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A Stronger Rationale for Music Education

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A STRONGER RATIONALE FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

The last decade has seen the rise of severe challenges to music education. Kenneth H. Phillips suggests a need to rethink the profession's philosophical foundations.

BY KENNETH H. PHILLIPS

The March 1983 issue of the *Music Educators Journal* carried as its theme "Utilitarian vs. Aesthetic Rationales for Music Education." "Utilitarian vs. Aesthetic" also was the title of the lead article in the issue, which addressed the defense of school music programs.¹ The article related the frustration of being unable to defend the school music curriculum on any other basis than that taught at most colleges and universities: aesthetic education. Parents, school boards, and administrators were not being convinced by arguments for aesthetic education, and many music programs were losing ground across the nation.

In an article written around the same time, "The Evolution of Music Education Philosophy from Utilitarian to Aesthetic," Michael Mark related that the aesthetic rationale as it grew through the 1960s and 1970s was relatively new in music education, and that earlier utilitarian tenets had become all but abandoned by the profession.² In the 1980s, some educators questioned whether this was a wise move—and they continue to raise the same question because the profession needs, more than ever, a rationale

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that helps in the fight for the place of music in the school curriculum. Perhaps it is time, these ten years later, to once again consider a philosophy that embraces both utilitarian *and* aesthetic objectives—a rationale that will better serve the profession in helping to define what we do and defend why music education is important.

When "Utilitarian vs. Aesthetic" was written back in the early 1980s, it

espoused a theme that was unpopular, especially among academics employed in our colleges and universities. Aesthetic education had gained a place of prominence, and it was the only philosophy being taught by music education professors. Those working in the trenches of the public schools may not have been convinced of the philosophy's unique value, but there is no doubt that aesthetic education was the driving force among those who prepared teachers in institutions of higher learning.

Today, in even harder economic times than the 1980s, other voices are speaking out on this fundamental philosophical issue, and they are repeating the question raised in 1983: Should the philosophy that drives our profession be so narrow and one-sided as to exclude the many and important "functional" benefits of music study? Is it time to recognize that the arts do not have a monopoly on aesthetic education and that our "uniqueness" only serves to isolate us from mainstream education? Isn't it time to seriously reevaluate our position?

Discussing the Issues

Every year, the music education faculties of the Big Ten universities meet together to discuss important issues relating to the preparation of music teachers.³ At the 1992 meeting at The University of Illinois, keynote speaker Kathryn A. Martin, dean of the College

Rationales for Music Education

■ *To study music is to study a basic form of communication.* While music may not be a universal language, it, like reading, writing, and speaking, conveys thoughts, ideas, and feelings among peoples. It is used for such mundane purposes as to sell commercial products and for such noble purposes as to inspire and elevate our appreciation of life. The impact and power of music as a basic means of communication among people of all ages makes it an important area of learning.

■ *To study music is to study the world's peoples.* Music is an important means of learning about and transmitting cultural heritages. Music and the other arts encapsulate what it is to be human and what it means to belong to any of the variety of cultures on earth. Music helps us to learn about ourselves, our traditions, and our ways of thinking and acting. It also helps us to learn about others, their traditions, and their behaviors.

■ *To study music is to study the learning process.* Music is an academic subject that involves learning in the major domains: cognitive (knowledge), psychomotor (skills), affective (attitudes and feelings), and kinesthetic (the senses). Music comprises its own complex body of knowledge, requires the development of motor coordination, shapes attitudes and feelings, and requires learning via the senses. Through music, people engage in the entire learning process and develop keener understandings and insights as to how knowledge, skills, attitudes, feelings, and the senses interrelate.

■ *To study music is to study the imagination and self-expression.* Music provides a means for developing self-expression and creativity. It involves a learning process that moves from convergent to divergent thinking—new ways of manipulating, organizing, and structuring sound. Society values problem-solving, and creative activities help in the exploration of numerous possible outcomes to specific problems. Music provides many opportunities for developing this valuable way of thinking, which then leads to new ways of doing things.

■ *To study music is to study the basics.* Music is a comprehensive art—within its study, students come into contact with other basic areas of the curriculum: math, science, social studies, languages, and physical education. While music is a subject with its own body of knowledge and is inherently worth knowing, its comprehensive nature serves as a foundation for a unified and comprehensive educational setting.

■ *To study music is to study art.* Music gives us a means to develop aesthetic sensitivity. The study of music teaches people to appreciate quality—those products of human creativity that represent the highest order of thinking, feeling, and technical achievement. When one is able to understand and experience the great works of art, one is more able to experience the richness and beauty of life in its highest form. Music is a means of understanding and relating to the noblest desires and aspirations of people throughout the ages.

of Fine and Applied Arts at Illinois and then-chair of the National Coalition for Education in the Arts, stated in her remarks that perhaps the time had come in our defense of the arts to forget about such slogans as “art for art’s sake.” Charles Fowler, independent writer and consultant in the arts, made the same statement, and noted that aesthetic education should be considered the “process” and not the product of an education in the arts.

Also at that Big Ten meeting was Illinois professor emeritus Charles Leonhard, whose philosophical arguments back in the 1950s had shaped the future of aesthetic education. In fact, Bennett Reimer, the leading voice in aesthetic education in this generation, states that the philosophy espoused in *Foundations and Principles of Music Education* by Leonhard and House was one of the driving forces in his eventual publication of *A Philosophy of Music Education*. However, by 1985, Leonhard felt it necessary to clarify his position:

I never anticipated that the concept of aesthetic education would come to be used as the major tenet in the justification for music education. That has, however, happened. As a result, the profession has been sated with vague esoteric statements of justification that no one understands, including, I suspect, most of the people who make those statements.⁴

Leonhard then goes on to list eleven outcomes having to do with the benefits of participation in the music program, all of which are utilitarian in nature. He is emphatic in noting that these tenets are not inconsistent with the concept of aesthetic education, which, he states, “applies to the *process* of music education, the teaching and learning of music.”⁵ It is not coincidental, then, that Charles Leonhard introduced Charles Fowler at the Big Ten meeting, and that Fowler’s address was supported by the Charles Leonhard Lecture Fund. According to these leading theorists, aesthetic education is to be more the process than the product of an education in the arts.

