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Orchestras That Educate

by

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Few readers of *Harmony* would disagree that in many American communities, music education in the school systems is, at best, inequitable. And that thought is the one with which this essay's author, Mitchell Korn, begins. He soon suggests that orchestras can become important partners in building effective musical education initiatives.

No Single Right Answer

Korn defines what he considers to be the primary components of comprehensive arts education, and suggests that there is no single right answer to how to implement them. He offers the thought that programs must be tailored to different age groups, musical experiences, and locales. Observing that "programs that are instructionally imposed upon teachers typically fail," he says that collaboration in the development of need-based programs is one key to success.

The essay then turns to ways in which orchestras can implement successful education programs, outlining ways in which staff, board, and orchestra members can work together to deliver effective programs. He concludes that "orchestras that educate" can make themselves indispensable to their communities.

Orchestras That Educate

Last year, while I was doing work for a major music organization, a middle-school student told me, “So I am supposed to think that seeing the pictures of dead white men means something? If anyone ever bothers to make it real, to let me try it, I might feel different, but all orchestras want to do is make me feel less by telling how great their art is and how bad mine is.” Most of the students in the room vigorously agreed and one added, “Yeah. It’s like going to an orchestra and them playing ‘Star Wars,’ and the lead guy, the conductor, dressed in some lame costume running round the stage like a cartoon, and we’re supposed to believe that when we grow up this is what we’re going to be. No way. It’s just no respect.”

Today, in numerous American communities and schools, music education and access to the arts is, without question, inequitable. Throughout our schools, there is ample opportunity for arts learning in one classroom, while across the hall there is none. Arts education from year to year in the sequence of a student’s education is, at best, uneven. From classroom to classroom, inequities are based upon a host of factors:

- ◆ the time dominance of state-mandated, high-stakes testing;
- ◆ the “content” comfort and knowledge of individual teachers;
- ◆ the support of the principal;
- ◆ district funding levels; and
- ◆ the presence or lack of full-time music specialists.

While many Americans assume that arts education is actually part of every child’s development, most students have no exposure to music education.

Given this situation, many schools have turned to the only arts education programs available to them, those provided by community arts organizations,

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such as the local orchestra. This development, a process that began more than 30 years ago, represents an intelligent use of resources: orchestras need multiple ways to build relationships with audiences and the communities they serve, while schools increasingly recognize the value of music education and the availability of orchestra personnel to fill that need.

However, many orchestras are still rooted in an “exposure-enhancement” model of music education content and delivery that is more than 30 years old. This approach to orchestra education, developed in the late 1960s, and typified by the Bernstein Young People’s Concerts, is today still the programmatic norm. At the time of its development, these concerts perfectly fit a nation whose children all received music education. While these efforts still have great value to orchestras and their communities, this model was developed as a means of enhancing an existing classroom music curriculum. From instrument demonstrations and reading of composer biographies to discussions of form, these programs look first at young people as potential audiences, not as learners. The content and teaching approaches are typically rational and pedantic, disregarding the creative and participatory nature of the arts. Considering the unstable and inequitable environment for music education in schools today, neither exposure nor enhancement is enough.

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Many orchestras are becoming increasingly aware of the lack of sound strategies for working in schools and communities, as well as the limits of their knowledge or capacity to effectively meet school and community needs. The laundry list of deficiencies among typical orchestra education programs includes:

- ◆ programs that have no relationship to authentic academic, community, and social needs;
- ◆ programs that lack sound pedagogic and developmentally appropriate learning approaches;
- ◆ programs without sufficient funding to assist school faculty in using the arts effectively in the curriculum; and
- ◆ programs that exhibit a general arrogance and insensitivity to students’ cultures and challenges.

If orchestras are to build truly meaningful and effective music education initiatives, they need to improve dramatically the methods and skills they employ in this work. There is a growing body of tested methods and strategies which an increasing number of orchestras are embracing to build effective programs for today’s children and schools.

No One “Right” Orchestra Education Program

Sophisticated orchestra educators currently promote a variety of programs, from community conservatories and culturally diverse partnerships to comprehensive curriculum integration programs and teacher-training initiatives. This diversity is well warranted when one considers the entirety of music and arts education.

Arts education is a discipline in which students acquire a broad range of skills which are not learned through “exposure” any more than math or science are. The skills are learned through teaching and experience, and good programs require teachers who are familiar not only with the subject matter, but also with the children’s developmental stages, and what concepts are best taught at what ages. Arts education is not only for gifted children any more than reading and history are; it is a central element of any well-rounded education.

