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### **Popular Music Ensembles**

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### **Abstract and Keywords**

Popular music ensembles increase interest and student participation in school music instruction. Some ensembles are small and selective, used as a privilege for the leading performers in larger, traditional school ensembles. Conversely, other popular music ensembles are much larger in size, for instance guitar ensembles, since they are attractive to students who lack background in traditional instruments, yet still allow students to gain experience playing in large ensembles. This article is devoted to identifying and describing core values that underlie teaching and learning in the most prevalent types of popular ensemble in the United States, and globally, as they occur within more traditional music curricula in public schools, and the implications of these emerging ensembles for music teacher education. Examples of specific programs that illustrate these core values in action are cited.

Keywords: music ensembles, popular music, music education, music teacher education, public schools

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The presence of popular music in the lives of humans is increasing, fueled by the digital revolution that has made music and music-making more accessible, convenient, and affordable than ever before. The previously independent roles of music listeners, composers, and performers have consolidated into a single musical experience that transcends much of the organization, content, and learning processes of traditional public school music ensembles. Consequently, young people are creating their own learning environments at an increasing rate. While some students remain satisfied with their participation in traditional school ensembles, there is also disparity between what at least some students want and need to know and what school music instruction offers them (e.g., Kratus, 2007). While music education programs in the United States have historically acknowledged the sociocultural influence of popular music by including it in the curriculum (albeit cautiously, and when it supports the goals and objectives of the existing music program), there is still resistance to the idea that popular music and

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culture belong in formal music education. The United States trails the educational systems of Canada, Scandinavia, Australia, and the United Kingdom to the extent these countries and regions have made use of popular music in public school music instruction. However, the United States is responding to global trends in music education, evidenced by the growing presence of popular music in basal music textbooks, and an increasing number of school-based nontraditional ensembles that showcase popular music styles, instruments, and activities.

In addition to supporting the goals and objectives of existing programs, popular music ensembles increase interest and student participation in school music instruction. Some ensembles are small and selective, used as a privilege for the (p. 879) leading performers in larger, traditional school ensembles. Conversely, other popular music ensembles are much larger in size, for instance guitar ensembles, since they are attractive to students who lack background in traditional instruments, yet still allow students to gain experience playing in large ensembles.

Popular music ensembles are praised by advocates as authentic learning contexts because they invoke and nurture the same learning processes that occur outside school as a natural process of expressing oneself through music, called “vernacular musicianship” (Woody, 2007, p. 35). Such processes allow students to engage directly in artistic communication of their own musical ideas, called “critical musicality” (Green, 2008, p. 14). These outcomes signal a significant departure from the traditional expectations for formal musicianship in the United States, which revolve around the use of notation, tonal, and rhythmic materials derived from common practice, and highly structured, conductor-led ensembles. The fundamental difference between the goals of traditional music instruction and popular music instruction is one of music literacy, which begs the question: what constitutes a musically literate person? Is it someone who preserves and practices the western European canon of notational skills and historically accurate renditions of classic literature, or is it someone who has developed an aurally based musicianship to explore and develop personal expressive needs?

Arguments for and against the use of popular music in music education are well articulated and long-standing (e.g., Hebert & Campbell, 2000; Rodriguez, 2004). To summarize, arguments for popular music include the widespread preference for popular music by students, the amenability of popular music to meet the traditional goals and standards of music education, the strong parallels between informal learning and best practices in education, and the comparatively close connection between in-school and out-of-school activity. Arguments against popular music include the lack of connection with the skills and knowledge provided by other courses in the music curriculum, the unsuitability of many lyrics for public school instruction, the inappropriateness of popular music role models for public school students, and the general lack of preparation of many new music teachers to teach popular music.

What the profession currently needs is a more detailed account of how and why popular music is increasingly being used in the schools. This chapter is devoted to identifying and describing core values that underlie teaching and learning in the most prevalent types of popular ensembles in the United States and globally, as they occur within more traditional music curricula in public schools, and the implications of these emerging ensembles for music teacher education. Examples of specific programs that illustrate these core values in action are cited.

