

## **2009 Symposium on Music Teacher Education: Enacting Shared Visions**

### **Large Ensemble Music Instruction: A Phoenix Awaiting Cremation or Reincarnation?**

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Despite repeated calls to revise and transform American music education, bands, orchestras, and choirs remain the primary focus of instructional practice in K – 12 schools. Critics maintain that large ensemble music instruction focuses on collective performance accomplishments and extrinsic rewards rather than on providing individuals with skills that might promote lifelong music making. There is legitimate concern that the music experienced in large ensembles has little relevance to the musical lives students lead outside of school. Even supporters of current practices realize that the music young people identify with, create in garage bands, carry on their iPods, and use to complement projects produced on their computers seems very distant from the school music that dominates academic settings.

Many of the issues regarding the quality of learning taking place in school music programs were brought to national attention by John Kratus in the MEJ article *Music Education at the Tipping Point* (2007). David Meyers echoed those concerns in his opening address to the 2009 SMTE conference which detailed many of the problems with current practice but offered little in the way of possible solutions. In spite of many on-going criticisms that this paradigm does not prepare people to integrate music into their

adult lives, large ensembles remain the major mode of music instruction in American schools. Newly constructed middle and high schools in the country still build rehearsal facilities for band, orchestras and choirs. The public perceives school-based performance organizations as safe environments that contribute to the intellectual and social growth of students and serve as visible symbols of institutional success. The power of large ensemble participation to impact the lives of young people is recognized beyond U.S. borders. The Venezuelan approach to music education called *El Sistema* has transformed the lives of almost 800,000 young people by teaching children to play orchestral instruments.<sup>i</sup> In an ironic twist, this Venezuelan model is currently being examined as a way to reintroduce music making to American children attending schools that have abandoned large ensemble instruction.<sup>ii</sup> Because school based large ensembles remain a cultural tradition that are likely to continue into the foreseeable future, finding ways to improve the quality of music learning in these organizations should be of paramount importance to the music education profession.

The purpose of this SMTE session was to begin a critical examination of the positive values associated with learning in large ensemble settings and the unique contributions that participation in these organizations makes to a student's music education. Five framing questions were developed by a panel of university music education faculty members and used to encourage a dialogue with colleagues about the current and future relevance of large ensembles. Of particular importance to the panel was the exploration of possibilities for creating relevant curricula for these organizations. The framing questions were:

1. What are the positive characteristics of large ensemble participation and learning?

2. What would constitute excellent instructional practice in large ensemble settings?
3. What changes are needed to improve instructional practice in large ensemble settings?
4. What are the challenges?
5. How to address the challenges?

Although panel members had each prepared position statements intended to provoke discussion, the five questions with accompanying sub points provided the catalyst for a productive dialogue with the audience. The remainder of this paper summarizes the contributions of panel members and participants from the session.

### **Positive characteristics of large ensemble participation and learning**

The first framing question explored positive features of large ensemble music education. Members of the panel identified a number of distinctive features that these organizations offer young people. Bands, orchestras and choirs often provide young people with a positive social environment in which students of varying skills levels and backgrounds can work together towards mutually satisfying performances. In particular, those who are not yet ready to function as independent musicians can thrive through the positive learning communities that the large ensemble experience offers. As they work together to create a successful performance, students often engage in the type of deliberate practice that is so necessary to the acquisition of expertise in many domains (Ericsson, 1996). Although most do not become experts in the field of music, former music students frequently report that their success in other educational situations is a direct result of learning how repetition and effort contribute to skill development.

Additionally, public support is created for school music programs by highly flourishing large ensemble programs.

Colleagues suggested that large ensembles offer the type of aesthetic experiences that are only possible when performing with others in group settings (Jamila McWhorter). This evoked Benzon's (2001) suggestion that one of the purposes of music making is to bring human minds together in common experience (Heuser). Although large ensembles have the potential of allowing students to experience great works from the Western canon, we were reminded that much of the literature performed in schools does not connect young people with music of exceptional quality (David Williams). However, even if the music explored may be less than outstanding, music making through the large ensemble is a human craft that is worthy of being perpetuated. It is the doing of music, not just the teaching of the canon which is of great importance (Alan Gumm).

### **Excellent instructional practice in large ensemble settings**

Participants at the session insisted that it is important for university music education faculty members to prepare future teachers to develop instructional goals extending beyond the simple preparation and presentation of performances. Students in large ensembles need to acquire lasting skills, understandings and values that transcend the instruments and musical works studied. In order to accomplish this, Serafine (1986) suggests refocusing teaching away from what she terms the secondary content of music which includes the symbol systems describing music, information about music and the ability to perform from written notation. Instead, she suggests that music instruction might center on the primary content of music which would include understanding the

style principles in the music of one's culture and the abstract cognitive processes through which musical meaning is communicated.

