Some Thoughts on the History and Current Developments of Non-traditional Forms of Music Education

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I would happily engage all of my Grade 2 students in valuable and exciting musical activities for the entire day, week, month and year long, save for the Department of Education's rather presumptuous notion that I interrupt these worthwhile musical adventures for such trivial matters as reading, arithmetic, social studies and science. In this claim, I am being more than a little serious in my belief that there are sufficiently valuable ways to explore the world of music that far exceed any time allotment we are likely to achieve in our school system.

Curricular choices, as we know from Bernstein's (1971) seminal work "On the classification of and framing of educational knowledge," are a complicated process of balancing not only what we believe is important within a discipline but also *between* disciplines. As a result, many of the valuable options available to us in the music classroom are withheld from students simply because there must be time for "other stuff." A conflict arises in music teaching because it is difficult to reach a consensus regarding *the* most important way to engage children in the musical arts.

The task here is to explore *non-traditional forms* of music education. This presumes that there must be some sort of "standard" against which the label "non-

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traditional" could be defined. This standard appears to be performance ensembles. While I certainly believe that having a band, a choir, an orchestra and a jazz band is a good and worthwhile goal, I am not sure in the 21st century that these ensembles alone legitimately define our purpose. It is clear that there is more under our umbrella than any of our traditional approaches might hope to fulfill entirely.

Wayne Bowman's recent paper stands out in its wisdom and obvious common sense as he argues that there cannot be a single philosophical justification for music education because music education is not one thing but "a remarkably diverse array of beliefs, practices and values" (1994, p. 28). I would therefore challenge you not to think about non-traditional forms of music education as "extra" or "supplemental" or "fringe" or "alternative" activities. Rather, I think of this topic as the exploration of ways in which we have come to engage children in the magnificence of the musical arts—because, in the end, it is the engagement that renders the value.

When I began my career in school music, elementary schools had general music classes largely delivered by the classroom teacher (when delivered at all), with the occasional visit from a Board level music supervisor. High schools were generally committed to a band program and, in some larger schools, a choral or string program. In my music teacher education, one thing that still stands out for me was the insistence by faculty that in Canada, our instrumental performance programs were fundamentally conceived as "general music" programs which, at the time, was held in direct comparison to the more American "performance only" school classes. I must say that at the time that I entered the teaching force, the degree to which high school band programs were engaged in "other than performance" activities was very mixed. At the time, and arguably

as now, many music programs were focused primarily or even exclusively on winning at local music festivals. Little time was taken in the instructional day to drift off into non-performance areas of music as a result. These performance groups, it would be safe to say, *were* the music education program at the time. Anything beyond that was extracurricular and confined to token marching bands the production of Broadway musicals.

40 years later, what do we have that might be considered *non-traditional*? Can we claim a fundamental shift away from the ensemble driven musical school life of the past?

I would like to jump ahead about half way through these 40 years to the mid-1980's when I took over the role as editor of the *Canadian Music Educator*. For me at least, this was a pivotal time in Canadian music education. My first issue as editor in December of 1983 included a paper by Wayne Bowman in which he chastises the profession for its "monism or mono-methodology" (1983, p. 9). While a subtitle "The Heretical Alternative: Eclecticism" had been with us for some time, Bowman's paper heralded a time when both alternative views and actions were expected. Those teachers looking for new avenues of musical expression in the classroom were on solid theoretical ground to explore new ways to engage their students in musical activities.

If I had to reflect on any issue in the expansion of music education into "non-traditional" areas, it would be the impact computers have had on us in the intervening 20 years. Computers now permeate our lives in ways that we could never have imagined. The advances in web-based research for students has made a huge difference in how we interact with musical knowledge and activity. For example, we can get applied performance music instruction from teachers in Toronto or St. John's to students in rural

Labrador or rural Cape Breton. In fact, the new recital hall at Memorial University is designed specifically for web broadcast and distance instruction.

