

Readers Comment

Large Ensembles—Pro and Con

Editor's note. In the December 2014 *Music Educators Journal*, Mark Fonder, professor of music education at Ithaca College in Ithaca, New York, wrote Another Perspective, “No Default or Reset Necessary—Large Ensembles Enrich Many,” on the importance of ensembles in today’s schools. His contribution elicited a number of letters, including the following. These are presented in the order received. All have been edited for length, with final texts approved by their authors.

Widen the Circle!

I couldn’t agree more with Mark Fonder’s statement in the December 2014 Another Perspective. He wrote, “Music is important. One hundred percent of our students deserve to be involved in this great art.” This is precisely why I am so interested in a variety of curricular and pedagogical models for music education, as our profession can only benefit from a wider array of offerings that more closely resemble the myriad musical possibilities that currently exist in our culture. It simply isn’t enough to say large ensembles enrich many—there is an abundance of other students who are not so enriched. I know there is a growing number of music educators who feel this way as well, but it’s quite apparent there are those who do not.

It is not the large ensemble itself that is the real issue. Perhaps it is more our profession’s singular devotion to it. Instead of considering how a change or an addition to school music programs might benefit students, too many of us

seem concerned only with how traditional band, choir, and orchestra programs might be affected by anything new. As I have suggested in *Music Educators Journal* before, a variety of curricular and pedagogical answers could play out in distinct ways in different schools, but the fear of change keeps us from even conceiving what change might look like. It isn’t an issue of “abandoning” the 20 percent—it’s ignoring the 80 percent.

We have become an insecure profession concerned with maintaining *our* status quo. We offer the ultimate in musical experiences for *our* purposes. We perform the best possible musics for *our* purposes. And, we work with “the most motivated and interested students” for *our* purposes. But in the course of doing all this, we have isolated ourselves. We could benefit greatly by getting out and mixing with those that do not darken our music room doors. We would find there are far more “most motivated and interested students” who would benefit from opportunities in schools to have the ultimate in musical experiences, with the best possible musics for *them*. Too often, our efforts don’t include these students.

I was struck by the quote at the end of Fonder’s essay: “The secret of change is to focus not on fighting the old, but on building the new.” It seems, however, instead of the classic Greek philosopher Socrates, the quote should have been attributed to Dan Millman, as it comes from his book, *Way of the Peaceful Warrior*, in which it is spoken by a gas station attendant called Socrates. In the revised 2006 edition, Millman modified this quotation as follows: “To rid yourself of old patterns, focus all your energy not on struggling with the old, but on building the new.” Again, I couldn’t agree more. As a profession, we should focus our energy on building

the new in order to reach as many students as possible with meaningful and relevant forms of musicianship for them.

—David A. Williams

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Two Points of Correction

I appreciate reading divergent views of music education, as exemplified in “No Default or Reset Necessary” (December 2014 *MEJ*). I am writing to correct two points the author made in the essay.

The author emphasizes his performance credentials and dismisses the work of nonperforming music scholars who “use their publications as their performance art.” If he is referring to David A. Williams (“The Elephant in the Room,” September 2011 *MEJ*) or me (“Music Education at the Tipping Point,” November 2007 *MEJ*), he is very mistaken. I perform faculty artist concerts of my own music accompanied by up to fifty university and community musicians, and Williams founded and regularly performs in a faculty chamber ensemble. The only difference between Williams and me, on one hand, and the author, on the other, is that when Williams and I perform, we are actually playing instruments (and I sing), and when the author performs, he is waving a baton. I may have a broader view of musicianship than does the author and am willing to accept his qualifications as a “performing” musician.

The essay concludes with one last swipe at “academicians,” as if the author isn’t one after decades of college teaching: “If this is to be even read by certain academicians, I feel I must quote Socrates. Here goes: ‘The secret

of change is to focus not on fighting the old, but on building the new.” The problem is that Socrates, the philosopher from ancient Athens, never wrote anything. I did a little research and found that the quotation was said by a fictional gas station attendant named Socrates in the novel *Way of the Peaceful Warrior* by Dan Millman, written in 1980. The Internet can be a capricious source of wisdom.

