

On Excellence in Music Education

The standards of performance in music that we have become accustomed to expect in our day are extraordinarily high. Considering that these are achieved by professionals only after intensive and prolonged training, why should music teachers, dealing with amateurs, aspire to an excellence that is so far out of reach? Would it not be realistic to settle for more modest results? Jorgensen first examines the problem of standards, finding that on each of four considerations of standard there can be both an absolutist and a relativist position, a state of affairs that leaves one with a somewhat general definition of what it is that must be excelled in order to achieve excellence. She then evolves five principles concerning the working of excellence in music education, and points to the strongly inspirational effect it has both on student and on teacher — an effect that is peculiarly achievable in music, but that clearly is equally desirable in any subject.

The English verb “excel” comes originally from the Latin *excellere* meaning “to rise above.” A variety of similar current meanings, viz., “to be very good,” “to be pre-eminent,” “to surpass,” “to be better than” may be cited. All imply two things: first, a high degree of “goodness” and second, the surpassing of general “norms” or “standards.” Indeed, the definition of excellence presumes both a “metric” by which the degree of “goodness” may be evaluated and a delineation of “norms” or “standards” by which excellence is judged.

The problem of standards

For looking at the problem of *standards* I have developed a schema which proposes two opposite or extreme cases, as shown in Figure 1. Each paradigm represents a profile of four dimensions, and in each case we juxtapose two opposite polar extremes. This technique for clarifying concepts theoretically is

called 'typification' and has been developed by Zentner (1978) following the work of Martindale (1959), Becker (Loomis & Loomis, 1965), Vernon (1973), and Machlup (1970) among others. By comparing two extreme theoretical viewpoints we can more clearly understand some practical situations which typically fall between these extremes.

In the present case there are four important considerations in the delineation of standards. First, there is the question of the referent group (of norms) to which comparison will be made. Are these norms imposed by society or self-imposed by the individual? Second, there is the question of the level of criticism to be employed. Are standards to be based upon uninformed judgment, theoretically at a zero point at one extreme, or upon a critical judgment representing a theoretically perfect knowledge at the other? Third, there is the question of the length of time during which the standards have been in force. Are standards continually changing, or have they been stable over an extended time? Fourth, there is the question of area throughout which the standards are in force. Are the standards acceptable only in a small geographical area, or are they accepted all over the world?

When we examine the two paradigms we see one which generates essentially 'relative' standards (Paradigm 1) while the other generates essentially 'absolute' standards (Paradigm 2). Susanne Langer (1948, 1953) has emphasized the essential 'relativism' of the musical event.

She has postulated the notion that the musical symbol is intuitively apprehended and that this subjectivity results in psychologically variant judgments respecting the quality of any given musical event. She argues that the musical event possesses both 'virtual time' and 'virtual space' for the listener, i.e., a psychologically apprehended time and space in distinction to actual clock time and physical space. Thus, for example, two musical pieces of equivalent duration may appear to a given listener to have widely different virtual times, the one appearing to be extremely short and the other extremely long. Similarly, one piece may appear to have a different virtual space from the other depending on such factors as textural differences and timbral contrasts, among others, as between the two pieces.

Pitirim Sorokin has advanced the theory that at the socio-cultural or societal nexus, social expectations, norms, standards and mores also vary through time and space. He postulates the notion of 'social time' and 'social space', i.e., sociologically apprehended time and space in distinction to actual clock time and physical space. Thus, for example, time may be measured with reference to social events, viz., "before the war," or with reference to socio-musical periods, viz., "the classical period." Similarly, space may be measured with reference to social events, viz., the social status of the musician may vary widely as for example between the "servant" status of the musicians in Europe in the 18th century and the "employee" status of their 20th century counterparts.

The possibility of changes in orientation toward relativism or absolutism from time to time and from place to place, as suggested by Sorokin, only serves to complicate the analysis and does not solve our problem of standards for excellence. Further, we have every reason to believe that in recent history, at least, a situation corresponding closely to a 'sensate' phase or Paradigm 1 above in music education and more generally in society as a whole has prevailed. The likelihood therefore of our selecting any given set of specific musical standards and having them adopted by all music educators is minimal.

The question of a "metric" by which we may measure the disparity between a given musical event and our formulated standard is even more problematic. It is difficult enough to quantify events which are subjectively perceived.

