

Music Education in the U.S.A.:  
An Overview

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by

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## Music Education in the U.S.A.:

### An Overview

In the United States, there is no national curriculum for music, mathematics, language, science, or any other school subject. America is a very large, ethnically diverse country that was founded just over two hundred years ago from thirteen British colonies. One of the compromises made by the founding fathers was that many governmental functions would remain with the former colonies, or states, and not shift to the federal government. One of those functions was education.

Therefore, the fifty American state governments, not the federal government, control public school and university education, according to the federal and state constitutions. The federal Department of Education influences educational policies, but it has no constitutional powers. Rather, each state makes its own policies and provides funds for public education. In addition, states give local school boards, most of which are elected by voters, the power to make local policies and levy additional taxes for the schools. Therefore, much of what occurs in local schools and even universities is determined by the voters, albeit indirectly through their school board members and elected state officials.

Regardless of this lack of legal consistency, schools and universities tend to be similar throughout the nation, in part because the federal government influences education through funds for various specific purposes, and through the judicial system, which protects certain rights of individuals and groups. In addition, all public and many private schools and universities are accredited by regional professional boards not associated with any level of government. Similarly, the National Association of Schools of Music insures some degree of standardization among university music programs in the United States. These boards and organizations tend to enforce similar standards

nationwide. Finally, each subject-matter field has professional, non-governmental organizations that influence teachers in the various subject areas. In music, the Music Educators National Conference (MENC)--with more than 65,000 members, mostly school and university music teachers--provides leadership and some standardization for school music programs nationwide. The MENC is analogous to your Greek Society for Music Education (GSME).

Because there is no direct federal control over education, state and local elected officials generally control the funds for education. These officials can be rather directly influenced by individuals and relatively small groups of people. It is for these reasons that American school and university music education programs evolved not from well-thought-out planning on the part of government officials or even professional music educators, but rather from the needs and desires of local communities, for the most part.

American public school music education began in the 1830s as part of a major effort to make education available to all the nation's children. Gradually, music expanded into all twelve grades. Today, we call this general music because it is intended for all students.

Throughout the nineteenth century, general music consisted of teaching students to sing at sight. School music began as sight-singing because local voters wanted children to learn to sing in church, and because most early school music teachers had received their musical training and experience in singing schools. Singing schools were private, temporary classes conducted by individual "singing masters" that were intended to teach people to sing in church. In other words, there was no national policy about music education, and no professional organization of music educators--like the GSME or the MENC--to guide the way. Local school boards throughout the country gradually hired music teachers to teach sight-singing to general students.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the nation was rapidly changing from an agrarian economy to an industrial economy. As a result of this Industrial Revolution, a

movement called Progressive Education developed. Educational progressives wanted the schools to provide more than the so-called basic subjects because they believed that people would henceforth have much more leisure time due to the industrial economy. Music was one of the subjects that profited from progressivism, in part because it was perceived as a leisure-time activity. However, technological inventions such as the player piano, phonograph, and radio changed the musical landscape so that people did not have to perform music themselves in order to have exposure to it. They could listen to a musical device instead. Therefore, beginning in the early twentieth century, general music began to include a great deal more than just the teaching of sight-singing.<sup>1</sup>

Today, more than ninety-five percent of American elementary schools offer general music, although most provide less than one hour per week of instructional time. However, music is taught by trained, certified music teachers in more than eighty-five percent of the elementary schools. General music consists largely of (in descending order): singing, listening to music, discussing music, reading music, playing instruments, and creative movement. There is some emphasis on improvisation, reading about music, and composition.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike the elementary schools, where usually music is a required subject, less general music is taught in the middle schools. Approximately seventy percent of American middle schools offer general music classes, and only about twenty-nine percent require students to take general music. Even then, the typical requirement is for one semester only. However, nearly all middle school music teachers are certified to teach music.<sup>3</sup> It appears that the content of middle school general music is similar to that found in the elementary schools.

