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The Problem with Race in School Music Programs

I have thoroughly enjoyed my time studying music, both at the grade school and collegiate level. However, I will not hesitate to acknowledge certain issues with our country’s system in place for music education. Music is meant to be personal and expressive and is therefore something that is difficult to teach. Educators have done the best they can to come up with a good-enough system in place of curriculums that draw out a student’s full musical potential. Unfortunately, one of the flaws with this system that has been called to my attention recently is the overrepresentation of white students is school music programs, and therefore the underrepresentation of students of other races. In high school I played in an all-state band, which was made up of students in band classes that had to audition in order to participate. The audition process was completely blind, which meant that at no point did the judges see the student or hear the student’s voice while the student was auditioning. When I went to the all-state group’s first rehearsal, I was shocked to see how many students were white. There was an overwhelming majority of white students, and there were also virtually no black students. There were a few Asian and Latino students, but I was startled by the demographics of the group. I wondered why the results of the audition process were so non-diverse if the judges never saw the auditioning students. Through my research I have found reasons why issues involving race in school music programs like the one I experienced are persisting, why they are detrimental to both the student and the school, and what can be done to solve them.

One of my findings indicates that issues involving race and racial bias are possibly more present in choral settings than in instrumental ones. There is in fact a huge discrepancy when it comes to the number of non-white choir teachers in schools compared to the number of white teachers. Author Julia Koza argues that one of the problems with our system in place is the narrowness of the types of students that are accepted into university choir programs. In her article, “Listening for Whiteness,” Koza lists several potential contributing factors in the limitation of diversity in higher choral learning. One is that there has been a shift towards applicants needing many prerequisite years of private voice training, which hinges on privilege and affluence (Koza, 147). Private lessons are expensive and may not be realistic for students of certain socioeconomic backgrounds. What is also interesting is Koza’s point that this requirement was not always as prevalent as it is now. The voice does not mature until late adolescence, which would make vocal training almost pointless for students at a young age. Koza says that for a while, institutions recognized this factor and that the move towards requiring vocal training for admission into choir programs has been fairly recent.

Another concern expressed by Koza is that only certain choir pieces are deemed acceptable for performance and audition. These pieces are primarily from the European/American high art *bel canto* tradition (Koza, 148). Koza is concerned by this tradition for two reasons. First, she says that students that have no interest in or who do not relate to these specific types of pieces will most likely be overlooked by schools and universities, regardless of actual musical talent or potential. An example that I think illustrates this point is that a student may greatly enjoy singing, but if a choir teacher hears them singing a popular song on the radio, they may not register that the student has musical potential because of the narrow definition in place among choir teachers of which music is academically acceptable. Koza’s second concern is that students who do show they can perform and relate to pieces that are deemed academically acceptable will be taught to carry on the tradition of teaching such pieces. This will ensure that unless new teachers change their ideology after they get a job, the same process of teaching music that is unrelatable to certain students will continue. One might ask, “how do her concerns about this system relate to race?” She says that the list if genres that are acceptable discount all music that has roots in non-white musical tradition and approves genres more-likely to be enjoyed by white people (Koza, 149). She also implies that the system in place for determining acceptable genres of music is outdated. She suggests that even though white-people are more likely to enjoy music that is approved by schools and universities, not many people at all enjoy them anymore. As a musical student I would agree with her point that the vast majority of pieces studied in choral and instrumental music classes are classical pieces ranging from a few previous centuries. Because of the concerns she mentions, Koza fears that exclusion of certain music in schools not only has a negative impact on cultural diversity in schools, but also the ability of K-12 music programs to provide culturally-relevant pedagogy and content (Koza, 149).