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At the same time, the teaching and assessment of arts education has traditionally been different from the teaching and assessment of the so-called “core” subjects—“testable” subjects, such as reading, mathematics, and history. An essential element of arts education is doing: singing, playing a musical instrument, dancing, or painting. What is more, in the arts there are often no “right” answers, so an important component of arts education is developing students’ capacities to perceive, understand, and make informed judgments.

For the purpose of this discussion, I would define three components of a comprehensive arts education.

- ◆ Skills-based instruction, in which specific artistic techniques are taught. These might include playing a musical instrument, drawing, or dancing.
- ◆ Aesthetic context instruction, in which the meaning of the arts is described in relation to culture. This includes study of the “great works” of diverse cultures.
- ◆ Integrated arts curricula, in which the arts are used to illuminate and illustrate concepts from other disciplines. The arts are used in an integrated fashion, as tools to explore other “non-arts” ideas. One small example is the profound relationship between music and mathematics, and the way that musical intervals illustrate the concept of fractions. When such concepts are applied in an artistic activity, they become for the learner relevant and understandable rather than dry and abstract.

Each of these three components is equally important; comprehensive arts teaching requires all of them. Teaching and learning in one area leads to increased demand for, and interest in, teaching and learning in the others. Comprehensive

arts education, therefore, refers to this holistic, comprehensive, three-part concept that makes learning attractive and engaging for students.

Turning more specifically to “orchestra education,” programs should be suited to different age groups, musical experiences, and locales. To insist that orchestra education has only one definition or can encompass only one kind of program

is ill-advised when one considers children’s needs, experiences, and different ways of learning. For example, family programs involving parents and grandparents provide wonderful opportunities for furthering relationship and community building through activities that include both adults and children. These programs exhibit an understanding of early childhood, and the fact that parents are more likely to be involved in the schooling of younger children.

“Successful programs acknowledge that informal presentations in classrooms and community settings require skills different from those used in teaching master classes or providing side-by-side mentorship.”

The development of effective strategic plans for an orchestra’s education programs occurs when articulated community needs intersect with the actual artistic and personnel resources of the orchestra. Musicians and conductors are more valuable education assets when they speak to the repertoire that they respect and love. Successful programs acknowledge that informal presentations in

classrooms and community settings require skills different from those used in teaching master classes or providing side-by-side mentorship.

Need-Based Programs: Education as Strategic Culture

A survey of orchestra education programs will typically reveal that many have developed over time, without strategic thought or planning. Program menus are crazy quilts of projects created from good ideas, senior staff suggestions, foundation gifts, or donors’ pet projects.

But orchestra education programs should be rooted in the genuine and articulated education and social needs of students, adult constituents, and the broader community. One should ask students, teachers, administrators, and parents what they want and need. By carefully examining children’s most important learning needs, and what schools, students, teachers, parents, administrators, and community leaders themselves identify as most important in improving their schools, we begin the process of authentic community building. Approaching orchestra education program development through the identification of school and student needs is the best means of creating a “strategic culture” for orchestra education.

Programs that are instructionally imposed upon teachers typically fail. However, working with classroom and arts-specialist teachers and seeking their

direction and experience creates successful efforts. It may seem a cliché, but teachers' ownership of and inclusion in instructionally based programs creates trust and community.

Today, educators frequently demand programs that meet their needs, and often voice complaint about education programs offered by arts organizations that do not include teachers in the planning process. Without involvement from area educators, programs cannot meet teachers' needs, often resulting in ineffective, underutilized programs. As one parent said, "Presentations to thousands of kids don't do much. The teachers can't integrate these programs into their classes, so they are often not relevant to the classroom."

Collaboration with teachers in the development of programs and materials results in programs that teachers can use to meet their own curricular requirements, and materials and activities which orchestras offer must be attentive to the pressures on classroom teachers to meet specific standards and curricular goals. Programs which feature integrated approaches to arts education, centered around building skills in core curricular areas as well as the music curriculum, will help teachers meet curriculum content standards. Without interdisciplinary approaches, programs are perceived as extraneous and will never achieve the sustainability of programs that are integrated into the regular classroom.

Successful initiatives also complement existing services and resources. This is especially important at a time when school systems, community organizations, and arts institutions are coping with overextended resources. This additive approach also recognizes the good works that teachers and artists accomplish and is dedicated to building upon their successes.

