

The Final Cadence: The Effect of Secondary Music Education in Post Secondary, Non-Musical Settings

By John L. Vitale, Nipissing University

Nipissing University

“Music education opens doors that help children pass from school into the world around them; a world of work, culture, intellectual activity, and human involvement.”

Former US President Gerald Ford

Abstract

Less than one percent of the secondary music students I have instructed have gone on to a post secondary musical setting. Despite this remarkably low number, over ten percent of my past students continuously and unexpectedly made informal visits to my classroom over the years to reminisce, reflect, and connect to past events from the music program. Although these encounters were spontaneous, I soon realized that I had a large pool of valuable research data at my disposal—data that was not solicited in formal interviews, but rather gained through sincere and genuine conversations with former students who somehow felt a strong and passionate connection to a music program they once belonged to. This deeply imbued passion for music education motivated me to ponder the types of knowledge, skills, and ancillary benefits my former students acquired from their secondary music education. This ultimately led to the following problem statement which is the genesis of this paper: What effect does secondary music education have on students currently engaged in post secondary, non musical settings? The data was eventually recorded in the form of anecdotal notes and coded for common threads and themes. From a methodology perspective, this process closely mirrors a qualitative research technique known as Conversation Analysis, which attempts to describe the structure and patterns of casual conversation (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974). Results have indicated that the three principal themes of (1) creativity, (2) cooperative learning, and (3) relationships are the most dominant effects of secondary music education in post secondary, non-musical settings.

Introduction

During my twelve years of experience in the secondary school music classroom, I had the opportunity of teaching over one thousand music students, many of whom were talented and gifted in a variety of ways. Despite this large number, less than ten

had pursued music in either university/college or music-related employment directly out of secondary school. This relatively low number of students (less than 1%) has left me to ponder what knowledge, skills, and ancillary benefits I have provided the 99% of my past students that did not engage in post-secondary music studies/employment.

Context and Methodology

I think it is safe to assume that most secondary school music teachers are aware that the majority of students they teach will not pursue a musical career. Selling the music program, therefore, has chiefly focused on the ancillary benefits of music education; such as the cognitive, emotional, physical, academic, and social growth that music students experience (Demorest & Morrison, 2000; Rauscher, Shaw, & Ky, 1993; Rideout, Dougherty, & Wernert, 1998; Rideout & Taylor 1997; Schellenberg, 2005). But how do these experiences translate to non-musical settings? While in the field, many of my past students continuously and unexpectedly made informal visits to my classroom. The chit-chat and friendly discussion that ensued always generated two specific topics, namely: the past and the present. With regards to the past, topics of discussion chiefly focused on previous classes, musical performances, and trips. The present, however, focused on what students were currently doing in terms of work or study. After several years of engaging in informal dialogue with these former students, I realized that I had a large pool of valuable data at my disposal—data that was not solicited in formal interviews but rather sincere and genuine reflections from past students that felt a connection to a music program they once belonged to. In recent years, with the onset of computer-mediated communication such as Facebook, this dialogue has grown into very informative and well subscribed conversations involving multiple participants. As I realized the value of these casual and authentic conversations from a research point of view, I began anecdotally recording them. After a large pool of data was collected, I started to sift, sort, and code common threads and themes, which I would like to share in this article as a means of exploring the impact of secondary school music education in post secondary, non-musical settings. In fact, this article is over five years in the making.

From a methodology perspective, this process closely mirrors a

principle themes

the final cadence

qualitative research technique known as Conversation Analysis—commonly abbreviated as CA—which attempts to describe the structure and patterns of casual conversation (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson; 1974). Arminen (1999) has stated: “CA treats talk and social interaction as a sufficient object for analysis . . .” (p. 251). Moreover, this field of research has changed and evolved over the years where new terms with slightly different methodologies have emerged, such as Discourse Analysis—commonly abbreviated as DA (please see Coulthard, 1985; Levinson, 1983; Stubbs, 1983). In addition, this paper also adopts an action research component—learning by doing (O’Brien, 2001). As I continued to engage in informal discussions with my former students, I was gaining knowledge (learning) on the impact of secondary school music education in post secondary, non-musical fields. This learning helped to guide, formulate, and cultivate conversations with my students as they transpired, indicative of the action research cycle as defined by Fisher, Bennett-Levey, and Irwin (2008).

