

Reflections: Thinking about Teaching Music

[Editor's Note: This chapter represents a variety of perspectives on teaching music education in Canada, ranging from undergraduate pre-service teachers to seasoned professionals.]

Reflection 1: Donald McKellar

On Music Education in Canada

Many years ago the Canadian Music Educators Association asked me to write the Aims and Goals of the CMEA. After much consultation with many teachers throughout the country, I defined the Aims and Goals and I believe they are valid today. The aim of we the Canadian teachers of music is:

To encourage and give guidance throughout Canada to the development of effective school music programs within a balanced curriculum and to encourage creative and competent music teachers in the awakening and nurturing of the aesthetic spirit innate in every person.

This was accepted by the CMEA and many of the provinces. One may question specific words but I believe the spirit of what we wish to accomplish in our Canadian school music programs is contained in the statement.

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In a later paper I outlined several specific goals that I hope we can accomplish through our teaching. They are:

- To teach our students to be musically literate, not only on a specific instrument but to be able to sight sing a musical line. As we know literacy in music opens up the entire world of music and gives our graduates a skill that can be used throughout life.¹
- To bring our students into meaningful experiences with the many different kinds of music now available to all people in the western world. This includes not only the great heritage of western classical music, but folk music, musical theatre, jazz and the best of the commercial popular music. Of course, we must include the music that is relevant to the multitude of different ethnic cultures now part of our Canadian mosaic. Within at least one and perhaps many of the exciting expressions of music a student can find an intimate association that fits one's personality.
- I would hope that on completing our music programs our graduates continue to have music as an active and vigorous part of everyday life. I would hope that because of our music programs our graduates not only have music in the home but also help their families to enjoy meaningful musical lives.

¹ As an aside I am very disturbed that perhaps 90% of Canadians are musically illiterate. What a waste.

- I believe that our graduates should be leaders in the arts aspects of community life. That they will be not only active participants in musical organizations but are active on cultural boards of directors and are leaders in the musical community.

Some will say the above is idealistic. However, I believe that many teachers, after long years experience have found that they have accomplished many of these goals and have had the satisfaction of knowing that they have brought music into the lives of many of the young people they have taught. Nothing can be more rewarding than to know that a music teacher has had a significant influence on another person.

Reflection 2: Daniela Bute

Personal Narrative

When I was a little girl in Romania, there was music in our schools. But I don't remember much about singing and dancing. The Romanian system is very dry, and our schools very strict. I remember dictation and solfège, and carrying wood to feed some little heating stoves during the long and cold winters.

At home, my father bought me a little brown plastic accordion sized for children with fewer keys and fewer octaves. Although I first liked playing it, when my parents wanted me to perform in front of guests, I began to hate it and I never liked accordion since. Piano lessons were more successful.

When I was in the 3rd grade, I remember pretending to be a teacher. I'd sit in front of the piano with a beginner's book, pen in hand. I would talk with my imaginary students, teaching them basic music grammar and how to play piano. However, the part I liked best was evaluating

them and giving them marks, the same way I observed my teachers doing it. I used to do this often. I also had little dolls to play with. There were my children and I would teach them. The only vivid and pleasant memory I have from my elementary school years is of an after class out-of-school band I joined in the 7th grade. It was fun. We sang and played keyboard and learned how to improvise. However, after my mother noticed a bad mark in math, she stopped me from going to rehearsals.

So, although my schooling lacked much, I became a musician and a music teacher in Romania with award winning choir (the choir I conducted obtained a first prize at a provincial choral contest which prompted us to the National Choral Olympics in 2000). It seemed as a successful start of a career, but I felt I needed more, so I decided to go abroad.

The idea to study in Canada first came from colleagues who had already been admitted to US schools. This was a new idea because travelling abroad under Nicolae Ceausescu was forbidden. When his regime was overthrown in 1989, suddenly there was freedom. Impossible things became possible. Impossible things like music and arts for all, travelling abroad and other aspects of a decent and normal living unheard of yet such as, simply, more TV and radio programs and channels, and abundance of food were permitted, including the chance to study abroad.

One year later after learning about this important opportunity, I was flying for the first time in my life. I felt like I wanted to laugh, like after climbing a steep mountain. So there I arrived not more than four years ago, to Canada, a country really foreign to me, a country I've eventually chosen at the suggestion of some Canadians doing business with my father.

