

## **Music Education in British Columbia**

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The goal of this chapter is to describe the state of music education in British Columbia in the first decade of the twenty-first century. This seemingly rather straightforward task has proven difficult because there is little constancy in music education throughout this province, let alone in Canada. One cannot assume that what is happening in Vancouver is similar what is happening to music education in Victoria, or in the interior or northern BC. This report then, is a snapshot of music education in British Columbia based on various major provincial music education surveys (1973, 1995, 2005), and on personal anecdotal evidence drawn from our collective 70 years of experience teaching music in British Columbia.

### **Political Influences and Realities**

Since education is controlled provincially, the political zeitgeist of the province has always affected what happens in any subject in the public schools of British Columbia. Music education is no exception. British Columbia has a well-earned reputation as being a province of extremes—politically and economically. Booms and busts in the resource-based economy, with the concomitant swings in budget largesse on the one hand, contrasted with severe budget cuts on the other, have helped to polarize the political climate by various governments of the day. Furthermore, in this polarized environment schoolteachers, often feeling under attack and under appreciated, have sought support and voice. As a result, the BC Teachers' Federation has become one of the most powerful unions in the country. In the battleground of various political upheavals between the government and the union, the case for the arts and music has had

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challenges being heard, funded, and otherwise supported (Ungerleider, 2003). Furthermore, to ensure that the message for the importance of music education in the schools was heard, various music education advocacy coalitions have been established over a number of years. British Columbia was one of the first provinces to start effective and organized arts advocacy groups that still exist today (see for example, Arts Action, 1973; Arts in Education Council, 1976, BC Coalition for Music Education, 1990).

The net effect of the political situation in BC is that music and the arts have struggled to assert what they feel is their rightful place in public education. There are numerous issues that impact music education and we touch on some of these below.

### **Declining enrolment**

One of the major challenges has been, and continues to be, the decline in student enrollment. The bulge of the echo boomer generation of students is now leaving the senior secondary school level and this demographic phenomenon is a contributing factor in the decline of elementary and secondary school populations. Coupled with the shrinking of student populations, many school districts have had to deal with enormous financial cutbacks.

Additionally, in many school districts, especially where a music teacher may have moved, the school board officials may not be able to hire a qualified teacher from outside the district; instead they have frequently had to select a less qualified teacher from within the district.

At the same time, many parents are feeling increasingly disenfranchised by what is happening in public education and are turning to home schooling or private schools where they can have their children study in the local music conservatories or academies. Some private schools are marketing themselves as providing stronger arts programs (Ungerleider, 2003).

Specialized arts' schools are also proliferating to a limited degree in the public schools districts.

### **Urban/rural divides**

There is a marked difference between urban and rural schools and the relative diversity and course opportunity that each can offer. There are still many fine music programs in BC, but these exist primarily in the urban areas where there is a confluence of strong parental support, effective administrative leadership, and committed and well-trained teachers. Small, rural schools, on the other hand, have challenges maintaining consistency in their music programs because they seem to have difficulty keeping music teachers; qualified or specialist music teachers tend to seek greener fields after a year or two in a rural school. Furthermore, rural schools find that there are too many conflicts on the timetable to allow students to elect music in sufficient numbers to make the music program viable.

The Synovate Study (2005)<sup>1</sup> notes that 60% of school music programs occur outside regular school hours. As a result, students in rural areas who have to catch a bus are usually unavailable for most extra-curricular music activity like sectionals, concerts, and even classes.

### **Music teachers**

Many music teachers report that they are simply electing to teach subjects other than music because it is just too hard to teach music in the current political, educational, and fiscal

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<sup>1</sup> In 2005 the BC Coalition for Music Education, with the assistance of the Synovate Corporation, conducted a survey of music education in BC schools. The BC Music Educators' Association was also a partner in this enquiry.

The results were very similar to the study conducted by the Coalition for Music Education in Canada. The highlighted conclusions were as follows: The drastic reduction in the number of elementary music programs and qualified teachers on staff to teach them; the drop in levels; the decline in teaching of and for music specialists in the teacher training institutions; the loss in the secondary schools of option slot time causing much of the music curriculum being taught off the regular timetable in the secondary schools.

At the time of writing, 2007, the situation has only gotten worse, complicated by the general drop in student enrollment in the school system.

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realities of the profession. Some teachers are deciding to take early retirement; others are moving to the private school system where they feel more appreciated. In many schools the teachers report that they are required to take on more responsibilities with fewer resources, and with minimal clinical and counseling training. More time is spent on team meetings, phone calls, collaborative planning sessions, curriculum team meetings, and parent interviews. Though each element is important, experienced teachers report that there is less and less time available to follow one's own professional development needs. At this time of writing the British Columbia public school teachers had been working for nearly a year without a contract. Job actions in the form of potential strikes and work-to-rule campaigns are a constant topic of conversation. Music programs, so dependent on extra-curricular and co-curricular activity, are particularly impacted negatively by such job actions.

