

Music Education at the Tipping Point

By John Kratus

Music education must find ways to both keep up with the changing musical culture and preserve the best of our musical past.

In his classic comedy *Annie Hall*, filmmaker Woody Allen remarks that relationships are like sharks: they have to keep moving forward or they die. The same could be said of a number of things, including music education. History shows that American music educators have been most successful and their positions most secure when they satisfied the prevailing musical desires of the public. Singing schools in the late nineteenth century and the band movement in the mid-twentieth century are unmistakable examples of music education fulfilling changing societal needs. Conversely, music education has suffered when it has been perceived as culturally irrelevant and unnecessary. History also tells us that the public's experience of music does not stand still: it keeps moving forward. For music education to remain relevant and provide value, it too must change with the times or experience the fate of the stationary shark.

To comprehend the changes occurring in music and their impact on music education, it is necessary to understand the dynamics of social change, which is the topic of the influential, best-selling book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, by Malcolm Gladwell.¹ Gladwell's thesis is that small changes and events can accumulate and cause rapid, large-scale transforma-

tions once a critical mass, or tipping point, has been reached. Gladwell employs his theory to explain such disparate events as the explosive growth of e-mail as a means of communication to the dramatic decrease in New York City's crime rate in the 1990s.

We are undoubtedly living in a period of rapid cultural and social change. We are also witnessing a dramatic transformation in the ways people experience music and the practices used to educate children. Is music education keeping pace with these changes? Can Gladwell's thesis be applied constructively to music education?

The Dynamics of Change

Gladwell writes that change begins with a few people, whom he calls *mavens*, doing something different. These people possess a vision and passion, as did, for example, the early adopters of personal computers.² The ideas of mavens are spread to a broader group of people by *connectors*, who are acquainted with both mavens and people outside of the mavens' community.³ Eventually, *salesmen* promote the ideas by putting them into contexts that others can understand.⁴ To ensure mass appeal, some characteristics of the ideas should be memorable or potent enough to have a "stickiness factor" that captures the public's imagination.⁵

John Kratus is a professor of music education at Michigan State University, East Lansing. He can be reached at kratus@msu.edu. The author would like to thank Patrick Freer for his generous and thoughtful editing of this paper.

At this point, something that once existed in isolation is spread rapidly. This adoption can add something to the culture, as in the widespread acceptance of e-mail as a means of communication, or it can take something away, as in the elimination of Latin as a standard school subject.

The prevailing social and physical climate must be ripe to allow change to occur, and in this context appearances matter. For example, the dramatic drop in crime that New York City experienced in the late 1980s and '90s can be attributed not to changes in demographics or law enforcement, but to a strenuous effort to remove graffiti and other signs of lawlessness from public places. The theory is that the physical signs of disorder invited an epidemic of crime by signaling its permissiveness, and that changing the environment reversed the epidemic. Similarly, Latin was eliminated from most high school curricula when conditions were right and it became "permissible" to do so, because there was little clamor among the general population for continuing Latin as a standard school subject. Latin had for centuries been a part of a classical education. Whatever arguments were once used to support Latin in the curriculum (e.g., learning Latin enhances logical thinking and intellectual discipline) lost credence in a world of rapidly changing priorities.

Perilous Times for Music Education

Now let us look at an example of rapid change in music education. In September 2004, the Music for All Foundation, an advocacy organization, produced a report on the status of music education in California public schools using 1999–2004 data from the California Department of Education.⁶ The findings of the report were striking:

- During a period when the total California public school student population increased by 5.8 percent, the percentage of all California public school students involved in music education courses fell by 50 percent.

- This decline represents a loss 512,366 students and was the largest of any academic subject area by a factor of four. (Physical edu-



This band parade at the state music convention in Greenwich, Connecticut, in May 1946 was characteristic of the band movement of the mid-twentieth century—one example of how music education has at times fulfilled changing societal needs.

cation was second with a decline of 125,000 students, representing a drop of 5.2 percent of the total PE enrollment.)

