

## **Music Education in Alberta: The Contribution of School Music Programs**

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Music education in Alberta appears to be thriving. The voices of young children can be heard in early childhood music programs at Alberta College Conservatory in Edmonton and Mount Royal College Conservatory in Calgary. Older students enroll in piano lessons, children's choirs, youth orchestras, and other musical activities in private music studios and at various community centres. Summer programs at the Banff School for the Arts offer high quality musical education for young musicians preparing to be professional performers. Alberta's universities offer outstanding music teacher education degrees for students interested in becoming music teachers. Adults participate in a wide array of ensembles such as community choirs, bands, or church musical groups. The Calgary and Edmonton symphonies play full schedules each year, which bring a wealth of classical music to both communities. In addition, various cities throughout the province feature concert series ranging from popular, country, and jazz, to world music. All in all, on any given day, one can hear a wonderful mosaic of musical sounds coming from a variety of venues across the province.

Questions about the state of music education in Alberta come about when one pauses to consider whether musical education is accessible to all Albertans. Certainly, larger, urban centres such as Edmonton and Calgary offer a wide variety of musical opportunities for people of all ages. Is this true, however, for the many smaller communities that make up the great majority of

Alberta's rural lifestyle? Do residents in these communities have reasonable access to an active music education? How does this compare across the province?

In view of the fact that schools are often the mediating factor providing educational access to all members of society, it seems appropriate to address this question by examining the current state of music education in Alberta schools. What, if any, music instruction do children receive and how do school music classes contribute to the overall music education of the young people in the province? A brief look at the structure of the Alberta music curriculum, combined with recent enrollment figures, may shed some light on these questions.

Alberta's school curriculum, across all subject areas, is organized into elementary and secondary grade levels. Kindergarten, combined with Grades 1–6, frequently make up elementary schools while the secondary grades are most often grouped into separate junior high schools (Grades 7–9) and separate senior high schools (Grades 10–12). In a few communities, the secondary grades may be housed in one facility (Grades 7–12) or in a middle school configuration (Grades 5–8) (Alberta Education, 2004).

The Alberta Elementary Program of Studies requires that schools provide students in Grades 1–6 have access to 950 hours of instruction per year in each grade. Six subject areas are named as required in these grades: (1) Language Arts, (2) Math, (3) Science, (4) Social Studies, (5) Art and Music, and (6) Health and Physical Education. Ten per cent of this instructional time is slated for Music; this is approximately 82 minutes per week (Alberta Education, 2004b). This compulsory general music program, guided by an official curriculum document (Alberta Education, 1989), is taught, for the most part, by generalist classroom teachers, that is, teachers with elementary education B.Ed. degrees which may contain little, if any, university-level music education classes. About 30 per cent of elementary schools employ music specialists—teachers

with elementary education B.Ed. degrees containing several university-level music and music education courses. One can only guess at the quality variance between delivery models but all indications are that elementary schools with music specialists offer more comprehensive, literacy-rich performance programs (Montgomery, 2002). Regardless, music specialists are more common in the schools of larger urban centres of Alberta, a finding that suggests unevenness in music education for elementary school children around the province.

Data for the 2004–05 school year show 254,875 students enrolled in the elementary grades (Government of Alberta, 2005). Although music instruction is a compulsory offering in Alberta elementary schools, there is no readily available data to indicate whether all of these students actually receive the appropriate amount of music instruction. Studies conducted in the United States have suggested that elementary music curricula taught by generalist classroom teachers often receives less time than what is officially required. The results of these studies suggest that this finding is related to non-specialist teachers' lack of both confidence and content-knowledge (Amen, 1984; Bresler, 1993; Byo, 2000; and Propst, 2003). Similar research is needed in Alberta to determine if this erosion of instructional time might indeed be the case in this province as well.

Nine hundred fifty hours of instruction per year is also required at the junior high school level. Subjects required during this instructional time are (1) English Language Arts, (2) Mathematics, (3) Science, (4) Social Studies, (5) Physical Education, and (6) Health and Life Skills. In addition to the required courses, the Alberta curriculum identifies optional courses, including Music. As stated, "Schools shall offer two provincially authorized optional courses except where instruction in a language other than English (*School Act*, sections 10 and 11) is offered, then only one provincially authorized optional course is required" (Alberta Education,

2004b, p. 37). A minimum of 150 hours of instruction is recommended for optional courses each year with students being encouraged to continue in Grade 8 and Grade 9 with at least one of the optional courses selected in Grade 7 (Alberta Education, 2004b).

The optional junior high school music program is approved for presentation through three distinct routes: (1) Choral, (2) General, and (3) Instrumental. Schools may offer one or more, or none, of these routes. Alberta Education publishes a non-prescriptive curriculum guide for each route: “The advice and direction offered is suggestive except where it duplicates or paraphrases the contents of the program of studies” (Alberta Education, 1988, p. ii).

