

Tradition and change

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Abstract:

A break in music education tradition is suggested: Restrict the bachelor's degree in performance to only the most talented young musicians. To regulate itself, precollege music teachers must offer urgent and compelling advice to young people considering a major in music performance.

Article:

Tradition is what we know; it is comfortable. Change requires new ways of thinking and acting; it is often not comfortable. Yet, if the noble profession of music is to survive and thrive; we must decide which traditions to keep and which to discard.

For instance, we all tend to teach the way we were taught. This may be a good or bad thing. In either event, the professional who wishes to grow, improve and keep up with the latest advice and advances must continually ask questions and seek new answers. We must learn all we can about every aspect of the teaching profession. Teaching is a search that can never cease.

Tradition

The tradition that, perhaps more than any other, cries for change is the notion that undergraduate music majors, as a matter of first choice, should pursue the bachelor of music degree in performance. The BM performance degree is a professional track that purportedly prepares students for successful careers as performers--no one may honestly pretend that this degree is designed for any other overt or covert mission. In fact, the BM performance degree springs from the conservatory tradition that, with its antecedents in the European model, took root in the United States in the latter decades of the nineteenth century.

The marketplace is now totally different. Major cultural institutions everywhere are feeling the destructive pressures of funding shortages. The country is littered with the carcasses of orchestras and opera companies whose demise has been widely reported in the past few years. The growth of digital and MIDI technologies has further diminished employment opportunities for musicians. Finally, prospects for the immediate and long-term health of the American economy are bleak. As the standard of living inevitably spirals downward over the next decades, increasing fiscal strain will further tighten the noose around the neck of traditional music opportunities as they existed in a time long past. The BM performance degree is an anachronism, and the conservatory has been rendered a preservatory populated by the hopeful and the hopeless.

A pitifully low percentage of those who complete BM performance degrees find fulltime employment as performers. So limited is the performance job market that the major conservatories alone could probably more than meet the demand. The situation is even worse for nearly all performance majors from less-renowned music departments. Defenders of this essentially bankrupt degree suggest that performance majors can always turn to a life of teaching, which is usually the only option available after graduation. Most private teachers, though, work with students whose abilities and aspirations are far different from their own, a fact of musical life that often frustrates those whose vocational sights were set on a much higher plane. Moreover, one can argue compellingly that music pedagogy is a profession that dearly deserves--and has--its own

degree focus in college. Piano pedagogy and music education programs, for instance, provide coursework in educational psychology, pedagogical tactics and literature, and supervised student teaching, all invaluable components of professional preparation. These are the suitable degrees for those planning to teach. Other proponents of the performance degree suggest that it is merely preparation for graduate school and is not intended to be the ultimate degree. However, few if any college catalogs advertise it as a transitional degree; indeed, it is typically represented and marketed for what it is--a terminal professional degree. Further, for those who go on to graduate school--the majority who do so because they are unable to find jobs in their chosen field--employment prospects upon completion of a master's or doctoral degree in performance are, at best, only marginally improved.

What other profession would accept such a dismal placement record for its graduates? Would medical schools be content to enroll students in programs with fulltime employment rates in the single digits? Questions of ethics and accountability arise, and the answers for many are terribly dismaying. Except for truly gifted and exceptionally talented young performers--and they are very, very rare--students who express an interest in music should be discouraged from pursuing professional performance degrees. The continued existence of the BM performance degree, in all but strictly limited circumstances and environments, is tantamount to a professional degree offering in astrology or conversational Latin. Precollege music teachers, together with their postsecondary colleagues, have a duty to advise students of job market realities.

Music departments must individually and collectively examine their own consciences to determine if the performance degree should even be offered. At least, audition expectations for it should be extraordinarily rigorous. Music faculties must realize that the mere presence of the BM performance degree in the school's catalog is a powerful endorsement and inducement to prospective students. Not many eighteen-year-olds question the collective wisdom of university or conservatory professors. The degree continues to exist, and to attract thousands of students, because it is the traditional degree of most music professors. Precious few question the appropriateness of drawing new generations of professional performance majors into the almost certain trap of a life of fulltime employment frustration. Perhaps bulletins should carry the following disclaimer:

Caution

Completion of the BM performance degree does not offer any significant hope of fulltime employment as a performer. It thus fails the central, manifest and implicit promise of all professional degrees.

