Centennial Series

Democracy and One Hundred Years of Music Education

By Randall Everett Allsup

An anniversary is always more than an opportunity to celebrate. After the cake is cut and the noisy congratulations received, we inevitably find a quiet place to take a deep breath and ponder the years gone by. How did we get here? Is this where we want to be? What's next? As MENC celebrates its centennial—1907 to 2007—we have much to be proud of and great work left to do. This article is about democracy and music education. In it, we'll pause in the midst of our celebration to quietly consider what lies ahead and where we've been.

Democracy, of course, is concerned with the effort to ensure the equal rights of all members of a given society. In the context of this article, it is believed that schools are ideal "societies" for fostering democracy and that the full and unfettered development of one's talents, abilities, and gifts is its primary aim. To foster growth, schools must transmit and communicate important traditional values, but they must also be open to change and inclusion. Diversity is valued because it enriches the lives of others, just as it enriches a society's ever-evolving culture and helps us adapt to change. In this sense, democracy is not an ideal to live by but an ongoing way of life.

We might begin our reflections by reaffirming the democratic promises made by our charter president, Frances Elliott Clark, when MENC was just being formed. In a talk at the General Federation of Women's Clubs in 1918, she said that in education no element except reading is more vital than music in "awakening the keen powers of attention, interest, concentration, selection, contrasting, judgement, and imagination."[1] She went on to say that "school is not only a preparation *for* life, it *is* life."[2]

Democracy is not a new idea in music education, but continues to be a very important one.

Clark recognized that teaching and learning in the context of democracy are, above all, social undertakings that require us to embrace a changing world and see that all participants grow while learning from each other. We know, fundamentally, that education is about change and growth. But it is the beliefs we hold about ourselves and our students, what we teach and why, and how we act on these beliefs, that make our classrooms democratic or otherwise. A constant monitoring is built into the democratic teaching and learning process. How did we get here? Is this where we want to be? What's next?

Keeping these questions in mind, I want to turn to this topic of democracy and music education as a force for growth and goodness. We will look backward and forward, examining five familiar domains as sites rich for the practice of democracy: schools, traditions, curricula, students, and teachers.

Schools and Community

There is broad consensus among the people who make, fund, and enforce educational policy that schools are places where students are prepared for future work in the global marketplace. This particular notion of schooling came of age about a century ago, coinciding with the advent of factory production. Factory production found its voice in Frederick W. Taylor's 1911 treatise *The Principles of Scientific Management,* in which the author put forth the concept that efficiency plus standardization equals increased productivity.[3] A simple device like the conveyor belt turned the world on its head, much like the personal computer did more recently.

From management principles and factory metaphors was extrapolated an antidemocratic concept of teaching where end results trump all else—an idea that still finds favor today. This idea of schooling, supported by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the standards movement, is one in which students are aggregated as statistics rather than understood as individuals. Those who favor this idea con-

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tend that children are human resources; that a standard curriculum applied with consistency and without exception will assure learners that they are all equally prepared for economic success. School, in this view, is narrowly conceived and exists apart from local concerns and traditions.

A competing vision that came out of the University of Wisconsin in 1904 saw schools and colleges as vital to the life of the community in which they exist. In this perspective, schools must not only reflect the diversity of their local neighborhood; they are obliged to make their neighborhoods better. The "Wisconsin Idea," as it was called, urged schools to broaden their responsibilities, "to extend their scope until the field is covered from agriculture to the fine arts."[4] Intellectual life—the good life of learning and growth—must be adapted wherever it is located to meet the needs of "the sons and daughters of the state."[5] Professors at the University of Wisconsin, for example, were called upon to build a better cow! Even today, a century later, Wisconsin professors are expected to connect their research to real practice in real neighborhoods and farms.