Before proceeding with the core values that serve as focus and advocacy points for popular music in the schools—creativity, musical expression, and self-identity—it is necessary to provide a working definition of the term “popular music.” While there are numerous criteria for determining whether music is popular (Rodriguez, 2004), the term is used here to encompass any music that has broad and pervasive appeal to the general listening public at any given time, and is influenced by (p. 880) current artistic, cultural, and technological trends. For this reason, it is necessary to accept that what is popular music to one generation will inevitably differ from what is popular music to future generations. Consequently, in this chapter the term “popular music” refers to contemporary popular music.

## Core Values Underlying Popular Music Ensembles

### Creative Thinking and Popular Music

Of all the shortcomings of traditional music education approaches in the United States, perhaps the most unfortunate is the failure to engage students in certain forms of creative activity. Although the National Standards for Music Education include composition and improvisation skills, these activities are routinely overlooked in general music classrooms (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 1995). As a consequence, school music activities and repertoires are not sufficiently engaging for students because their ability to experiment and problem-solve with sound is severely restricted, although it should be mentioned here that this tendency may be partly due to the erroneous belief that composition and improvisation are the only creative activities in the music classroom (Humphreys, 2006). Popular music is attractive to people for the very reason that most of the restrictions to creative involvement are not present: it is, by definition, “their” music.

Popular music offers students substantial freedom to develop creative musical ideas through composition, improvisation, listening, analysis, and performance. When students are encouraged to exercise full creative control over their work, they are encouraged to simultaneously invoke everything they understand, know, and feel about music. Students at every educational level have demonstrated the ability to be creative if given the

opportunity, ensuring student-centered, engaging, artifact-producing learning consistent with best practices in education. In general, creative thinking processes motivate and improve future learning in a broad range of disciplines (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

### **Musical Expression and Popular Music**

Musical expression is cited as one of the most critical aspects of musical sound in a broad spectrum of literature, including perception (Kendall & Carterette, 1990), philosophy (Scruton, 1980), education (Gordon, 1965), and psychology (Seashore, 1938). The term is often used synonymously with “interpretation” in music scholarship. An interpretation is what one thinks and feels are the most relevant qualities of an object or experience; in the case of music, it involves decisions as to (p. 881) what are the most salient attributes of the music from one moment to another. For example, Scruton (1980) defined musical expression as “those elements of a musical performance that depend on personal response and which vary between different interpretations” (p. 327). Thus, to interpret music is to make decisions about sound, mediated by the resources and challenges at hand, and to communicate musical ideas to others. Interpretation is essential to cognition in the arts because it requires exercising, modifying, and refining these communication skills.

One important reason why popular music is so enticing to performers, listeners, and creators is that personal expression, that is, interpretation and communication of ideas, is its foundation because it allows performers to personally control all the tonal, rhythmic, and literary parameters of the music. Singers, instrumentalists, and songwriters are considered successful to the extent they can extend their personalities through their instruments and music (Rodriguez, 2004)—in other words, to produce reliably recognizable interpretations.

### **Self-Identity and Popular Music**

We are only beginning to understand the ways and degree to which students perceive and define themselves in relation to music. The relatively new literature on this topic ranges from ethnographic narratives (Campbell, 1998) to research-based essays (MacDonald, Hargreaves, & Miell, 2002). It makes much intuitive sense that musical experience, being highly individualized, can intensify and reflect one's sense of self, and that music can be used to socialize the experience of personal identity. These points are more likely true in cases of students consuming and producing music of their own choosing, which is, by definition, music that is popular with those students. Insofar as different students may like the same kinds of music and form friendships based on these preferences, music is valuable in the formation of social identity as well. It has been suggested that individual and social identity formation and growth need not be contingent on extended involvement in music, but that living in an abundantly musical world is sufficient (Mueller, 2002).

Identity formation can then comprise perception of oneself as a musical person, or perception of oneself as a social being through music (MacDonald, Hargreaves, & Miell, 2002).

Student membership in a guitar ensemble may reveal more social information about a student than membership in a concert choir; similarly, membership in a school rock band could say more about a student's social characteristics than membership in a concert band or orchestra. The reason is that popular music ipso facto is individualized music, articulating the identities of its performers through words, sounds, and gestures. Popular music provides a rich learning medium for students as they negotiate their identities in terms of individuality and conformity (Mueller, 2002), perhaps because the ensembles are smaller, student-led, and do not rely on notation skills. Frith (2007) believes that young people find musical patterns more satisfactorily reflective of social realities than do either visual images or discourse, and concludes that “music just *matters* more than any other medium” (p. 205).