- There were 1,053 fewer music teachers, a decline of 26.7 percent.⁷

Keep in mind that these changes occurred during just a five-year period. This rapid, dramatic change signifies that a tipping point had been reached for the viability of music education in California's public schools. It became "permissible" for one district after another to curtail or trim music programs, and the cumulative effect was catastrophic.

The authors of the California study interviewed educators and policy makers to try to understand the underlying causes for the decrease. Those interviewed emphasized the same two root causes: the focus on reading and mathematics of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) resulted in a shift of funding away from subjects such as music, and California's budget crisis restricted funding to public schools, leading to a reduction in funding for music education.

Yet the report's authors rejected these explanations. Regarding the NCLB rationale, the authors noted that "music programs have been limited in a manner vastly disproportionate to other curricula. At a minimum, therefore, other forces must have been at work."⁸ The authors similarly argued against blaming the state's budget crisis. If the budget cuts were the cause of music education's decline, why were other subjects, including other elective subjects, not equally affected? What were the "other forces" at work?

This brings us to another possible explanation: that during times of fiscal uncertainty, the arts in education is perceived as less valuable than other, more pragmatic subjects that provide skills directly related to the workforce. One can therefore assume that student participation in music would rise again along with an upturn in the economy. Unfortunately, enrollment in California music classes did not improve, even after the 2001–2002 economic downturn ended.

Futhermore, negative public opinion cannot be to blame for cuts in music education, because a large majority of the American public supports arts education, at least in principle. A Harris Poll released in June 2005 found that 93 percent of

Americans agree that the arts are vital to providing a well-rounded education for children. Also, 54 percent rated the importance of arts education a 10 on a scale of 1 to 10.⁹

But what kind of arts education does the public support? Turning to the California enrollment data, during the five-year period that participation in school music programs dropped by half, student participation actually increased in art, drama, and dance classes.¹⁰ It was not the arts in general that suffered; it was music alone. And students were not leaving music classes to take more pragmatic courses like computer studies; enrollment in computer education in California decreased by 0.7 percent.¹¹

There are signs that music education is at a tipping point elsewhere. The status of music education in Canada is also troubling. A May 2005 report conducted for the Coalition for Music Education in Canada found that 20 percent of the music programs in Quebec and 21 percent of the music programs in Ontario had experienced declining enrollments in the past two to three years.¹² Furthermore, funding for music education had decreased during this period in one-third of Canadian high schools. According to the report, many Canadian music educators viewed the situation as a conse-

quence of deteriorating or nonexistent standards for music teachers. Fully one-half of the schools surveyed employed at least one music teacher who did not possess a provincial teaching certificate in music, sapping the professionalism of the teaching profession.

The picture does not brighten with a look toward the future. A recent study by the Council for Basic Education suggests that instructional time for music and the arts will be further squeezed in the coming years.¹³ Of one thousand principals surveyed in Indiana, Maryland, New Mexico, and New York, one-third anticipated further decreases in instructional time for the arts, while just 7 percent anticipated increases. The situation was worse in schools with large minority populations, in which 42 percent of the principals anticipated that less time would be allocated for the arts in the near future.

What is going on here? Conventional wisdom holds that recent declines in music education are the direct (and simple) result of inadequate school funding and mandatory testing. This view is not supported by the evidence. Furthermore, public support for arts education is quite strong. School funding crises and NCLB have likely contributed to music education's difficulties, but these factors alone do not explain the disproportionate hit that music has taken when compared to other school subjects. Conditions had to be ripe for economic and political changes to bring music education to this point.

MEJ Centennial Series

During 2007, MENC's hundredth anniversary, each issue of *MEJ* will feature a special article celebrating the centennial in a series guest-edited by Patrick K. Freer. Each article is intended to help readers reflect on the past one hundred years and consider where we might go from here. The following articles make up this special series:

- "Reflections on Fifty Years of Publishing with MENC" by Bennett Reimer, January 2007
- "Extending the Vision: Three Women Who Saw the Future of Music Education" by Patrick K. Freer and Diana R. Dansereau, March 2007
- "Democracy and One Hundred Years of Music Education" by Randall Everett Allsup, May 2007
- "MENC in International Perspective" by Marie McCarthy, September 2007
- "Music Education at the Tipping Point" by John Kratus, November 2007

Causes and Effects

Obviously music education has not tipped everywhere. There are thriving music programs in some schools, and these programs can serve as models for the future. But it would be a mistake to ignore the warning signs from the Golden State. These same root causes exist elsewhere, and when something tips, it tips quickly.

