Comprehensive Musicianship in Undergraduate Music Programs

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Comprehensive musicianship is a philosophy of teaching and learning music. It is an attitude rather than a method (McGaughey, 1974) or a developed curriculum (Willoughby, 1990). The concept evolved from various sources, but its most direct lineage is that of the Contemporary Music Project (Comprehensive Musicianship, 1965). The Contemporary Music Project began in 1957 as part of an effort, funded by the Ford Foundation, to examine the place of the arts in the United States (CMP in perspective, 1973).

The Contemporary Music Project's initial endeavor was the Young Composers Project which, in 1959, placed thirty-one composers in public secondary schools over a three year period. None of these composers were more than three years beyond their formal education, nor were any over the age of thirty-five (Comprehensive musicianship: An anthology of evolving thought, 1971).

The Young Composers Project revealed that although students were receptive to present day music, barriers existed between their teachers and the composers. The composers attributed these barriers to outmoded teacher training which failed to encourage the mature exploration of all types of music (Comprehensive musicianship: An anthology of evolving thought, 1971; Mitchell, 1969). In 1962, the Young Composers Project expanded, conducting seminars and workshops on contemporary music in elementary and secondary schools at various colleges and universities (Comprehensive musicianship: An anthology of evolving thought, 1971).

The concerns expressed by those involved with the Young Composers Project were shared by the participants in a seminar at Yale University held in 1964. The Yale Seminar advocated a more rounded musicality in the public schools through composing, performing and listening (Werner, 1979). The seminar urged that public schools broaden their repertoire to include non-Western music, jazz, popular and folk music. The seminar suggested that a reexamination of undergraduate and graduate programs of music teacher training would be necessary to achieve these goals (Willoughby, 1971) and advocated bringing together the disciplines of composition, musicology, theory, performance and pedagogy (Werner, 1979).

These seminars and workshops culminated in a conference at Northwestern University in April 1965, the purpose of which was to examine the content and orientation of required college music courses designed to develop general music knowledge. The term comprehensive musicianship emanated from this conference (Comprehensive Musicianship, 1965; Werner, 1979).

In 1966, experimental programs in colleges and universities were organized by the Contemporary Music Project as the Institutes for Music in Contemporary Education (IMCE). The focus of these programs was basic musicianship training in undergraduate music programs (Comprehensive musicianship: An anthology of evolving thought, 1971). Four elements of comprehensive musicianship were summarized by those involved with the IMCE (Mitchell, 1969a).

First, the components of basic music study; theory, composition, history and performance should be directly related to each other (Mitchell, 1969a). Fragmented courses in various music disciplines should be combined into a series of classes in basic musicianship in order to encourage the exploration of music as a total experience rather than a series of seemingly unrelated concepts (Willoughby, 1990).

Second, individual courses should utilize materials and techniques from all eras of music history (Mitchell, 1969a). A common elements approach emphasizes the analysis of elements which are present in the music of every culture, style and era (CMP in perspective, 1973). These common elements; pitch, duration and quality constitute the form, or lack of form, of music (Comprehensive musicianship: An anthology of evolving thought, 1971).
Third, the theory and practice of comprehensive musicianship should be applied to all levels of education and to all types of students (Mitchell, 1969a; Willoughby, 1971). Comprehensive musicianship has been applied to preschool and elementary private instruction (Comprehensive musicianship at the City Music Center, 1999); junior high school (Woods, 1978); high school (Garofalo & Whaley 1979; Jeanneret, 1993; Moses, 1970); undergraduate music programs, with respect to both music majors and minors (Ward-Steinman, 1987); and graduate music programs (Symposium: The Contemporary Music Project forums, 1973).

Fourth, a comprehensive musicianship curriculum should be designed to encourage self-direction, imagination and critical judgment in a broad range of musical experiences (Mitchell, 1969a).

A number of colleges and universities, including the 32 experimental programs which made up the IMCE, based their undergraduate music curricula on the concept of comprehensive musicianship in the years following the conference at Northwestern University (Willoughby, 1971). Many of the schools which experimented with an integrated core curriculum based on comprehensive musicianship have reverted to a more traditional approach (Bess, 1988; Willoughby, 1990). Other schools have retained this integrated core curriculum (Buccheri, 1990; Ward-Steinman, 1987; Wennerstrom, 1989).

