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Transcending the Facade of Music Education

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The scene: an elementary school auditorium, filled to capacity with beaming parents proudly snapping photos. Onstage, well-rehearsed children sing, dance, and play instruments with zeal. The show is a complete success, and the music teacher is pleased and relieved. With good reason. Just as most professionals must demonstrate their success to some supervising authority, music educators know that their future employment depends upon how their work impresses administrators and parents. Consider three ways the music program is judged.

The teacher's efforts to avoid any appearance of failure can result in a failure to educate.

The concert performance is one of the most visible, and therefore crucial, demonstrations of the music program. The bigger the better in terms of enthusiasm; numbers of students; involvement of other teachers and subject areas; and the impressive use of instruments, choreography, narration, sets, costumes, and other means of heightening production value. Because more performances mean more exposure for the music program, class plays and other productions further enhance the teacher's success.

Classroom ambience is also important. The successful classroom has a bright, cheery look; the children seem happy and participate well; the class uses various equipment the school has purchased; there is a lot of activity lending an air of accomplishment to the class and apparently boosting the children's self-esteem.

Finally, the absence of anything problematic is a plus. The teacher is considered more successful when no disciplinary dealings are evident, when things run smoothly as far as the office is concerned, when there are no failing grades, and when parents hear no negative remarks from their children.

Because parents and administrators rely on external aspects in evaluating the music program, teachers are motivated to focus on the surface of the work, where it seems to count. When superficial elements are pieced together and polished to a high gloss, an impressive facade is created, effectively masking the truth —a failure in music education.

Scratching the Surface: Is This Education?

The flashy concert is likely to succeed in impressing parents and administrators, earning the teacher career success. However, if the goal of music education is truly to educate our students in music, we need a more valid measure of success.

First we must define music education. To determine what we should expect of a musically educated student, let us consider what we would require of a person deemed minimally educated in any other subject. At the least, we would expect a working knowledge of basic concepts and symbols. In mathematics, for example, we would expect students to read and write numbers and to implement them functionally. In English, a minimum standard would be the ability to read and write letters, words, and sentences. In other words, the minimum condition for education is literacy.

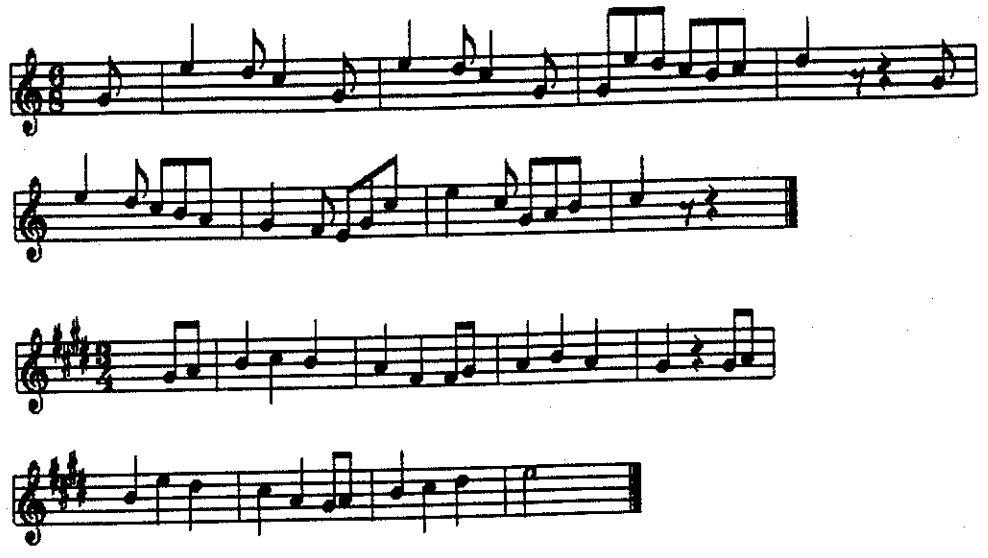
In fact, *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* defines "literate" as "educated," as well as "able to read and write" and "having knowledge or competence." In all subjects, the ability to read and write is linked with knowledge and competence. The mathematics teacher, for example, might initially use material objects such as beads and apples to present concepts but would soon need to represent ideas with symbols. To continue to use beads and apples indefinitely would severely limit the students' ultimate abilities in mathematics. Similarly, although preschoolers are often read to by their parents, a primary task of the English teacher is to enable students to read and write themselves. Illiteracy is more than an inconvenience—it is a hindrance to continued education. The need for notation to represent concepts develops as a natural progression and illustrates the reason for notation's existence: concepts can progress beyond a certain level only with the aid of notation to represent, clarify, and communicate ideas. Illiteracy thus impedes learning.

