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COMPETITION

Is Music Education the Loser?

by James R. Austin



Photograph by Rozanne Levine

The process of music education is often colored by the competitiveness of our society. James Austin, an assistant professor of music education at Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, discusses the questions surrounding competition and suggests ways in which teachers can answer them.

Music teachers and competition are not strange bedfellows. For most of this century, the relative merits and pitfalls of music contests have been debated within the profession. Indeed, the ongoing identity crisis that music educators face—whether we teach within a curricular area or an activity area—may be attributed in large part to our struggle to reach a professional consensus on the role of competition in the school music program.

Why do we compete? Frank A. Beach, one of the founders of early school music contests in this country, suggested that the purpose of contests was “not to win a prize

but to pace one another on the road to excellence.”¹ Beach’s noble goal was to use competition as a tool of educational progress. Over the years, however, students’ educational needs have frequently taken a back seat to the pursuit of competitive treasures (money, awards, or notoriety), the standardization of performance practices, and the enhancement of music industry revenues.

There have been many efforts to reform contests—by eliminating cash prizes, by using a rating system rather than a ranking system, or by incorporating “festival” components (such as student clin-

ics and massed group performances). Strangely, the greatest degree of resistance to such efforts often has come from within the ranks of music educators.

Ronald Neil, in a 1945 dissertation on the development of the competition-festival, noted that many directors of the era were reluctant to do away with the highly competitive format of early contests and warned, "Although there may be other concomitant values, the true purpose and value of the competition-festival is an educative one and any departure from the basic purpose or the development of any phase which may overshadow or change this purpose weakens the whole competition-festival movement and negates its place in American schools."²

More than forty years later, we ponder this same issue with a certain degree of futility. Many of today's music educators are immersed in the race to be number one, and at times it is difficult to tell where the athletic field ends and the music classroom begins. Well-meaning rhetoric continues to surround competitive music events, but in the final analysis, education appears to be a serendipitous by-product, rather than a primary goal, for the many teachers and students who cling to contest outcomes for social status or material rewards.

Is our continued preoccupation with competition method or madness? Will a competitive orientation help or hinder music programs in their efforts to attain a secure place in the school curriculum? Is competition a worthwhile educational tool, or does competition, by its very nature, undermine the learning process? Does competition provide all students with a healthy experience, or are some students destined to flounder under such setups? If structured contests and other forms of competition are not the answer, to what other educationally viable alternatives can music educators turn in their daily efforts to attract students to music courses, to motivate students to practice, and to maximize student achievement?

To answer some of the familiar questions that surround competition, music educators must move beyond the animated exchange of

personal opinions that has paralyzed this issue for so many years. More objective insights may be gained by examining our traditional views about competition in light of current motivation theories and research in education.

The myths of competition

The expression "A little healthy competition never hurt anyone" mirrors our common belief that competition is an effective means of generating student interest, stimulating students toward higher levels of achievement, measuring students' achievement in relation to that of other competitors, and preparing students for the eventualities of winning and losing in the real world. Surveys of public attitudes toward music competition confirm this; contests and other forms of competition are perceived as being valuable, if not essential, experiences for music students, and many directors feel a pressure to be competitive in relation to other school music programs.³

Alfie Kohn, in his book *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*, agrees that there is a clear sociological imperative to compete in our society. He contends: "Life for us has become an endless succession of contests. From the moment the alarm clock rings until sleep overtakes us again, from the time we are toddlers until the day we die, we are busy struggling to outdo others. This is our posture at work and at school, on the playing field and back at home. It is the common denominator of American life."⁴

Kohn argues, however, that many of our beliefs about competition are based more on folk wisdom than on scientific fact. Among the myths that he attacks are the ideas that (1) competition is inevitable as a part of our human nature; (2) competition motivates us to do our best; and (3) learning to compete builds character and self-confidence.