The deficiencies in undergraduate music education which first motivated the work of the Contemporary Music Project (Mitchell, 1969) still persist, more than thirty years later (Parkes, 1988; Wing, 1993). The failure of many students to realize a connection between disciplines such as theory and performance is one such persisting problem (Foltz & Lanning, 1989).

The purpose of this study was to examine comprehensive musicianship in undergraduate music programs. Specifically, (1) to examine the goals and objectives of undergraduate music programs based on the principles of comprehensive musicianship, (2) to describe the characteristics of those programs, (3) to examine the methods used to assess the achievement of the goals and objectives and (4) to evaluate their success in meeting the goals and objectives.

There is no neatly packaged method or curriculum which can be labeled as the comprehensive musicianship model (Willoughby, 1990). The essence of comprehensive musicianship is the utilization of methods and patterns of teaching in order to adequately prepare students for careers in music (McGaughey, 1974). Proponents of comprehensive musicianship believe that musicians should not only specialize but be competent throughout the realm of music and comprehend music of all cultures, traditions and styles (CMP in perspective, 1973). The goal of comprehensive musicianship is to develop a musician who can compose, analyze and perform music intelligently (Kraft, 1972) by relating each task to music in its totality (Willoughby, 1971, 1990). All musicians should experience music from the perspective of the composer and performers should have available the same tools as the theorist (Buccheri, 1990). Music students should also be able to understand the relationship between the theory, history and literature of music (Taylor & Urquhart, 1974). These objectives should be accomplished without a dilution in academic standards relating to composition, analysis, aural skills and performance (Ward-Steinman, 1987).

The successful comprehensive musicianship curriculum will help the student recognize examples of musical elements studied when presented in unfamiliar contexts; apply this knowledge to new contexts; compose examples illustrating various topics or styles; improvise appropriately in a given style; function as a conductor, performer and arranger of musical material; notate from dictation; sight read and sing musically; and develop a discriminating attitude for judging musical quality (Ward-Steinman, 1987).

Early comprehensive musicianship programs combined various elements of music training into combined courses of musicianship (Willoughby, 1990). These combined courses were designed to take the place of compartmentalized instruction in the various music disciplines (Mitchell, 1969). Although the disciplines of theory, composition and performance were generally taught in each of the basic musicianship classes (Kraft, 1972), no attempt was made to standardize the details of a comprehensive musicianship curriculum and various programs aligned their course work differently (Willoughby, 1990). Greater emphasis was generally placed on seminars and independent projects than in traditional courses (Willoughby, 1971).

Prior to the initiation of comprehensive musicianship in the undergraduate curriculum, students at Florida State University were completing the basic musicianship courses without grasping the relationship between theory, history and the actual music literature (Taylor & Urquhart, 1974). To remedy this situation, the content of two theory and two literature-history courses were combined into a single ten credit course
(Taylor & Urquhart, 1974).

At Indiana University the content of musical skills courses were coordinated with combined theory-literature courses and designed to be taken simultaneously. A new emphasis was placed on twentieth century music and the activities of these theory-literature courses were broadened to include composition and research papers (Wennerstrom, 1989).

At the University of Texas, freshman theory courses related basic skills to all types of music laying the foundation for future, more sophisticated, analysis (McGaughey, 1974).

At Northwestern University the undergraduate curriculum was divided into two years of basic studies and two years of specialization. During the basic studies component, applied instruction, performance, general education and musicianship were taught concurrently. This class met for five one-hour sessions per week. Two hours were in lecture format and the other three in smaller groups. Aural and keyboard skills courses were offered separately. Periods of Western music and music of other cultures were taught sequentially within this framework (Buccheri, 1990).

San Diego State University began a three-year program of core musicianship training emphasizing composition, analysis, aural skills and classroom performance. This integrated curriculum included harmony, ear training, sight singing, counterpoint, analysis, orchestration, composition, improvisation, conducting and performance (Ward-Steinman, 1987).

Many schools presently incorporate principles of comprehensive musicianship into their curriculum without mentioning comprehensive musicianship by name. Conversely, some educators and schools identify their courses as comprehensive musicianship without including many of comprehensive musicianship’s features (Willoughby, 1990).

