
Editorial

Dilemmas, Tensions, Trade-offs— Can We Have Both?
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Recently I interviewed music teachers as part of a research study focusing on talent, motivation, musical excellence, peak performance, discipline, memories of learning music, etc. As I listened to these interviews I realized that as musicians and teachers we must constantly deal with tensions or dilemmas.

An evident one is tension between technical perfection—musical expressivity. We need technique to make sound and play notes but it is the soulful, passionate expressivity that thrills us. How much teaching focuses on technique? How much on expressivity? Can we get at technique through musical expression? Or at expression through technique? Can we expect the student to “play from the heart” when they think we are listening for mistakes or technical flaws?

Another dilemma is the application of relative versus objective standards. Within our school a student may be the best and receive great acclaim. However, this same student may be judged very differently when held up to objective national criteria. Do we praise students for achieving personal musical growth but fear over-encouragement lest they start to believe they might gain admission to a major music school? Can all the groups in a class at the local music festival meet the criteria for outstanding excellence? Or must we declare a “winner” among the participants?

A similar dilemma is the choice between equality of opportunity for students and merit-based assignment of parts and solos or selection for groups. On one hand we want to give all students a chance to perform, but we know certain students will make us and our school look better in public performance. Can we let a “weaker” student have a chance to play or sing when that person may “ruin” it for the whole group? What is important to us – the quality of the art or the spirit in the community of music makers? Can we have both? That is the question in most of these dilemmas. And if we can have both, how do we manage that?

The interviews of musicians and teachers revealed that many people pursue music because they love achievement and music offers an ever-moving “target” for achievement—you can spend a lifetime finding new challenges to conquer in music. However, greater satisfaction and career sustaining power comes from loving the music. If the young student is motivated by “loving achievement,” they may become very
disillusioned and personally hurt when they begin to approach the limit of their musical ability or the limit of the time they can devote to conquering musical challenges. However, if they are motivated by the love of music, they are setting their focus on what can be a life-time of riches regardless of their own personal performing capability.

Perhaps finding the love of music is the key to resolving all the dilemmas. Perhaps helping students find a love of music is the most important thing music teachers can accomplish.