It is my contention that it is necessary to take account of actual physical clock time and actual physical space, psychologically apprehended 'virtual time' and 'virtual space' (after Langer), and sociologically apprehended 'social time' and 'social space' (after Sorokin-Zentner) if we are to develop a "metric" by which musical events may be measured. It should then be possible to formulate theoretical propositions and make corresponding "measurements" or "observations" in the testing of these propositions which will translate through the variety of causal nexus.

Figure 1

**A COMPARISON OF TWO PARADIGMS
FOR THE GENERATION
OF MUSICAL STANDARDS**

Dimensions	Paradigm 1	Paradigm 2
Referent group	Individually imposed norms	Society imposed norms
Level of criticism	Zero knowledge	Perfect knowledge
Length of time over which standards are in force	Change orientation	Stability orientation
Geographical area over which standards are in force	Minimal space	Maximal space

Thus far I have referred to the musical symbol and event. Music education straddles two principal disciplines, namely, music and pedagogy (itself covering primary fields of physiology, psychology, sociology, philosophy and theology). Pedagogy also illustrates both 'relativism' and 'absolutism'. It represents varying

approaches in what should be taught, what methods should be used and what students should be accepted, through time and space. It also represents the evidence of physiological, psychological and sociological research. At these varying levels of integrative analysis, it involves varying levels of subjectivity in research.

It can therefore be argued that the utilization of physical, virtual and social time and space as a “metric” in music education quality evaluation is appropriate not only to the musical symbol but also to pedagogy itself.

Where does this leave us in our quest for a definition of excellence? Essentially we are left with a very general definition. Obviously there are certain absolute standards inherent in the form and function or the relevant aesthetic of the music itself which dictate judgments respecting the quality of a given musical event. But relative and interpersonal subjective judgments come into play which vary in prominence from time to time and from place to place. These introduce an element of uncertainty into our judgments and standards, making them more unclear.

Some principles

Certainly, we should not abandon our interest in excellence in music education because we are unable to quantify our standards and metrics precisely. Indeed, this state of affairs constitutes a challenge to continued research in the area. But it may mean that on a practical level we need to be content for the present with gross comparisons and crude indices.

There is a second question which is even more fundamental than the first problem of definition of excellence, namely why be concerned with excellence in music education? What can its achievement do for us on the practical level in stimulating student learning and teaching performance? How is it achieved and what does it demand in commitment from teacher and student alike?

In pondering the factors which are at the essence of the music teaching-learning process, I have formulated five principles which characterize the operation of excellence in music education and place it at the very heart or centre of the process. I emphasize the speculative nature of these principles. They arise out of an intuitive view of musical pedagogy, based upon my observations of and participation in a variety of music teaching-learning situations at the elementary school through graduate school levels. They may apply not only to music education but to other curricular areas as well. We turn now to an examination of principles of excellence in music education.

Principle 1: *The teacher's actions determine the level of excellence achieved by the student, within the operative constraints imposed by student individual differences.*

This principle declares the central importance of the music teacher in the achievement of excellence. The teacher sets the standards principally with his or her actions rather than with words. As teachers, we may expect our students to reach no higher level of excellence in performance than we ourselves demonstrate and maintain. We may ask our students to give us excellent choral or instrumental tone, but if we do not expect this and take appropriate steps to achieve it, the tone will not necessarily be forthcoming. We may ask our students to sing or play the correct notes, but if we ourselves allow inaccuracies to go unchecked and if we demonstrate a lazy or sloppy attitude to the music, we cannot expect any more of our students.

It is obvious that student individual differences in such things as musical ability will influence the level of excellence which it is possible to achieve. But within these constraints, the degree to which the student achieves his or her potential level of excellence depends centrally on the teacher's actions.

Principle 2: *The central communication in musical pedagogy is that of energy rather than knowledge. It is this energy which enables the achievement of excellence.*

The role of electro-chemical processes in learning has been documented in recent physiological research. The work on protein synthesis as an hypothesized part of the electro-chemical process of current transfer and circuit establishment, stabilization, and degeneration is of special interest (Ansell & Bradley, 1973). An emotional response to the learning process has also been shown to be of importance in facilitating or hindering these electro-chemical processes (Jorgensen, 1977).