Some scholars have attempted to assess the performance of undergraduate programs based on comprehensive musicianship through research (Boyle, 1971; Johnson, 1992; Taylor & Urquhart, 1974). Research on evaluating comprehensive musicianship in public school music programs has also been conducted (Boyle & Radocy, 1973).

A symposium was held in 1967 which was attended by regional directors and instructors involved with the IMCE programs together with members of the Contemporary Music Project policy committee and experts in education, testing and curriculum design (Mitchell, 1969a). This symposium developed a method of assessment for individual students and the programs under which they were studying (Willoughby, 1971).

The main purpose of the evaluations was to compile data in order to ascertain the validity of the theory and practice of comprehensive musicianship. The student's work was assessed through direct testing and an independent project (Willoughby, 1971). No research discussing the results of these student evaluations has been published.

Research was conducted involving Florida State freshmen in the early 1970s. Students in a combined theory and history course (experimental group) were compared to students in the traditional separate theory and history courses (control group.) Student progress was measured by group scores on identical post tests although no pretest was given. Students were randomly selected for the two groups and the same instructors taught both groups. The experimental group met during the first quarter of the academic year and the control group met during the second and third quarters. A five-hour post test designed to measure student achievement was administered to the experimental group at the end of both the first and third quarters and to the control group at the end of the third quarter (Taylor & Urquhart, 1974).

The experimental group outperformed the control group by a significant margin on the test given at the conclusion of their respective studies. When the control group scores were compared to the experimental group's test given after the third quarter, the experimental group still performed significantly better than the control group. The researchers concluded that a single combined course based on the principles of comprehensive musicianship was a viable approach to teaching music fundamentals (Taylor & Urquhart, 1974).

A pilot project was undertaken at San Diego State University with one-third of the entering freshman music majors. The remaining two-thirds of the freshman took the traditional fragmented courses. Periodic testing
was performed comparing the comprehensive musicianship group to the traditional group. At the beginning of the two-year course of study the comprehensive musicianship group generally ranked in the bottom third of all freshman. At the end of the first year the comprehensive musicianship group had reached the level of the other students and at the end of the second year each of the comprehensive musicianship students scored above the mean level of the rest of the students. After two years, the comprehensive musicianship students took the final exams from the traditional classes as well as their own and there were no failures (Ward-Steinman, 1987).

Descriptive research was conducted at a Contemporary Music Project workshop held at the Eastman School of Music in 1969. The research was designed to measure participants’ attitudes toward comprehensive musicianship. Preworkshop and postworkshop questionnaires asked participants’ attitudes about teaching musicianship to first and second year college students. Participants were primarily college music professors in schools where a majority of the students were preparing to be music teachers. As would seem likely at a workshop organized by the progenitors of comprehensive musicianship, the vast majority of the participants favored combining musicianship, history and analysis courses. A slim majority favored adding performance techniques to that combination of courses (Boyle, 1971).

A study conducted of choral directors in Wisconsin sought to evaluate how directors associated with the Wisconsin Comprehensive Musician through Performance (WCMP) approach differed from directors not associated with that project (Hoffer, 1995; Johnson, 1992). The main purpose of the WCMP was to educate teachers in methods of teaching more than just performance in high school ensembles (Hoffer, 1995). Although the researcher concluded that there was little difference in the approaches of choral directors associated with and not associated with WCMP, only four teachers were observed and the research methods have been described as weak and flawed (Hoffer, 1995).

Much of the assessment of comprehensive musicianship as a foundation for undergraduate music programs comes from authoritative opinions and anecdotal experiences. This large body of literature can be useful for forming an overall view of the success or failure of comprehensive musicianship based programs. Some authors have been openly critical of comprehensive musicianship based curricula (Silliman, 1980). Others, while supporting the basic concepts, have acknowledged problem areas and discussed reasons why many schools have returned to a traditional fragmented approach (Bland, 1977; Chrisman, 1974; Kostka & Riepe, 1991; Thomson, 1990; Ward-Steinman, 1987; Wennerstrom, 1989; Willoughby, 1982; Willoughby, 1990).

