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The School Ensemble a Culture of Our Own

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THE SCHOOL ENSEMBLE

A CULTURE OF OUR OWN

School ensembles are not just classes or performance groups, but guardians of their own specific culture, a culture that informs and enriches the lives of their members.

BY STEVEN J. MORRISON

If any one idea has taken center stage in contemporary music teaching, it is “context.” No music exists in a vacuum. All music comes from someone and someplace, at some point in time, and for some purpose. In any musical interaction, the fullest rewards are reaped when the experience is centered within a chronological, stylistic, cultural, and geographical framework. Much attention has been given to these contextual matters, as our profession has sought to expand its teaching repertoire to include music from the world’s vast array of cultural traditions.

Unfortunately, there are limitations to the experiences that our students draw from this global repertoire. Students may explore the unique sounds, fascinating history, and often stirring ideas behind the musics that they encounter while remaining tourists to these traditions, never able to truly live within them and make them their own. At the same time, one of our goals as music educators is to teach students “to meet significant musical



Photo by Mark Regan

School ensembles inspire individual excellence in a group context, forming bonds that create a unique and enduring culture.

challenges in teaching-learning situations that are close approximations of real music cultures.”¹ The question arises: “How can a real music culture be approximated in the rehearsal room?” Surprisingly, a real musical culture already exists—not only exists, but thrives. By recognizing school music programs as real musical cultures, educators may better articulate

the value of performance in students’ development, better understand the program qualities that students value, and better choose future directions for an ensemble program’s structure and content.

An Overlooked Culture

It is tempting to consider organizations so historically rooted and tradi-

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tion-laden as the school band, orchestra, or choir as “outmoded,” as not in step with new emphases in music teaching. How can organizations with such a narrow, albeit rich, historical lineage accommodate the needs of today’s diverse school community? How can real musical cultures be closely approximated within the constraints of current school performing ensembles? These are important questions, but they may overlook one of the greatest strengths of school ensembles: these performance programs are themselves real musical cultures.



Surprisingly, a real musical culture already exists—not only exists, but thrives.



Orchestra is a performance ensemble. Band is usually one component of a school music program. Choir is often a class. Each of these traditions is a musical world unto itself. For example, take the band program. Michael Mark, in his thorough exploration of the history of American music education, observed, “It is one of the ironies of history that the professional band, now a thing of the past, is recreated and emulated in schools, while the symphony orchestra, which is held in esteem by society, is not as prevalent in the schools.”² It is easy to see how Mark reached this conclusion. School bands have, over time, drawn significantly from the great professional bands of the past. These great bands provided guidelines for instrumentation, fostered a foundation of public support, formed the training ground for many pioneering

band instructors, and generated an important early body of performance literature.

Though many of the school band’s structural characteristics are directly reminiscent of old professional groups, school bands have long since moved away from re-creating or emulating the performance medium that was so popular in the past. School bands, along with school orchestras and choirs, have created their own performance traditions. Within this current, ongoing tradition is the realization of much present philosophical thought.

The term “culture” probably does not immediately conjure images of a middle school choir in the midst of vocal warm-ups. Certainly school-ensemble culture is very different in size and scope from groups traditionally organized by nationality, ethnic background, or geographic proximity. However, as music educator Keith Swanwick has observed, “Any group of people sustained by a common interest or a set of shared values ... will develop customs, conventions and conversational manners of a more or less specialized kind, creating a sub-culture.”³ Who can deny that the school band, choir, and orchestra have their own customs, conventions, and conversational manner? Noted ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl suggested that “one significant way to comprehend a culture is to find dominant themes that exhibit themselves in a variety of cultural domains and behavior patterns.”⁴

Cultural Themes

In light of Nettl’s remarks, it may be fruitful to look at several common cultural themes and consider how they manifest themselves in the familiar world of the school ensemble:

Identity. Students take math. Students enroll in science class. But students become members of the choir; they join the band; they are in the orchestra. Students take ownership of the ensemble experience in a unique and personal way. Participation becomes an aspect of students’ self-identity. Membership in one or more of these ensembles may continue for the better part of an entire primary and secondary school education, often

under the consistent tutelage of a very small corps of music teachers (sometimes only one!). Over time, this identity grows and strengthens until, by high school, a particular group of individuals is identified as being the band and not just being in the band. Perhaps it is the compromise of this personal ownership that is at the core of the distress many music teachers exhibit over such reform efforts as block scheduling or all-arts course offerings. Part-time performers cannot be full participants in an ensemble culture.

