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The Road Goes Ever On: Estelle Jorgensen's
Legacy in Music Education

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Ch. 13 - In Search of Choral Music Education: Where is it Now?

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Section III – Becoming Other Than

Chapter 13

In Search of Choral Music Education: Where is it Now?

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Abstract

This chapter chronicles the influence of Jorgensen’s writing in a graduate choral music education course. Jorgensen’s book chapter, *On Spheres of Musical Validity* (2005), becomes the focal point for an examination of the legitimacy of five major influences on music education: family, religion, politics, the music profession, and commerce. This investigation leads to consideration of these influences in graduate students’ personal lives, classrooms, rehearsal halls, and the broader profession of choral music education.

She invited me to sit next to her. Seriously? It happened in Hamburg, Germany at the 2005 symposium of the International Society for the Philosophy of Education. Estelle Jorgensen tapped me on the shoulder during one of the conference’s refreshment breaks and asked me to sit with her for a moment.

That she knew me, let alone wanted to talk to me, was positively stupefying. Estelle asked a simple question: “When are you going to write a philosophical article about choral music education?” I replied

that while I’d written many articles, I did not consider myself a philosopher because I had not studied philosophy beyond the required courses in my degree plans. Plus, I relayed that I viewed myself as an accidental academic and was really a middle school choral music teacher at heart. Estelle replied, “I’ve read everything you’ve written . . . I’m a former choral music teacher, and I get it. But I don’t think you realize that you have been writing philosophy all the time. I want to help you explore your philosophical views in a systematic, rigorous way so that you can share your ideas and influence

others in our field.” Then, for the next few minutes, Estelle gave me rudimentary pointers about locating exemplar essays, approaching a philosophical argument, and expanding small ideas into nuanced discussions filled with richness and breadth. Our brief conversation ended with my effusive thanks whereupon I quickly returned to my backpack, grabbed a pad of paper, and furiously wrote everything I could remember from my first conversation with Estelle Jorgensen.

I still have that piece of paper. It sits on my desk, both as a guide for my daily work and as a constant, nudging reminder that I really (really!) need to get that book written . . . the one that has bounced around in my subconscious for several years. And, that’s the thing—I would not have even considered my work as having bona fide philosophical groundings had it not been for Estelle’s encouragement. Her interactions with me on that sunny afternoon in Helsinki were vintage Estelle, always the nurturing senior scholar providing kindness and support to those in need of reassurance and a little motivation.

Estelle is able to provide this nurturing because she seems to have never left her “school music teacher” persona behind. She is one of the rare authors able to bring readers into the core of her discussion through the judicious description of experiences and understandings common to the music teachers who are her books’ prime audience members. Once hooked, readers are led by Estelle’s metaphorical hand to interrogate those

experiences and understandings. I often sense that Estelle must imagine the individual reader as she crafts each sentence of her writings and presentations. The result is that Estelle seems to speak to us both individually and collectively.

For me, one of Jorgensen’s most influential writings is the second chapter from her first book, *In Search of Music Education*.¹ The chapter, “On Spheres of Musical Validity,” has become required reading for my graduate choral methods classes. Most of the students in those classes are in the early years of their teaching careers. I choose that chapter because it epitomizes Jorgensen’s ability to reach in-service music teachers by asking them to cross-examine their daily experiences and assumptions. Much of the chapter is about the nature of music and musical experience rather than specifically about music education (the last few pages are an exception). I have students first read the chapter and make notes for later discussion. Then, I ask for a second reading, during which students are to consciously substitute “music education” for each instance of the word “music.” We discuss again and eventually move on to the development of implications for the subdiscipline of choral music education.