Factors which play a part in the effectiveness of a comprehensive musicianship based curriculum are class size (Chrisman, 1974), prior training of first year students (Ward-Steinman, 1987; Wennerstrom, 1989) and transfer students (Kostka & Riepe, 1991; Ward-Steinman, 1987), the commitment of students and faculty to the goals and objectives of the program (Ward-Steinman, 1987; Willoughby, 1990), and the balance of breadth and depth of the material covered (Bland, 1977; McGaughey, 1974; Willoughby, 1971).

Class sizes need to be small to facilitate the performance of student compositions and allow individual teacher-student interaction (Chrisman, 1974; Willoughby, 1971). Small class sizes, however, require more faculty members and increase the cost of the program to colleges and universities (Willoughby, 1990).

Entering students need to be functional in certain areas such as aural skills and sight singing. Students who are deficient in one or more of these areas often need to be channeled through remedial courses either before or simultaneously with comprehensive musicianship courses (Ward-Steinman, 1987; Wennerstrom, 1989).

Students transferring from non comprehensive musicianship programs frequently have difficulty adjusting, often losing a semester or two of study. Students transferring from programs with comprehensive musicianship-based curricula tend to do much better (Ward-Steinman, 1987). Another issue with respect to transferring students is course descriptions. The course descriptions of comprehensive musicianship and traditional courses can be difficult to reconcile for the purposes of granting transfer credit (Kostka & Riepe, 1991).

Comprehensive musicianship aims to develop independent thinking and student responsibility (Willoughby, 1971). Students, however, need self discipline to accomplish the independent projects. When self discipline is lacking and the student postpones work on a major project, the comprehensive musicianship curriculum is sometimes blamed (Ward-Steinman, 1987).
A curriculum based on comprehensive musicianship will not succeed without commitment, determination and belief on the part of those teaching it (Ward-Steinman, 1987). Teaching comprehensive musicianship is more difficult and time consuming than teaching traditional courses (Ward-Steinman, 1987). In addition, the additional time, effort and dedication required of the students are sometimes resented by faculty members not involved in the comprehensive musicianship program (Ward-Steinman, 1987). The integrated experiences required to meet the goals and objectives require close planning and cooperation by all those educating the students (Lowder, 1973). Often faculty members will concentrate on their own expertise at the expense of other facets of the integrated course (Willoughby, 1990).

The expansion of content inherent in comprehensive musicianship-based programs requires a balance between the scope of materials covered and the depth in which the materials are examined (Willoughby, 1971). Care must be taken not to cover material superficially. (Willoughby, 1990).

Comprehensive musicianship has been criticized for placing music theory at the core of undergraduate curricula to the detriment of other areas of study (Silliman, 1980). According to Silliman, areas other than theory such as applied music could make an equally valid claim to be the core of the music curriculum. Silliman sees elements of music not at the core of the curriculum being reduced to ancillary roles. While proponents of comprehensive musicianship admit that most of its applications have been in the areas of theory and general music classes they advocate the extension to other areas and consistently emphasize that the goal is to help students learn how each part of music fits the whole (Willoughby, 1971, 1990).

The basic principle of comprehensive musicianship is that students should learn to comprehend, compose, analyze and perform music of many different eras, cultures, traditions and styles. This principle has widely influenced undergraduate music programs and has become part of the conventional wisdom of music teaching (Thomson, 1990). Some programs, such as those of Northwestern University and San Diego State University, still closely follow the model conceived by the Contemporary Music Project and nurtured by the Institutes for Music in Contemporary Education. Programs implementing the principles of comprehensive musicianship to its fullest are not common, however (Willoughby, 1990). The long term influence even on some schools which participated in the original IMCE project has been minimal as the difficulties in enacting a comprehensive program are encountered (Bess, 1988).

Although research suggests that an integrated curriculum can meet the goals and objectives of comprehensive musicianship without sacrificing basic musical knowledge, particular factors must exist for this approach to be successful. Class size, prior training of both students and faculty, faculty commitment and student motivation are all factors in the success of a comprehensive musicianship curriculum. By emulating the successful programs and insuring the continued presence of the positive factors, it would seem that the goals and objectives of comprehensive musicianship can be met. In many cases, however, the characteristics of a school's music faculty, the department's faculty-student ratio and the quality of the students will render a full implementation of comprehensive musicianship impractical. In such cases, individual aspects of comprehensive musicianship can be considered for incorporation into a more traditional curriculum.

References

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