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## CONTEMPLATION ON MUSIC EDUCATION

### Propelled by Joy

*There are few things more reinforcing than recognition of one's own accomplishment. And there are few activities that afford more frequent opportunities to accomplish tangible goals than learning to play an instrument or sing.*

Let me begin by expressing my appreciation to Brian Meyers and the editorial committee of *Contributions to Music Education* for inviting me to write this piece for the Contemplations series. With the exception of a couple of summers in high school, all of the jobs I've had in my life have involved either teaching or playing music, and the past five decades have led to my asking more and more questions about the value of what we do and how we do it. It's a great privilege to get to share my ideas in this issue of *Contributions*.

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Music and music making are tightly woven into the fabric of human culture. Every known human society engages in some form of music, but the types of typical engagement vary widely among cultures, groups, and individuals.<sup>1</sup> In many societies, music and movement are inextricably linked, and music making in social settings engages everyone present in active participation. Sitting quietly (or not so quietly) and listening while others make music, or listening to recorded music while performing other tasks, are relatively recent conventions that now pervade many modern industrial societies.

The advent of recording devices has made music accessible in nearly every environment in the developed world. A recent global survey of over 43,000 people aged 16-64 from 26 countries estimated that individuals on average listen to 20 hours of music per week.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, listening to music brings pleasure to a great many people, even those without the benefit of a formal music education.

Over the years, voices in the U.S. have disagreed about what “every child’s” music education should comprise (i.e., what children should learn about music

while in school), and official and unofficial music learning goals for elementary children often include a little bit of everything—singing, dancing, playing various instruments, improvising, composing<sup>3</sup>—with the expectation that all of this will be accomplished in brief, infrequent music classes, a nearly impossible task in most school music programs.

This way of thinking has led some in music education to the regrettable conclusion that mere exposure to music experiences is enough, and that the development of lasting skills and confidence that persist into adulthood is the province of only those children whose schools and families provide the wherewithal for extended time and focused instruction. This in turn has led to what some describe as the hegemony of large ensembles in secondary schools in the U.S., where approximately 24% of children report having participated in at least one year of a music ensemble (13% in choir, 11% in band, 2% in orchestra).<sup>4</sup>

In many places around the country, including my home state of Texas, the technical skills demonstrated by children fortunate enough to have access to high quality, extensive, sustained music instruction are astonishingly impressive. Students in the top ensemble programs around here play and sing beautifully. The entire enterprise of secondary-school music seems somewhat less impressive, though, when one considers the percentage of children who participate in these ensembles and the many children who don't. Reasons for nonparticipation are manifold, and include family responsibilities, money, transportation, availability of private instruction, and ordinary lack of interest. But perhaps the biggest reason that many children choose not to participate is that they come to believe that they aren't any good at making music, a (mis)perception that many of them learn in school.

Ask adults about what subjects they're "bad at," and nearly everyone has an answer at the ready. How do we learn about what we're "bad at," whether it's math or science or writing or soccer? Mostly from the experiences we have in school.

I regularly review the data on the number of children in Texas public schools who begin instrumental music instruction in 6th grade, which is where most beginning instrument instruction is situated. In the cohort who graduated from high school in 2022, for example, over 103,000 had enrolled in beginning band when they were 6th-graders. By the next academic year 26,000 of those 103,000 beginners had quit. By 9th grade another 17,000 had quit. And by 12th grade only 24,000 were still enrolled.<sup>5</sup>

I recognize the argument that music performance "is not for everybody" and that music participation competes with many compelling alternative activities, both in and out of school. Yet, I wonder whether the numbers of participants are limited by the way we teach and the demands of time we make on those who wish to participate.

## Joy as a Learning Goal

I have many opportunities to observe and learn about the goings-on in schools, in music classes and in other disciplines. I think most observers, as well as students and teachers, will agree that everyone seems *very busy* right now. Yet, I don't typically observe a level of joy that's commensurate with all of the time, attention, and effort that the busyness requires, perhaps because the stress created by all the busyness diminishes opportunities for joy. And I'm really into joy—the joy of human relationships, the joy of learning, the joy of being awed by the world around me and all it contains.

Experiencing joy is not generally a passive phenomenon. You need to invest something of yourself to experience what most of us would describe as joy. You have to care and pay attention, and that caring has to be transduced into productive actions that lead to accomplishing goals that matter to you. Some of these goals may be highly personal, like helping a loved one with limited capacity get what they need. Or they may be more public, like successfully performing for an appreciative audience a piece that you love and that you devoted time to learning.

The common feature of these paths to joy is the *accomplishment of things that matter to you*. And I would argue vigorously that the most important, overarching goal of education should be to help students learn to accomplish goals that matter to them. This is true for every discipline and every endeavor, but it seems particularly apt with regard to learning to make music.