The two factors that I believe have brought us to this tipping point are changes in the ways music is experienced and changes in educational practice. In both cases, music education has become disconnected from the prevailing culture. First, let us

consider the nature of music experience. Music is undeniably important in the lives of young people. Research suggests that adolescents in the United States listen to music an average two to four hours per day.¹⁴ Music is the soundtrack of their lives, and the relationship between adolescents and their music is potent and deeply personal.

How Music Is Experienced. Rather than develop curricula that complement the ways people actually experience music in their lives, teachers typically base their curricula on their own goals and the way they were taught. One example of this is teaching solfège. How many amateur or professional musicians use solfège outside of school settings? Collegiate music schools are in many cases the most out-of-touch, clinging to an outmoded nineteenth-century model of conservatory training for professional classical performers, even in the preparation of music educators. One wonders whether our profession's resistance to change is a direct result of the limitations in the musicianship we have been taught.

The music made in schools, largely based on classical, folk, and sometimes jazz traditions, represents a small and shrinking slice of the musical pie. Students perform music in school that they rarely, if ever, hear outside of school. More than one-third of the nation's largest one hundred radio markets have no classical music station.¹⁵ Between 1999–2000 and 2003–04, symphony attendance in the United States dropped 13 percent.¹⁶ A recent article by the chair of the American Symphony Orchestra League notes, "The ground beneath us is shifting—has already shifted—in fundamental ways. We are seeing changes in the public perception of culture and taste."¹⁷ In 2005, classical music accounted for only 2.3 percent of the total number of CDs sold.¹⁸ Some may view this as a cultural calamity, and others may consider it to be a natural evolution of public tastes. Regardless, it is real.

The experience of music is also becoming much more individualized, a world of earbuds and personal digital recording studios. A student's iPod tunes are his or hers alone, and a

young composer or performer no longer needs bandmates to create a pop song or a symphony in the basement. By contrast, school music emphasizes large-group performance, in which everyone plays or sings the same piece at the same time.

Technology has forever changed the experience of music. In the twentieth century, the advent of radio and the phonograph made it possible for people to listen to music without being physically present at its performance. Today the digital music revolution has been equally profound. The growing use of MP3 players has made music more portable, more accessible, and more individualistic. The Internet has not only changed the

music is not as important as it once was. The generation who attended Woodstock has been replaced by a generation who experienced 2005's Live 8 concerts on AOL. Counter to this trend, music education still places its emphasis on one-shot, auditorium performances of large ensembles.

Instrumental performance media have changed as well. The best-selling instruments in the United States are the electric keyboard and guitar.¹⁹ They are instruments that allow for a lifetime of musical performance and creativity and enable a performer to play alone or with others and to sing while playing. Many keyboard and guitar players even compose their own songs. Rather than eagerly embracing

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way music is distributed, it has also encouraged the development of communities of music mavens who may live thousands of miles apart. For example, I now have the ability to discover for myself, online, the music of an obscure musician and communicate with others around the world who like his music. I can also upload music I have created to the Web and have others listen to it and provide feedback.

Musical communities can be formed by musical interest rather than acquaintance or physical proximity. A seventh grader in Florida may have musical tastes more in common with an Internet friend in India than with the person sitting next to her in home-room. The dream of music serving as a bridge connecting the world's people, the elusive "universal language," is within our grasp. Yet few schools fully employ the power of technology in the making and sharing of music.

Because of these changing ways of experiencing music, the notion that music performance is best experienced in person has become passé. Live performance is still a vital part of our musical culture, as exemplified by television's popular *American Idol* program, but physical proximity to live

these instruments—which more readily connect to students' own world of music and could help students continue creating music after graduating from school—our school programs still emphasize band and orchestra instruments and standard school repertoire. The oboe is a fine instrument. But considering the small audience for classical oboe music and the enormous amount of effort it takes to get a single good tone from an oboe, is there any wonder that twelve-year-olds are not jumping at the chance to play it?

