

Philosophy of Music Education

Julie A. Ringlien

University of Wisconsin Oshkosh

November 7, 2007

For almost as long as I can remember I've been a musician, but becoming a musician was not my idea. My mother was determined that we, her children, have every chance at culture and success. We were all signed up for music by the age of seven. By the time I was in high school, my parents had me signed up for every ensemble or performance opportunity that came my way and now I can't imagine my life without music. I can't imagine *anyone's* life begin complete without music. We might as well do without speech or sight. Music is part of our humanity. It is an essential element of our existence because it is a universal language that can express our feelings. Our joys, sorrows, loves, dislikes, beliefs, and injustices across all cultures. Music is used to protest political issues, or support causes, to calm the soul and relieve stress, to keep us company when we're alone and to be a background to just about every type of ceremony or social event we know. With this in mind, is it truly possible that anyone would believe that music education in schools is *not* an imperative? Do we really expect our children to live their lives without an understanding of one of our most cherished modes of self expression?

But where does music come from? The heart? The soul? The mind? I believe that music comes from all of these places and that everyone has the capacity, not only to listen to and enjoy or appreciate music, but to *create* with it. Creation with music takes place at many levels. Whether one composes, sings, plays an instrument, or simply feels the music and moves with it, there is creation and it is this creation that I think is an essential part of music education.

Another essential part of music education is its contribution to academic achievement in the areas of math, reading and language. The study of music teaches discipline, teamwork and dedication. Music's potential as a tool for learning other subjects is also a key reason for teaching music in schools. Students can write alternative lyrics to familiar tunes to aid in memorization, to tell stories or to relate historical facts. Each culture in our world's history has created its own music and this diversity can

easily be communicated to school children through exposure to multicultural music. What a wonderful way to support and enhance social studies and teach acceptance!

Our children's creativity and musical diversity can also be a source of joy for the community through school concerts and performance field trips to area retirement centers and hospitals. This leads to the issue of the value of performance. Too often I have had private students who are worn out because they have been rehearsing their public school musical all afternoon and into the evening for weeks and weeks. All of their other subjects suffer. Some schools are so performance driven that they lose sight of why they are performing in the first place. For example, my first principal simply wanted the students to sing. We spent so much time preparing for the many, many performances she scheduled, that we had no time to study any other aspects of music. My philosophy for music education will call for a more moderate emphasis on performance. My ideal curriculum will focus on the idea of music *for the children* and will be a balance of theory, listening to, discussing, singing, and using instruments to play music from other cultures, popular music, music of our heritage, western art music, and music that students have composed. They will be encouraged to take an in-depth look at the composers of their favorite pieces and write about them in the context of music history. With this knowledge, I would like the students to help plan performances based on cultural and historical music.

Empowering students is another essential goal of music education in schools. Self esteem and peer approval are often key factors in a student's attitude toward music education, especially in the middle school and high school years. Many students view themselves as "not musical", and do not want to appear "uncool" or silly in front of their peers, but I believe each student has the ability to be "musical" if they have a good music teacher. I have seen a "tone deaf" eighth grade boy, who wouldn't open his mouth to sing, pick up a bass drum mallet and keep the beat like a drum major to great applause from his friends. I saw another "tone deaf" boy's eyes light up as the entire class applauded when he finally matched a pitch with his voice. Every child *can* learn music and *enjoy the learning*, even the reluctant ones. The right curriculum taught by the right teacher will reach and inspire them musically and empower them in some way.

But, who is the right teacher? Certainly a great music teacher is very well educated in music theory, history, performance, education, etc., but what *kind* of person makes a good music *teacher* and what are their responsibilities outside the classroom and in the community? A music teacher has to wear many hats and has to have a passion for all of the roles those hats represent. These passions must include a love for children, sharing music with children and encouraging them to express themselves. The music teacher must enjoy designing programs for teaching all types of music, planning performances, rehearsals and recitals, promoting the music program within the community, fundraising, and generating support for a plan of growth for the music program in the future. The successful music teacher must also be computer literate and aware of the benefits of technology in music education. This requires knowledge of available music software programs and the use of such programs as tools for teaching and for student assessment. Music technology itself can be a module of study in the curriculum and can be a great source of inspiration for students who have no desire to be instrumentalists, but love computers!

Another role every teacher must play is that of a recruiter. A good teacher is sensitive to the potential teacher in all students. Many music teachers dream of grooming the next Broadway star or touring concert pianist, but a good music teacher recognizes the talent to teach and promotes the development of students believed to have a strong potential to become music teachers. A teacher of music is a great and precious thing to find!

One thing a great music teacher is *not* is egocentric. Music education is all about the children and the children should be the focus. In the classroom or in the auditorium, any and all programs or curriculums should be planned with this in mind. Yes, a teacher can choose music he/she is passionate about, but such choices should be made with the students' best interests at heart. The joy of teaching music comes not from following the wonderful rules set forth by the standards of music education, it comes not from doing our job and getting paid, nor does it come from being in the spotlight and showing how well we've done our work. The joy comes from the knowledge that we are sharing our passion and gifts with future generations and from the light that shines in the children's faces.

