The end of a school year can be a very eye-opening time for music educators. As we clear the desktop, remove the post-it collections from our monitors, and go spelunking through supply-closets-turned-junk-rooms, we are reminded of all the things we intended to do over the previous year. For me, one such task was unearthed from the recesses of my bottom desk drawer. On this long-forgotten to-do list was a reminder to revise an assignment for our senior-level music education majors.

Our students, like those in most music teacher preparation programs, are required to write and present their personal philosophy of music education. In the lectures and discussions preceding this assignment, students learn of aesthetics, the Mozart Effect bandwagon, state and federal arts advocacy campaigns, and other justifications for what we do as music educators and why we do it. As I revisited this issue, I realized it had been a few years since I was asked to write a personal philosophy statement. After several years as an elementary music teacher and a few as a college music educator, I find that I face the same questions and struggles concerning a personal philosophy that my current students face.

As a music educator, how do the common advocacy campaigns and philosophies of well-known music educators affect what I believe and thereby influence what I teach? At a fundamental level, when I stand before a room of music students, how do I put into action the words and concepts I learned in my own music education classes? Specifically, what is my primary objective for teaching music, and how does that affect what I teach and how I teach it?

The answer I propose to these questions is based on three, commonly accepted beliefs about music and its place in formal education. The first premise is that all people are musically inclined. To support this belief, educators have commonly turned to the research of Howard Gardner and Edwin Gordon. In *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983), Gardner included music as one of seven “intelligences” that are evident in all people, indicating that all people possess some degree of musical intellect or ability. Likewise, Gordon suggested that all people are musical and described the general population’s musical ability using a bell curve (Gordon 2003). A small percentage of the population is very musical, most are of average talent, and a small percent of the population possesses minimal musical talent. But, just as there is no one person to whom all talent has been bestowed, there is no one person to whom no talent was granted.

The second premise is that because all people are musical, all will participate with music in some way. In this argument, all people may be classified into one of three categories of musicians: professional, avocational, and covert. According to this model, and returning to the bell-curve diagram, there are very few professional musicians, a large number of avocational musicians, and a smaller number of covert musicians. The category of professional musicians includes music teachers, performers, composers, music therapists, and all other career fields directly related to music. The second category, avocational musicians, includes people who used to take piano lessons, or were in a school performing ensemble, but decided on a non-musical career field. Many of the people in this category play in community bands, sing in church choirs, or perhaps perform a few gigs when they get the chance. The final category, covert musicians, describes the smaller percentage of the population whose musical talent is hidden, undiscovered, or masked in some way, perhaps by each person’s perception of their ability or by a previous experience in music that made them feel unmusical. Although covert musicians may claim to be unmusical, they still demonstrate an innate desire to participate with music, usually by singing in the shower, in the car, or at their places of worship, attending concerts, and programming their favorite pop-song as their ring tone.

Finally, because all people have the capacity for music, and because all people participate with music in some way, music must be a core component of every child’s education. Future professional musicians need a solid foundation of musical skills and concepts on which their careers will be built. Avocational musicians may need to develop some skills and concepts, even though their success will be less contingent on musical development. More than skill, the avocational and covert musicians need a healthy perception of the role of music in everyday life. Only with a positive mindset will
they desire to continue participating with music when they are no longer required to do so.

Understanding this three-part premise, we are faced with the reality that we must teach in a way that reaches the future covert and avocational musicians while also preparing future professional musicians for their careers.

After long deliberation, it occurred to me that the answer to the earlier question about our primary objective may be simply stated as this: Our main goal as music educators is to scar our students for life. Although the phrase “scarred for life” is generally a negative one, I would like to propose the acronym SCAR in a positive framework, as a model for effective music education and as a four-part answer to the fundamental question proposed here. Specifically, effective music education should address musical skills, concepts, attitudes, and repertoire.

**Skills and Concepts**

Succinctly stated, skills are the tasks music students are expected to do or perform. A sampling of recommended skills described by the National Standards and TEKS objectives includes singing independently and with a group, performing on classroom instruments, and others. Concepts are the components that students are expected to know or understand and are commonly imbedded within a corresponding skill, indicating a direct connection between skills and concepts. For example, students learn to sing and aurally recognize certain pitches and intervallic relationships (skill). Later, students are taught that certain notes on varying lines and spaces represent the pitches and intervals they have been singing (concept).

Other concepts, however, may not have a particularly direct relationship to the skill of performing music but do have a significant impact on a student’s understanding of and appreciation for music. These types of concepts include historical knowledge, well-known instrumentalists and vocalists, and knowledge of musical genres, among others. Usually, music skills and concepts, and the sequences pertaining to them, are well defined in music curricula, TEKS, and National Standards.