Now, dairy cows in Wisconsin are not the same as cattle in Texas, nor are Green Bay polka bands the same as mariachi traditions in Dallas. The point is that when schools see themselves as members of a local community, their classrooms begin to reflect the unique world around them. A music class in New York City's East Harlem would not be a democratic one if there were no explorations of salsa, no mention of Celia Cruz, and no attempts to dance the merengue.

Of course this doesn't mean that we don't also have to explore worlds that are not located near our own or to imagine experiences we have never had. Lisa DeLorenzo writes about a young teacher who taught her majority Caucasian elementary class a unit on the Underground Railroad, "about traveling through the dark, hiding, feeling fear in being discovered."[6] Think how the African American spiritual "The Drinking Gourd," if it had been part of her lesson, might help students understand a world vastly different than their own and how this same song might help them understand their own world a bit better, too.

"In thinking of community," Maxine Greene writes, "we need to emphasize the process words: making, creating, weaving, saying, and the like."[7] We can add a few more: searching, growing, participating, and emerging. Focusing on process calls attention to how meanings are created and ideas are understood. Handed-down facts mean much less than the ability to apply them. Knowledge of the Underground Railroad means much less than an understanding of the world it affected (and still affects). This is what John Dewey meant when almost a century ago he described democracy as "a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience."[8] I listen to your story, it weaves into mine, we work together, we create something new.

Tradition and Change

When music teachers speak about democracy and education, there is always a bit of fear present in the conversation. One is likely to hear, "If I took a vote, all we'd listen to is rap." Or, "How do my students know what they like unless I expose them to

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Photo courtesy of MENC Archives

Teaching class piano on cardboard keyboards (Ogden, Utah, 1930s?) is an example of the factory model of school.

something else?" Indeed, the democratic classroom calls attention to the great fear faced by all music teachers, myself included: "Does what I love matter to my students? Is my music still relevant?" These questions communicate much about the tension between tradition and change, and they are especially pertinent because no art form can exist without an engagement with the past and the future. The music teacher, representing the present, must make careful decisions about what music is selected and what music is left out.

The educator's charge is never to teach material that students already know. The teacher who wishes to teach the familiar—for the sake of argument, let's say rap—is charged with bringing new understandings to the topic at hand. His or her task is to help deepen understanding and complicate the familiar. We can envision a scenario where a classroom studying rap music moves quickly away from likes and dislikes to competing definitions, associated genres, histories, and diverse traditions. The teacher in this democratic classroom might quickly discover that not every student is a fan of rap and that there are different voices with their own sets of critical questions to ask. This example reveals another characteristic of the democratic community, one in which care and respect are practiced by saying, in effect, "Your music is worthy of study."

Maxine Greene talks about the choices we make as teachers to live within artistic traditions that are understood as "conversations" and not as "containers."[9] To understand that a musical tradition is a critical conversation with the past and not an isolated container is a moral position, one that reflects care and respect for the students we teach and the world they live in. All traditions have evolved from other traditions, after all. This forces us to ask the difficult question, "Why this tradition?" or more specifically, "Why *this* tradition for *these* students?"

Sometimes the best answer we can give is that it has served us well. Somewhere in our young lives a teacher came along and introduced us to a way of making music, and because we grew to love this music, we choose now to pass it on. If one part of democratic teaching is to prepare students for growth and change, then it is our responsibility to provide learning opportunities that extend students beyond their immediate communities, to put them in touch with *historical* communities like gospel choirs or wind ensembles.

However, knowing which opportunity to supply requires a special kind of teacher vigilance. It requires both a respect for past practices and the ability to identify a need for change when appropriate. A band director may opt to augment the program by letting students practice in small garage bands after school. A rural educator may wish to introduce opera to children who have little experience with the genre. A jazz band instructor might include an arrangement of Stevie Wonder, or even Nirvana.

