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# Music Education – With Equity and Justice for All. [From the Academic Editor]

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[JUNE 2012 MEJ] From the Academic Editor

by Patrick K. Freer, Georgia State University, Atlanta

### Music Education: With Equity and Justice for All

Readers of the *Music Educators Journal (MEJ)* may have noticed an increasing number of articles and news items dealing with topics that might seem a bit unusual for our pages. In the past two years, we've published items dealing with harassment, religion, bullying, social justice, spirituality, and culturally-specific code words. The articles in this issue all focus on topics related to justice. Though the content of the articles was not coordinated, the theme of justice resonates through each author's work. The topics include socioeconomic inequities in music education, financial and cultural barriers to instrumental music, social injustices in music classrooms, cultural differences that result in inequities, and the potential for positive impact from music education in prison settings.

We are seeing a groundswell of calls for equity and justice as a consequent of the recent global economic crisis. These types of changes frequently emerge from impatience with the status quo, for as conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein offered in *MEJ*'s pages, "Thank God you're impatient, because—and this is the whole point—because that impatience is a certain signal of hope—yes, hope. You couldn't feel that impatience, that urge for instant dream-fulfillment, if you didn't feel hope. Because it's the artists of the world, the feelers and the thinkers, who will ultimately save us, who can articulate, educate, defy, insist, sing, and shout the big dreams. Only the artists can turn the 'Not Yet' into reality . . . And there's no time to lose, which makes your position twice as difficult, because you're caught in a paradox. You see, you've got to work fast, but not be in a hurry. You've got to be patient, but not passive. You've got to recognize the hope that exists in you, but not let impatience turn into despair. Does that sound like double-talk? Well, it is, because paradox exists. And out of this paradox you have to produce the brilliant synthesis . . . it is you who must produce it, with your new atomic minds, your flaming, angry hope, and your secret weapon of art" (February 1973, p. 37).

As Estelle Jorgensen has noted, "the ground of the question has shifted from 'Why should music educators be interested in justice?' to 'Why should music educators not be interested in justice?' The burden now moves to music educators to show cause why we should not be concerned with matters of justice. Music is interconnected with other aspects of life, education is concerned with the array of aspects of human life and culture, and music education is interconnected with other aspects of education." Jorgensen added, "The injustices that abound in music education and in public education generally are swept under the carpet by music educators who should work for justice and unmask and remedy injustice. And the silence is deafening." ". . . In embracing the claims of humanity and redressing systemic oppression, music educators need to spell out unequivocally the ideals for which we stand and make practical plans that reflect them."<sup>1</sup>

In a March 2003 letter to the editor, *MEJ* reader Kelly MacDonald was critical of an article that, to her eyes, ignored issues of diversity in favor of "teaching towards people of Caucasian descent . . . a form of cultural imperialism." MacDonald continued, "I am concerned that if all teachers teach from your suggested viewpoints we will

continue to oppress people of color, and that only leads to a world of racism . . . we need to have a common goal in our classrooms and curriculums that puts an end to racial oppression and cultural imperialism. We tend to spend too much of our time teaching ‘whiteness’ and not enough time teaching about the cultures that make us a multicultural nation” (p. 10). Several decades earlier, Bennett Reimer agreed, stating “A noteworthy social change in music education, strengthened by the civil rights revolution, has been the dramatic turnabout from a previous ignorance about and unconcern with the music of this culture's minorities, to the placing of the music of black Americans in the forefront of our consciousness, as well as the music of other minority groups. Reflecting a new ethnicity, the treatment of the music of these groups attempts to be fully authentic, both in dealing with its American habitat and its origins in various countries. No longer is the melting-pot mentality in evidence, as when ethnic musics were so watered down that little or nothing of their musical integrity remained” (December 1976, p. 27).

In one of *MEJ*'s most frequently cited articles, Ernest Justice (May 1974) wrote that social issues often influence music education as when some teachers “look at a rebellious student, [and] they see a child pushed beyond his limits by a social stress that may eventually defeat him. These teachers see the need for a restructuring of both the material to be presented and the method by which it is to be presented. These teachers consider the frame of reference that surrounds the learner and affects every decision he makes. The people who have shaped his environment are the other drummers to which he has listened. If a teacher wants to influence a student who has been listening to an off-beat drummer, [the teacher] first must hear the same drummer himself and then begin to build a variation on that beat before he can convince the learner that it is worthwhile to change drummers” (p. 45).

One of the major publication initiatives in *MEJ*'s history was the preparation of the Special Report on Urban Education published in January 1970. More than 100 pages of articles focused on urban issues specifically, but more generally on how music educators could effect justice and equity through their work. This was not a self-congratulatory tome; the criticisms of the profession were explicit and the suggested actions were substantial. At the report's core were more than 300 interviews with teachers, students, administrators, parents, and community leaders in seven major cities across the United States. The purpose was to “document the extent of the problems facing the inner-city teacher of music—and the exultation of solving them” (p. 29). Editor Charles Fowler closed his introductory commentary with these words: “It is no longer enough to teach for the few; you must also reach the many. This should not be interpreted as a request to lower standards. There must be no condescension in approach. Rather every child must be valued as an artist. And every teacher must consider himself a cultivator of genius” (p. 29). Famed composer William Grant Still offered, “When I visit schools in the so-called ‘deprived’ areas, I notice that so many of the children are attentive and receptive to what is brought to them—more so, in fact, than in schools in other areas where music is taken for granted. This to me signifies a *potential* that sensitive teachers can probe and develop” (p. 161).

It is simplistic to read that January 1970 issue of *MEJ* and assume progress has proceeded in a direct line during the intervening 42 years. As some of the authors in the current issue observe, our awareness has broadened with our successes—making the remaining inequities all the more glaring. The articles in the current issue of *MEJ* explore

issues of equity (and inequity) and justice (and injustice) from several viewpoints within music education. In so doing, they highlight issues of wealth, access, culture, gender, sexuality, freedom, and privilege. They also cause us to ponder how these issues, and our response, might lead toward reexaminations of curriculum, instruction, assessments, and goals.

Finally, several of the articles contained in this issue were developed by the Society for Music Teacher Education's special focus group on social justice. I am deeply grateful to Abigail Butler (Wayne State University) and Constance McKoy (University of North Carolina–Greensboro) for providing the leadership and support that resulted in the publication of these articles.

### **Note**

1. Estelle Jorgensen, "Concerning Justice and Music Education" *Music Education Research* 9, no. 2 (2007): 173, 183, 185.