

Music Educators Journal

<http://mej.sagepub.com/>

Behind the Budget Crisis: A crisis of Philosophy

Charles A. Elliott

Music Educators Journal 1983 70: 36

DOI: 10.2307/3401210

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://mej.sagepub.com/content/70/2/36.citation>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



[MENC: The National Association for Music Education](http://www.menc.org)

Additional services and information for *Music Educators Journal* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://mej.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://mej.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

BEHIND THE BUDGET CRISIS, A CRISIS OF PHILOSOPHY

by Charles A. Elliott

Music educators in increasing numbers are beginning to shift from the aesthetic rationale for public school music that has dominated the thinking in our profession for the past two decades. This is, of course, due largely to the growing budgetary problems faced by many local school districts and the resulting reductions in programs, particularly arts programs. There is a growing belief among music educators that a more utilitarian justification for the inclusion of music in public school curricula would be more effective in combating further budget cuts, particularly when dealing with local school board members. Phillips¹ pointed out that many school board members "... haven't the vaguest idea of what the term aesthetic education means," and if they do, they don't believe that it's important. In arguing for the utilitarian view, he correctly points out that music was originally justified in the public schools on utilitarian grounds (contrary to the MENC position paper that appeared in the April 1977 issue of the *Music Educators Journal*), believing "If it worked for Lowell Mason, it may work again."

Budget or philosophy

As we rush into yet another change in philosophy, and there have been many since 1838, I suggest we consider

1. Kenneth H. Phillips, "Utilitarian vs. Aesthetic," *Music Educators Journal* 69, no. 7, (March 1983): 29-30.

Charles A. Elliott is an associate professor in the music department of the University of South Carolina, Columbia.

the possibility that though budgetary problems may be the primary cause for the current "demise in public school music education," the root cause may run deeper. It seems as if music educators have always struggled with the problem of justifying their programs in the public schools through the best and worst of times, and a brief examination of that struggle will reveal what I believe to be the underlying cause of our present dilemma.

Historically, the music education profession has fluctuated between two opposing philosophies, one embracing a utilitarian view, the other the so-called "intrinsic rationale": music for music's sake. As noted, music education in the public schools was originally justified on a utilitarian basis when Lowell Mason presented a rationale to the Boston School Board based on the moral, health, and recreational benefits of music. At other times in history, typical utilitarian arguments have included the following:

- The belief that studying music will teach democracy and encourage democratic living.
- The claim that studying music will aid in developing various social skills.
- Statements to the effect that music can foster patriotism.
- The claim that studying music, particularly the music of other cultures, can encourage world peace, racial understanding, and tolerance.
- The claim that music can be used as an effective tool to teach the more traditional, academic subjects.

The list could go on. However, it has been pointed out that such a rationale is precarious at best. Many of the utilitarian claims are simply not true, many can be achieved more efficiently in other ways, many do not

require the services of a highly trained music teacher, and most importantly, under such a rationale music education could run the risk of losing its integrity as a discipline.

Music's intrinsic value

To address some of the problems inherent in the utilitarian rationale, various attempts have been made to develop a philosophy based on the intrinsic value of music. For example, during the latter part of the nineteenth century, the primary objective of public school music was to teach music reading: sight singing. Music reading was a skill all children were expected to master, just as all children were expected to master mathematics, reading, spelling, and grammar. The argument was that the child who mastered music reading would, later in life, have access to great works of music just as the child who mastered reading skills would have access to great works of literature.

That vision, however, was apparently not realized in practice. Music class became an academic discipline and its study was reduced to mastering a series of sight-singing exercises with much emphasis on drill and little on singing and enjoyment. It was pointed out that such a rationale was likely to turn many children away from music.

Aesthetic education

Perhaps the most concerted effort to develop a rationale based on the intrinsic value of music emerged in the 1960s and became known as aesthetic education. The aesthetic rationale in our profession dates at least to the writings of Will Earhart² and states that the purpose of public school music should be to allow every child to develop his or her aesthetic potential as much as possible. Aesthetic education held great promise and was considered by many to be the philosophy the profession had been searching for since 1838. Unfortunately, the promise has not been realized. Martin Engel³ perhaps best summarized why in an article from *Principal*, the professional journal for elementary school principals. He wrote:

It seems to me that aesthetics remain a domain of intellectual speculation for philosophers seeking to construct a world view, an explanation and a series of open-ended questions that emerge from a mature and sophisticated level of inquiry and intellectual discipline. Teaching and learning aesthetic perception in the elementary school, while not impossible, can surely never become a central component of the school curriculum; nor... can aesthetic perception ever become established in school as a fundamental learning skill.

Aesthetics is an end state, not a rudimentary discipline.

2. Will Earhart, *The Meaning and Teaching of Music* (New York: Witmark Company, 1935).

3. Martin Engel, "Getting Serious About Arts Education," *Principal* 60, no. 1, (September 1980): 6-10.

One can't teach... Aesthetic Experience any more than one can teach maturity or wisdom or morality. (p. 8)

Some music educators have also expressed a concern that the philosophy of aesthetic education tends to deemphasize performing, which has become the central component of most public school music programs, and that it is a philosophy that espouses a merging of the arts, which also could be detrimental to most traditional public school music programs.

To paraphrase Bennett Reimer,⁴ what then is the source for this lack of philosophical "inner peace?" Why has our profession, so venerable in age and widespread in practice, been unable to produce a unifying philosophy?

Apparently, the blame for this lack of inner peace cannot be attributed to any particular philosophy of music education. This, in my opinion, is the real crisis alluded to in the title of this article. As noted, we have produced a number of philosophies over the past 145 years, some grandiose, others mundane.

Support the philosophy

The root of our problems is that regardless of the philosophy we adopt, we rarely offer evidence to support it. Music educators are chronic bandwagon jumpers and more often than not the arguments we offer to justify public school music are based on expediency and wishful thinking. It is no coincidence that the first music programs usually affected by budget cuts are nonperformance oriented. The high school band is usually quite visible in the community, performing at football games, festivals, and parades. Consequently, the band is usually perceived by the lay person as being valuable to the school and the community.

But what about the K-12 comprehensive music program we have fought for? Is it of value to our children, our schools, and our communities? Is the child who studies music in the public schools better off than the child who does not? Can questions such as those be answered so that a local school board member can understand them? Most importantly, *do we have evidence?*

Granted, those are tough questions. Until such a time as we can find answers, can produce evidence to support those answers, and can produce a rationale based on that evidence so that persons not schooled in our discipline can understand, we will never find that philosophical inner peace of which Reimer writes. Furthermore, our position in public education will continue to be precarious. We will continue to "revise our philosophy" at every crisis point, forgetting that we have traveled the road before. Only the names will have been changed to protect the innocent. ☐

4. Bennett Reimer, *A Philosophy of Music Education* (Engelwood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970).