When we conceive of tradition as a critical conversation, we have even greater responsibility for teaching about the many musical traditions in our world in an authentic way. This is another moral position. Children, for example, must never feel themselves to be strangers to our tradition, and we must never make the mistake of applying overlays of knowledge from our own traditions to worlds conceived as separate, different, or less fortunate. We must trust what we know about our students and the community we teach in to know what is right. To do this, democratic educators will listen as much as they will speak. After all, "it is not the will or desire of any one person which establishes order" wrote John Dewey, "but the moving spirit of the whole group."[10]

MEJ Centennial Series

During 2007, MENC's hundredth anniversary, each issue of *MEJ* will feature a special article celebrating the centennial in a series guest-edited by Patrick K. Freer. Each article is intended to help readers reflect on the past one hundred years and consider where we might go from here. The following articles make up this special series:

- "Reflections on Fifty Years of Publishing with MENC" by Bennett Reimer, January 2007
- "Extending the Vision: Three Women Who Saw the Future of Music Education" by Patrick K. Freer and Diana R. Dansereau, March 2007
- **"Democracy and One Hundred Years of Music Education" by Randall Everett Allsup, May 2007**
- "Keokuk I, 1907–Keokuk II, 2007: A Story of Global Dimensions" by Marie McCarthy, September 2007
- "Music Education at the Tipping Point" by John Kratus, November 2007

Curriculum and the Problems of Preparation

To my mind, music education faces two related challenges that resist the practice of democratic teaching and learning. These are the degree to which we prepare or train the minds of our students and the way we teach performance skill. Training in its best sense refers to what Dewey often called "habits of mind." We exercise our thinking by testing it in various contexts, and our minds grow in flexibility or "plasticity." Likewise, skill (ideally) is always practiced in context. The problem Dewey identified was that schools are too often set up with static endpoints in mind. This notion recalls the assembly lines of F. W. Taylor and Henry Ford; it is a deficit model of education in which children are seen as incomplete adults, little products to be filled for

future knowledge. Instead, Dewey believed that education should be "a process of living and not a preparation for future living."[11] Consider how difficult it is for children to be always preparing for a far-off future. It's like being promised ice cream but never getting to taste it.

What does this mean for music educators? For one, we might take this self-evident idea, that music education is a "process of living and not a preparation for future living" and ask ourselves how much time our students spend "living" music and how much time they spend "preparing" music? Is learning the violin a pleasure in itself or continuous practice toward a pleasurable though illusive end? Are the children we teach musicians or are they incomplete "future" musicians? Are the concerts we schedule the reason we teach, or signposts of progress and growth along the way? It might be an overstatement to say that this conflict between process and product has occupied MENC and *Music Educators Journal* for a hundred years. But no matter how long the debates have gone on, we know that an ideal curriculum does not focus solely on future preparation but combines a love-of-process with a love-of-product so one cannot make sense without the other.

This is not an easy problem to solve. Rightly or not, music teachers are insatiable skill-builders. Our students can never have enough skill. *We* can never have enough skill. Our student teachers always need *more* skill. Skill, as they say in Latin, becomes our very sine qua non—our absolutely indispensable thing. Our experiences as performers and educators hold that the more our children practice, the better they will sound, and the more they will enjoy what they do. But is it that simple? An overemphasis on mechanical skill can do more than just take the fun out of music learning, it can remove students from lived experience: the work can cease to make sense. In our students' minds, there come to exist "real music" and "school music." As a young teacher, I didn't understand that until a brave student asked me, "When do we get to play music? ... You know, *real* music?" Our justification is, too frequently, "just wait." Like the promise of ice cream, you will enjoy it if you can "just wait."

There is a democratic alternative, but the notion is a conceptual one and requires a fundamental rethinking of the very meaning of the word *skill*. I suggest this: Let's exchange the word *skill* for *skillfulness*. (If we want to refer to the mechanics of playing the violin, let's call that *craft*). So what would it mean to be rid of this word, to be skillful, rather than skilled? What would a skillful performer sound like? In my mind, a skillful musician is one whose artistry functions in a multitude of settings. A classroom whose curriculum is designed around skillfulness would require multidimensional approaches, not the least of which would be critical thinking, discussion, and debate.

