

## **Excellence in Ensemble** (the 2 E's)

Two Core Values Essential to America's Future Taught In Music Class

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Recent polls make it clear that Americans are worried about their country's future in a highly competitive global marketplace. U.S. schools have become second-rate and have fared poorly on tests in comparison to other countries. Political, business, and education leaders are wondering how to recapture America's stature as leading innovators and entrepreneurs.

How does a child become an Albert Einstein, Thomas Edison, or Steve Jobs? Is the answer in providing a larger helping of Science, Math, and English? Or might part of the answer lay in a subject like Music — considered by some to be a curricular extra, a non-essential add-on to the meat-and-potatoes of the school diet.

What do music teachers value, and how do they teach those values to students?

### Excellence in Ensemble

How good is good enough? How can we learn to work together? The answers to these questions for music teachers are not just in the quality of the final performance but also in the *striving* necessary to get there.

The earliest music experiences of pre-school and primary grades involve learning to sing, play and move with increasing accuracy (albeit with basic skills) and togetherness. Although there is kind forgiveness for errors, all arrows in this developmental path point to doing it better each time — a spiral of excellence (Google *Kaizen* principle). As upper elementary students learn new instruments such as recorder, Orff xylophones, drums, strings and winds, or how to sing in parts, they continue on their quest of greater complexity and pursuit of excellence. Let's examine a typical scenario:

A 4<sup>th</sup>-grade music class is working on a West African piece that uses drums, xylophones, recorders, singing and movement. Every student is encouraged to learn all of the complementary layered parts so that he/she can hear and understand what is happening in the entire group. Since the ensemble cannot succeed without the complete cooperation of each individual, discipline is not a problem (students not ready to contribute are asked to sit outside the circle until they are ready to be part of the group). Students with limitations can play skeleton parts that still contribute to the whole. Gifted students may be assigned to more complex parts or even improvised solos. As students progress toward higher levels of performance excellence they realize a shared pride in having worked hard, individually and together, to get it right. After each attempt at the piece, they discuss what could be done to make it better. When they finally get it "in the groove," and it sounds good, they cheer for each other with collective joy upon stopping. There is no false praise delivered by the teacher meant to promote artificial ego development. Students know whether they have "nailed it" or not. They have a justifiable pride in accomplishment.

Middle or high school students continue their pursuit of excellence in ensemble through choirs, bands, orchestras, and classes for general students such as guitar,

keyboard/technology, or world music drumming. Choirs, bands, and orchestras tend to be selective based on the acquisition of specific playing or singing skills. Class offerings in keyboard/technology, guitar, or world music drumming are intended to offer the general student additional pathways to music experiences and lifelong skills. Here are two other typical music class scenarios:

A high school choir is working on a Bach cantata and has elected to sing it in German rather than the English translation provided in the music. Some members of the school orchestra will also be performing with the choir. Students in the choir from the German class have been enlisted in the tutoring of correct pronunciation. In addition to learning to sing from complex notated music scores, students must pay close attention to how their part (soprano, tenor, etc.) interacts with other parts in fugal sections. They must sing together as a section, a choir, and in ensemble with the chamber orchestra. In rehearsals the teacher/director shares how Bach's cantata has an amazing architectural structure that blends repetition and variety in ways that mirror the design of some classical buildings. Choir members learn to tune their pitch within the choir ("in-tune" is either in or it's out) — an exacting challenge. They learn to sing the vowels and consonants at exactly the same time as others in their section. Re-entering after measures of rest requires focus and listening. Some students are chosen to sing the solos and duets, giving opportunities to special talents. They will voluntarily be rehearsing with the chamber orchestra before school, because the two classes do not meet at the same time. The first rehearsal is kind of rough and there is discussion later in the day about what needs fixing. Subsequent rehearsals go better as the performance nears. On the day of the performance students are keyed up and ready to contribute to as-high-a-level performance as possible. The concert goes quite well, but it is (of course) not perfect. There is a feeling of pride in accomplishment because they have tackled a tough piece and done well. Their evaluation of the experience is not about what the director, their parents, or their friends have to say about it. It is what they *know inside* that counts. On the way home in the back seat of their parents' car, two of the performers are discussing what they could have done better — the spiral of excellence. This discussion is both personal and ensemble-oriented. They have learned that they cannot succeed by themselves — they must work together. At the end of the school year, they choose the Bach cantata as their favorite piece of the year (it was the most demanding).

Five 7<sup>th</sup> graders who play woodwinds in the band are looking forward to summer. The flutist has been playing since 5<sup>th</sup> grade. The clarinet player started in the summer before 6<sup>th</sup> grade but made fast progress and eventually became the best player in her class. The oboist was moved over from saxophone and took to the instrument with aplomb. The bassoonist was a transfer from clarinet, and the French hornist had a good sense of pitch and did well. The band teacher spotted the possibility of a budding woodwind quintet and talked the five into meeting twice a week during the summer to play ensemble music. They loved the experience and were well matched in ability and temperament. They greedily digested the pieces that the band director supplied and started to sound pretty good. They suggested that they would like to perform in public and volunteered to look for opportunities in the community. Soon they had booked themselves into Rotary meetings, church services, and even a book

store/café. None of their motivation toward excellence in ensemble was external. The band teacher rarely attended their rehearsals, because he was teaching lessons at the time. They played together for two years before going to high school.

### Lessons Learned

If we value high standards and achievement, striving to improve, and the teamwork necessary to build a stronger America and a better world; then we must pay attention to how schools really work to produce these results. Following are some ways of thinking about the future of our schools:

- Learning to *value excellence* as a child becomes a lifelong habit.
- Working with others toward *shared improvement* is essential to America's future in research, business, and social services.
- *Play is the essence of creativity*. American innovation depends on taking enough time to experiment and manipulate ideas. The best corporations give their employees some room to *play*.
- *Working hard and playing hard* are totally compatible. A balanced school curriculum that includes music can "go for it" in all areas producing the brightest and the best who can compete in a global marketplace.
- Healthy *self-criticism and assessment* learned in music class is a building block of a productive work attitude and a foundation for lifelong learning.
- Spending more time in math and English classes drilling to improve test scores "makes Jack a dull boy" and reflects an out-of-date, 19<sup>th</sup> century assembly-line model.
- A narrowly focused "vocational" education produces a narrow adult often incapable of adjusting to quickly changing times.
- Providing wider access to active-music-making classes (Guitar, World Music Drumming, Keyboard/Technology) at the middle and high school levels will provide *excellence in ensemble* experiences to the 80+% of students not currently enrolled in band, choir, and orchestra.