MUSIC LITERACY

Applying a similar standard to music, we should expect students to gain literacy—the ability to sing, play, hear, read, write, and understand music. Beginning on the elementary level, students should gain a working knowledge of musical elements—phrasing, rhythm, form, melody, and harmony; the ability to transfer symbols on the page into sound (reading) and to transfer sound to symbols on the page (writing); and the working knowledge required to construct their own music phrases in sound and then in notation. Providing music literacy skills on the elementary level, where much of music education occurs, ensures the students' ability to proceed beyond rudiments in the upper grades.

To be sure, there is such a wide range of music programs throughout the nation that it would be difficult to make generalizations were the problem not so pervasive. Although many elementary school children are gaining a true musical education, evidence of music education's crippled state is likely to be found in most readers' districts.

A simple test of music literacy will provide our first evidence. How many students in your district would be able to sight-sing the melodies in Figure 1 by grade five? By grade eight? By grade twelve? These examples might seem difficult by our current standards. Although it is not the case in every school, you are likely to find that only a few students in your local high school would be able to sight-sing them successfully; thus sight-singing these tunes may seem too severe a test of music literacy. Yet American children were once taught to sight-sing such melodies. The first example below is from the *Boston Music Course: Second Reader* by Luther Whiting Mason (1871); the second is from *Third Year Music* by Hollis Dann (1915).[1] These books were intended for children, and although they contain songs to

FIGURE 1. Sight-singing exercises

be learned by rote, the melodies are sight-singing exercises included to supplant rote methods entirely. Evidently, with few exceptions, our standards of music education have not only failed to progress, but have actually regressed.

Widely used textbook series support this view. Many contain no substantive material toward music reading and writing skills but leave the conceptual level at its broadest terms: high and low, upward and downward, loud and soft, fast and slow, long and short, same and different.

Further evidence is found at the upper level of the system. High school students in band and orchestra have had some experience with notation—instrumental study makes a connection between the fingering required to produce a tone, the tone's representation as a note on the page, and the note's name. However, this alone still does not constitute a music education according to our definition. Even the correct manipulation of instruments to produce specific tones does not necessarily provide a foundation that enables students to hear, sing, and construct music themselves.

CHORAL STUDENTS

Unlike instrumentalists, choral students are able to reproduce a pitch without seeing it or naming it; thus they are even more likely to forgo music literacy. It is all too easy for choral students to grow dependent on the rote process and resistant to reading study. When they use sheet music primarily for the words, choral students force their directors to rely on rote teaching methods, wasting time and energy that would be better spent refining musical interpretation and performance. Although many choral directors manage to squeeze in some rudimentary reading training, we cannot expect them to teach literacy single-handedly at this late stage while maintaining a performance schedule and high standards of musicianship.

Elsewhere in the curriculum, high school electives in the fundamentals of music annually return to the basic elements; even colleges and universities offer introductory freshman courses in the rudiments of music, further attesting to our failure to educate our students musically in the public schools. Despite years of music classes, many students in the United States graduate from high school musically illiterate, with little appreciation of our musical heritage.

The Factors of Failure

In searching for the cause of this decline in music education, we might implicate school funding for a dearth of materials or time. Although music education is scheduled in most public schools throughout the nation, a common challenge, limited time, necessitates highly concentrated lessons and reinforcement strategies. Nevertheless, even one half-hour a week can amount to 140 hours of music instruction by sixth grade alone, and it is not impossible to provide music literacy skills in this amount of time.

Scarcity of equipment is rarely a hindrance, since the essential raw materials of music teaching are few and inexpensive—the children's voices and bodies, writing implements, a space, and perhaps some instrument of pitch. Our early music educators, it is worth remembering, accomplished much with very little.

