

## Ensemble Traditions and Best Practice: Teaching in the Modern Music Classroom

Education has changed in the last century to reflect new research on student learning and how we can best facilitate it. Music classes should be no exception. The traditions of music education are long-standing and often regarded as sacred. The way we teach large ensembles in particular is deeply rooted in the traditions of where the ensembles came from. I would like to explore these traditions, their function, and where they intersect with new methods in music education. To begin inquiry regarding the effectiveness of traditional ensemble practices, we first have to define what it is that we are effectively trying to accomplish. Instilling an appreciation for the aesthetic beauty of music-making, cultivating independent musicians, and encouraging students to be lifelong music lovers are widely-accepted goals among music educators. I do not disagree, but I also think we have the opportunity to teach so much more.

Music education provides us with a tool for teaching young adults about themselves and as well as the world around them. While we are teaching music theory and critical listening skills we are also teaching life skills. David Elliot articulates clearly this critical opportunity to not just teach music content, but to also teach THROUGH music. He submits that when music education is ethically guided and not only about music, but through it— we empower students to pursue a life of well-being, flourishing, fulfillment, and constructive happiness for the benefit of themselves and others (Elliot, 1995).

### **Historical Background**

To understand where we are now in large ensemble settings, we can look back to their origins. All three of the large ensembles typically in secondary schools (choir, orchestra, band) descend from professional realms. Established norms from these settings have been integrated

into school ensembles. Choir descended from the church setting, where choral groups provided structure and meaning during sacred ritual, proclaimed faith and celebrated tradition, and brought people together in an organized social experience. Orchestra is the descendant of the European tradition of art music. This realm is marked by social class and education. The wind band tradition emerged from the military band. When the industrial revolution allowed for more instruments to be made at an affordable cost, the middle class was able to participate in this culture in the form of town bands.

### **Ensemble Norms**

“A musical tradition espouses particular values that are considered to be normative by its exponents. Adherents of musical traditions have specific attitudes that help frame their beliefs and actions. These ideas hold particular emotional valences that reinforce behaviors because they are taken to be normative, internalized, and committed-to through actions... the fact that they undergird and prompt commitments to actions renders them powerful” (Jorgensen, 2008, p. 55)

The following list enumerates many of the accepted norms passed down through tradition of music-making in the ensemble setting:

- Dialogue is one directional, from leader to followers or from teacher to students
- Learning is through lecture and criticism directly from the teacher
- A strict seating arrangement is used, and participants remain stationary for the duration of rehearsal
- Rehearsals should be quiet, and members should only speak to the leader when called on

- Performances are the ultimate goal: the process of learning is a means to the end product
- Performance requires a specific etiquette: respected repertoire, dress attire, silent audience, limited dialogue addressing the audience
- Only trained musicians may participate
- Ensembles are embedded in society: parlor songs, town bands, etc.

### **New Research-Guided Methods**

As I previously mentioned, education has evolved and music education is no exception. The following is a sampling of new methods supported by current research in the field. The master-apprentice model for teacher-student relationships has historically been the norm in traditional western music education. This model is characterized by one-way communication from teacher to student, which facilitates the direct imitation of the teacher's model. In contrast, the mentor-student model is an equal exchange between teacher and student in which the teacher facilitates musical experimentation and guides the augmentation of the students own musical experiences. This in turn often cultivates a greater feeling of autonomy for students and the greater possibility of intrinsic motivation for music learning (Lehmann, Sloboda, & Woody, 2007).

Assessment consists of designing, conducting, interpreting, and communicating the results of an investigation into learning (Fautley and Colwell, 2012). Herein lies the difference between the professional or ceremonial ensembles and the educational ensemble setting. It is important that we use the repertoire and the performance not solely as the goal and ultimate measure of achievement, but as a vehicle to cultivate musical abilities, develop artistic concepts, and build life skills.

Literature is an integral part of the music education curriculum. Beyond wanting to provide the audience with a satisfying aesthetic experience as a professional ensemble does, we also want choose literature that provides our students with meaningful experiences, musical and otherwise. In the *Teaching Music Through Performance* series, Ray Cramer shares his seven-point list of components for music with artistic merit. He states, “If we are going to teach about music, through music while performing music, then all of these elements need to be incorporated into our rehearsal planning...” (p. 125).

Does the music have...

1. *a well-conceived formal structure?*
2. *creative melodies and counter-lines?*
3. *harmonic imagination?*
4. *rhythmic vitality?*
5. *contrast in all music elements?*
6. *scoring which best represents the full potential for beautiful tone and timbre?*
7. *an emotional impact?*

These criteria may be met in a variety of settings aside from western art music. Current music education research and philosophy encourage a diverse repertoire to reflect our diverse society. This implies the need for incorporating multicultural music, popular music, and abstract or improvised music into the classroom. German composer Kurt Weill (1900-1950) once stated, “I have never acknowledged the difference between ‘serious’ music and ‘light’ music, there is only good music and bad music.”

Though it is often stigmatized, popular music is a resource rich with musical content and teachable concepts that are valuable in advancing curricular goals. Many students come to the

ensemble rehearsal with an extant musical understanding that is heavily shaped by popular music. Thus, a culturally responsive approach to music education would incorporate elements of pop music in the rehearsal framework. The repertoire of pop music offers many listening examples to illustrate ideas of form, harmonic function, and expressivity that might sound different than Western art music or traditional band repertoire, but are conceptually analogous. Learning by ear provides opportunity to strengthen students' aural perception skills and offers opportunities for improvisation and musical play. If one of our ultimate goals as music educators is to create independent musicians and thoughtful music appreciators, we should consider incorporating both the repertoire and pedagogy of popular music as part of the curricular sequence.

Historically, the rehearsal setting in an ensemble would mean a quiet room, absolutely still unless members are cued to play or sing. This instills a culture of leader and followers. Current research indicates that adolescence is a transformative period in which young people move toward life independency (Kleibeuker, De Dreu, & Crone, 2013). Choice and agency are huge components in reaching this independency. Musical play in secondary ensembles can offer young people the opportunity to express their individuality and decision-making abilities through informal, self-regulated music making. Motivation is more easily sustained when the impetus for learning comes from the student rather than from an authority figure. It may seem difficult to fit this into the large ensemble curriculum, but we can apply this tool as a strategy for teaching concepts already in the curriculum. This could take shape in the form of improvisation, composition, or small ensembles such as chamber groups, pop groups, or rock bands. We can also integrate musical play into our everyday instruction with games, movement activities, and discussions requiring imaginative and creative thinking.

## **Reflection and Intersection**

It's important that we as music educators reflect on our teaching practices as well as the traditions of our art form to create the best possible experiences for student achievement. I believe that some norms are still crucial and create invaluable opportunities for our students while others can be retired. Among the norms that are still vital, a high standard for rigor and routine are keys to success in any classroom. Additionally, music educators should embrace music's historical role of bringing people together in community. Community outreach presents an incredible opportunity for our students to take pride in their hard work and share it. It's also beneficial for the community to experience and understand all that music has to offer. Lastly, making music for the sake of music provides opportunity for students to create something beautiful, to feel and express themselves, and to experience creating something special. This is the basis of an aesthetic philosophy, as it relates to the individual and to the quality of music performed.

The roots of large ensembles contribute rich traditions and history that have value in contemporary music education and should be present in our classrooms today. However, a hybrid of new methods (for instance broadening, encouraging student voice, and movement) with old concepts may be the most engaging and efficient way to reach students and inspire more than just the notes on the page. As our world is evolving, it is our responsibility to our students to reflect on our current practices and evaluate if we are meeting our goals for the future of large ensembles in music education.

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