Canada has unravelled to me gradually, throughout the span of these four years. The first month I was both scared and excited. The new university in London, Ontario, was so

different. And I didn't know how to think critically. I'd not been trained to question. The Romanian system is more based on acquiring, selecting and synthesizing knowledge. When my Canadian professor read my first critique, he had me re-write it several times and this was also intimidating. When, however, the fear of the unknown gave way to increased adjustment to the new life, I began to enjoy my academic enterprise and to get involved into various activities, be those scholarly (i.e., qualitative research into choir singing, exposure to Kodály teaching approach) or of a volunteer nature (i.e., amateur "assistant" to a music summer camp).

Coming from a very dry and severe music education system, especially appealing to me was the Canadian system's emphasis on movement associated with singing and learning through fun activities. But I still didn't know how little children learned and how pre-service students acquired and developed their teaching methodologies and philosophies. So, when the opportunity to observe an elementary teaching methods class at the university level appeared last year, I grabbed it.

I started first as a graduate student taking the course, and then I continued as an observer of the class as I wanted and needed to know more. Dr. Kari Veblen, the music elementary methods' professor, has offered me the opportunity to increase my knowledge by analyzing students' reflections on observations of elementary teachers in real teaching settings. As Dr. Veblen and I started to write a paper on these reflections in order to observe students' development from novices to becoming teachers, this task was even more valuable to me as I continued to "dig" deeper into elementary music teaching and learning. On the other hand, I, myself, was in the same transitory stage as our students, from a Romanian-trained music

teacher, to a student in a Canadian university, to aspiring college/university professor so I could relate with their doubts, questions and anxieties.

I ask myself often, just like our students: why do I want to go into music education? My answer would be: because I love working with students and ... Well ... I don't know! Outside of accompanying as a part-time job I really can't think of anything I want to do. It scares me. It excites me. So I know that I, the eternal student, still negotiate a sense of teaching identity as I knock at the gates of the future.

Reflection 3: Jessica Edwards

My Simple Song

“This is the sound of one voice,

One spirit, one voice,

The sound of one who makes a choice,

This is the sound of one voice.” – Wailin’ Jennys

I believe that every individual has something to say, that every human who lives and breathes as you and I has the capacity to respond uniquely when asked, “what do *you* think?” Their response is their voice. From as early as I can remember, it was always easiest to express my thoughts, dreams, beliefs—my voice—by some musical means. I spent hours singing “myself” to every willing audience member. As a toddler, my audience usually consisted of the faithful herd of cows that congregated each time my bright red rubbers clanked against my fencepost stage. As I grew, I traded in my rubbers and fence posts for more formal musical performance settings, and learned to express

myself through involvement in community and school choirs and throughout private

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instruction in piano and voice. Upon entering the public school system, I was quickly labeled as a “musically gifted student” and was afforded countless opportunities to develop my musicianship. On one musical enrichment opportunity, I was ushered into a crowded gymnasium with the rest of the grade seven and eight students to take in a performance by the neighbouring high school’s Senior Concert Band. To be quite honest, I was initially more interested in the gentleman sitting next to me than the guest performers, but any excuse to miss class was always warmly embraced. I had no idea what I was in for.

In speaking with the conductor of the band years after what turned out to be a personally pivotal performance, I was assured that her intention in raising her arms that day to direct her ensemble was only to get the concert started. Still, as she raised her arms in readiness, something started in me. As the concert unfolded, and the performers’ artistry engulfed the room, I breathed with a sort of reverence to my neighbour, “when I grow up I’m gonna do *that*.” The ‘that’ I was referring to was the conductor. Something about that performance, about her role within the ensemble resonated so clearly with the sum of every musical moment I had experienced up to that point that I was overwhelmed with a sense of belonging: I had found my place.

The path I had been traveling veered suddenly that day, and I found myself walking down an unfamiliar but exciting trail that promised to lead to a career teaching music. It finally felt like the song I had been trying to have my life sing for all those years was starting to sound right. I saw teaching as an opportunity for me to facilitate the development of my students as engaged and aware individuals by creating an atmosphere that allowed for and encouraged experimentation and exploration of self with the aim of

self-discovery for all. Because I understood music as such an inside out subject—highly personal, and inherently dependent on each individual participant, yet steeped in communication and performance—it made perfect sense for me to aspire to use music as the setting for my discovery-based philosophy of teaching.