And one should remember that study of the arts can teach skills that employers need in such arts-related industries as media, advertising, fashion, and more. While these industries search for young talent with a combination of creative and technical abilities, successful partnerships can supply the experiences and skills to help students attain these opportunities.

Finally, a strategic culture for orchestra education should foster collaborative relationships among area schools, arts and community providers, foundations, and corporate philanthropies. Through partnerships and the creation of sustained relationships, children and schools are better served, and the community begins to value the orchestra as essential.

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The Orchestra Educator: Sophisticated Professional

In both small and large symphonies, growing numbers of orchestra educators have developed into formidable professionals. These orchestra education directors provide institutional leadership within their organizations on an array of issues. Effective orchestra educators seem to embody certain consistent characteristics that are assets to an entire symphony orchestra organization.

The most compelling of these qualifications is the singular ability to effectively advocate internally for education and the building of relationships with new communities as a primary service of the institution. Busy and distracted orchestra

leadership needs to be reminded constantly of the importance of education, and that message can only be consistently carried by the orchestra educator. Effective and passionate communication skills, combined with political and social savvy, are essential to success.

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Knowledge of the symphonic repertoire, of education approaches, and of school and community issues are also requisite but not always found in the same package. Typically, orchestra educators come from careers as music teachers or musicians. Recently, orchestras have increasingly hired their educational leadership from business, public television, and other areas of organizational management. Graduate programs furthering the careers of accomplished professionals (such as the arts education program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education) will add to the field professionals who have both content and management skills.

Successful orchestra education leaders are also extremely effective external advocates for music education. They find the means to support local music educators in practical and ongoing ways. There is an erroneous, yet long-held, belief that orchestra education programs substitute for and hasten the decline of music education (and, by extension, the employment of music teachers) in schools. For some, this notion is the cynical fruit of having witnessed the slashing of music programs, faculties, and budgets by bean-counting school administrators. Recently, there was even an attempt by a national organization of music educators to curtail or halt national funding of orchestra education programs. While this political effort ignored the history of effective working relationships between orchestras and music educators, it was a warning sign. Hence, it is no surprise that effective orchestra educators are directing their resources to aid and abet music educators, and are aggressively supporting increased budgets for supplies, facilities, and faculty for music education.

Sophisticated orchestra educators are politically able, having the experience to move complex agendas through committees and staff leadership. Effective education directors must sometimes take bold leadership action when it is necessary and “ask for forgiveness” later.

Successful orchestra education efforts also recognize the need for adequate staffing and expert consultation. Numerous education departments have been built in this manner, fully recognizing that education is an income and programming center requiring the same commitment to staffing and advice which development and artistic departments receive.

A Rightful Place in the Front Row

There is a plethora of orchestra behaviors indicative of the lowly priority education actually has in some orchestra organizations. Among these are:

- ◆ the inadequate rehearsals and back-ended schedules allotted for education services;
- ◆ the lack of preparation, interest, or qualifications of conductors or musicians assigned to or volunteering for education programs;
- ◆ the fundraising success of education programs being completely out of proportion to the money actually allocated to those programs; and
- ◆ the overall marginalizing of education leadership in relation to other orchestra management.

Yet there is a proven remedy.

Successful orchestra education programs are often managed by a director who is equal in staff position to any other orchestra department head. This senior management position gives the educational effort access to the institutional decision-making process. When the education director is present at meetings, and regularly speaks to the role of education in scheduling, budgeting, board involvement, fundraising, programming, and strategic planning, education begins to have its rightful place in an orchestra's management process.

This front row seat is further assured by active internal education of staff and board. Some orchestra education departments have successfully created extensive "professional development" workshops that engage the orchestra organization in participatory and comprehensive music learning. Learners become enlightened supporters.

Education as an orchestra priority is also furthered by a board education committee that is equal in status and leadership to other board committees. This strategy assures a much higher level of knowledge of education by board leadership and members. Also, when these committees are encouraged to invite professionals and constituents from the broader community (teachers, community leaders, parents), the agenda of education becomes more community directed and powerful.

The rightful place of the education director in orchestra management is as an institutional conscience, creative programmer, and fundraising innovator. When an education director successfully fills these roles, education receives the institutional respect it deserves.

Primary Resources: Musicians and Conductors

For decades, many have viewed the symphonic repertoire as our most precious educational resource. But successful orchestra educators know that it is artists—musicians and conductors—who are the primary teaching and relationship-building resources of the symphony.

