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# Whose Music? Music Education and Cultural Issues

By Roger Rideout

**A**ny music teacher who has planned a holiday concert knows about the politics underlying the selection of appropriate music. Some students do not sing carols or cite lyrics that refer to fictional characters such as elves, goblins, or Harry Potter. Still others do not sing the national anthem. To these students or their parents, such songs represent cultural traditions or heritages that have values incompatible with their own. These are some of the political realities of school music, and most music educators navigate these waters with varying degrees of comfort, planning their public performances and school activities to be inclusive and to reflect what they hope will be a value-neutral approach to music study. Still, questions remain about whose music to study and perform and why.

Recently, some music scholars have suggested that we need to reconsider the basis for music selection. Their concern is not that a particular musical work has been chosen for performance. Rather, they believe that the aesthetic justification we give to music education and the highly personal and reflective musical meaning we claim to engender through music study favor the European art-music tradition at the expense of all other musical traditions. David Elliott, in particular, argues that the aesthetic

*Debates about what music to study can raise questions related to the very purpose of music education.*

*special focus*  
Reconceptualizing Curriculum

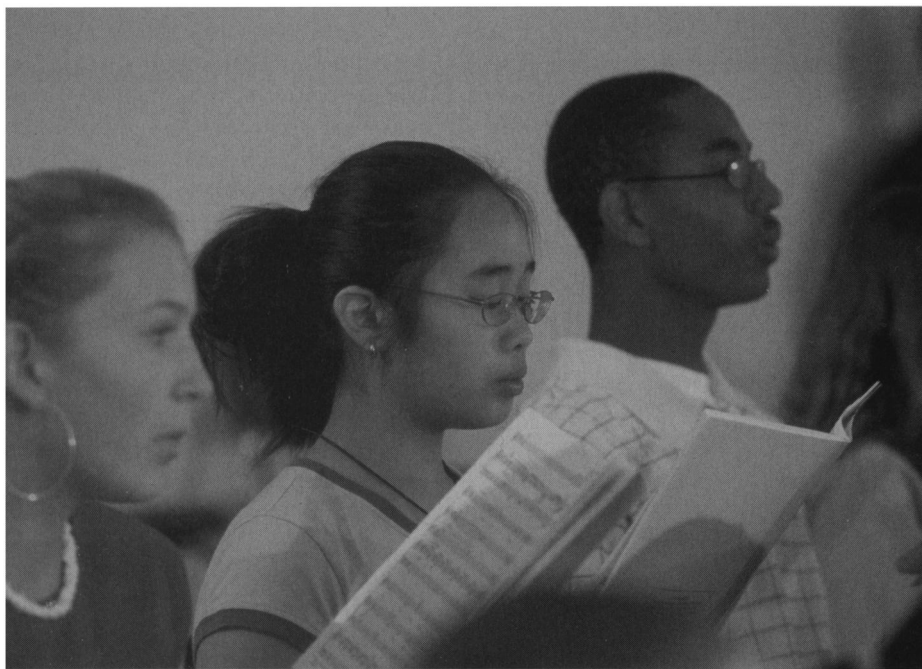


Photo by Mark Regan

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Music educators use a variety of approaches to selecting repertoire that meets the diverse needs of students.

# Three Positions

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- **The aesthetic position** is based on the argument that humans inherently strive to improve themselves, to move upward in their knowledge and perspective. By studying musical masterworks, students will grow toward new understandings and perceptions.
  - **The sociological position** is based on the belief that, first and foremost, all music reveals aspects of a particular society and culture. The goal of music education should be to help students understand how music expresses cultural values.
  - **Our pragmatic political reality** is that the real goal of music education is to provide a musical experience for all involved and to ensure public support for continuing the school music program.
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rationale for music study denigrates the social and cultural heritages of music.<sup>1</sup> According to Elliott, rather than studying music of the students' own time and cultural place, music educators using an aesthetic rationale seek to develop an internalized value system within each student that ignores these social and cultural elements.

## Aesthetic Music Education or ...

To understand both lines of thinking, we need a little background. For the past thirty years, American music education has been based, to a large degree, on the writings of Bennett Reimer. In his three editions of *A Philosophy of Music Education*, Reimer has given an elegant defense of music education and provided untold thousands of music educators with a rationale for music study.<sup>2</sup> One of the basic tenets of Reimer's aesthetic argument is that the essential knowledge and value to be gained from music study is found in the music itself, not in any utilitarian or ceremonial function it might serve.

Most music teachers have used this argument to defend the study and performance of works that some in a community might consider inappropriate. For example, many a high school choir director has defended performing the Schubert *Mass in G* or the Mozart *Requiem* on its aesthetic value as a masterwork of the Western art-music tradition. Educators argue that the work's religious association, which some might find unacceptable, is not the point of study and should not interfere with

the performance. Rather, the work transcends its origin and stands outside any cultural or political association. Their defense of performing the work is based on a belief that such great works are the core of our musical heritage and that, through their study, students come to new dimensions of understanding the power of music and its function in their lives.

Certainly, as a profession we believe that music has a value in and of itself and that no person can claim to be educated who does not understand the inherent power of music to express the human condition.<sup>3</sup> The problem with this line of thinking for scholars such as Elliott is that relatively recent music, such as American jazz, musical theater, and other nationalistic and popular styles of the twentieth century, aren't seriously considered for study because they fall short of the model set by the great masterworks. This sociological line of thinking suggests that music educators should help students understand the expressions of their own musical heritage. Proponents of this view, ranging from teachers who present world music to those who explore its underlying issues,<sup>4</sup> believe that music educators should examine the cultural and social heritage of their students and the function of schooling in their students' lives. Music teachers should select music that leads students to a broader understanding of their cultural expressions in music. The values that students develop as a result of such study will be more meaningful because of their connection to students' lives outside school.