Results

The concept that music provides ancillary life benefits beyond formal music instruction has not only been discussed for decades, it is in many ways the basis for selling music education in many public and private institutions. Although I have argued against this method of promoting music programs (Vitale, 2007), the principal aim of this paper is to thematically represent many years worth of informal conversations that I have had with my former music students. (Please note—to protect the identity of these students, pseudonyms have been used in this article.) These representations are intended to establish a connection between: (1) the past (studying music in secondary school), and (2) the present (post-secondary, non-musical settings) former music students find themselves in.

In sum, the following three areas manifested themselves as the principal themes of my study, namely; (1) creativity, (2) cooperative learning, and (3) relationships.

Theme One - Creativity

The out-of-the-box thinking necessitated by music performance is a skill set valued and venerated by employers of all types. After all, all problems are solved by some sort of creative solution. Torrance (1995) suggests that creativity is “a process of becoming sensitive to problems, deficiencies, gaps in knowledge, missing knowledge, missing elements, disharmonies, and so on” (p. 6). Many of my former students made reference to the creative component of their high school music classes. For example, Calvin (a former percussionist) and present-day personal trainer in a gym, draws a similarity between the creative aspects of music and his current job. He has said:

Playing the kit [drum set] in high school was fun and awesome and I really learned a lot, like when some licks [patterns] worked and some didn’t, kind of like when I am personal training. Some exercises are great for some of the members and not really for other people. Some people need one kind of exercise and other people need a different type. You have to be creative when working with members of the gym because they are all different

and need different things from me, kind of like experimenting with licks on the kit.

My memories of Calvin are of a hyperactive student who never followed the percussion parts, but always made up his own thing. He made my role as a conductor difficult, but he always came up with something that worked. Playing drums, much like working out in the gym (his current line of work), was a way for Calvin to let off some steam and attend to his hyperactive personality.

Joseph (a former bassist) actually made the connection between creative thinking in music class and his current job as an urban planner:

Sometimes I think about where a green space should be when looking over a proposal—kind of like a really good, really great, piece of music. Bangs and soft spots have to be carefully placed in the song for it to be a good song—a great song—kind of like a good neighbourhood.

Since I am a bass player, I had a very good teacher/student relationship with Joseph. He was a very intelligent and introverted student who I would often see reading a book in the cafeteria when I had lunch duty.

Silvia (a former vocal student) who is a recent Early Childhood Education graduate from community college has stated:

I really liked the CPT’s [culminating performance task] where we had to compose our own song...it was like something came out of nothing, a few words and a few notes into an entire song...I still keep my songs in a safe place at home and even read the words once in a while...My friends really liked my song and even said that my song was very original. I still write songs even now.

Silvia was one of my more recent students and she loved pop music and seemed to know every song and artist that was in vogue. She was a very happy and caring individual who loved singing for the fun of it and it is not surprising that she wanted to work with pre-school children as a career choice. When asked how she uses creativity in her daily work with pre-school children, Silvia responded: “All I do all day long is think up new and different ways to entertain children. I love kids but the job is very demanding.”

Lisa (a former vocal student) who was an active member of Student Music Council is now a student at university studying Visual Art, and she unsurprisingly enjoyed the creative aspects of planning a concert. She has stated: “I enjoyed designing the programs and creating posters for our Music Nights. It was always such a fun event to promote.” Visual Art and music have always worked well together, especially in the modern era of pop music—album covers, tour programs and t-shirts have always involved some sort of correlating visual design to the music and musical performers. My memories of Lisa are of a student that had average vocal ability at best, but would submit three to four different versions of artwork for consideration as our Music Night Program cover. It was very clear that her love of visual art was her principal focus, but being actively involved in the Music Program allowed her to cultivate her love of drawing.