—John Kratus

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The Necessity of the Reset

Mark Fonder’s (Another Perspective, December 2014 *MEJ*) admonishment to stop the “negative badgering” [all quoted material is from Fonder’s piece] marks a glorious point for our field. How many decades has the large ensemble been above and beyond interrogation (never mind “badgering”) from large and growingly vocal segments in and outside the wind band field? Surely articles focusing on and supportive of the “large Western European performance ensembles of band, orchestra, and choir” far outnumber those suggesting alternatives or adaptation or, in Fonder’s parlance, those that are “needlessly divisive”? And now it seems a paradigm is in need of defense?

To paraphrase Thomas Kuhn, when you start defending a paradigm, that’s a sure sign of its demise. But beyond that, I’m just not quite sure *what* paradigm is being defended. Maybe it really is just the “Western European performance ensemble” paradigm (that seems obvious enough when “Satan” is being invoked). Perhaps, however, what *is* in its final death throes is the paradigm of “the way things have always been done” because it’s “working well.” Certainly the notion of “working well” needs to be considered “in order to build upon whatever needs improving,” but so does the idea of working at *what*.

Perhaps Fonder is uncomfortable with a recognized need for interrogating

one’s language and actions and the environments they construct. Consider that “endeavoring to teach every willing student” suggests not just a pliable (and more than likely privileged) student but also a one-way teaching relationship where responsibility lies solely on the student. The unwilling student, in this context, seems to imply the student who has not found interest in Western European performance ensembles.

I don’t doubt that Fonder considers himself as someone whose job, even calling, is to guide students toward independence. But if we are to begin with the concept of independence (musical or otherwise), it seems fair to suggest that educative environments must include multiple moments when students have opportunities to grapple with states of confusion so that they might construct understandings of their own. Freedom is found as people (and *people* in this case meaning *diversity* in its broadest sense) create meaning with each other over time and space. Democratic governance would then be something other than through and by the control of another.

In 2005, Gary Hill, then president of the College Band National Association (CBDNA), articulated why provocateurs are essential to the growth of the wind band field: “It is my hope that these conversations will challenge each of us . . . for without regular and thought-provoking discourse between us, our field will surely atrophy!” Fonder’s remarks and *MEJ*’s platform “allow[s]” all voices to be represented “front and center” so that thought-provoking discourse might move us forward. The exciting possibilities of the reset are the encounters with the other and the new beginnings embedded in those encounters. Any attempt to control these encounters destroys this very possibility. But if this is the target of Fonder’s fear, we are in real trouble, for then Fonder’s call is nothing more than an attempt to silence.

—Cathy Benedict

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coordinator of music education,
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Seeking Balance

Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater. Don’t sacrifice what we already have for the sake of what we still need. If the baby represents the students in the large-ensemble model, and the water is the means by which we teach, develop, and inspire the musicality of our students, then I fully support the idea that the large-ensemble experience is an important *part* of music education that needs to be preserved.

However, the baby isn’t the only one who needs a bath. There are many students who are either not connecting to the options for music education in their schools or not using their music-learning experiences while in school to foster a lifelong love of music after graduation. While the large-ensemble model still works well for *some* students, there are many others who may not feel that conductor-centered ensembles that were at the height of American and European popularity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are still the most relevant environment to learn music in today.

I know firsthand how important performing in large ensembles can be because some of the most peak experiences in my life happened during a performance on one side or the other of the conductor’s podium. When I was young, my cultural background motivated my connection to wind ensembles and marching bands in ways that other students from different backgrounds might not have felt as strongly as I did. All students deserve an opportunity to be refreshed and rejuvenated by performing and creating beautiful music that is authentic to the context of their life. Do all students today get that chance?

