

## “DYNAMIC, UNFOLDING FORMATIONS”

Reflections on “*The NEC Journal for Music-in-Education: Advancing Music for Changing Times: Portraits and Portfolios of the Evolving Role of Music in Education*”

by

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“IF, WHEN IN THE HEAT OF A CREATIVE EXPERIENCE—PLAYING, COMPOSING, IMPROVISING—I SPIN AROUND AND ‘STARE INTO’ THIS PLACE, I OBSERVE A CONSTELLATION OF DYNAMIC, UNFOLDING FORMATIONS INTERLOCKED IN ALL OF THEIR AMAZING COMPLEXITY.”

—LORIN HOLLANDER IN “MEMORIES AND VISIONS OF TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION THROUGH MUSIC”

**I BELIEVE THAT THERE ARE THREE MAJOR CHALLENGES FACING ARTS EDUCATORS: ACCESS AND EQUITY, QUALITY, AND UNDERSTANDING.**

In this first decade of the 21st century, it seems that arts education may be having a Dickensian “best of times/worst of times” moment. Certainly, the field we call arts education—which, broadly speaking, includes the full range of activities intended to engage young people in meaningful arts learning experiences—could be argued to be both the richest and most marginalized of the educational fields. The power of the arts to excite, engage, and even transform the lives of children, schools, and communities has been documented, and this volume adds wonderful dimensions to that literature. Yet, at the same time, the role of the arts in public education in the U.S. has been on a long, slow slide to the sidelines since the Russians put Sputnik into space fifty years ago.

My sense of this field, based on my recent travels to programs around the country, regular conversations with arts educators from diverse settings, conferences attended, and attempts to stay current with emerging literature, including this *Journal*, is that there is terrific rigor and innovation in the practice of arts education today in spite of, or possibly to some degree *because of*, the simultaneous and continued dismantling of the infra-structure for the arts in schools. There are fewer arts specialists teaching in schools and fewer hours spent devoted to arts instruction during the school day than twenty years ago. In other words, the standards-based, high-stakes-testing, No-Child-Left-Behind school reform movement of the last 15 years has not been kind to the arts in schools.

Yet the last two decades have also seen a powerful revitalization of efforts by arts educators and their supporters to provide arts learning experiences of great authenticity, power, originality, and quality to young people both in and out of school. A number of the most exciting of these developments are documented in this volume—the creation of arts-focused schools, a new rigor and sophistication in arts integration, and the use of action research to better understand what is actually happening in arts education, to name a few. In short, we are experiencing the “worst” and the “best.” Our challenge is to build on the “best” and work on the “worst.” Living in the worst



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**BUILDING THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL WILL TO PROVIDE HIGH QUALITY ARTS LEARNING EXPERIENCES FOR ALL YOUNG PEOPLE IN THIS COUNTRY, AND CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH TO GUIDE US IN THAT ENTERPRISE, IS PROBABLY THE CHALLENGE ABOVE ALL OTHERS. FORTUNATELY, THE MANY AUTHORS AND SUBJECTS OF ARTICLES IN THIS JOURNAL, AS WELL AS MANY OTHERS IN THIS FIELD, ARE NOT CONTENT TO SIMPLY WAIT FOR THAT DAY. THEY ARE INTENT ON SPEEDING ITS ARRIVAL.**

of times encourages us to reconsider who we are, what we are about, and how we go about doing what we do. In this regard, this issue of *The New England Conservatory Journal for Music-in-Education*, produced by the Music-in-Education National Consortium and NEC’s Center for Music-in-Education, is a very important contribution.

In broad terms, I believe that there are three major challenges facing arts educators: access and equity, quality, and understanding. We know that far too few young people have access to high quality arts learning opportunities in the United States. When we hold basic expectations—that those opportunities should be sequential, in all art forms, and allow for the pursuit of deep learning—we see how few children have access to a serious education in the arts. Even a quick analysis reveals that, like so much else in America (health care, housing, and higher education, for example), growing up in poverty radically lowers a child’s chance of having sustained access to positive arts

learning experiences. When young people do have arts experiences, all of us in this field know that there are serious questions to ask about the quality of those learning opportunities.

Quality is, obviously, a major challenge in American education. If this were not the case, we wouldn’t be struggling through yet another wave of school reform. But each discipline must, to some degree, accept responsibility for its own excellence, and the arts are no exception. Teaching and learning in the arts are distinctive enough that, while there are certainly many critical lessons about the nature of quality instruction to learn from (and offer to) other academic disciplines, each art form and the arts broadly must address the particular challenges to quality that they encounter.

