of interest to students and are part of the culture in which they live. In a work published in 1997, Libby Larson stated that, in addition



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to a core of acoustic sound, we are now faced with "the musical reality of produced sound." She suggests, "We do not need to replace the basic standards but we must rethink the approach to music. We must rethink its core, and we must expand it to include the core of produced sound."<sup>13</sup>

#### 6. Musical Styles

School ensembles were well established in the United States by the 1920s. Up to that time, the music they performed was a significant part of the musical society. As we well know, this is no longer true. Today, most music performed by school

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could have success with classes based on Latin or Asian musics. Students at many schools could benefit from courses dealing with different popular music styles found in the United States, such as rock, pop, country, or rap.

## 7. Traditional Notation

Large ensembles are bound to traditional music notation out of necessity, as rote learning in large groups is typically tedious and can slow learning to a crawl. Students involved with other musical styles and instruments function very well without the need for learning standard notational systems, and these musical involvements often lead to advanced aural skill development. In traditional music education, understanding notation skills is usually considered synonymous with music literacy. Literacy in music, however, has a much different connotation in the greater majority of musical genres throughout the world, and even in traditional forms of American musics, including jazz and rock and roll. New models of music education could benefit from involving practices that emphasize aural development over written competence.

## 8. Lifelong Skills

One important goal of education should be helping students develop skills and understandings they can make use of throughout life. There is convincing empirical evidence a very large percentage of students that begin participation in secondary school ensembles cease their musical involvements while still in school or soon after leaving high school. Aside from fond memories, there is little indication that traditional music education has much of an effect on musical life after high school for most students. Considerable thought should be given to the enhancement of lifelong musical skills when developing new models of music education. Helping students find relevance between music study in school and their musical life outside of school will go a long way in the development of lifelong learning. Educator Lucy Green suggested in a 1988 study that allowing students

ensembles has become so esoteric that perhaps the only way to categorize it is "school music." Little of this music has relevance to the lives of students outside of school. To attract interest in music education programs, new models of music education must include a variety of musical styles and genres and should embrace

popular styles, including cultural/ethnic considerations of interest to students. Many of these musical styles come with authentic learning and performance practices that are not well suited to our traditional large ensembles. Some schools might find an Afro-Cuban music course of great interest to students, while others

more autonomy over the learning environment can have positive effects on learning for life.<sup>14</sup> Autonomy in several of the previous areas, including creative decision making, instrument choice, and musical styles, could have a significant effect on the acquisition of lifelong musical skills. If we expect music education to be taken seriously as a school subject, we must give considerable thought to the enhancement of lifelong musical skills when developing new models of music education.

## 9. Entry Level

Once a student has missed the entry point for participation in traditional ensembles, it is often difficult to break into the system as a beginner. Few high school programs (especially instrumental) have serious options for students with no previous performance skills. New models of music education must not only allow but encourage students to start music instruction at any grade level and provide opportunities for them to be placed in small-group settings where students of various abilities and experience can learn with and from each other.

## 10. Developing Functionality

In traditional performance programs, it normally takes several years of practice and study to achieve a functional level on an instrument. Even with a full year of ensemble experience in a band, choral, or string class, a student is not likely to have achieved a level of musicianship sufficient to sustain musical activity if he or she stops in-school participation. Ideally, new models of music education need to help students reach a functional level of musicality within one year or less, providing students who cannot or choose not to participate in school music classes for longer periods the ability to independently enhance their musicality after they leave us.

## A New Direction

There are several opportunities for change that are worthy of serious consideration

as we look to the future of music education in the United States. I chose the term *opportunities* very carefully. The music education profession is, and has been for some time, facing various challenges that may best be dealt with through change. Change can be scary. But change can also be an opportunity. I suggest that we are entering a very exciting time for the music education profession as we deal with potential change. I think we have many great opportunities to make music study in the schools as relevant as it has ever been. We also have amazing opportunities to help expand musicianship for all students, and to enhance the musical culture of the United States. None of this will be easily accomplished, but I have to believe we are up to the challenge.

