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An Evaluation of “A Music Educational Setting: Bands Across the Sea”

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As a professor of music and music education, I have been evaluating curriculum documents for more than thirty years.

In my view, “Bands Across the Sea” is the most original, innovative, and brilliant approach to music education that I have ever seen anywhere in the world. I have several reasons for saying so.

Growing from a “Jazz Concert/Festival” format in which students develop their musicianship skills and understandings (alongside the world’s finest professional jazz artists, Fritz and Helen Renold have made “Bands Across the Sea” into an extraordinarily creative and effective educational format.

Among the many exceptional and effective educational elements of this teaching-learning format are the following: an “informal learning” context built around role modeling; “authentic” teaching and learning, *in situ* (which Fritz and Helen Renold call learning “on the bandstand”); musical problem-finding and musical problem solving; democratic learning; coaching; teacher-learner scaffolding; musical peer-assessments; rehearsal and listening journals; and dialogical-experiential learning. This is not to say that traditional “verbal knowledge” is being totally replaced. Not at all! It means that the curriculum that has developed and matured from “jazz concerts” has found a way to integrate and balance “knowing-about” music with “knowing-how” to perform, improvise, and compose music. This is an extraordinary pedagogical-musical achievement.

Moreover, this program also enables students at all levels -- not just supremely gifted future professionals, which this program also serves, of course -- to achieve many forms of knowledge and personal dispositions that I have rarely (if ever,) seen acquired so completely and successfully anywhere else: experiential knowledge, intuitive knowledge, metacognitive abilities, and a form of knowing/being that has only recently come to the fore in other parts of the world -- ethical dispositions and knowing.

By “ethical dispositions/knowing” I mean the deeply personal and relational ways of being that a young person needs to learn in order to live and work with others in effective and moral ways. I have seen students achieve this by learning with/from the deeply ethical teachers in the BATS program. Fritz and Helen Renold expect the highest standards of professional and ethical conduct from their artist-teachers. The students learn from being with and observing these artist-teachers in their respectful and ethical interactions with everyone in the program -- including their artistic colleagues, administrators, and, of course, the students.

Also, very few music programs in the world have ever been able to teach students to do anything other than perform music or to acquire abstract theoretical principles. “Bands

Across the Sea” has proven, year after year, that it is effective in teaching students how to improvise and compose music, as well as to understand the social, historical, cultural, and theoretical nature of jazz and related musical styles. “Bands Across the Sea” is able to operationalize abstract knowledge – that is, students learn about music through doing music: what John Dewey called “learning by doing.”

It is also important to understand that “Bands Across the Sea” has always been committed to developing students’ lifelong love and involvement in music as both amateurs and professional musicians. “Bands Across the Sea” is committed to – and definitely succeeds in – nurturing students deep emotional joy in the moment-to-moment processes of music-making and listening (which are often difficult and challenging). Joy-in-learning is essential to learning music (and all other subjects) effectively. “Bands Across the Sea” protects and preserves the emotional dimensions of teaching, learning, and curriculum while also instilling deep knowledge of the doing, creating, and social-cultural history of jazz and related styles.

Having evaluated, summarized, and extolled key elements of jazzaar concerts and BATS, I wish to emphasize now that it is time for the next growth stage of this superb program. As Helen Renold’s document rightly says, the existing program is suffering from a lack of support. To grow, funding is needed to develop the infrastructure for the next stage of the BATS educational concept, which Renold rightly calls “curriculum-as-practicum.” For one thing, it is true (as I have personally witnessed) that, without more funding and infrastructure (like that at the Berklee College of Music in Boston, USA), the full educational-curricular potential of this learning environment cannot be realized for several related reasons:

- (a) the time period of the project is too short (the time frame of learning must be expanded significant to deepen the learning processes);
- (b) student enrollment has grown enormously, so there is a proven need for more space, equipment, and administrative support;
- (c) there are insufficient funds for commissioning new works (a basic feature of any contemporary music curriculum);
- (d) new technologies applicable to contemporary music learning are not available to this program;
- (e) there is no existing library of books, audio-visual aids, or music software programs;
- (f) there are no facilities for supplementary online education to supplement the central processes of socially interactive, hands-on learning.

What exists now is extremely rich and effective. But BATS is capable of so much more. The success of BATS has generated a huge demand for this program across a wide geographical -- a much wider area than is presently served.

I have no doubt this program can achieve all of its aims, but this will require further funding, which the program has so rightly earned and which it rightly deserves. I note that the local community has been exceptionally supportive of jazzaar concerts and BATS, as have government agencies. But it is important to realize that jazzaar concerts and BATS have turned the artistic eyes of the world on Switzerland as a whole, as well as Aarau. This attention will be augmented tremendously with the help of further financial support. In this regard, I support the idea of establishing a Foundation to support the growth and development of BATS into a full music education practicum.

In conclusion, the educational vision and analyses presented in “A Musical Educational Setting” is one of the most intelligent, valid, and carefully documented research studies that I have ever seen. To me, it builds on what has already been accomplished in Aarau and, now, provides an extremely well-reasoned, fine-tuned, and comprehensive plan for music education, which will surely be – given further support -- the envy of the world.