

Readers Comment

The article by Louis Bergonzi in the December 2009 issue of *Music Educators Journal*, "Sexual Orientation and Music: Continuing a Tradition," inspired many letters from readers. Here is a selection of these, chosen by academic editor Mitchell Robinson, whose summary comments are found at the end of this column. Thanks to the many readers who shared their opinions by letter, by e-mail, and through calls to MENC. We are a community and a forum for ideas, and like a family, we don't agree all the time, but we can listen to different viewpoints and learn. Members who wish to do so may continue the discussion by adding comments on the MENC forums found at menc.org.

Ella Wilcox, MEJ editor

Mitchell,

I am a thirty-six-year veteran of music education here in Nebraska. I've certainly been a career-long member of MENC, our state Nebraska Music Educators Association (NMEA), and several other state-affiliated music organizations. I've served on our state level within our NMEA, and have served as state president and secretary of our Nebraska Bandmasters Association (NSBA).

If the article included in *MEJ* (December, pp. 21–25) reflects the attitude of the current *MEJ* editorial and advisory boards, then I am requesting my subscription to *MEJ* cease. In this day of liberal thought processing, what are cited in the article as "privileges of heterosexuality" and "privileges for heterosexual music teachers" we used to call traditional values and norms. I'm more and more appalled at the dismissal of and chastisement for beliefs in traditional values and norms that are certainly responsible for why each of us

are here on Earth (because each of us had a "mother" and "father")—but perhaps that was just a "heterosexual privilege" extended to us by society.

I hope to have five to six more years in music education. If the nature of this article isn't in some manner dismissed by editorial comment in a future issue, I should think the backlash across the nation might have you reconsider including articles of this nature in your magazine. I rather doubt I'm among a "few" who take offense to the nature of what is written. I hope the clamor to be strong and clear to you as an organization.

It might just be that I reconsider my renewal in MENC when that opportunity arises again next October.

Respectfully submitted,

Richard L. Keiser

*Privileged heterosexual music director,
Boys Town High School,
Boys Town, Nebraska*

Louis and Mitchell:

This is an excellent, long-overdue piece for the *MEJ* and high school music teachers. Thank you both. I hope that a few courageous districts will heed your observation on the dearth of in-service workshops dealing with diversity or sexual orientation to help teachers better understand and tend this ignored "special needs" group. Synchronicity at work—my wife and I viewed the *Milk* DVD [a film about Harvey Milk, California's first openly gay elected official] last night, and this morning I opened the December *MEJ*!

Michael D. Bennett

*Retired music teacher,
Rociada, New Mexico*

I must object, or at least call attention to the sad article in the December *MEJ*, "Sexual Orientation and Music."

How vulgar to include the homosexual

agenda boldface in a publication such as *MEJ*. Does anyone screen these articles for common decency and appropriateness?

Or has *MEJ* become a lapdog for the National Education Association and its far-left thrust? How about bringing the level of *MEJ* back to its former glory, when one could trust all the articles and not have to keep an eye on the hidden agenda?

Please.

Don Nickson

*Music teacher,
Harford Christian School of the
Evangelical Methodist Church,
Darlington, Maryland*

Dear Dr. Bergonzi,

Thank you for your thought-provoking article in the most recent issue of *MEJ*. I loved the questions and scenarios you posed throughout the article about our assumptions about sexual orientation in the music classroom. I sincerely hope that many music educators not only take the time to read your writing but also ask themselves those questions and reflect on their own practices. I know I certainly have.

Sincerely,

Blake Leister

*Choral director and
musical theatre educator,
Derry, New Hampshire*

I felt that the recent article, "Sexual Orientation and Music Education: Continuing a Tradition," was not an appropriate article to run in the *Music Educators Journal*. It is not my place, as a teacher, to discuss sexuality with my students (heterosexual or homosexual), and it is certainly not my place to go into detail about this lifestyle. Even though I completely disagree with this article on an ethical and moral standpoint, I'm also disappointed in the writing of the article. In education we are always taught to put the student first. Describing

people as "LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] students" rather than "a student who is LGBT" doesn't put the student first. I'm extremely disappointed that this article was in the journal. I realize that a subscription to *MEJ* is included in my MENC membership, but I would like to know how I can cancel that subscription. I will not support a journal that doesn't match my opinions and views.