Finally, my graduate choral methods students are asked to evaluate the legitimacy, both in the past and in the present, of the five major influences on music and music education that Jorgensen

proposes in the chapter: family, religion, politics, the music profession, and commerce. Jorgensen positions these five influences as contributors to the development of each individual's spheres of musical validity. The term "spheres of musical validity" is adapted from the work of George Simmel and elaborated upon by Peter Etzkorn.² Jorgensen restates Etzkorn's definition when she offers that "a sphere of musical validity exists about a given musical genre, style, or tradition when similar cognitive responses or meanings are evoked through a shared symbolism that it communicates."³ Jorgensen examines several ambiguities within that definition in the pages that follow, most notably the issues of inclusivity and exclusivity:

It is inclusive in that the individuals within it hold shared beliefs, opinions, and mores and act in certain prescribed and proscribed ways according to given expectations shared by a musical group. It is exclusive in that individuals and groups outside the sphere who do not share these beliefs and expectations are excluded from membership in it.⁴

For Jorgensen, then, these spheres are social conceptions derived both from musical influences and extra-musical influencers. They create the musical "in-groups" and "out-groups" that we readily see between individuals of different ages, socio-economic backgrounds, educational experiences, and geographic locations among any number of distinguishing factors. My graduate students struggle with this socio-political conception of music;

many of them have not before questioned the content they should be teaching, focusing instead on pedagogical and musical technique. Jorgensen's chapter provides a pathway for graduate students to begin approaching philosophy by looking at the five major influences with a dispassionate yet critical eye. The discussion nearly always moves inward as students begin to consider the role of these influences in their personal lives, classrooms, rehearsal halls, and, most important, the profession of choral music education.

The following points were generated during several semesters of class discussions as students considered how the five influences currently shape the teaching of choral music. Students were asked to identify key sentences in Jorgensen's text and consider the relevance for the present moment. Each of the five influences (family, religion, politics, the musical profession, and commerce) is listed below with several corresponding student-selected sentences. These are accompanied by brief descriptions of the graduate students' analyses of how each of the five influences the musical lives of the students in their own choirs.

Family

The notion of family is an ambiguous one, [applying] to those who share common bonds of customs, livelihood, or experience and whose reality is partly articulated through music.⁵

The interrelationships between music and family are played out differently according to whether families are organized matriarchally or patriarchally.⁶

Musical values reflect and reconstruct the social values that characterize family life with which they are associated.⁷

Viewed as a social institution within a particular cultural and societal context, the family inculcates its beliefs, values, mores, and traditions in its young and ensures its survival through a life-long educational process.⁸

The idea of colleagues as a family structure is intriguing because it extends the notion of “family of choice” to our chosen profession and co-workers.⁹ We may not be fully cognizant of the choices we make when seeking to establish our career identities. For instance, most members of the choral music education community join the American Choral Directors Association, the National Association for Music Education, and their related state and local organizations. In many states, these associations administer the ranked festivals and competitive musical events required of so many school music teachers. Those who hold influential positions in these associations develop the criteria for success, including the repertoire that is permissible and the standards by which the ensemble is evaluated. Our professional colleagues become de facto families due to

our job similarities, relative levels of expertise, professional roles and stature, and our desire to develop communities of friends with whom we share similar experiences and goals. Though it appears we are expanding our family by creating a close network of colleagues, we are actually limiting our family as we associate with an increasingly similar group of individuals.

This sameness then extends to all aspects of our lives as choral music teachers: from repertoire to performance practice and from the vocal technique and resultant tone quality of our choral ensemble to the structure and function of our choral course offerings. While there are positive aspects to developing these professional family structures, there is the potential for negative effects. These can be seen, for instance, in the overwhelming lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the memberships of “elite” choirs chosen for performance at the state and national conferences of our professional association. The desire to adhere to the “beliefs and values” of our professional family can result in limited programmatic choices where all concert programs sound alike. One extreme example was the eight-day 2017 World Symposium on Choral Music (Barcelona, Spain) that included performance of only one piece of repertoire written prior to 1991.