Performance is a fundamental part of learning to be a musical person. Yet, without malice and often with the most genuine of good intentions, some music teachers may inadvertently be ignoring the individual musicality of their students by overly focusing on ensemble performance without also addressing other fundamental parts of musicianship based on individual creativity,

self-discovery, and personal expression. Students who are unable to connect the music they learn in school to the musical activities they engage in at home—or who depend on a teacher-centered formal music setting to fulfill their musical passions—may be severely limited in expressing themselves musically after they graduate when the music-learning environment they depended on in school is no longer accessible.

A balanced music curriculum that addresses how to perform with artistic beauty *and* how to create music independently would offer a more relevant and engaging way for students to approach musicianship. “You are the music while the music lasts,” as T. S. Eliot has said, but if you learn to improvise, arrange, and compose, you can be the music again and again whenever you want.

—Richard Edwards
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Mark Fonder replies:

Enduring a heavy blanket of convention in the guise of performance expectations bestowed by the community, school administration, and parents, the large ensemble is admittedly slow to evolve. But with the reality of endless inadequate support for music in our schools, it remains the most viable way to continue providing transformative aesthetic experiences to the most students.

This year in my large ensemble, I've had students use their smartphones to e-mail their improvisations to me. In other words, every student had the opportunity to practice and perform an improvised solo. The Orpheus project I incorporated demonstrated conductorless, constructivist rehearsals resulting in a riveting performance. In the past, students in my large ensemble have learned a very intricate African folk song by ear and performed it, and each composed a variation on a theme from

the music. We have performed a cover from a rock anthem incorporating synthesized mash-ups of our ensemble's own rehearsal excerpts using the technological talents of students not in the ensemble.

The experiences described above were rarely practiced when I began teaching music through large ensembles thirty-five years ago. The model taught to us then was a standard cycle of performances. But I listened, grew, and, I hope, now model successfully for my students a contemporary vision of music teaching with large ensembles as the medium. The students have always been receptive.

There are academicians who continue to use an anachronistic model as a basis for their invective toward large ensembles and the people who teach them. If there is anything I would wish to silence, it is the sanctimonious lecturing by them regarding what kinds of roles a large ensemble cannot fulfill. They remain uninformed that diversity, integration, process, and creativity are becoming integral parts.

Furthermore, I believe there is a responsibility for every music teacher to also introduce Western music's monuments to human expression. After all, Shakespeare and Twain are still encountered in English classes next to Maya Angelou and Ahmadou Kourouma. The large ensembles provide experiences different from other ensembles, and for those interested, these experiences must not be denied.

Apparently if I defend my position any more, it will signify proof of demise, so I will stop here. Additionally, it will further fuel the fires of polemics at a time in music education when it is more necessary than ever that we be team players. So, to clarify, here's where I agree with the respondents: To attract the maximum number of students, we should provide other Western and non-Western musical experiences in alternative settings to the extent possible. Here is where I stand firm: It should not be at the expense of the large ensemble. Moreover, our enterprise of music education is too small to be made so fractured by so few. Here is a

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Music Educators Journal Academic Editor Patrick K. Freer welcomes your views on any article in this journal. E-mail him at pfreer@gsu.edu, or write to

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Comments may be edited for length and to comply with *MEJ* style.

final attempt at this quote thing; it might fit our needs better: “In India, when we meet and part, we often say ‘Namaste,’ which means: I honor the place in you where the entire Universe resides; I honor the place of love, of light, of truth, of peace. I honor the place within you where if you are in that place in you and I am in that place in me, there is only one of us” (Ram Dass).

—Mark Fonder
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MEJ Authors: Consider Dissertations as Source Material

I very much enjoyed reading Tim Drummond's most recent article, “Singing over the Wall: Legal and Ethical Considerations for Sacred Music in Public Schools” (December 2014 *MEJ*). The article was concise and helpful. What was surprising to me was the absence of what I would consider to be an excellent reference for the article, Amanda Plummer's 2003 dissertation titled “Sacred Music in Public Schools: A Historical Consideration of Policy and Practice.” The title alone demonstrates its relevance to the topic, and while a dissertation might not be the first option members of the public would choose to peruse for general knowledge,

the depth of the topic explored in this dissertation would be of great benefit to the author. Similarly, while many of the same court cases and articles were cited between both Drummond's article and Plummer's dissertation, it would be nice for there to be some recognition of works that provide a great deal of depth on a given topic for readers who might have further interest.

