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# Responding to Challenging Times [From the Academic Editor]

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From the Academic Editor  
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## Responding to Challenging Times

2010 has been a tough year for music teachers. School boards and administrators across our nation have made the difficult decision to eliminate or minimize public school music programs in response to the current fiscal crisis. In many communities, including some in my home state of Georgia, music programs became viewed as expendable because of perceptions about large ensembles (involving a small minority of the school population) and individualized lessons (relying on a cost-inefficient, one-to-one method of instruction). The resulting level of public support was not sufficient to maintain the current music programs, to say nothing of expanding the music offerings to reach all students.

How do we measure our success in these challenging times? For much of music education's history we have defined success by quantifying an increasing number of student participants in large performing ensembles and the perception of increasing performance quality. Even so, we need to remain aware that ensemble performance is but one pixel in the music education picture. Behind each large ensemble performance are multiple years of interactions between students and their music teachers. But, the large ensemble performance is hardly the culmination of this careful attention to music education. The real goal is what happens in the years following a student's departure from our music classrooms.

We must teach for understanding – for application – of musical knowledge and skills that have a place and function in the adult world. In MENC's *Vision 2020*, Judith Jellison proposed the concept of transition as a response to the large question of how all people can continue to be involved in meaningful music education. She defined transition as “the movement of individuals across a variety of school and non-school environments throughout life” with a goal of increasing “the probability that meaningful school experiences will continue in adulthood.”<sup>1</sup>

I recently spoke with a 56-year old woman named Laurie who related, “I didn't start singing until I was an adult. I wanted to sing desperately in high school, but my teacher said I wasn't ‘good enough.’” Such reliance on high standards for performance at the expense of other types of music learning has been deemed the “elitist virus”<sup>2</sup> and “special education for the interested and talented”<sup>3</sup> by authors in previous issues of *Music Educators Journal*.

We simply cannot allow another generation of students to perceive that they are not “good enough” to learn, or that music is something other people do. Music must be reconceived of as something everyone does, and our instruction needs to take into account the vast opportunities for musical engagement enabled by our newest technologies. Ensemble performance and individualized lessons remain critical components of musical involvement, but they need to be part of an augmented view of how music functions in the lives of 21<sup>st</sup> century adults.

Some adult musicians do compose, improvise, play instruments and sing. It doesn't much matter whether this music is made within the context of a community band,

a church choir, a symphony orchestra, a garage band, or an individualized transaction with digital music media – what matters is that the adults involved are using the knowledge and skills they first learned in school music classes. Students in our classes today will likely remain involved in music making throughout their adult lives; the other students in our schools probably will not. It remains our task to relate music education experiences to adult life, discarding those instructional activities not directly related to the development of understandings essential to lifelong participation in music. Some of these decisions will require us to teach in ways other than how we were taught while others will cause us to question customary practices in our field.

Several articles in this issue of *MEJ* address these topics in substantive ways. William Bauer's article, *Your Personal Learning Network*, urges us to embrace technologies that facilitate teacher-to-teacher support and enlarge our understanding of the media tools commonly used by our students. The role of applied studio instruction within the broad context of music education foregrounds Matthew Fredrickson's *The National Standards for Music*. And, this issue's lead article, *Encouraging Cognitive Connections and Creativity in the Music Classroom* (Christopher Peterson and Clifford Madsen) draws from research to identify ways we can help students weave musical knowledge and skills into the fabric of their musical lives both within and beyond school settings.

As I sat at my desk writing this column, a group of middle school girls sauntered down the sidewalk in front of my house. They were laughing, dancing, and singing a choral arrangement of a folksong with joyful, unabashed glee. Somewhere a few blocks away was a music teacher who probably didn't have any idea that these students were so happy making music. That music teacher had obviously selected the right literature for the right reasons at just the right moment, and these kids were overflowing with enthusiasm. It is our responsibility to take hold of this energy, build the opportunities into our programs that make the most of each student's intrinsic motivations, and lead them toward an adult life that sustains a range of musical interests.

- <sup>1</sup>. Judith A. Jellison, "How Can All People Continue to be Involved in Meaningful Music Education?," in *Vision 2020: The Housewright Symposium on the Future of Music Education* (Reston, VA: MENC, 2000): 121.
- <sup>2</sup>. Charles Leonhard, "A Challenge for Change in Music Education," *Music Educators Journal* 86, no. 4 (1999): 41.
- <sup>3</sup>. Bennett Reimer, "Music Education in the Twenty-First Century," *Music Educators Journal* 84, no. 4 (1997): 34.