### **Music teacher education**

Teacher education programs in BC have steadily increased at the post-secondary level, despite their relatively late start, beginning only as recently as 1959. There are strong music programs in many of the community colleges, private academies, and some universities. However, at the college level some of the program administrators have had to endure the debilitating exercise of annually justifying the music program's existence.

Most music education for secondary music teachers in BC occurs primarily in the faculties of music—not the faculties of education—and tends to stress music performance and theoretical training. The core ensembles of choir, band, and orchestra, with occasional and important offshoots of jazz performance, are the most common. There appears to be an inherent disconnect between what is happening in teacher training in music and in what the students in

schools are increasingly electing to do. In summary, there is a trend in music teacher preparation towards having performance training in the faculties on the one hand, and in the field towards a sampling of diverse offerings.

Teacher education, especially at the elementary level, has increasingly become more generalized, rather than concerned with the intensively distinct methodologies of teaching any given subject, music included. The BC College of Teachers governs teacher certification and at the elementary school level music is not considered a teachable subject by the College of Teachers for certification purposes. As a result, elementary methodology music teaching courses are rare. Meanwhile, middle schools (Grades 6, 7, and 8) are growing in number, but the training of music teachers for middle schools is still a work in progress. As one can see by the grade configuration this type of school is a hybrid of both elementary and junior secondary schools. How teachers in middle schools will obtain the appropriate training to teach music is a key question.

Because of the many challenges that exist within music education in our schools, many potential music teachers are deciding that music teaching is not a sustainable or healthy profession to pursue. Consequently, enrollments in music teacher education courses have dropped in recent years in in some faculties of education in BC.

### **Ministry of Education**

The Ministry of Education has recently developed up-to-date curricula for all schools from Kindergarten to Grade 12 and has spent additional monies in many jurisdictions to support programs. While this is a positive move, communication with the Ministry has been weakening over the years. There are a number of factors at play. First, there is only minimal staff at the

Ministry level to assist in curriculum writing and the role of Fine Arts Coordinator is tenuous at best. Even if the position remains, it has been watered down over the years as additional roles and other responsibilities have been added in addition to the arts. Second, as of September 2005, students are no longer required to study an arts course after Grade 9. The subsequent elimination of the compulsory Fine Arts 11 requirement has also had a negative effect on overall arts enrollments.

Third, British Columbia engages in province-wide government testing at both the elementary and secondary school levels. Teachers complain that they have to teach to these tests to a greater degree. Since the arts and music are not included in this testing program,<sup>2</sup> these subjects tend to suffer (Ungerleider, 2003; Synovate Study, 2005). Fourth, literacy is the main emphasis at all levels of school in the province, and in many jurisdictions assigned times for literacy and mathematics programs have been increased while time spent on music has declined (Synovate Study, 2005). To further exacerbate the problem, schools are ranked with these placements being displayed prominently in the local media. This ranking implicitly creates a further disincentive from studying music and the arts. Finally, in the most recent round of budget cuts, 130 schools in British Columbia were closed and pupil–teacher ratios were raised. These two factors have led to a loss of 2,300 teacher positions over the past three years.

### **School districts and curriculum developments**

Many school districts are counseling their students to take a preparatory study block in order to achieve higher grades in their Grade 10–12 years. This practice has led to a loss of another elective option where music is usually offered. The mandate to have Planning 10 as a

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<sup>2</sup> We are not suggesting that music or the arts be included in compulsory testing. However, it is clear that the subjects being tested are considered more important within the system. When teachers emphasize the tested subjects by taking additional time to ensure students are prepared, then valuable instructional time is lost in the arts. Anderson, A. & Tupman D. F. (2007). Music education in British Columbia. In K. Veblen & C. Beynon (Eds. with S. Horsley, U. DeAlwiss, & A. Heywood), *From sea to sea: Perspectives on music education in Canada*. Retrieved from <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/musiceducationE-books/1/>

compulsory course has also put pressure on enrollments and elective time. At the time of writing there are rumours that other compulsory planning courses will be offered in Grades 8 and 9; this will likely cause a further reduction in elective time. Additionally, school counselors and administrators in a number of middle and junior secondary schools encourage students to broaden their course sampling. This practice is also putting pressure on long-term, sequential music study in schools (Synovate Study, 2005). Curricular sampling flies in the face of a music education program that depends on long-term, sequential understanding and development of performance skills to a reasonable standard. This cafeteria sampling approach has had a mixed effect. While there has been a drop in the number of some music electives, musical theatre courses have proliferated. In music theatre courses skill development in the respective art is secondary to the overall excitement of the integrated experience of getting “the show” ready. Music theatre courses are in danger of being a typical medium for sampling a number of arts experiences, such as music, but not to any depth of study.

