Fiddle

Habits of Culture-Sustaining Pedagogies at MNSOTA's Eclectic Strings Day

by Aaron Lohmeyer

While the past two years in education have been tumultuous for all, music educators may have a fair argument for why they have been hit especially hard. Both the pandemic and the racial reckoning brought on by the murder of George Floyd have worked together to re-focus our attention on student engagement.[1] In response to social change and longer downward trends in music participation, state and national music education conferences have been laser focused on enrollment and relevance. As relevance drives enrollment, NAfME's conference title for 2022 speaks volumes for our collective re-focus on representation: "NAfME is ME!"[2] Current research, pedagogy, and equity initiatives all seem to indicate a need to adapt to student cultures and communities to address systemic problems related to representation.

Inviting student-centered practices into music education will require learning more about the music alive in students' communities. Few teachers will teach what they do not know; student-centered teaching requires us to grow beyond our hard-earned university degrees. Student-centered music instruction also requires we adapt our instruction to teach through the traditional methods which make those music communities unique. In Minnesota we are extremely fortunate to have local educators and artists modeling diverse musicalities and pedagogies, allowing us to imagine string music education that is flexible to social and demographic change.

Music as Culture, Culture as Habit

Consider the following definition of culture provided by ethnomusicologist, Thomas Turino: "the habits of thought and practice that are shared among individuals."[3] Given this view of culture, music becomes more than notes, music becomes an active process of negotiation and relating to each other.[4] Music is not just sound; music is the process of making those notes happen with people. Music is not a context-less discourse; music is made meaningful as a mediation of social experience. In our classrooms, this means the diverse experiences our students bring into the classroom guide how our students will interact with the musical products and processes we bring into the classroom.

The processes and products of music education must both diversify if we are to stay relevant in a diverse, digitally connected world. As enrollments in some programs are in decline, one contributing factor may be a mismatch between the experienced curriculum and our student's own lived experiences of music. Thomas Regelski warns of this growing distance between student life worlds and teacher practice, by noticing that "friction results, draining energy from the interaction between teacher and student."[5] Both find themselves working harder for diminishing musical and social returns—does this sound familiar? While calls for representation may be superficially met through programming alone, if we do not change the methods by which we teach and perform different musical traditions then our pedagogy is not truly responsive to the music cultures (habits of thought and practice) we may intend to represent.[6] Furthermore, while learning to perform classical music can be an incredibly positive experience for many students, maintaining its *exclusivity* in our education system may be problematic as it may function to maintain gendered, economic, and racial hegemonies.[7]

Research indicates that our teaching force is more culturally homogenous than the students we serve.[8] As a result, the content and pedagogical change needed to meet our more culturally diverse students may require stepping out of our own comfort zone and learning different cultural *approaches* to music: different processes. For example, teaching an improvisatory aural tradition such as bluegrass, rock, or jazz, through playing notes on a page is not completely authentic to those living traditions. The "right notes" may be found through transmission via staff notation, but the original social and musical meaning is lost by disregarding the transmission methods authentic to the tradition. Learning aurally via recording, orally from a culture bearer, and through social negotiation are all hallmarks of these traditions which prioritize transmission by ear via a culture bearer. By ignoring the traditional aural methods used to figure out which notes to play and how to play them, the social meaning of those notes is fundamentally changed. As a result, the exploration of genuine cultural diversity—*habits of knowing*[9]—eludes student

1 Shaw, Ryan D., and Whitney Mayo. "Music education and distance learning during COVID-19: a survey." *Arts Education Policy Review* 123.3 (2022): 143–152.

2 "The theme of the 2022 NAfME Conference is NAfME is ME!. NAfME is Music Education, a vibrant diverse community of music educators. NAfME is ME! is the unique, valuable contributions, perspectives, and participation that all NAfME members embody every day at the local, state, and national level." https://nafme.org/events/2022-nafme-national-conference/

3 Thomas Turino, *Music as social life: The politics of participation*. University of Chicago Press, 2008, 95.

4 Thomas Turino lays out an argument for embracing music in four basic forms: as presentational, participatory, high-fidelity recording, and studio audio art. Each form involves different processes and fulfill different social functions. Thomas Turino, *Music as social life: The politics of participation*. University of Chicago Press, 2008.

5 Regelski, Thomas. Music Education for Changing Times. Springer, 2009, xxvi.

6 Lind, Vicki R., and Constance McKoy. *Culturally responsive teaching in music education: From understanding to application*. Routledge, 2016; Shaw, Julia. "The skin that we sing: Culturally responsive choral music education." *Music Educators Journal* 98.4 (2012): 75–81.