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### Guitar Ensembles

The guitar is one of the most popular musical instruments in the world, so it is not surprising that guitar-based ensembles are becoming increasingly widespread in the United States and abroad. These ensembles typically appear in middle and high schools, since the instrument requires a level of physical dexterity that usually develops by the later elementary school years. The first guitar ensembles attempted to support traditional music program goals such as reading standard notation, playing with a conductor, and playing in parts. Such skills could be taught with a guitar primer such as Aaron Shearer's *Classic Guitar Technique*, volume 1 (Shearer, 2009), a carefully sequenced method for learning the notes on all strings in first position. A more recent trend has students learning to read chord charts and tablature, a repertory of beginning finger picking patterns and strums, and first-position guitar chords, all of which greatly helps them “figure out” songs on their own. This trend is evident in current individual and group guitar books such as *Jerry Snyder's Guitar School, Method Book 1* (Snyder, 1998). All these basic materials illustrate the question posed earlier regarding the nature of musicality—whether performing by note or by ear is the purpose of instruction. Guitar ensembles seem to support both purposes.

The most commonly used instrument in guitar ensembles has been the “folk classic” guitar, since it possesses features that are amenable to beginning players, including nylon strings, wide string spacing, low tension, and wide frets. However, increasingly steel string acoustic guitars and electric guitars are being used, since these instruments have

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become more accessible and are stylistically more suitable for much modern popular music.

As of January 1, 2008, the Music Educators National Conference estimated that more than 728 schools in the United States housed guitar programs. Some programs were highly structured, offering year-long, multiple-ability-level classes, and utilized specially designed materials. One such program is at Leon High School in Tallahassee, Florida, led by Ed Prasse, a program with an enrollment of over 165 students. Another example is the recently created guitar program at Whitney Young Magnet School in Chicago, led by Jeffrey Peek, where there are four Guitar 1 classes and one Guitar 2 class, indicating the incipient status of this program. Next year, each guitar class will advance to the next level, with four new Guitar 1 classes. A new Guitar 3 class will introduce students to jazz improvisation and offer opportunities to perform with the school jazz band. Both schools described above aim their first-level classes at beginners, an attractive opportunity for the many students who are interested in music-making but do not choose (or lack the requisite notational skills) to participate in the band, choir, or orchestra.

**(p. 883)** Guitar classes in the public schools of Australia have increased dramatically over the last 20 years, largely due to the increase in degree programs in popular music in Australia's universities. Hannan (2000) reported that 8 of the 37 universities in Australia offered popular music degree programs by the year 2000, compared to no programs in 1985. Much of the public school work available for guitar teachers is part-time and in the form of semiprivate lessons for elementary school students, but these positions are becoming more numerous and well paid as the guitar increases in popularity.

## Rock Bands

There are at least two different types of rock bands present in public schools. One type accompanies a choir, vocal ensemble, or show choir, standing behind the group for purposes of sound balance. The second type of rock band arises endemically from a classroom situation, in the context of learning activities involving original compositions produced through group collaboration.

The first type, the "accompaniment" rock band, is common in schools that feature other types of popular music ensembles that need accompaniment. Typically, they are rehearsed by the school's choral or instrumental instructor, but occasionally by a parent, other community member, or paid consultant. These bands consist of guitar, bass, keyboards, drums, and occasionally brass instruments. These groups typically rehearse the music from a score that includes notated keyboard and drum parts as well as chord symbols for the guitarist and bassist. Music publishers provide accompanying CD recordings with these scores to facilitate the aural learning of the guitar, bass, and drum parts, much like what they would be in a real-life rock band scenario. Thus, this type of popular music ensemble requires both playing from notation and by ear, a point

reinforced by music performance differences between the CD recordings and the respective scores.

The second type of rock band is found in music courses involving original, collaborative musical rehearsal and production between students. They tend to focus on creative activities such as songwriting, improvisation, and other informal learning practices. These “classroom rock bands” are typically small and still relatively rare in the United States but have been common for many years in the United Kingdom, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Australia. Unlike larger popular music ensembles, these smaller ensembles usually do not perform formal concerts or reproduce established repertoires. Instead, they provide laboratory experiences for students to learn pieces by ear, copy solo material, compose original songs, and “jam,” a colloquial term for improvising, generating new material, or simply performing fluidly in a small group context. These ensembles most closely recreate the conditions, materials, and procedural aspects of playing in garage bands outside school, and for that reason are seen as authentic learning experiences. Researchers who have studied the interpersonal dynamics in these ensembles have noted high levels of critical thinking, cooperation, sharing, and motivation for improvement (Green, 2008; Jaffurs, 2004).