In addition to these thoughts, my students have linked the idea of professional family to Jorgensen’s notion that we then “inculcate” our school-aged students into the same system through

what might be a limited set of performing traditions, repertoire genres, tone qualities, and behavioral expectations. Many of my graduate students who have their own school choirs relate common knowledge that inner city choral ensembles should never sing spirituals at choral competitions because they'll be judged as sounding "too black," evidencing the need for me to teach about the evolution and purpose of the concert spiritual tradition in North America.¹⁰ Other students make connections between Jorgensen's distinctions between patriarchal and maternal esthetics in the pedagogy of choral rehearsals where the conductor assumes authority and the choir members are often subservient. And, there is some evidence that this patriarchal approach to *both* rehearsal and performance may hinder the recruitment and retention of secondary students to their school choirs.¹¹

Religion

[Religion] involves the belief or sense of ultimacy, at times transcendent, that suggests various feelings of power, benevolence, dependence, mystery, intimacy, or awe in the presence of this other.¹²

Music is often a principal, if not indispensable, element of religious ritual, religion is sometimes a part of musical ritual, and the drama of religious rite is played out differently, depending on the particular religious experience that underlies it.¹³

The particular way in which a church educates its members musically depends on the particular underlying theological beliefs examined in musical aspects of religious rituals.¹⁴

Religion and choral music education are intertwined, sharing elements of hierarchy, repertoire, performer/conductor/audience etiquette, and the opportunity for transcendence during what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi labels optimal experiences, or flow experiences.¹⁵ Some characteristics of these flow experiences are high levels of both perceived challenge and perceived skill, a clarity of goals, deep personal involvement and concentration, self-directedness, self-awareness, and a lack of awareness concerning time constraints. When in these situations, people experience a state of flow while the loss of these conditions disrupts the flow experience. These characteristics are each possible in both religious and choral settings, subject to the careful crafting of the facilitator, whether clergy member or conductor-teacher.

The textual component of choral repertoire presents perhaps the most direct link between choral music's historical roots and the formalized rituals of religion. Other connections include the use of music—apart from text—in religious services, the hierarchical divide between clergy/congregation and conductor/choir, and the physical similarities between religious ceremonies and choral concerts. Tensions can arise when teacher-

conductors either lack acknowledgement of or seek to minimize differences between choral music in religious services and the use of religious music in choral music education. My university is located in a part of the country where the church calendar and religious views influence nearly all aspects of daily life, where there is a near-expectation that school choral concerts will be held in church sanctuaries, and where school Christmas concerts include sacred carols without objection. For my graduate students, it is inadequate to argue with their school communities about the separation of church and state, when for many the separation is theoretical.¹⁶ Rather, Jorgensen's both-and dialectical approach can assist young teachers as they begin to reconcile their educational philosophies with their underlying religious beliefs and then identify how those stances might influence what their choral singers' experience during rehearsals and in concert settings.¹⁷

Politics

States use sponsorship to encourage and support musical beliefs and practices of which they approve.¹⁸

Through education, states seek to inculcate musical beliefs and practices that will be consistent with their methods and ends and ensure their survival.¹⁹

Through censorship, states act to prevent that which is considered

subversive from being heard. They constitute a filtering mechanism whereby only that music within the range of what they consider to be acceptable is composed, performed, and listened to.²⁰

State officials and their representatives shape the musical knowledge considered to be legitimate, enact policies that ensure these objectives will be met, and devise methods for musical instruction consistent with their enunciated objectives.²¹

...the political power that musicians exercise through music making subverts or preserves the status quo.²²