Music teachers may be blamed for music illiteracy and be accused of being lazy or deficient in skills. Yet these educators work hard to produce programs of the kind described earlier and exert obvious effort in their training, conferences, workshops, seminars, and journals. To ask why music educators fail is to ask the wrong question. Music educators succeed in doing the job they are hired to do: producing the product expected or even required of them. They only share blame to the extent that they share in perpetuating and promoting that product.

In the January 1991 issue of *Music Educators Journal*, Karl Glenn, president of the Music Educators National Conference, questioned whether music teachers should emphasize "process or product," concluding that we should concern ourselves with both.[2] However, since the two are by nature inseparable—every product is produced through some process, and every process creates some product—the initial comparative question yields little insight. A more enlightening question would be, In what *sort* of process and product are we interested?

Let us consider that question in terms of the criterion identified earlier for evaluating the music teacher's success: the concert, the classroom, and the unblemished veneer of the program. If a lavish performance is our optimal product, music literacy will be forfeited; given typical scheduling constraints, few music edu-

cators can teach literacy while preparing large-scale productions. The teacher must choose which will prevail. Administrators and parents are not likely to be dismayed if students cannot notate a rhythmic pattern, nor excited if they can. An extravagant performance can catch us all up in excitement, however, and in schools with a tradition of such concerts, anything less would seem disappointing. True musical accomplishments in the early levels seem pale in comparison.

MIRED IN ROTE

The teaching process leading toward this performance-oriented product is certain to be mired in rote. Indisputably, rote teaching satisfies our culture's desire for instant gratification, and it allows students to sing more songs, and more complex songs, in less time than do other methods, thus producing a more impressive performance. However, its quick results in the lower grades compromise the students' achievement in the long run. Only slower educational processes provide the skills and understanding the students will need if they are to continue to develop musically in the upper grades.

Because music is a performing art, some people reason that performance should be the focus of music education; and rote teaching, so the thinking goes, provides a way for children to learn by "speaking the language" of music. However, if we are interested in the children's education in music and not in entertainment value, we will not rote-teach songs for the same reasons that mathematics students are not drilled to recite equations they do not understand.

Although the process of learning language is so unique in human development that it cannot be easily equated with other learning processes, it is worth considering as an educational model. In learning to speak, young children do not merely mimic words in fixed phrases; rather, they gain functional use of words organized by concepts of phrase and sentence structure through active experimentation. Thus, speech is an improvisatory demonstration of the child's developing knowledge of grammar. Rote teaching does not allow for this kind of experimentation and improvisation, and without the opportunity to manipulate concepts, students are unlikely to learn. Even parrots can say "E equals mc^2" but we would not assume it holds meaning to them; nor should we believe that either the parrot or the child are musically educated, by our earlier definition, simply because they have been taught to sing a variety of songs.

Thus, rote methods do not really enable children to speak the language of music, because this approach prohibits the working vocabulary needed to speak fluently in any language. Rather, teaching select songs by rote affects the student's music literacy skills to the same extent that memorizing phrases from a tour book gives the American in Paris fluency in French.

In the class lessons, as well, the superficial appearance of success may misrepresent the extent of real music education. Here again, to be favorably viewed, a product will present visible evidence of accomplishment. Many teaching aids are designed to enable students to define and identify music nomenclature, such as note values, clefs, and dynamic markings. This appears to demonstrate music literacy, and has the advantage of providing documentation through objective tests. However, if the terms of music are not preceded by meaningful, clarifying experiences in musical sound, they will remain intellectual exercises, the map of a road the students have never traveled. Thus, even when the students pass the test, they may fail to gain true music education.

APPEARANCE OF FAILURE

According to our third criterion for the music program's success, both its process and its product must avoid the appearance of failure, in terms of failing grades as well as of failure to master specific skills. When a child fails, the teacher is often blamed for failing to meet the student's needs. A class boasting high grades and good reports presents the flawless appearance desired.