Julie Purin
*General music and reading ISA,
Wakarusa Valley Elementary School,
Lawrence, Kansas*

Great article in the *Music Educators Journal*. As a (straight) high school choir teacher, I have seen a significant shift in attitudes of students towards their gay peers. Ten years ago, I remember watching gay students struggle to hide their identity to their peers. Sometimes it was a struggle that led them to misbehavior in the classroom because they were so frustrated and unhappy.

Now I have three boys who are out in choir. They are popular with their peers and they are (at least as far as I have observed) accepted. I see happier students. I would like to think that the trend towards acceptance is growing.

I also have teacher friends who are out. They still struggle with the issues, but when I first started teaching (twenty-eight years ago), they would not have even been able to tell their peers. It's progress. We still have a long way to go.

Suzanne Chimenti
*Fairview Elementary School,
Reynolds School District,
Fairview, Oregon*

Sir:

I was very dismayed at the article by Louis Bergonzi relating to sexual orientation and music education. First, I hold no ill will towards those who consider themselves homosexual. I have a brother and other assorted extended family and friends who consider themselves so. I have had many conversations with them and others regarding the pros and cons of such, but it

is my opinion that the classroom is simply not the place for such discussions. And to suggest even the slightest modification of teaching/learning objectives to satisfy the political correctness disease that is running rampant in our country is pure folly.

I am now retired. But I severed my connection to the National Education Association back in the early 1970s because it strayed totally away from the purpose of education. It appears that maybe MENC is following that same path. I hope not. I would prefer to think that the Bergonzi article is an aberration, not a trend.

Tim Johnson
Congress, Arizona

Dr. Bergonzi,

Thank you for addressing an important topic in a forum that will reach a large population of educators who need to hear it. I have always struggled to make students feel equal in my classroom, even though in my schools there has often been contention between the political left and right. If you are familiar with the notorious Westboro Baptist "Church" that famously pickets and protests military funerals and any attempts at gay equality, I will relate to you that its members came and demonstrated in front of our high school in 2006 because several students started a chapter of the Gay-Straight Alliance, and several of the club officers were also band officers and senior students in my band program. The students who identified themselves as the young Republicans in our band gave these students the cold shoulder and I was caught in between, which was at times difficult to mediate.

Your article is one more step in the right direction. It has been over forty years since Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr., yet in some communities, discrimination against African Americans still exists. Therefore, I believe it will require the funerals of two to three more generations of ignorance before gay rights become as accepted as women's rights are today.

Timothy J. Groulx, NBCT
*Doctoral fellow in music education,
University of South Florida, Tampa*

In response to the article "Sexual Orientation and Music" (December, 2009), I think we as educators need to be careful what kind of sexual encouragement (if any) we are giving our students. Granted, when studying the lives of famous people (composers, musicians, artists, writers, politicians), we are going to find diverse proclivities often outside the norms of society, possibly to a greater extent than found in a random cross-section of culture. This may be that those who explore the limits of their various disciplines explore other limits as well, sexuality included. The point I would like to make is that going beyond established sexual limits is not always beneficial and therefore should not always be encouraged or even treated as neutral.

Oscar Wilde was a brilliant writer. Did his homosexuality and other addictions contribute to his brilliance or merely cut it short? Keith Richards was a heroin addict for years (hopefully, he is clean now). Did this make him a great musician, or is his addiction a deadly proclivity that he has been able to get under control? I am not a homophobe. I have friends whom I have loved, whom I have defended when their sexuality was brought into question, and then these friends died because of the unhealthy nature of their LGBT behavior. Granted, I have other friends who are now dead or dying of cervical cancer because of (promiscuous) heterosexual behavior. I have friends who are working with orphans in South Africa whose parents are dead due to the AIDS epidemic, which affects all levels of society in that country.

All this is to say that sexuality is wonderful, but it can also kill without proper discipline and restraint. Just as good musicians must recognize discipline and restraint as necessary elements in music, these principles should be applied to issues of LGBT and heterosexual behavior as well.