> *Are the children we teach musicians or are they incomplete 'future' musicians?*

A skillful violin player would work with a teacher on a multitude of problems and styles. The violin instructor in turn would need to be skillful at asking good questions; the student's feelings, needs, and interests would be listened to; there would be lots of stories and smiles, but above all, the lessons would exhibit a true sense of collaboration.

The instructional aims will always be about music and musical growth, but the curriculum will be conceived as a social undertaking. This democratic classroom will look a lot like Frances Elliott Clark's vision of music, not as a discipline, but as a force to awaken "the keen powers of ... judgement, and imagination."

Students and Teachers as Growing People

With regard to democracy and education, reciprocity is at the heart of the teacher-student relationship. This relationship is frequently described as one in which the teacher learns from students, just as students learn from the teacher. But for some, this sounds like just another cliché of progressive education: "What if the teacher is teaching kindergarten? What can the teacher learn from the novice, the child who is playing the drums for the very first time?" It is true that the teacher can learn very little from a student if the only point of a lesson is the delivery of a specific piece of musical content. Recall again the idea of the assembly line and the deficit model of education. I can learn very little from children if I see them as empty vessels, as deficient in the subject matter I am offering to teach. I will learn a great deal more if I see them as growing people. But I must also see myself that way, too.

David Hansen explains educational growth as the cultivation of moral qualities through the acquisition of new outlooks, dispositions, and knowledge. He writes that simply "packing in" information and skill is no guarantee of growth. "The moral quality of knowledge lies not in its possession ... but how it can foster a widening consciousness and mindfulness."[12] To apply so-called "moral knowledge" is to commit what we know of our world (musical *and* otherwise) to ways that make it better. I realize that this is an immense topic to end an article with—we have thousands of years of religious, spiritual, civic, and philosophical writings from which to draw lessons in morality. But we mustn't be intimidated by the charge. Nor must we see this charge as outside our purview as music educators. *Students and teachers who engage in conversations that matter are acting upon their world.* Conversations that matter—whether about art, curriculum, community, teaching, life, or love—are what make us people first, and students and teachers second.

A Great Vital Force

I can think of no better way to end this article than to pass on the words

of joy spoken by Frances Elliott Clark as she looked into the future. But before that, let me give a toast: "Happy centennial, MENC! Happy hundredth anniversary! May we engage in another century of conversations that matter."

In closing, here is Frances Elliott Clark: "The hour of music education has struck. Not music for fun nor entertainment, nor as a pastime or accomplishment, nor yet as an art standing alone—*but as one of the great vital forces of education.*"[13]

Notes

1. Frances Elliott Clark, "Music in Education," part 2, *Music Supervisors' Journal* 5 (November 1918): 16.

2. Ibid., 18.

3. Frederick W. Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: Harper & Row, 1911).

4. From Charles R. Van Hise, "Inaugural Address," *Science* 20 (1904): 193–205, in Michael Lazerson, ed., *American Education in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1987), 72–74.

5. Ibid., 73.

6. Lisa C. DeLorenzo, "Teaching Music as Democratic Practice," *Music Educators Journal* 90, no 2 (2003): 39.

7. Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 39.

8. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1916), 87.

9. Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination*, 115.

10. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books. 1938), 54.

11. From John Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed" (1897) in *John Dewey: The Early Works, 1895–1898*, vol. 5, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern University Press, 1972), 86.

12. David T. Hansen, *Exploring the Moral Heart of Teaching: Toward a Teacher's Creed* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001), 59.

13. Frances Elliott Clark, "Music in General Education: Music—A Vital Force in Education" (talk at Music Supervisors National Conference, St. Louis, MO, 1919), in *Source Readings in Music Education History,* ed. Michael L. Mark (New York: Schirmer Books, 1982), 197. See also Hazel H. Morgan, *Music in American Education* (Chicago: MENC, 1955), 72–74. ■