

## **DEVELOPING A PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY**

**By Brian Murray**

Mahatma Gandhi said, “A man is but a product of his thoughts. What he thinks he becomes.” This idea encourages everyone to contemplate his or her beliefs—to consider the foundational principles that govern everyday decision making. Every choice has repercussions, therefore, it is essential that music educators understand, and are able to articulate their beliefs about why music is important, why it should be included in the school curriculum, what kind of music should be experienced, who should teach it, and who should learn it. In creating a personal philosophy of music education, educators establish a *raison d’être* for their life’s work, a foundation and impetus behind every decision they make.

### **Why music?**

Music is an integral element in the lives of all people. According to Reimer (2010), “the arts exist to make the seemingly ordinary extraordinary...”. Music, then, has a transformative power over everyone it contacts, an unparalleled ability to communicate directly with the soul and transcend reality.

Music, in its capacity to achieve a sense of deep significance by going beyond the meanings made available by words to meanings only sounds can bring into being, has always been a major source of, or an important accompaniment to, the quest for profound experience (Reimer, 2000).

Music is more than an activity, a pastime, or a hobby, it is integral to the human experience. To be able to express meaning and emotion, to prompt the senses through intricately planned noises, to unite unique individuals momentarily through a shared communal endeavor is the art of music. Through music we experience the past, communicate with the present, and inform the future about

the essence of humanity. “Music...is a demonstration of the human capacity to think—to be intelligent” (Reimer, 2000).

### **Why music in school?**

“The primary aim of education is not to enable students to do well in school, but to help them do well in the lives they lead outside of school” (Eisner, 2004). A lifelong pursuit of musical experiences is valuable for everyone. It is integral, then, that music be included in school curriculum. If students do not have the opportunity to study music in schools, then where or when will they? Consider the number of families that own pianos and encourage their students to take piano lessons. Valuing private musical instruction is no longer ubiquitous—it has been relegated to the affluent, educated social elite. Without the free music education offered by public schools, society relinquishes the opportunity to musically educate all children. iTunes, Spotify, Pandora, and YouTube, then, take the place of general music teachers, ensemble directors, and private music instructors in the music education of America’s students.

When students are exposed to and trained in music in school, they are more likely to participate in music as adults. Schools have the ability to encourage students to actively participate in musical ensembles where they develop music reading, performance, critical thinking, work ethic, teamwork, and social skills. Through this, students have the opportunity to develop a passion for music making that motivates them to actively pursue musical outlets for the rest of their lives. “The American public school is responsible not only for educating citizens to develop and maintain a democratic society but also for engendering in individuals the desire to continue their education throughout their lives” (Tyler, 1994).

### **What music?**

“All music has a place in the curriculum. Not only does the Western art tradition need to be preserved and disseminated, music educators also need to be aware of other music that people experience and be able to integrate it into classroom music instruction” (Madsen, 2000). The music that educators choose to teach has an indelible impact on the musical development of their students. This music becomes their curriculum, the conduit through which students learn myriad musical elements, critical thinking, and sociocultural awareness. These pieces, then, should have merit so students experience the highest quality repertoire available.

Careful consideration should be given to each piece of music that educators put in front of their students. It is the obligation of all music educators to inform their students about high quality repertoire—music representative of the most prominent composers from all time periods. It is also crucial to program music that makes students feel successful. The art of repertoire selection falls under the Goldilocks rule—the music conductors select should not be too hard, making students to feel unsuccessful, neither should it be too easy, shielding them from the necessary challenges that accompany skill development. Other factors music educators should heed include the appropriateness and interest of the text, the range of each voice part—it is not enjoyable to sing something that is uncomfortable—, the skill level of the ensemble, the social and cultural composition of the ensemble, as well as the way a song relates to the other repertoire the ensemble performs.

Additionally, music educators should incorporate high quality music from various cultures and genres to expose students to differing forms of musical expression and to promote appreciation for and tolerance of differences. Music serves as a pathway for teaching humanity to students in an attempt to ameliorate their social and cultural understanding. "For many students, school might be

the only place they come to know cultures different from their own. The materials you choose offer you the privileged position of shaping children's way of seeing the world" (Abril, 2006).

### **Who should teach?**

Teaching music as a profession requires long-suffering commitment, unyielding passion, fierce tenacity, and genuine care and patience. People who desire to pursue music education as a profession must strive to create a classroom culture where creativity, musical artistry, friendship, safety, and learning are fostered continually. They must be lifelong learners themselves—modeling a quest for continual self-improvement for their students. Many are not equipped to fulfill the role of musical expert, professional educator, mentor, counselor, role model, or any of the other tasks music educators take on every day. While the demands and stress of this profession are at times unbending, the intangible rewards associated with positively impacting the lives of students through music endure and sustain.

Music educators have the fortunate challenge of bridging two distinct genres—the world of musical performance and the field of education. To be effective, music educators must be fluent in both methodologies—lacking in either arena greatly limits teachers' ability to positively influence students. A music performer is not necessarily equipped with the correct skillset to be a music educator, likewise, a general educator is not adequately trained in music to lead the musical development of students. The skills and traits that mysteriously combine to make up the fabric of a great music educator seem impossible to manifest in one human being. Fortunately, educators need not exhibit perfection in all areas of pedagogy to be effective. A teacher's weaknesses only hinder student achievement when they go unchecked. Awareness, self-reflection, and motivation to improve are the keys to continued development, success, and efficacy in the profession of music education.

### **Who should learn?**

In the Housewright Declaration of 1999, leaders in the field of music education exclaimed that “all persons, regardless of age, cultural heritage, ability, venue, or financial circumstance deserve to participate fully in the best music experiences possible” (Madsen, 2000). Additionally, “musical expression can enlarge the personalities and enrich the social living of all, not just a few, children” (Pitts, 1944). All students should have the opportunity to study music in school, and then, ideally, continue to experience music in various contexts throughout the rest of their lives. Fortunately, music educators have the ability to reach and communicate with all people through music, regardless of ability level, language, mental fortitude, age, etc. While it may not speak to everyone in the same way, music is unique in its ability to be enjoyed and valued by everyone.

Developing a personal philosophy is paramount to the success of any professional. In the same way that major corporations have mission statements, countries have constitutions, and religions have sacred texts, educators must maintain in the forefront of their minds a concrete understanding of why they do what they do. This philosophical exploration is more than the amalgamation of novel ideas, rather, it is the engendering and the molding of a mindset from which the teacher can shape the musical experiences of future generations. This enormous responsibility placed on music educators is palpable—weighing, pressing, and twisting deeper with every ineligible student, every unpleasant parent-teacher conference, every irrelevant assignment from administrators, and every out-of-tune chord at the end of an otherwise flawless performance. Regardless of this seemingly insurmountable burden, music educators press on, continuing the venerable work before them. Holding fast to their renewed understanding of *why* they do what they do, music educators directly affect *how* they engender hope for the future—by fostering humanity in young adults through music.

## References

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