When I'm invited to give talks about music education advocacy, I don't talk about purported contributions of music study to children's academic performance, mostly because there's little credible data indicating that there are such benefits.<sup>6</sup> And I don't focus primarily on students' learning to work together in groups and becoming better listeners and team members, though these outcomes may actually be realized in the course of music participation.<sup>7</sup> What I do focus on is this: there are few human activities that vividly illustrate the relationship between the efforts you expend and what you gain from those efforts—in terms of increased capacity, a sense of agency, and joy—like learning to play an instrument or sing. Plus, when you're done learning to play an instrument and sing, you can play an instrument and sing.

But if all of the music making that children experience in school requires the presence of a conductor, a metronome, a tuner, or all three, it should come as no surprise that many (most) children who devote a great deal of time in school learning to play or sing don't continue to do so once school is over. The conductor's gone. So is the music library. And so is my bassoon.

I should point out that important progress has been made in recent years by including more diverse music performance classes in secondary schools (e.g., gui-

tar, mariachi, modern band),<sup>8</sup> and these so-called alternative school music experiences often develop the kinds of independence that leads to active participation beyond school.

So how does this musical independence come about? What does it require?

Imagine a set of music learning experiences in which young musicians from the outset are invited to practice setting reachable goals for themselves and assess their progress in meeting those goals moment-to-moment during individual practice—experiences in which children learn to be joyful music makers, reveling in what they are able to do right now, in this moment, rather than always in a state of getting ready for the next-hardest thing.

This involves creating a balanced musical life in which learners not only work on *becoming musicians* (i.e., practicing, struggling to meet goals set by others), but also spend a great deal of time actually *being musicians* (e.g., playing or singing alone for pleasure, performing together with family and friends).

## Building Capacity and a Sense of Personal Agency

I was invited to give a talk at a conference on the arts and healing several years ago, and it prompted me to look up then-current definitions of human well-being, of which there were a lot. I found most of them to be either overly complicated or overly vague, so I decided to compose my own. Here, in my view, is what well-being requires:

*More often than not and on most days, your efforts lead to rewarding outcomes, all in a context of physical health and positive personal relationships.*

Independent music practice provides tremendous opportunities to create experiences in which your efforts lead to rewarding outcomes. But for this to happen, music practice should focus not on time-spent but on goals-accomplished. And by accomplished I don't mean merely "better"; I mean nailing what you've set out to master in the next couple of attempts. A great deal of systematic study by my students, colleagues, and me have shown that this is the way that experts practice: they set short-term goals that are reachable in the next few performance trials, and practice sessions include multiple iterations of goal-setting and accomplishment.<sup>9</sup> Again, not merely "getting better," but successfully achieving small, reachable goals multiple times during each practice session. Experts don't practice this way because they are experts; they became experts because they practice this way.

Here is one brief example of what I'm talking about. Say a long-term practice goal for a wind player is to learn to play two-octave major scales in 16th notes at 144 bpm. Well, if that's not going happen today, what are some examples of the

kinds of goals that can be accomplished today, in the next few minutes? Perhaps, play the lowest octave of the scale in 8th notes at 96 bpm, evenly, with a beautiful tone, in tune, and with a relaxed body. Can't do that after three or four attempts? OK, then, change the goal to something more doable (e.g., play the first note with a beautiful sound, in tune, and with relaxed body). If that goal is met in several attempts and can be repeated consistently ("Nailed it!"), then try to play the first tetrachord at 96, evenly, maintaining a beautiful sound, in tune, and with a relaxed body. If that goal is met in several attempts and can be repeated consistently ("Nailed that, too!"), time to move on and increase the difficulty and complexity of the next goal(s). The point of this way of structuring practice is that the practitioner performs beautifully frequently, because there are small, strategically sequenced goals that focus on the most important aspects of playing and singing (e.g., beautiful tone, accurate intonation, evenness, and physical efficiency [relaxation]).

The most popular video games are designed to teach (yes, they teach skills) just like that. If, after many minutes of game time, players seldom experience a successful outcome, it's doubtful they'll continue to play. Game designers understand this really well, so they design incremental goals that are achievable in the short term. Players feel like they "nail it" often enough to keep them interested and motivated to continue as the game presents increasingly greater challenges. This strategic approach to goal-setting not only develops skill but also increases players' patience and tenacity, and the frequency of success contributes to positive self-perceptions of efficacy, agency, and well-being.

