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# Rethinking Religion in Music Education

**Abstract:** A great deal of discussion of religious music in schools has been generated in our field. As we become increasingly sensitive to the diverse interests of the multiple stakeholders in public schools, issues of political correctness and pedagogical goals are raised. The author poses questions about religion and music education. To generate a different dialogue on this topic, four vignettes and alternate interpretations of the situations as well as possible unintended consequences are examined. The author describes alternative approaches to music-learning contexts and offers questions to wrestle with while keeping in mind the goal of music for all.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural competency, diversity, multiculturalism, religion

The topic of religion often appears in music education scholarship. The music literature that we program for performances and choose for listening activities sometimes includes spiritual themes or connects directly to particular religious practices. Scholarship in our field includes a great deal of writing on such choices, specifically about the ethical decisions we make as the demographics of public schools in the United States shift and holiday-centered performances become increasingly sensitive to the diverse stakeholders we aim to serve.<sup>1</sup> MENC: The National Association for Music Education aimed to assist in this discussion through the publication of guidelines on literature choices of a religious nature.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, I do not focus on the choral selections sung during concerts held in December or the appearance of “Joy to the World” in band methods texts. Instead, I want to raise a related, yet different, set of questions regarding religion and music-learning contexts. Rather than focusing on the secular or religious nature of the music literature studied in classes, I highlight the ways in which music teachers relate to students

who may not identify with the dominant Christian culture in the United States. I discuss the ways in which teachers may unintentionally place school and home values in direct conflict with one another, possibly leading students to disengage from school music programs. To generate conversation and debate, I present four vignettes. These scenarios were brought to my attention due to my experience working in schools housing diverse student populations. Students relayed the first two of these scenarios to me, a colleague brought the third scenario to my attention, and I witnessed the fourth. After I present these vignettes, I describe possible interpretations of the situations as well as unintended consequences that may result. I end by describing alternative approaches to music-learning contexts and questions that I hope my colleagues and I might wrestle with to improve music students’ experiences and outcomes. As Adam Adler asserts, “Music teaching and music teacher preparation have often been based on suppositions which are biased by adult perspectives . . . which have contributed to continuing inequities and injustices in the educational

*Here are some thought-provoking situations involving religion and music that you may encounter in your teaching.*

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experiences of our students.”<sup>3</sup> This article is but one response to my own former students’ outcries as they navigated the relatively homogeneous worlds of high school and college music programs in comparison to their middle school music classrooms. I hope to respect their desire to seek change by raising their questions here.

## Uneasy Situations

(A) Students and a professor sit around a conference table, discussing the changing demographics in U.S. public schools during a course in music education. As the students discuss the plainly visible diversities, such as gender and race, the professor guides the discussion toward less obvious differences. She confesses to the class that

*her private conversations with one of the class members, whom she names, helped her realize that “not everyone is Christian.”*

(B) Wanting to acknowledge the diversity in her elementary classroom, a teacher asks her only Jewish student, Josh, to step forward to the front of the room. Josh then complies with his teacher’s request to tell his classmates why his family does not sing the Christmas songs enjoyed by the other students. Prompted by the teacher, Josh describes the Hanukkah traditions celebrated in his home as all of the other elementary students quietly listen.

(C) A bus of undergraduate choral musicians pulls away from the hotel. This group of music majors and nonmajors enrolled in a public university

*choral ensemble course spent the past day touring a small city located just a few hours away from their college, followed by a rehearsal and performance in a historical building. Before heading directly back to campus, the ethnically, racially, and socioeconomically diverse group of singers make a scheduled stop at a church in which their choral directors offered a performance by the undergraduates as part of the Sunday morning service.*

(D) A high school band director sends the fall marching band competition schedule to all students’ homes. Immediately, the Jewish students realize that their first competition will take place on Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year and a High Holy Day. The students relay the conflict to the director. Discussing the situation later with colleagues, this high school band

director relays the situation and his response: "Thanks for letting me know you have a holiday, but we need to have a competition."

Scenarios A and B depict situations in which a teacher singled out a student as a representative of a particular ethnic group. In both situations, the teachers seemed to single out these individuals without any malicious intent. However, even our best intentions sometimes lead to unintended consequences. Although one scenario describes an elementary school classroom, while a university seminar serves as the learning context in the other vignette, both students said that they experienced the very real sense that they were an "Other" in a group of "Same." In the university course, the professor made explicit that everyone except the student (who had spoken with her in confidence) was alike in his or her Christian faith. Reflecting on his elementary school experience as a university student, Josh (the student in the second scenario) described the situation as a moment in which he stood in front of his peers while coerced to describe in what ways he was different from all of them.

