

## MUSIC EDUCATION AT THE CROSSROADS

Malcolm Tait

Our most basic aim in education has not changed; it is concerned with the wholeness of man, "the man for all seasons," the man who feels deeply, thinks carefully, and acts wisely. The realization of this profound aim is dependent on our ability to relate human experiences, to draw together all those impressions and behaviors which crowd in upon us. The arts and aesthetic education serve this purpose; they are the means for synthesis because they involve feeling as well as thinking and doing. The comparison of man as a being of thought, feeling and action with music as an art of thought, feeling and action is obvious. Therefore, the teaching of the art form, be it music, poetry or drama, must surely do justice to the tripartite structure. Regrettably this is rarely the case.

Frequently we find music being taught on the basis of a teacher's attitude towards the subject. For example, if a teacher regards music as nothing more than a pleasurable social activity, the thinking (cognitive) and feeling (affective) domains are likely to be minimized. If on the other hand a teacher is overly concerned with the conceptual content of music, the musical elements, or those properties which can be aurally identified, there may be a tendency to ignore expressive qualities or performing opportunities. Sometimes a teacher is obsessed with the idea that music is a skill demanding inordinate amounts of dedication and discipline before any "real" understanding or pleasure is attainable.

These kinds of attitudes are not altogether rare in our schools, and they unfortunately create false impressions about the nature of music and music education. They also limit the educative potential of music, since fragmentation of one kind or another obviously limits the achievement of the basic aim of wholeness. Therefore our planning procedures in music education must be based on and derived from the fundamental nature of the subject. If this were so, there would be a real effort to delineate musical meaning as well as musical content, and if content were meaningful, it is likely that performance would also be meaningful.

Recently there has been considerable discussion about the nature of musical perception and response as well as aesthetic perception and aesthetic response. A generally held view is that in order to develop response we need to focus on perception, and in terms of curricula development this represents a rather obvious starting point. However, the obvious starting point is not necessarily the wisest or the most effective. Increased perception without increased response does appear to have been the tendency in general education where frequently we find increased knowledge without increased understanding. So much of our knowledge seems to exist as a collection of labels, remote from individual feelings and actions.

Another term frequently discussed in music education is musical meaning. My experiences have led me to believe that musical meaning is not exclusive to the subject (person) or the object (music), but rather it is dependent on both. The beginnings of meaning may reside in either perception or response. Therefore, in an educational context it seems reasonable to argue that if our goal be the development of musical meaning we may start with the student or with the music, since one has to be related to the other. In starting with the student we are concerned with his qualities of feelings, the nature of his experiences and his desire to clarify, share and heighten those experiences through the media of music. If we start with the object then we are concerned with the qualities of sounds and the way those sounds are organized and produced.

### The Nature of Music Teaching

Teaching strategies for music, as for all the arts, have not been subjected to extensive or detailed research. We do know a little about the artistic process from accounts of practicing artists, composers and performers. We know for example that imaginative, divergent and intuitive processes are involved which are frequently more significant than logical, convergent, or analytical processes. We also know that in cases of high artistic productivity there

is a total involvement of mind, body and soul. There are periods of intense action as well as moments of reflection; there is constant exploration and evaluation as the product takes shape.

It is reasonable to expect to find these kinds of artistic processes in our music classes but on the whole they do not appear to be particularly evident. Many music classes reflect a kind of team sports atmosphere in which following the leader, practicing the part, and having a healthy esprit de corps characterize the situation. More typically we would have to say that the teacher is involved in the artistic process while the students project the teacher's musical perceptions and responses. Students are told what to play and how to play.

These strategies have often produced musical performances of high standard, but they have also produced generations of graduates who possess only a passing acquaintance with the musical process. In terms of our basic educational aim we have produced generations of musical "doers" whose thinking and feeling capacities have been only superficially involved with music. It is doubtful if this short term interest in music can continue to be a wise investment in days of declining audiences and curtailed or deleted music programs. If the situation is to be retrieved it would seem there must be some degree of consistency and integrity between the product and the process or between the nature of music and the way in which it is taught.

One area that is of particular interest is children's musical composition in which the introduction of relatively simple instruments together with some contemporary composition techniques have led to quite extensive experimentation. However, the natural enthusiasm for involving children in what at first glance appears to be a creative process should be tempered with caution. Bearing in mind the tripartite nature of music, these efforts, if they are to be truly artistic, must embrace thought, feeling and action. The actual starting point may vary from student to student but, as was so often the case with class percussion band, the starting point as well as the stopping point was exploring the media regardless of whether or not there was a message! A precipitous involvement with "doing" is frequently calamitous because there is no effort to convey meaning and consequently no feeling of growth or direction to the experience and no sense of fulfillment.

Alternative starting points could be meaning, involving imagery, qualities of movement and feeling, adaptation of literature, a painting, a poem, a particular life experience; or it could be content,

involving tonal, dynamic, pitch, texture, rhythmic or harmonic parameters. Ideally the approach should involve all these bases so that a child might begin with an image, explore and select appropriate musical content and then refine the message on the media of his choice. He may on the other hand explore some aspect of musical content which of itself suggests meaning and media. Clearly if the process and the product are to possess musical integrity and significance, then the meaning, the content and the media must be as one. This kind of activity is a far cry from the indiscriminate bangs and rattles of a percussion (rhythm) band trying to keep the pulse of a recorded example.