Effective orchestra education programs create a qualitative environment for conductors and musicians in which repertoire and ideas are valued. Musicians are students of preparedness. Yet for many orchestra education services, musicians are regularly underprepared and underrehearsed. Successful programs are committed to engaging conductors and musicians in a planning and listening process that includes teachers. This process also includes comprehensive preparation and musician training that emphasize the learning styles of audiences to be served, selection of important repertoire, presentation skills, and the means to create participatory learning.

Teachers and administrators frequently cite the need for orchestras to deliver more of their programs and musicians to classrooms. Educators recognize the benefits of interactive contact with professional artists. Teachers typically express an interest in programs that include deeper involvement with the musicians of the orchestra. As one teacher put it, “Symphony performances are good, but kids need someone coming in and working with them, offering a more hands-on approach that deals with kids in small groups and individually.” Parents also recognize the benefit of artists in the classroom. “My daughter’s classes are boring. They need an infusion of activities that are interesting. Arts in the classroom give our students a chance to move around, socialize, interact,” noted one parent.

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While time and budget constraints are frequently cited as barriers to participation in programs involving travel to an orchestra’s hall, there are also perceived barriers in many communities which limit travel to the “downtown” symphony hall. Bringing artists to the classroom allows the orchestra to overcome these perceived barriers that prevent teachers and students from fully utilizing the services of the orchestra. Expanding and giving priority to programs that deliver artists to the schools not only serves the expressed need for artists in the classroom, but also is an essential element in addressing the needs of fractionalized communities. Delivering artists to schools and community settings builds bridges that will ultimately encourage people from these schools and communities to come to the orchestra, opening a two-way street of travel to and from the symphonic experience.

While many education programs are filled with a “dumbing down” of musical selections, from the traditional “kiddy pieces” to movie and cartoon music, successful education programs emphasize the authentic repertoire of the

orchestra, and work creatively toward making the music accessible and real, rather than mistakenly creating programs of music that is already “popular” to young listeners.

The economics of orchestra education are much like those of any profession: free services are viewed as less valuable than paid ones. While there are a number of programs that utilize the generous volunteer labor of orchestra players, the increasing demands to professionalize orchestra education require professional pay. The American Federation of Musicians has established baseline fees for education services which serve as an excellent starting place to discuss with musicians fair pay for demanding work.

Finally, successful education programs have the authority to veto participation by musicians or conductors who are uncommitted to education and children. Certainly this is controversial, yet plainly it is necessary. Orchestras that use the education podium to fill out job descriptions, for conductor or musician, are met with lukewarm audiences and ultimately failing financial and community support. Ask anyone in education: children and teachers always know when the adult before them does not care.

Passionate and communicative musicians are orchestra education’s finest assets. Orchestra members have the singular ability to speak about the music, the instrumentation, and the ways in which the music connects to our lives. Successful education programs find many ways to showcase these human resources and to build programs around them.

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Education as a Programming Center

A number of orchestras are exploring broader and more diverse programming, from open houses and new-music festivals to ethnic, rock, and jazz concerts. While some of this programming is driven by financial and facility needs, successful orchestra education departments are playing a major role in the planning and presentation of these events. The opportunity for the education department to play a significant role in programming is unprecedented. As orchestras broaden their artistic and cultural palettes, it is education that serves as a glue and connective pathway to all music and cultures.

Successful institutional programming emphasizes education because it is the best means of establishing a context for diverse music for all audiences, and for building sustainable relationships with historically underserved communities and neighborhoods. Rather than staging programs featuring “representative” cultures and music styles, and cynically “checking off” this social responsibility, effective education programs embrace programming that values all music.

Diversity and Partnership

Because of the pluralistic nature of our nation, and the multicultural populations within our schools and communities, educators throughout America express a need for experiences in many kinds of ethnic music. An emphasis on cultural equity will assure that art forms which are representative of the community are included in children's arts education. Some orchestras are successfully educating their communities in culturally pluralistic music. Programming for audiences in our schools and communities requires that orchestras develop partnerships with a broad spectrum of artists and organizations, and requires the same qualitative criteria as symphonic or chamber work. Ethnomusicological expertise is important, and the inclusion of ethnographic approaches is consistently successful.

“Partnerships help provide equitable distribution of resources, attract sustained funding, and can be maintained over many years.”

Partnerships can bring together schools, cultural, and community organizations, and individual artists, and can provide a framework in which all of these constituents can work together to provide comprehensive services to learners. Partnerships bring together needs and resources, and form strong organizations that give ownership of programs to the entire community. Partnerships help provide equitable distribution of resources, attract sustained funding, and can be maintained over many years. The sharing of artistic visions among partners stimulates artistic excellence. By joining forces and combining strengths, the organizations in a partnership can create a “whole” that is capable of achieving far more than any one of its components.