Opponents insist that the sociological view replaces music with culture. Rather than use class time to explore the potential value inherent in the art form, works become reflections of nonmusical concepts. If I might be allowed an overly simple analogy, it is this. The aesthetic position, exemplified by Reimer, is based on what is called a teleological argument, namely that humans inherently strive to improve themselves, to move upward in their knowledge and perspective. Through study of great works, the child grows upward, as it were, to new dimensions of personal understanding and perception. Only those musical works that lead to this highly internalized, reflective, quasi-spiritual development are worthy of study and performance. By contrast, the sociological position is based on the belief that, first and foremost, all music reveals aspects of a particular society and culture. Becoming knowledgeable about these aspects and skillful in using them for personal music expression should be the goals of music education. This view leads outward, as it were, to broader awareness of the musical culture of the child's time and place. Which view has the greater merit?

## A Middle Ground?

To many music teachers, both arguments seem forced. As a profession, music education does not support any one musical tradition over another. What teacher hasn't willingly sought arrangements of pop tunes or planned concerts in light of the audience's reaction to the music being performed? What teacher doesn't scour the music store bins and catalogues looking for arrangements that can serve the multicultural objectives of the curriculum? In our performances, we generally try to reach out and engage parents and the community by programming music of many traditions, eras, styles, and genres. What one feels, personally, about the worth of a given piece of music means little when the real goal is to provide a musical experience for all involved and ensure public support for continuing the school music program.

In light of this pragmatic political reality, the question of whose tradition is most worth honoring seems like a second-order one. Yet, the essence of these arguments still haunts us. Who owns the music we study? Whose musical tradition and values are we presenting to our community? Is the essence of music learning personal enlightenment or cultural immersion? Are those two options antithetical, or can they complement each other?

These arguments, as summarized in the Three Positions sidebar, ask us to reexamine the way we think about music making. To put the issue simply: Do we study the Mozart *Requiem* because we believe that the work can serve as a musical lens through which the student or performer can explore the deepest expressions of the human psyche, or do we form the school equivalent of the garage band so that students can explore their known musical heritage through improvisation and replication?

It should come as no surprise that many sociological supporters prefer guitar classes, jazz bands, composition classes, and chamber ensembles to the large-ensemble tradition of American high schools. Their reasoning is that through these more individualized forms of musical study students can explore their own music heritages and develop individual musical expressions. To them, the study and performance of the “work” as a high water mark of musical creation and expression should be replaced by an exploratory process centering on student values as determined by peers, parents, the community, and personal experience.

When such questions arise, some of us turn to John Dewey’s *Art as Experience* for guidance.<sup>5</sup> Dewey asked American music education to structure music learning by “doing” music, whether composing, improvising, performing, or listening. In Dewey’s view, students come to value that which they experience as valuable. Active, conscious learning engages students to construct opinions and values about the music being studied and performed. Parents, siblings, peers, the school, teachers, and the community all contribute to the criteria that students use to determine for themselves

- Adorno, Theodor. *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*. New York: Seabury Press, 1976.
- Crafts, Susan D., Daniel Cavicchi, and Charles Keil. *My Music*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993.
- Small, Christopher. *Music, Society, Education*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996.

the value of their musical experiences in the classroom and performance hall. The actual works of music are just the catalysts that set this matrix into motion, not the objects of learning.

Dewey’s insights may allow a middle ground between aesthetic music education and the sociological view. The works listed in the Suggested Reading sidebar add additional voices to the conversation. This debate is important because it allows music educators to explore the various dimensions of musical value formation in students and to state clearly and effectively what we believe should be the purpose of music education. The formulation may be challenging, but each of us must understand the issues, make a judgment, and work diligently to ensure that our curricula and instruction lead children to a greater understanding of the power of music in their lives.

### Notes

1. David J. Elliott, *Music Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and David J. Elliott, “Continuing Matters: Myths, Realities, Rejoinders,” *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 132 (1997): 1–37.
2. Bennett Reimer, *A Philosophy of Music Education* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970); Bennett Reimer, *A Philosophy of Music Education*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989); and Bennett Reimer, *A Philosophy of Music Education: Advancing the Vision*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2003).
3. Susanne Katherina Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969).
4. Bennett Reimer, ed. *World Musics and Music Education: Facing the Issues* (Reston, VA: MENC, 2002).
5. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958). ■

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## MENC Resources

The following MENC publications offer more information on issues related to repertoire selection. Visit <http://www.menc.org/publication/books/booksrch.html> or call 1-800-336-3768 for more information. Some journal articles may be available through periodical databases at your local college, university, or public library.

- “Music with a Sacred Text,” MENC’s position statement on sacred music in schools is available at <http://www.menc.org/publication/books/relig0.html>
- Persellin, Diane, ed. “Special Focus: Selection of Repertoire.” Special issue, *Music Educators Journal* 87, no. 1 (2000). Includes articles on choice of repertoire, use of multicultural music, and specific suggestions for particular ensembles.
- Rodriguez, Carlos X., ed. *Bridging the Gap: Popular Music and Music Education*. Reston, VA: MENC, 2004. Addresses issues related to the use of popular music in schools. Item #1675.