The third challenge I named is ‘understanding.’ In this regard, I believe that although there is always far more to understand than we currently know, we live in a truly exciting time. Arts education

research is as robust as it has ever been. Given the extremely limited resources for this work, the developments of the past twenty years have been significant. The general state of research on learning, teaching, cognitive development, and, especially in recent years, the functioning of the brain is strong and provides a wonderful foundation for recent and further developments in arts education research. Many of the articles in this *Journal* reveal the seriousness and rigor of efforts in music education to transform both the questions and methods of research.

These challenges are inextricably linked. Though perhaps a bit simplistic, I believe that real advances toward providing greater access to meaningful arts learning opportunities are dependent on the quality of those experiences, and advances toward greater quality are dependent on our understanding of the nature of learning and teaching in the arts. Of course, building the social and political will to provide high quality arts learning experiences for all young people in this country, and conducting the research to guide us in that enterprise, is probably the challenge above all others. Fortunately, the many authors and subjects of articles in this *Journal*, as well as many others in this field, are not content to simply wait for that day. They are intent on speeding its arrival.

Indeed, based on the myriad insights and initiatives chronicled in this *Journal*, I think there is an argument to be made that arts educators, and, notably, music educators, may well be in the forefront of the improvement of educational practice in this country, especially on the instructional front, particularly through new models of rich, integrated learning experiences in and out of schools. This *Journal* moves beautifully, section by section, from a micro-exploration of personal feelings, identities, motivations, and insights to a macro-view of the current cutting edge of music education practice. Starting with the individual stories of accomplished musicians at early, middle, and mature phases of their development in *Yearning to Connect: The Enterprise of*

*Music and Learning*, the *Journal* moves then into a deeper exploration of possibilities for the education of the next generation of music educators in *From Mentorship to Empowerment: Guided Internships as Entry Points to Music-in-Education*. The third section explores “Rules for Arts Ed Radicals” and examples of music making and music education as the core of significant social change, notably the youth orchestra movement in Venezuela, in *Underlying Principles for Advancing Music in Changing Times*. The final section, *Evolving Models of Inquiry, Documentation, Assessment, and Research*, with its case studies of the Conservatory Lab Charter School (Boston) and the Ramsey International Fine Arts Center (IFAC) Public School (Minneapolis), provides portraits of young institutions engaged in complex partnerships and with commitments to evolving significant elements of research, the use of data collection and analysis, and professional development both to improve learning and teaching in these schools and to contribute to the scholarship of the field.

Throughout, this volume provides views from ground-level to somewhere around 10,000 feet. Yet, at all of these altitudes and angles, there is perhaps a single major image that remains in focus, and it is this image which may have the power to, and may already be, transforming arts education as we know it in this country—the image of the Artist-Teacher-Scholar. I would argue that this volume actually extends that image even further to include the role of Change Agent—whether as one who changes the curriculum in a classroom, the culture in a school, the relationships of adults and children in a community, or the way in which children are seen and understood in a society and the subsequent roles they may play in building the world they hope to live in. From small, but courageous, reconceptualizations of the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of teaching to profound changes in communities and societies, what is suggested in this volume is not just that music has these powers, but that music educators have this possibility—and in possibility, responsibility is born.

In addition to the magnificent specific insights of that are offered through the words and work of Julia Carey, Lorin Hollander, Michael Cain, Randy Wong, and so many others, we get a view into the deep roots and rightness of this emerging view of arts educators as simultaneously artists, teachers, scholars and change agents. As Hollander’s eloquent interview suggests, the impulses to create, teach, and understand are basic to human life and are especially powerful in those who seek to make meaning in and through the arts. But this publication goes further, I believe, and suggests that it is virtually impossible to separate these basic human instincts and that our attempt to do so—and we have certainly attempted to do this (and have been devastatingly successful)—is an artifact of our desire to narrowly define roles,

assign widely different status to certain kinds of accomplishments, and build institutions with departments and units and roles within units and hierarchies within roles. Add to this, the generally low status of the arts in relation to the sciences and even, ironically, to the humanities, and we currently have a situation in which it appears to be almost impossible, if not completely unreasonable, to simultaneously want to be an artist, a teacher, a scholar, and an agent of change. Yet, as argued here, it is almost impossible to imagine a full life in the arts without serious and sustained work in all four realms. This *Journal* aims at nothing less than publicly and explicitly restoring the unity of these four human functions in varied “dynamic, unfolding formations” and celebrating their reunion. ¶

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