



**Title:** Meanderings: Some Thoughts About the Future of Instrumental Music Education

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*It is with pleasure that we inaugurate the reprint of the entire seven volumes of The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning. The journal began in 1990 as The Quarterly. In 1992, with volume 3, the name changed to The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning and continued until 1997. The journal contained articles on issues that were timely when they appeared and are now important for their historical relevance. For many authors, it was their first major publication. Visions of Research in Music Education will publish facsimiles of each issue as it originally appeared. Each article will be a separate pdf file. Jason D. Vodicka has accepted my invitation to serve as guest editor for the reprint project and will compose a new editorial to introduce each volume. Chad Keilman is the production manager. I express deepest thanks to Richard Colwell for granting VRME permission to re-publish The Quarterly in online format. He has graciously prepared an introduction to the reprint series.*

# Meanderings: Some Thoughts About the Future of Instrumental Music Education

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By Roger Rideout

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**T**his article contains short discussions of three issues which may affect the growth and development of instrumental music education, and bands in particular, over the next two decades. In fact, some are having their effect now. The different issues are discussed separately and brought together in the final paragraphs.

## **Bands and the Music Industry**

In the Spring of 1981, Gene Wenner, then president of the American Music Conference, spoke before members of the Loyola Symposium IV sponsored by Loyola University of New Orleans. His topic was changing emphases within the music industry toward the role of music in community education. In his speech, Wenner explained that music publishers and instrument-makers perceive the public schools to be a "soft market", meaning that new areas for development and expansion were few and far between.

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Two conditions in public schools at the end of the 1970s brought about this perception. First, the great "baby boom" of the 1950s was over, and schools that had

expanded rapidly to meet the demands placed upon their facilities and faculty now found their enrollments leveling off or dropping. As total enrollment went, so went music program enrollment as well.

Secondly, curricula were expanded to include more stringent requirements in mathematics, computer science, English, and other courses defined as "basic" to students' education. These additions effectively curtailed the elective options and reduced the number of students available for bands, orchestras, high school choral ensembles, and general music classes.

Wenner also noted that the industry was looking to home and individual use of music and musical instruments made possible by the then-new processing capabilities of microcomputers and electronic keyboards. Of course, many companies such as Wurlitzer, Inc., and the Allen Organ Company had already developed keyboards for piano classes and filled many a church sanctuary with synthesized organ tones. The difference Wenner noted was that in the 1980s a larger segment of the industry would make a concerted effort to reach a newly identified market: people whose musical training varied from novice to expert and whose musical needs could no longer be met through public school educational opportunities. While the schools would remain a major market for instrument manufacturers and music publishers, Wenner gave a clear signal that a new era in music instrument study was beginning, one based on electronic technology and the aesthetics of popular music ensembles, particularly jazz and rock-and-roll bands, not the traditional instrumentation of bands and orchestras.

In the years since Wenner's pronouncement, society has seen the development of a host of electronic instruments that rival the sonorities and flexibility of acoustic instruments. Not since the appearance of bands in the latter part of the 1800s have we seen such a strong foothold taken so quickly in the music business. The sales of computer-controlled electronic keyboards have exceeded even the most liberal expectations. This growth is not abating and, in the years to come, will surely alter the very nature of the musical experience our children have in their formative years. Soon, the dominance of acoustical instruments in the classroom may be challenged by these electronic instruments.

Perhaps no electronic instrument demonstrates more clearly the revolution than the new Akai EWI (Electronic Wind Instrument), which can produce the tone of any acoustic instrument at the touch of a button. Purchasing the software and attaching the instrument to a computer opens up great musical opportunities to the performer, who needs only to use one fingering system and embouchure. If one substitutes computer-controlled keyboards, even those problems are eliminated. By learning to "play the piano", the interested student can sound like any instrument or any combination of instruments.

Wenner's comments remind us that a true symbiotic relationship has existed for over 75 years between instrumental music education and the music industry. Instrument manufacturers need students purchasing their products, and the schools need quality instruments for instruction. Equally, music publishers need classes and performing ensembles to buy books and music, while the schools need a steady supply of literature, composed and arranged for the technical and mental maturity of the students. If the industry finds that the new electronic instruments are more lucrative than acoustical ones, then its influence on instrumental music may be enormous. As companies develop the methods and materials for electronic instruments, more people will be asking the schools to provide instruction. This is a development which we should note seriously.