In this regard, there is a need to differentiate instructional processes in middle and high school settings from the professional models of large ensemble rehearsals that are prevalent in higher education (Betty Anne Gottlieb). Music educators in schools might accomplish this by including students in the score preparation process. This would allow instructors to demonstrate how they acquire the background necessary to teach a piece and how in-depth score study reveals different layers of meaning in a work (Jeff Ward). By providing opportunities for community sharing and for learning *with* rather than being taught *by* the director (choral person), it should be possible to balance technique and musicality and thereby provide more comprehensive musical learning experiences (Linda Hartley).

### **Changes for improving instructional practice in large ensemble settings**

Most students in university large ensembles are performance majors. They expect and deserve a professional rehearsal model as part of their training (Betty Anne Gottlieb). Future music educators, however, need to experience comprehensive instructional models so that they can teach students with a wide range of abilities and interests. Some university ensemble directors understand this and successfully present rehearsals or work with music education faculty members to team teach performing groups so that the needs of both future teachers and performers can be met. Those successfully working in such paradigms insist that their ensembles perform more successfully (Mike Raiber). Although comprehensive models of ensemble instruction should help future teachers understand that performance is only one component of music learning, such models are not possible

in every university setting. University methods teachers will need to expose their students to a variety of instructional models through observations in the community (John Whitener).

Socializing music educators to view their role as guides who learn a piece with their students rather than as authoritarian figures who impose a preconceived notion of perfection on them could help to make learn more engaging. Attitudes that are prevalent in folk ensembles and garage bands, in which ensemble members negotiate the outcome rather than striving for a predetermined standard, could succeed with students as they collaboratively work on great literature (John Kratus). Such ways of thinking will be challenging for teachers accustomed to traditional approaches to ensemble instruction and who are rewarded for presenting concerts and winning competitions. This will also require changing the attitudes of administrators, parents and community members who view school music ensembles as performance organizations rather than as venues where learning takes place. Finally, school ensemble students themselves will need to understand that music classes will expect more than just performing. This means that music educators must socialize students at the beginning level to expect to engage in composing, improvising and writing about music.

### **What are the challenges?**

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing our profession is the “tyranny of tradition” (Steve Zdinski). Most young teachers participated in traditional school music programs which valued product over process and worked with directors who were motivated by a “drill, play, win a trophy” rewards system. Often, they enter the profession with a desire to replicate their own secondary school experiences and eagerly participate in all aspects

of that tradition. These conventions are reinforced by university conductors who themselves view ensemble performance as the ultimate reason for learning to make music. The many communities within which music teachers live and work tend to support this status quo. Teachers earn the respect of other music educators by developing award winning programs. The status of outstanding programs results in an increase of students participating in the ensembles. Administrators and community members quickly come to believe that the purpose of school music programs is to perform and garner prestige for the institution. For music educators wanting to provide students with a more process oriented learning experience, community expectations as well as the time demands placed on teachers as they attempt to meet those expectations make change difficult.

### **Addressing the Challenges**

The most exciting aspect of this SMTE session was the very real desire on the part of all participants to seek solutions for revitalizing large ensemble music programs. In the short amount of time available, several audience members contributed information about individual teachers who are creating new pathways for the performing organizations at their schools. In order to transform traditional practices, music educators must work with their communities so that stakeholders might begin to see music as educationally valuable and as a vehicle for aesthetic experience rather than as a form of entertainment (Jamila). This in turn would mean that music educators need to move beyond simply helping students learn to create sounds and use the ensemble experience as a means of providing young people with the cognitive structures central to music making and understanding (Heuser). In particular, the profession needs to clearly define the terms we use when discussing music education. This will allow us to separate clearly

the issues that we are critiquing such as musicianship, musicality and musical understanding. It would also clarify discussion about the curricular structure of school ensembles, the contributions ensemble literature makes to learning, the quality of instructional processes being used in ensembles and value of the experiences children have in ensembles (Peter Miksa). The challenges facing large ensemble music instruction need to be addressed on an on-going basis by university and K – 12 teachers working together.

In this regard, the panel members presenting this session are very much interested in continuing the dialogue begun at the 2009 SMTE Symposium. This could be accomplished by bringing the discussion to other constituencies (e.g., CBDNA, ASTA, ACDA, CMS, MENC folks, Midwest Clinic participants). Additionally, we could encourage the formation of an ASPA for studying and supporting large ensemble instruction. The work of this ASPA might include examining and providing clear definitions for frequently used terms such as "music education" and "music learning." Such an ASPA might also explore why solutions that have been proposed over the years to the problem of providing meaningful instruction within large ensembles have not been all that successful. Such a project might explore the actual viability of CMP. Finally, concerned colleagues could conduct case studies of teachers who are successfully working "out of the box" and consider creating a publication that documents creative solutions that are already functioning in schools. Such work might facilitate the transformation of large ensemble music education.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://makeartlikeyoucare.blogspot.com/2008/04/el-systema-changing-world-through-music.html> accessed 6/21/08.

<sup>ii</sup> [http://www.laphil.com/education/youth\\_orchestra\\_la.cfm](http://www.laphil.com/education/youth_orchestra_la.cfm) accessed 6/21/08.

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