Less than fifty percent of American high schools offer music classes to general students. Only about sixteen percent of high schools require a music course of all students, and less than fifteen percent of high school students actually take a general music course. High school music courses tend to emphasize music listening, although

there is a wide variety of offerings, including music history, music theory, and many, many other aspects of music.<sup>4</sup>

There is considerable emphasis on folk music, as well as on Western European art music, popular music, and music of other lands and cultures in general music classes at all levels. There is also some concern for students with physical, mental, and emotional handicaps and disabilities. Some general music teachers specialize in Orff, and a few in Kodály, but most teach in an eclectic manner and base much of their teaching on music series books, of which there are only two major ones still being published today.<sup>5</sup>

Now we shall turn to music offerings for specialized students. There are a few specialized performing arts high schools, some public and some private. However, these are the exception rather than the rule. During the time of progressivism in the very late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, bands, choirs, and orchestras were added to regular upper elementary and secondary schools. These classes were and still are elected by students. They are required in almost no schools.

Where did these groups come from and how did they come to enter the public schools? The modern military band, which took its present form during the French Revolution, was very popular in the United States. A number of professional civilian bands, the most famous being the John Philip Sousa Band, and large numbers of amateur town and company bands modeled themselves on the military band. School bands, in turn, were modeled on the military, professional, and town and company bands, which filled a need for parades and shows for athletic events, as well as concerts in parks and other public venues.

Today, approximately ninety percent of American public middle schools offer bands, and more than ninety-five percent of high schools do so. Most of these bands still march, mainly at athletic events, and perform concerts. Early in the century, bands performed mostly marches, transcriptions of orchestral works, and various show music. Today, marching music tends to be popular music of various types, whereas the concert

music consists primarily of music composed for band, not orchestral transcriptions. Several well-known composers have now written for band, although the repertoire is still very limited when compared to the repertoire for orchestra.<sup>6</sup>

School orchestras, of course, were modeled after professional and amateur European (and later) American orchestras. They came into many high schools beginning about 1900, and they outnumbered bands until the 1920s. Today, orchestras are in approximately thirty percent of American middle schools, and about twenty percent of high schools.<sup>7</sup> They tend to be in large schools, usually in cities. Their repertoire, of course, is European classical music, mostly.

Choirs come from a church music tradition. Today, they are in approximately eighty-five percent of middle and high schools.<sup>8</sup> The music performed varies a great deal—from traditional choral art music to rock and other types of popular music.

Most ensemble teachers use traditional teaching techniques, although some orchestra and a few band teachers have been influenced by Suzuki string methods. Virtually all band, choir, and orchestra teachers are certified music teachers. However, only approximately twenty-five percent of middle and high school students participate in one or more of these ensembles.<sup>9</sup>

So, today, American school music consists of general music, mostly in elementary schools, and bands, choirs, and orchestras, mostly in secondary schools. General music tends to be a required subject, but it lacks sufficient curricular time in the school day and a clear focus of goals. Elective performance ensembles are offered in most schools, but only approximately twenty-five percent of students choose to participate. They focus on the performance of music. Some schools offer class instruction in guitar, piano, and other instruments, and some offer specialized music classes of various types. These types of programs are relatively few in number, however.<sup>10</sup>

University music programs are also borrowed from other sources. The comprehensive American university music school evolved in the late nineteenth century.

These schools offer performance, including private instruction on most instruments, and ensembles of various types. This type of performance instruction was modeled after European conservatories. University music schools also offer scholarly studies in music history, theory, and composition. This part of the school was modeled after the medieval European university music curriculum in which music was one of the seven liberal arts. (Of course, that curriculum was based on ancient Greek models.) The third part of the comprehensive American university music school is teacher education, which was borrowed from European, primarily Prussian, teacher-training institutions.<sup>11</sup> Universities also offer some courses for the general student, usually so-called music appreciation courses that focus on listening to music. Many schools offer preparatory music programs for younger, pre-university music students.

In addition to schools and universities, other types of formal music education include private teachers outside the schools, mostly of piano but some voice and Suzuki strings. There are a few commercial programs also, like the Yamaha piano program.