Jorgensen defines politics as "having to do with the public and the state"²³ and presents the related concept that "music has fundamentally to do with the exercise of power, be it political, religious, economic, or otherwise."²⁴ Jorgensen's focus is on the relationships between politics, music, and power. The equating of politics with power relations is somewhat unexpected for new teachers, given the vitriolic polarization found in today's public discourse and the perception that political motivations yield correctness instead of degrees of power. Of immediate appeal to my graduate students are discussions of how issues of the day relate to the practice of choral music education. One of these is the current focus on the singing of the National Anthem at school gatherings, the desire among some

students to refrain from singing (or standing for) the anthem as a form of protest, the reasons for and reactions to those protests, and the implications for programming repertoire in choral concerts.²⁵ And, there are many social issues with particular relevance to practical matters within the choral classroom. None of these is more prominent than how to incorporate transgender singers and their voices within the choral art.²⁶ Choral teacher-conductors are uniquely required to respond to transgender students due to issues of voice part placement, healthy vocal development, and care for the singer's socio-emotional wellbeing in an environment traditionally focused on binary male-female nomenclature, repertoire texts, and ensemble configurations. This requirement is a political decision of teachers, based on their moral and ethical concerns, even though it may not be a political requirement supported by those who have power over teachers.

But are these responses to social issues "politics" in the manner elucidated by Jorgensen? Probably not, though they provide activation points for discussions about the intersections of public policy, school regulations, and teaching practice. In an effort to humanize the issues in policy and practice, my graduate students are encouraged to replace the ubiquitous word "they" (as in "*they* say we need to teach X in Grade 9") with specific identifiers. This prompts them to begin recognizing the concept that policy reflects political views and the people who hold them. From there, students begin to identify existing policies,

explore why they exist, and consider the effects on course offerings and curricular content. Three questions emerge: what are the policies, what are the politics behind them, and who are the politicians (broadly speaking) who enact them? It becomes easier, as a result, for early-career teachers to look beyond the individual policy-curriculum components of the ensemble-specific National Core Arts Standards and instead consider what viewpoints and philosophies are given privilege by those standards.²⁷

The Musical Profession

An ongoing dynamic interrelationship exists between the beliefs, mores, and traditions of the music profession and musical ideas and practices.²⁸

There is also an avowal or commitment to pursuing and practicing the received wisdom as a way of life and direct contact with clients who attempt to direct the professional's work and remove patronage if they are dissatisfied.²⁹

Musicians are influenced by the musical ideas and practices characteristic of the traditions in which they work. They also reconstruct these traditions and create new ones, especially through their writings on, and activities in, music education.³⁰

Like the family, church, and state,

the music profession, through its various institutions that served as its “gatekeepers,” sponsored particular musicians and musical styles, censored ideas and practices, and educated the public; it was also partly shaped by social and musical events outside its control.³¹

Allowing that distinctions between amateurs and professionals are sometimes fuzzy in practice . . . these typical differences, seen more or less in practice, translate into corresponding contrasts in music education.³²

I ask my graduate students to consider this influence on spheres of musical validity through the lens of music education rather than of music more comprehensively. New music teachers can understandably be confused about what the music education profession entails. They often view the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) as synonymous with the whole of music education in the United States and are surprised by the realization that NAfME is an association of members like themselves—an association of music teachers. This is partly due to the organization’s name change in 1998 from Music Educators National Conference to the National Association for Music Education. The former name was focused on music teachers, whereas the latter is focused on the enterprise of music education.

Young teachers have, in reality, been dues-paying NAfME members for many years, first as collegiate members and then

as in-service teachers. The same holds for membership in the smaller, more tightly focused American Choral Directors Association (ACDA) that notably emphasizes its constituent “choral director” members in the organization name. However, the vast influence of NAfME, its affiliate organizations, and its publications obscures the fact that professional associations are wholly dependent upon their members instead of the reverse scenario where music teachers need to “buy into” the associations. It is easy to understand why. In all but a few states, NAfME affiliates and members hold all visible levers of power related to professional development, prestige, the adjudicated ensemble contests required by many school administrations, and student opportunities such as auditioned honor choirs. These are each individually favorable benefits of NAfME membership, but it is inaccurate to equate NAfME with the totality of music education.