Directors in smaller communities who lack the instrumentation to perform certain music already use this technology to supplement available performers. A percussionist, piano student, or a good clarinetist can simulate a missing tuba, cello, or oboist. Recently, at a competition in the Midwest, a 15-member string ensemble performed Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture", simulating all the woodwind and brass parts on a Yamaha keyboard attached to a computer. Also, some middle school teachers are using the keyboards to provide a tonal model for a given section to use as a pitch standard. Since the electronic instrument always plays in tune, it serves as an example for interval studies and intonation control. The dynamics are variable, so one instrument can balance or override an entire section when needed.

These pedagogical possibilities illustrate the Greek poet Pinda's observation that "... the gods give man two evil things for every good." The good is the additional help to teachers in need. The evils are the potential demise of instrumental instruction as we have known it and the replacement of bands and orchestras with electronic ensembles. Schools already have the computers, and students already know how to run them. "Interfacing" music with computer instruction would seem to be a viable idea, and one that the music industry can support.

Also, there is historical precedent for this trend. The violin family replaced the viols because of improved tone and projection, and the trombone, oboe, and flute replaced the sackbutt, schawm, and recorder for similar reasons. The improvement in intonation, timbre selection, and performer flexibility, along with the general expectation by citizens for electronics, may very well tip the scales against acoustical instruments.

Naturally, we say, "No electronic instrument sounds as good as an acoustical one. What of the musical experience which is diminished by electronic reproduction?" To the majority of students, parents, and music consumers, this is a nonissue. The consuming public holds no such values; for most people the convenience, flexibility, and variety offered

by the new technology offsets any compromise in traditional sound.

Finally, the new technology is a boon to the commercial music industry where costs can be reduced dramatically through using electronically generated instruments. The music being written in jazz and other popular idioms uses these instruments extensively. There is every reason to believe students and their parents will expect such familiar musical technology to be a part of their child's education. If the industry supports this, then two strong allies of instrumental music education will have been lured away from the acoustical instruments that are now believed to be basic to bands and orchestras.

Obviously, the growth of the new technology has not had any appreciable effect on recruiting students for bands, nor should we rush to sell our Bach trumpets and buy Yamaha keyboards. Rather, the possibility exists that the next decades will be a watershed period in which the traditional modes of making, hearing, and using music in society will change as a result of the convenience, variety, and flexibility the new instruments provide. The gains and losses are not measurable yet, but the alarm bell is sounding its synthesized tone.

## **Bands and Changing Entertainment**

Within two years of Wenner's prophecy, I watched an Orange Bowl game in which the Disney "Imagineers" had devised a half-time show that was mesmerizing in its visual effect and—not by accident, I'm sure—used tapes and other synthesized music over the existing loud-speaker system as part of the effect. I was stunned by what I saw. Half-time entertainment was no longer defined through the music. Music was used as a backdrop, an adjunct, a "pacer" of the visual movement.

The Orange Bowl show signaled a new direction for outdoor spectacle and sports entertainment, one that challenged the importance of bands. Historically, bands have served one function more effectively and efficiently than any other musical ensemble, namely entertainment at public ceremonies such as sports events, parades, and the like. The sources of their effec-

tiveness are the volume of focused sound bands can produce (as opposed to orchestras and choirs, whose sound dissipates outside) and their portability (you can't march and play a cello simultaneously).

However historians cut it, bands took root in the American educational system in order to train young people of talent and interest to perform this very important community service. Through the end of World War II, there was no other means for most citizens to have music as a part of their public ceremonies; high school or community bands provided this service. In smaller communities, the band was the only ensemble to perform quality literature and was the primary group on which the citizens could foist their aspirations and pride. Harold Hill knew that very well.

Equally, the electronic inventions of the first half of this century centered on reproducing and disseminating music, i.e., records, tapes, or radio, none of which ever approximated the reality of a live performance, however convenient it was to listen in one's living room. This technology may have muted an individual's excitement over hearing a masterwork played in a wind transcription, but the technology still assumed active participation by the listener. But as television took over our society, people became content to have their entertainment, news, and civic ceremonies acted out for them by 19-inch images moving to the accompaniment of full orchestras and choruses sounding through two-inch speakers. The decline of the concert in the park, of parades, and of other civic functions associated with holidays and events are examples of the change. Now the Friday night school football game is the only remnant of civic activity, the only social event which cuts across socioeconomic, racial, and religious lines to galvanize a community to common goals. Film and TV use music as an adjunct, interpretive soundtrack, subsuming the aural message to the visual one. Accepting music in this role has become commonplace, passively seeping into the collective unconscious to the point that many citizens now find a live concert unfathomable. Quality performances are available at the touch of a

button; why leave home? (People vicariously relive moments of a show or film through hearing familiar themes. A montage of television commercial jingles would probably be better received at a school concert than a Rossini overture due to their familiarity—unless of course it was an overture which Walter Lantz, Warner Brothers, or Disney bawdlerized for cartoons in the late 1940s). After 50 or more years of using music in films, television, supermarkets, and elevators, it is no surprise that, as Disney illustrated, music used in conjunction with a visually exciting show could slip into the background of the event rather than remain the primary avenue of its presentation.