7 Bull, Anna. *Class, control, and classical music*. Oxford University Press, 2019.

8 Elpus, Kenneth. "Music teacher licensure candidates in the United States: A demographic profile and analysis of licensure examination scores." *Journal of Research in Music Education* 63.3 (2015): 314–335.

9 Habits generate cultural artifacts—musi-

experience.

Pedagogy and Pluralism

From my own view in Winona, MN, the music living in my students' lives stems from a rich tradition of community bands and orchestras; religious singing practices derived from the historical Catholic and Lutheran traditions as well as contemporary worship styles derived from gospel and popular music traditions; old-time string music kept alive through community jams, music festivals, farmers markets, and breweries; jazz music influenced by the multiple universities in the area with strong programs; accordions keeping the Polish and German communities in touch with their immigrant identities; and a thriving indie scene celebrating the myriad musical identities we are all discovering in a digitally connected musical world. As it turns out, small town Winona can be seen as surprisingly diverse.

In the string world, we see the performance of our complex global identities at the highest echelons of performance. Artists like Yo-Yo Ma have made a career of stretching our stereotypes of art music beyond the subsidized corridors of university composition departments. Premier conservatories such as the Amsterdam Conservatory offer hip-hop, bluegrass and jazz for their "classical" students. Acts like Two Cellos, Black Violin, and Lindsey Stirling not only demonstrate extraordinary abilities in musical code-switching, but also how these code-switching abilities can inspire audiences across economic and cultural divides. Indeed, strings have long found relevance across many musical borders. As Thomas Turino has noted, the global cosmopolitanism of the 21st century may build bridges across many of the cultural and class divides erected through 20th century musical practices.[1] Educated, middle-class audiences seem to not want to be boxed in by the culture and class music stereotypes of yesteryear. I believe this is an exciting shift for musicians and teachers alike.

MNSOTA Eclectic Strings Day

In Minnesota, we truly have an embarrassment of riches when it comes to artists and educators comfortable demonstrating diverse musical practices on string instruments. Dating back to 2007, MNSOTA has offered Eclectic Strings Day, a day devoted to introducing and advancing more diverse views of string musicianship. This past year MNSOTA member, Levi Comstock, hosted three teaching artists, each contributing a different cultural view of music—habitual ways of knowing. Cristina Seaborn represented bluegrass fiddle; Ernest Bisong represented jazz violin; and Greg Byers represented rock cello. As each of these artists taught, central habits of thought within each tradition were readily apparent.

As culturally-responsive, informal music learning strategies have gained wider acceptance in formal learning environments, the influence of Lucy Green's research and practice is pervasive. Green's *How Popular Musicians Learn* (2002) documented through extensive field study and interview with emerging and established popular musicians the processes and habits of popular musicians.[2] Among many other differences with my own formal training in Western Art music, Green's popular musicians described the importance of moving to the music, choosing your own repertoire, creating your own arrangements, negotiating performance decisions with bandmates, rough approximation of performance models, and repeated listening with simultaneous playing. As I observed Greg Byers[3] teach last April at the Eclectic Strings Day, I saw an artist-teacher free to move and model with a cello worn like an electric guitar; teacher-arranged repertoire taken from popular student video games, repeated listening and playing along with the recording (with and without melody through Byers' own recorded tracks); and students talking about the social context of the music—the video game! While I entered instrumental teaching believing some of these strategies to be "incorrect," with the objective of teaching rock music, they are the authentic methods within the popular music tradition.

While we may generally assume jazz to be an oral tradition, the staff notation-centered methods by which most students experience it may be a troubling example of how Western Art dominated music education methods may colonize a tradition by taking the notes while ignoring transmission.[4] Referring back to the above conversation about *music as culture, culture as habit*, such practices may engage in a form of tokenism whereby we give the appearance of inclusion while ignoring the human practice underlying those notes. By doing so, we fail to introduce genuine human diversity of thought and thought processes. Paul Berliner's ethnography, *Thinking in Jazz*,[5] has become one of the most widely cited studies on the authentic practices of jazz musicians. In it, the reader takes a deep dive into how an original solo voice emerges through a language-immersion approach. Like language learners, we surround ourselves with sound models far exceeding our own abilities; we feel free to attempt basic sentences in early efforts to communicate; through successive approximations, we slowly develop better vocabulary and a natural sense of phrase.