Changes in Educational Practice. The nature of music in the world and the nature of music in school are, then, quite different things. As illustrated in figure 1, these differences are substantial. These are factors that, I believe, have brought music education to a tipping point. Not only have in-school music experiences become disassociated from out-of-school music experiences, but tried-and-true music education practices have become unmoored from educational practices used in other disciplines. The teaching model most emulated in secondary ensembles is that of the autocratic, professional conductor of a large, classical ensemble.²⁰ Is that the model of

music making we want for our students? Even our language conveys this intent: people who lead school ensembles are called “directors,” not “teachers.” (Directors direct and teachers teach.) In many cases, the ensemble director selects the music, makes all the artistic decisions regarding interpretation, and shapes the resulting performance through tightly managed rehearsals to match a preconceived notion of the piece, correcting errors along the way. It is an autocratic model of teaching that has no parallel in any other school subject. Of course, not all ensemble teaching is structured this way, but a great deal is.

Other school subjects have come to terms with the cognitive revolution. Children learning to use language, for example, learn to read from authentic sources such as newspapers and books as soon as possible. Elementary children are encouraged to write and publish their own books, fostering communities of independently functioning readers and writers. Language is taught contextually, not as a series of sequential exercises. By contrast, many of our music education practices take students through a step-by-step approach, dominated by the teacher, and leading toward a result that is anything but an independently functioning musician.

I contend that the long-term problems of music education will be fixed neither through improved advocacy for the status quo nor with “music makes you smarter” campaigns. School music has drifted too far from out-of-school music, and music education practices have drifted too far from other contemporary education practices. Perhaps we must just admit that music education did not adequately change with the changing cultures in music or in education.

The situation has been noted by others outside the music education community. In an essay in MENC’s *Vision 2020*, Warrick Carter, former director of Disney Entertainment Arts, wrote:

When one looks at the study of other disciplines, it is apparent that there is a direct correlation between what is learned as a future adult and its implication and application for adult life ... It

is only in the study of music that specific kinds of music are known as “school music,” separate from other music with which students may participate as adults ... School music experiences have frequently neglected large areas of music making and music expression and have consistently not only failed to validate these but have in many cases relegated them to areas that seem to be less desirable and unimportant.²¹

There is irony in all this. One of the functions of music education is to preserve the best of our musical past and our diverse musical cultures by passing on valued practices and traditions to the next generation. The aim of preservation would appear to run counter to radical curricular change. Music is unlike science, in which contemporary discoveries and theories improve upon and supplant prior ones. In music, Stravinsky is not necessarily better than Beethoven, and R&B is not necessarily better than jazz, even if R&B outsells jazz eight to one.²²

Perhaps an answer would be for music educators to take a page from colleagues in history education, who also have a responsibility to preserve the past. They reformed the teaching of history away from names, dates, and places of historical events to an understanding of history’s subtexts, causes, and relevance to current events. Music educators, too, can uphold tradition while embracing the future.

Creating a Movement for Change in Music Education

I would like to apply Gladwell’s ideas to positive ends, beginning with the notion that music education needs to become sticky, meaning that it must become potent and irresistible. It must also connect people to music in ways that are both personally fulfilling and educationally valid. There must be mavens to initiate the change, connectors to transmit the change to a broader population, and salesmen (and women) to translate the change into each school’s particular context. Above all, the nature of music education should reflect the cultural and

social milieu in which it exists.

So what would this kind of music education look like? It seems to me that the best way to start is by looking at how music is actually used in the world, *not* the ways it exists in schools. The factors in the first column of figure 1 might lead toward such a starting point. Are there models of using music in schools that are similar to the way music is used in the real world that also fulfill Gladwell’s criterion of being sticky?

One unique example is the popular ukulele movement in New Zealand schools.²³ The ukulele is an instrument that is relatively easy to play, allowing for a quick path to a satisfying musical experience. It can be used to accompany songs; it can be played by an individual student without the need for a teacher and other performers; it can prepare students to play the more difficult guitar; and it can provide a lifetime of enjoyment. A group of students playing ukulele is also funky enough to be a very sticky idea.