Certainly, NAfME has advanced music education at legislative and structural levels more than any other entity in its 112-year history. NAfME’s educational and legislative resources are unparalleled in the field. With this power, however, comes the possibility that certain viewpoints and practices are foregrounded while others are forced to the background. The pages of the *Philosophy of Music Education Review* have often featured analysis and critique of these privileged positions.³³ The dilemma for young teachers is not that such positions exist or even dominate the profession, but that there may not appear to be opportunities for other positions to be fully

voiced or explored. The result is that choral music teacher-conductors increasingly teach alike, rehearse alike, program the same repertoire, aim for the same choral sound, structure their school programs similarly, attend the same conferences, and so forth. The result is a homogenization of choral music education rather than the nurturing of variants that reflect the diversity of cultures and communities in which they are located.

Commerce

The impact of Western music on the rest of the world through the activities of commercial enterprises had important consequences for musical ideas and practices internationally.³⁴

Commerce often seems reactive rather than proactive in regard to musical taste—it responds to what it thinks people want . . . it makes these determinations based principally on quantitative and fiscal rather than esthetic or artistic criteria.³⁵

Much of Jorgensen’s discussion of commerce centers on the expansive impact of the music industry on the ideals and practices of music both locally and across wide swaths of the globe. While Western music’s influence reverberates through the world at large, the choral community is broadly able to glimpse how choral music functions in other countries through the diverse array of international performing choirs at national and international

conferences of the American Choral Directors Association, the International Federation for Choral Music, and the International Society for Music Education. It should be noted that nearly all of these choirs are grounded in the Western a cappella choral tradition, though many meld differing musical cultures through the repertoire they sing and the elaborate staging that occasionally accompanies the performances.

Still, few opportunities to hear diverse choirs are accessible to school music teachers who cannot afford to travel to national and international conferences, and the practicalities and expenses for hosting international choirs are beyond the means of many regional and state association chapters. There are implications in this for commerce, since many of these associations and the choirs they present are supported by the music industry. One goal might be to discern which teacher-conductors would most benefit from exposure to international choirs, what kinds of choirs might be the best models, and how funding might be secured to facilitate such arrangements. The music industry might collaborate with the professional associations of ACDA, IFCM, and ISME to assist conductor-teachers—and their students—to extend their concepts of how choral music exists elsewhere in the world . . . without the scheduling and financial hardships of attending a prestigious conference. An international spotlight on inner-city secondary school choirs would be particularly intriguing, for instance.

My students immediately draw their focus closer to their daily lives in classrooms and rehearsal spaces as prompted by Jorgensen’s comparison of the “business approach to music education” with a “musically oriented business approach.”³⁶ Choral music education is particularly dependent upon the publishing houses that create the academic literature used in school ensembles. Especially for elementary and middle school choirs, this academic literature is composed to teach specific skills to the singers, but it is not often reflective of the music that school students encounter outside the classroom.³⁷

This gives rise to concerns that publishing companies may emphasize potential pedagogical content over the artistic quality of the academic repertoire they develop. This decision results in limited connections between school-based music making and the diversity of ways the students might employ music skills later in life. The arduous task of choosing repertoire is difficult for teachers with specialized choral ensembles, such as those with changing adolescent voices. The days are gone when there was very little choral repertoire available for young changing voices. But, the teacher-conductor’s repertoire selection process becomes particularly burdensome when the available vocally appropriate repertoire is of a style that is neither enjoyable to teach nor sing. My students recognize that choral music teachers in the United States are fortunate to have an academic music publishing industry that is robust and ubiquitous. Yet, those same qualities can lead publishers to

produce repertoire that is redundant and stale, all in the name of service to schools while adhering to a solid business model of maximizing profits. In so doing, they often fail to respond to the consumers of most importance but with the fewest financial resources to contribute: the school-aged singers in the choirs.

