ENGAGING BOYS IN A SEQUENTIAL, VOICE-BASED MUSIC PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

The problem of engaging boys in music is a perennial one. Boys are typically less involved in formal music-making than their female counterparts and tend to achieve lower grades in music at school. Of all the types of musical participation, singing is one that is often shunned by boys because of its association with gender-incongruence: it is not always socially acceptable for boys to sing at school. This research addresses the fact that singing classical or folk music in class is challenging for boys. For educators involved in a sequential, voice-based program, this is a significant concern. The problem is explored through literature from the field. Responses to the problem are also offered though recent research and reference to practical examples.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Engagement in music

There is evidence to suggest that both boys and girls undervalue involvement in music. Swanwick (1988) found that between the ages of 8 and 15, music was the subject that exhibited the single greatest decline in interest, with the exception of religion. In Queensland in 1996, 72% of primary students took part in a choir, band dance group or art display, while 44.5% of secondary students reported involvement (Ainley 1996, p. 77). This data represented the lowest participation rates per capita in Australia. The data of Ainley and Swanwick also suggest that there is an issue with the transition into secondary schooling that effects student involvement. Students at this age are spending their time engaging in other activities. The Australian Bureau of Statistics figures from 2001 indicate almost 100% of children are watching T.V., almost 70% are playing electronic or computer games, almost 60% are playing sport and 30% are involved in cultural pursuits. Of those involved in cultural pursuit, the ratio of girls to boys is 2:1.

Students therefore tend to disengage from formal music making at some stage, typically at the transition into secondary schooling.

Boys' engagement in music

There is still a long way to go in ensuring some kind of gender equity in our musical world. As Mead (1962) stated "any art is much richer when it is practiced by both sexes." By highlighting the plight of boys, there is no intention to undervalue the plight of girls. Girls and boys both suffer as a result of the stereotyping of musical instruments. Historically, girls have been disadvantaged. The canon of western music, as it is commonly taught, includes few references to women composers and performers. In the profession there are less females involved in ensembles. The proportion of males to females in Australian orchestras is currently 56% to 44% (Harris 2006). Within this proportion, strings and wind tend to be closer to a 50/50 split, but 80% of brass players are male and over 95% of percussionists are male. The foundation for this stereotyping can be found in secondary schools: boys' tend to restrict themselves to this narrower range of activities through gender-role rigidity, avoidance of femininity and homophobia (Harrison 2001, 2003; Adler and Harrison 2004).

The history of boys' non-involvement in certain musical activities in Australia can be traced back to Bartle (1968) who found that at least half of the choirs is his sample of 474 schools were not using senior boys. Australia is not an isolated example in this regard. Nor is it a recent phenomenon. Koza (1993, 1994) studied musical activities at the turn of last century in U.S., finding choirs that consisted of 60 sopranos, 10 altos, 2 basses and no tenors. In 1993, Green (1997, p. 248) found that "boys and girls tend to restrict themselves to certain musical activities for fear of being accused of some sort of musical transvestism." Girls, however, are demonstrating a willingness to cross the gender divide. Gates (1989) also found that girls appear to adopting social values traditionally associated with males. Mahoney (1998, p.48) concurs: Teachers report that girls are increasingly acting in a way conventionally associated with particular forms of masculinity. This has two possible effects: girls may end up with the same reluctance as boys and our music programs may be bereft of singers and players of "feminine" instruments. The second possible effect is that girls will hold their ground and assume the instruments associated with the masculine.

Why are boys restricting their behaviours? If you ask them, they won't always tell you. In a study by Fortney, Boyle and Carbo (1993) only 3% of respondents indicated a "gender" related reason for their choice of musical activity. Fortney et al (1993, p. 38) concluded that "regardless of the reasons given, males still tend to play instruments that are considered masculine and females tend to choose instruments that are considered feminine".

Examples of similar talk could be found in the work of Green (1993 and 1997), Koza (1993) Hanley (1998) and Harrison (2004). In one of Green's surveys of instrument selection (n=50) there were no boys. Teachers in Green's (1997, p. 253) study allude to a gendered view of some musical activities with comments such as: "There is much peer pressure amongst boys that music still has a sissy stigma. Boys that do have the character to resist the pressure tend to achieve highly." Essentially Green's findings demonstrate that boys succumb to heavy peer pressure and that certain activities are to be avoided because they are seen to be "sissy" and "unmacho".