A decade later, this decision to teach music still feels right. I still believe that everyone has something to say, and that music can be an effective means of exploring and communicating externally everything that rests internally. I have yet to find an experience more fulfilling than that of facilitating the process of discovering and unleashing an individual's potential for the creation of art. I still believe that my job as an educator is to facilitate rather than dictate. Yet, as I've grown as a musician, teacher, and individual, I've seen these beliefs translate into my practice. My highest aim for each educational setting is to equip my students with the resources they require in order to use music as a meaningful method of self-expression. This can translate into providing any resource from theoretical basics, to technique exercises, to science-based knowledge of the physics of an instrument not with the aim of following a specific method or curriculum but rather with the aim of encouraging student engagement and ownership in the process of learning. Though a lofty goal, I am working diligently to make this student-focused approach my habit.

I aspire to teach this way in response to my own experiences as a music student. Too often in music education settings, my artistic contributions representing that little part of myself were ignored, discouraged, or completely silenced. In those situations, I became disengaged from the process of learning, and suffered all ill as a result of the marriage of teacher insecurity to rigid methods. Similarly, as an aspiring teacher on the

edge of her teacher training experience, my developing voice that is trying to find the courage to sing for the education world has often been drowned out by the voice of experience and curriculum demands. I understand and am delighted that in ten years I will be singing a new song about education, music, and myself from a very different perspective. Still, I believe that I will be committed to my choice to teach music in a manner that allows my students to discover everything that music can possibly mean in their lives.

So for now, I'll sing this song: I'll teach, I'll *live* in a way that asks everyone, "what do you think?" and wait patiently with open mind, heart, and arms for the reply. I sing a simple song, really. But it is a simple song that is my own:

This is the sound of one voice:

My voice,

One spirit, one voice,

expressing everything I am and stand for,

The sound of one who makes a choice

may teach and inspire others

This is the sound of one voice:

to find their own.

Reflection 4: André Heywood

Reflections on Teaching Music in the Community

While the term “music educator” is usually associated with school music teachers and university music professors (many of whom have also served in K-12 schools), I think it is important to realize that music education is not limited to the school system. While the school rightfully holds the privilege of being the central focus, as it is the only full-public access arena, I think the value of community music education is often underrated, and often not even considered.

We are all aware of the many distinct social groups in K-12 schools, and the labels and stereotypes that apply to them. I was a “music geek” - and proud of it! Yes, my activities included being on the soccer team, peer mentoring and tutoring, and even participating in the Science Olympics, but I was known by students and teachers alike as a musician. In fact, in my first visit back to my high school after commencing my university studies, many were astounded to hear that I had chosen to pursue a degree in Biochemistry. “Well, you could be André the Singing Doctor,” they told me. Naturally they were aware of my involvement in school musical activities - concert choir and concert band, the school show, singing at school masses, etc. While I very much immersed myself into the musical community in my school, it was merely an extension of my musical life. My own personal musical development was more closely related to my experiences in community music programs. This is not to say that I didn’t learn anything in school. My high school music teachers remain some of the greatest influences

in my life. However, now that I am about to enter into a career in music, it is clear that my entire character is the result of my community music experiences.

I remember a conversation at Festival 500 in Newfoundland in 2001. One of my conductors, Ken Fleet, was introducing me to his friend, Nancy Telfer. He said “This is André. He’s a science guy, but he really should be in music.” I smiled, not knowing what to say, but quite frankly, I believed it. I had spent a few dismal years at university mixing test tubes and inspecting Petri dishes. Without the school choir and band around, I was lucky to still be involved in my community choir to be able to have some joy in my life. Just over a year after that conversation, I stripped off my lab coat and walked into a Music Faculty to begin my new career path. I remember sitting in my first music education class, and being asked to think about why we were there. I had never even thought so much as to why I involved myself in music in the first place. To me it was second nature - I sang because I needed to; it was part of who I was. But now, being asked why I want to teach music?

