

## **Musical Knowledge and Choral Curriculum Development**

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*This paper examines the nature of musical knowledge as it impacts choral curriculum development. The author suggests that musical knowledge is broader than the mere recitation of facts and therefore argues for a praxial conception of musical knowledge. Based on David Elliott's philosophy of music education, the author suggests that the choral curriculum emphasize process over product and explores ways that constructivism may inform the delivery of choral music instruction.*

## **Introduction**

For over thirty years music educators have investigated the nature of musical knowledge and its relationship to curriculum. Music education philosophers (Elliott, 1995; Reimer, 1970, 1989, 2003) cognitive psychologists (Gardner, 1983, 1999; Perkins, 1986), and music practitioners (Regelski, 1998) agree that music is an essential element of human nature and that it should be a foundational subject in school curriculum. However, they draw different conclusions when they address the following questions: (1) What is musical knowledge? (2) Is music a product (musical work) or a process? (3) To what extent does a praxial approach to music education bear on practice in the choral music classroom?

The purpose of this article is to examine the inter-relationship of musical knowledge and curriculum particularly as it relates to a course of study for choral music education. The article discusses the nature of musical knowledge as seen through the lens of a praxial approach (Elliott, 1995). The author then presents his own ideas that use constructivist strategies (Bruner, 1966, 1979) to blend these views into a viable curriculum for school choral programs.

## **The Concept of Knowledge**

According to Benjamin Bloom (1984), knowledge is the lowest level of thinking. Students have knowledge when they can accurately state Bach's dates or the definition of a motet. To conceptualize knowledge, however is more complicated. Deciding whether to teach only facts, or to manipulate those facts using more sophisticated critical thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis or evaluation (Bloom, 1984) is debatable. Perkins (1986)

illustrates a fundamental problem in educational practice: when he writes, "First you learn the facts. Then you learn to reason with them" (p. 29). Perkins develops the idea that we can teach facts and the ability to use them at the same time. This thinking is in direct contrast to educators like E.D. Hirsch (1985) who generated lists of factual knowledge he feels should be taught to every individual in order for them to be "culturally literate."

While factual knowledge is essential, facts alone become what Perkins calls "inactive knowledge" or others have called "inert knowledge" when it is not applied to critical, reflective problem solving. Paulo Freire (1970) argues against what he terms a "banking concept of education" where educators are "depositing" knowledge into students' brains, as one might make routine deposits of money into a bank account, without considering how that knowledge will be used. Many educators are trapped in such "fact-based" teaching. Howard Gardner (1999) calls this a "dipstick" approach. He explains:

If you want to know how much oil you have in your car, you stick in your dipstick, and you pull it up, and you say "Oh, I need another quart." Most of us, think that if you had the right cortical dipstick, you could shove it into your cortex, pull it out and see how smart you are. (p. 11)

These perspectives would suggest the importance of choosing a curricular model that moves beyond a "fact-based" design and engages students who are able to leave the classroom with the abilities to analyze and solve problems on their own.

### **Musical Knowledge**

The way we conceptualize knowledge in the general sense informs the question "what is musical knowledge?" and a more difficult question, "Is performance musical knowledge?" If musical knowledge goes beyond the ability to recite facts and extends into the ability to

operationalize musical information through performance, the challenge remains for music teachers, and particularly choral conductors to develop a different kind of curriculum. The charge to choral music educators is to teach students to think critically in addition to developing musical skills (Bower, 2001, p. 36) so that both enhance the abilities of students to perform in choir. For example, in a choral rehearsal it is possible to structure learning experiences where the director asks the choir members to identify problems, critically evaluate them, and work together to solve them. This approach, however, is not typical. Hillary Apfelstadt (1989) criticizes such an approach where the choir members are expected to blindly follow their director; "If, however, the teacher is always solely responsible for decision-making in the choral rehearsal, the students act as mere automatons with little independent thought" (p. 74). Enlightened choral directors, committed to the essence of musical knowledge consider the larger issue of how that knowledge is used, what future ends it is intended to achieve, and where it manifests itself.

David Elliott (1995) makes an important distinction between education and schooling when he suggests that our education system needs to focus on developing the whole child (p. 295). Often, a problem with skill-based music curricula is that students are expected to acquire large amounts of memorized information, but are not challenged to use that information to solve or pose problems. A choral curriculum that focuses on performance without the integration of history, theory, and composition, or without providing opportunities for the singers to pose or to solve problems is limited in its effectiveness. Gardner's dipstick theory (Gardner, 1999) illuminates curricular problems

specific to choral music education and, depending on the focus of a given choral program, can assist as a measure of the effectiveness of what 'knowledge' is being taught and how the application of that knowledge is being assessed. For example, if a choral curriculum is structured so that students are graded on their ability to answer questions about music history or music theory, instead of being evaluated on how well they are able to integrate that information into their choral performance, the conductor has lost sight of a larger and more important goal of teaching students how to use that knowledge in the world. Rather than expect choral students to simply memorize factual information, conductors of school choirs must create a rehearsal environment where students apply knowledge to real-life problems and solve those problem with analytical and evaluative thinking and action.

