

A Philosophy of Music Education

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It seems valuable for the purposes of writing a philosophy of music education to outline some of my basic philosophical beliefs before going into detail regarding music philosophy. I have struggled with certain concepts that have to do with faith. It has been difficult for me to subscribe to and sustain faith, which directly relates to philosophy. I had a particularly hard time with the concepts of universal truths and beauty. I have concluded that true beauty reflects God and that by attempting to create beauty in music we attempt to gain a better understanding of God and the universe. But it is hard for me to connect my philosophy with faith, mostly due to my religious trauma. At the same time, I am still connected to the idea of Christianity and loosely call myself a Christian. So, I have come to a decision to honor what I do believe and to let go of any guilt that I retain (for some reason) regarding religion. My faith and relationship with God are mine and mine alone; it is not for anyone else to judge. Through reading and contemplation on the topic, I have decided that there is a creator that cares for all their creations. I believe that this being appreciates any worship and that religious labels humans create and identify with have no meaning. I also believe that this creator is not vengeful; but I do believe in karma. These basic ideas lead me to the conclusion that the only requirement to be in favor with God is to be a generally good and kind human. I believe that God is good, and therefore being a good human means to emulate God within your life. Therefore, we need to make attempts to learn more about God, the universe, and our place within the world through the study of subjects that bring us closer to the creator. Music is only one of the ways to do so, but it is the only way which we can study beauty through and with sound. My philosophy of music education reflects these beliefs as I encourage students to reach their fullest potential by learning music. The study of music and accompanying skills will lead students to be good and kind people. The following paper is an explanation and justification of these beliefs.

The Purpose of Music (1)

Music can serve many purposes depending on the context in which it exists. Music is a uniquely human activity and has had a role in every culture across time. Even ancient humans who had to hunt and gather to survive took to music for entertainment and worship (Killin 2018). The purpose of music from ancient times to now has not changed. Creative communication is the purpose of music. What music communicates is dependent upon the context. Music has found its purpose in dance, religion, entertainment, and as a social agent. Instead of speaking, writing, or arguing, music combines aspects of sound with the context of the performance to communicate. Context helps to inform purpose and meaning of music. For instance, a religious ritual of the Blackfoot Native Americans is a communal music experience that connects each member of the community. The purpose of that music is to worship their gods and to connect the community. (Killin 2018). Music serves a different purpose on the dance floor of a club in New York City. The music in a club serves as a starting place for social engagement amongst individuals on the dance floor. Music serves a different purpose in a middle school band room. The band director uses music to communicate concepts. They lead students through the rehearsal and performance of a piece and communicate through, with, and because of the music. The composer of the piece also communicates; the notes on the page communicate ideas that at one time only existed in their mind.

What we communicate through music is truly only determined by the listener and the cultural context they exist in. If I, for example, were to observe the Native American religious ritual mentioned above I would not find nearly as much meaning in it as someone raised in the Native American tradition. I could find some meaning in it due to my awareness of the cultural significance of said ritual. I can understand that it has meaning to the people of the Blackfoot culture. I can also understand the potential it has as an educational tool for my own music

students to witness. Perhaps I could follow along to the beat and watch the dances and draw meaning from the complexity of the rhythm and movement. However, as a white person raised in the Christian faith, I will never truly understand the music. My musical knowledge is not centered around Native music, nor do I understand their language. I do not have a connection with the culture, which means it will not communicate the same thing to me as it would to a member of the Blackfoot tribe.

Consequently, the creative communication of music only truly works when those involved have enough knowledge to interpret the music. Their communication relies on shared cultural experience regarding music. For example, those who have been raised in the 21st century in the United States have a basic schema for western classical and pop music. If they listen to the radio, have seen a movie, or watched cartoons they have heard both popular and classical music of the western tradition. They have heard typical chord progressions, standard meters, can feel beat, amongst other musical concepts. They have enough information to interpret and understand the music. As a result, they can understand basic communication from Bach and the Beatles alike. Essentially, when the composer (or performer) and listener have similar cultural experiences, they are more likely to understand music the way it is intended (Inskip et. al, 2007). Of course, meaning can be drawn and understood in different ways, but what information the listener internalizes depends on them and their personal experiences.

