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by Douglas C. Orzolek

Equity in Music Education

Programming and Equity in Ensembles: Students' Perceptions

Abstract: This article offers the thoughts and comments of ensemble students performing music composed by women, African Americans, LGBTQ+ persons, and those who are minoritized in their own countries or regions. The student reflections suggest the potential roles music education might play in helping students reflect on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Keywords: composer, diversity, ensemble, equity, inclusion, repertoire, social justice

What do students in ensembles think about the value of learning about musical works and perspectives of composers from underrepresented and marginalized groups?



Doug Orzolek
Photo by Liam Doyle

Throughout my thirty years as a music educator, the call to diversify the repertoire of our traditional ensembles has been loud and clear. But given all that is happening around us, I cannot think of a time when this topic was more important to our students and their development than it is now. Music does not exist in a vacuum, and it can be a powerful tool to help students view the world in different and unique ways.¹ When we provide students with music composed by those who might use a different lens than their own and couple this with the opportunity to reflect on that music, we can provide our students with the ability to question and reflect on the things happening around them.²

Let me be quite clear—I do not remotely believe that the performance and study of compositions by diverse composers are solely the solution to the deeply ingrained issues of social justice in our communities. I do, however, believe that music education can help create awareness of the ongoing marginalization of specific peoples by offering opportunities for meaningful discussion, thought, and reflection.³ I hope this article provides you with a chance to think about your potential role in helping your students view music in this way.

Why Diverse Repertoire?

There are certainly those who believe that topics like diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice have no place in the rehearsal hall. There are also those who suggest that the quality of the music is far more important than who happened to compose it. There are music educators who imply that their students are not interested in studying music for this purpose—they simply want to play and sing good music. I do not agree. I believe that all music is the direct reflection of those who composed it—it shares their life experiences, their viewpoint of the world, their personal perspectives, and their ideas about the nature of being human. For these reasons, I support the view that music education can be a place to guide students in their thinking and reflecting

about sociopolitical issues,⁴ including the ongoing marginalization of specific peoples.⁵

I was curious to determine whether students really were uninterested in who composed the music being performed. I decided to collect some information from my own students to learn more about their thoughts on this topic. How would students feel about performing the music composed and arranged by underrepresented and marginalized composers? Would they value this music as an opportunity for thinking and reflecting about diversity, inclusion, and equity? The purpose of this article is to share what their comments revealed.

A few years ago, I reviewed my own programming for my concert band only to determine what I already knew—the majority of the music we studied and performed was written by white men. To provide my students with more lenses, I dedicated the past few years to increasing the amount of our repertoire that was composed by women, African Americans, LGBTQ+ persons, and those who are minoritized in their own countries or regions. At the end of each year, the students were provided with open-ended prompts to share their thoughts about experiencing these musics. I think their comments represent their honest and true thoughts about the compositions, the composers, and the role this music might play in helping them reflect on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

What Do Students Say?

A broad analysis of the student responses outlined the following themes: Many of the students believe that music can indeed provide opportunities to learn more about others; the students think that the study of music can provide opportunities to consider issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion; they believe that music can give voice to those who are marginalized; and they appreciated studying this music and desire additional opportunities to perform more music by diverse composers. Some of their statements are shared in the following

paragraphs as a means of characterizing their thinking—I find their comments to be quite powerful. In addition, I also offer some of my own reflections about what their comments might suggest for music classrooms.

The majority of the students' responses expressed a sincere appreciation for the opportunity to perform the works of diverse composers. Many of the students saw these pieces as a chance to learn more about other cultures and other peoples and as a chance to look into the lives and experiences of people different than themselves. Students expressed these ideas in these ways:

Music speaks from the heart of those who made it and those who are playing it. In other words, listening to somebody's piece doesn't tell you information about them, but instead, it can communicate their emotions or feelings to you in a unique way.

I think that it is incredibly important that we play music written by people who have different backgrounds and have different experiences than we do. I think that music is like literature in this way. We can't just read books written by white men because we would miss out on so many stories about different topics. I think music is the same.

The exposure to different composers gives me knowledge about different cultures or different life experiences that I would have never learned from a textbook or in another class.