Coda

“Family” was the first of five influences described in the preceding essay. This image of family is central to Jorgensen’s influence on the field of music education. We regard Jorgensen as influential because of the content of her ideas and the rigor, integrity, and authenticity that permeate her work. Jorgensen’s greatest contribution, however, is in the worldwide network—a family, if you will—of philosophically oriented music educators she has established through her founding editorship of *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, her founding of the International Society for the Philosophy of Music Education, and her leadership and guidance with the National Association for Music Education’s special research interest group in philosophy. Estelle has steadfastly provided an exemplary model of how a single scholar can affect an entire field.

Notes

- 1 Estelle R. Jorgensen, *In Search of Music Education* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997).
- 2 Ibid., 37.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid., 37-38.
- 5 Ibid., 45.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid., 46.
- 8 Ibid., 47.
- 9 Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1991).
- 10 Andre J. Thomas, *Way over in Beulah Lan': Understanding and Performing the Negro Spiritual* (Dayton, OH, Heritage Music Press, 2007).
- 11 Alfonso Elorriaga, "The Construction of Male Gender Identity Through Choral Singing at a Spanish Secondary School," *International Journal of Music Education* 29, no. 4 (November 2011): 318-332.
- 12 Jorgensen, *In Search of Music Education*, 48.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid., 50.
- 15 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Nina Gilbert, "Singing and the Self: Choral Music as 'Active Leisure,'" *Choral Journal* 35, no. 7 (February 1995): 13-20; Estelle R. Jorgensen, "Religious Music in Education," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 1, no. 2 (Fall, 1993): 103-114.
- 16 Emily Marie Mercado, "Perceptions of Religious Music in a Southern U.S. Public Middle School: A Case Study" PhD diss., Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, Baton Rouge, 2018. Ph.D. dissertation. https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/4526
- 17 Jorgensen, *In Search of Music Education*, see chapter 3.
- 18 Ibid., 53.
- 19 Ibid., 54.
- 20 Ibid., 53.
- 21 Ibid., 54.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid., 51.
- 24 Ibid., 52.

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- 25 Dicker, Ron. "Students singing National Anthem kneel at MLB game." *Huffingtonpost.com*.
https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/two-students-singing-national-anthem-kneel-at-seattle-mariners-game_us_5ac2462ae4b0a47437aca459 (accessed July 20, 2018); also an active topic of discussion in Facebook groups such as "I'm a Choir Director."
- 26 Joshua Palkki, "Inclusivity in Action: Transgender Students in the Choral Classroom," *Choral Journal* 57, 11 (June/July, 2017): 20-34.
- 27 National Core Arts Standards. <https://nafme.org/wp-content/files/2014/06/5-Core-Music-Standards-Ensemble-Strand1.pdf>
- 28 Jorgensen, *In Search of Music Education*, 56.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Ibid., 57.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid., 58.
- 33 For example, Estelle Ruth Jorgensen, "Songs to Teach a Nation," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 150-160; Julia Koza, "In Sounds and Silences: Acknowledging Political Engagement," *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 168-176.
- 34 Jorgensen, *In Search of Music Education*, 62.
- 35 Ibid., 63.
- 36 Ibid., 64-65.
- 37 See, for example, Allen P. Britton, "American Music Education: Is it Better than We Think? A Discussion of the Roles of Performance and Repertory, Together with Brief Mention of Certain Other Problems," in *Basic Concepts in Music Education II*, ed. Richard Colwell (Niwtot: University Press of Colorado, 1991): 180.

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Project Links

This chapter comes from a book titled *The Road Goes Ever On: Estelle Jorgensen's Legacy in Music Education*. The philosophical essays contained within focus on themes that have intrigued Estelle Jorgensen whose forty years of scholarship have strongly influenced music education research and practice: the transformation of music education in public schools; feminist and LGBTQ voices; mentoring; the unfinished search for new ways of seeing, hearing, and doing; multiple and intersecting musical identities; the tension between tradition and change; and activist practice in music education.

The complete book can be found at the following link: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/jorgensen/>