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Popular Music: Friend or Foe? [From the Academic Editor]

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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.”’ 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