This principle recognizes the centrality of intellectual-emotional interaction on the part of both teacher and student. The focus of the teacher's attention is upon the student, upon making the subject meaningful to the student rather than upon the subject matter for its own sake. This does not deny the importance of the material — the music itself. In practice, following this principle, it becomes even more important that the teacher understands the subject he or she teaches. But the principle simply shifts the focus of emphasis for the teacher. Further, it changes the nature of instruction from an intellectual communication to an intellectual-emotional communication, the results of which yield an increased efficiency in the learning process.

The force, vigour, activity, and enthusiasm which the word *energy* implies is an essential part of the intellectual-emotional interaction between teacher and student. It is absorbed by the student, not forced upon him or her. Rather, the vigour of the communication and the quality of the teacher's emotional and intellectual response stimulates the student to increased activity and vigour, and to greatly enhanced learning. The response of the student in turn interacts with the teacher, stimulating his or her intellectual-emotional reaction. Thus the com-

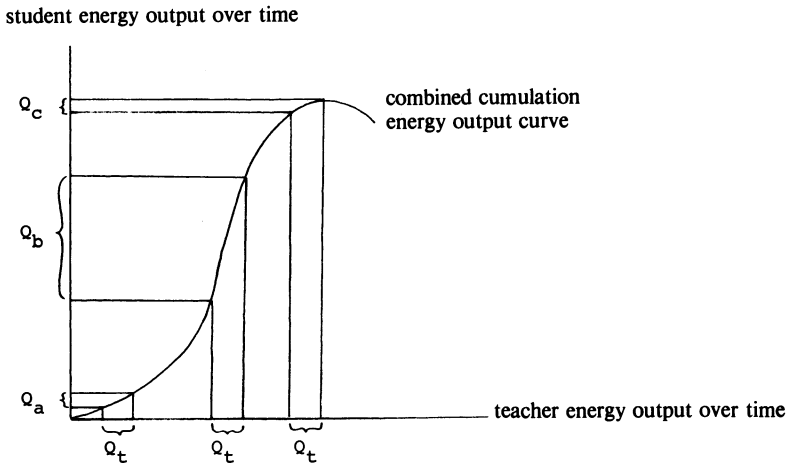
munication of teacher with student and vice versa becomes a highly creative process. It is the contention of this principle that the achievement of excellence is “powered” centrally through the communication of energy rather than of knowledge.

Principle 3: *There is a pattern of relationship between the quantity of energy output of the teacher and that of the student.*

The energy output relationship postulated here may be represented diagrammatically as in Fig. 2.

Figure 2

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHER AND STUDENT ENERGY OUTPUT OVER TIME



Let the X axis represent teacher energy output on a series of lessons and the Y axis represent student energy output. Consider a given constant quantity of teacher energy Q_t . At first there is a complementary but lesser student energy output of Q_a where $Q_a < Q_t$. As the teacher’s energy output continues, an additional quantity of Q_t is matched by a greater student energy output of Q_b where $Q_b > Q_t$. Further increments in teacher energy output continue to the point where an additional quantity of Q_t is matched by a lesser student energy output

of Q_c where $Q_c < Q_t$. At first, student energy output may come more slowly than the teacher's, but a period of exponential growth of student energy output follows which may, however, subsequently become a slower growth to a point of relative satiation. It is possible that the curve may actually then fall, following satiation and with the onset of fatigue.

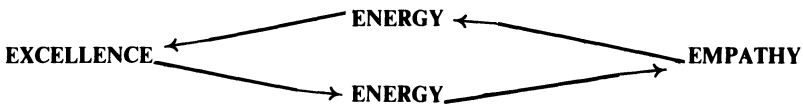
The elasticity of the energy output curve may vary between individual and groups, and may vary over time. Some students will be more receptive both to the teacher and to the subject at hand, varying with such factors as musical ability, intelligence, socio-economic background, and so on. Further, they will be more receptive at some times than at others, depending on a variety of psychological factors.

Principle 4: *There is a relationship between excellence, energy, communication, and 'reciprocal empathy' between teacher and student.*

Given the existence of readily identifiable teacher and student 'types', and given that these types interact in a series of "mixes" of teacher-student intellectual-emotional interaction, then 'reciprocal empathy' describes the total resultant interaction, which varies in quality (the intellectual-emotional mix); intensity, and extent. Presumably, at some given point the "type mixes" are optimized and at that point reciprocal empathy and student learning are optimized (Jorgensen, 1977).