I was aware of Amanda's dissertation because she is a friend of mine, and while I want her to receive some credit for the hard work she did in producing scholarship on the subject of sacred music in public schools, I feel that there should be consideration given to including more dissertations as source material in general. A quick scan of the last few issues of *MEJ* yielded few if any references to dissertations on any subject. While I am aware that *MEJ* is not the *Journal of Research in Music Education* and that the two publications serve somewhat different but overlapping audiences, I feel that it would be a mistake to overlook the substantial knowledge that is widely available in the form of dissertations. Currently, nearly all dissertations are available in digital form (including Plummer's), so for most scholars, accessibility is not an issue. My request, then, would be for potential *MEJ* authors and members of the editorial board to consider that many researchers have produced in-depth scholarship through dissertations and that these studies should be considered and included as reference material when possible. If it is an editorial decision on the part of *MEJ* to exclude dissertations from reference sections, then I urge the committee and its editors to reconsider that position.

—David Ferguson

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Tim Drummond replies:

Thank you for your response, Dr. Ferguson! I did not come across Amanda Plummer's dissertation during my research, due primarily to lack of access.

While you are correct that nearly all dissertations are digitized, they are made available only to those whose institutions pay for access. ProQuest does have an option for "open access" publishing, but it costs the author an additional \$95, and few seem to choose that option (including Dr. Plummer). Like most music educators working outside higher education, my access to dissertations, many periodicals, databases, and encyclopedic references expired upon leaving graduate school. I count myself lucky to teach at a school that subscribes to JSTOR, so I do have more access than many teachers to academic material; for many reading this, *MEJ* is the only academic literature they can readily access.

I have, on occasion, visited the campus of a local university and used its library's access to scholarly content. With multiple jobs and multiple children in my life, those occasions have become fewer and farther between. I know many colleagues with similar loads of responsibility, yet those people are often fountains of knowledge and experience. What sort of articles might they be able to produce if they could combine their expertise and the best academic research? Unless democratization of information one day allows for your average elementary music teacher to read and write at 9:30 in their living room, after picking up toys and putting kids to bed, we may never find out.

—Tim Drummond

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The Military and Music Ed: A Different Drummer

Thank you for a very good March 2015 issue of *Music Educators Journal*. It is always good to read positive comments about the value of music education, creativity, and research in the field. The feature on military music is most interesting. I have a "different drummer" story to relate about my experience with military music.

When I was an undergraduate in the early 1960s, I completed the Basic Course in Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) with the army program at Ohio State University. During this time I performed with the military band on percussion and played solo bass drum near Ohio Stadium to practice for Corps Day in the spring. In my senior year, I drove to Washington and auditioned successfully for the United States Army Band, "Pershing's Own." This gave me something to look forward to as I completed my undergraduate education, and I didn't have to look for a job while concentrating on my studies. However, I picked up a chronic disease and had lifesaving surgery a few months after graduation and, as a result, never went into the army. Years later, when I composed my four-movement *Symphony for Band*, I sent a manuscript copy to the Army Band for its archive library in gratitude for my positive experience with the organization. (The score can also be found in the libraries of Ohio State University and the Eastman School of Music.)

Indeed, the military has offered positive experiences for many people through the years, and I certainly appreciate your good and revealing focus on the subject in *Music Educators Journal*. Your excellent collective work is much appreciated.

—Geary H. Larrick

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"Music training not only helps children develop fine motor skills but also aids emotional and behavioral maturation."

Amy Ellis Nutt, *The Washington Post* (January 13, 2015), quoting James Hudziak, director, Vermont Center for Children, Youth, and Families; researcher in a brain study that analyzed children who played musical instruments