

# **My Philosophy of Music Education: Creation, Inspiration, Cooperation**

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## Introduction

The early teen years through the early twenties are accurately described as the decade of decision. For better or worse, choices made during that decade will largely shape the quality of one's life. When I was that age I asked myself the timeless question, "What do I want to be when I grow up?" As I wrestled with this inquiry, I came to a simple conclusion. I want to help young people in their decade of decision the way my teachers helped me during mine. I wish to help them lead a more fulfilling and joyful life.

How could I hope to influence the rising generation in such a way? For me, the best way would be through music! Music had been my passion, and teaching young musicians would become my career. As I prepared to become a full-time educator, I pondered difficult questions. Why is music essential to education? How should it be taught? Who should study it? Those questions continue to press upon my mind today. My responses to them shape everything about my career. Bennett Reimer (1970) stated that it is important to answer these philosophical questions because "everything the music educator does in his job is a carrying out in practice of his beliefs about his subject" (p. 7).

My ultimate aim as an educator is that students will have experiences through music that contribute to living a happier life. Three words effectively summarize my philosophy of how music can do that: creation, inspiration, and cooperation. The *creation* of music must be accomplished at a high level. *Inspiration* can come through music, especially those rare masterpieces which have the ability to move us from the inside out. *Cooperation* is critical as musicians and others work together to create inspiring performances.

## Creation

Creation, in all its varied forms, is essential to our humanity. David Elliott (1995) describes the importance of musical creation as musicianship "demonstrated in actions," and says that "musicianship equals musical understanding" (p. 53, 70). Creating music certainly deepens one's understanding of it. Creation encompasses performing, composing, improvising, and more. While

it is true that every human *society* has music makers, each society also has *individuals* who are not interested in making it themselves. “The vast majority of people in our culture engage in music only by listening” (Reimer, 1996, p. 75). They are content to simply enjoy the music made by others, and I am okay with that.

However, I do feel that the *opportunity* to create music should be available to all who are interested. Those who chose to become what Elliott calls “musicers,” or music makers, should be dedicated to excellence. Anything worth doing is worth doing *well*. Music teachers must teach success. Students need small wins in each practice session or rehearsal. Success breeds motivation and confidence. How can music students create music of superior quality? Through dedicated work toward what I call **The 5 T’s**: Time, Tone, Tune, Touch, and Technique.

The first step to musical excellence is *time*. Whether it is the ebb and flow of Debussy’s *Claire de Lune*, or the infectious beat of Michael Jackson’s *Billie Jean*, music is the manipulation of rhythm and tempo. Second, music becomes pleasing to the ear through beautiful *tone*. Students must be taught how to produce a characteristic sound so their audience will enjoy listening to them. Third, even young musicians can learn to play in *tune*. Accurate pitch brings sounds together in an aurally pleasing manner. Fourth, all compositions must have the appropriate stylistic *touch*. Articulation, dynamics, and phrasing all contribute to the general effectiveness of a performance. Finally, *technique* is the physical means through which the other 4 T’s can be consistently applied.

Mastery of the 5 T’s requires years of dedicated practice. The decade of decision is a critical time during which youth need to learn how to work hard. Creating music at a high level can teach them the value and process of such work. Those skills can be applied throughout their lives in countless nonmusical ways. Most of my music students will have careers in some other field. While music isn’t the *only* way to learn about hard work, for some youth it is the *best* way.

But the process is just part of the benefit. Reimer (1996) explains that the product is the result of the process. He quotes Elliott Eisner saying that “processes can be improved by attending to the product and products improved by making inferences about the processes” (Reimer, 1996, p. 65-66). The product of a music performance as a listener or performer is an aesthetic experience that triggers a desire for us to return to music again and again. This leads to the second aspect of my philosophy: inspiration.

## Inspiration

Whether through creation, listening, or a combination of both, all people can be powerfully moved by music. Reimer describes this as an aesthetic experience. I prefer the term *inspiration*. People are enlightened and lifted up as they have intimate experiences with the greatest music compositions. The world's finest music generally meets 5 criteria. I remember them with the acronym **ENDURE**: **E**nduring, **D**esigned, **U**nique, **R**evolutionary, and **E**xpressive. It is the responsibility of the music educator to expose students to these masterpieces.

First, the greatest music is *enduring*. Timeless music was superior in its origin, it still is now, and will be in the future. As challenging as it may be, a music educator must not only rely on "old" music. They should also judiciously search out new music to find those pieces that will last beyond the current generation.