I suspect that music educators will probably find the same willingness and openness in their classrooms too. I have found, however, that students need multiple outlets to share their thoughts. While some are very willing to share their viewpoints in class, others prefer to write out their comments or share their thinking in dialogue through online applications. I think it is imperative that we keep this in mind when we ask students to share their opinions with us.

There were a number of comments reflecting on the idea that the music of diverse composers is a good and "comfortable" means to explore and discuss issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Like others, I find social justice to be difficult to talk about at times. But the students' comments suggest that they believe our classroom is an appropriate place for them to consider these issues. Here are a few of the comments they shared:

The term "the great equalizer" is thrown out to describe a lot of things in the world. Some people say it is the law, others say it could be the school system, but to me, I think the answer is music. Thinking and talking about music this way helps me see the world differently.

Music can open the door to new experiences and perspectives in a very positive and safe way. It can help them to think and talk about their preconceived prejudices and opinions, too. No matter the gender, race, sexual orientation, or even the language spoken by a person, music brings people together, and that's all that matters.

As one of the people of color in the band, it is a struggle to be in a place where you do not see many people like you. I felt very safe in band, and I owe that to the openness of our class, even when we went online. I am grateful for a place to express how we feel!

There were additional comments that reflected our rehearsal as a safe environment for discussions about diversity, equity, and inclusion. I was not surprised by those comments, as establishing an inviting and warm climate for classrooms is a high priority for my school community. We also spend time talking about what it means to work together toward a common goal and share in an experience that requires all of us to be engaged. I think that is something that all music educators must consider if they hope to bring these discussions into their setting.

The students' statements also revealed that they believe music can give a voice to those who are marginalized and why

it is important for them to make sure those voices are heard. Their comments remind me that our work as music educators extends beyond our classrooms and how our concerts may be a unique venue to give others the opportunity to reflect on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Here is a sample of their thoughts:

And that is the power of music: it gives a voice to the voiceless. Music is a way for a composer to [put] their experiences, struggles, triumphs, and emotions out there for others to consider.

Every time we played that piece I felt the music, the sorrow, the joy and everything in between. I was able to be angry and feel pain. It can make you feel connected to something you are not a part of or do not fully understand.

[Our performance of this music] not only shows support and respect for these composers, but it expands our own visions of what music is and what it means to us as human beings.

I have always seen music as something that is blind to demographics. But, after thinking about this more, I now believe that if we can bring to light voices commonly unheard, we should.

Why Not Connect?

Finally, I think the following comments speak to how much the students want and need to perform music by a wide array of composers. In my opinion, students deserve an opportunity to perform music by those with whom they can connect, and music educators should seek musics that will support the needs of these students.⁶ I think these comments speak for themselves:

I hope that in the future our band can perform more pieces written by women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ folks. I've been playing the flute since I was in 5th grade, and I remember even then

noticing the lack of female composers. I have a binder on my bookshelf of all the pieces I played in high school, and in my four years only two pieces were written by women. Crazy, right? I think that needs to change.

I have been playing music for a majority of my life but never by people that look like me or have similar stories to mine.

The student comments have inspired me to continue my efforts to engage students in thinking and learning even more about diversity, equity, and inclusion in all my music classrooms. At the same time, however, I know that a simple "drive-by" experience with this music is not enough. I also need to take the time to guide students in a way that challenges their thinking about the power of music to change our world.⁷ The work continues.

NOTES

1. Karen Howard, "Equity in Music Education: Cultural Appropriation versus Cultural Appreciation—Understanding the Difference," *Music Educators Journal* 106, no. 3 (2020): 68–70.
2. Juliet Hess, "Equity in Music Education: Why Equity and Social Justice in Music Education?" *Music Educators Journal* 104, no. 1 (2017): 71–73.
3. Juliet Hess, "Equity and Music Education: Euphemisms, Terminal Naivety, and Whiteness." *Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education* 16, no. 3 (2017): 15–47.
4. Julia Shaw, "The Skin That We Sing: Culturally Responsive Choral Music Education," *Music Educators Journal* 98, no. 4 (2012): 75–81.
5. Hess, "Equity and Music Education."
6. There are many online research tools and databases that can assist music educators in their search for literature suited to their ensembles. One such site is <https://www.composerdiversity.com>.
7. Shaw, "The Skin That We Sing."