

# A DYSFUNCTIONAL CULTURE

## COMPETITION IN MUSIC

*Rodney E. Miller shows how eliminating competition among music faculty and in secondary music education encourages cooperation and creativity.*

BY RODNEY E. MILLER

**F**or art to be art, it must be a reflection of our human condition. This is because art is ultimately a subjective sharing 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 to 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.

Life for many of us in America has now evolved into a series of challenges to compete. We are bombarded with this doctrine at work, at school, and, worst of all, at home. It has become perhaps the only common thread in the diverse patchwork culture of American life. We hear it in our commercials (Pepsi vs. Coke in a taste test), in our politics (Republicans vs. Democrats), and in our recreation (Cowboys vs. Redskins). So saturated is our society with this spirit of competition that we allow its effects to go unchecked because we simply don't

recognize its existence, or, worse yet, we fail to understand how it decays the very essence of art and creativity. Yet, as psychologist Elliot Aronson maintains, the prevailing spirit of competition is a dysfunction of epidemic proportions.<sup>1</sup>

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James Austin wrote very well and succinctly about the dysfunctional nature of competition in his *MEJ* article three years ago.<sup>2</sup> He argued quite correctly that we as a culture harbor many myths about the positive nature of competition. If competition does not enhance performance, if it does not build character, and if it is not a part of human nature, then how do we counter its effects and, more important, find alternative ways of

teaching our children both as musicians and as citizens of the future? The heartening news is that many people have started to recognize the importance of alternative, noncompetitive teaching methods and are beginning to make a difference. We need only to look around for concrete examples to follow.

### Some Examples

One example is Fred Rogers. Through his television show, "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," which reaches millions of children each day, Rogers instills the ideals of self-esteem, sharing and caring, and, most important, the worth that all of us have to both ourselves and those around us. Rogers has taken the parable of the good Samaritan and turned it into the guiding light of his show, making everyone who watches a neighbor. Although the concept is quite simple, the implications are so complex that only a child can really understand them—everyone that we touch and that touches us is connected, and what we say and do to one another is the greatest gift and responsibility we have.

Closest to home for music educators is the furor that has been caused by the innovative extracurricular policy of Plainfield Community Middle School in Plainfield, Indiana. The policy states that any child may partici-

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pate in any and all extracurricular activities that he or she desires. This means that anyone who wishes can be a cheerleader, serve on the student council, play in the band, or join the football team. Although critics might conjure up images of athletic teams and musical groups in a state of laughable chaos, the principal, Jerry Goldsberry, testifies quite confidently that quality is being maintained. The best football players still play the greatest amount of time, although everyone who has worked hard gets in for a few plays. The band has developed a mentor program, where the best students help teach the newcomers.

In the process, the school has been able to do away with superimposed social castes that develop around such activities as cheerleading, which often produces a social caste elite based on unimportant skills. The emphasis is on teamwork, cooperation, and connecting with the group because, as Principal Goldsberry says, "These are eleven-, twelve-, and thirteen-year-olds who are undergoing massive physical and emotional changes, creating anxiety and stress."<sup>3</sup> Adolescents who fail to make the cut in one activity often are too defeated to try another. The answer for Plainfield Middle School was to emphasize maximum participation in order to have students feel connected to the school, rather than concentrating on an outstanding few students.

## Changes for the Future

Mr. Rogers and Plainfield Middle School offer examples of real-world solutions to the obsession we have for finding out who is the best and ostracizing who is the worst. How do we apply such principles to our own situations in secondary and college music? The first thing we can do is take a hard look at what we do in our everyday routines and teaching that fosters unnecessary competition.

Take high school music ensembles, for example. Is it really necessary to have everyone audition to be first chair, second chair, and so on? Does it really matter that the best clarinet player sit in the first chair rather than the third when both clarinetists are playing the same music? Or is it essen-



Are auditions for first chair and second chair necessary in school ensembles?

tial that the three tenor saxophonists, who are playing the same part, be certified as the best, middle, and worst player? Why not move students around so that they can experience playing all different parts on their instruments? It takes a courageous band director to do this, but if done, the average and less-gifted players might feel a greater sense of belonging to the group and might rise to the occasion.

Choral directors are usually a bit more egalitarian in their approach, but could improve as well. Using section leaders and auditioning a small, elite madrigal or show choir ensemble often smacks of the same social casting that cheerleading and twirling do—the prettiest and brightest are placed in the upper echelon. The counter-argument is, of course, that this is the only way to identify the students with the best voices in order to make up the best ensembles. True enough, but the emphasis of a musical organization should be on the students and the experience they carry away from the organization, not on training an elite group to enhance the reputation of the director or the school.