In the United States, a perfect example of sticky music education is the Metropolitan Opera Guild’s “Creating Original Opera” program.²⁴ The program is part of an effort to make opera relevant to elementary and secondary students, accomplished by showing students how to make the music their own. As a result, thousands of young people across the United States have learned to create and produce their own operas. For these students, opera is cool! Is such a program attractive? Newsworthy? Educational? You bet.

Another example of sticky music education is the Vermont MIDI Project.²⁵ The project uses the Internet to connect student composers in general music classes with professional composers and with collegiate music education and composition majors. The students in Vermont create MIDI files of their original music, which are sent to music majors and professional composers. The students in Vermont receive detailed appraisals of their music in its first draft and throughout the revision process. Here, younger and older musicians form a virtual community of composers, making use of technology to bring people together and pro-

moting the creativity of individuals.

Other new directions for music education such as ethnic ensembles, popular music ensembles, songwriting classes, and composition classes offer additional means to connect with young people in musically and educationally rewarding ways. None of these ideas would work everywhere. But each of them has worked somewhere and could work elsewhere. To get there, I suggest that we focus on Gladwell's three criteria for creating a movement that spreads: *focus*, *test*, and *believe*.²⁶

First, *focus* by identifying the mavens who have the talent and passion to nurture an idea. In each of the examples presented above, a passionate maven, often a single teacher, put into practice an idea that had great power. These people exist everywhere but are often limited by bureaucratic walls. Often enough these mavens persevere and effect change. I think there are more mavens out there, although they are not necessarily education professionals. We need to identify them and put their advice to good use.

People who can be connectors are also necessary. One possible reason for the California tipping point was a lack of effective connectors. In the report on California schools, the authors wrote that the elimination of many fine arts coordinator positions meant that there was no one sitting with administrators to address the needs of music when budgetary decisions were made. We need more music champions, whether they come from the ranks of music educators, parent groups, universities, arts organizations, government agencies, or the music industry. We also need to make greater use of MENC at the state and local levels, where good ideas can be passed along through workshops or even streaming-video demonstrations.

Second, *test* to refine the idea and decide how to best package it. Any educational reform will have to be tested under a variety of conditions. Almost certainly there will be no single panacea that can be applied everywhere with equal success. Is the ukulele movement in New Zealand transportable to another country? Only testing will reveal the answer. Before jumping into major changes,

Figure 1. Comparison of Out-of-School Music and In-School Music

Out-of-School Music	In-School Music
Satisfies the user's personal and emotional goals	Satisfies curricular goals
Individualistic	Large-group oriented
Makes use of technology to connect mavens across distances	Makes little use of technology to connect students to others
Primarily nonclassical	Primarily classical
De-emphasizes formal concert attendance, enabling a performance to be experienced over time and distance	Emphasizes one-time concerts, requiring the audience to be present in a single location at a specified time
Often homemade	Usually composed by others
Makes wide use of guitar and keyboard, allowing for a lifetime of musical involvement, alone or with others	Makes limited use of guitar and keyboard, instead focusing on instruments that restrict musical involvement after graduation except in large ensembles

the product will need to be refined and tested to see how it works in different situations.

Third, *believe* that change is possible, even under unlikely circumstances. Curricular change is possible, as exemplified by the programs I have described. It never would have occurred to me that the ukulele would be an instrument young people would enjoy playing. The instrument, at least in the United States, is widely considered to be the product of a bygone era, hopelessly corny. I also would never have believed that seventh graders would find opera "cool." But these "illogical" ideas worked, thanks to the mavens who had the strength of their ideals to promote the causes. By learning to connect better with each other and with others outside our profession, we can spread the word of our most successful practices and reform music education.

None of this will come easily. The future would be so much easier if we could blithely continue teaching as we have been taught, generation after generation. But I do not think we have that option, and time is precious. The bad news is, like the ancient saying,

that we are cursed to live in interesting times. The good news is, as Malcolm Gladwell wrote—little things can make a big difference.²⁷

Notes

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