Partnerships are also about increasing the value of the resources an orchestra provides to a school or community. Partnerships recognize that no one artist, ensemble, or organization alone can serve a school and its students, teachers, and parents. Partnerships of organizations with similar missions, culturally diverse and supported by musicians, composers, and conductors, can make significant differences for schools.

Orchestra Education, Philanthropy, and Accountability

Leading orchestra education initiatives often drive fundraising campaigns and the development of sustained relationships with philanthropies. This fact alone should empower education and education directors at orchestras. Those institutional efforts that embrace education as a primary income and programming center give education due respect. But there still are too many orchestras that use education as a “cash cow” and public relations instrument, while internally marginalizing educational commitment and mission. This is a real ethical dilemma that should not be ignored.

Orchestras that educate are finding the means to create sustainable efforts—a quality embraced by many philanthropic interests. And why not? If you were to invest in a service to your community, you would be much more inclined to devote your dollars to a service that would last.

There is a history in America of short-lived arts education programs. Changes in institutional leadership, organizational commitments, and funding priorities often lead to their abandonment. Orchestra education efforts should use some of the following strategies to garner long-term program support.

- ◆ K-12 programming ensures continuous learning for all students every year. While programs may initially be introduced in a limited number of schools and grades, K-12 programming can be achieved by adding additional schools and grades each year. This sequential approach allows for the isolation of program variables in such a way that problems can be identified and solved early.
- ◆ Adult learning, both for teachers and parents, provides a means of program continuity. Such efforts lead to increased support for and reinforcement of students' arts interests both in school and at home. They also build a powerful constituency for enlightened arts-education policy.
- ◆ Effective and objective program assessment is a most compelling form of advocacy. The wide distribution of assessment information can lead to sustained funding.
- ◆ Sustained funding creates the financial stability for programs to grow. Sustained funds also encourage thorough planning and enable programs to become a natural element of daily classroom life.

An orchestra's need to be accountable to constituents is another tremendously powerful encouragement to fund education initiatives. When service providers, teachers, principals, funders, and others are all mutually responsible through contracts, assessment, and evaluation, accountability furthers and sustains these relationships. The fact that the committed, expert staffs of these education initiatives are able to work with diverse populations; complicated educational, institutional, and economic agendas; and complex artistic, school, and instructional issues is testimony to their skills.

Successful orchestra education initiatives have been uniquely capable of generating multiple-year support from single funders. This rare occurrence is not so rare in arts education. Philanthropies are motivated to fund educational initiatives that are strategically planned; involve authentic partnerships; implement serious external assessment procedures; are planned directly with educators and directed at mandated curricula; present the arts in authentic cultural and discipline diversity; engage in sustainable capacity building, including teacher and musician training; and emerge from orchestras that clearly set a priority for arts education as a primary institutional service.

Orchestras That Educate

Orchestras that educate have in common certain qualitative and strategic approaches. Artists are primary teaching and relationship-building resources.

Programs contain meaningful learning opportunities for families, and build capacity in four critical areas: professional development of teachers and administrators, artist training, curriculum development, and assessment. These orchestras also see teachers as primary instructional leaders; seek articulated student need as a guiding force; provide diversity in arts education; include educators in the design and development of programs; work with instructional goals and curriculum mandates; promote meaningful, skills-based learning; and demonstrate genuine accountability among orchestra, schools, and partners.

“... successful programs create a strategic culture in which education is both a programming and fundraising center.”

There is no single program that identifies the orchestra that educates, nor is there a single successful leader or service. Yet, successful programs create a strategic culture in which education is both a programming and fundraising center. Because no one orchestra can comprehensively serve its community alone, orchestras that educate seek meaningful partnerships to enhance artistic offerings with discipline and culturally diverse arts.

Orchestras that educate are “causing” arts education to sprout and grow, finding ways to create more equitable access to learning about and through music and the arts.

Many individual Americans would say that their communities’ orchestras are dispensable. But when orchestras begin to provide services that change and improve schools, and to build relationships with historically uninvolved constituencies, they become indispensable. These are the orchestras that educate.

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Readers may learn more about Artsvision by visiting the Web site at < www.artsvision.com > , or by sending e-mail to Mr. Korn at < artsvision@aol.com > .