What might all this look like? One example could be a guitar class where students learn primarily in small groups (two to four students), learning to play copies of music they choose and music they compose/arrange themselves (including vocals). The teacher would help individuals develop technique, learn stylistic characteristics (including movement), and lead students to representative listening examples. The performance aspect of the class would be groups playing for each other and discussing what they did and how they did it. Other performance opportunities include use of the Internet and informal presentations around the school. An obvious extension for such a class would be to include additional instruments such as keyboards, electric bass, and drums. A similar class could use iPads as instruments instead of guitars. The iPad (as well as similar devices) brings a whole new world of possibilities to music performance. The touch interface is a big part of this, but even more important is the ever-growing library of musical applications (apps) that are available. The variety of musical apps is truly amazing, and the array of different sound possibilities is staggering. Never have so many sound choices been so easily accessible. Almost anything is possible when multiple iPads are played together.

Another example might be a computer-based classroom where students would work independently and also collaborate in small groups, copying and creating original music. Again, vocals and other instruments could also be used (including traditional instruments!). Multimedia could be added through video, and elements of dance could be incorporated. Ideally, students would activate their creative thinking skills and make artistic choices, and teachers would facilitate learning. Still another example might take the form of a hip-hop and deejaying course where students create their own beats and songs, rehearse them in small groups, and perform for each other in the class. The options are many and limited only by our own imaginations.

Another important option is an Internet-based music class. In a very short time, the Internet has changed the way many people access information. It has literally changed how we live, and it is changing what is meant by "school." Our profession would be wise to think seriously about Internet-based courses. A music composition, songwriting, or music production type course would actually work very well in an online environment. Even a guitar class would be easily attainable.

Any of these examples could also include investigating the popular music business, studying musicians and personalities from within the musical styles covered in the class, and analysis of exemplary musical examples. Additionally, samples of musics of other styles and genres, including classical, could be used to help students understand general sonic relationships within music.

Classes such as these, and no doubt there are many more possibilities, combine various aspects of the ten preceding opportunities by limiting class size to twenty to twenty-five students, allowing students to choose the musical styles to study, and then allowing them to choose the instruments to authentically produce this music. Students in such classes would be responsible for their own creative decisions and would work cooperatively

with other students, of varying experience levels, and would regularly demonstrate what they are learning for others in the class. Green provides an excellent model of this setting from her research on informal learning.<sup>15</sup>

As a profession, should our goal be to perpetuate the type of musical experience we enjoyed as students, or should we adapt as necessary to reach new generations of students with musical experiences that might be more meaningful and relevant to them? I suggest the answer is not necessarily “we should do both.” Certainly there are schools where the traditional model is still very strong and needs to continue in addition to new offerings, but just as certainly, there are schools in which it no longer makes sense to continue traditional instrumental and/or choral programs—and I would propose there are more examples of the latter than the former. In fact, many school music programs would benefit from starting over completely with different types of music experiences for students, experiences many students not currently interested in school music programs would find both relevant and meaningful.

There are two issues keeping the profession from making significant strides in increasing enrollment and extending musicianship skills. First is this belief that a secondary school music program must include traditional ensembles, and second is the belief that anything added is exactly that—an add-on, not the serious music-making business found in the band and choir. Students attracted to nontraditional music classes can be just as earnest, sincere, and committed (if not more so) as students who play trumpet or sing in a choir, and they deserve teachers who are equally resolute.

These attitudes are keeping the profession from making any real progress related to enrollment and musical participation. Perhaps we are fifty years too late. It would have been timely if we had started adding substantial numbers of guitar classes, composition classes, and popular music classes in the early 1960s. While we continue to debate the need for

these classes today, they are fast becoming noninnovative and now only scratch the surface of the possibilities. Whatever we do, I hope we act quickly. The profession's reluctance to address this elephant in the room has hurt us greatly and has robbed countless numbers of students of a potentially rich music education.

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