High School Performing Ensemble Members'
Verbalized Criteria for Evaluating Performed Compositions.

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The purpose of this research project was to discover the specific criteria used by high school performing ensemble members to evaluate compositions they are currently rehearsing or performing. Based on previous research, it was hypothesized that members of the target population have specific evaluative criteria that they apply to the compositions they are currently rehearsing and performing.

The study was designed using a case study methodology based in the qualitative research tradition of grounded theory. The site for the study was a high school music program in rural Pennsylvania. The high school had 589 students with 146 students enrolled in four performing ensembles. The cases were defined as four subjects that were chosen using the typical case sampling method. The subjects were in the 10th or 11th grade, had at least three years of formal participation in school music ensembles, demonstrated a typical level of musicianship for that program, and were recommended by the music faculty as students who had adequate verbal skills when discussing music.

Data were collected through interviews with the subjects. Interviews were conducted using an interview guide and data were analyzed using the open coding method. Answers to the following research questions were sought: (1) what criteria do the students use to evaluate compositions; (2) what categories of evaluative criteria emerge; (3) what factors shape the students' criteria?

Analysis of the data will indicate how students currently evaluate compositions. In addition, this research might indicate how they developed the criteria to make those evaluations, and suggest instructional methods music teachers might use to help students in the development of evaluative criteria.

In 1994, the Music Educators National Conference (MENC), as part of the Consortium on National Arts Education Association, completed "The National Standards for Arts Education" (Blakeslee, 1994). As one of the benchmarks established for all high school students, MENC stated in Standard 7 that students should be able to evaluate music and music performances (Blakeslee, 1994). Proficiency for this standard is defined as follows.

Students evolve specific criteria for making informed, critical evaluations of the quality and effectiveness of performances, compositions, arrangements, and improvisations and apply the criteria in their personal participation in music (p. 62).

Although the MENC standard indicates that students should evolve specific criteria for making evaluations about music they have performed and listened to, most researchers have focused on students' musical preferences only. Graffius (1989), Gregory (1994), and Rentz (1994) found that students who participated in high school performance ensembles preferred classical music recordings. Students' preferences for recorded music also appear to be influenced by their music teacher's expressed preferences for classical music (Alpert, 1982; Greer, Dorow, Wachhaus, & White, 1973). The students must be using some criteria in order to have a preference, but because the researchers did not establish what specific criteria the students were using it is not clear if the students' preferences were based on an evaluation of the quality of the compositions, or on other criteria. In addition, the researchers focused completely on recorded music and did not consider music that the students were currently rehearsing or performing.

Teachout (1993) found that band students use musical factors when evaluating band music they are currently performing. This suggests that students' musical preferences might be based

on judgments of quality. Tutt (2000) found that there was a positive correlation ($r = 0.5430$) between band students' rankings of recently performed literature and students' predictions of director rankings of the same literature, suggesting that band directors might have influenced their students' opinion about recently performed literature. However, it is not clear from that study whether the students ranked music according to their preferences or according to specific evaluative criteria.

All of these researchers have examined factors affecting students' preferences for musical literature but have not addressed what specific evaluative criteria are applied by the students when judging the quality of compositions they are currently rehearsing and performing. Although MENC has suggested teaching strategies that performing ensemble directors may use to teach their students to develop specific criteria to evaluate the quality of compositions (Hall, 1997), it has not been established if these methods work or are currently in use by professional music educators. In order to formulate successful strategies for helping students to develop specific criteria for evaluating compositions, it is important to identify the criteria they are currently using.

Purpose

The purpose of this research project was to discover the specific criteria used by high school performing ensemble members to evaluate compositions they are currently rehearsing or performing. This project was the pilot study for a dissertation.

Research Questions

Primary. How do high school performing ensemble members evaluate compositions?

Supporting.

1. What criteria do the students use?

2. What categories of evaluative criteria emerge in open coding?

3. What factors shape the students' criteria?

Methodology

Research Design

This study was designed using qualitative research methods and was organized as a case study (Creswell, 1998; Marshall & Rossman 1999; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990; Stake, 1995). The case was defined as the music program at a high school in rural Pennsylvania. The high school has 589 students with 146 students enrolled in four performing ensembles. The high school was chosen using convenience sampling (Patton, 1990).

Subject Selection

Subjects (N=4) were chosen using a purposeful sampling technique (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 1990). The goal of purposeful sampling is to attain a sample for qualitative inquiry from which the researcher "can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (Patton, 1990, p. 169). The particular purposeful sampling technique employed in this project will be typical case sampling. The intent of typical case sampling is to identify the average subject in order to identify what is typical about the case in the area being researched rather than "to make generalized statements about the experiences of all participants" (Patton, 1990, p. 173).

The performing ensemble faculty at the high school assisted in selecting students who:

1. the faculty believed were neither in the top or bottom ten percent of musicians in their

ensembles;

2. were sophomores or juniors;

3. had participated in organized band, choir or orchestra since at least seventh grade, but not before fourth grade;

4. additionally, out of eligible students, the faculty recommended numerous students who they believed demonstrated adequate verbal skills when discussing music.