The point is that during the two decades after World War II, arts “consumption” changed dramatically and music, the preeminent art until that time, slowly moved from center stage to the pit, where it has become an accompaniment to the visual image. This slow and hardly perceptible change in American attitude is similar to the move from a mentally active entertainment, such as reading for relaxation, to a passive one like watching TV. The increase in attendance at live concerts of what we call “classical” music and the establishment of orchestras in cities around the country are more artifacts of increased economic growth than evidence of appreciable increase in musical sensitivity. These groups are often identified with “culture” and their presence seems to wax and wane depending on the availability of funding.

Electronics and entertainment are a good mix. Canned shows are cheaper, louder, and often of better quality than school ensembles can produce. Pep squads, local twirling clubs, and a host of other support groups can now participate in the civic event of a Friday night football game and not worry whether the band can play the music. Disney has shown the way. Entertainment need no longer be music centered; preparation time can be spent on visual impression instead. While most schools will not emulate Disney’s model, there is greater emphasis on visual effectiveness in today’s marching show, where competitive ratings for visual effect are often equal to

the ones for musical performance. The growth of additional ancillary groups on the field with the band attests to the movement toward the visual in half-time entertainment.

## **Bands and the Teaching Profession**

During the 1950s and the 1960s, bands and orchestras dropped their traditional social functions.

No one minded too much. Teachers were relieved at not having to muster an ensemble of students whose embouchures were shot due to summer vacation. Students didn’t miss parading behind the horse brigade or standing for hours in the hot sun listening to speeches. City councils didn’t mind cancelling the teacher’s extra stipend. In fact, these changes seemed a boon for all, particularly the overworked teacher, who could put full attention to serving the remaining school-related functions like sports events and assemblies, and to participating more actively in professionally sponsored events, such as competitive contests and festivals. Band directors successfully maintained programs by focusing on school-related functions and defining success and superior achievement as tangible things like medals, plaques, and trophies. The public relations advantages for the schools were enormous. Administrators used quality performance ensembles as a means of securing public support for all educational activity within a community.

Contests, festivals, and school-related functions now take up the time that community functions once took. As an example, consider the activities of one band director in Oklahoma whose band attends every invitational, predistrict, district, and state contest sponsored by the Oklahoma Secondary Schools Activities Association and other schools within his district. His students average 14 Saturdays and nine days absent from school. His school’s football team is in the state finals, and the band must perform at all games; this adds 14 Friday night performances. On alternate years, the band tours Texas to compete in invitational festivals there, costing students another five days of school absences. In total, students miss 14 days of school and commit nearly 20 weekends



a year to the band. Not a single one of these events is education or community related; none is required for graduation. They are activities devised to attract and recruit students to band and to help the school's public relations efforts with the community.

A school principal who knows this gentleman said to me recently, "If bands exist to go to contest, and contests exist to judge bands, then why not eliminate both of them and save everyone a lot of trouble?"

Naturally, he meant this in jest, but he added the comment, "Were the state activities association to no longer sponsor contests, most band directors could not defend their programs." I thought of the director we both knew and did not know how to reply.

The instructor in my example publicly laments the conditions he has created. Yet, he defends the quality of his program by citing the awards he received, and his administrators support that perspective. His program does not allow his students to be in choir, debate club, or any other school activity. The director admits he is not keeping the upper 10 percent of the students, for their studies and college prep courses will not allow that much time to be devoted to a single elective course. His fear is that as school demands increase, these professionally sponsored functions will become increasingly marginal to the better students who are needed to sustain his program.

If civic or community association with school bands is weakening, and if entertainment activities at school can be better met by electronic ensembles, pep squads, rifle teams, and twirling lines, then the problem my friend is confronting will only increase. Six years of daily practice and work pale against a student's need to prepare vocationally or for college. Add the facts that live music is no longer a social necessity and that instrumental music has fewer and fewer goals or activities to attract these students.

In my weekly visits to areas schools to observe student teachers, I find many directors tired and distraught over the difficulty in attracting the top students, designing a visually exciting marching

band show, and assuring a first-rate symphonic performance group. They complain to me that their students are pressed for time more than they were 10 years ago, that additional requirements in math, English, and computer literacy prevent many from staying in the program, and that more of their students are having to work after school to meet family living expenses. I don't think these gripes can be explained away as end-of-the-day blahs. They are real problems being faced by every teacher in the country.