Although the teachers in these situations aimed to celebrate religious diversity, they chose to do so by pointing out the single Other in their classroom community. In each situation, one member of the class served the teacher as a token, or representative, for a group of people different from the dominant Christian culture in the United States. By *tokenizing* (singling out) individuals, the teachers placed a responsibility of representation on these students. These students may not have conformed to the dominant religious culture in the classroom, but they may not have felt comfortable representing everyone who identified with their religious affiliation either. Moreover, these individuals might not have felt comfortable with their classmates' knowing that they were different once this difference was pointed out, as their teachers did.

Scenarios C and D depict not individual students but, rather, the contexts of time and place that may lead to internal

conflicts for populations of students in an ensemble. In scenario C, the university choral directors assumed that a church service would be a familiar and comfortable setting for all students. Students, existing in a submissive role (earning grades for their participation during ensemble performances), followed directions but did not voice their discomfort. Primarily composed of Christian students, the ensemble also included Muslim, Jewish, atheist, Hindu, and agnostic students. Some of these belief systems include the tenet precluding individuals from assisting in religious services outside of their own faith. However, many of these students may not have spoken up for fear of letting down their peers, making themselves known as different, or negative grade-related consequences. Additionally, their subsequent choices to participate in university music ensembles might have been affected by this experience. According to Nieto, when students "are asked to give up their identities . . . students may be quite correct in rejecting the trade."<sup>4</sup>

In scenario D, the high school band director put the performance goals of the program above the needs of the students. Although a significant percentage of the band were Jewish, the director did not consider their family needs and desires during their observance. Similar to the university choral ensemble example, these high school band members may have been placed in an uncomfortable position; they could observe the tenets of their religion and be with their families, or they could ensure one less hole in the formation on the field through their presence at the competition. If they did not choose to make concessions as to their families and belief systems, they would contribute to a lower score and rating for their peers and band director.

## Alternative Approaches

Rather than approaching our ensembles and classes through attempts at political correctness or appeasing everyone (as some of my colleagues have interpreted questions regarding diversity), we might

take a moment to question whose needs we should consider and our own comfort levels with belief systems different from our own. Even as I write this, I note the fact that my wording may imply that all music educators compose one group of "us." I know, however, that my own background differs from that of many of my close friends and colleagues in our profession. Some of my colleagues recently balanced their observance of Ramadan with their arts education careers, while others celebrated the Jewish holidays at the beginning of the school year. Other colleagues focused on literature choices for future Christmas concerts, while still others did not feel personally affected by any of these religious days.

Rather than considering religion in terms of religious celebrations or calendar dates, we might reflect on the contexts in which we teach and learn. Nieto reminds educators that students learn when their identities are respected and the contexts in which they are placed are caring.<sup>5</sup> Are we placing our students in a setting that reflects images and symbols that conflict with their beliefs? Are we asking our students to learn about music or to support faith-based events through musical performance? Do our musical performances show our students how to act in particular places or spaces according to a particular set of religious or cultural tenets, or are we creating a dialogue about the cultural underpinnings of the musical literature? Do we tokenize students, pointing them out as examples of something different from their classmates, or might we create an open dialogue between a teacher and student? Are we placing students in uncomfortable situations or doing our part to make our classrooms safe spaces for all? How does it feel to be the Other? Do we think of our desire for recognition as educators or our students' desires to freely participate in all musical learning activities? Alan Peshkin claims that all school decisions, pedagogical and political, are moral in nature. As such, educators' important questions remain: "Who are the beneficiaries of these decisions? Whose good do they ignore or slight or undermine? And do they take account of

the short-, middle-, and long-term needs and aspirations of students?”<sup>6</sup>

Our marching band competition record should reflect the needs of the students we aim to reach. Our desire to check off a “multicultural” box on the observation form or state confidently that we “covered” diversity should not direct our pedagogical decisions. The comfort of the teacher should not serve as the basis for curricular decisions, whether programmatic or related to classroom social interactions. Although some of us might not have a great deal of knowledge about particular religious beliefs or the ways in which those beliefs affect student’s participation in musical activities, we should be careful about avoiding particular students or discussions because of our own insecurities. Geneva Gay asserts,

Students feel a need to have a personal connection with teachers. This happens when teachers acknowledge their presence, honor their intellect, respect them as human beings, and make them feel like they are important. In other words, they empower students by legitimizing their “voice” and visibility.<sup>7</sup>

The teachers in the first two vignettes may have tried to empower students by making their differences known. However, they enacted this goal through tokenizing, or pointing out, the sole Other—their students. Empowerment does not need to occur through public acknowledgement. Students may feel empowered through the personal and confidential conversations they have with mentors. These conversations do not need to be made public for the student to feel a connection, as Gay posits, with music educators in their lives.