Subjects were selected so that one subject was a student who participated only in choral ensembles, one subject was a student who participated only in instrumental ensembles, and two subjects were participants in both choral and instrumental ensembles. There were two sophomores and two juniors in the subject pool.

Students were contacted individually to determine their willingness to participate in the study. Their parents' permission was also solicited.

Data Collection

Data was collected through interviews with the students identified by the typical case sampling. A "general interview guide approach" (Patton, 1990, p. 280) was used. The interview guide contained an outline of the material to be covered, but "the actual wording of the questions" was "not determined in advance" (Patton, 1990, p. 280). The interview guide allowed the researcher to cover the same issues with each subject, but also allowed for the examination of different areas depending on each subject's responses to the questions (Patton, 1990, p. 283). Areas that were covered in the interview are represented by the sample questions below:

1. How would you rank the pieces of music in your folder? The student will complete this portion with the folder in hand.

2. Why did you choose that particular order of pieces? Why did you put the top composition first and the bottom composition last?

3. What makes a piece of music "good"? How do you define good?

4. Would you have answered that question the same way last year? In junior high?

5. Do you think your friends have the same opinions? What about your parents?

6. How do you think your music teachers define good music? The same as you or different? Do you think they are right?

All interviews were completed in a practice room at the high school during the school day. The length of each interview was between 30 and 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-taped using a Sony TCS-580V dual microphone recorder set to continuous record. Interviews were recorded onto TDK Type I 90-minute tapes.

Data Analysis

Data from the interviews was transcribed and analyzed using the open coding method, sometimes referred to as coding (Stake, 1995). In open coding, the researcher reads the data many times, seeking groups of data that may be combined into single categories (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Categories are confirmed by a process of triangulation, or meaningful statements from three different sources of data (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995).

Findings

The Setting

The school. Set back on a hill, next to a major state road, this small high school is an important part of its local community, perhaps the most important part. Every aspect of the school is important to the local community and the music program is no exception. Teachers, administrators, parents and students take great pride in the music program with all events, from concerts; to musicals; to fundraisers; to football halftime shows well attended. The music program has its own suite complete with practice rooms, storage facilities and a large rehearsal room. I went to the school early in the morning and set up my equipment in one of the practice rooms, which doubled as the choral faculty members' office.

The students. All of the students initially contacted about the project voluntary elected to become involved. They arrived at the practice room one at a time, over the period of five hours. Paul was the first. He sang in the choir and was very out-spoken and clear about his opinions. He was comfortable with all of the questions and enjoyed talking about music. Mark arrived next. He played trombone in the band and sang in the choir. He was less comfortable with the questions at first, but warmed up to the idea of talking about music. He was very inquisitive about the process of doing research, how he was chosen and what I was going to do with the interview tapes. After lunch, I interviewed Ann, who played clarinet in band. She frequently gave me a look that suggested that I was taking music far too seriously, but I was not successful in getting her to explain that look. Laura was the last to arrive. She also played clarinet in band and sang in the choir. She was extremely quiet. She was so quiet that the jazz band, practicing

behind several sets of closed doors, was louder on the tape than she was. Although she did not seem uncomfortable, she frequently was silent after some of my questions, which typically resulted in me rephrasing the question in some manner in order to generate some response to my questions.

Criteria for Evaluation

Like and good. The subjects had a difficult time explaining why they thought one piece of music was better than another piece of music. Frequently, they would initially respond to any question regarding the quality of a composition by saying they liked it better. When pressed to differentiate between whether they liked a piece of music and whether or not they believed it was a good piece, they usually responded with silence. It is my opinion that these four students only like music that they believe to be good. I usually followed their silence by asking them to differentiate between two pieces that they had in front of them. All four of them were able to verbally differentiate between the quality of the works, but would sometimes use the word "like" when giving reasons why one piece was better than another. I eventually categorized the majority of their comments into six categories. No categories contain data from every student and only two categories contain data from three students.

Difficulty and complexity. The students spoke at great length about how the difficulty or complexity of the music made a musical work better than a comparison work. At first, I thought that the students meant that how technically demanding their parts were was what made the piece better, as exemplified by the statements below.

"[A piece of music is good] because we have to go home and practice the piece more and more and concentrate to play it well" (Laura).

"A piece is better if it gives me something to do that I know I can improve on" (Mark).

However, when I pressed them to clarify their statements I found that their comments about difficulty did not have to do only with how hard the work was for them to personally perform, but also about what the effect of complex music is on the listener.

"[This piece of music] sounds better overall because there are a lot of different people playing different parts instead of all playing the same thing" (Laura).

"The more complex the music is, the better it can become" (Paul).

Part interest. Three of the students also talked about how well their individual part suited their own personal needs or interests. Laura, Paul and Mark all made references to whether they found their part interesting and therefore enjoyable to play. In some cases, the comments related directly to the complexity of the music. Mark felt that the piece of music was better if "some of the parts in the music are different from all the other trombone players." At other times, it had more to do with how well they thought the part fit their personal skills. For example, Paul felt that a piece of music was good if "it was written well for my voice range".