A similar kind of approach could be arranged in high-school music classes utilizing small vocal or instrumental ensembles. Students could be challenged to explore and share musical meanings by developing an ability to organize and structure sound events which would in turn lead to original compositions. This kind of experience has built-in motivational qualities from the beginning because a student knows that his particular thoughts and feelings are going to be involved. He has the opportunity to explore and discover not only musical media but, more important, ways in which he as a person may relate to that media. Such opportunities are difficult to structure in large performing ensembles but it is not impossible to do so, particularly if there is an open rather than closed concept of how the literature might be interpreted and realized. Students can be encouraged to make an input in terms of phrasing, articulation, tone, balance, and dynamic gradations. More importantly in terms of the realization of musical meanings, they can be encouraged to introduce subtleties of deviation, of rhythm and pitch, of stress, and of voicing, together with qualities of movement and feeling. Challenges of this nature would certainly involve students in legitimate musicianly roles and accordingly deepen their understanding of the nature of music.

### **The Nature of Music Evaluation**

If music teaching strategies are to be based on the fundamental nature of music, it is reasonable to argue that evaluation procedures should also be consistent with the nature of the subject. In other words we should be able to evaluate what a child is thinking, feeling and doing about music, and this would be in accord with our basic aim of wholeness through education. If musical growth is to be evaluated there needs to be a base or starting point from

which growth can be measured as well as a point of evaluation to represent achievement.

The base or starting point has often been referred to as aptitude, talent or ability, inferring an innate and genetically endowed skill. Several tests of musical aptitude have become available over the years but generally their success has been limited to identifying a child's perceptive abilities in the areas of rhythm, melody, tone and harmony. The hypothesis has been that an ability to differentiate subtle tonal nuances and rhythmic or melodic patterns is likely to lead to musical "success." Whether or not the abilities are inherited seems to be less important than their being related to affective and psychomotor potential. High levels of musical perception without affective involvement or psychomotor application seem educationally wasteful. On the other hand, if a musically perceptive child can bring his affective resources to bear on his perception, and project those meanings through musical performance or composition, he is certainly likely to be "successful."

It may well be that our efforts to evaluate musical aptitude have been too closely focused on musical

perception and cognition and not enough on the areas of musical response, feeling and imagination. Certainly we need to assess a child's inward involvement with music as much as his outward recognition of it. In painting, poetry or drama, for example, we know a child is less concerned with projecting his analysis of outward appearances than with portraying his identification with, and concern for, the object. He paints how he feels about things more frequently than how he sees things. Perhaps in music a child of high musical aptitude is one who can make music in the way he feels rather than being limited to the adult world of musical sound.

In the psychomotor area children do seem to vary enormously in their affinity for particular instruments. A child may be most uncomfortable and uncoordinated on a piano, for example, and yet be able to adapt to a clarinet easily and effectively. There has been very little detailed or coordinated research in this area and even the few programs which encourage children to explore instruments still seem largely ineffective in meeting the need. We really have no idea how many children drop out of music programs because of a bad experience



with a particular instrument and these may be the very children who could have achieved deep musical satisfaction if only they had chosen a different instrument. In short, it seems that we need to give much more thought and care in identifying what has been commonly referred to as musical aptitude.

Musical achievement, if it is evaluated at all on an individual basis, tends to be haphazard and one might say whimsical. Grades may be awarded for participation, enthusiasm, note-reading ability, knowledge of composers, ability to sing in tune, or a host of other criteria which in isolation present a narrow and inaccurate picture of a child's musical wholeness. Sometimes musical achievement is evaluated on a group performance basis in which a "good" performance represents a "good" program which in turn represents "good" students. But as has already been pointed out, the "goodness" is more likely to be a reflection of the teacher's musical achievements than of the students'.

Even though performing ensembles may be rated on the basis of specific musical criteria such as pitch accuracy, tonal beauty, articulation and dexterity, a single grade obviously cannot accurately represent the wide range of ability within a group. Clearly there is a need to develop an evaluation profile for each student based on his musical thoughts, feelings and actions. It should not be too difficult to spell out some objectives in each of these areas. For example, in the psychomotor area "a student can sight read simple melodies with accuracy and musical conviction," or "he can carry an independent musical line in an ensemble." In the cognitive area we could say "the student can identify and discuss the principle musical elements represented in a musical extract" or "he can recognize and name recorded musical examples drawn from different stylistic periods." In the affective area we might say "he can demonstrate how musical meaning might be clarified or intensified in a selected musical example" or "he can identify those factors and events that contribute to a musical climax in a given selection." The particular level of achievement for individual students could be designated on a five point scale and if the expected behaviors were specified in relation to a particular program, we could expect a fairly comprehensive evaluation for each student.

### Conclusions

There is little doubt that music education has reached the crossroads. We can continue to pursue performing skills, we can interpret music as a body of knowledge, or we can involve children in musical experiences which seek to clarify and refine their



feelings. If we choose one course of action to the exclusion of another, we not only fail to do justice to the nature of music and Man, we also fail to demonstrate the tremendous value and relevance music has for this day and age. We need to embrace the complete musical experience into our aims, our teaching, and our evaluation. If we are successful in doing this, music in our schools will be secure.

*Malcolm Tait was born and educated in New Zealand. He gained an M.A. degree in New Zealand before undertaking post-graduate studies at the Royal Academy of Music in London and, later, at Columbia University where he was awarded a Doctor of Education degree. In addition to teaching experience in England, New Zealand, and the U.S.A., Dr. Tait has given piano recitals and conducted numerous choral groups. He has contributed several articles to the Music Educators Journal and was one of the authors for the Hawaii Music Program. He is currently Professor of Music and Chairman of Music Education at the University of Hawaii at Manoa.*