Ironically, the teacher's efforts to avoid any appearance of failure can result in failure to educate. Teachers of all subjects are aware of a trend to demonstrate success at the expense of genuine education. The arts certainly suffer from this syndrome, as illustrated by the commonly heard question, "How is it even possible for anyone to fail music?" The disbelief expressed in that question reflects a disbelief in the content of a music class, and a contention that music is not a "real" subject. The assumption is that one cannot really fail (or succeed) to learn music, since it involves no content to be learned or failed. Both parents and students are likely to be concerned about a failing grade in music because it mars the report card and lowers the grade point average,

rather than because the student has not learned music.

The assumption that music is devoid of real content can motivate the teacher to remove class content in order to maintain an appearance of success. Here, by emphasizing class activities that contain nothing to fail, classes are designed to ensure that no one will fail. Whereas an approach toward literacy helps focus the musical content of each lesson, an emphasis on fun experiences in which all "succeed" has no such focus. Rather, the students merely fiddle on the fringes of music without delving into its challenges, and learn as much as they would learn in mathematics by merely playing around with the apples and beads mentioned earlier.

FAIL-PROOF CLASSES

It might be argued that these fail-proof classes, along with lavish performances, are valuable because they bolster students' self-esteem. This may be true. But while participation in music does promote healthy, positive feelings about ourselves, gearing music primarily as a vehicle to enhanced self-esteem is the purpose of music therapy, not music education. Moreover, the quick boost in self-esteem is likely to be short-lived. Students tire of frivolous classes, leading to problems with behavior and motivation. Genuine buoyancy of self-esteem comes from the accomplishment of a challenging task or the mastery of a practiced skill, and these true successes are able to build upon each other continuously to produce a long-range sense of self-worth.

Administrators may also contribute to this therapeutic approach to music education. Although many doubtlessly do support music literacy, in *Coming to Our Senses*, the Arts, Education and Americans Panel notes that first among the "typical goals of school administrators" for music is that "elementary school music should exist only for the enjoyment and pleasure of the children; it helps them relax."[3]

The Trickle-Up Effect

Further problems develop in the upper grades when students are not truly educated in music on the elementary level. Students meet low expectations for their achievement with low expectations for the music class. When their elementary music classes comprise primarily music games and rote-taught songs without concrete study or achievement, students are bound to conclude that music classes contain nothing substantial nor challenging, and they enter the middle school groaning over the prospect of more general music.

Their teacher is in a tough spot. By the seventh grade, these students have made their favorite popular music a significant part of their lives and identities and may therefore be even more resistant to the music classroom. The teacher lacks a handle, a means to approach them, and a foundation on which to build. Imagine an English teacher facing a class of middle-school students whose literary experiences had consisted only of being read to, memorizing verses taught by rote, and perhaps labeling the letters of the alphabet. Without the skills to read and write, the literary content of the class is sure to remain limited.

Confronted with students who cannot read, write, hear, or understand music and given an imperative to "succeed," teachers in grades 7–12 must further dilute the curriculum to get by. Working around students' inabilities can result in a makeshift approach to music education. For example, although "soundpieces"—discovering sounds in the classroom, such as pencil tapping and paper crinkling, and organizing them into a compositional form—may be one way to present the elements of music, this approach would surely be surpassed if more students were musically literate.

This problem has not gone completely unnoticed. A burgeoning industry has gladly come to the aid of music teachers with graded textbooks, plays, slides, videos, records and tapes, posters, flashcards, computer programs, games, and numerous easily played instruments, especially recorders, handbells, tone-bar, and other percussion instruments. Although these teaching aids may in some ways succeed in aiding the teacher, we have seen that they have not endowed our students with a level of music literacy equal to the scarcely supplied pupils of earlier generations.

Again, there are certainly music teachers around the nation who quietly and successfully teach children music literacy. It is sometimes suggested that it is unfair to these teachers to point out evidence of our dearth of music literacy and to urge reforms. But these are not the teachers who bristle at the call for music literacy, for the evidence supports their work. Indeed, we need to identify these teachers and learn from them to make progress in music education.

Prescriptions for Progress

Clearly, we must reevaluate both the proces and the product of music education in order to effect change. Specifically, we need goals reflecting our belief in music's substance and value, and we need guidelines for an effective educational process. Solutions must be addressed collectively by groups of professionals in the field through open forums of shared ideas, debate, discussion, and resolution.