If only a few chosen ones experience any select aspect of the program, it is elitism and isn't very smart. The influence of puberty on the adolescent voice isn't overcome till the late teens. The young wavering bass with little

breath in high school just might turn out to be the rich, strong baritone in college with a professional future on the horizon, if he isn't too discouraged from his high school experience.

Music contests have been a part of secondary education almost from the beginning. They have been controversial for almost as long. One thing that can be said for them is that they were instrumental in helping music gain wide acceptance as a legitimate part of the public school curriculum. Many directors feel, however, that the ten to twenty minutes of time a judge has with an organization is hardly ample time to make a competent commentary on the instructional and musical caliber of a specific program, although the merit of the program is reflected in the scores received. This concern was reflected by national music education leaders at the Yale Seminar in June 1963. It was the feeling of those attending that students were missing out on the musical facets of their ensemble experience because of the competitive nature of musical contests.<sup>4</sup>

Little has changed in the thirty years since the Yale Seminar. Even though the idea is to compete against a "standard" rather than with each other, that standard remains undefined and in its place is usually found a strategy whereby a certain number of ensembles—no matter how good or

how bad—receive I's (enough to spread around the good feelings without making it look too easy), and anyone who gets less than a III has no business being there. These ratings create a tangible pecking order that separates the best from the rest. More to the point, directors from all of these schools can expect the results to be reflected in job security. Those who consistently receive I's are assured a continuous relationship with the school. Those who have had more than one year of bad ratings start looking for another job.

### Ratings and Festivals

All contests, be they competitive or not, should be done without rating systems at all. Very few directors, let alone students, are able to get past the number they receive and objectively analyze the comments of the adjudicators. The reaction a director has to a critical comment about phrasing is different when accompanied by a I rather than a III. Donald Ivey, in one MENC publication, established more colorful labels for the traditional rating system:

I—Wonderful job, glowing success.

II—Not so hot, maybe a mistake to try.

III—Ugh! Total failure; give up.

IV—Suicide!

V—Never heard of it.<sup>5</sup>

Some critics will argue that we have so watered down many situations that we are plagued with a lack of standards. Others will say that our greatest problem is that we have lost our zeal for excellence and are willing to settle for less than our best. Too many teachers want credit for just showing up—never mind the quality of performance or workmanship. The paradox is that excellence seems to have diminished as we have increased the number of competitive situations in our educational system. Competition is inevitable, but it should be used only when necessary and not as a means unto itself.

One's view of the competition may very well depend on whether one looks at music as an educational discipline crucial to the core curriculum or as an activity area open only to the best and the brightest. If it is an educational

issue, then the object should be to find ways to develop music appreciation and music-making skills in as many of our students as possible. If the goal is merely to identify and reward a select few, as in athletics, then that is easily accomplished, no matter how poor the training might be. Just at a time when our colleagues in physical education are revising their course content and teaching methods because of compelling research, we in music education seem to be clinging to out-of-date beliefs in the mythical powers of competing to enhance performance. Is it any wonder that former U. S. Secretary of Education William Bennet, during his keynote address at the 1986 convention of the National Association of Schools of Music, declared music to be a vital component of the core curriculum, yet went on to defend and praise the use of "no pass, no play" policies for music classes?



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Another reason that competition is the antithesis of productivity is its tendency to promote conformity. In order for competition to work, people must be measured by the same standard. The same rules apply to everyone, and the game must be played the same way each time. Creativity and individualism are the opposite of competition because the very nature of creativity is to originate something new that defies standardization. One cannot compare Mozart and Wagner (at least in terms

of "better or worse") any more than corn and apples. To be creative is to be uniquely individualistic, idiosyncratic, and daring. As Will Crutchfield asserts, piano competitions result in interpretations that are too similar, with little or no creative risk-taking.<sup>6</sup>

To illustrate, here's another example. In recent years, Little League has modified its organized baseball program after it was recognized that placing youngsters in competitive situations that were beyond their developing physical skills was a negative experience both psychologically and physically. There are now two beginning levels of play: one in which the ball is hit from a stand, and one in which an adult throws the ball underhanded to the batter. In both cases, balls are not counted, only swings and misses. This allows the children to play the game with the skills they have developed at that level (hitting, running, catching, and fielding), forget about the ones they do not have (the ability to control pitches for a strike zone and the ability to calculate the route of a pitch for a ball or strike), and learn the rules of the game as they play. All players must play all positions, and a team is allowed only three runs in an inning. Is it competition? Yes, but it is manageable competition that the children can handle, competition that is not out of line with their abilities, either physical or psychological. Is it watered down? Perhaps, but for reasons that are justified in the long run. Is it any coincidence that since these measures have been implemented the United States has begun to win the Little League World Series again for the first time in many years?

