

Chase Christensen

Dr. Brian Alber

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Philosophy of Education

The earliest physical evidence of a musical culture – a Paleolithic bone flute discovered in Slovenia in 1995 – is estimated to be about 43,000 years old. In comparison, the earliest cave drawings discovered date to 40,000 years ago, and the earliest examples of written language date to only 5,000 years ago. It is incredibly likely that a flute made of bone was not the first musical instrument to be used by early humans. Rather, the voice – which evolved with the human itself – probably holds that honor, and it is likely that this “musical” use of the voice co-evolved with spoken language some 100,000 years ago.

What do these facts tell us, and why are they important to education in the twenty-first century? The answer cuts into our very existence as a species. We say music is a cultural invention – something to bind us together as a society, something to help us express our emotions, something to help us empathize with each other. Music is a tool for our use – we use it to celebrate and we use it to communicate. We surely do not need music to survive, do we? In fact, Charles Darwin – in his groundbreaking book, *The Descent of Man* – devoted ten pages to his theories about the development of music in our species. His conclusions differ widely from popular opinions about music today.

Music, Darwin argues, must have had a significant survival value to early humans. He theorizes that humans learned to manipulate their voices into complex patterns of pitch and rhythmic variation, possibly imitating the animal sounds they heard around them. Evolution

would have selected for this trait because it enabled humans to compete for mates more effectively – the singers were the winners. Darwin even believed that this singing predated an organized spoken language, making music the very first “protolanguage.” Additional theories of musical evolution exist which tap into ideas of social bonding and mother-infant relationships. In these cases, emotional expression is shared between two or more people, making them closer-knit and more willing to care for one another.

This information should be a foundation for a philosophy of music education. Simply put, humans are hard-wired for music perception and creation. As Darwin implied, this was important for the early survival of the human species. Other theories suggest that the ability to enjoy music is simply a by-product of having such a complex brain. Either way, creating, performing, and perceiving music is sure to strengthen the brain’s internal wiring precisely because of the activation of nearly every brain region when exposed to music.

Thus, music has an important place in the development of humans, so it should have an important place in schools – institutions designed with the child’s brain in mind. But what type of music instruction should be included? How, exactly, does one instruct music anyway? The answer is quite simple – a music educator must develop the evolutionary potential of music in each student, or at the very least, set up each student with a basic foundation to develop this potential on their own with further instruction and exploration, encouraging all students to meet a predetermined curricular minimum (in the form of state and national standards), but never hindering a student’s desire to go farther.

Just as the first musical instrument was the human voice, this should also be the first instrument that children learn to use. From very early childhood, children must be exposed to singing, and the timbral differences between the singing and speaking voices must be

emphasized. Students should be encouraged to start vocalizing as early as possible, and simple songs should be shared with them. These activities will begin to sensitize each student's ear to pitch. Babies begin to feel rhythm with their bodies before they can speak, so this is another important area to explore. It is imperative that these activities begin in the critical period before children reach school-age – even before they reach pre-school age. It would be unwise to deprive a child of basic language and reading instruction until they signed up for kindergarten. In the same way, children who do not experience music at an early age will struggle to see cognitive, affective, and psychomotor benefits associated with music learning.

In a school setting, a music educator is simply responsible for formalizing all of this naturally-occurring behavior. In elementary school, students learn about the basic building blocks of music, and each lesson, song, dance, and game will contribute to clarifying a conceptual picture of musicality in the mind of each child. Music is perhaps the most abstract discipline, and students will reap the cognitive rewards of participation. As children mature in this instruction, their brains will develop more solid connections – all areas of the brain will be able to communicate more effectively. This is largely because of the heavy aural, visual, and kinesthetic properties of musical activity. Music educators will be able to tap into these domains more easily than educators in other fields because of their prominence. Once students have obtained sufficient motor skills, they are able to participate in instrumental ensembles – including marching band – which add another layer of kinesthetic experience.

Concert bands, orchestras, choirs, jazz bands, and chamber ensembles are also all effective ways to develop the student's cognitive and kinesthetic skills. However, the most important benefit of a musical education is that it teaches people how to share experiences and emotions with one another. Therefore, as language arts educators seek to cultivate literate

citizens, government educators seek to cultivate civically literate citizens, and mathematics educators seek to cultivate mathematically literate citizens, it is the job of the music educator to cultivate emotionally literate citizens.

An emotional education does not at face value seem to be something that fits with other educational disciplines. Emotional processing and social bonding seem to be basic things that are taught at home, so why should music have a place in school? Education is the vehicle by which society ensures the competency of future generations to inherit a diverse and complex world. If a student receives private mathematics tutelage from ages four to nineteen, she may not need any math courses in school – but she still needs to know math. If a student receives private music instruction, he may not need it in school – but he still needs it. The inclusion of music in a school ensures that every child – every human – is given the opportunity to give attention to their emotions in a social environment.

This environment, in fact, is where educators must begin. The best music classrooms are those that are stimulating to the visual and aural senses. Students must be engaged the moment they step into the classroom. Their eyes might be drawn to a large printout of a word cloud that the class constructed with adjectives describing each piece of their repertoire. Their ears might encounter a programmatic symphony from the Romantic era that was or will be discussed in class. Environment is not just a physical place, however. In the ideal scenario, students in the music classroom will release some of their stress, gain confidence and self-value they might never have otherwise had, and above all, understand that they are in a safe place to ask for help, express their emotions, voice their opinions, give and receive compliments and criticism, and share their creations with their teacher and their peers.

Performance is the most visible aspect of any music program, and the majority of instructional time is devoted to the preparation of these performances. Music class, along with Speech, Theatre, and Debate, should be a tool to impart presentation literacy to students. In both areas, students will be required to stand on a stage, alone or with a group, and express themselves. It matters not necessarily whose words (or notes) are being expressed, but rather, how they are expressed: with confidence and conviction. Upon leaving my classroom, these are only some of the skills that my students will have strengthened.