Though the most formal manifestation of ensemble membership occurs at concert performances when members don their uniforms and take the stage, identity surfaces at other times and places as well. Custom-designed shirts or jackets may proclaim a student’s performance affiliations. School letters adorned with clefs, notes, and lyres may be worn with all the pride of their equivalents representing athletic endeavors. And the school yearbook invariably preserves the membership of the performance culture for future generations.



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Transmission. Throughout the world, musical traditions are often passed down from generation to generation by respected elder music masters. Young novices develop their skills

under the watchful eye of the expert. Similarly, the school ensemble tradition is passed on by music educators who themselves were brought up in the band, orchestra, and choir ensemble culture. It is rare to find a school music teacher who came to the profession without serving an apprenticeship as a student musician. University music education programs are filled with students who have had particularly powerful experiences in their own school performance programs. Even among practicing teachers, there is a tendency to identify first as a band, orchestra, or choir director and secondly as a music educator. Yes, the school ensemble director is a musician and teacher who clearly fills the role of “culture bearer”—a senior practitioner who passes on accepted practices, values, and traditions to a younger generation.

The ensemble director is not the only culture bearer. School performing groups are multilevel organizations. The youngest and oldest members of the student community may sit side by side in the orchestra. A freshman who has never sung in a choir before may find herself standing alongside the soprano section leader. Directly and indirectly, the student elders in every ensemble see to it that less experienced

members know what is expected of them, both musically and socially.



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Social Dimension. An ensemble is very much a social unit. As students soon realize, becoming a member of the band, choir, or orchestra requires a sizable time commitment. With so much time spent together, a clear social structure soon develops among the participants. This social structure often extends beyond the music room.

Groups of ensemble members may be found staking out their own table in the school cafeteria, keeping up on gossip in the corridors, cruising the local mall together, or checking out the latest movies.

Many of the same social divisions evident throughout the larger school population also emerge within the ensemble. Though the terminology may vary, there are always the brains, the socialites, the athletes, and so on. But, whereas in the wider school setting these students’ paths may only occasionally converge, the school ensemble demands regular and extensive interactions—shared experiences and goals—among its members. We might even say that the time spent with “others” is far greater in the performance culture than in many other aspects of real life.

Practical and Personal Boundaries. On a group level, for nearly all ensemble members, participation is not limited to class time. In some cases, ensembles do not even meet during a formal class period; they hold rehearsals before or after school or during lunch. Concerts, festivals, and football games bring members together at times and in settings well removed from school. Summer camps may require students to spend full mornings, afternoons, and evenings working with their ensemble colleagues. In the case of trips and tours, students may live exclusively as band, orchestra, or choir members removed from the familiar confines of the rehearsal room for days or even weeks. Such a wealth of shared experience only strengthens the bonds and focuses the identity of this culture’s members.

On an individual level, the realization of school ensembles as a culture rather than a class may suggest why participation in our programs so rarely expands beyond a “critical mass.” An ensemble’s identity within the larger community is exactly what many participants value about their membership. However, for a school ensemble to provide that identity of “within,” there must also be a “without.” For students to take on the identity of the ensemble within the larger school population, then part of that popula-



Photo by Mark Regan.

As students invest in membership in an ensemble, the culture of the ensemble informs their identity and shapes their interactions with each other and the larger school community.

tion cannot be ensemble members.

Organizational Hierarchy. Unlike many other school organizations, and certainly unlike other academic classes, performance ensembles often possess a formal internal power structure. Remarkably, this structure is not necessarily constructed along musical lines. Students may be elected to roles such as president, secretary, treasurer, or drum major based more on personal characteristics than strictly musical achievements. Positions such as section leader or rehearsal assistant may represent more formal recognition of a student's musical leadership.

As the years pass, students constantly move into and out of ensembles. Yet the organizational hierarchy often remains, supported through formal bylaws or even a constitution. All classrooms have rules, but in the culture of the school music group, these rules take on a depth and breadth that go well beyond the simple maintenance of good discipline.



Since ensemble culture exists throughout the country, ex-performers from different geographical backgrounds quickly discover that they share a wealth of familiar experiences.



Traditional Song. Nettl wrote, "A society has a music, or at least a principal music, that consists of a set of rules and principles that govern ideas about music, musical behavior, and



Photo by Jim Kirby.