There must be an internal instinct in each musician to want to share the gift of music with others; we simply differ in how we choose to share it. The composer gives his/her gift to the performer and subsequently to the audience. The performer favours an attentive listener. For me, there is no musical experience more satisfying than inspiring a host of other performers to engage in the musical experience. We are naturally drawn to things that we excel in. Those who have a knack for finding musical motifs and sonorities that interest the ear and move the heart typically choose composition as a career path. Likewise, those who have a gift for being able to inspire others to create music probably enjoy teaching. I was lucky enough to take a choral conducting class during my tenure as

a science student. My professor, unaware of my faculty affiliation until the end of the course wrote to me in an e-mail “You have a special gift in your ability to conduct expressively and communicate musical ideas. Don’t ignore that gift. It is an important part of who you are.” All my life I had been brought up with the belief that to excel in music you had to be “*the best*.” My professor’s comments not only said to me “André, you can do it,” but more importantly, “André, you *should* do it.”

And so I did it. I spent years learning how to resolve augmented sixth chords, memorizing the differences between Beethoven’s three periods, and sight singing a series of ridiculous intervals in 7/8 time. My experiences in my first conducting class had clarified for me the role I wished to pursue in the musical community. By the end of my undergraduate tenure, I came to see myself a conductor more than as a singer, and I looked for opportunities to further immerse myself in that role. Some of my favourite courses were the Music Education courses, and so I immersed myself in that arena as well. I went into schools to volunteer and started thinking about entering an Education faculty to pursue a B.Ed.

But sometimes, other opportunities present themselves, and we run with them and see where they take us. I was accepted to pursue a Masters degree in Choral Conducting, and this is where I am now. I am no longer under the jurisdiction of the Music Education department, but under the Performance department. It has been extremely difficult for me to not include myself under the Education umbrella. Yes, I am a performer; we all are in a sense. However, it is difficult for me to separate the educational aspects of my role from the performance aspects. I think conductors enjoy a privileged position of not only being

responsible for the performance of great music, but also as the education and inspirational force behind the creative forces of the individuals who engage in the performance.

So what do I do with all this now? I am a performer. I am an educator. While a career in the school system is still an enticing possibility for me, I see myself diverging from this path slightly. How then will I become involved in inspiring creativity, a task which seems embedded into my very bones. The answer lies in where I began my story - with the same community music programs that inspired me in the first place. These community programs require competent, animated and motivating leaders to further enrich the musical life of our communities. Yes, the schools should remain the central focus of our university music education programs as it is where it all begins. However, school teachers and other music professional need to be active in community programs that not only seek to provide entertainment or to attain 'perfect' performance, but to educate, to inspire, and to develop the musical talents within each individual. Whether or not I choose to enter the world of school music teaching, my commitment to community programs will remain. If I choose to pursue a doctorate and to continue working at the university level instructing future music educators, I will surely stress to them the importance of community involvement. Let us not forget how important these community groups are in augmenting the honourable work we pursue in our schools.

Reflection 5: Joseph Chi-Sing Siu

Personal Vignette

Two years ago, becoming a music educator was a career path that I would least like to pursue. However, after studying in Canada for two years, my perspective has changed completely. Now, I believe that I would enjoy very much being a piano teacher or to do any job that is related to music.

Although I was born into a musical family with my mom being a piano teacher, music had never touched my heart. Since I was five years old, I started taking piano and cello lessons; however, they were merely obligations to me. Despite winning prizes in festivals and getting distinctions in examinations, I was never motivated to take upon music seriously. Therefore, I only practiced enough to get by and I always answered “no” whenever people asked whether I would like to become a musician. Once I completed my associate diploma examination in grade ten, my parents finally gave me the choice of continuing my study in music or not. As a result, I quit both piano and cello lessons. Nevertheless, I have always enjoyed listening to music and making music with my friends in choir or small ensemble settings. It was because there was no pressure in these two musical activities compare to my piano and cello lessons. Hence, I realized that I enjoy music when it is for recreational purpose, but on the other hand, I would try to get away from it when I have to learn music seriously.

After completing my high school education in Hong Kong, I came over to Canada and continued my study at the University of Western Ontario. The subjects offered at UWO were very diverse and I found myself having interest in many areas. Therefore, as

an undeclared social science major in my first year, I took courses from five different faculties across the campus, including anthropology, biology, business, music and Spanish. The music course I took was “Listening to Music” and it was a music appreciation class especially for non-music majors. Despite the fact that I dislike studying music academically, I thought that would be a fun class to take since all we have to do was listening to music. Yet, in this process of learning how to listen to music actively, I developed a genuine interest in music for the first time and I realized that music was indeed a powerful way of communication among human beings. Besides, since the first year of university in Canada was not as demanding as grade thirteen in Hong Kong, I had quite a bit of free time and I decided to play some piano just for fun. However, I was soon attracted to the piano for its lovely tone colour and its richness in harmony. I had never enjoyed playing the piano so much and I could practice for hours for the first time in my life. Later, I realized that what made the difference was that I was learning music for myself but not for my parents or for my music teacher. Moreover, since I was appreciating and enjoying the music I was learning, I was motivated and thus I was willing to put in the hard work.

