

Music Competition

Developing a Healthy Paradigm for Performers and Teachers

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Two dichotomous forces continually shape artistic output in our society: individual freedom of artistic expression and the competitive nature of free enterprise. This conflict manifests itself in every arts arena. Competitive structures have developed in the multiple realms of music education, particularly in the second half of the 20th century. Should music educators embrace these structures or dismantle them? And given our societal and human nature, can music educators dismantle these competitive structures effectively if we decide to do so? Rodney Miller (1993) asserts the following:

For art to be art it must be a reflection of our human condition. This is because art is ultimately a subjective communication of emotion, usually emotion affected by or in response to the conditions in which the artist and the subject find themselves. Paradoxically, art very often becomes a casualty of the very social conditions it tries to reflect. One of the most insidious examples of this in our contemporary society is the obsession for competing that has permeated all venues of our society, including our artistic environment. (p. 140)

Are competitive structures in music education paradoxical, or is it possible to maintain artistic and educational integrity within these competitive structures? Should we pursue ways to develop healthy approaches to competition in the arts, or should we focus our energies on dismantling all competitive structures within music education?

Competition: Past and Present

Although much has been written disparaging all forms of music competition (Austin, 1990; Hurley, 1996; Kohn, 1986), it is a historical fact that musicians seek competition. In 1703, at the age of 19, George Frideric Handel found himself in a duel with Johann Mattheson because Handel asserted that his clavecin (i.e., harpsichord) playing was better. During the performance of a Mattheson opera, Handel insisted that he should play the clavecin. A duel ensued. Fortunately, Mattheson's sword struck a large button on young Handel's suit, saving Handel's life (Cline, 1985, p. 201). Although this story is an extreme example, there are many more anecdotes of musicians defending their perceived musical superiority. The idea that artists are somehow beyond the psychological urge to compete is probably unfounded.

Historically, organized competition in the United States has fairly recent roots. During the

19th century, immigrants in the United States revived the *Eisteddfod*¹ and established the Anton Rubinstein International Competition (c.1890). Prize money for the winning pianist and composer in the Rubinstein competition was provided by income from Rubinstein's 1886 investment of the proceeds of a series of recitals (Cline, 1985, p. 203). Until the mid-20th century, organized performance competition among college musicians was scarce.

In the two decades during and immediately after World War II, the personal and professional expectation and goals of most young musicians appeared to be considerably different. Between the years of 1946 and 1956, it seemed entirely likely that a student at almost any one of the country's top conservatories had never been exposed to a competition. (Cline, 1985, p. 1)

In the second half of the 20th century, a dramatic increase in performance competitions ensued. Vocal, instrumental, jazz, and composition competitions have developed through the auspices and with the blessings of universities.

In publications where once one read primarily of the National Federated Music Clubs, Naumberg, and Leventritt competitions, one began to see reports of new competitions sprouting up around the country. By the late 1970's, the list of competitions in the *Musical America International Directory of the Performing Arts* was arrestingly extensive. Now the Dean's Office at the Juilliard School in New York receives so many announcements of competitions that it sends out, regularly, three single-spaced pages of announcements to its faculty. At Indiana University and other music schools, the bulletin boards and office files are filled with competition flyers and announcements. Within those schools there are several competitions per year. (Cline, 1985, p. 3)

Increased interest of the media and the general public in music festivals and competitions is connected with social attitudes about competitive events.

These highly publicized events are being widely imitated at various levels. The artist/teachers who judge and prepare students for them sit on national panels that influence the future of music in this country. Performers use competition successes as stepping stones to concert careers and as credentials for securing positions as teachers and artists-in-residence in the country's schools and communities. (Cline, 1985, p. 5)

This cycle propagates an increased acceptance of competition in the musical fields of higher education.