Students in junior and senior high school music programs are in much the same situation. Their skill levels are not so advanced that the levels of competition to which they are subjected are always justified. In attempting to meet those competition levels, many basics are ignored or left behind. The rating system we use at contests, for example, is a process whereby a shortage is deliberately and artificially manufactured. By stipulating that only "the best" can attain the highest rating, we manufacture a situation where everyone is competing against each

other for those few choice scores instead of taking each student and dealing in an individual way with that student's technique, phrasing, intonation, and interpretation.

## Assessment

Last year marked the bicentennial of the first instance of grades being assigned to student papers—the auspicious event occurred at England's Cambridge University.<sup>7</sup> In honor of that momentous but misguided occasion, I would like to suggest that assigning grades to student work in subjective/aesthetic areas such as art and music be abolished. Yet, I fear that dismantling such a cornerstone of educational culture would be too traumatic. Grades are simply too embedded into our psyche and our views of learning and motivation to let loose. As John Holt wrote:

We destroy the ... love of learning in children, which is so strong when they are small, by encouraging and compelling them to work for petty and contemptible rewards—gold stars, or papers marked 100 and tacked to the wall, or As on report cards, or honor rolls, or dean's lists, or Phi Beta Kappa keys—in short, for the ignoble satisfaction of feeling they are better than someone else.<sup>8</sup>

Another reason that grades do not work effectively in evaluating the aesthetic work of students is that all grades are not created equal. What may be the standard for an A at one high school may not be an A at another program, and it may not be for the same subject material. The ultimate irony is that at a time when even the results of national standardized tests such as the SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test) or GRE (Graduate Record Exam) are being called into question, we continue to take grades from two or more different schools at face value.

Higher education is not immune to the effects of competition, either. Let us concede for the moment that grades are necessary for the purpose of documentation. Given that, I propose that applied music in the college curriculum be pass-fail rather than graded. Grades should be an objective rep-

resentation of class participation and testing results over the same exact material. It is exceptionally difficult, if not impossible, to create such an objective evaluation system for applied instruction without destroying the very elements that make it the unique form of instruction it is. What is lost with regard to motivating a student by the threat of a lower grade is more than gained in freedom to let the student pursue individual technical and musical needs.

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The last statement is a reference back to the assertion that competition breeds conformity. Most programs have established specific criteria for jury examinations at the end of the semester—a certain amount of music memorized, certain étude and scale aptitudes, repertoire requirements, and so on. This is, after all, the only logical and efficient way in which we can compare one individual student to another in order to assign appropriate grades. But it inhibits spontaneity and freedom of expression. Quality programs in vocal performance, for example, are so suffused with language and repertoire requirements that there is little room for exploration into nontraditional repertoire.

Grading is not the only aspect of applied music touched by competition. Taken from a historical perspective, the idea of a student fully committing himself or herself to one teacher appears logical because of the

European tradition of apprenticeship from which it springs. To outsiders, however, it is a curious system in which students must abide by an unwritten law allowing them to seek help and advice only from their assigned teacher. Some music programs, however, have begun to implement procedures of cooperation rather than competition between studios with very positive results. Brigham Young University is one such example.

Clayne Robison, the coordinator of voice instruction at BYU, described the experience that his faculty and he went through together. Before the experience, professional response to one another was a show of mutual respect on the surface. Behind closed doors, each colleague tended to harbor convictions that his or her techniques and teaching styles differed so radically from those of other colleagues that it was best to avoid open and honest communication. Students picked up and even intensified these assumed differences. "Impassioned allegiances to a 'view' and a 'teacher' ranged the halls, and the popularity banner passed from studio to studio as the cliques of articulate talents ebbed and flowed."<sup>9</sup>

Robison goes on to describe how one colleague came up with the inspired suggestion of the voice faculty members spending Christmas vacation together, crossing the country and back, with the objective of getting to know each other better and trying to solve some of their major problems. They started from one key acknowledgment: "Notwithstanding the close personal relationship that usually develops in the private voice studio, 'our' students are not really our *personal students*, but rather students of the University."<sup>10</sup> Their discussions led to three important discoveries:

1. All the university's resources should be available to each student who pays the university's tuition—including *every* teacher's best input to that student.
2. Since most of our students will likely make most of their vocally related income through *teaching* voice, it seems in their best interest to have close experience with several teaching

styles during their time at the university.