The Value of Music (2)

The value of music relates to both the meaning derived from it and its purpose. Due to the creative and communicative nature of music, the individual and societal values have much to do with the context in which music exists. At the individual level, music can be an “emotional stabilizer” (Gonzales, 1946), and it is an opportunity for expression. The difference being the

way individuals interact with music. While the emotional stabilization can be provided by listening or performing, expression through music generally happens when the individual is creating or performing the music. A musician can express through music even when no one else is listening. There is also value in the fact that music itself can be expressive. According to Stephen Davies composers create music, “with an expressive character that independently matches what they are inclined to feel” (as cited in Hodges, 2017). Essentially, while music’s meaning might be able to be found in the context of a performance, or in what it refers to, there is also meaning in the music itself because certain structures within music can express, even without lyrics or associated explanation. It is a cliché, but where words fail music has the power to speak. That is where the value lies. As a special music educator, I rely heavily on the emotional impact of music just to know that there is understanding. I work with individuals who have no ability to speak and have no control over their bodies. Many of them are wheelchair bound and stiff. But when music comes on their faces light up. People who typically never emote smile. People who typically never move raise their arms to dance with me. People who typically refuse to walk on their own stand and walk to get an instrument. For them music is connection and expression. That classroom alone provides enough examples of the value of music for the whole world.

Music also has aesthetic value. Beauty, or aesthetically pleasing things, reflect the natural universe and its creator. As a result, we are drawn to music that is aesthetically pleasing. It brings us closer to understanding the creator and the universe. Although there is music that isn’t necessarily aesthetically appealing, it still has value, but the value might not be as obvious. Perhaps the value of that music is how it contrasts with pleasing music; it shows us what the opposite of beautiful is, which helps us to understand more regarding beauty, nature, and God.

By taking part in the creation of something that is intrinsically beautiful, we become more fully human because we gain a better understanding of God, ourselves, and our place in the universe. Therefore, students should get the opportunity to participate in ensemble-based music education. While I would love to see each of my students continue to grow throughout life by studying music, they don't have to. They might find themselves to be more passionate about or better connected with other forms of art, and that is okay; they will continue to become good humans through the study of those subjects. If they have participated in music at all, then they have had the opportunity to grow and connect through sound. It is best that they tried then to never have explored music at all.

The Need for Music Education (3)

Although music is a human phenomenon and, "all humans are born with musical brains" (Demorst and Morrison, 2000), musical skills need to be trained to be useful. It is important for individuals to be able to differentiate useful music from music that adds no value to life. These terms are in place of "good" or "bad" because there are qualities of every piece that can be of value, regardless of the subjective opinions. Students need to understand the concepts within music that they find value in, but first they need to understand what aspects are valuable. Music education should bring students into contact with as many different types of music as possible while also providing a proficient level of understanding regarding concepts, structure, and performance techniques. This way, students can learn many different aspects of music that are valuable and or aesthetically pleasing, and what aspects are not valuable. Then they can go on to identify what they find the most valuable and important as they interact with music throughout their lives. This process is vital because they may find new music that better reflects their needs and that they find enjoyable, but they might not ever discover it or why they like certain music

without a teacher guiding their learning. Students may also find passion for performing or, at the very least, an appreciation for where the music they do listen to comes from. Music is human, but without developing a listening and performance skills, true understanding isn't achievable.

As stated by Kenneth H. Phillips, "If we stay that the aesthetic experience is the only justification for studying music, we severely limit our argument for music's importance in the curriculum" (Phillips, 1993). There are many utilitarian needs for music education. Music engages the whole brain in learning which creates and strengthens neuropathways. It helps students to develop empathy, self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, and social skills. (Fox, 2021). The study of music doesn't inherently make students smarter, but it does correlate with above average scores on standardized tests. (Demort and Morrison, 2000). Music is also an opportunity for cross-curricular learning. In the music classroom, students connect history, geography, mathematics, world languages, art, and the learning process through the study of music (Phillips, 1993). The music classroom has great potential for academic and social support that is also needed within schools.

Goals for Students in Music (4)

The goals that music educators set for their students should reflect their needs. The music teacher should set appropriate goals that follow a sequence, reflect each student's ability level, and the context in which they receive music instruction. For example, it would be inane for a music teacher to set a goal of learning a B flat concert scale on the trumpet for a kindergarten student who has no prior musical training. Along those same lines, it would be unreasonable for an educator to expect a student who is wheelchair bound to perform a line dance without reasonable accommodations or modifications to the dance. The short-term goals should be measurable, attainable, and should reflect the long-term goals of the educator. The primary goal

for my students, as summed up by Sister Gonzales, is to produce people who, “continue to grow musically, culturally, and spiritually after their education in school is over. If the teacher can create a genuine love for music and appreciation of better music, she will have done her duty as a music educator.” (Gonzales, 1946). Sister Gonzales argues that the basic aim in education in the arts is to develop people who are sensitive to aesthetic values which is reflected in their social living. By creating individuals who are sensitive to the arts we create individuals who are sensitive in life. They have a better understanding of the world around them and how they should interact with it. By setting this standard for each student, educators create a respectful, empathetic, and social society.

