Music Education’s Rehearsal Model
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What we do as teachers, our beliefs, values, and applied pedagogical repertoire are all related to a pedagogic model that holds assumptions of who does what and how, knows what and how, controls what and how, and aims for what and how. When you think of music class you likely think of a teacher trying to get all the kids to make music together with as few mistakes as possible and with the most pleasant sound. This pedagogic model can be described as a "rehearsal model." Whether it is a grade 3 class playing Orff instruments, a grade 5 class singing with Kodaly hand-signs, a grade 6 recorder class, and grade 8 band class, a grade 9 guitar class, a high school choir, orchestra, or band, the "rehearsal model" is the most prominent model of education in music. Typically the conductor is in front of the ensemble making most of the musical decisions and making coordination of the many individual efforts into musical performance possible. This model in which most music teachers have been trained has essentially three basic steps - the teacher as conductor says what is to be done and how, the musicians attempt to do it, the teacher/conductor offers criticism. To make it work the teacher must have superior knowledge of all matters—there is little possibility for student and teacher to be co-learners here. If the conductor asks a question, the conductor asks with the intent of helping the music-makers think about possibilities, but rarely is it a real question (one to which the teacher/conductor does not know the answer).

Conceptually, music education is dominated by orchestra, choir, and band. There are of course "music appreciation" classes or "music in life" but these essentially are designed to help the “untalented” become "cultured" music consumers (of orchestras and choirs). And, the teaching model used is still usually the same teacher-directed model. In recent years alternatives like computer/synthesizer, piano, or guitar classes have individualized instruction and even allowed students to teach the teacher at times. But these opportunities are rare.

A related problem of music teaching is the lack of musical fulfilment for the teacher. The music making with their students is often the only music making they actually do. Musicians want music that challenges their ability and for the teacher the students easily become the means to the teacher's musical fulfilment—the students become the "ensemble" they conduct/perform.

Two concepts dominate classical music in our culture—the large ensemble and the solo virtuoso (or the small ensemble made up of virtuosos!). The large ensemble and the music that is the honoured main-stay of the prestigious ensembles in our society (the symphony orchestra and the concert choir often combined with orchestra) developed in a political and social context where society was stratified, musicians were "servants" in livery, the political leaders were aristocrats and kings, and where totalitarian power was accepted (17th and 18th centuries). The performing organization created in this context shared the foundational political and societal leadership concepts and so the same structure applied - one man would be king and the rest obedient servants obligated to and usually willing to take whatever abuse was heaped upon them for a chance to move a bit higher up
the rungs of society.

In the Romantic period (late 18th and 19th century) existing political structures started to change but art had been set on a course—the large ensemble continued to get larger. The 19th century brought the rise of the individual artist, the celebrity, the virtuoso. The "individual celebrity" was conductor, composer, or solo virtuoso—the solo star—hallowed by public rather than supported by aristocrat. The musician in the 19th century won artistic independence. Freedom yes, but bondage to the virtuosity and ever more impressive scope and scale of musical work. The composers created music that a democratic and social "union" could not play but that required a dictator. And of course, although the king was reduced in power, the male patriarchal strongman, at times as dictator and at others as manipulative and charismatic leader, still controlled society. The virtuoso composer/performer created music that only the most gifted and most devoted musicians could play.

With the 20th century new societal models were accepted—social democracy, equality and equity, cooperation and collaboration, empowered teams and unions, and especially individual and human rights. However, the music of greatest honour and admiration in our culture was that of the 17th to 19th centuries. This required music ensembles to sustain the 17th-19th century models of society. In music ensembles, the elimination of the monarch or dictator would mean the abandonment of most of the music of the 18th and 19th centuries.

So in music class the large ensemble still rules. The teacher is the conductor in the political tradition of the dictator. The teacher must know all the music and be able to make all musical decisions. The students obey, conform, "recite" the correct answers (or musical phrases). Otherwise the band will not be ready for the required concerts, the standard will not be up to collegial expectation, the reputation of the teacher (conductor) and ensemble (symphony orchestra) will not be noteworthy.

So how do we become progressive educators? The pedagogical approaches considered standard (almost traditional by now) in general education are rarely seen in normal music classes. We see them in "alternative" classes like guitar, and computers, and class piano—but are those serious music programs? What would happen to our orchestras in our major cities if schools only used collaborative methods in music, if they only did cooperative learning, if they used heuristic approaches, if there were multiple right answers, if there were different ways to the goal? Can we justify anything else?