The whole truth, and nothing but the truth, is laid bare in this a priori apology that in no way excuses or forgives professional complicity.

Faculty members who argue that the BM performance degree is equivalent to bachelor's degrees in history or philosophy, for example, have got it all wrong. The BA music degree is their equivalent in that it makes no pretense to be a professional program, and "professional" means the likelihood of a job. The existence of the BM performance degree should be regulated by the profession, perhaps through the auspices of the National Association of Schools of Music, in such a way that the number of music departments offering the degree would be limited to the realities of market demand. Unfortunately, the inertia of tradition makes implementing this recommendation highly improbable. Thus, if the profession is to regulate itself in some meaningful fashion, it must be done through urgent and compelling advice to young people contemplating a major in music performance, a task that rests heavily on precollege music teachers.

Change

Amidst the preceding gloom, there is light. Bachelor of arts degrees with music concentrations have long been available. These broad nonprofessional programs prepare students in a liberal arts tradition. Corporations hiring college graduates are more interested in such students than in those more narrowly trained in a professional music track. Likewise, music education degrees have been part of the American

university scene since the early part of this century. While employment prospects in music education are not as promising as they were a decade ago, most graduates still secure fulltime jobs, demonstrating the continuing validity of music education professional programs. More recently, a growing number of progressive universities have been offering professional majors in developing fields such as pedagogy, music business, recording technology, arts administration and so forth. These degrees open the doors to realistic, viable music career options for today and the approaching new century. They are the alternatives--the replacements--for the performance degree, which by now should have been rendered all but extinct by market exigencies and socioeconomic Darwinism.

With all these degrees, performance skills can be fully realized. No one limits the amount of practice time contingent upon the chosen major. The dedicated musician will find a way, as she always has, to seek maximum fulfillment of artistic expression. The BA music major, and the students of music education and arts administration can, if they want, play or sing just as well as performance majors. The really important distinction is that the BA music major and the music education and arts administration students will probably find the jobs they want and expect, while the performance major almost certainly will not.

Precollege music teachers can be enormously helpful to their students by learning all they can about music degrees that provide career alternatives to the traditional performance degree. Teachers should urge students who want to teach to consider a pedagogy degree (for private instruction) or a music education degree (for public or private instruction). Music students who also enjoy technology should be encouraged to look at recording technology degrees. Those who enjoy leadership roles should think about arts administration. Anyone who is good at selling and promotion should explore music business degrees. For the generalist, there are BA music degrees that offer a broad exploration of the liberal arts. One of the major changes that will begin to take effect as a result of such informed counseling is that students will start to regard these realistic choices as first options, not "fall-back" positions, as they typically do now. Far too many high school seniors at their college auditions respond to the query, "What do you want to do in four years?" with the answer, "I want to be a concert pianist (or an opera singer, or to land a job in a major orchestra and so on)." Far too often the best high school performers at college auditions are advised by a professor to enroll in the performance degree, typically a reactive bow to tradition. How sad and tragic for the overwhelming majority of these students, who could have had the fulfillment of their performance potential and the probability of professional success.

The urgent task, then, for precollege music teachers is to inform their students about the possibilities for realistic careers in music. Let us bring to the minds of young people a perception of nobility regarding the music teaching profession that is its full and due right. Let us tempt students with music business and arts administration careers and with dreams of recording technology. Let us break with tradition and steer all but the incredibly gifted performers away from performance degrees. Let us, as a profession, begin to be honest with our apprentices and ourselves.

Precollege music teachers might consider holding an annual career day where these options can be discussed. Perhaps MTNA or MENC might develop brochures describing the various possibilities.

Certainly active advising is needed. The paradigm must change. What worked a hundred years ago is no longer valid. The mold must be broken, and the precollege music teacher must make a new one.