We may imagine a dimension not unlike that proposed by Merton (1967) in his theory of deviance where at one extreme we have reciprocal empathy (+ +) while at the other extreme we have reciprocal antipathy (— —). Obviously, in music education where much of the music program centres around large performing ensembles consisting of diverse student types, maximizing or at least optimizing reciprocal empathy is a major consideration.

Further, there is an interaction between excellence and reciprocal empathy depicted diagrammatically as follows:



The experience of excellence results in an increase in reciprocal empathy. There follows either

- a. An increase in the “emotional” dimension of reciprocal empathy by which there is an increased emotional bond between teacher and student;
- b. An increase in the “intellectual” dimension of reciprocal empathy by which there is an increased intellectual respect and admiration between teacher and student;
- c. Some combination of both.

A conductor may rely principally or exclusively on either dimension. He may be greatly loved by the students, or, alternatively, he may be regarded as a “bear” and yet wins the admiration of the students for his capacity to engender a creative and excellent performance even though disliked on the personal level.

Again, the achievement of increased empathy further results in a greater receptivity of teacher to student and vice versa, and the consequent possibility of heightened excellence in subsequent performances.

Energy is intimately related to both excellence and empathy. The greater the level of empathy, for example, the greater the student energy output relative to each given corresponding unit of teacher energy output, and the more efficient the system. Energy might be regarded, analogically, as the ‘force-field’ within which excellence and empathy operate.

Principle 5: *The experience of excellence involves an intense intellectual-emotional action and reaction.*

The achievement of excellence involves a high level of creativity. Margery Vaughan has described a four stage model defining creativity as “the life of mind at its highest level of functioning.” The value of this model is in pointing to the importance of a thorough knowledge and understanding of the subject and the music itself before creativity can be achieved (Vaughan, 1973).

A performer’s reaction to the experience of excellence similarly involves an intense intellectual response. There is an intuitive apprehension and awareness of what has been achieved that is quite objective, as well as an intense realization of the weaknesses and mistakes of the performance. The artist may be pleased, but never satisfied, with the performance. In such cases, students themselves are conscious of what they have and have not accomplished. This fact acts as *intrinsic* motivation in further endeavours. The intellectual pleasure achieved is itself a reward.

Nevertheless, the achievement of excellence involves a high degree of emotional involvement. In this respect, we may think of a continuum, represented at

one extreme by total *concentration* on self-consciousness in performance. On the one hand, the total self-conscious pre-occupation with “feelings” in the performance results in the focus of the attention being on oneself rather than upon the music. The individual may be pre-occupied with fear, and it is this fear which precludes excellence in performance. It diminishes the level of intellectual concentration on the music essential for the achievement of excellence, and the self becomes the chief intellectual consideration. Thus, “Where are the next problems I must overcome?”, “Will I be able to negotiate these difficult sections?”, and so on.

On the other hand, the total absence of self-consciousness enables the emotions to assume their proper place as subservient to the intellect and under its control during the performance. The individual is totally caught up with the music and its implications. Technical difficulties have been relegated to the subconscious. Practically speaking, for this to occur, the material must have been thoroughly learned beforehand. Yet while the performer must “lose himself” in his music, and while this is an intense emotional as well as intellectual experience, the emotions must be controlled by an extremely active intellect.

Again, the performer’s reaction to the experience of excellence also involves an intense emotional response. The Greek word *εκστασις* from which we get our English word “ecstasy,” meaning “exalted state or feeling,” is appropriate to describe the sensation. Some performers describe their emotional reaction as that of “being on a high”. Students may be unable to handle their emotional response and react variably, hugging each other and/or their director, breaking down and crying, and so on. The students *know* when they have achieved an excellent performance, and this knowledge brings of itself a tremendous emotional joy.