Music is an avenue to the skills mentioned above. Music can be used to direct emotional understanding, both for students who are typically developing and for students with disabilities. Because we have the capacity to understand emotion in and through music, music educators can structure their teaching in ways that help students to identify feelings they might not have a personal understanding. It is useful for students to be able identify emotions within themselves and within others (Kopec et. al, 2014), which makes it easier to learn how to healthy coping strategies. Fear and anxiety are typical performance-based emotions that music educators can prepare students for in this way. Music educators also can help students mitigate these feelings by having students perform frequently. The educator can also make performances more about the good feelings associated with performing to make them more enjoyable.

Of course, there are musical goals which teachers can set for their students. In my opinion, teachers should expect students to leave their classroom with a love of music and appreciation for the performance art. Regardless of if they continue to perform, students should understand how music is created and have a genuine appreciation for those who are performers. At the end

of their studies in the music classroom, students should be able to decipher basic concepts of any kind of music, but also have a deeper understanding of musical concepts from within their area of study. It would be unreasonable to expect a guitar student to be able to identify trumpet fingering patterns, but it would be reasonable for them to know the difference between swing and hard rock. Much of the education process and expectations are reliant on the context in which it exists. Goals should be set based on the level of experience students have, their needs as students, and the type of music education they receive.

Since my goal as of right now is to teach band, I will approach the specific goals from that point of view. The following goals exist as an outline for band students upon graduation from the 12th grade, assuming they are typically developing students who have participated in band without interruption from beginner band through 12th grade. A band student should leave school with technical awareness on their instrument. Though their technique may not be as refined as a professional performer, they should be able to mimic closely and describe the proper set up for their instrument, as well as technique for playing including posture, hand placement, finger placement or grip, and fingerings for the standard range of their instrument. Every graduating band student should be able to hear, read, and play in all the majors keys and in many different meters. They should be able to read and interpret rhythms that include whole, quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes. They should also be able to interpret, rehearse, and play dotted rhythms. A student who has studied their instrument throughout high school should be able to describe and play several articulation styles such as legato, staccato, accent, marcato, etc. They should also be able to identify and perform dynamic and performance markings. These include fermatas, repeats, Da Capo, Dal Segno, fine, and codas, amongst other markings. These also include a range of dynamic markings from pianissimo to fortissimo as well as appropriate crescendos,

diminuendo, fortepiano, accelerando and ritardando. These are not the only markings, but they are common markings they should see throughout their high school performance career. The students should be able to sight read at around a grade 2 level with minimal mistakes. They should have a concept of typical band music as well as a knowledge of composers and arrangers that are standard for band. These include John Philip Sousa, Gustav Holst, and Percy Grainger, as well as modern composers such as Frank Tichelli, Julie Giroux, and John Mackey, amongst others. A good measure of the concepts a band student should know would be their performance of a standard march. If they can execute proper rhythm, pitch, dynamic, articulation, and phrasing of a march of the appropriate grade level, then they have internalized an understanding of the musical concepts that a band student should know.

Experiences & Processes for Meeting Musical Goals (5&6)

People learn through experiences. If people do not interact with what they intend to learn, they never truly develop an understanding. The opposite of experience-based learning is rote memorization, which is not true comprehension. The current trend, or perhaps a trend within the 2010's, was the phenomena of "teaching to the test" which depends on declarative knowledge on the part of the students. The issue with this format of testing is that students forget the information that they crammed to learn. It is preferable that students apply declarative knowledge to their daily lives. This is especially evident in music courses, as students memorize the names and definitions of musical symbols, but they do not apply that knowledge in performance. Instead, they wait to be told what to do by their teacher, then they acknowledge the markings they missed before. Perhaps this way of thinking is due to the process of education they have grown up in - the era of the standardized test. It is my hope as a music teacher to produce students who are good people and who go into the world with an understanding and

appreciation of music. But they need to understand the process, or procedural knowledge of music. They should know how it works. The goal is for them to embody musicianship (Duke, 2015). This means that in addition to being able to accurately interpret, practice, and perform music in a way that makes them a better human. Musicianship means many things including, but not limited to, being a team player, being kind to others, being on time to rehearsals and performances, following instructions, and performing the music to the best of ones capability.

Therefore, students need ample opportunities to practice these skills. Most of the time in the music classroom, especially a performance-based ensemble, is taken up to rehearse for a quality performance. To make these rehearsals effective at teaching the musical concepts, not just the individual pieces, it is important that learning become an “inherently active process that requires some *doing* on the part of the learner” (Duke, 2015). The students must engage in music in some facet to learn music. Possible ways of interacting are listening, rehearsing, performing, composing, or improvising. The concept can either be introduced as part of repertoire or within warmups and then applied to the repertoire. Students discover techniques and concepts through seeing and performing them in context. Warmups are an opportunity to address new concepts alongside technical development. This would include scale practice, sight reading, tone, intonation, dynamics, balance, and blend exercises provide the foundational music skills. Group interaction, how rehearsals are run, and how the students interact with one another before, during, and after are all learned behaviors that are integral to understanding all aspects of musicianship.