The inevitability myth

The more avid proponents of competition often point to the pervasiveness of competition in our society as convincing evidence that being competitive is part of human nature and that a predisposition to compete must somehow be essen-

tial for survival and advancement as human beings. Bil Gilbert, who has examined society's fascination with competitive athletics, suggests that most people view competition as the "behavioral equivalent of gravity"—a necessary force guiding each individual to his or her proper niche in the world.⁵

Kohn counters that Americans' fetish for competition is not innate but is, rather, a learned behavior. We perpetuate our belief in competition, he contends, by teaching our children to compete as we did and then citing the competitiveness of our children as proof that competition is inevitable. Blinded by this circular pattern of reasoning, we easily overlook the many interdependent aspects of living that are integral to survival in our own society, as well as the many foreign cultures that are clearly more cooperative than competitive in nature. Kohn adds that individuals who rely most heavily on the human nature argument are often those who have benefited from competition in the past and who will benefit from maintaining the status quo in the future.

The motivation myth

Many individuals propose that competition motivates us to do our best and that without competition we would wallow in a sea of mediocrity. Kohn, however, cites an impressive and growing body of research literature indicating that competition does not improve performance quality. Moreover, on complex tasks that require higher order thinking skills (such as creativity or problem solving), competition may actually interfere with learning and subsequent achievement.

The large gap between research findings and our intuitive beliefs on this matter might be explained as a difference in perspective. Competition connoisseurs are naturally drawn to the excitement and thrill of victory that surround extraordinary performances and winning performers. Researchers, on the other hand, generally concern themselves with larger populations that include not only elite performers but also average and struggling performers—individuals who often flounder under competitive conditions and bring the average per-

Goal Structure	Feedback Focus	Attributional Focus	Sources of Positive Affect
Competitive	Personal or group performance relative to others (win/lose)	Ability	Winning
Cooperative	Group performance relative to standards and/or prior achievement (low to high quality)	Effort	Reaching an intragroup goal or standard, making progress, putting forth adequate effort, using good strategies
Individualistic	Personal performance relative to standards and/or prior achievement (low to high quality)	Effort	Reaching an individual goal or standard, making progress, putting forth adequate effort, using good strategies

Figure 1. Characteristics of goal structures

formance score back down to earth in school achievement studies.

Martin Maehr, a presenter at the third session of the Ann Arbor Symposium on Motivation and Creativity, cautioned music educators about this phenomenon: "There is a tendency in music education to place elites and regulars on the same track, designing the system in such a way that most will inevitably fall by the wayside with only the cream of the crop surviving. Competitions, contests, and recitals all seem to revolve around that end. . . . One does not create enduring motivational patterns by showing people that they are incompetent. Insofar as an activity is structured to do that, it will be a motivational failure for the large majority of the participants."⁶

The character-building myth

Kohn states that feelings of competence are central to each individual's self-esteem. "Competence" can be defined, most simply, as doing well in relation to some accepted standard of performance. Yet, many people confuse the term competence with "competitive success" or "winning." These ideas are not analogous. It is quite possible to display competence without engaging in competitive behavior (for example, the master craftsman working in isolation). Conversely, one might enjoy competitive success (winning a swimming event) without attaining a desired level of competence (surpassing a previous best time by five seconds).

In Kohn's view, our society tends to place greater emphasis on winning than on the demonstration of competence. With winning as

the yardstick of success, Kohn contends, competition undermines character instead of building it. Students often develop a "win at all costs" attitude; symptoms of this attitude include setting unrealistic goals, displaying heightened levels of conformity, adopting adversarial relationships with other participants, and relying upon excuses to rationalize poor performance.

Why competition fails

Perhaps the quickest route to understanding why competition has limited effectiveness as a teaching tool is to consider what it really means to compete. Competition, by definition, always produces few winners and many losers; one person's success requires another person's failure. Competitive events may be distinguished according to the number of eventual winners or the degree of direct confrontation that is involved, but all are characterized by a scarcity of rewards.