Performance is neither the first nor the only competitive activity in college and university

¹ An *Eisteddfod* (literally, "a sitting") is a competitive cultural festival or celebration of the performing arts.

music departments. Competition for jobs, tenure, scholarships, and students has consumed significant energy among college and university faculty. According to Rodney Miller (1993),

the [music] department identifies the institutions and music programs with which it is in direct competition—programs that its prospective recruits are most likely to be interested in, apply to, audition for, and/or attend instead. Once these programs are identified, evaluation of them, using the same process employed for self-evaluation, is imperative. (p. 177)

Nature or Nurture?

There are basically two theories upon which psychologists base their discussions on competitive behavior. The focus has been on whether *nature* (genetic influences) or *nurture* (environmental influences) has more influence on human behavior. Is our tendency to compete part of our survival nature, or is it really a survival nurture that is the catalyst for competitive artistic activities?

In light of studies of competitive behavior and attitudes in children and adults, most modern psychologists agree that “both innate genetic material (nature) and learned experience (nurture) are crucial components of human development” (Ruben, 1981, p. 17). The degree to which we inherit or learn our competitive urges is where psychologists disagree. Most psychologists subscribe to a *sociobiological* platform. The sociobiological approach to the origins of human competitiveness has the advantage of fusing the most positive aspects of both the nature and nurture theories. This view accounts for what we as humans start out with and recognizes how far we have yet to go if we are to move beyond a “survival of the fittest” paradigm to a more complex and humane structure of social interaction.

While most theorists have gravitated toward a sociobiological approach, there are those who take a strong stand, backed by some data, that competitive behaviors are not natural urges but are learned social constructs or *memes*. A leader of the “anti-competition” approach is Alfie Kohn. He proposes that given the choice,

[m]ost of us would avoid competitive situations. We act competitively simply because we have been taught to, everyone around us does so, it has never occurred to us not to do so, and because success in our society seems to demand that we do so. Like an addiction, competition is a vicious cycle only contributing to the need to compete again rather than contributing to our self-esteem and healthy human development. Acknowledgement of these negative outcomes would be painful and force us to make changes in our lives, so instead we rationalize that competition is part of human nature, is more productive, or builds character. (Kohn, 1986, p. 15)

There is some research that supports Kohn’s theory. For example, research by David and Roger Johnson (1981) revealed that “competition inhibits rather than enhances performance by the

individual” (as cited in Miller, 1993, p. 148).

Some might believe that we develop our competitive urges as a result of living in a capitalistic American society. However, Ruben (1981) asserts that this idea does not hold up to the research findings of sociologists and anthropologists who study other cultures.

Although some aspects—perhaps some types—of competition are unique to our contemporary culture, for the most part competitive strivings are shared by all human societies from the beginning of history. In the most primitive societies, competition within and between tribes for food and shelter is a frequent factor of social interaction—and these are societies in which capitalism has not even been imaged, much less implemented. (p. 15)

If we as music educators accept the sociobiological approach, which recognizes both nature and nurture as influences on behavior, and acknowledge that competitive structures have existed in most known societies, then we need to take these ideas into account as we develop methods that contribute to healthy competitive events, attitudes, and perhaps even alternatives to competition. We should then pass these ideas on through music teacher preparation programs.

Healthy Competition

If music educators involve themselves in formulating a model for healthy competition, they may come to agree with Ruben (1981) that competition is probably an integral part of human ego development and that many children who fail to learn to compete in positive ways may develop serious emotional problems later on. It is the attitude of the participant that will determine personal success ... win or lose. According to Ruben,

for the unfortunate person who cannot compete well, competition becomes a terrible hurdle, an obstacle which elicits nothing but unhealthy, self-destructive urges and desires. The successful competitor can often feel like a winner even when he loses, while the person who is accustomed to feeling like a loser will feel that way even when he wins. (p. x)

Qualifying the meaning of success is a challenge music educators must address if they are to help their students develop healthy attitudes toward competition, whatever the outcome of the event itself.

One can divide the ways that individuals compete into three basic approaches: (1) they “bully” their way to success (aggressive), (2) they assess their adversaries and patiently create strategies (indirect), or (3) they set personal goals and devise strategies for reaching those goals with the hope of success when competition comes. Coleman (1982) refers to these three approaches as hostile, strategic, and conciliatory (pp. 272–3).

