

Strengthening Your School's Music Program: Beyond Christmas Concerts and Competitions

BY MICHAEL MOORE

Everyone loves a great performance. Students and teachers, alike enjoy the sense of accomplishment that comes from long weeks of hard work. Parents and administrators also take pride in their children and their school. But producing enjoyable performances is only one aspect of a balanced music education program. How can we be sure our students are receiving a quality education in music? Perhaps more important, why should we be concerned with music education in the first place? Is it even necessary?

To understand the role of music education in Christian school education, we must remind ourselves of the foundational purpose of Christian education: the development of the student in the image of God (Horton, 1992). Such a development necessarily encompasses all aspects of a student's life, including the nurture of the student's music aptitude and the development of the student's music abilities for worship and service. Music education, therefore, is a vital component of Christian education, not a mere recreational diversion. And insofar as the Christian school serves to fulfill the goals of Christian education *in loco parentis*, music education is particularly crucial to fulfilling the mission of the Christian school.

A Biblical Model

If music education is indeed vital to Christian education, we should expect to find biblical precedents and principles to follow when we design or evaluate a Christian school music program. In fact, the ancient Hebrews' example of universal participation in music-making, refinement of vocal and instrumental performance skills, and employment of professional musicians provides an excellent framework to formulate the goals of a Christian school's music program.

Multiple biblical references to universal participation in vocal and instrumental music (e.g., Ex. 15:1; Num. 21:17; 2 Sam. 6:5; 1 Chron. 13:8) suggest that music was an integral part of life for all Hebrew men, women, and children. Whether working in the fields, fighting on the battlefield, or marching in grand processions, the Hebrews enjoyed a music-filled life. Furthermore, the Old Testament chroniclers provide evidence that the quality of the Hebrews' music-making transcended that of mere casual endeavor or pastime. For instance, in 2 Chronicles 5:13, the writer testifies to the precision and power of the music that accompanied the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem:

It came even to pass, as the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and

thanking the LORD; and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and praised the LORD, saying, For he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever: that then the house was filled with a cloud, even the house of the LORD.

In Psalm 33:2-3, the children of Israel were exhorted to “praise the LORD with harp: sing unto him with the psaltery and an instrument of ten strings. Sing unto him a new song; play skillfully with a loud noise.” King David himself was considered an accomplished instrumentalist (1 Samuel 16:18).

Alfred Sendrey, a noted Jewish historian, posits that the Hebrews’ “broad musical culture . . . would scarcely have been conceivable without adequate preparatory work by a score of musical educators” (1974, p. 97). Indeed, the writer of 2 Chronicles 23:13 specifically mentions those who were “taught to sing praise.” At one time those singers were taught by Chenaniah, the chief of the Levites, appointed by David to instruct “about the song, because he was skillful” (1 Chron. 15:22). The musical training under Chenaniah and his successors was extensive; “the fact that no singer might become a full-fledged member of the Levitical musical guild until thirty years of age indicates that the years of preparation were long and arduous, his basic training probably starting in early childhood” (Sendrey & Norton, 1964, pp. 51-52). Ancient Hebrew musical training was not limited to the Levites, however, as students from other tribes likely received music instruction in singing and instrumental performance as well (Sendrey, 1974).

In summary, the Old Testament Hebrew example of both universal and specialized music education forms the biblical basis for the following four principles regarding Christian school music education. Music instruction (both vocal and instrumental) should (a) be available to all students, not just those students considered talented; (b) equip students with the music knowledge and skills necessary for full participation in worship in a manner honoring to God; (c) provide students with the foundational knowledge and skills requisite to pursuing a future career in music, should a student so desire; and (d) be taught by qualified instructors.