Subject specific categories. In addition to the mostly shared criteria for evaluating music, I found four other categories of comments that the students used to evaluate musical works. In each case, the category was subject-specific because only one subject made significant statements regarding that particular criterion.

Ann repeatedly referred to pretty music as good music. When I pressed her to clarify what made a piece of music sound pretty, she said that it should "sound like a lullaby." I asked her if a piece of music could sound ugly and still be good and she told me that it could not. Even

pieces that she categorized as repetitious and "boring" were still good pieces if they sounded pretty.

Mark held up rhythm as the most important criterion for evaluating music. He said a piece should have "good rhythm". He clarified this by saying that the rhythm should be "not too fast or too slow" and should be "continuous" without any "breaks in the music." He was unable to give any further clarification about what kinds of rhythms were not too fast or not too slow. When I tried to give him a few examples with a metronome, his response was: "Uh, I think so." Paul's primary concern was with the "message of the lyrics." He was not concerned with the quality of the lyrics themselves, how appropriate the setting was or how easy the lyrics were to sing. Paul stated that all good music must have a good message, one that "describes a positive attribute to humanity". Music which portrayed humanity in a negative light without providing some sort of redeeming message was considered to be not as good as that music which did provide an uplifting message. For Paul, the text's message was everything, more important than any criterion associated with a musical work.

Laura was the only student to consider the final product, the performance, as an important criterion for evaluating a musical work. She believed that "how it sounds when we play determines whether it is good or bad." I asked her if that meant that a musical work could start out bad and eventually, through practice, become a good piece. She responded by saying yes, and that was something that happened frequently. To Laura, the performance was part of the musical work and thus a crucial part of any evaluation of musical quality.

Causes of Change.

All four of the students believed that the criteria that they used to evaluate musical quality

had changed since they were in elementary school. Each believed that their largest change was that they now thought that music that is more complex was better music. They spoke of their previous musical experiences as being "simple" or "boring". When I asked them to reflect on what might have caused these changes, Mark and Laura were unable to come up with any reasons for the difference. Their perception was that change was a natural part of growing up.

Paul and Ann had a decidedly different view on the causes for change. Each believed that their experiences in band and choir had made them more accepting of different kinds of music. I tried to find out what specific musical concepts they had learned that changed their criteria, but neither was able to articulate anything clearer than what Ann told me: "I have just gotten used to hearing songs like this." She and Paul both felt that the experience of singing in the choir broadened and deepened their musical tastes, without any specific instruction in musical concepts that they could remember or articulate. Paul also put a heavy weight on the technical advances he had made, saying that he was better able to sing, and therefore more able to participate in music making.

The students did not identify specific actions or statements that directly influenced their development and selection of criteria. Each student felt that their friends, teachers and parents had, for the most part, the same criteria for evaluating music as they did. They were unable to recall or articulate any particular circumstance that they discussed evaluative criteria with any of those groups, including their music teachers. This is not to say that it does not happen, but that the students are simply unable to recall any circumstance where it did.

Discussion

Trends

This small sample of students suggests several issues to me about how what criteria students use to evaluate compositions they have been actively involved in performing. First, the criteria seem to be partially individualized. However, a larger sample may yield more diverse data in the same number of categories or it may increase the number of categories. In addition, this diversity of criteria may be the result of a lack of formal instruction in this area. If I interviewed students that received formal instruction in the evaluation of compositions, I might find a more consistent outlook on criteria for evaluation. Second, the difficulty or complexity of the music is important when evaluating the musical quality of a composition. Third, the interest that a particular part held for a student was important when evaluating the worth of an entire composition.

The most interesting result was the idea presented by two of the students, Paul and Ann. They suggested that experiencing music resulted in a change of their criteria. They could not recall receiving any exact instruction in evaluating criteria, but rather suggested that learning musical works and performing them went a long way to changing their understanding of what makes a piece of music worth performing. A significant finding in this area might suggest an emphasis on performing music as an authentic way of knowing about music.

Future research

I will need to make several changes in order to make the complete dissertation project more successful than this pilot study. First, I need to be much more probing in my interviews. In an attempt to be impartial and not suggest any particular criteria to students, I did not

continually ask the subjects to clarify their ideas with specific musical examples from the music. As a result, the data is weaker than it could be and is sometimes lacking in the richness that is one of the hallmarks of qualitative research. A more probing approach to interviewing will be important to help differentiate between the students' association of the term "like" with the term "good".

There will need to be more data for the dissertation project. While some of that will be covered by up to 20 additional interviews, I think a variety of data sources might be appropriate. Perhaps reflective writings as a part of student journals might provide additional insights into the students' criteria for evaluating compositions.

Conclusion

This pilot study has suggested several possible categories of criteria that students use to evaluate the music they perform in band or chorus in addition to providing insight on how a larger study might be completed with a greater degree of success. Several studies in this area will be needed before a meaningful picture can be drawn about what criteria students use to evaluate musical compositions and how they learn those criteria. I hope that such studies will suggest how music educators can best help students to develop their own criteria so that they can more fully understand the music that occurs around them.

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