Alberta Education reports that there were 138,107 students in junior high school in the 2004–05 school year (Government of Alberta, 2005). Unfortunately, there is no data readily available for enrollment in junior high school music courses; Alberta Education does not collect this information (C. Vocioni, personal communication, May 2005). Since music is not compulsory, it is likely that when a music option is offered only a small percentage of the students enroll. This is due in part to the “generalist” interests of most 12–14 year olds who often enroll in a variety of options throughout junior high (e.g., one term in art, one in music, one in computers, etc.) rather than sticking to one subject area for all three years of Grades 7–9. It can be assumed that junior high students are most often taught by music specialists—teachers holding a B.Ed. degree with a music education focus.

The Alberta Senior High School Program of Studies requires that “Schools must ensure that students have access to a minimum of 1000 hours of instruction per school year” (Alberta Education, 2004b, p. 42). Credits for course completion are awarded based on instructional time. Generally, courses are offered for three or five credits; a three-credit course must be offered for a minimum of 62.5 instructional hours and a five-credit course for a minimum of 125 instructional

hours (Alberta Education, 2004b, p. 42). Students must complete 100 credits to meet Alberta high school diploma graduation requirements. The 100 credits required for graduation must include the following: 15 credits in each of English Language Arts and Social Studies; 10 credits in each of Mathematics and Science; 3 credits in Physical Education; 3 credits in Career and Live Management; 10 credits chosen from a broad spectrum of courses, including Music; and 10 credits in 30-Level (Grade 12) courses other than English Language Arts and Social Studies. Students enrolled in Francophone programs must include 15 credits in Français. Just as it is in the junior high school grades, music is another optional course.

Senior high school music offerings follow the same organization as the junior high school options with three distinct routes: (1) Choral, (2) General, and (3) Instrumental. At the Grade 10 and 11 levels all routes may be offered as a 3-credit or a 5-credit course. At the Grade 12 level only the General route may be offered as a 3-credit course, Choral and Instrumental routes must be 5-credit courses. Any route at the Grade 10 level will be accepted as the prerequisite course for any route at the Grade 11 level. Students progressing to the Grade 12 course must have completed the same route at the Grade 11 level.

Alberta Education publishes Teacher Resource Manuals for each of the high school music routes. “The advice and direction offered are suggestions only, except where they duplicate or paraphrase the contents of the program of studies” (Alberta Education, 1991, inside cover). The Music Teacher Resource Manuals for senior high school are more prescriptive than those for the junior high school Curriculum Guides. For example, in the senior high school Instrumental program the performance of scales at specified tempi with specified articulations is a curricular requirement. In the junior high school Instrumental program the performance of scales at specified tempi and with specified articulations is suggested as a means to meeting the

curricular goal, “To discover, develop, and evaluate their talents and abilities relative to playing a musical instrument, and to establish and reinforce correct techniques and skills” (Alberta Education, 1988, p. 6).

High schools may also offer locally developed music courses, such as Marching Band, Vocal Jazz, Instrumental Jazz, and Chamber Ensemble. Additionally, in lieu of earning course credits through the school program, students can receive credits for private study through Conservatory Canada, the Royal Conservatory of Toronto, or Mount Royal College, Calgary (Alberta Education, 2004b, p. 40).

Alberta Education reported that there were 152,549 students enrolled in senior high schools in Alberta in 2003–04 (Government of Alberta, 2005). During this year, there were 8,476 enrollments in high school Instrumental Music, 3,344 enrollments in high school Choral Music, and 1,907 enrollments in high school General Music (C. Vocioni, personal communication, May 2005). These enrollments, when expressed as percentages of the high school population, are 5.6%, 2.2%, and 1.3% respectively. This means that less than 10% of the high school students in Alberta received music education at school during the 2003–04 school year. Indeed, the fact that there may have been students registered in two or more routes, suggests that the total percentage of students enrolled in high school Music may be even lower.

These low enrollment figures are due in part to the small number of Alberta high schools that actually offering music courses as an option for students. There were 630 high schools in Alberta when these statistics were gathered. According to Alberta Education, during the 2003–04 school year, Grade 10 Instrumental Music was offered in only 251 schools, Grade 10 Choral Music took place in 137 schools, and Grade 10 General Music was offered in only 117 schools. That means that of the approximately 630 schools that included Grades 10-12, only 40% offered

Instrumental music in Grade 10, 22% offered Choral Music 10, and only 19% offered General Music 10. Since many of the schools that provided music education for students actually offered more than one type of class (e.g., instrumental plus choral), one can assume that for the most part, less than 50% of the high schools in Alberta offered any music credits at all. To add to these alarming statistics, Alberta Education reports a serious decline in grade level offerings for the Alberta high schools that did offer Music in 2003–04. For example, Instrumental Music was offered in Grade 12 in only 32% of the schools that offered Grade 10 classes. The same decline in offerings can be noted for Grade 12 Choral Music (15%) and Grade 12 General music (12%) (C. Vocioni, personal communication, May 2005). A marked decline in enrollment can also be clearly seen in Grades 10 through 12 for all three music curricula. During 2003–04, 4,100 high school students were enrolled in Grade 10 Instrumental Music across the province. In Grade 11, this number dropped to 2,553 and in Grade 12 in decreased again, to 1,823 students. Expressed another way, in the 2003–04 school year, Instrumental Music 30 enrollment was 44% of the Instrumental Music 10 enrollment. The decline across grade levels in Choral and General Music is more pronounced with Choral Music 30 enrolling 33% of the numbers in Choral Music 10 and General Music 30 enrolling 23% of the numbers in General Music 10.

