A Response to "Ontario—By the Numbers: A Statistical Examination of Enrolment in Ontario Secondary School Music Classes" (Nora Vince)

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Nora Vince's presentation and analysis of enrolment and retention figures in secondary school music programs (1993-2002) rings several alarm bells. The proffered statistics indicate a developing pattern away from music enrolment after the Grade 9 arts credit has been satisfied. For senior secondary school students, it also indicates that those who do enrol in music courses are applying the credits toward university entrance, but generally not for music study at the university level. To find out the reasons for these patterns, it challenges music education researchers to initiate studies to discern in detail what is actually taught to music students in Grades 9 to 12, and how this correlates to or deviates from curriculum guidelines. What are the curricular, pedagogical, learning, and societal factors that are contributing to the decline in music course enrolment after Grade 9?

Nora Vince also points to existing difficulties in the perception, reality and consistency of music course content and its evaluation. Credits that are given for music ensemble courses (AMR or "Repertoire Credits") are not always twinned as co-requisites with other music courses, and are based solely on participation, and rehearsal and performance attendance. These credits cannot provide reliable evidence of technical skill levels, or demonstrated knowledge of repertoire, or music theory and history. This gives rise to a credit credibility problem for those who oversee university applications.

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For those who evaluate and audition would-be music students for admission to post-secondary music study, evidence of secondary school music training and experiences is vitally important. Beyond the attention that a low mark will obviously provide, and indications of participation in various ensembles, the details of the evaluation can at times be largely irrelevant. Secondary school music marks tend to be unreliable in proportion to the required skill and experience levels for admission. Marking systems are so variable that evaluations are generally viewed as being inflated and untrustworthy, and can err toward a disproportional reward for enthusiasm and participation, rather than reflecting a balanced evaluation of demonstrable musical attributes and understanding.

For admission audition purposes, it is the conservatory examination system (e.g. The Royal Conservatory of Music, Conservatory Canada) that provides the most qualitative window on an applicant's achievements on his or her instrument, and their grasp of theoretical and historical concepts. In addition, private study and participation in extra-curricular ensembles (within the school and the community) with rigorous repertoire and performance standards are also a strong indicator of aptitude, affinity, experience level, and readiness.

Secondary school curriculum requirements imply that students take a progressively peripheral view of the arts. If, however, students show continued interest, then opportunities do exist for them. In order to retain their Grade 9 students in the music program for subsequent years, teachers can therefore resort to recruitment and teaching strategies that are short on the long-term rewards of artistry through acquired skill and understanding. Repertoire and practice standards can too often lean toward instant Edwards, D. (2007). A response to "Ontario by the numbers: A statistical examination of enrolment in Ontario secondary school music classes" (Nora Vince). 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/

gratification, with an eventual loss of interest to the greater, deeper satisfaction level in musical skill, expression and creativity. Some find that greater standards and experiences exist outside the school music program.

Students desiring more sophistication and breadth in their musical experiences are now looking beyond their schools' offerings. Regional and community youth bands, orchestras and choirs are flourishing like never before, satisfying the search for pinnacle musical experiences that are so elusive with the disparate resources in individual schools. Sometimes, even those secondary schools identified as arts schools are all too often staffed by teachers who are placed there by seniority rights or by simple convenience, rather than by talent or merit, or by the diligent insight of the appointing administrators. It doesn't take long for a community to realize that these slackening compromises have been made at their expense. The students either choose to go elsewhere, or to make their music elsewhere.

Universities also have to admit to their insufficient training of music education students, and the present generation of young teachers. Successive funding cuts have ravaged the availability of professorships and fundamental curriculum offerings. Also, whether by philosophy or by a feeling of necessity, some of the most penetrating experiences in the university curricula have been reserved for music performance majors, excluding the music education majors from opportunities to sharpen their applied music skills and their elite ensemble experiences and repertoire. Teachers cannot teach to a standard that they do not know or have not experienced. In turn, their students are similarly deprived of such elevating and enlightening possibilities. For those who have the knowledge, the opportunity, and sometimes, the finances to gain access to greater Edwards, D. (2007). A response to "Ontario by the numbers: A statistical examination of enrolment in Ontario secondary school music classes" (Nora Vince). In K. Veblen & C. Beynon (Eds. with S. Horsley, U. DeAlwiss, & A. Heywood), From sea to sea: Perspectives on music education in Canada. Retrieved

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experiences available to them, they find them outside the classroom walls. Teachers then have to cope with having some of their brightest and best students choose not to participate in the musical life of their schools.

Another obstacle to music enrolment is today's emphasis on the cultivation of the individual. It has made the encouragement of group musical discoveries and achievements a less obvious ambition for teenagers. Mp3 players, home theatre systems, video games and personal computers have engendered the building of personal music and entertainment spaces. Perhaps this has been the major contributing factor to slumping attendance at concerts, movie theatres and sporting events. The pursuit of personal projects is presently taking a greater priority over group enterprises.

Conclusion

Why make music in the schools when it is often more satisfying to do it elsewhere? Why make music in the schools when the teaching is often better elsewhere? Why make music in the schools when the traditional band and orchestral instruments are being replaced in the media and the orchestra pit by computerized and digitized sound? Why make music in the schools if not even the curriculum encourages one to do it? Why make music in the schools if the long classes and semestered curriculum work against what is known about ideal skill and repertoire building, making it more difficult to achieve true peak musical experiences?

We can be grateful that Ontario's dedicated and talented teachers are continually helping to resoundingly refute what has been stated above. They are creating musical experiences that are so compelling that students cannot help but share in them. University Edwards, D. (2007). A response to "Ontario by the numbers: A statistical examination of enrolment in Ontario secondary school music classes" (Nora Vince). 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/

funding is reviving somewhat, and new curriculum possibilities are beginning to thrive.

Students are realizing that skilled music making for themselves and with others, whether on a violin, trumpet or a guitar, is more rewarding than just listening through their headphones - while others do it.

We can be encouraged that the difficult elements involved in boosting school music enrolment also have the solutions within them. However, bringing about governmental and administrative leadership for the arts to flourish throughout the curriculum is the greatest of all the challenges. Then, we must make responsible choices to train teachers to the highest standard so they can guide their students to reach and grasp those higher heights. If given the opportunity, inspiration, encouragement, and safe environment, many students will choose to make music in school, and make it meaningfully.