In sum, the creative insight and intuition students can achieve from studying music are perhaps the most important components of music education. Problem solving, whether you are a student, employee, or entrepreneur, is paramount to success. Suh & Shin (2008), for example, have concluded that employees achieve more success on the job when creative approaches are used to achieve a goal. They have stated that an employee “is better related to the performance goal when the employee is encouraged to take risks and to work in a creative manner (p. 407). The music room is a great place to practice and engage in creative tasks. Evidence of this can be found in a study by Hamann, Bourassa, & Aderman (1990) where it was reported that undergraduate music majors scored significantly higher in general creativity based on the results of the Guilford Unusual Consequences Test—a test that quantifies creative ability based on the work of American psychologist J.P. Guilford. In another similar study, Hamann et al (1990) tested high school students, and once again the authors found that music students exhibited greater creativity than non-music students. In both studies, there was a statistically significant relationship between the length of music education (music studied over time) and the creativity score. Hence, the more musical training one had, the higher the creativity score was.

Theme Two - Co-operative Learning

Although none of my former students used the term “cooperative learning,” several of them always made reference to the balance between individual success and group success, namely; that each student had to learn his/her part in order for the larger group (band/orchestra/choir) to be successful. Jacobs, Power, and Wan Inn (2002) have maintained that this “one for all and all for one” (p. 32) approach is essentially the main principle behind cooperative learning: Alex (a former clarinetist) clearly makes this “one for all and all for one” connection: “I always remember how bad songs sounded the first time we played them because nobody could play their parts . . . but once we all learned our parts, the orchestra always sounded fantastic on Music Night.” Alex is a business graduate who currently works in the finance department of a large corporation. When asked how the “one for all and all for one” motto manifests itself in the corporate world, Alex responded: “Everyone thinks that it is a dog eat dog world out there, but people in my company only get promoted if they are a team player and get along well with everyone else.”

Gerry, a present-day physical education teacher (former trumpeter in the Wind Orchestra) eventually came back to his secondary school alma mater as a teacher. He was a former student who turned into a colleague, and we had many conversations about the music program and how it helped his teaching and coaching. He stated:

I always tell my girls that our soccer team is no different than an orchestra. I tell them that each position on the field plays a particular part of the song that on its own may not make a lot of sense, but when put all together creates a beautiful symphony, and that's how games are won!

Although some students were selected to perform solos, duets,

and trios during performances, all students had their chance to perform in a larger group, even those students who lacked in musical talent. Jesse (a former trombonist) stated: “I know I was not that good at music, but the other guys always helped me cover up my mistakes but I still got a chance at playing in the concert.” The concept of helping other people is also tied into the theme of cooperative learning, in that we all have a job to do to ensure that no person in the group is left behind. Sometimes in our personal and professional lives, we have to carry other people with us in order for things to move along, and sometimes, we get carried. As of two years ago (the last time I communicated with Jesse) he was working as a real estate agent, and I specifically asked him if he uses the “one for all and all for one” approach in his daily work:

My whole job is about getting buyers and sellers to reach a number [money] where both parties think they are getting a good deal. I have to think about and please everyone in order to achieve this good deal which is the difference between me getting paid or not.

In sum, music education promotes a cooperative and supportive learning environment that encourages student success at all levels. Such success can be used to cultivate future endeavours and accomplishments. In Kagan’s (1999) discussion of the 17 benefits of cooperative learning, he argues that: “Students learn how to work in teams, preparing them for the interdependent team-based workplace of the 21st Century in which increased technology and complexity demands increasing use of interdependent teams.” Moreover, Battistich & Watson (2003) have stated: “Cooperative learning activities provide an ideal vehicle for teachers to structure the environment for successful peer interactions and to provide students with the coaching and support they need to develop their social and emotional skills and understanding” (p. 20). Additionally, Johnson & Johnson (1991) have argued that the teamwork aspect of music education is also at the very core of most job descriptions.