The good news is that at the secondary level where music programs are offered, they are, for the most part, considered outstanding by students, community, and school administrators. Alberta junior and senior high school instrumental and choral ensembles provide wonderful music education for students who choose to participate. However, why is there such limited access to Alberta high school students in that less than 50% of schools actually offer music courses as an option to Grade 10–12 students? The second part of this is question is why does less than 10% of the student body participate in these music classes when they are available?

Research regarding these two questions appears limited. Anecdotal evidence suggests that instrumental programs are more likely to be found in high schools with student populations of 600 students or greater. The relationship between school population and the existence of a band program could most definitely be curriculum driven. For example, typical high school band or wind ensemble literature is orchestrated in 35 to 38 individual instrumental parts. Having even one player per part and teaching Grades 10 through 12 together in a “band” class requires a school population of at least 625 to 679 if even the minimal enrollment percentage quoted earlier (5.6%) is to be met. Not only would at least 35 students need to be enrolled in band, but there would also need to be the correct complement of instruments to realize the music as the composer has orchestrated. Most instrumental teachers would suggest that incomplete instrumentation and instruction that is not differentiated by grade level militates against a high quality experience for the students. Inevitably, schools with a small population have a difficult task in establishing and maintaining a viable band program.

It is also likely that high schools in rural areas with a small school population may not be able to hire a music specialist to teach the few instrumental music classes offered. The non-specialist nature of Alberta teacher certification means that individuals who are employed primarily to teach another subject could be asked by a principal to teach a band class. One may speculate that these individuals, even those with music background, who have not graduated from a teacher preparation program in music education, are ill equipped to offer a quality program that will attract and retain students.

Problems of insufficient instrumentation as a result of low enrollment are likely not as detrimental to choral music programs. Choral music is available for many combinations of voices. Students with no junior high school musical background are perhaps more easily

accommodated in high school choral courses than in instrumental courses. Why, then, is there such low enrollment in these choral classes? It may be from the lack of interest in singing exhibited by many students in general. Or, these smaller enrollments may simply result from the fact that the main teacher education institutions in the province have traditionally put their resources towards the preparation of instrumental teachers, thus the supply of choral teachers making their way into the Alberta school system is minimal. Or, there may be societal stigmas that discourage adolescents from singing. Most likely, a combination of all these factors is at work.

Compounding the difficulties created by small school populations, the ever-burgeoning compulsory course work in Alberta secondary schools makes the inclusion of music courses in the student timetable increasingly difficult. Music courses compete with a plethora of optional and “academic” subjects for the few spots in the timetable that are not filled by compulsory course work. In addition, semester timetabling, a common occurrence in Alberta high schools, makes the inclusion of Music in many student’s programs virtually impossible as they juggle their schedules to get in all the course requirements for university.

Such scheduling difficulties become even more complex when one adds the layer of specialty that exists within high school music options. Indeed, it may be that Grade 10–12 Instrumental Music is simply too elitist for the majority of high school students. Given the advanced nature of the high school band program (i.e., students who have not participated in junior high band rarely begin to do so in Grade 10–12), it is quite likely that an increase in General Music offerings including Guitar classes at both the junior high and high school could attract significantly more students. Since the province is currently considering a required 3-credit course in Fine Arts for high school graduation, teacher education programs at Alberta

universities would be wise to consider offering more curriculum and instruction courses in general music pedagogy for their preservice B.Ed./B.Mus. students. These courses would help encourage future teachers to begin offering new, highly motivating music options for their junior high and high school students.

In conclusion, the statistics examined in this article are unsettling at best. High school student contact with school music instruction across the province is clearly in distress. With less than 10% of the Grade 10–12 students participating in music classes, the mediating influence of public access to music education through school music, at least at the high school level, seems minimal. Combine these low participation numbers with the unevenness of quality in the elementary grades due to the lack of music specialists and one questions how much influence school music really plays in the overall music education of Alberta youth. If school music classes are really going to make a difference in young people’s lives, both curriculum choices and teacher qualifications must be enhanced. Alberta children deserve a wide range of music education offerings taught by highly qualified music specialists throughout Grades K–12. Only by doing so will the current trends be reversed and will school music take its rightful place as a significant contributor to the music education of Alberta youth.

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