Students will also have plenty of performance opportunities as well as a variety of performance types varying by location, group size, and style of music. In addition to the real-world experience of preparing, packing, and traveling for performances, students perform and

listen to music in different venues. This means they are learning skills to adapt and adjust in many aspects, but most importantly musically, to make their performance successful. Along with this is interaction with professional musicians. Students will see collegiate and professional performances. Guest teachers will be welcomed to the music classroom so students can hear other interpretations of music. Students are also encouraged to take private lessons to find even more support and improvement in terms of their playing. Students will also experience music of many genres and ensembles. The music classroom is not limited to concert band. Students can partake in jazz band, marching band, small ensembles, choir, and theater.

Students will learn enough repertoire prepared to make each concert unique. Students also have input as to what and how they play. Ultimately, they are the performers and have the most control over how they sound. While the music teacher's job is to guide them to make the most musically appropriate decisions, students do have creative opportunities. So long as they make decisions as a group and their playing reflects those decisions, then the music teacher has facilitated cooperative music learning well.

My stance on teaching and learning is somewhat praxialist and pragmatic in nature since I believe humans learn through experience and I value research to inform what, why, and how I teach. A music teacher who guides students through learning experiences asks sequences of questions that permit students to make discoveries regarding concepts. For example, instead of telling a student they are out of tune and how to adjust their instrument to fix the situation, a teacher who wants to provide an experience regarding tuning might point out the clashing beats in the sound and move the conversation from there. The teacher might guide a student's tuning experience by playing a drone asking the students to assess where they are in relation to the pitch and then ask what they need to do to get their pitch closer to the drones. This way, students are

guided through an experience involving a musical concept. As a result, the student in this ensemble is an active member of their learning instead of a witness to their learning.

Putting together a clear idea of how to meet the many goals I have set is like solving a puzzle. I think a good starting place for any classroom is to set clear expectations and come up with a set of classroom rules. Students should be guided to form a set of rules regarding rehearsal expectations, performance expectations, and classroom rules. While the teacher might already know what the rules will be, it is worth taking time to facilitate a discussion in which students write and agree to the rules. There are 2 basic guidelines for my music class: 1. Treat others with respect, always. 2. Try your best every time. Any other guidelines are procedural, like no eating while you play or have a pencil at every rehearsal. Those expectations can be written as part of the rules, or they can have their own set list of expectations. Having the students help “create” rules gives them ownership within the classroom and it makes them accountable for their actions.

My musical goal of having each student graduate with an understanding and appreciation of music with a particular emphasis on the kind of ensemble they are in and instrument they play. As stated above, this means that they should be provided several performance opportunities, have a developed technical skill on their instrument, and they are literate in their genre of music. Bob Duke says it best, “the more opportunities they have to practice the application of skills as they are learning, the more they will develop the ways of perceiving and thinking and behaving that are the core of expertise” (Duke, 2015). This will look different for every instrument and every type of ensemble since performing groups require different skills from one to the next. Assuming the perspective of a high school band, students will be able to sight read, interpret, rehearse, and perform music around an easy grade 3 level. They will learn to do so by learning standard rhythm and pitch patterns through repertoire. They will improve tone, timbre,

intonation, balance, blend, dynamics, articulations and other musical concepts through the rehearsals and performances with the ensemble. By learning these things in a large ensemble setting, students also develop social or “soft” skills, like communication, cooperation, empathy, and so on. The important thing that I want them to take away from band is that it doesn’t matter how good anyone is at playing or performing; what matters is that they are good and kind people. It means more to be the person who is hard working and kind than the person who is talented but difficult and rude. Employers, friends, and peers are more likely to want to interact with the kind individual than the one who is difficult to work with, even if they are “better” at the task.

Mission and Vision Statement (7)

My mission as a music educator is to provide all students with musical opportunities that make them kind, fulfilled, and successful people. Through the study of music, they gain a better understanding of themselves and their peers due to the intrinsic aesthetic value of music as well as the utilitarian benefits of music education. Students in my classroom will grow musically, emotionally, socially, and academically. They will leave my classroom with a knowledge of music as well as the skills to be kind, successful, and responsible individuals.

My vision for my music classroom is to provide every student who has an interest in music with a meaningful music education. They receive high quality instruction that supports them as they grow to understand themselves and the universe. This instruction and support guides them to develop their self-esteem, academic abilities, and their social concepts. They will leave my classroom with a clear musical skill set that allows them to appreciate or perform their preferred music. They will also leave my classroom as kind advocates for themselves and their peers.

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