With the curricular framework for music already prescribed, music educators must decide how to teach the prescribed skills and concepts, and ultimately must determine why they teach it in that manner. To address this issue, we turn to **attitude**.

**Attitude**

I commonly pose the following question to music education majors: Which is more important: your content or your students’ experiences with that content? It may seem obvious for a music educator to state that content is most important. However, one must also consider that a student’s perception and prior experiences have a significant impact on the student’s future participation with that content. There may be several very gifted musicians who decided not to major in music because of unfavorable music experiences. If this assumption is correct, a student’s attitude about any given subject may be equally as important as the content, or the skills and concepts, of that subject.

Attitude, then, becomes a major figure in determining how and why to teach. To completely understand the meaning of
attitude and apply it to music curriculum, one must understand that attitude begins with skills and concepts. A student must first be exposed to a skill or concept before that student can formulate an informed or appropriate attitude about it. There are many scenarios in which people, particularly children, form attitudes or opinions toward things not yet experienced: unfamiliar books, movies, musical styles, and, of course, vegetables, to name a few. In these examples, people refuse to try something simply because it does not fit within the parameters of what they already know.

As the concept of healthy, informed attitudes pertains to the current discussion, the same is true of music as it is with vegetables—you never know until you try. Some students may have preconceived notions toward music class as a whole or toward certain aspects of the music curriculum. An effective music curriculum is one that exposes students to a wide array of music to equip them with the tools and vocabulary necessary to express their attitudes toward a song, singer, genre, instrument, or other aspect of music in an informed, knowledgeable manner, rather than dismissing something before having been exposed to it.

There are also certain attitudes about music that students seem to have developed before they reach our classrooms. While teaching a first-grade class, I played an excerpt from a Chinese opera. Even though the excerpt was not intended to be humorous, the classroom was immediately filled with laughter. When I evaluated the situation, I surmised that it may be common to believe that foreign is synonymous with funny. In this scenario the excerpt was not intended for humor, but was interpreted as funny because it did not fit within the students’ parameters of normal. This scenario indicated that students often develop certain criteria for what they define as “good music” before they begin formal music instruction.

As a result of the preconceived opinions some students may have developed about music, or about certain types of music, our professional responsibility may include the unteaching or reteaching of certain attitudes toward music. While it is not feasible to indoctrinate positive attitudes toward music in children before they become our students, early exposure to a broad range of music content may significantly affect their attitudes toward music and generate an open-mindedness necessary during the formative years. This open-mindedness could spawn positive attitudes toward music and a lifelong desire to continue participating with music.

Repertoire

It is not by happenstance that the discussion of attitude leads to the fourth and final component of the proposed SCAR acronym: repertoire. In its simplest sense, a repertoire is a list or an inventory. Musicians typically use the term to describe a specific set of excerpts they have prepared for an audition or an inventory of the standard literature for their instrument or voice type.

In education, every area of study has its own particular repertoire, or list of related content. After careful scrutiny, the list is organized into a curricular scope and sequence based on the age and develop-
mentally appropriate characteristics of each item on the list.

In most areas of study, there may not be a definitive or exhaustive list of curricular components upon which all educators agree, but there are certain elements that have become mainstays of the repertoires for various subjects. For example, just as no student should leave high school English classes without having read Shakespeare, Dickenson, or Hawthorne, no student should leave an art curriculum without studying Picasso, Rembrandt, or Van Gogh. In music, vocalists study their 26 Italian Songs and Arias, percussionists practice their rudiments, and no elementary music curriculum would be complete without The Nutcracker and Peter and the Wolf.

Although it would be presumptuous for any author to assume that he or she had compiled the exhaustive repertoire of content in his or her related field, one would hope that any seasoned educator would have a firm understanding of the diverse components to which students in their areas should be exposed. As a music educator, and in the context of the SCAR approach, I am challenged to ensure that students leave my classroom having been exposed to the appropriate repertoires of music education in the fullest possible extent. If I am successful in this endeavor, they will have had opportunities to develop a wide variety of skills that require an equally diverse array of knowledge or concepts, and they may thereby become enabled to develop positive attitudes concerning each of the areas to which they have been exposed.

It is important to respect the interconnectedness of the concepts represented by each letter of the acronym. A music student cannot be successful with certain skills if that student does not also know the facts or concepts about those skills. We must also realize that we do not know which students will become professional, avocational, or covert musicians, and thus it is vital that all develop positive attitudes toward music to support their continued participation. To that end, we teach a rigorous curriculum so that our future professional musicians will be well prepared for their careers. We also seek engaging and interactive music lessons within the rigorous curriculum to instill positive attitudes in the future avocational and covert musicians. And to ensure a comprehensive curriculum for all, we deliver lessons that address the entire repertoire of skills, concepts, and attitudes pertaining to music education. If even one component is missing, the entire model is jeopardized, as is our effectiveness as music educators.

References


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