There is another type of music education, one that professional music educators tend to ignore. That is informal music education, or musical learning that occurs even without any intent to learn music. This phenomenon has not been studied very much by scholars. In fact, as I will talk about in my other address, the sociology of music education probably is the most understudied facet of our business at this point.<sup>12</sup>

Consider that rock music is extremely popular, especially if we include country music and various other types along with it. Sales of classical music on compact disks and tapes are low and continue to decline. The same is true for the sales of pianos and some other classical instruments.

Yet, popular music is everywhere, more so than ever. People are more affluent, and the price of music-reproduction instruments has come down. People, even children, have compact disk and tape players. Tens of thousands of people attend expensive rock concerts, like those of the Rolling Stones and Beach Boys.

Finally, our churches still teach music. This type of music education falls somewhere between formal and informal music education in that, in some cases, music is taught somewhat systematically, but the purpose is not for music education *per se*, but rather to enhance worship.

It is difficult to criticize American music education, or music education anywhere, unless we can agree on what we should be accomplishing in music education. This is something that American music educators have not been able to do, at least in this century. We adapted singing classes from the old, colonial church- and community-related singing schools. General music has changed a great deal from its roots in the singing schools, but the price is lack of a clear purpose. We adapted bands from military and community models, choirs from churches, and orchestras from the European art music tradition. Their purpose remains clear, but that purpose is being challenged as less than a complete musical education, and the majority of students do not participate. So, the American educational system has adapted musical practices and organizations from society, both pedagogical and performance, and attempted to use them as educational vehicles in the schools.

Today, American music educators do not agree that teaching musical literacy is the only thing to teach, or perhaps even one of the most important. I will talk about philosophy of music education a bit in my next paper, but suffice it to say here that the scholarly community is not in agreement about what to teach, much less on how to teach it.

If we assume that the purpose of school music education is to train performers, the American system is doing a good job. We produce great performing ensembles, the participants of whom go on to populate outstanding orchestras and other professional performing groups throughout the world. However, very, very few graduates from high school ensemble programs ever perform again. In addition, research suggests that ensemble participation does not lead to increased musical participation among adults, and



it appears to do little to increase preferences for certain types of music, including art music.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, it is likely that the general music experience, which averages less than sixty minutes per week in elementary schools, is insufficient to effect real changes in musicianship and musical taste.

If the purpose of music education is to enhance aural skills, we may be doing somewhat better, at least for some students. Research shows that school ensemble experiences do lead to better aural music skills.<sup>14</sup> However, many of those students may have had better aural musical skills before they began participating in school ensembles.

Most Americans would probably characterize themselves as unmusical, and indeed it is doubtful that many could sight-read a melody from notation. Even fewer American adults, including graduates of our ensemble programs, could play back a melody by ear. The last systematic, national measurement of school music achievement, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which took place more than twenty years ago, revealed dismal results for music education. To make matters worse, we teach very, very little music history, music theory, or music literature.

### Conclusions

Is American musicianship really so poor? If we define musicianship as the ability to read music, including singing at sight, the ability to "hear" a score, or even the ability to echo play or sing a melody from notation, then it probably really is very poor. Similarly, if musicianship is defined as heightened awareness of and appreciation for art music, then American music education appears to be making little difference.

On the other hand, I am not sure that musicianship is poor by historic standards. The ancient Athenians taught music in the schools, including the Greek musical notation system, but only approximately ten percent of the population attended schools--and only the boys at that. Could the non-citizens, the other ninety percent, read music? Probably not. Similarly, in the West, only a small percentage of students attended schools during the Middle Ages.

Indeed, in Western Europe, it was not until the religious reformation of the sixteenth century that the concept of universal schooling occurred, and the attempt to provide anything like equal schooling did not begin until the nineteenth century. The United States did provide the lead in equality of schooling concepts in the nineteenth century, but true equality in schooling has not yet been achieved.<sup>15</sup> Throughout history in the Western world, it is doubtful that many non-schooled people learned to read music, just as most did not learn to read and write language. In that respect, the fact that most Americans are still relatively musically illiterate is in keeping with historic standards throughout the Western world.

Today, we have language literacy well above ninety percent in the United States, but we devote several hours per week to language instruction beginning in kindergarten and continuing through the universities. The Music Educators National Conference recommends one hundred minutes of music instruction in elementary schools, but the average is less than sixty minutes. Given that we provide less than one hour of instruction per week, we probably cannot expect to have a musically literate population.