The musical power of computer-based instruments today is, quietly stated, beyond belief. Take the new Korg "Oasis" keyboard. I am not at all convinced that "keyboard" is the right word any more. This instrument does have a keyboard but it runs on a totally software-based platform through non-proprietary hardware and formatting.

In March 1986 I wrote:

> In 1965, R. Murray Schafer, with his *Composer in the Classroom*, led our cause nowhere. There is no future in ripping paper in seventeen different ways and calling it creative or musical. Perhaps he was just ahead of his time. He had no creative tools that actually made sense. Students crave the opportunity to be creative but lack the tools to be so under the confining conventions of 19th century music notation. An escape from this into various "paper ripping" symphonies makes no sense. A leap into the technological jungle does! (p. 16 -17)

Today, teachers have the tools that students need to explore music composition in many forms. The availability of "sounds" is next to limitless. No longer are we tied to the various sounds of paper ripping. Programs such as Sibelius offer an easy interface for students to explore conventional music writing and music theory. "Band-in-a-box" can provide nearly instant back-ups to solo performance and can be used to teach and explore improvisational skills. Teachers are using computers to have students compose and record video music, to write advertising jingles, to write film music and to combine

prerecorded music and sounds with their own. Web-based instruction is now as commonplace as a textbook was just a few years ago. Both the input and the output have radically changed the way in which our students can interact with music. Technological advances have had more impact on our teaching arsenal and in the area of "other" forms of music education than anything else.

Traditional music education has also been challenged in other significant ways. There have been quieter revolutions. For example, there was no doubt in my mind as I left with my music education teaching credentials from Western those many years ago that Bach, Beethoven and the boys were the stuff of substance and substance was the goal. When I compare that repertoire with the kinds of music inspiring today's classrooms, I see legitimacy in a diversity that would not have been contemplated back then. We now embrace a multicultural repertoire, insist on a world musics view, and explore all varieties of musical genre. Our extra-curricular adventures with Broadway have grown into a full-bodied eclectic repertoire; a cornucopia of choices.

Additionally, our schools have become more client based. We, as educators, are now expected to create whole curricular models to address a variety of special needs. The structure of schooling has changed. My first significant teaching challenge occurred when the semester model was introduced. How could we teach a progressive subject such as music for one semester and then leave the students without a horn in their hand for sometimes as much as a full year? Other provincial curriculum changes have swept through our programs. In some jurisdictions, mandating the arts or music for *all* students seemed like a great idea until we saw that, while *all* students would get *some* music, it was nearly impossible for students to get much more than the "music-for-all" course we

were obliged to offer. How could we sustain an ensemble music performance program with students who receive only one or two music courses in their entire high school program? Furthermore, what sort of legitimate music program could be offered to students who could only take these one or two courses? Does learning to play a clarinet for two semesters seem like a legitimate way to approach music education?

To combat these "quiet revolutions," many schools are now offering applied music in a "solo" version, rather than one attached to an ensemble program. In Newfoundland, applied music courses are offered to students who come to play any instrument, not to students who come to play in a band or sing in a choir – although many do that as well.

In addition to "other" changes within our immediate control, there is a growing presence of external curricular models being used in our schools. The growth of the Advanced Placement (AP) music theory course sets a standard beyond the reach of local political intervention. Another growing influence is the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, which has a rigorous music course within the diploma offering. There are many schools in Canada offering this music course and more are registering each year. Worldwide, the IB is growing at an unprecedented rate with its emphasis on world music and music as a cultural study in addition to theory, musicology and music performance components. The two-year IB music course is substantially different than what would normally be seen in a Canadian music classroom. I know of no Canadian schools that would likely include the music of the Ituri Forest pygmies within their music curriculum syllabus.

In conclusion, it is difficult to identify aspects of school music that would count

under the rubric of "non-traditional" without limiting the view of what counts as central or essential or normal. Bowman's assertion that music is "a remarkably diverse array of beliefs, practices and values" (p. 28) belies the ability to do that. As teachers explore other ways to engage their students in the musical enterprise, we should be reminded of this diversity and the value that this diversity brings to school music.

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