

**A DISCUSSION OF
MY APPROACH
TO ASSESSMENT
IN MUSIC**

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The Choral Music Portfolio

Today's product-oriented view of education is often inappropriately applied to the study of music. Since the nature of musical learning is process-oriented, an intrinsic conflict arises when teachers must assign grades quantified by letters and numbers. The way in which accountability is currently determined by educators juxtaposes two philosophical ideologies: the analytical and the holistic. Whereas quantitative academic subjects like math and science are readily amenable to an analytical approach (the whole being equal to the sum of its parts), the study of choral music requires a holistic approach (the whole as being conceived of as an integrated and independent reality).

In the day-to-day activities of the chorus class, instruction and evaluation occur simultaneously. We do everything at once. It is only when teachers are required to provide written assessments of the students that these two processes must be parsed out and separated. The music portfolio is a multi-dimensional assessment tool and it is for this reason that many of today's music educators are now adopting it.

The "choral music portfolio" consists of a series of documents generated from various projects such as individual performances, recordings of rehearsals and, in the case of older students, ensemble critiques, compositions, structural dictations and journal entries. grade. A portfolio assessment can be converted into letter or numerical grades. Letter or numerical grades, on the contrary, cannot express the richness and accuracy of the portfolio

The learning strategies to achieve these goals can be broken down into three categories: 1) performance skills, 2) musical literacy and, 3) musical understanding.

Performance Skills Learning Strategies in choral studies include: singing with technical accuracy, posture, breath management, tone quality, diction, intonation (pitch accuracy), balance and blend, vocal flexibility, dynamics, and artistry/singing with expression.

Musical Literacy Learning Strategies include: musical notation and symbols, , developing ensemble skills, improvising rhythmic and melodic variations with accompaniment, composing music within specified guidelines and, evaluating music and musical performances.

Musical Understanding Learning Strategies include: Listening to, analyzing and describing work performed in terms of the stylistic elements of the music, Understanding the historical and cultural context from which the work originated, Understanding the

dynamic and often collaborative relationships between music, other artistic domains and disciplines outside the arts.¹

On the high school level, the choral music portfolio is comprised of a series of documents ranging from such types of projects as individual performance projects, ensemble critiques, compositions, structural dictation, tape recordings (audio and video), and journal entries. An ensemble critique, for example, might consist of having selected students sing portions of concert material in 4-part harmony octets before the entire assembled chorus.

In addition to providing students with motivation for completing the performance task, the students who are *observing* the octets will complete a peer evaluation. The peer student evaluators will be asking themselves: "How well is that student sing the same part which has also been assigned to me?" Again, a strong emphasis is placed on critical thinking skills. The portfolio provides an assessment which is detailed and rich. Care must be taken, however, the observing students are reflecting *objectively* on their peers' performance excluding such factors as friendships (or "enemy-ships") with the performing student.

The high school assessment rubric species and defines the following dimensions of critical thinking: (1) problem solving, (2) divergent thinking, (3) evaluation, (4) reflection and (5) intrinsic motivation. Underscoring each dimension are behaviors describing the students' use of critical thinking processes. A fixed scale may be used to determine the degree of proficiency with which the student is using critical thinking processes.²

Although this topic concerns assessment, I feel strongly that if a student is to be graded on something it must first be taught. The portfolio would include a description of the **method** used to teach the various dimensions of musical understanding. I have chosen ***pitch accuracy*** as an ***illustration*** of a single aspect of what would actually be taught in class.

For high school students, an example of a performance skill strategy involving pitch accuracy and consistent intonation within a choral work might be effected through the use of the following lesson plan:

(a) Problem Statement

"What do you think might be meant by the term polytonality?" (2 minutes)

¹ Field, Sandra T. Critical Thinking Skills in the Secondary School Choral Music Curriculum. Diss. Teachers College Columbia U.1997. Ann Arbor: UMI 9810598. pp.3-4.

² Field, p.177.

(b) Processing Task (10 minutes - based on the preparation of an upcoming performance of Charles Ives's "Psalm 67").

A four-part warm-up is sung using a chromatically ascending and descending scale. The warm-up is continued by building a polychord. For example, the tenors and basses are asked to sing a g minor triad while the sopranos and altos sustain a triad in C major. Then the students are asked to respond to questions such as: "How would you describe the tonality of the warm-up?" "What did you hear?" "Describe your experience of trying to maintain your pitch accuracy and consistent intonation?"

(c) Creating (20 minutes)

The students are divided into mixed-voice octets. The groups find places in different parts of the room. The teacher selects short phrases from Ives's "Psalm 67." All the students in each octet *hum* their parts except one student who is designated as the "soloist." The solo student has to improvise a melody in full voice over the polytonal texture.

(d) Evaluation (10 minutes)

The students resume their places in the usual choral formation. They are then engaged in a dialogue led by the teacher during which they exchange ideas about the improvisations. They are asked which improvisations they felt were the most effective and why, the musical effect of polytonality and the aural demands placed on the singer to maintain pitch accuracy and proper intonation.

(e) Verbalization of the answer to the problem statement (3 minutes)

"How would you describe polytonality?" The teacher hears answers raised from the floor.

(f) Homework: reflective journal entries

The students are assigned to write a one-paragraph statement discussing what problems he/she may have had maintaining pitch accuracy during the improvisation and what strategies were used to solve the problems.³

In Conclusion

Although the National Standards for Art Education stress the need for accountability in music studies, the forms in which this accountability is to be expressed generally rest in the hands of individual teachers. The traditional learning environment which requires students to regurgitate rote information on standardized tests may not

³ Field, p.99-102.

necessarily be a true indication of the knowledge the student has acquired. The study of music in particular, isn't always amenable to strict paper and pencil testing because its very nature is more cognitively flexible and holistic than other subject areas.

My thoughts on portfolio assessment in choral music have been influenced by Sandra T. Field's dissertation Critical Thinking Skills in the Secondary School Choral Music Curriculum and Ellen Winner's ARTS PROPEL: An Introductory Handbook. The one major drawback to portfolio assessment is teacher time management, although according to most teachers who participate in ARTS PROPEL, the benefits seem to greatly outweigh the disadvantages. "It takes an enormous amount of time. It's the most exhausting thing I've ever done in teaching, but it's the most valuable."⁴ Ultimately, it may be for this reason that an ever increasing number of teachers are now turning to the portfolio assessment model.

Bibliography

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⁴ Winner, E., PROPEL Researchers at Harvard Project Zero and Educational Testing Service, Teachers and Administrators from the Pittsburgh Public School System (1991). In Ellen Winner (ed). ARTS PROPEL: An Introductory Handbook, (pp. 1-55), Educational Testing Service and Harvard Project Zero. (qtd. in Field:188).