(p. 884) Another example similar to “classroom” rock bands but with a more active performance profile is the “school rock band,” in which a single ensemble rehearses and performs for the entire school and community. One such program is a 13-member rock band at Moreno Valley High School in Angel Fire, New Mexico, taught by Gary Yamane. The band plays pop and rock classics at school concerts and is active in the community, as evidenced by their recent joint concert with 30 violinists from the Santa Fe Suzuki Violin School. Yamane allows the participants considerable freedom in selecting and arranging the music, making the class quite different from traditional secondary music ensembles.

In Australia, there are numerous initiatives designed to bring popular music into the public schools in response to increasing demand for it in primary, middle, and lower secondary levels. One program, entitled “Rock and Pop for Schools Music Program,” is sponsored by Learning Music Australia, which has the following goal statement:

The Rock and Pop for Schools music program...educates students about modern music...and how it is performed...through various teaching methods that are specific to the modern music industry—such as use of tablature...and “learning by ear/aural development,” whilst also being instructed on how to use traditional notation and theory as tools to develop as modern music performers.

Aspects of traditional “classroom” music teaching methodology are also used to enhance the course delivery. Children are also educated in professional vocabulary relevant to the modern music industry, and are exposed to various aspects of music technology, including songwriting.

(Carlson, 2007)

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The program promotes creativity through interpretation and composition, which is evident in the distinction drawn between “cover” and “original” bands, both of which are taught in the program. The “Rock and Pop for Schools Music Program” fulfills requirements set forth by the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework produced by the Government of South Australia's Department of Education and Children's Services. Teachers receive training and screening, and teach sets of nine 30-minute lessons to groups of six students. Each class has two music teachers, one experienced and one in training. The curriculum consists of learning experiences in singing, guitar, keyboard, and drums.

Institutions of higher education have played a major role in disseminating principles and practices of informal learning, which are directly associated with rock or “garage” bands, to public schools in many countries. For example, the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki and the Guildhall School of Music and Open University in the United Kingdom have greatly influenced the adoption of popular music study and ensembles in the public schools. The Institute for Contemporary Music Performance in London's Kilburn district provides degree programs in popular music that include courses in theory, songwriting, arranging, performance, studio lessons, and recording technology. It produces graduates who are highly functional popular musicians. The spirit of these influences is captured by Odam's (2004) reminder that what can be learned *through* popular music is more valuable than what can be learned *about* it.

### (p. 885) Hip-hop Ensembles

Hip-hop is an originally Hispanic and African-American practice of dance, singing, and dress that has been one of the most widely consumed popular cultures since the late 1970s. While some of the other popular ensembles described here are grounded in traditional, that is, western European, harmony, notation, and instruments, hip-hop is decidedly an oral/aural genre. In the past it has made use of unusual instruments, such as dual turntables manipulated by hand, “beatboxing,” or imitating the sound of percussion instruments with the voice, hands, and body, and “rapping,” the rapid recitation of rhymed verses incorporating contemporary colloquialisms. While the term “rap” has previously been used synonymously with the term “hip-hop,” it is more accurately a technique that is subsumed by the more encompassing culture of hip-hop. In a concise condensation of the characteristics of hip-hop culture, Ibrahim (1999) recounted these as music, clothing, attitudes, language, walking, hairstyles, and treatment of cultural artifacts, which converge among participants in “moments of identification” (p. 351).

Hip-hop groups are flexible in number of performers. In most groups, vocalists are backed by instrumentalists, with individual vocalists taking turns at center stage while other vocalists may add percussive accompaniments or chant-like refrains. Lyric content is directed toward the African-American experience, including issues of social class, sexuality, violence, and other themes viewed through the lens of urban contexts. Berry (1990) studied the musical behavior of low-income black adolescents for two years and

concluded that hip-hop culture helped her subjects understand and cope with their reality. She observed that the success of hip-hop artists in the popular media was empowering to them, since they practiced and perfected the same performance techniques as their favorite artists.

