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Patrick K. Freer

Georgia State University, pfreer@gsu.edu

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[December 2012 MEJ]
From the Academic Editor
by Patrick K. Freer, Georgia State University, Atlanta

Developing Musical Independence, from Anarchy to Elevation

In 1905, the Spanish-born American philosopher George Santayana famously wrote, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”¹ Or, placed in a more mundane vernacular, “What goes around comes around.” The goal of educating for musical independence is one of the topics that have “come around” repeatedly during the *Music Educators Journal’s* ninety-nine years. The conversation continues in this issue with Robert Duke’s article “Their Own Best Teachers: How We Help and Hinder the Development of Learners’ Independence.” Two excerpts from Duke’s article capture the breadth and importance of the topic:

“If learning comprises primarily students doing things that teachers tell them to do and show them how to do, then it’s unsurprising that many children find school unmotivating. What they’re learning is not really mathematics or science or musicianship. What they’re learning is to remember and follow teachers’ instructions.” (p. X)

“Creating unsolvable confusions for learners is just mean. But creating *strategic confusions*—estimating what learners are independently capable of and then designing tasks that require them to use their capabilities to reach meaningful goals—nurtures the development of intellectual and physical skills while setting up personal rewards that are obtained through learners’ own efforts. Truly great teachers do this all the time.” (p. X)

Structuring the Classroom for Independence

Many *MEJ* articles in the first half of the last century focused on issues of musical independence, curriculum, and grading—critical topics as the profession sought to define itself and its role in public schools. These discussions often included concerns about tensions between uniform curricular goals and artistic freedom, teacher/conductor-centric classrooms and individualized instruction, and the role of democracy in music classrooms. In a 1948 article, John W. Molnar distinguished between “grading,” which primarily measures teacher effectiveness, and “evaluation,” which provides specific feedback to students so that they can regulate their personal learning and skill acquisition.² Molnar’s article promoted the teaching of self-evaluation skills, as “it improves attitude toward self improvement and more firmly fixes aims and objectives. It trains in the highly important objective of education of taking stock of one’s self and his success in reaching clearly defined goals.”³

A quarter century later, Larry W. Edwards asked music teachers to picture a student: “Can’t we help him, even while he is young, to begin to make value judgments regarding works of art? By the time our children reach adolescence, too many of them have been forced to conform. They have learned to hide their true feelings. Their natural spontaneity, curiosity, and creativity have been crushed.”⁴ Several decades passed, and *MEJ* published Julie K. Brown’s observation that “some of the best teaching strategies come from students, because the students are the ones that are being taught. Often no one knows better how students learn than the students themselves,” as well as Bernadette

Scruggs's observations about fostering musical independence within the structure of the orchestra rehearsal room.⁵

Regelski's "Toward Musical Independence"

Four decades ago, Thomas Regelski penned a now-classic article for *MEJ* that, similar to Robert Duke's current essay, exhorted teachers to consider the developing musical independence of students.⁶ Regelski's article is worth revisiting, and it is excerpted at length in the following paragraphs.

Regelski's desire was to help teachers see the connection between public school music education and the role of music in the adult lives of their former students. Regelski noted related issues in the introduction to his article, including a potential "lack of functional and meaningful instruction." Regelski continued:

This creates problems of retention and, subsequently, an inability to apply what has been learned to adult life. Psychology of learning maintains that students retain what is meaningful to them and that this in turn adds to their motivation. Fragmentary or unrelated information is rapidly forgotten (even though it may have been memorized successfully for a quiz). Concepts or generalizations formed from many particular experiences are better understood and are retained longer. Similarly, the retention rate for over-learned associations and constantly reviewed factual materials and skills is very high. According to many learning theories, skills and information must be used to be truly learned. The degree of music learning can be measured by the ability of the student to transfer or apply successfully such learning to a new or unfamiliar musical situation. To be musically independent, the student, whether involved in performance or consumption, must arrive at a state of theoretical competence whereby his general musical experiences are formulated into principles commensurate with his ability. With the exception of the constancy of notation, the aural or expressive problems of music vary greatly and require a conceptual or theoretical understanding.

These theoretical principles of music cannot be taught by lecture or receptive measures wherein the student receives information from outside his own experience. Musical independence can be encouraged only through the discovery or problem-solving approach, in which the student, through the structuring of learning situations and guidance through these situations by the teacher, participates in the formulation of concepts and the acquisition of meaningful musical learning. The student, using his own personal verbal or performance skills, discovers the important characteristics and interrelationships of the music and re-creates them in a personally expressive manner. This does not advocate musical anarchy but does, however, imply that the student be led to discover why the elements of musical composition and performance function as they do. Many teachers feel that the most expedient way to achieve this is to explain these functions, but such a method does not lead to the development of musical independence. If these principles are discovered by the students themselves, they are retained and the students are better able to apply them in new and perhaps more difficult problem-solving situations.

The current emphasis on performance skills contributes heavily to the low level of listening skills apparent in our society. Although performing good music may contribute to an appreciation of it, such performance does not necessarily contribute to a general understanding of music. Nor does such performance engender a desire for contact with good music outside the confines of the particular performance situation. Reliance solely

on performance can limit the performer's appreciation to the music or musical groups with which he has had experience.⁷

After examining myriad ways to promote musical independence in ensemble and classroom settings, Regelski concluded with words that are relevant today:

In evaluating progress in music, and in this case the effectiveness of techniques designed to breed musical independence, a noticeable change of behavior is sought. If, independent of the teacher, students do not make or are not capable of making some use of the skills and concepts taught them, such as impromptu ensembles or membership in community music groups, then no significant change of behavior has taken place. In the long run, this same evaluative principle should be used in determining the overall success or failure of music education in America. Music educators have sometimes sought to deny that music instruction can be judged in these terms, but the time may have come when further concern for the long-range effectiveness of instruction is needed. The desire to affect the musical taste and discrimination of the general public in some way should be regarded as more than the imposition of an intellectual or musical snobbishness, for it stems from a sincere conviction and desire shared by many to reconstruct and dynamically affect the musical fabric of American society. This cannot be done by the theoreticians of music education. It can only be done by those music educators in direct contact with young people, those who, in the long run, have the most to gain from the elevation of music in American society.⁸

Notes

1. George Santayana, *The Life of Reason: Reason in Common Sense* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1905): 284.
2. John W. Molnar, "Self-Evaluation by Students." *Music Educators Journal* 34, no. 4 (1948): 48, 52.
3. *Ibid.*, 52.
4. Larry W. Edwards, "Elementary School Students *Should* Make Value Judgments: Here's How Sensitivity and Independence Can Be Developed." *Music Educators Journal* 61, no. 1 (1974): 41.
5. Julie K. Brown, "Student-Centered Instruction: Involving Students in their Own Education." *Music Educators Journal* 94, no. 5 (2008): 31; Bernadette Scruggs, "Constructivist Practices to Increase Student Engagement in the Orchestra Classroom." *Music Educators Journal* 95, no. 4 (2009): 53–59.
6. Thomas Regelski, "Toward Musical Independence." *Music Educators Journal* 55, no. 7 (1969): 77–83.
7. *Ibid.*, 77–78.
8. *Ibid.*, 83.