Ensemble culture is passed on by the student elders in an environment that is more clearly defined by experience and expertise.

musical sound There is Italian music, Chinese music, Arapaho music, and Ewe music."⁵ And, I would add, there are musics for school band, orchestra, and choir. With the possible exception of the most advanced works, the school ensemble's literature is its own. Indeed, an entire branch of the publishing industry has grown up to serve the specific needs of the school performance community. Even among the most advanced musical compositions, only the older works are shared with other historical performance traditions—the professional wind band, the church choir, or the symphony orchestra, for example.

The school ensemble's central repertoire appears most formally in the state contest or festival list. Teachers across the country demonstrate strong agreement on the cornerstones of the repertoire, the yardsticks for performance achievement, and the most promising new works. Usually, there is also a more localized repertoire including fight songs, alma maters, and traditional student favorites. Though the specific contents of this localized list vary from school to school (or even ensemble to ensemble), the general characteristics of the list are remarkably consistent. Common local traditions

include not only literature but also such peripheral activities as warm-ups, technique exercises, and chorales—activities that are often as ritualistic as they are pedagogical.

Traditional Performance Practices. Models of outstanding performance practice are drawn from within the school ensemble culture. Agreement on acceptable performance characteristics is built from within the school performance community—school ensembles strive to emulate other school ensembles. A developing middle school orchestra may take its cue from an outstanding middle school orchestra in the area. An outstanding high school choir may set goals according to the standards demonstrated by the local college choral group. The musical goals toward which school groups aspire are regularly on display, locally at the state large-ensemble festivals and nationally at such events as MENC conferences, the ACDA conference, or the Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic.

The Diaspora. Participation in performance ensembles often ends upon high school graduation. Is this because music educators have failed to instill a love of music and music making in students? Probably not. It is more likely that this milestone signifies the loss



Photo by Mark Regan

An ensemble culture that is real and vibrant can create shared experience and traditions that live beyond graduation.

of a student's place within a familiar and reinforcing social structure. Even among those who do continue to perform after graduation, one comment students commonly make upon joining a college ensemble is how different it is from high school. More than likely, although the literature may be more difficult, they are responding to a new and unfamiliar cultural dynamic. No matter what a student's subsequent performance career, his or her identity as a member of a secondary school ensemble does not necessarily vanish after graduation. Many school music programs have active alumni organizations that, through socializing, supporting, and music making, regularly gather to celebrate the school performance culture. And, since ensemble culture exists throughout the country (and even throughout the world), ex-performers from different geographical backgrounds quickly discover that they share a wealth of familiar experiences.

Other Areas. Additional themes may include such items as indoctrination: In how many ensembles do new members have to pass some significant milestone (band camp or the first concert, for example) before being accepted as full-fledged members of the group? Another theme is lore: Every performing group passes on stories of superlative moments or individuals

from the past, both musical (that lead jazz trumpeter from ten years back who could pick off a high G on every try) and nonmusical (the time the entire choir had to push the bus out of the snowdrift on the way back from the festival). But, hopefully, by examining even a few of these common themes, the view of the school ensemble as a real and vibrant culture emerges a little more clearly.



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A Wider Perspective

Recognizing the cultural dimension of the school performance program allows us a much wider perspective on the value of ensemble participation in our students' lives. But it does not allow us to say that our work is already done and that recent ideas about the nature of music teaching can provide us with nothing new. This perspective is certainly not meant to take anything away from the many exciting innovations in ensemble teaching that are developing in many schools across the nation. Exploring the world's musical cultures has rightly become a significant part of a young person's musical education. Indeed, the long history of success enjoyed by student musical groups should push us to further explore the diverse practices that can thrive within the school performance program.

But practices are not a culture. Learning about the world's musical traditions is a valuable, even essential, part of a student's musical and personal growth. Developing an appreciation for and understanding of "difference" goes a long way toward a human education. But the sharing of musical experiences within a real cultural context—learning within rather than only learning about—gives an unmatched depth to a student's musical education. The diversity within our classrooms is created by what students bring from outside. The unity that develops within our classroom is created by experiences shared. Nowhere in the school is the opportunity for celebrating both diversity and unity greater than in the school performing ensemble—a real, living musical culture all our own.

Notes

1. David J. Elliott, *Music Matters: A New Philosophy of Music Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 206.
2. Michael L. Mark and Charles L. Gary, *A History of American Music Education* (New York: Schirmer Book, 1992), 264.
3. Keith Swanwick, *Music, Mind, and Education* (London: Routledge, 1988), 3.
4. Bruno Nettl, *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 6.
5. *Ibid.*, 87. ■