The classic definition of competition requires that two or more persons are striving for a

reward. Based on this definition of competition, Rich and DeVitis (1992) believe that the view of competing with oneself is

misleading since someone can seek to perform well by attempting to attain a standard independently of others, whether self-created or created by an external authority. This is a variation once again of the misnomer “competing with oneself,” as the individual is seeking privately to attain something or to improve oneself. Two or more persons are not striving for R[eward]. (p. 19)

In this view, the competitor who is pitted against himself or herself is no longer competing in the traditional sense of the word. Ruben (1981), on the other hand, goes against this traditional definition by stating that people can compete with themselves in all the ways described above: “Like people who compete primarily with others, those who compete mainly with themselves may do so, without realizing it, in an indirect or direct manner, in an aggressive or a nonaggressive way” (p. 45).

Perhaps the first step in developing a healthy paradigm in artistically competitive situations is to compete from within. Ruben (1981) defines this paradigm as *autocomping*. According to Ruben, autocomping is “a pattern of competition which substitutes an internal for an external standard of appraisal, and in which the competitor is actually pitted against himself or herself.” Autocomping can serve a number of purposes. Three stand out:

1. It may be used as a way of enhancing self-esteem.
2. It may be used as a way of avoiding direct interpersonal competition.
3. It may be used as practice or training, prior to interpersonal competition. (p. 47)

It is interesting to note that many children who gravitate toward initially noncompetitive activities (like music) might do so as a response to lack of athletic ability. Many nonathletic children develop interests which are tangential to, rather than in direct competition with, those of their peer group. An activity in which excellence is not measured by reference to how someone else is doing often attracts these students. In other words, they take up autocomping (Ruben, 1981, p. 47).

Given this view concerning why some students gravitate toward activities like music, it is imperative that music educators carefully groom healthy and appropriate attitudes in music students so that they can effectively handle the competitive situations in which they may be placed. Perhaps autocomping is the answer.

Autocomping emphasizes effort and task rather than ability and ego. Hurley (1996) highlights the damage that can be inflicted on students when the focus is on extrinsic reward and ego rather than the musical process: “The emphasis on effort is important because ability is viewed as a capacity for learning, and without adequate ability to reach a competitive reward, the student

feels undervalued” (p. 77). Instructional goals centered on extrinsic ego-tasks, like winning a band competition, tend to create counterproductive dynamics within individuals and music ensembles.

Classroom situations that use extrinsic motivators may promote involvement with a task through ego. Ego-task goals tend to promote student attributions of learning to ability. Because ability is viewed as a capacity for learning, it is considered by the student to be an internal and unalterable quality. Failure-threatened students, who view success as primarily related to ability, may develop conditions of task avoidance because of the perception that they have little personal control over future performance levels. (Hurley, 1996, p. 77)

Research supports the notion that performance is enhanced when the focus is on task and individual or group goals, rather than when an individual can attain his or her goal only if other participants cannot. According to Hurley (1996), “In an individualistic situation there is no correlation among the goal attainments of the participants. Whether an individual accomplishes his or her goal has no influence on whether other individuals achieve their goals” (p. 77).

Music ensemble performance can be classified as a “cooperative social situation in which the goals of the separate individuals are so linked together that there is a positive correlation among their goal attainments” (Johnson, Johnson, & Scott, 1981, p. 48). Even in performance competition, if the attainment of individual and group goals defines success, then winning or losing the event is quite irrelevant. Therefore, autocomping can become a most constructive and successful approach toward promoting quality ensemble performance.

Another unhealthy attitude that music educators must caution against is the “sore loser.” Whatever form of behavior is favored by the sore loser, a consistent feature of his or her personality is the inability to accept defeat as the result of performance (Ruben, 1981, p. 185). For the musician, conquering this unhealthy attitude is of paramount importance. Until the musician can critically evaluate his or her own performance, musical progress may not proceed.

