

## Transforming the Elephant.

In the September 2011 edition of the *Music Educators Journal* (Volume 98, No. 1) appeared an article, "*The Elephant in the Room*," by David A. Williams, associate professor of Music Education at the University of South Florida. In October of 2011 *USA Today* published a similar report entitled "*How to enliven – and save – high school music programs*" by David Sall, associate director of the Music Access Project. Both articles deal with what the authors consider a dated approach to music education involving the band, orchestra, choir large ensemble (the Elephant) approach to teaching music. Both articles also are concerned with the disconnect between the way schools are teaching music and the way today's students experience music and listen to music. Both articles present substantiated facts and statistics that support their opinions. I am not so sure their facts are a true reflection of all programs or schools. I have thought about this for some time and I feel the need to express my opinion and share some thoughts on why I believe that the large ensemble is not necessarily the problem and may even be the solution to the decreasing numbers of students involved in music programs across the country.

David Sall states that according to the National Endowment for the Arts the number of children participating in any kind of arts education decreased by more than 21% from 1992 through 2008. David Williams sites similar statistics that chart a declining enrollment in large ensembles based on a study by the Florida Department of Education. According to this study 16.45 percent of high school students were enrolled in music classes in 1985. By 2005 this number had dropped to 11.67. At this rate of decline a projection was made that by 2025 only 7 percent of high school students would participate in music. We all have noticed a similar decline maybe not as drastic as these two articles indicate. But there are many factors that contribute to this decline and all of the blame should not be shouldered by the large ensembles in our programs. Demographics have changed, NCLB has forced higher graduation requirements, the cost of instruments has increased tremendously in the last 20 years and school funding continues to fluctuate. What about advanced placement course that raise GPAs for college scholarship chances and result in scheduling conflicts. Let's not forget the problems that block scheduling can have on class schedules. But these types of changes are not felt only in the arts. I see a decline in the number of students that participate in school sports as well. Many schools do not have enough players to dress both a freshman and junior varsity team and they are forced to combine the two in order to have one team that competes under the varsity level.

Music students as we all know are involved in multiple activities and serve as leaders within our schools. Our students also represent the "best of the best" in terms of academic status. They are pulled in various directions and time becomes an issue for all of them. Because of this finite amount of time that is available to our students choices must be made. If we place unreasonable demands on our students and their time students are more likely to not participate because other interests are not allowed equal time and we find them hitting the open road. It is not the large ensemble method of teaching but the demands and approach we as teachers place on its members that may be the concern.

David Williams states that the large ensemble is a dated model established in the early 1900s and has remained unchanged for a century. The large-ensemble model is the basis for most music education at the secondary level. When alternative classes are introduced such as guitar or piano

classes the large ensemble model is often the model for instruction. He goes on to list ten points that he feels are the reason for our educational demise. Everything from formal concerts, dated instruments, musical styles, class size, traditional notation and musical creativity is challenged.

Musical creativity and expression is developed by teachers guiding students and exposing them to the world's best music performed in an artistic fashion with incredible musicianship. Without a model and guidance how can students be expected to understand the aesthetic qualities of music that are the ultimate goals. Williams feels that school music experiences should be more student centered and less teacher directed and the large ensemble does not allow this type of student interaction and input. This is not necessarily true. Our students are constantly making musical decisions based on performance outcomes and are reacting instantly to issues of balance, blend, nuance and expressive qualities. We may not have the opportunity to stop a rehearsal and ask them to verbally express all of these musical aspects but that does not mean they are not making musical decisions. Ensemble participation is one of major ways for students to experience diverse styles, develop a wide variety of musical skills and be a place where students are encouraged to contribute to the interpretive and creative force of the music being performed. We make suggestions for interpretation but we don't do it for them. I have trouble imagining the expressive nature of an iPad ensemble. I also have trouble understanding the how DJing has anything to do with learning to read and interpret music.

The large ensemble can be a troublesome beast when it is not administered by a creative teacher with well planned objectives and artistic goals for their students. Ensembles that function for the sake of winning trophies at the expense of music goals and outcomes are a concern. A trophy to show to parents and administrators must mean that education is taking place. Balanced curriculums that give equal attention to all aspects the band, choir and orchestra program satisfies the musical and artistic needs of all students. When we as directors put too much emphasis on a single aspect of our programs we sacrifice the needs of the many. A program that allows students to explore instrumental and vocal music in a variety of styles, historical and cultural perspectives peaks the interest of the students and keeps them coming back for more. The large ensemble in the hands of a caring and conscientious teacher is one means by which to reach a large percentage of students. When the musical needs of the students are the number one priority quality improves, self esteem grows, numbers increase and now we have a new problem, too many students!

Students must be given a well-balanced idea of the type of music pertinent to the course they are taking. Focusing on a single type or style of music is short changing our students. Today's students want more. They want to know the where, when, how and by whom. Putting music in a historical context often helps students relate it to other subjects and draw connections to cultural and historical aspects.

Contemporary music takes many forms and should be included in all ensembles so students experience styles that are relevant to their world. Connecting the music and the composer can be an assume experience. The students get a firsthand look into the creative process and an understanding of what the composer is trying to say or explain. This emotional and cognitive insight can be truly rewarding and intellectually stimulating. The large ensemble provides these types of memorable experiences. Chamber music offerings on a regular basis throughout the

school year will challenge our students. These chamber offerings are best realized when the skills of intonation, balance, blend, expression and musicality first experienced in a large ensemble setting are now the responsibility of the individual student.

I think the addition of guitar ensembles, rock ensembles and technology based composition classes, to name a few, would be much desired additions to all curriculums. But if we abandon the large ensemble for a high tech alternative or for the mediocrity of the pop culture we are doing the next generation of musicians a huge disservice. A function of education in general is to pass on to younger generations the culture and learning of the past. The goal is not that the past be revered but that we all profit from the experiences of our predecessors.

David Elliot in his 1995 work, *“Music Matters: A New Philosophy of Music Education,”* objects to a focus on music as a fixed object independent of performance, which he argues leads to a narrow concept of both music and music education, and to a curriculum that emphasizes listening at the expense of performing. Elliot holds that focusing solely on aesthetic perception restricted one’s understanding of the full range of musical experiences. The significance of Elliott’s philosophy lies in the doing of it. When students are engaged in music making they raise their level of consciousness and self knowledge. This knowledge is further enhanced by a teacher lead experience and the sharing of ideas and influences that members of a large ensemble share when rehearsing and performing.

If the large ensemble method is such a hindrance to music education how do we explain the youth orchestra movement in Venezuela? El Sistema has 31 symphony orchestras. But its greatest achievement is the 250,000 children who attend its music schools around the country, 90 percent of them from poor socio-economic backgrounds. Gustavo Dudamel is a product of this movement.

I encourage you to read David William’s article. It makes us think about the goals and direction of our ensembles. With so many other concerns in the world of education it is not the time to be negative about the methods of teaching and instructing that are very basic to our art. The large ensemble setting when administered with music education as its primary objective is an effective means for educating students.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve the Missouri Music Educators Association as your College/University Vice President. The opportunity to be a part the conference/workshop planning and administering the All-Collegiate Choir and Band have been very rewarding experiences. Thanks to everyone that has helped me with both endeavors. I am honored to continue to serve as President-Elect. This is a responsibility that I willingly accept and I will do my best to promote the best interests of Music Education in our schools.