

CASMEC 2024

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Four Questions on Popular Music Education

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*Towards a more diverse and
inclusive music education*



If our mission is "encouraging the study and making of music for all," shouldn't we continue to diversify the styles of music we study, create, and perform?



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Over the course of the past several years I've had the opportunity to attend and present at a number of conferences on the topic of popular/commercial music education. Some of the topics discussed include how to go about implementing popular music education (PME) modules into an existing curriculum, how to develop a curricular framework for a commercial music program, and what part doe PME plays in the current paradigm shift in music education.

During that time, I've certainly enjoyed many robust conversations as we continue to wrestle with the 'how' and 'why' of developing and providing a culturally appropriate, skill-laden, engaging music



*It's not a matter
of reaching kids
where they are;
it's simply a
matter of
reaching kids.*

education. Change can be hard, especially when our strongly held opinions are challenged on matters as near and dear to our hearts as music and music education. NAFME Executive Director Michael Blakeslee, when discussing adopting practices that focus on culturally responsive music teaching states, "Dealing with this requires a willingness to question existing practices with care. We don't want to delete or dilute things that have made us strong for a century or more, but we may well want to expand and enhance our offerings" (A New Year's Vision for Music Education, 2017).

At the core of these conversations, then, is the issue of how to cultivate a framework of an inclusive music education to embrace traditional, jazz, and popular music. Unfortunately, the answer to that question is both long and complex! Before we get to the four questions I'm most often asked, if you're new to the conversation, I encourage you to read the first blog from this series "Blending Traditional and Contemporary Teaching Methods" as well as John Kratus' article "Music Education at the Tipping Point" from the Music Educator's Journal. Hopefully, these discussions will help lay the groundwork relevant to our conversation. With that, here are the questions along with possible solutions.

What is popular/commercial music?

There are a multitude of definitions for, and opinions of, commercial music. The same can be said for popular, rock, classical, hip-hop, Broadway, concert band, etc. I would argue commercial music is any style of music that can be commercialized and/or monetized. In short, anything you might hear on the radio – *inclusive* of the styles I mentioned above.

Much like the term commercial, the definition of popular music is complex, fluid and, quite simply, it is music we like or are familiar with (Association for Popular Music Education, 2018).

In regards to the terms popular contrasted with commercial, again, there are multiple definitions and opinions. For our discussion, I've found the two terms are somewhat interchangeable as well as quite oppositional (I did say it was complicated!) and that, often, the descriptor comes down to preference, purpose, and familiarity. That said, I will add the dominant term used, primarily as a differentiator to other styles of music and pedagogical methods, is popular music education (PME).

What is popular music education?

In addition to traditional and jazz education models, popular music education is the third component of a culturally appropriate, relevant, well-rounded music education. It includes, but is not limited to, courses and classes in popular music studies, popular music performance, songwriting, production, and areas of music technology (Association for Popular Music Education, 2018). In comparison to traditional music education models, popular music education:

- utilizes a variety of styles of music the majority of our students already consume and enjoy
- instills business skills including knowledge of social media promotion/marketing, contracts, licensing, copyright, etc.
- includes multiple opportunities to write, arrange, perform, and record music – both original and existing material
- offers an opportunity to explore the social and cultural aspects of music as it relates to our students' lives and identities
- provides a space for students who do not want to solely participate in traditional band, choir or orchestra to pursue a love of music
- uses more informal pedagogies that involve student-centered learning and peer-to-peer learning than traditional, teacher-centered pedagogies (Holley 2017)

How does a popular music rehearsal differ from a traditional rehearsal?

Depending on the blend of pedagogical styles you choose, not as much as you might think. I often encounter educators who mistakenly believe they'll need to unlearn what they've realized in their previous ensembles experiences. As in any situation, you build on the skills you have. The primary difference is PME most often calls for a

facilitator/producer/coach model as opposed to a director, or *sage on the stage*, model. In traditional and jazz rehearsals, a student's focus is placed to the front of the room on the director. In contrast, a PME rehearsal fosters a more democratic, less formal learning environment, where the ensemble *director* serves as a coach or facilitator in the musical conversation.

The rehearsal environment truly depends on the skill set, personality, and temperament of the ensemble coach. In my rehearsals, I would often move from one end of the spectrum to the other depending on a number of factors. In the same manner you already instruct the diversity of learning styles in your classroom, being able to employ a number of teaching styles will only benefit your students and their musical experience. In short, PME is one part of the jigsaw puzzle of a music educator's portfolio of approaches to learning, teaching, and assessment (Association for Popular Music Education, 2018).

For a more in-depth discussion of blending traditional, jazz, and PME methods within the context of a rehearsal, I encourage you to read my blog "How to Teach Commercial and Popular Music in Schools".

Will teaching popular music styles diminish enrollment in my traditional/jazz program?

Ensemble enrollment is dependent upon a number of factors, but a study by the nonprofit Little Kids Rock (LKR), with data provided by teachers after LKR's Modern Band program was introduced to their school, indicates enrollment in music actually stayed the same or *increased* (Burstein and Powell, 2018).

In a majority of secondary programs, the jazz/popular program is supplemental to the larger, traditional program. This is commonplace as jazz bands were added to the curriculum as demand for that type of program increased. Indeed, in the same manner a jazz ensemble enhances a program a popular music ensemble will do the same by way of giving students both outside and inside your program an avenue to study, rehearse, and perform a diversity of styles. Take comfort in the knowledge that many of the growing pains we're experiencing, due to the growth of popular music education, are not new - not by a long shot! As with any change, it takes time to review, understand, implement, and adapt.

Where do we go from here?

PME is an integral component of the paradigm shift towards a more diverse and inclusive education. The diversity of ensembles and pedagogical styles the continually changing musical landscape has provided is one of the hallmarks of a well-rounded music education. Estelle Jorgensen, when considering curriculum renovation in her

book *Transforming Music Education*, notes that "each generation needs to renew education and culture for its time and place...and this renewal constitutes the seeds of musical, cultural, and societal transformation" (Jorgensen, 8).

If our mission is "encouraging the study and making of music for all," shouldn't we continue to diversify the styles of music we study, create, and perform? Our NAFME preamble states, "Music allows us to celebrate and preserve our cultural heritage". The inclusion of popular music genres affords us the opportunity to broaden our understanding and appreciation of styles and cultures that might be unfamiliar to us while, at the time, allowing us to connect with

our students while modeling a culturally responsible environment. How do we go about shifting the educational paradigm, and the conversation, to one of inclusivity, diversity, and cultural responsibility in regard to our students' experiences, musical preferences, socioeconomic status, and demographic? That is the \$64,000 question.

PME offers an opportunity to explore the social and cultural aspects of music as it relates to our students' lives.