Five suggestions for a collaborative effort in reforming music education follow:

1. A first step for music educators, singly and collectively, is to rethink and clarify the goals of music education, replacing a superficial orientation toward performance with an emphasis on the smaller outward achievements that reflect genuine educational growth toward music skills and understanding.

2. Since these gains can be subtle in appearance and difficult to measure, specific skills in music (hearing, reading, writing, and performing physically, vocally and/or with instruments) should be decided upon for various levels to be used as guideposts to teach toward, although teachers will approach them in various ways.

3. Without prescribing any particular teaching method, we need to outline collectively the general characteristics of an educational process that will help music educators to reach these new guideposts and goals, replacing an interest in quick results with a concern for the more subtle effects of genuine musical development.

4. We need to identify and publicize programs successful in teaching music literacy and use them as models for development.

5. We must educate the public, including parents, administrators, and fellow teachers, about these new goals, guideposts, and processes in the music program; the rationale behind them; the need for support in their implementation; and the specific ways in which the school's music program will be affected.

The task of persuading the public to support music literacy is compounded by the pervasive idea that music is not a "real" subject. We must, therefore, address the broader issue of the value of arts in education. We must argue this case if we are to strengthen music as a subject of substance and increase music literacy.

In response to the overall decline in educational standards and achievements and pleas from industry for a better-educated work force, politicians and others now call for a return to basics, an emphasis on the core curriculum, and a strengthened connection between education and the workplace that emphasizes vocational training. In this perspective, the arts can seem insignificant.

We can argue the benefits of the arts in this light, saying that they foster creativity and critical thinking, or that they provide recreational and therapeutic value that enhances other skills, for example. These rationales are persuasive, yet it would be better still to change the initial premise that education's purpose is merely to provide an economically effective workforce and the secondary premise that the arts' purpose is to assist education in that endeavor.

A more humanistic approach, extending the goals of education beyond mere vocational training, has been voiced throughout the history of education in Western culture. A fundamental purpose of U.S. education must be to ensure human development and democratic freedom, guarding against the idea that children are born to be fed into the labor market. As David Rockefeller, Jr., said, "The heart of the case for the arts in education is, I believe, that they are essential to human development—to individual growth."[4]

When the core curriculum takes on focal value, the arts are seen only for their subservient value to these other subjects. We would do well to heed John Dewey's words in *Democracy and Education*:

> We cannot establish a hierarchy of values among studies. It is futile to attempt to arrange them in an order, beginning with one having least worth and going on to that of maximum value. In so far as any study has unique or irreplaceable function in experience, in so far as it marks a characteristic enrichment of life, its worth is intrinsic or incomparable.[5]

As one of the few intrinsically rewarding gifts of life, the arts need not justify their existence in terms of other fields and interests; rather, aesthetic literacy should be valued for its own sake. As Junius Eddy concludes in his monograph *The Case For the Arts in Schools*:

> Arts education must be valued in education first and foremost on its own varied merits because it is in so many ways the only means available for teaching students about, and involving them in, aesthetic literacy and creativity.[6]

Music literacy should not remain the cherished trove of the fortunate few, but must be shared throughout the nation. To foster the growth of our musical culture and to enrich the lives of all Americans, we must restore music in our schools to its fullest resonance and impart genuine music literacy. This is the highest challenge facing music education today.

Notes

1. Luther Whiting Mason, *Boston Music Course: Second Reader* (Boston: 1871), 23; and Hollis Dann, *Third Year Music* (New York: American Book Co., 1915), 109.
2. Karl Glenn, "Product and Process in Music Education," *Music Educators Journal* 77 (January 1991): 4–6.
3. The Arts, Education and Americans Panel, *Coming to Our Senses* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), 72.
4. David Rockefeller, Jr., New York University Alumni Awards Dinner, quoted in *AEA Progress: Newsletter of the Arts, Education and Americans, Inc.* 1 (Spring 1981): 1.
5. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 239.
6. Junius Eddy, *The Case for the Arts in Schools* (New York: The Arts, Education and Americans, Inc., 1981), 17.

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