Ernest Bisong's presentation of jazz violin at the Eclectic Strings workshop asked students to learn a melody by ear, develop an intuition for the three four-bar phrases of the 12-bar blues through a clever passing game, and analyze his own note selection and melodic construction through teacher modeling and student description—not teacher lecture. While a master model was used, expectation for student performance was kept at whatever level the student demonstrated through letting their words, and their playing guide instruction. While Jerome Bruner would have definitely approved of this discovery approach, more importantly, so would Miles Davis. Bisong's pedagogy re-situated the notes of jazz into the processes of the jazz tradition.

cal sound. David Elliot and other praxial philosophers have more fully examined how this view differs from the aesthetic approach which came to dominate music education thinking in the 60s and 70s. McCarthy, Marie, and J. Scott Goble. "Music education philosophy: Changing times." *Music Educators Journal* 89.1 (2002): 19–26.

1 See Turino's chapter on middle-class old-time cultural cohorts in which the suburban capitalist anxieties are released through participation in their idealized practices of the rural past. An informal demographic profile of the many "new-grass" festivals in MN and WI seem to back up Turino's observations on the class and education of these audiences. Turino, *Music as Social Life*, "Old-Time Music and Dance: Cohorts and Cultural Formations," 155–188.

2 Green, L. (2002). *How popular musicians learn: A way ahead for music education*. Routledge.

3 An active performer and teacher of rock strings, Byers gives masterclasses through Electrify Your Symphony—a music education movement to unite string musicianship with contemporary student identities.

4 Hess, Juliet. "Decolonizing Music Education: Moving beyond Tokenism." International Journal of Music Education, vol. 33, no. 3, Aug. 2015, pp. 336–347, doi:10.1177/0255761415581283.

5 Berliner, Paul F. *Thinking in jazz: The infinite art of improvisation*. University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Finally, when I think of culturally-responsive practices within my own Winona, MN community, I consider how I should respond to the bluegrass liturgies presented at area churches, the Boats and Bluegrass Festival, the far reach of SEMBA (Southeast MN Bluegrass Association), and the sound of Friday night at so many area coffee shops, breweries, and campgrounds. Bluegrass was not my upbringing at all, yet this is a big part of the community I love and call home. I have a neighbor who may only know a few open chords, but he could sing off the top of his head hundreds of songs. He's the kind of musician I would have ignorantly labeled "illiterate" years ago—because he does not read the kind of staff notated music I read. And yet, I envy his deeply personal connection to the music he performs seven days a week. He has zero ego, just a deep wish for others to love the music that frames his lived experiences over his seven-plus decades of living in Minnesota. The music is as much in the notes as it is in the story and relationships among fellow players. To practice with him on my porch means grabbing a drink and listening to him talk about his life as I try to keep up with the I-IV-V chord changes to the next song he wants to do by just watching and listening.

MNSOTA's own Cristina Seaborn led a session on old-time playing for beginners which blended many different traditions together—no doubt a diverse pedagogy influenced by her own diverse musical training. Seaborn taught melody first through singing the original lyrics—a method by which players naturally come to discover phrase and accent without written musical notations through playing the rhymes, repeated words, and punchlines within the text. The students learned how to arpeggiate the I-IV-V chords within the song not through lecture and notation, but through playing scale fragments and showing fingers. The concept was first made enactive before it was made iconic or symbolic; again, Jerome Bruner was smiling.[1] Seaborn had the students seated in a kind of circle. While this is certainly authentic to bluegrass jams, it also allowed for Seaborn to systematically roam the room, connecting with each individual student with eye contact and modeling individualized to student needs. Staff notation was used as a support to learning a melody learned initially by ear and voice. Finally, authentic to the tradition, Seaborn had a live band of local musicians present to fill out the sound on guitar, bass, and banjo. The music of the classroom was re-situated back into the local community through culture-bearers.

Conclusion

The reasons why students pursue music today has not changed in fifty years—the desire to express one's musical identity in community is a constant. What is not constant is the nature of the musical communities through which our students develop their identities. Music and musical practice have diversified. The recording industry has adjusted, publishers have adjusted, music stores have adjusted, and houses of worship have adjusted to these social changes. As music cultures are built on habit, an adjustment for music education means expanding representation in thought and practice, product and process. MNSOTA's Eclectic Strings program provides one avenue for educators and students alike to learn more about the musically diverse communities living within our own state. In so doing, string students expand their musical identities and teachers may acquire student-centered strategies to expand the reach of their programs.

Next article: *Music as a Language and strings pedagogy?*

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1 For those who forget their Ed Psych course from undergrad, Jerome Bruner was a constructivist who suggested we learn concepts through a sequential approach: enactive (body experience), iconic (pictorial representation), and symbolic (symbol system like staff notation).