The heart of most jobs, especially the higher-paying more interesting jobs, is teamwork. Teamwork involves getting others to cooperate, leading others, coping with complex power and influence issues, and helping solve people's problems in working with each other. Teamwork involves communication, effective coordination, and divisions of labor. (p. 24)

Theme Three - Relationships

Many former students consistently mentioned the fact that being part of the music program was an opportunity to develop relationships and experience a slice of daily secondary school life with the same students year after year. The students in the Junior Band, for example, were more or less the same students in the Senior Band a few years later. Hence, several years of performing and often traveling together via the music program forged many good friendships that created a strong social bond—almost family like—throughout secondary school which still continues well after graduation for some students. Daniel, a former saxophonist currently employed in a family business, has stated. “All of my closest friends today are from my secondary school band class. I guess hanging out for four years together made us real tight, like brothers, I guess.” When asked about his current job and his

principle themes

the final cadence

friends, Daniel replied:

I don't work with my friends, but we hang out all of the time, especially on weekends where we have a lot of fun. Working kind of sucks, but hanging out with my buddies is what I look forward to the most.

Bianca, a former clarinetist, would always visit me on a regular basis after she had graduated. I always remember her saying "I miss my family" (referring to her music classmates). Although Bianca was the only former student that actually used the word "family", I have had many similar sentiments over the years from former students, such as Mary (former flautist) who said: "I miss everybody who was in this class." On separate occasions, I asked both Bianca and Mary why they missed their friends from music class, and both had a similar theme of isolation in their answers.

Bianca (currently an undergraduate psychology major) stated:

University is lonely. Classes are so big and doing assignments is so lonely. Although many of my friends go to the same university, they are all in different programs and I never see them. In music class we saw each other all the time and it was a lot of fun.

Similarly, Mary (who was just completing a degree in French last I spoke with her three years ago) stated:

Everybody goes on to do their own thing. It is very hard making the adjustment from high school where you see everybody all the time, especially in music class, to university where you hardly see anybody you know and have to make new friends and that can be uncomfortable. It's like you're cut off from your friends.

I have had many students over the years reminisce on the collegial and friendly relationships that manifested themselves in the music classroom. For instance, former bassist Mark has said: "We loved hanging out with each other in this room." Likewise, former trombonist Clarence has stated: "It seemed like everyone in the band was your best friend."

Several of my past students in music even forged romantic relationships with one another. A few of these couples have even gone on to get married, such as Joe and Sara, who sat beside each other in the trumpet section for four years. Joe acknowledges that the time they spent together in the music program, particularly all of the afterschool rehearsals and music trips, brought them together. He has stated:

Music class was like going to a party every day. We always had fun playing music and socializing with one another. Sitting next to Sara for four years was awesome. We really got to know each other and we started out as friends for a few years before we started dating. Music definitely brought us together, especially during after school rehearsals and music trips to Boston and Cleveland and now we are married.

In sum, the family-like atmosphere of the music program helped to create a very strong social bond between students. So strong in fact, that these bonds still manifest themselves many years later through friendships, marriages, and nostalgic sentiments. Being connected to your past and still having fond memories of secondary school are necessary attributes of building a content and happy lifestyle. Hallowell (2002) has stated:

We all know that friends matter. How much, and in what ways, are the subjects of considerable debate, but for the purposes of

most parents and teachers, it is enough to know that friends matter, and they matter a lot. Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam speaks of your friends as being a life asset, social capital, as important as money in the bank. As Putnam documents in his scholarly book *Bowling Alone*, numerous studies show that your friends constitute not only an emotional support but a health asset as well; if you are rich in friends, your chances for a healthy and happy life dramatically rise.

Moreover, Hallowell (2002) also argues that a "sense of the past" and "exposure to the arts" (both of which can be accomplished by a meaningful secondary school music education) are necessary ingredients of ensuring that children avoid feeling lonely and isolated as adults. At the end of the day, society has become so fragmented and technologically oriented that meaningful human relationships are waning. Music, however, allows students to foster and cultivate meaningful relationships throughout secondary school and beyond. Media mogul Ted Turner (2009) has so eloquently stated: "Music has a great power for bringing people together. With so many forces in this world acting to drive wedges between people, it's important to preserve those things that help us experience our common humanity." Bowman's (1998) view on this matter is also worth noting: "...music is always and fundamentally a mode of human activity, something people do with or for each other" (p. 304). Lastly, the CEO of the Eastman Kodak Company, Daniel A. Carp (2009), has stated:

Music is one way for young people to connect with themselves, but it is also a bridge for connecting with others. Through music, we can introduce children to the richness and diversity of the human family and to the myriad rhythms of life.