Martin Covington, in discussions of his Self-Worth Theory, proposes that most students are consumed by the need to establish and maintain a sense of personal worth. Those who encounter repeated failure within competitive contexts experience not only a decline in their perceived level of ability but also a growing feeling that they have little personal control over future performance. Covington advocates greater use of "equity paradigms"—classroom arrangements that provide all students, irrespective of ability, with opportunities to attain reasonable goals and obtain meaningful rewards. He submits the view that "[there is] a paramount need to increase the number

of classroom rewards available so that students are no longer forced simply to avoid failure for the lack of opportunity to experience success. Providing sufficient rewards requires a basic alteration of competitively oriented achievement structures."⁷

The term "goal structure" is frequently employed by researchers to describe the classroom arrangement by which students are evaluated and rewarded. In competitive goal structures, students work against each other toward some goal or reward. In cooperative goal structures, students work with each other toward a common goal. In individualistic goal structures, students work separately toward independent goals.⁸

Carole and Russell Ames have conducted an extensive amount of research on learning motivation, comparing the effects of competitive, cooperative, and individualistic goal structures on student behavior. The Ameses have discovered that children use, within these different types of goal structures, rather unique methods of self-evaluation. Three components of self-evaluation have been of particular interest: (1) the performance information/feedback that children focus upon, (2) the child's explanation or interpretation of the causes of success and failure outcomes (called attributions), and (3) the child's positive or negative feelings associated with these explanations (called affect).

Competitive goal structures tend to promote an egotistic type of motivation whereby children focus on social-comparison information and disregard instructional feedback addressing the actual quality of

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inimizing competitive pressure and emphasizing instructional feedback [help] more students to focus on personal growth.



their effort or performance (see figure 1). Child competitors usually attribute success to ability (something they believe is fixed or lying beyond their control) rather than effort (something they can control). Personal perceptions of ability, personal satisfaction, and effort are typically unstable—high after winning but low after losing. Habitual losers, starved for psychological rewards, eventually abandon the positive, coping strategies associated with striving for success and adopt tactics designed to avoid failure.

In cooperative goal structures, where complementary ideas and resources may be pooled, group outcomes shape self-evaluations. Membership in a successful group tends to alleviate the otherwise negative self-evaluations of low performers. Unfortunately, failure to reach a group goal may diminish the typically positive self-evaluations of high performers who sometimes, in frustration, will point an accusing finger at low performers in the group. Nonetheless, a most positive aspect of cooperative learning is that children begin to explain success in terms of effort more than of ability.

Individualized goal structures seem to promote student motivation for task mastery. In this approach, students value directed effort as the key to success and tie positive affect to reaching some absolute standard or to progressing beyond prior achievement levels. When students are provided with opportunities for self-improvement over time, they develop a "task engagement" attitude, focusing on how to do the task and on the

quality of their own effort or strategies.

It is possible for competitive behavior to arise in the absence of any competitive goal structure. Frequently this occurs when ostensibly objective performance standards are implemented but past levels of achievement are not used to guide goal setting. As a result, children change the goal orientation in their own minds from "Did I improve?" to "How did I do compared to Johnny or Susie?" A case in point is furnished by those music contests in which division ratings are employed. Because students are not explicitly compared against one another, interpersonal competition is thought to be minimized. In the absence of personalized goals, however, many students adopt the implicit goal of receiving a top rating or beating their best friend—an orientation that increases the chances of failure for most. Worse, this orientation takes personal control out of the student's hands.

Can students learn to cope with competition where it does exist? Perhaps. Benjamin Bloom, in his investigation of exceptional performers in six talent fields, revealed that competitions were a regular activity for concert pianists in the middle and later years of their development. He noted that "The winning and losing does not seem to have been as important as the doing . . . whether they won or lost, the pianists seem to have learned to walk away from the performances thinking about what they had to work on next in order to do better next time."⁹ But Bloom also discovered something

special about these pianists. All had experienced a very nurturing environment in their early years. Unconditional support had come from parents as well as teachers—something many children miss out on today.