From Principle to Practice: The Biblical Model in Action

What do those principles look like in a day-to-day operation? One helpful resource for planning or evaluating a school music program is the *Opportunity-to-Learn Standards for Music Instruction* published by the National Association for Music Education (Music Educators National Conference, 1994) and available through www.menc.org. The Opportunity-To-Learn Standards provide guidelines for curriculum and scheduling, staffing, materials and equipment, and facilities. “Both practice and history support the belief that there is a high correlation between effective student learning in music and the existence of the favorable conditions specified in the Opportunity-To-Learn Standards” (MENC, 1994, p. vii). Following are some guidelines and observations based on the MENC Opportunity-To-Learn Standards, the author’s own teaching experience, and the results of a recent survey of music teachers in 280 randomly selected AACS member schools (Moore, 2005).

Curriculum. As with any academic subject, the music curriculum should be designed as a year-round, sequential learning program built on core concepts and experiences. Music instruction should begin in preschool with an emphasis on singing, playing simple instruments, listening, creating, and movement activities. General music instruction for all students should continue through grade 8 and should provide students with basic music literacy and performance skills as well as an appreciation for God-honoring music. Instrumental instruction should begin around grade 4 for strings and in Grade 5 or 6 for winds and percussion. Secondary-level ensembles should instill in the student a ministry-minded approach to the performance of both sacred and classical repertoire.

In some schools, the temptation has been to limit music instruction to preparation for specific performances and competitions, neglecting the need for a year-round, sequential music curriculum. Those performances then serve to define rather than supplement the curriculum, resulting in a piecemeal approach to the students' education. Students may thus come to conceive of music as merely a seasonal or competitive endeavor rather than a God-given, everyday activity of worship, service, and enjoyment with a rich cultural and historical heritage.

Scheduling. Sufficient instructional time is essential to providing a quality music education. Music courses should meet a minimum of twice per week for a total of 90 minutes (more time should be allowed for secondary-level ensembles) and should not be scheduled against required courses. Administrators, teachers, and parents should regard music courses as regular classes, guarding against infringements of allotted instructional time because of athletic events or other avoidable interruptions.

Instructional Materials, Equipment, and Facilities. Adequate supplies of textbooks, sheet music, recordings, sound equipment, and instruments as well as appropriate rehearsal space and a secure storage area are the bricks and mortar of a quality music education program. A library of several well-crafted, age-appropriate, pedagogically sound, God-honoring music resources and compositions is especially important for teaching concepts and motivating students to learn.

Many music teachers do not have the resources they need because of inadequate funding in the school budget. But with patience and creativity, teachers and administrators can address those needs through alternative funding options such as a nominal per-student music fee, judicious fundraising, and partnerships with local Christian business owners. Various education improvement grants are offered through private foundations and other non-government organizations.

Staffing. Qualified music teachers are critical to a biblically based music education. In addition to a Christ-like disposition and a burden for ministering to young people, teachers should possess a mastery of performance skills sufficient for modeling a high degree of musicianship for their students, a thorough knowledge of the cultural, historical, and theoretical foundations of music literature, and an understanding of

pedagogical techniques and materials appropriate for a wide range of ages. All music teachers, regardless of their qualifications, should have adequate opportunities throughout the year for professional development in specific music disciplines (e.g., paid release time for attending music education workshops and conferences). Music teachers should also have sufficient time in their daily school schedule (a minimum of 30 minutes) for instructional planning and assessment.

Administrative Support. The administrator, as the school's educational leader, is the catalyst for improvement. Without active support in terms of scheduling and basic resources, little can be accomplished. Parents and teachers who view their administrator as willing to set and pursue realistic, biblically based goals for improving music education in their schools will be more likely than not to lend their equally important support in the form of time and finances.

Conclusion. Is sequential, year-round music instruction available to all students in your school? Are your students receiving the foundation they need to be well-equipped for God-honoring worship and service now and in the future? Are your music teachers receiving adequate professional development and support?

Developing a strong music program involves sustained effort and patience, requiring everyone to thinking beyond the next performance. Whether your school has a well-established music program or perhaps a small, struggling one, be sure to include the music program in your school improvement plan. Take time to identify opportunities for improvement, set measurable goals, and redouble your efforts to put the biblical principles of music education into practice.

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