Playing music for myself was definitely pleasurable, however, I soon realized that I could not improve very much unless I have a teacher. Therefore, together with my curiosity about music history and theory, I decided to transfer to the faculty of music. In the audition, I had to play two contrasting pieces and also write a theory placement test. Thankfully, I passed those two tests despite not playing the piano for three years and not learning any theory for nine years. As a result, I began my second year of university as a music student and I have enjoyed every single class. Music theory was particularly

interesting to me since I had never learned it properly in Hong Kong. I was amazed at how every chords function differently and when they were put together in a certain way, they just sound gorgeous. Learning theory also helped me to improve my piano playing because now I understand the structure of the piece a lot better. The comprehensive music education that UWO offers has given me a complete picture of music and I realized that different areas in music actually depend very much on each other.

In my life journey of learning music and through the music education I received at UWO, I realized two important approaches to music education. First of all, music teachers, especially private studio teachers, should encourage their students to discover the wonderful world of music instead of forcing them to practice meaninglessly. Of course, practicing diligently is absolutely essential to become a successfully musician, however, forcing the students to practice against their will often lower their efficiency. Therefore, music teacher should aim to raise the student's interest in music and as a result they will work hard for what they find pleasurable. Secondly, a comprehensive music program should be introduced to students at a young age. Studio teacher should integrate music theory and history in their lesson so that their students will know more than just how to play the piece perfectly. It is important for a performer to know how the piece was composed as well as how it fits into the historical context. Students will definitely improve their performance once they have a thorough understanding of the repertoire that they are playing.

To sum up, I would like to thank my parents for giving me the opportunity to learn music when I was young. Without their foster, I would never be able to discover the joy I now found in music.

Reflection 6: Kim Saunders

Becoming A Music Teacher

At the age of twelve, while most children spent their time riding scooters through the park, me included, I knew I wanted to be a music teacher. I had this desire because of the wonderful music teachers I had during my schooling. My passion to teach continued to develop throughout my university career and continues to be fostered by my family and the wonderful music educators I have had the pleasure to meet throughout my journey.

Looking back over my 20 years of schooling I am forever indebted to the teachers I have had; I am the product of their tutelage. Now that I find myself at the end of 20 years in school *as a student* (for the time being), I am excited about starting my life as a teacher.

Right now I am in educational purgatory as I have coined it; two professional degrees and not a job between them. This is the current stress in my life; finding a job. I am looking to move away from London, which in the end was not a difficult decision; the music job market in London for the next while is not looking prosperous for a beginning teacher. I am saddened at the thought of leaving my home town, friends, and family, but excited at the challenge of starting my own life.

Besides the stress of finding a job I also worry about the current state of music education. For years now music educators I know have expressed concern about the declining numbers of students continuing with music through high school. I posit these

declining numbers are a result of changing cultural values, and the negative image some students have of *traditional* music education. I find myself at an impasse in my own thinking about music education; I know I cannot stick rigidly to the *traditional* but how far will I stray? My goal is to provide modern, perhaps even risqué musical experiences for my students. That being said, I do not suggest we throw the wind band and choir to the way side, for it was these two mediums that made me as well as many others fall in love with music. There must be a healthy balance between traditional and modern musical experiences. How will I achieve this healthy balance? I don't know at the moment. The answer to this question as well as many more will find me as I begin my career.

I am at a loss of words to express how I feel now that this portion of my journey has ended. Five years ago, although it seems like yesterday, I received my acceptance letter from the University of Western Ontario. I remember running out of the house and jumping on my scooter (a popular mode of self-propelled transportation at the time), the wind whipping past my face, overcome with insurmountable joy, I said to myself "I am going to be a music teacher." Now that I have arrived and have the piece of paper to prove it, I find myself with the same joy and excitement. "I am a music teacher!" ... Now where's my scooter?