### **A Praxial Philosophy**

David Elliott's (1995) praxial philosophy of music education whereby he conceptualizes music as a verb of action, provides a useful grounding for the development of choral curricula. Elliott offers a distinction between musical works and musical process in relation to the enlightenment and postmodernism (p. 22). In Europe, from the middle of the eighteenth century until the rise of postmodernism, a mode of thinking evolved in which the ontological notion of music was conceived as a "piece" or a "composition" much like we think of a visual artwork. There was little attention given to the act of music making. It was assumed that in order to ascribe the due honor and adulation given the composer (god-like creator of his work), performers learned how to fulfill those wishes. The act of music making was given little attention insofar as the concept applied to the definition of music. Rather, the idea of music was wrapped up in the concept of a musical

work. This thinking extends itself into the realm of choral music education today.

Certain schools of thought focus on the product rather than the process. Choral conductors who think in terms of this approach instill a sense in their students that in order to become a musician, they would need to apply years of practice and drilling in order to reach a level where they might be considered worthy of the title. While this idea certainly works for those in line for a professional career, it leaves the vast majority of amateur choral singers out in the cold. Elliott (1995, p. 22) says, "To look at or listen to something [and] to focus exclusively on its structural or aesthetic qualities, in abstraction from the object's context of social use and production" is contrary to what music making is all about. In the praxial philosophy, music making is central.

### **Musical Knowledge and Constructivist Theory**

Jerome Bruner (1966) develops a view of constructivist learning theory in which the teacher is aware of the structures students bring to the learning experience. Educators then build on those structures in a spiral fashion, revisiting concepts at increasingly higher levels, as the student is ready. Embedded in Bruner's theory are the pursuit of excellence and the emotional connection of the child to the learning experience. In Bruner's (1979) words, "How can I know who I am until I feel what I do?" (p. 43) This mode of thinking has clear applications in the choral curriculum and is closely tied to Elliott's (1995) views. In *Music Matters* (Elliott, 1995) Elliott writes, "we don't hear music as it is, we hear it as we are." This points to the importance of the student as the center of planning in curricular development.

## **Philosophy in Choral Practice**

While a reflection on the many aspects of praxial theory, as developed by David Elliott (1995) in his groundbreaking volume *Music Matters*, is beyond the scope of this paper. However, there are several that seem essential as they relate to choral curriculum. Most significant, is the role of listening in the choral curriculum. Elliott introduces the idea that "music listening is a complex form of thinking that can be taught and learned. [Choral] students can achieve competent, proficient, and expert levels of music listening. But teaching and learning this kind of thinking effectively requires that its development be embedded in efforts to develop musicianship through choral performance, improvising, composing, arranging, and conducting" (p. 106).

Recently the author led a choir rehearsal of an arrangement of a Thomas Tallis canon. One of the tenors raised his hand and asked if a phrase sung by the women was to be immediately connected to a phrase sung by the men, or if there was to be a break between the two. I responded that this was an excellent question and asked several members to take turns coming up to the front to listen to the passage both ways. Based on the reaction of the listeners, it became clear that in an acoustical situation such as ours (relatively dead in the heavily carpeted church) the phrasing was far more pleasing when connecting without the break. In doing a "meta" reflection on the planning and "doing" in relation to my choral rehearsal experience, I recognized how my own philosophy is embedded in the practice in the following ways: (1) the choir members were expected to be critical participants in musical problem-solving (2) active music making was central to the learning experience (rather than inactive listening to a recording), (3) the choir was

not becoming so dependent on me (their teacher) that they would go out into the world ill-equipped to face problem-solving situations on their own.

## **Conclusion**

Musical knowledge can be easily misconstrued to imply that that nature of music study involves merely learning skills related to performance or the rote memorization of facts about the music. The nature of musical knowledge is complex and includes critical and reflective cognitive processes such as thinking, knowing, and listening far beyond mere facts and skills. A praxial approach, as pioneered by David Elliott (1995), assists choral conductors to successfully write curriculum that informs their practice by placing music making as the central value in their philosophy and subsequent practice.



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