Considering Music Teacher Education as a Democratic Project: Reflection on "Reclaiming A Democratic Purpose For Music Education" (Paul Woodford)

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Paul Woodford's call for music teachers to "reconceive themselves as opinion leaders and champions of the public good" stirs our imagination. He makes a compelling case for a more democratic conception of music education in schools and communities. As a music teacher educator, I am prompted as I read this paper and his recent book to consider how new teachers draw upon their ideals and visions of society in forming their beliefs and acting upon those beliefs in practice. Many new teachers go through a disconcerting period of adjustment as they reconcile their idealistic aspirations for a challenging and intellectually inclusive music program with the messy, conflicting realities of school norms and community expectations. I am reminded of Maxine Greene's (1995) characterization of this contentious landscape in which teachers work and act: "Diverse publics challenge our teaching; often, they scapegoat. They demand not only improvements but guarantees; they want things to be stable and predictable; they want the schools to repair cultural deficiencies; they want their own interests to be secured" (p. 169). This polyphonic chorus, heard even louder in the decade since Greene published her landmark book, *Releasing the Imagination,* is the backdrop against which Woodford asks new teachers to challenge the status quo through music. As he observes,

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many of these new teachers may not have considered or confronted the various social, political, and economic uses of music as students themselves, spending more time engaged in the processes and products of music performance in highly disciplined and teacher-directed instructional settings. Work is needed on several fronts to realize the aims of this democratic project—to emphasize the sociocultural underpinnings of music itself; to reconfigure pedagogy toward more dialogic interaction; and to sharpen awareness of the various uses of music in education, business, and politics. Music teacher education, as always, is seen as a catalyst for broadening teachers' understanding and deepening their resolve.

We have known of the benefits of teaching music with its roots exposed for decades. The American music educator James Mursell, for example, wrote in 1943, "The music teacher who fails to select material and also to handle and present it with attention to the human ramifications and meanings of the art is certainly foolish" (p. 24). The prospect of "grounding philosophy and practice in social reality" (Woodford, p. 4) provides many pedagogical openings and curricular opportunities. Starting with the music itself makes sense, particularly if we focus on the diverse musics that teachers choose for study and the musics that students are invited to bring into the classroom. The latter certainly builds from students' musical tastes, as Woodford recommends, but such open invitations can also put teachers in a vulnerable position. Woodford's use of Marilyn Manson as an example reminds me of a recent conference presentation of a secondary general music teacher who stated that her general rule for students is "make sure that whatever you bring in won't get me fired." Many teachers are governed by the tacit criterion of "appropriateness" that consists of a blend of the teacher's own beliefs

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and the social mores and expectations of the school community. Not all choices are quite so risky. Many composers and artists have been inspired by a desire to give voice to the marginalized and to draw attention to the problematic; many of these works are well suited for classroom inquiry. In the past few years, undergraduate and graduate students in various music education courses have constructed curricular plans that are grounded in multidimensional encounters with musical works, and that draw upon the composers' intended messages of the works as well as their reception histories. Some of these students have chosen works and genres that are especially provocative in subject matter and context, such as Billie Holiday's *Strange Fruit* (whose disturbing subject is lynching), Penderecki's *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima,* South African Toyi-toyi (inciting violent opposition to Apartheid), and numerous other works and styles. These preservice teachers find intriguing possibilities in these works without knowing quite yet where these curricular explorations might be launched, and whether their inclusion in classrooms would be welcome. The study of these works prompts the investigation of many concomitant societal issues, political ideologies, and closely related fields of inquiry that stem directly from the music.

In order for these new teachers to implement these ideas and learn how they influence students' understanding of the many functions of music in society, they must ask: Where does such democratic inquiry through music take root within the traditional offerings of school music programs? In secondary schools where the sophistication and interdisciplinary breadth of this work seems most fitting, ensemble instruction dominates and secondary general music venues are limited. Woodford recommends that music teachers "engage in meaningful and sustained dialogue with representatives of other

disciplines and with the public about the ubiquity and centrality of music in their lives" (Woodford, 2005, p. 74). Perhaps it is through collaborative efforts with humanities, literature, and history teachers as well as other arts specialists that music teachers can find instructional openings for this sort of work to find its place in schools (there are parallels, for example, to the emphasis on visual literacy that is prominent in art education). In the same spirit that Maxine Greene (1995) claims that the study of literature "dislodges fixities, resists one-dimensionality, and allows multiple personal voices to become articulate in a more and more vital dialogue" (p. 183), music also prompts multiple meanings and interpretations. Music teacher education can thus begin to realize the democratic ideals Woodford articulates, and encourage teachers to move toward democratic vistas in their future classrooms.

References

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