Excellence in the curriculum

The achievement of excellence has an inspirational effect. On the assumptions, first, that the students’ interest in music should be awakened and aroused rather than having music forced upon them; and second, that students will generally recognize and desire experiences of excellence, then we may expect that students will want to participate in a music program which is both relevant and excellent. Witness the many music programs which while demanding a very high standard of performance from the students, and while moving them to an appreciation of excellent music, are filled to overflowing with eager students. In such programs, the higher the standard the teacher demands of the students, the more students there seem to be wanting to participate in the program. On the other hand, where mere entertainment or “affective” goals are pre-eminent, where the teacher is desirous of a popular image and where quality and excellence are sacrificed on the altar of popularity with students, a high level of student demand for music is not always evident. Rather, student enrolment may be stable, rather small, or even diminishing in size.

The role of the experience of excellence in providing a form of intrinsic motivation for students and teachers has been referred to above. Further, its role in increasing 'reciprocal empathy' and thereby increasing the effectiveness of student learning and stimulating increased levels of performance have also been discussed. These provide important educational reasons why such experiences should constitute a fundamental place in the school curriculum. Teachers need inspiration just as much as do students, and the achievement of excellence provides teachers themselves with encouragement for the future.

Of all the areas of the school curriculum, music presents the means whereby the student may most readily experience excellence. The musical performance can be heard and immediately perceived. And it is this aspect which constitutes a major argument for music education's role as basic to the school curriculum.

REFERENCES

- Ansell, G. B. and P. B. Bradley. eds. *Macromolecules and Behaviour*. London: McMillan, 1973.
- Jorgensen, E. *A Critical Analysis of Selected Aspects of Music Education*. Calgary: Department of Educational Administration, University of Calgary, 1977.
- Langer, Susanne K. *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study of the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art*. New York: Penguin, 1948.
- . *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*. New York: Scribner, 1953.
- Lazarsfeld, Paul F. and Allen H. Barton. "Qualitative Measurement in the Social Sciences: Classification, Typologies and Indices." *The Policy Sciences*, Daniel Lerner and Harold D. Lasswell, eds. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1951, pp. 155-192.
- Loomis, Charles P. and Zona K. Loomis. *Modern Social Theories*. 2nd edn. Princeton, New Jersey: Van Nostrand, 1965.
- Machlup, F. "Homo Oeconomicus and His Classmates." *Phenomenology and Social Reality: Essays in Memory of Alfred Schutz*, ed. Maurice Natanson. Hague: Mijhoff, 1970.
- Martindale, Don. "Sociological Theory and Ideal Type." *Symposium on Sociological Theory*, ed. Llewellyn Gross. Evanston, Ill.: Row, Peterson, 1959, pp. 57-91.
- Merton, Robert K. *Social Theory and Social Structure*. Revised edition. Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1967.
- Vaughan, M. M. "Cultivating Creative Behaviour: Energy Levels and the Process of Creativity." *Music Educators Journal*, Vol. 59 (1973), pp. 35-37.
- Vernon, P. E. "Multivariate Approaches to the Study of Cognitive Styles." *Multivariate Analysis and Psychological Theory*, Joseph R. Royce, ed. London and New York: Academic Press, 1973.
- Zentner, Henry. "Sorokin's Analysis of Time and Space." *Sorokin and Sociology: Essays in Honour of Professor Pitirim Sorokin*. G. C. Hallen and R. Prasad, eds. Moti Katra, Agra-3 India: Satish, 1972.
- . "Varieties of Concepts, Attributes, Types, and Standards in Sociology." Unpublished paper available from the writer, Department of Educational Administration, University of Calgary, 1978.

Résumé

Les normes d'interprétation musicale auxquelles nous nous sommes habitués aujourd'hui sont extraordinairement élevées. Étant donné que seuls les musiciens de carrière parviennent à les respecter au bout de nombreuses années de formation intensive, pourquoi les professeurs de musique qui n'ont à faire qu'à des amateurs aspireraient-ils à un degré d'excellence aussi difficile à atteindre? Ne serait-il pas plus réaliste d'escompter des résultats plus modestes? Jorgensen étudie pour commencer le problème des normes et constate qu'il est possible d'adopter une position absolutiste et relativiste face à chacun des quatre critères normatifs fixés: cela donne une idée un peu vague de ce en quoi il convient d'exceller pour atteindre un niveau d'excellence. Elle énonce ensuite cinq principes qui permettent d'atteindre un tel niveau dans l'enseignement de la musique et souligne l'effet bienfaisant qu'ils exercent tant sur les élèves que sur les professeurs, effet qu'il est surtout possible de réaliser en musique, mais qui est également souhaitable pour toute discipline.