Acknowledging failure is often a necessary prelude to reassessing strengths and weaknesses. Even if competition is not part of the equation, *competence* is. A musician who cannot continually assess his or her strengths and weaknesses is doomed to mediocrity. It is not the competitive event that creates this negative paradigm, it is the participant. Herein lies the real value for the musician who possesses a healthy competitive paradigm—the development of individual student perspective:

1. an understanding of just how much practice is required to come forth with an exceptional performance
2. when he/she loses (in competitive terms), how to prepare for a better performance next time
3. when he/she wins, how to handle that win with appropriate humility and generosity to

others

4. in any case, he/she can find value in the feedback from the judges (Cline, 1985, p. 10)

The paradigms of the healthy competitor are inextricably related to the paradigms of competent musicianship. In any endeavor, including sports, the healthy competitor focuses his or her attention on process, continually testing and improving goal oriented competencies (Ruben, 1981, p. 10). The competent musician realizes that performance, whether in the solo recital hall or competitive festival, is as much a process as a goal.

Music educators in higher education, and others who teach teachers, should instill the autocomp paradigm through methods and philosophy classes. Music educators must come to terms with the reasons for, and approaches to, participating in musical and artistic competition. There are many reasons for participating in a music competition, both positive and negative. The most positive, and hopefully pervasive, reason for involving oneself in a music competition is the desire to improve competence. "The pleasure associated with the attainment of competence, and the drive that is thereby engendered, lead directly to competition" (Walker, 1980, p. 17). An appropriate competition, approached in a healthy paradigm, can be a useful tool for increasing competence. One of the founders of school music contests, Frank A. Beach, suggested that the purpose of contests was "not to win a prize but to pace one another on the road to excellence" (as cited in Austin, 1990, p. 21). Beach's goal was to use competition as a tool for educational assessment. It may not be the act of competing that corrupts this goal, but our attitudes toward process and outcome. The most destructive force in music competition can be the teacher:

We frequently hear about the role teachers can play in orientating a student toward "healthy" competition. Unfortunately, research indicates that competition may corrupt teachers to a greater degree than their students. Competition-oriented teachers tend to view students in a dichotomous fashion (low ability or high ability) and often gear their efforts toward validating their own egos rather than toward accomplishing educational goals. They invest a majority of instructional time in high-ability students who, from the teacher's perspective, represent the ticket to competitive success. Because these teachers focus on maintaining a performance image rather than on employing specific instructional strategies to help students improve, low achievers find themselves trapped in a catch-22 situation—neither talented enough to help the teacher's cause nor equipped with the tools for progress. (Austin, 1990, p. 21)

Perhaps music educators and those who prepare future music educators should examine their own motivations and process. The pursuit of a strong curriculum vitae may come at the cost of appropriate musical goals for students of varying abilities, especially if the educator chooses to function in an unhealthy competitive paradigm. Or, even worse, if we do not make it our responsibility to discuss and develop healthy competitive models in future musicians and music

teachers, we miss the opportunity to instill a sound and realistic philosophy toward competition. It is all too easy to condemn artistic competition, excluding appropriate tools for dealing with its social and psychological reality.

Some educators suggest that competition undermines the long-range goals of music education. If competition is indeed the culprit, music educators in teacher education programs should take an aggressive stance in addressing competition, and delineate viable alternative activities to competitive ones. (Hurst, 1994, p. 130)

Ability, demographic, and learning-style differences underscore the view that no single approach to motivation is adequate. Teachers should “offer a variety of classroom practices that include competitive, individualistic, and cooperative arrangements” (Rich & DeVitis, 1992, p. 193). It is the responsibility of music educators to instill a healthy competitive paradigm as a way of promoting self evaluation and competence for performers and future music educators. It is naive, hypocritical, and probably unhealthy to guide our students away from all forms of artistic competition. The development of teaching strategies based on individual and cooperative goal setting, autocomping, and healthy competitive attitudes may result in constructive dialogue that prepares music teachers for contemporary challenges.

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