Bill Samuelson
*Music director,
Minarets High School,
O'Neals, California*

Professor Bergonzi,

I just finished reading your article in the most recent edition of the *Music Educators Journal* about sexual orientation and music education. I really appreciate this article, because I teach in a state and live in a community where homosexuality "doesn't exist." As a first-year teacher, it is very difficult for me to live in a community like this and feel supported. I am battling ignorance (what I love calling "ignernce") and am trying to educate my students that it is inappropriate to say things like "This is gay," or "You're gay," etc. I am implementing a new behavior plan after the impending holiday break, in which I will give detention to any student who misuses this word. I know this is harsh, but I have told them that they can offend individuals who are gay. Not telling them that I, myself, am gay.

Anyway, I am truly grateful that you took the time to write this and educate my heterosexual colleagues about this issue.

Mark Anderson

[School and state withheld by request]

Letter to the Editor (Mitch):

Today, I finished reading the December 2009 issue of *MEJ*, and I wanted to send a note of sincere congratulations to you and your editorial committee and advisory board. The articles on informances, portfolios, spirituals, Brazilian music, and teacher recruitment were all well written and timely. But I must say that I was especially impressed by the lead article on homophobic biases and uneven treatment based on heterosexual privilege. I found Louis Bergonzi's work to be a major turning point in the maturity of *MEJ* and perhaps our profession as a whole.

I am sure that there was a great deal of internal question about the publishing of this article. It is a difficult topic for many and it shows great courage and vision to publish it. I hope it starts much dialog about diversity, tolerance, and perspective that is so badly needed in music education in America and that we use this as a starting point in discussing this problem and others that relate to issues of

gender equality and racial prejudice that sometimes become unknowingly embedded in formulaic teaching practices. Such thoughtful articles move us forward by exploring the richness of what it means to be human and to teach music in a complex and democratically tolerant environment. In this one issue of *MEJ*, we find excellent writings on music, teaching practices, and social issues! Bravo, everyone! I want to say, too, that I have noticed a steady improvement in the quality of articles in *MEJ* in the last few years, and this is a most hopeful sign for the field. In a time when MENC is struggling with ways to best serve music educators as a whole, *MEJ* is a real bright spot, and I hope that the good work continues and that we return to more issues of this quality published on a monthly basis.

Peter R. Webster

*John Beattie Professor
of Music Education,
Henry and Leigh Bienen
School of Music,
Northwestern University,
Evanston, Illinois*

Hi, Louis,

Just want to compliment you on a fine article in the current *MEJ*. A really useful contribution, clearly and decisively stated and deeply sensitive to the situations you tackle. We very much need this kind of head-on treatment of important yet overlooked issues. Our field is in your debt for helping us toward maturity in this way.

With admiration,

Bennett Reimer

*Professor emeritus,
Northwestern University,
Evanston, Illinois*

Response from Author Louis Bergonzi

It was little surprise, given the size of MENC membership, that there was a wide range of viewpoints expressed in reaction to my article. As it would be for any author, it was satisfying to hear from readers who found my ideas thought-provoking. I'm also grateful for those who disagreed with me and said so. But it was a bit disheart-

ening that many, when asked, were not willing to place their ideas into the public arena and let them be considered for publication in this column. I say this because, in my experience, the most undesirable result of the looking at a contentious issue is a closing-off of dialogue.


Conversations that are intentionally limited to a "gotcha" or a "slam dunk" are too common in our society. Civil discourse is often shut down; viewpoints don't get exchanged, reconsidered, reaffirmed, or revised. This can happen in a college classroom, which is now my primary teaching setting. Often, it is difficult for students who hold Christian or conservative viewpoints to be heard without a professor's encouragement and support. In an institution that is designed for the exchange of ideas, I find this tragic.

This is why the intended tone of my article was one of inviting the questioning of long-held assumptions by presenting information and examples. I did not ask


EXPERIENCE
ChoralArts
WWW.CHORALARTS.ORG

FREE
Online
Learning Community
Join Today!
www.ChoralArts.org

MUSIC-INTEGRATED CURRICULA



**Voices:
A Teachers Guide
(Civil Rights)**



**Celebrating
Sacred Rhythms:
A Teachers Guide
(Latin American
with Bilingual Readings)**

**All Resources
Aligned with the
National Standards!**

www.choralarts.org
888.349.7464
schronenberg@choralarts.org

readers to adopt a particular position on the issue.