The second concept is the way music is *designed*. The best compositions and improvisations have well-constructed form, harmony, and motivic development. The best songs have melodies so brilliant they can stand alone without the words. Such melodies can be played on a violin or piano, and they are still musically rewarding. Similarly, their lyrics are meaningful enough that they can stand alone as great poetry.

Third, the most influential musicians in history did something *unique*, and they did it first. Bach, The Beatles, Louis Armstrong; each did things nobody else had done. They were innovative in their style, instrumentation, application of theory, and in many other regards. All people should be taught to listen to such musical pioneers.

The fourth is *revolutionary*. Consider the great revolutions in world history. They were motivated by change. An innovative musical work or composer becomes revolutionary when other musicians alter their processes in response. Music was never the same after Beethoven wrote his *Symphony Eroica*. Improvisation was never the same after Miles Davis recorded *Kind of Blue*. Revolutionary musicians should be familiar to all people.

The fifth aspect of inspiring music is *expression*. Consider the music masterpieces. What motivated their creation? Love, war, politics, dance, nature, and death, are but a few of the endless list of topics that have moved musicians and all people throughout the ages. What will move the student? Expression in music can be approached in two ways. The first would be to express the

emotions intended by composer. The second would be for a performer to express their own emotions. In either case, music is a means of communication unlike anything else in the world.

David Elliott argues that one must perform in order to understand music. While I do agree that performing *deepens* one's understanding, on this issue I must side with Bennett Reimer. He declares that music teachers need to "help children perceive what is actually expressive in music they are listening to, so that the power of the music can be felt" (Reimer, 1970, p. 120). I believe that people can feel the power of music without performing it. This is especially true when people are taught about historically significant works that meet each of my 5 criteria. That said, musicians should go beyond listening by experiencing these composers through performance. There is so much music in the world that is mediocre or worse. It is the responsibility of the educator to prioritize quality literature, especially music that changed history.

## **Cooperation**

The third aspect of my philosophy is to teach the principle of cooperation. To be cooperative is to work well with others and to demonstrate kindness. This argument is ignored by Reimer and Elliott, perhaps because it sounds like the old utilitarian justification for music education. If using music to build character sounds utilitarian, so be it. It is tragic when someone becomes a brilliant performer yet a lousy collaborator.

A cooperative musician keeps their commitments to themselves and their ensemble. They are punctual and reliable. They come to rehearsals and performances prepared. A cooperative person understands that each individual contributes an important part to the ensemble. They believe that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In a cooperative environment the teacher is not greater than the learner, and the learner is not greater than the teacher. Both are edified as they work together toward similar goals.

A cooperative musician is kind. Kindness is the essence of greatness. It is a fundamental part of the character of the greatest people I know. A kind person respects all people and property. Is each person uniquely valuable to the human family? Of course they are. Do we always agree? Certainly not. Life would be boring if everyone were the same. A kind person values those differences. A kind musician progresses in unity with their associates. Their compliments and critiques are motivated by love rather than selfishness.

For many youth, music is absolutely the best place to learn cooperation. What greater skill could anyone gain during their decade of decision than learning how to work with others? Cleaning drill on the marching band field; tuning chords in a sectional for chamber choir; trading improvised solos over a 12-bar blues. These are real music experiences that require real cooperative and communicative skills. Digital communication is rapidly replacing human interaction. Face-to-face conversation is a dying art among our youth. And yet, if they wish to have stable jobs, families, and societies, it will come only through their ability to work well with other people. I propose that for some children, there can be no better way to internalize such life lessons than through the creation of inspirational music.

## **Conclusion**

A recent television commercial claimed that there are over 400,000 college athletes, and just about all of them will be going pro in something other than sports. The same is true of young musicians. As a music teacher in secondary schools, my objective is not to have all of my students become symphony professionals. A very small percentage will pursue careers in music, and I will rejoice in every student that does so. But all the rest can also have deep, meaningful experiences through beautiful music. If they choose to create music themselves, I will help them become their personal best at it. They can all be inspired by musical masterworks. And if they are cooperative, kind, and dedicated to achieving excellence, they will improve the world one individual, one family, one community at a time.

To play rhythms, scales, and standard repertoire is not enough. In the end, what is important is what we have become through both the process and the product of music. In contrast to the institutions of the world which challenge students to *know* something, music challenges students to *become* something. To provide youth with such an opportunity during their decade of decision is to give them the gift of a lifetime.

## Bibliography

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