Conclusion

Through years of dialogue, discussion, and sometimes even playful banter, with many of my former music students, I have realized that all of them carry a sense of pride and accomplishment with them from their experience in the secondary school music program. These experiences provide assistance and direction for these students in their present endeavours, creating more confident and self-assured members of society.

The process of sifting, sorting, and coding anecdotal information that represents years worth of discussions (the basis of this paper) has been very cathartic and therapeutic for me. It allowed me the opportunity to ponder and reflect on my own pedagogy, not only as a former secondary school music teacher, but as a present-day professor of teacher candidates. Moreover, many of the past experiences referred to in this paper have made their way into the "online world!" Many of my former students have posted a plethora of video clips of past music performances and trips on YouTube for continuous viewing and listening. From time-to-time, I also get a bit nostalgic and find myself replaying all these video clips on YouTube. This is also a wonderful opportunity for me to reflect on over a decade worth of teaching music—truly magical memories. CME

References

- Arminen, Ilkka (1999). Conversation analysis: A quest for order in social interaction and language use. *Acta Sociologica*, 42(3), pp. 251-257.
- Battistich, V. & Watson, M. (2003). Fostering social development in preschool

and the early elementary grades through cooperative classroom activities. In Gillies, R. & Ashman, A. (Eds.), *Co-Operative Learning: The Social and Intellectual Outcomes of Learning in Groups*. (pp. 19-33) New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

Bowman, W. D. (1998). *Philosophical perspectives on music*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Carp, Daniel (2009). "Connections between learning in the fine arts and enhanced achievement in other academic areas: Selected findings." Retrieved June 21, 2009 at <http://www.cso.org/res/pdf/OE%20Gear.pdf>

Coulthard, Malcolm, (1985). *An introduction to Discourse Analysis*. London: Longman.

Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

DeMorest, S. M. and Morrison S. J. (2000). Does music make you smarter? *Music Educators Journal*, 87(2): 33-39, 58.

Fisher K., Bennett-Levey J., and Irwin R. (2008). *What a gas! Action research as a peer support process for postgraduate students*. Southern Cross University, Lismore, Australia. Retrieved May 05, 2008, from <http://ultibase.rmit.edu.au/Articles/nov03/fisher1.htm>

Gregory, Andy H. (1997). The roles of music in society. In David J. Hargreaves & Adrian C. North (Eds.), *The Social Psychology of Music*. (pp. 123-140). New York: Oxford University Press.

Hallowell, Edward (2002). *The childhood roots of adult happiness: Five steps to help kids create and sustain lifelong Joy*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Hamann, D. Bourassa, R. and Aderman, M. (1990) Creativity and the arts. *Dialogue in Instrumental Music Ed.*, 14:59-68.

Jacobs, Power, and Wan Inn (2002). *The teacher's sourcebook for cooperative learning: Practical techniques, basic principles, and frequently asked questions*. Thousand Oak, CA: Corwin Press.

Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T. and Smith, K.A. (1991) *Active learning: cooperation in the college classroom*. Edina, MN: Interaction Book Company

Kagan, Spencer (1999). *Kagan Online Magazine*. Winter 1999 Edition Retrieved June 02, 2009 at <http://www.kaganonline.com/KaganClub/FreeArticles/ASK06.html>

Levinson, Stephen (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Merriam, S.B. (2002). Introduction to Qualitative Research. In S.B. Merriam (Ed.). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*. (pp. 1-17). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

O'Brien, R. (2001). "An overview of the methodological approach of action research." In Roberto Richardson (Ed.), *Theory and Practice of Action Research*. João Pessoa, Brazil: Universidade Federal da Paraíba. (English version) Accessed online on Feb. 2, 2007 from <http://www.web.ca/~robrien/papers/arf.html>

Putnam, Robert (2000). *Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Rauscher, F.H., Shaw, G.L, & Ky, K.N. 1993. Music and spatial task performance. *Nature*. 365, 611.

