

Engaging Non-Traditional Music Students: Guitar Class and Popular Music in High School

In the summer of 1967, a symposium was held by the Music Educators National Conference (MENC - the forerunner to today's NAfME) at the Tanglewood Music Center, the summer home of the Boston Symphony in western Massachusetts (Choate, 1968). Among the outcomes of the symposium was a set of statements, called the "Tanglewood Declaration", which outlined a roadmap for the future of music education in American schools. The declaration called for music should be a core subject in school curriculum, and, "The musical repertory should be expanded to involve music of our time in its rich variety, including currently popular teen-age music, avant-garde music, American folk music, and the music of other cultures." Music educators were called upon to "break out of the mold" of the traditional western european model, and engage their students in different ways, including the use of popular music and instruments.

Traditional ensembles like band, choir, and orchestra will always have their place in music education. A popular addition to high school curriculum is guitar classes. Although guitar classes will never (and should never) replace traditional ensembles in a high school curriculum, they can be a means to engage those students who may have "oppositional personas" (Seifreid, 2006, p.175) or otherwise would not be in music classes at all (Cape, 2013, Tobias, 2012, Abramo, 2010). Reimer (1989) that suggested that roughly 15 percent of high school students nationwide participate in music classes. That means that approximately 85% of high school students don't engage in music. Offering guitar classes is a method to engage a different demographic of high school students, and give those students the opportunity to reap the benefits of music education while in high school.

Why guitar? Although the guitar is often viewed as an instrument of leisure rather than a virtuosic instrument (Jacobs, 1981 *in* Silverman, 2009), it is portable, intimate, relatively easy to learn, and ubiquitous in the popular music that surrounds us everyday. However, guitar classes in high school is not as widespread in American music education as the authors of the Tanglewood Declaration probably hoped in 1967. In a survey of more than 500 American high school principals in 2006, Abril and Gault (2008) reported that only 19% offered a guitar class in their high schools. However, another 36% indicated that they would like to offer such a class, or wanted more information about how to offer one. One of the major obstacles was the lack of teachers trained to teach guitar.

Research has shown that guitar classes provide many social and educational benefits for high school students. Cape (2013) investigated the “perceptions of meaningfulness” of guitar class by interviewing and following five students at a high school in Winnipeg, Canada. She found that to the students, the meaningfulness of taking the guitar class fell into five categories: 1) Building skills. The students were actively constructing a skill set by practicing and learning guitar. 2) Appreciation of music. Students were more actively engaging with music outside of school, breaking down and analyzing the music to which they were listening, and exploring new genres. 3) Student choice. Students appreciated being able to choose their own repertoire, something that is different than band or choir. 4) Belonging. The students felt like they were part of a group, and 5) Being heard. Through the guitar class, the students were developing their individual voice and were able to express themselves as artists. Case also pointed out that the teacher was the focal point of the class, and the students had a positive connection with him.

Seifried (2006) evaluated the social outcomes of his own guitar class in a suburb of Washington D.C. He interviewed and followed 14 students during the course of a school year

and defined positive outcomes from the guitar class. Seifried grouped responses into three categories: 1) Group identity and bonding, 2) Personal identity and expressivity, and 3) New experiences with music. Although they are slightly different terms, they are very similar to the outcomes indicated by Case (2013), and are outcomes that can be found in students engaged in traditional music ensembles. Seifred also explored the impact on academics by implementing a quantitative study of GPA and academic performance, but did not find statistically significant results, most likely due to small sample size.

A Guitar / Music Technology class can also help students to build musical skills that may prove useful in employment in music production. Tobias (2012) demonstrated that students in a guitar / music technology class engaged with music in multiple ways. During the process of writing, recording, and producing an original song, the students assumed musical roles such as songwriter, performer, recordist, sound engineer, and producer, all of which have real world application. The collaborative nature of the project allowed students who excelled in one aspect (e.g. running the sound board, or playing bass) to hone their skills by working for other students.

Abramo (2010) indicated the value of including popular music study in a music class. He described using popular songs to teach music theory in such a way that “grabbed” the students attention. He used the example of, “Let It Be’ by the Beatles to examine song form and structure. He also demonstrated examples of using pop songs to introduce culture and gender issues. The song, “Imagine” by John Lennon was used to investigate lyrics, politics, and philosophy, and the song “Personal (Big Girls Don’t Cry) by Fergie was used to open a discussion of feminist issues and popular culture.

A common thread among researchers was the importance of the music teacher. Without exception, all the literature reviewed for this document indicated that the space created by the educator (i.e. the classroom) was important, if not essential, in developing positive

experiences for their students. Tobias (2012) recommended the creation of “hybrid” music rooms so that students have access to a variety of methods to engage with music.

Guitar / Technology / Popular Music classes can serve an important function in a high school music curriculum by adding to the traditional ensembles and reaching out to a new group of students. And I submit: band teachers can teach guitar, choir teachers can teach guitar, general music teachers can teach guitar, and elementary teachers can teach guitar (although I suggest starting off with ukuleles.) Teaching guitar is an avenue to reach more students and to engage them in the joys of music.

References

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