Compare the practice session above to one in which the learner never "nails" anything consistently, and at the end of practice, the most positive thing they can say is that what they're doing "got better." Weak tea indeed, and merely "better" generates a response in the brain that's much different than the response to "nailed it" (i.e., actually accomplishing the goal). Learning is a process of creating and refining memories, and the efficiency of procedural memory formation and refinement (memories for how to do things) is increased when learners' performance trials match their goals precisely.

If you've been skillfully set up by a teacher, you can experience the accomplishment of multiple goals in every practice session. All by yourself, any time you want. In other words, music study presents ideal opportunities to imagine, clarify, and accomplish goals. This can only happen, I suggest, if teachers share the responsibility of goal setting right from the beginning in ways that allow students to assume increasing levels of independence in doing so.<sup>10</sup>

The statement I wrote at the top of the article is worth recapitulating here: There are few things more reinforcing than recognition of one's own accomplishment. And there are few activities that afford more frequent opportunities to ac-

comply with tangible goals than learning to play an instrument or sing. During individual practice, satisfaction comes not from being recognized by others, but by taking pleasure in how capable you are in successfully accomplishing what you set out to do. A joy.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Patricia Shehan Campbell, “The Musical Cultures of Children,” in *The Arts in Children’s Lives: Context, Culture, and Curriculum*, ed. Liora Bresler and Christine Marmé Thompson (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2002), 57–69, [https://doi.org/10.1007/0-306-47511-1\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/0-306-47511-1_5); Sandra E. Trehub, Judith Becker, and Iain Morley, “Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Music and Musicality,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 370, no. 1664 (March 19, 2015): 20140096, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2014.0096>.

<sup>2</sup>International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, “Engaging with Music” (Author, 2023), [https://www.ifpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/IFPI-Engaging-With-Music-2023\\_full-report.pdf](https://www.ifpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/IFPI-Engaging-With-Music-2023_full-report.pdf).

<sup>3</sup>National Coalition for Arts Standards, “National Core Arts Standards,” National Core Arts Standards, accessed March 5, 2025, <https://nationalartsstandards.org/>.

<sup>4</sup>Kenneth Elpus and Carlos R. Abril, “Who Enrolls in High School Music? A National Profile of U.S. Students, 2009–2013,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 67, no. 3 (October 1, 2019): 323–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429419862837>.

<sup>5</sup>These data are relatively consistent over the past eight cohorts (i.e., since the cohort that graduated in 2014).

<sup>6</sup>Giovanni Sala and Fernand Gobet, “Cognitive and Academic Benefits of Music Training with Children: A Multilevel Meta-Analysis,” *Memory & Cognition* 48, no. 8 (November 1, 2020): 1429–41, <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13421-020-01060-2>; Daryl W. Kinney, “Selected Demographic Variables, School Music Participation, and Achievement Test Scores of Urban Middle School Students,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 56, no. 2 (July 1, 2008): 145–61, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429408322530>; Eugenia Costa-Giomi, “Effects of Three Years of Piano Instruction on Children’s Academic Achievement, School Performance and Self-Esteem,” *Psychology of Music* 32, no. 2 (April 2004): 139–52, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735604041491>.

<sup>7</sup>Andrea Creech et al., “Active Music Making: A Route to Enhanced Subjective Well-Being among Older People,” *Perspectives in Public Health* 133, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 36–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1757913912466950>; William J Dawson, “Benefits of Music Training Are Widespread and Lifelong: A Bibliographic Review of Their

Non-Musical Effects,” *Medical Problems of Performing Artists* 29, no. 2 (June 1, 2014): 57–63, <https://doi.org/10.21091/mppa.2014.2014>.

<sup>8</sup>David Knapp, Matthew Clauhs, and Bryan Powell, “A Demographic Profile of High School Music Courses in New York,” *Music Education Research* 25, no. 5 (October 20, 2023): 532–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2023.2272159>.

<sup>9</sup>Sarah E. Allen et al., “The Relationship between Moment-to-Moment Accomplishment during Music Practice and Emotional Well-Being.” (International Symposium on Performance Science, Warsaw, Poland, August 17, 2023); Micah Furey Killion, “The Central Strategy of Music Practice” (PhD, Austin, TX, The University of Texas at Austin, 2023), UT Electronic Theses and Dissertations, <https://doi.org/10.26153/tsw/50122>; Amy L. Simmons, Jennifer L. McKeeman, and Margaret Yankeelov, “Skill Acquisition by Artist-Teachers and Their Advanced Students” (International Symposium on Performance Science, Melbourne, Australia, July 17, 2019).

<sup>10</sup>Robert A Duke, “Their Own Best Teachers: How We Help and Hinder the Development of Learners’ Independence,” *Music Educators Journal* 99, no. 2 (2012): 36–41, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0027432112458956>.