We frequently hear about the role teachers can play in orientating a student toward "healthy" competition. Unfortunately, research indicates that competition may corrupt teachers to a greater degree than their students. Competition-oriented teachers tend to view students in a dichotomous fashion (low ability or high ability) and often gear their efforts toward validating their own egos rather than toward accomplishing educational goals. They invest a majority of instructional time in high-ability students who, from the teacher's perspective, represent the ticket to competitive success. Because these teachers focus on maintaining a performance image rather than on employing specific instructional strategies to help students improve, low achievers find themselves trapped in a catch-22 situation—neither talented enough to help the teacher's cause nor equipped with the tools for progress.

Alternatives for educators

Clearly, competitive education contexts do not provide "healthy" experiences for many students. Failure in competition leads the less talented, the less confident, and the less fortunate down motivational dead-end streets. Preliminary research in music education, similarly, has provided no solid evidence to indicate that competition

enhances musical or extra-musical growth among students.¹⁰ In truth, competition may be curtailing student achievement by making music educators less effective as teachers.

It behooves music educators to invest less time in the pursuit of competitive success and more time in determining how to best encourage stable patterns of long-term motivation and achievement among all students. In place of contests, instructors might offer the experience of performing in quarterly, noncompetitive recitals for peers, parents, and townspeople. Teacher and student can establish specific goals, videotape the performances, and then jointly evaluate the progress that is made in reaching goals from recital to recital. By alternately emphasizing solo and small-ensemble performances, teachers expose their students to both individualistic and cooperative learning.

Teacher/clinicians provide another alternative to contests. These experts can perform for and alongside students in a master-class setting, modeling effective practice and playing techniques that may exceed the director's personal expertise. Clinicians might help willing student performers to evaluate their own unique performance problems and to identify strategies that can be used to make personal progress. Students who elect not to perform can observe these sessions and pull out the ideas that apply to their own situations.

While performing in recitals and for clinicians still elicits certain anxieties and fears from many students, the combination of minimizing competitive pressure and emphasizing instructional feedback helps more students to focus on personal growth and the strategies needed to improve. In turn, these students are more apt to practice and to pursue performance opportunities on their own time—an ultimate indicator of motivated musicians.

Within the rehearsal room, music teachers also can work to mini-

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mize any indirect reinforcement of competitive student behavior. Using rotating seating plans in place of constant chair challenges, encouraging peer tutoring within sections, and placing names on concert programs in alphabetical order are all subtle ways of reminding students that everyone has something to contribute to and to gain from their music experiences. General music teachers may wish to examine some of the publications that provide ideas for cooperative games and noncompetitive learning activities in the elementary classroom.¹¹

Eventually, any discussion of educational practice leads to the larger questions of values and philosophy. Over sixty years have passed since the music contest movement began, and our professional vision appears to have changed; we no longer dare justify our curricular existence on the basis of public attendance at concerts or contest ratings while disregarding accountability for all students and all types of learning. Yet, in practice, the profession clings to the tradition of competition and contests with a level of single-mindedness that defies logic.

Perhaps a lesson could be learned from our colleagues in physical education. In view of research estimating that nearly 80 percent of the students who try competitive sports drop them permanently by the age of seventeen, physical education instructors have begun to modify their course con-

tent and teaching approaches.¹² There is a gradual movement away from the physical education classes of yesteryear, which served as spawning grounds for future athletes and emphasized competitive game playing, toward classes devoted to individualized fitness programs and lifelong involvement with recreational sports activities.

Physical education teachers hope to provide students with a positive alternative to the problem-plagued world of competitive athletics, where winning has become larger than real life. We, as music teachers, must work toward a similar goal.

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