On the other hand, recently, the music education establishment has come to an agreement in the form of some National Standards for Music Education. Actually, standards are being developed for all school subjects, including the other arts.<sup>16</sup> The standards are an attempt to create a basis for states and localities to develop their own curriculum. If this happens, it would be first time in American history that there is a national consensus on curriculum, although the standards themselves are too broad to be a curriculum in themselves.

There are nine content standards, including singing alone and with others, performing on instruments, improvising melodies, composing and arranging, reading and notating music, understanding music in relation to history and culture, and so forth. Each content standard has several associated achievement standards.<sup>17</sup>

I think you will agree that these standards are quite ambitious. They reflect the desires of many diverse groups of people. The standards are an attempt to develop a basis for a national curriculum in music and the other arts, and they may succeed in encouraging music teachers to teach more than music appreciation/listening and music performance. No one knows whether these standards will be successful, or even whether they will survive. From the standpoint of the voting public, school music education in the United States has always been based on utilitarian purposes: improving church singing, providing music and pageantry for athletic and other school and civic events, competitions between schools and towns, and the like. For the standpoint of music teachers and students who elect to take performing music classes, the purpose has generally been the desire to perform music.<sup>18</sup> Seemingly, there has been little interest on the part of teachers, students, or the public in teaching anything other than music performance. Even general music includes some performance. The standards do include performance, but time will tell whether music learning in ways other than performance will prove popular enough with students, teachers, and the public to sustain itself in the schools and universities.

Whatever happens, music educators from throughout the world should increase their efforts to learn from each other. I am grateful to the GSME for this opportunity to share with you some observations about American music education. Thank you.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Jere T. Humphreys, "Instrumental Music in American Education: In Service of Many Masters," in *The Ithaca Conference on American Music Education: Centennial Profiles*, ed. Mark Fonder (Ithaca, NY: Ithaca College, 1992), 25-51; reprinted in *Journal of Band Research* 30 (Spring 1995): 44-46, 48-49. (page references are to the reprint version)

<sup>2</sup>Charles Leonhard. *The Status of Arts Education in American Public Schools: Report on a Survey Conducted by The National Arts Education Research Center at the University of Illinois*. (Urbana, IL: Council for Research in Music Education, 1991), 6-8, 26-29.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 48-49, 73-75.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 108-10, 143-44.

<sup>5</sup>McGraw-Hill Book Company, *Share the Music* (New York: Author, 1995); and Silver Burdett Ginn, *The Music Connection* (Morristown, NJ: Author, 1995).

<sup>6</sup>Leonhard, 108, 142; and Humphreys, "Instrumental Music," 52-53.

<sup>7</sup>Leonhard, 49, 73, 108, 143.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Jere T. Humphreys, "National 1988 Study," unpublished manuscript.

<sup>10</sup>Humphreys, "Instrumental Music," 48-49.

<sup>11</sup>George N. Heller and Jere T. Humphreys, "Music Teacher Education in America (1753-1840): A Look at One of Its Three Sources," *College Music Symposium* 31 (1991): 49-51.

<sup>12</sup>Jere T. Humphreys, "Expanding the Horizons of Music Education History and Sociology," *The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning* 7 (1996/97): 6-7, 9-10, 15.

<sup>13</sup>Jere T. Humphreys, William V. May, and David J. Nelson, "Research on Music Ensembles," in *Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning*, ed. Richard

Colwell. (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992), 657-58; and Dimitrije Buzarovski, Jere T. Humphreys, and Barrie Wells, "College Students' Attitudes Toward Music," *PMEA Bulletin of Research in Music Education* 21 (Fall 1995/96): 26.

<sup>14</sup>Humphreys, May, and Nelson, 659-60.

<sup>15</sup>R. Freeman Butts, *A Cultural History of Western Education: Its Social and Intellectual Foundations*, 2d. ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1955), 205-07.

<sup>16</sup>Consortium of National Arts Education Associations. *National Standards for Arts Education*. (Reston, VA: Music Educators National Conference, 1994).

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Humphreys, May, and Nelson, 661.

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