Defining Roles

Music serves humankind in many ways, only one of which is the aesthetic

experience. It is the aesthetic experience, however, that drew most of us into the music profession, and its power cannot be ignored or debased. But if we say that the aesthetic experience is the only justification for studying music, we severely limit our argument for music's importance in the curriculum, and we ignore the many and important contributions that music makes to life.

How is it then that we should define and defend what we do in music education? I believe it is by embracing utilitarian *and* aesthetic objectives. If we don't, we may well lose even more ground, and we will have many more students who graduate in music being unable to articulate a strong and viable rationale for music education.

One thing is sure—we cannot return to the era of “The boy who blows a horn will never blow a safe.” Making such out-on-the-limb statements will not do in this age of accountability. If the study of music makes better people, what about the great tyrants of history who loved art music? No, we have to find better reasons than “music hath charms to soothe the savage breast.” Even if you believe such a statement, how could you objectively defend it?

One of the assignments that music education students receive at The University of Iowa is to write down the ways in which they think the study of music benefits people. They start by looking at and discussing the ten reasons given in the MENC publication *The School Music Program: Description and Standards*, and reviewing the materials and videos in MENC's *Action Kit*

Rationales and Standards

For more than a year, MENC has been involved in an effort to define forward-looking national standards for music education. These standards, a draft of which appears in the center of this issue, define what arts study should enable students to know and be able to do. In defining standards content and achievement, the standards have a great deal to say about the rationale for what professional music teachers do.

Read—and comment on—the standards. They will be an influential force in the shaping of music education for the foreseeable future.

for Music Education. Students then make their own lists and share them in class, noting the many duplications.

Then begins the process of dissecting and discussing each reason: Can it be understood in this form by the layperson? Does this reflect reality? Is this wishful thinking or does it have real substance? Is there any research to affirm this statement? Finally, students are asked to choose not more than six reasons from the list and to defend those in a paper, one paragraph for each of the six statements.

They are to choose their reasons carefully and to defend them with substance. Cautioning against out-on-the-limb statements usually prevails, but some students still persist in trying to save the world through music. Alas, if only we could.

The sidebar on page 18 lists some of the reasons that students at Iowa have chosen and found important in forming

their own rationales for why we do what we do. This list is not complete, nor is there any hierarchy suggested in the list's format.

The Value of Defining Values

There are at least twenty-five reasons that students often give for the importance of music study. These include its power as an economic force and its link to community pride. We need to ponder and debate the many reasons, and decide which ones are important to us and which ones will speak to those who make the decisions regarding budgets and curricula. Every music educator should have ready at least six strong arguments that he or she can deliver with conviction. His or her future may depend upon it.

Recently, a graduate from Iowa stopped by to exclaim, “I got the job!” After I congratulated him, he stated that the first question at his interview was “Why is music important?”

“I had so much to say,” the student said, “the principal had to change the subject...and I got the job teaching what I wanted to teach!”

Music educators will be indebted forever to Bennett Reimer for his tremendous contribution to our understanding of aesthetic education. It is a worthy objective. But hasn't the time come to recognize that utilitarian objectives do not weaken our cause, but make it stronger? Doesn't everything in life have two components: the functional and the aesthetic? A tree is a thing of beauty, but it also contributes in a

References

Leonhard, Charles, and Robert W. House. *Foundations and Principles of Music Education*, 2d ed. New York: McGraw Hill, 1959.

Reimer, Bennett. *A Philosophy of Music Education*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970.

The School Music Program: Description and Standards, 2d ed. Reston, VA: Music Educators National Conference, 1986.

Action Kit for Music Education. Reston, VA: Music Educators National Conference, 1991.

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major way to our ecological system. To paraphrase the eminent Dutch art historian H. R. Rookmaaker, art does not exist on its own but is tied to reality because it deals with reality (the things we love and hate), and is used in reality.⁶ So if art exists for art's sake, it separates itself from reality and is easily dismissed. As former MENC president Paul R. Lehman has said, "The arts must be taken off their pedestal and given a place in the life of the average American."⁷

Music education must bind itself to reality if it is to survive in the school curriculum. Utilitarian and aesthetic tenets are not mutually exclusive. In the real world, these qualities exist to some degree in everything. Music is part of the real world, and its many functions should not go unnoticed. Aesthetic education by itself is isolationist and separates us from the mainstream of education. Its doctrine of "uniqueness" is not only false, it is counterproductive. When combined with functional or utilitarian objectives, however, the rationale for music in the school curriculum is strengthened. Viva la musica!

Notes

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

2. Michael L. Mark, "The Evolution of Music Education Philosophy from Utilitarian to Aesthetic," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 30, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 15-21.

3. The Big Ten universities are Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, Michigan, Michigan State, Minnesota, Northwestern, Ohio State, Purdue, and Wisconsin. Just recently, Pennsylvania State was added to the list.

4. Charles Leonhard, *A Realistic Rationale for Teaching Music* (Reston, VA: Music Educators National Conference, 1985), 7.

5. *Ibid.*, 11.

6. H. R. Rookmaaker, *The Creative Gift* (Westchester, IL: Cornerstone Books, 1981), 115.

7. Paul R. Lehman, "Down from the Pedestal," *Music Educators Journal* 72, no. 5 (January 1986): 73. ■

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