It's clear from the responses in this column by Mitch Robinson and Ella Wilcox that MENC values respectful dialogue. So, I offer a few comments on two reactions that were prominent in the collection of letters received:

Sexuality has no place in the classroom; therefore, homosexuality and heterosexuality are not issues for professional music/educators.

Some seemed to suggest that I was writing about teachers' sex lives or composers' sex lives as having a place in the classroom. Neither homosexuality nor heterosexuality is about sex. Sexuality is about romantic, emotional, and physical attraction; love; long-term commitment; and a special richness of happiness. I'm fairly confident that we all agree that sex and a teacher's sex life do not have a place in the music classroom.

I was hoping that readers would see that sexuality is already (just) part of who we are as teachers and of what we do. Through my examples in the article, I tried to show how teachers already and regularly indicate and reference sexuality—but only when it is heterosexuality. This is the notion of privilege.

It was easier for me to understand and appreciate one reader's viewpoint that heterosexuality's privileged place in the classroom is a deserved one. In this reader's view, homosexuality is "less _____ (desirable, ordinary, natural, sacred, normal, healthy, etc.) than heterosexuality." At least this position recognizes heterosexual privilege and has certain logic, even though I respectfully and completely disagree with the premise.

Some readers thought my examples were not plausible. Frankly, I find this difficult to believe. I kindly ask that these readers listen to and watch themselves and other teachers during the next few weeks for heterosexual information, artifacts, jokes, and references. One example: conductor's bios often include mention of spouses/partners and children as if their heterosexual orientation were an important part of their professional

background. This anticipates the next reaction to which I'd like to respond.

As professionals, our personal lives are off-limits to our students.

Again, I ask that you listen to yourself and your colleagues for the ways teachers admit that they are more than a classroom persona. Our students look to us as role models of citizenship and adulthood; we can't avoid this even if we wanted to. Even my doctor and tax accountant have pictures of their families in their offices, and they make mention of their children as part of our conversations.

I want to express my appreciation to MENC for allowing us to engage in this discussion and for providing this forum for the exchange of ideas and viewpoints. *MEJ* is an educational education journal.

Louis S. Bergonzi
Professor of conducting and instrumental music education and chair of music education; Conductor, Illinois Philharmonia; University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Response from the Academic Editor

Dear Readers:

The vigorous and passionate debate represented by the letters in this column is, in my opinion, one of the signs of an active, healthy, maturing profession. It has been a goal of the current editorial and advisory boards for *MEJ* to be the place in our profession where this kind of conversation can take place, to provide a "voice" for marginalized and underrepresented constituencies—in this case, LGBT students and teachers.

More important, however, is how we as a profession choose to respond to the critical issues raised by Dr. Bergonzi in his article. A helpful framework for considering these issues is provided by educator and scholar Sonia Nieto, who offers us a conceptual model for understanding diversity in education. The model includes stages of

- tolerance
- acceptance

- respect and affirmation
- solidarity, and finally,
- critique.¹

I believe that Dr. Bergonzi's article provides us with an opportunity to think about our practice as music educators, and about the ways that we treat our students, and our colleagues, who may be different in some way from ourselves. I also believe that thinking about issues of diversity, such as sexual orientation, could very well lead to enhanced classroom teaching practices, another reason the article was found to be suitable for publication.

Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Bergonzi for bringing these important questions to our readers, and the members of the editorial and advisory boards who reviewed the article for their thoughtful and thorough contributions to the editorial process. I often think of *MEJ* as music education's "town square," a place where people who hold differing points of view, backgrounds, and perspectives can come together in an effort to advance our profession. A place to be heard, and to listen. This is something we don't do enough of as a profession, or in our society in general.

1. Sonia Nieto, "Affirmation, Solidarity, and Critique: Moving beyond Tolerance in Multicultural Education," *Multicultural Education* 1, no. 4 (1994): 9-12, 35-38.

Mitchell Robinson
Associate professor of music education, Michigan State University, East Lansing

Letters to the Editor

Were you inspired or aggravated by something you read in *Music Educators Journal*? *MEJ* academic editor Mitchell Robinson would be interested to know what you think. Please send your comments to him at mrob@msu.edu. Kindly include your full name, title, school or institution, and city and state where you teach, or where you live if retired. Letters may be edited for style and length.