The high school band director mentioned above may not know enough about Judaism to understand why his students cannot march in competition on Rosh Hashana, but he has the opportunity to talk individually with his students and ask about their family beliefs and practices. Additionally, secondary band

teachers enjoy a great deal of autonomy when choosing marching band competitions outside of the district football and state festival schedules. Forfeiting the opportunity to participate in one less competition to ensure the participation of all students will not mean less success for the group. In fact, participation of every member in the ensemble might mean that the students feel a greater sense of ownership in the group, leading to stronger performances. The university professor may have considered the confidentiality of his graduate student, perhaps asking her if she might feel comfortable discussing invisible differences with the group rather than tokenizing her as an example of someone different from the rest of her colleagues and classmates. The elementary music teacher knew that differences exist between her students’ winter celebrations, but perhaps she might have privately contacted a local community member to ask or contacted the parents rather than putting a young student on the spot. The university choral director could have looked for a community park or other public space for an outdoor concert, rather than assuming all of his students would feel comfortable performing in a church service. All of us can begin to examine our own assumptions regarding whom we think we serve and to what end we make our musical and educational decisions.

Our classrooms are communities in which musical learning occurs. Some classrooms, like larger communities, are more effective in achieving their goals than others. Sonia Nieto claims that three primary issues exist regarding culture and learning: first, students’ cultural identities may positively affect learning.<sup>8</sup> In other words, our pedagogical practices and music program policies should avoid conflict between home and school values. Religious observance should not come into direct conflict with success as musical learners. All music educators should make themselves aware of the cultural diversity of the school community in which they work. Our nation’s size and diversity make understandings of diversity a localized, evolving task. Second,

teachers promote student learning by acting as a cultural accommodator. While affirming the cultural resources students bring to the classroom, teachers must also help students navigate the school structure. In a school music context (and specifically regarding religious diversity), this may mean providing students with background knowledge about the religious-based texts sung or the cultural context of Christian holidays around which historical pieces of music literature were written. Last, Nieto reminds us that without a “wholesale transformation of schools,” addition of a few “multicultural” pieces of music or representations of various religious cultures will not lead to increased student learning. This article is but one response to Nieto’s assertion.

## Questions and Thoughts

Music educators bemoan the fact that a small percentage of secondary school students continue enrollment in school music programs. We celebrate the music educators who boast 10 percent school enrollment in their music ensembles. At the university level, ensembles and music education programs rarely represent the ethnic and religious diversity present on campuses. Graduate programs in music teacher education do not appear to represent the diverse perspectives and cultures present in American society. These facts beg the question, Who are the students we do not serve? Subsequently, why do we not serve them? Responding that the students do not choose to enroll, eliminating our sense of responsibility, seems too convenient.

Perhaps we do not directly tell students that they are not welcome, but our actions might convey that very message. What did the Jewish elementary student remember about that day? Did he learn that his teacher knew him or respected him by understanding his family background or that he was different from everyone else in his class? Many among us became music educators on the margins of dominant society. Be it ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status, our profession values particular ways of being,

although some of our lived experiences do not mirror those of the majority. I believe that it is important for us all to ask how many of our students or colleagues would willingly persist as musicians, teachers, or students knowing or feeling that no one else in that particular place was like us. How many would seek support from a mentor who made clear that he or she did not understand us? Would our students possess the inner strength to pursue musical paths if the structures in which performances took place made them choose between their families and their music? These are not easy questions with simple answers.

Our increasingly diverse society creates levels of complexity in our daily work as music educators. Such complexity challenges our understandings about ourselves and our world. Christopher Small reminds us that “although we cannot escape the condition which our culture imposes upon us we do not need to remain bewitched by it; the fish can learn to be aware of the water in which he swims.”<sup>9</sup> I suggest that we continue to serve those already included in music education, but pause to consider those we may unintentionally exclude. Perhaps, as Small states, we might become more aware of the dominant Christian culture in the United States and the subsequent religious nature of music education. By doing so, we might rethink the structures of school music programs and pedagogical practices, creating opportunities for a stronger and more inclusive profession.

## NOTES

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2. See <http://www.menc.org/about/view/sacred-music-in-schools>.
3. A. Adler, “A Case Study of Boys’ Experiences of Singing in School” (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2002).

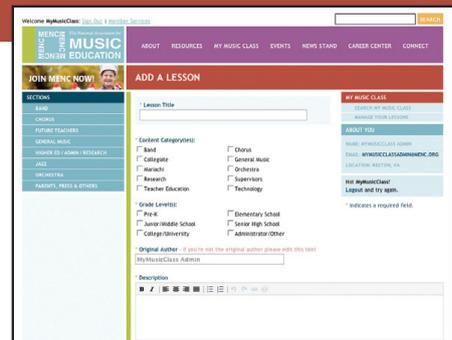
4. Sonia Nieto, *The Light in Their Eyes: Creating Multicultural Learning Communities* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999), 13.
5. Nieto, *The Light in Their Eyes*.
6. Alan Peshkin, *Permissible Advantage? The Moral Consequences of Elite Schooling* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001), 5.
7. Geneva Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000), 49.
8. Nieto, *The Light in Their Eyes*.
9. Christopher Small, *Music, Society, Education* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 1996), 8.

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