### **Professional development and advocacy groups in music education**

Mention must be made of the professional associations that exist to support the growth of music education in British Columbia. Each group, staffed by volunteers, has served BC music education well in numerous capacities.

The British Columbia Music Educators’ Association (BCMEA)—a specialist association within the BC Teachers’ Federation—was started in 1959, and serves all aspects of the music curriculum. It remains relatively comprehensive in supporting all music education areas with a province-wide network of Local Specialist Music Teacher Associations. There are excellent BCMEA communication networks of fax numbers, email list serves, and electronic journals and

newsletters. The BCMEA also maintains good working relations with other music organizations, such as Orff and Kodály. In the past many of the BCMEA presidents, as well as other executive positions of this association, were held by school district staff and university educators. Today, however, this is not the case. Most of the music and arts district staff positions have been lost. Additionally, university music education professors are now outside the jurisdiction of the BC Teachers' Federation and are not allowed to become presidents of the BC Music Educators' Association. As a result it is progressively harder to find teachers who can serve in leadership positions, or who are even willing to host a music conference. As the baby boomer generation of music teachers retire in considerable numbers it will be increasingly more difficult to replace their leadership experience. Already the impact can be seen as the annual BCMEA conference numbers are gradually decreasing. At one time there used to be 1,000 teachers attending the annual BC Music Educators' Conference; now there are fewer than half that many in a good year.

The British Columbia Coalition for Music Education is a well-established agency that was initiated out of necessity by music educators and parents to develop advocacy strategies to preserve music and arts education in BC. It designs and sends newsletter, meets with Ministry and local officials, and has links to various media. The BC Coalition is a member of the Coalition for Music Education in Canada, and supports activities developed at the national level. Recently, a music education survey was sent to every school in the province (1,860 schools) and findings are being collated. In addition, the Coalition has managed to produce some excellent materials that have been used by many schools and district parent advocacy coalitions, and as a result, there are a number of programs that have been saved by the efforts of these parent coalitions. One positive outcome is that the Coalition is recognizing school administrators who

actively support music education in their schools through the “Principals of Music” annual award presented by Bramwell Tovey of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra at one of their performances.

While the Coalition has performed admirably, it faces two key issues. First, it is having a hard time recruiting a new generation of advocates who are willing to put in the time to speak out for music education. Second, advocacy efforts have tended to focus only on preserving the status quo—specifically high school band, orchestra, and choir programs—in that order. There is seldom a concerted effort to speak out for elementary general music, and as a result 68% of schools in BC report they have no school-wide, coherent music program (Synovate Study, 2005).

Local and provincial music festivals have supported music education programs across North America for many years. In BC alone, there is a network of more than 30 Performing Arts Festivals. At one time, music festivals played a predominant role in providing public performance venues for school programs and schools entered these festivals with great anticipation and energy. Despite the obvious benefit to the participants and community provided by these community arts festivals, most of their organizing committees complain of diminishing volunteers and a lack of the leadership required to continue running such large events. This reduction of volunteerism in the arts is reflective of the situation across Canada at the moment (Statscan, 1997, 2000, 2003) and music festival organizations are in danger of shutting down.

### **Conclusion**

We salute the many hard-working music teachers who, over the years, have achieved so much in BC. Despite even the most difficult circumstances British Columbia has much of which to be proud. Several BC music educators have assumed leadership roles at the national and

international levels in music education associations; many BC school musical ensembles continue to achieve outstanding success in national and international festivals; and many music education programs continue to thrive with highly qualified and motivated music teachers.

The status of the arts and music are corollaries of a sustainable and livable society, and the health of the arts and music in a society generally coincide with a healthy economy (Wyman, 2004). There is room for cautious optimism for the future of music education in BC. Now that some of the severe budget cuts seem to be behind us, there are some signs of population growth and the economy seems to be improving. Furthermore, the advocacy efforts at the local and provincial levels have had a positive effect in getting the arts and music back on the political agenda. As a recent announcement made by the Premier of British Columbia indicated, “the arts and music are important aspects of a comprehensive and effective education and should be supported. To that end this government dedicates \$150,000,000 towards supporting the arts, special education and libraries in schools” (Campbell, 2005).

Thus, in spite of the real challenges that we face in BC school music education at present, we look to the future with optimism. The academies, universities, and colleges are graduating scores of fine musicians. Our community choirs, bands, and orchestras are some of the finest in the land and are increasing in number. There is a growing talent pool of young musicians in our province who will inevitably have an influence on the music education in the schools and eventually take their place as strong and committed music educators for the youth of tomorrow. British Columbia is increasingly becoming a multicultural province and the music of British Columbia is growing in variety and structure, urged on by the numerous fine musical groups in these various cultural societies. The future will provide both an opportunity and a challenge to help us all tap into and integrate these fine community resources in order to breathe new life into

our school system.

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