Rideout, B.E., Dougherty, S. & Wernert, L. 1998. Effect of music on spatial performance: a test of generality. *Perceptual & Motor Skills*. 86, pp. 512-4.

Rideout, B.E. & Taylor, J. 1997. Enhanced spatial performance following 10 minutes exposure to music: a replication. *Perceptual & Motor Skills*, 85, pp. 112-4.

Sacks, H., Schegloff, E., & Jefferson, G. A. (1974). Simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language*. 50(4), pp. 696-735.

Schellenberg, E. G. (2005). Music and cognitive abilities. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 14, pp. 317-320

Schegloff, Emanuel A. (2006). *Sequence organization in interaction: A Primer in Conversation*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Schegloff, Emmanuel A., (1968). "Sequencing in Conversational Openings," *American Anthropologist*, 70(6) pp. 1075-1095.

Suh, T. & Shin, H. (2008). When working hard pays off: Testing creativity hypotheses. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*. 13, 4, pp. 407-417.

Stubbs, Michael (1983). *Discourse Analysis: The Sociolinguistic Analysis of Natural Language*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Torrance, E. P. (1995). *Why fly? A Philosophy of Creativity*. Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Turner, Ted (2009). "Why music education?" The National Association for Music Education. Retrieved June 21, 2009 at <http://www.menc.org/resources/view/why-music-education-2007>.

Vitale, John L. (2007). "The principal principle: Selling the high school music

program in Canada." *Canadian Music Educator's Journal*. Volume 49 - Number 2, pp. 26-30.

Wetherell, Margaret, (1998). Positioning and interpretative repertoires: conversation analysis and post-structuralism in dialogue. *Discourse and Society*. 9(3), pp. 387-412.

Winter, Richard (1989). *Learning From Experience: Principles and Practice in Action- Research*. Philadelphia: The Falmer Press.



Dr. John L. Vitale is currently Assistant Professor of Curriculum Methods in the Faculty of Education at Nipissing University (Brantford Campus) where he instructs teacher candidates in the Bachelor of Education Concurrent Program. He has also taught music for both Public and Catholic School Boards in Ontario for 14 years, including two years at the elementary level and 12 years at the secondary school level. At the secondary school level, Dr. Vitale has taught choir, strings, band, guitar, and music technology where he also served as Department Head of the Arts. His current research interests include alternative pedagogy and curriculum in music education; the benefits of music education for at risk students; the politicization of music education; and the role of music in media applications (particularly film music). As a bass player, Dr. Vitale has over eleven hundred professional performances to his credit, including national festivals, concerts, television shows, and private functions. He has recorded and toured internationally with Warner recording artist and Juno Award winner Robert Michaels. Other performance credits include playing bass for Order of Canada Recipient Guido Basso, comedian Joan Rivers, Michael Burgess, and most recently on a regular basis, with two-time Juno Award winner Liberty Silver. Dr. Vitale has also opened up for numerous headlining acts including Neil Sedaka, Don Rickles, The Temptations, and Andy Kim to name a few. Dr. Vitale also has numerous compositional credits, including the score to award-winning children's animated film *Attic-in-the-Blue* (first place winner at the Chicago International Children's Film Festival).



Britannia Printers INC

138 Main Street, Toronto, Ontario M4E 2V8
Tel: (416) 698-7608 • Fax: (416) 698-7904
Email: print@britannia.ca

**FULL COLOUR / BLACK & WHITE
OFFSET AND DIGITAL PRINTING**

STATIONERY • BUSINESS CARDS
BROCHURES • MAGAZINES • BOOKS
FOIL STAMPING • THERMOGRAPHY
DIE CUTTING • POST CARDS
VINYL CUT SIGNS AND BANNERS
PRESENTATION FOLDERS
and much more!

"Making a good impression . . . for you"

Copyright of Canadian Music Educator: Musicien éducateur au Canada is the property of Canadian Music Educators' Association / L'association canadienne des musiciens éducateurs and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.