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From the Academic Editor – March 2011
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Popular Music: Friend or Foe?

“Entertainments which are the product of the hot-house are a menace . . . [We have a] seeming willingness to sacrifice culture to a desire for popularity.”¹ Thus began a century-long discussion about the repertoire and materials appropriate for use in American music education.

In the 96 years since those phrases appeared in the first volume of what would later become the *Music Educators Journal*, the resulting debate has frequently centered on the use of popular music in the classroom. Some discussions have dealt with philosophical matters, while others have concerned the pure practicality of teaching popular styles and repertoire. The conversation continues in this issue with Randall Allsup’s article, “Popular Music and Classical Musicians.”

One of the earliest full-scale articles concerning popular music appeared in the March 1933 issue of MEJ. In it, William Arms Fisher argued that technological advancements necessitated changes in what types of music were used in classrooms, with implications for how teaching similarly needed transformation. Though the technology he referred to was the radio, Fisher foresaw the ubiquity of music’s availability in future years and warned music educators to prepare youngsters to navigate the coming flood of musical styles and formats. Three decades later, Royal Stanton’s article, “A Look at the Forest” (November 1966) passionately argued that music education had, indeed, not changed with the times and was becoming “anachronistic in modern American life” (p. 37). And, Irwin Sonenfield’s “The Mystical Rite of Youth Culture: Search and Celebration in Popular Music” (February 1973) is particularly interesting, especially when read in chronological order with the contributions by Fisher and Stanton.

The topic of popular music in the classroom has prompted several large *MEJ* projects through the years. One of the most notable was the November 1969 special report on “Youth Music.” A surprising element in the report was the inclusion of several pages of comments from students about their repertoire-related perceptions of music education (pp. 54–57). The comments are worth a look four decades later, especially when we wonder if anything has changed. A related special focus issue appeared in April 1991 (“Pop Music and Music Education”).

In the November-December issue of 1958, Richard Kent asked, “If popular music is that which is admired by a majority of the citizenry, then I suppose we will always have it. What is to prevent us from raising the level of such music by education...?” (p. 54). This question has not been addressed without controversy. Many well-written articles generated spirited Letters to the Editor, and it was through these letters that collegiate MENC student members often made important contributions by offering new and current perspectives. For example, students at Appalachian State University responded to Joe Stuessy’s article “When the Music Teacher Meets Metallica” (March 1994) by asking, “*Must* the Music Teacher Meet Metallica?”

Other pop-related articles stimulating significant reader response included James O’Brien’s article, “A Plea for Pop” (March 1982) and June Hinckley’s eloquent “Back to

the Future” (January 2000). The reaction of readers to many articles was to ask for details about the pedagogical implications of theory and philosophy articulated by the authors. It is possible to view *MEJ*'s changes over time as its Editorial Board responded to these requests. For example, articles in the 1970s through the mid-1990s largely contained practical teaching suggestions in response to the Tanglewood symposium of 1967 that broadened the scope of what many considered to be appropriate teaching repertoire. Prior to those decades, articles about popular music's role in the classroom were largely philosophical in nature. The conversation changed somewhat again with the adoption of the *National Standards for Music Education* in 1994. From that point on, articles published in *MEJ* often integrated elements of philosophy, theory and practice. Notable of these were Robert Woody's March 2007 article "Popular Music in School: Remixing the Issues" (which kindled a lively reader response), and George Boespflug's "Popular Music and the Instrumental Ensemble" (May 1999).

Articles appearing in *MEJ* have frequently pointed to a lack of knowledge about popular music among music teachers, and others have tried to fill that gap by presenting information either about popular music itself or by offering suggestions for reciprocal student-teacher learning experiences. Among these were Frank Groff's "Music in High School" dealing with adolescent motivation (June-July 1950), Henry Pleasants' "Bel Canto in Jazz and Pop Singing" regarding similarities of vocal technique (May 1973), and Peter Winkler's historical overview of "Pop Music's Middle Years" (December 1979). Winkler's account, by the way, should be required reading for anyone teaching courses in pop music at any level.

In the current issue, Allsup extends the line of articles presenting ways to link elements of "classical" and "popular" music traditions. Although he doesn't state this, Allsup presents a thought-provoking way to deal with the either-or dilemma of whether to use popular or classical music. He redefines popular music with some of the same standards that makes classical music, well, "classical." These include standing the test of time, harmonic integrity, compositional inventiveness, and the interplay of text and tone.

The conversation continues. What do you think about this article, popular music, and music teaching & learning? Send your comments to pfreer@gsu.edu.

¹. Stella R. Root, "Scrutinizing Our Material," *Music Supervisors' Bulletin* 1, no. 3 (1915): 26.