I believe that several things have coalesced to undercut the academic, musical, and social foundations on which instrumental instruction has rested for the last 75 years. They are:

1. Our society has changed in its patterns of "consuming" art so greatly that the traditional functions served by bands and orchestras are no longer in demand.
2. In reaction to this changing society, secondary-school associations and teachers have erected artificial academic and professional activities which are rapidly becoming irrelevant to the social and educational goals of students.
3. The rapid growth in home computers and computer-generated technologies now threatens to undercut the interest of educational institutions and perhaps the music industry in providing high-cost instruction in acoustical instruments.
4. The attractiveness of the new technology suggests to parents and students that for no more money or time, more varied musical experiences are available.
5. The marriage of this new electronic technology with "passive entertainment" potentially minimizes the role of bands in providing "active entertainment" at sports events while supporting the third and fourth concerns.
6. Schools are increasing academic requirements for graduation and strengthening achievement standards as well. Therefore, a greater demand is placed on the conscientious student to select electives carefully and assure the most benefits will accrue from the limited time available.
7. The pressures we place on teachers to be conductors, choreographers, designers, public relations experts, and to compete burns them out within a few years, denying the music education profession the maturity and leadership it needs to meld these evolving social and technological conditions into a meaningful educational experience for students.

If these observations have any credence, it is time once again for the professional organizations responsible for setting goals and standards for instrumental music education to address the fundamental question: "What roles do bands and orchestras serve in the education of students in the public schools of the twenty-first century?" Without a clear agenda of goals and rationales that buttress instrumental music study, bands and orchestras may become historical artifacts, incidental to the vital music culture of our nation. Without a clear sense of community and educational purpose, we may act only on behalf of ourselves, attending contests and winning plaques and medals that illustrate no higher musical enterprise than attending contests and winning plaques and medals.

The task is to keep our tradition while meeting our electronic future. George Pattison, Christopher Small, and other British sociologists have argued, very convincingly, that the future of music education lies in knowing consciously and deeply the musical structures that define national and ethnic character, and in tapping the creativity that lies in students to express those characters musically. As an example of their point, ensemble directors have always known certain works move an audience to ecstatic emotional reactions (i.e., the last repeat of "Stars and Stripes Forever").

This "playing to the boards" mentality is a show-business element that every director uses to advantage. The strength of audience reaction suggests, however, that certain elements of the music deeply reflect some facet of the American experience and character. The love of Sousa may not be merely the identification of bands and marches with our militaristic heritage; rather, the nature of his melodies, the unabashed sentimentality accompanying performances of the marches are elements of an aesthetic in which the breezier, positive, uplifting, and light-hearted aspects of our American character are represented. Other elements of that character are presented in the music of Bernstein, Copland, or Harris and a host of other popular commercial musicians who have succeeded in expressing such

character intuitively. Discussions of the American character and the musical structures which have defined it must be a conscious aspect of our teaching and a foundation for any new rationale for instrumental music education.

Finally, I showed a draft of this article to a colleague who, as a wind ensemble conductor, found the subject depressing. I explained to him that I do not mean to present a bleak picture of the future, and I rush, now, to disclaim any alarmist intent. After my apology, we discussed the evolution of bands in this century from Harding's beginning at the University of Illinois through Revelli's work at the University of Michigan to the contemporary movements in corps marching and wind literature. What struck us most clearly was that the band never was a stable entity with a set of continuing musical and educational goals. It has evolved as the tastes and technology of instrument manufacture allowed. The new technology may offer no threat; also the increase of quality literature for winds as a result of the presence of bands is tremendous. The opportunity for students to learn music through ensemble performance is still prized highly by our society. Many of the school and civic services provided by bands to communities are still viable. Bands are not in decline, nor is instrumental music instruction on the wane.

My comments are meant as a cautionary observation by someone who has the luxury of predicting the future free of any responsibility if he is wrong. Living in the Southwest, in a state famous for its soil erosion and calamity, I may see the problems through clouded lenses. But I fear that the music I love, the marches of J. P. Sousa and K. L. King, the overtures and concert pieces by the likes of Reed, Husa, Hindemith, and so many others are moving into the shadows of our musical life as a result of inattention to the evolving patterns of our American society. At best, this music may become museum pieces preserved by synthesizers and computers. At worst, they will not be heard at all because no one sees as worthwhile the long years of work and technical study necessary to give them sound. □