Music Education Philosophy

Music in the public school curriculum is at a precarious point. Indeed, one author has described the place of school music as teetering at a veritable “tipping point.” Borrowing from Malcolm Gladwell’s book of the same name, Kratus (2007) identifies the need for “sticky” ideas in music education that will attract new students and new audiences, lest we see the divide between music and “school music” grow even wider and deeper. A 2006 survey by the Center on Education Policy, an independent education policy think tank, found that since the passage of NCLB in 2001, 71 percent of the nation's 15,000 school districts had reduced the hours of instructional time spent on history, music and other subjects to open up more time for reading and math (NY Times, 2006).

This narrowing of the public school curriculum has been accompanied by an increased emphasis on standardized testing, especially in the subject areas of math and reading, in a back to basics movement that has threatened to alter the very fabric of American public education. In an example of how this curricular reductionism has impacted some students more than others, at Martin Luther King Jr. Junior High School in Sacramento, CA, “about 125 of the school's lowest-performing students are barred from taking anything except math, reading and gym, a measure that Samuel Harris, a former lieutenant colonel in the Army who is the school's principal, said was draconian but necessary. ‘When you look at a kid and you know he can't read, that's a tough call you've got to make,’ Mr. Harris said.” (NY Times, 2006)

And yet, I believe that the place of music in our schools has never been more important than it is at this juncture. Along with this importance must come a recognition of the value in providing equitable access to high quality, comprehensive music instruction to all learners, not just for those who attend schools in middle class suburbs or wealthy enclaves of privilege. For, as music educators know, music—when taught well—may well provide the “antidote” to today’s “teach to the test”, assessment-driven culture. Because music, when taught well, offers the very qualities that employers say they are looking for in the workforce, and for what school leaders emphasize in their mission and vision statements: critical thinking, teamwork, problem-solving skills and creativity. How we got here, and how we might proceed from where we are, is the focus of the following section.

I believe that the enterprises of teaching and learning are not only mutually informing, but that the interaction of these constructs in music education is inevitable and, in fact, desired. While many in education hypothesize about the “gap” that too often exists between theory and practice and look for ways to bridge it, I believe that there may always be a sort of desirable friction, or “rub” between the theoretical and the practical, and that it is this tension that produces the creative energy needed to produce what we consider to be “best practices” in music teaching and learning.

I believe that it is vitally important to maintain one’s teaching identity at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. I also believe that it is our duty as music teacher educators to ensure that our course offerings are as authentic and contextually rich as is possible, providing our students with significant “real life experiences” **prior** to student teaching. This means designing courses that include meaningful field experience requirements in a variety of school and community settings.

I also believe strongly that every person is innately musical: there is no such thing as a “non-singer”, or a “non-musician.” While musical aptitudes are normally distributed among the population, rich and immersive musical experiences and settings, combined with excellent informal, and later, formal music teaching experiences, can help each person develop their talents to the fullest extent possible. To this end, the importance of early childhood music offerings can not be underestimated, as well as the importance of diverse musical offerings at every point along the life span, including senior adults.

Never before in my teaching career can I think of a time when what we had to offer as music teachers was more desperately needed, by our students, our schools and our society. I often tell my students that the job we are preparing them for as teachers is an amazing one—it allows them to make decisions, solve problems, make interpretive choices, and be responsible for making a glorious whole out of disparate, disconnected pieces. I think these are the reasons we were attracted to the job of music teacher—we like being involved in creating something new and beautiful, and we enjoy working with others to make this happen.

It is our job as music teachers to make sure that our students also view their “jobs” in the same way—that they feel creative, empowered, and independent. It is both our privilege and our challenge to be music teachers during the first time in history when many of our students can do more musically with their computers, tablets and smart phones at home then they can in many public schools. Young people are becoming adept at composing, arranging, editing and recording music using a vast array of technological tools—it is imperative that our teaching and our curriculums stay current and relevant.

I will conclude with a quote from Elliot Eisner: “Our schools, teachers, and students might be a lot better off if schools embraced the idea that education means **learning what to do** when you **don't know what to do”** (Eisner, 2005). This, to me, is the great power and appeal of music for the schools—for, when taught well, music can provide the means for our students to figure out what to do, when they don’t know what to do. And that should be what we want for all of our students.