Given this highly evolved and ethnic-specific practice, it is remarkable that hip-hop has spread among students of all ages and ethnicities throughout the world, albeit more in form than content. The Academy of Music and Dance in British Columbia in Canada offers hip-hop classes for students from kindergarten through the eighth grade. Tanzanian youth have been jamming to American hip-hop beats for decades, and have created a unique genre, *bongo flava*. It dominates the music activity of teenagers and is an expected feature at school and community functions. Participants use the genre to express feelings and viewpoints about political oppression, poverty, HIV, and other social problems. To explain the sudden and unexpected popularity of hip-hop culture among Danish boys, Torp (1986) speculated:

Can the whole-hearted adoption of the Hip Hop dances by so many [boys] in Denmark and other West European societies be explained by an absence in the traditional repertoires of these societies of expressive and powerful dances in which it is permissible for the male to show off physical strength and masculinity? (p. 29)

Torp viewed hip-hop as a liberating phenomenon in Danish culture in light of music teachers' reports that boys were suddenly willing to place themselves in (p. 886) situations of rehearsed music and dance performance in front of large crowds, in the school and in the community. It appears that hip-hop has influenced the global community of music-makers, even if the original contexts and contents of the genre usually do not survive the transition.

## Conclusion

The previous descriptions of popular music ensembles have included explanations of how the groups assemble, rehearse, and perform, the specific roles of the ensembles within the larger curriculum, and the responsibilities and qualifications of popular music ensemble directors. These descriptions illustrate that popular music ensembles are an emerging presence in the United States and especially abroad, and tend to be a more welcome addition to music education programs in some countries than in others. Tagg (1998), commenting on Sweden's educational system, has speculated that popular music education is more prevalent in countries that lack strong competing school music traditions, while Väkevä (2006), writing about Finland, cites a national concern for educational theories that support using the natural activities and interests of students as instructional media. He participates in the music education degree program at the

Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, which makes extensive use of popular music and culture as learning media.

In the United States, Boespflug (1999) suggests that embracing popular music pedagogy may be as straightforward as acknowledging the interchangeable roles of consumers, performers, and creators. In response to a growing need for music in worship, Boespflug developed an undergraduate degree program at Biola University in La Mirada, California, that helps students acquire relevant musicianship skills from professional musicians, including notational skills balanced with a strong aural component. The Thornton School of Music at the University of Southern California (USC) has recently developed a bachelor of music degree in popular music performance, allowing students to specialize in pop/rock, folk/rock, and Latin/salsa. The program allows students to concentrate on small ensemble performance and recording. While the programs at Biola and USC are intended for students seeking careers as professional musicians, some efforts are being made at other institutions to better prepare public school music teachers for popular music teaching and learning. The University of South Florida has revised its music education curriculum to include experiences in creative musicianship, performing and composing by ear, and performing and recording in small ensembles. However, despite these exemplary programs, the fact remains that American universities focus almost entirely on western European classical music. This was the finding of a study in which a single music program accredited by the National Association of Schools of Music (thus likely representative of most university programs) was (p. 887) found to include a negligible amount of study in non-Western and popular music (Wang & Humphreys, 2009). In this sense, the United States trails many other countries in accepting popular music as a valid learning medium in music teacher education programs, even as incipient efforts to include more popular music in the general undergraduate curriculum appear to be succeeding.

As early as the mid-1970s, Scandinavians realized the importance of popular music repertoires and practices, and included popular music skills and knowledge as a significant portion of the public school music curriculum. It appears as though the United States may be slowly warming up to what much of the rest of the world already knows—that popular music ensembles provide students with opportunities to develop self-expression, creativity, and a sense of connection to themselves and their world that makes public school instruction more meaningful to their lives.

## Reflective Questions

1. The National Association of Schools of Music has provided guidelines for degrees in jazz studies that outline the basic competencies needed for teaching in this area. Given the emergence of degree programs in popular music, what are the most practical guidelines for such degree programs?

2. How might we address the challenge of relating popular music more relevantly to other types of music used in the traditional school curriculum? Are there underlying principles of music experience that transcend stylistic and cultural differences that may be used as a basis for music curriculum?
3. What are the implications of popular music ensembles for music teacher education? How might we accommodate the increasing diversification of the music teaching profession in our undergraduate methods courses?

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