3. Our students are not to be viewed as extensions of our own adequacy; we have no more responsibility to them than the best teaching we can muster.<sup>11</sup>

What Robison describes as the result of this cooperative endeavor was the joyous reinvigoration of the true ideals of common educational goals for all students. Studios were placed together, students were encouraged to seek help wherever they could find it, and administrative support was forthcoming for team-teaching workshops. In Robison's words, "Once the thick studio doors and even thicker self-protecting pride began to dissolve, our colleagues emerged substantially more creative and successful teachers than we had ever thought."<sup>12</sup>

We seriously jeopardize the opportunity for the rich and fulfilling relationships we can forge with our colleagues in many other ways as well. The peer evaluation systems we use in higher education too often reflect the same ones we use in music contests and are just as wayward in their outcome. Now we return to the tactic of manufacturing artificial shortages. By making it possible to get the optimum raise in salary only by beating out one's colleagues for a I rating (or whatever the label for it might be), we set up a competitive, malevolent scenario of pitting each professor against the other. One of the oldest and truest maxims of competition comes into play here—to win does not mean that you must be better than your competition, only that they be worse than you. It is now impossible to freely express support and admiration for another colleague's work, lest your own seem wanting in the balance.

Rather than evaluating the faculty individually, why not evaluate the entire departmental faculty as a total entity in coordination with strategic planning initiatives? Granted, this would not permit individual faculty ranking within the department, but it would allow for the real reason for evaluation—departmental (and ultimately institutional) status and reputation. This would be beneficial for several reasons. First, it would alleviate the need

for unnecessary or trivial scholarship just for the sake of amassing credentials for evaluation, contributing nothing but evidence of the researcher's ability to conduct scholarly exercises.

A second consequence of departmental evaluation would be the motivation for faculty to engage in cooperative scholarly productivity. With the emphasis on department status rather than individual status, faculty members would be freer to work together to produce scholarly work that they all agree is significant. Robison and the rest of the vocal faculty at BYU were able to collaborate on a number of significant projects that would never have occurred had they not breached the barriers to cooperation—the total becoming greater than the sum of the individual parts. Departmental evaluation would also allow for individual members of the faculty to concentrate on larger works, such as a book or a major composition, because the pressure to produce every year would not be as great.

Finally, this process would allow evaluation of specific faculty (such as tenure-track faculty) to be descriptive rather than mathematical. Evaluation ratings don't count toward tenure in most colleges anyway, because, legally, ranking systems have not held up in court. I am painfully aware that much of this smacks of academic anarchy, and many people will reject this sug-

## Tell Us Your Point of View

Should students be expected to participate in competitive events such as music festivals and contests? How do such events affect the students—positively or negatively? Should rating systems be revised? How?

Share your ideas and experiences. Send in your contribution of 500 words or fewer to Point of View, MEJ, 1806 Robert Fulton Drive, Reston, VA 22091-4348. Contributions to be published will be selected by the MEJ staff and edited to conform to the journal's style and to fit available space.

gestion out of hand. But I ask my critics to remember that many of the complaints faculty members have about teaching in college center around the dysfunctional relationship they have with colleagues and the punitive nature of evaluation.

These are only a few examples of possible ways to change adversarial situations. It will be a major task to attempt to dismantle ingrained traditions of competition, but we need to begin somewhere. To start, we must diligently observe our own day-to-day activities, both with our students and with our colleagues. What is involved here is nothing less than the affirmation of each other. We must ask ourselves if there is any situation in which such an affirmation is harmful to either short- or long-term goals. Only when we discover that it is not, can we rededicate ourselves to its pursuit, for that affirmation is, after all, one of the primary reasons we teach.

## Notes

1. Elliot Aronson, *The Social Animal*, 2d ed. (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1976), 153–54.

2. James R. Austin, "Competition: Is Music Education the Loser?" *Music Educators Journal* 76, no. 6 (1990): 21–25.

3. John Leo, "Two Cheers for Plainfield!" *U.S. News and World Report* (December 23, 1991): 19.

4. Darwin E. Walker, *Teaching Music: Managing the Successful Music Program* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1989).

5. Donald Ivey, "Can We Afford to Deceive Ourselves?" in *Perspectives in Music Education* (Washington, DC: Music Educators National Conference, 1966), 543.

6. Alfie Kohn, *No Contest: The Case against Competition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 46.

7. Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Random House, 1992), 73.

8. John Holt, *How Children Fail*, rev. ed. (New York: Delacorte, 1982), 274; as cited in Kohn, p. 61.

9. Clayne Robison et al., "Voice Students of the University," *The National Association of Teachers of Singing Journal*, 45, no. 5 (May/June, 1989): 10.

10. Robison, p. 10.

11. Robison, pp. 10–11.

12. Robison, p. 11. ■