So why are minority students still at a disadvantage when it comes to opportunities in music in schools? According to a study taken by Kenneth Elpus and Carlos Abril in 2004, white students accounted for 65.7% of high school seniors that participated in music were white. The total average percentage of white students attending the schools that Elpus and Abril observed was 62.3%. This is significant because it shows that in 2004, white students were overrepresented in music programs. Hispanic students made up 15.1% of the student population observed, but only 10.1% of high school seniors in music ensembles were Hispanic. This indicates that a student that has participated in music programs throughout high school is 1.7 times more likely to be white than Hispanic (Elpus, Abril, 135). I believe this overrepresentation of white students in high school music ensembles highlighted by Elpus and Abril’s demographic study is one of the major contributing factors of why white students are likely to be given more higher learning opportunities in music, which is seen in Koza’s research of university choir programs.

We’ll now reexamine the example of my experience in all-state band, which involved a blind audition process. This audition process is seen as a standard in music programs at the high school level. High school music students who choose or are encouraged to pursue an advanced ensemble can expect to take part in a blind audition. I say encouraged to because I wonder what other factors could influence the overrepresentation of white students that I experienced in all-state band and was also demonstrated by Elpus and Abril’s research. Could it be possible that a reason for this overrepresentation is that teachers are more-likely to encourage white students to pursue music at an advanced level? I believe that Koza’s concern about which students relate to music that is deemed academically acceptable could support this possibility. Another possibility is that the blind audition process does not fix the problem. Lawrence Blum acknowledges that in certain situations, colorblindness is entirely appropriate, and may even be morally required. I agree with this point in the context of music to an extent. I believe blind auditions should be used and that students of all races benefit from a blind audition process. However, Blum also says that recognizing or valuing black people obviously requires attention to racial identity in thought, feeling, and behavior (Blum, 244). In other words, in order to fully value black or other non-white students, we must look beyond just color. A blind audition process is necessary, but it should not be viewed as a solution to issues regarding the representation of minority students in music classrooms. In order to combat issues of diversity in music ensembles, teachers must cater to the personal needs of students of all races and backgrounds. Blind audition processes should be viewed as resourceful not because they bypass potential race bias, but because they give every student who wishes to pursue an advanced music ensemble an equal playing field. Colorblindness should not exist in the music classroom and is detrimental to diversity in school programs.

Another reason that positive change has been hard to come by in school music programs is that teachers are not yet well-prepared or equipped to facilitate lasting changes. According to Deborah Bradley, when positive changes in classroom diversity have occurred, they have been isolated and associated with individual initiative. She says that teachers are very willing to reflect on themselves critically and for the most part have good intentions regarding social justice for their students. However, Bradley is also concerned that teachers use the phrase “social justice” without enough consideration for what it means and entails. She says that the “do something” motivation among music educators leads to acts of charity posing as social justice. Such motivation may raise student and audience awareness of such issues but do nothing to impact the status quo and may even leave participants with a false sense of self-satisfaction (Bradley, 133). I believe that this is a prevalent misconception, not just in teachers but in many American people. It is especially saddening to see a lack of actual change initiated in a field like music that should ideally be accessible to students of all racial and cultural backgrounds.

So, what can be done to fix these major problems with the representation of race in our current system of music education? I propose that there a few major steps that should be taken as soon as possible. First, I believe the conversation surrounding social justice in music settings needs to change. Teachers have great intentions, but do not yet know how to initiate actual change. Blind audition’s can no longer be used as an excuse to not pursue further responsibilities of racial justice in the music classroom. While they are necessary, they do not contribute towards ending the overrepresentation of white students in school music ensembles. Teachers cannot view overrepresentation of white students as coincidence and must reconsider how they determine which students have musical potential. Second, musical curriculums need to be updated. There is no need to encourage or overvalue private vocal or instrumental training beginning at a young age, especially if it may hinder students from certain socioeconomic backgrounds from participating in music. There is also no need to continue studying pieces exclusively from certain genres and discounting music that has roots in non-white musical tradition. Updating what music is viewed as acceptable to study and perform will benefit all students. In conclusion, music needs to be as accessible as possible to all students. If we do not make these crucial changes, we will continue to do non-white students a major disservice and shut diversity out of the musical classroom.

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