Harrison (2001) constructed a continuum of musical choices, based on a study of tertiary students' (n=103) perceptions of whether an instrument was masculine or feminine:

FIGURE 1: Masculine – Feminine continuum of instruments

Feminine   **Masculine**

I_____I_____I_____I_____I_____I_____I_____I_____I_____I

Flute   Clarinet   'cello   singing   violin   saxophone guitar   trumpet   trombone drums

(Harrison 2001)

Two further studies conducted by Harrison (2004) provide data relevant to the discussion. Primary school students (n=345) were asked to indicate which instrument they would most like to play. Of those who selected singing, 84% were female. In a similar study undertaken with secondary students (n=903), 92% of those choosing singing were female.

There are clearly issues associated with boys' involvement in certain musical activities in school.

Boys' engagement in vocal music

In reflecting on her earlier research, Green (1997, p. 185) said that boys are reluctant to sing in class or join a choir. Hanley (1998) replicated much of Green's study in Canada in 1998, with similar results. Some of her responses included comments such as: "singing is viewed as a feminine activity – boys who engage in singing are feminine by implication" and "boys don't sing because they are hung up on the image that boys don't sing and those who do are gay or sissies or weak or whatever."

With regard to participation in ensembles and specific styles of music, Hanley (1998) suggested, "some girls want to be like boys. Boys, however do not want to be like girls" This appears to support the views of Gates (1989) and Mahoney (1998) noted above. As result of this shift, "more girls are joining traditionally male ensembles like stage bands, while boys are not flocking in great numbers to choir".

The role of singing can fluctuate according to the situation. Specifically in the Australian context as researched by Collins (2005) and Harrison (2001, 2003), singing can be seen as an un-masculine or gender-incongruent activity that adversely effected socialisation, as demonstrated in this remark from one of Harrison's (2003) subjects:

> Subject 21: Kind of being on the outside of things as a rather odd faggoty [sic] person at my school, singing did little to boost my social standing.

The issue of voice change and the uncertainty it brings also contribute to a lack of confidence about singing as noted in this comment, also from Harrison (2002):

> Subject 13: I can remember a musician being hassled - it was the Italian singer. When he sang in front of the whole school in Year 8 he was mocked for his high voice and when in later years he moved to Elvis songs, they knocked him now and then…He copped a lot of flak, mostly about his voice, especially from the older kids whose voices had broken.

A considerable body of research has been dedicated to physical changes a male voice goes through (McKenzie 1956, Swanson 1984, Cooper 1965, Cooksey 1977, 1992). The extensive details of the voice change are beyond the scope of this paper except to note that there are several stages of change and that the rate of change will vary according to the individual. Cooksey (1992) developed a five-stage model using the

criteria of range, tessitura, register development, vocal quality and speaking fundamental frequency. His five stages are:

- ❑ unchanged voice
- ❑ mid-voice I
- ❑ mid-voice II and IIa
- ❑ new voice
- ❑ emerging adult.

Trollinger (1993, p. 29) comments on the nature of boys' vocal abilities noting that "it is likely that more males than females are monotones, drones, or out-of-tune singers." Awareness of these stages and rates of change play a significant role in boys' engagement with singing.

There are therefore both social and physical obstacles to boys' engagement in vocal music.

Boys' engagement in specific styles of vocal music
One of the comments above refers to the role of style as a factor in boy's reluctance to sing ("... he moved to an Elvis son, they knocked him…"). Green (1997) found to that be involved in slow music or in music that is associated with the classical style in school would not be considered appropriate for a boy. Hanley (1998) concurred, finding that classical music was considered too feminine because, according to one of her respondents, "it is too slow and boring for boys." Dislike of particular styles of music was also a feature of a study by Hargreaves (1995) et al. Students were asked to express their dislike of different styles of music. Students of both sexes were in agreement about the ranking of the four styles, but boys tended to be more extreme in the expression of their dislike. Folk music and opera fared particularly poorly as evidenced in the results presented in Table 1:

Table 1

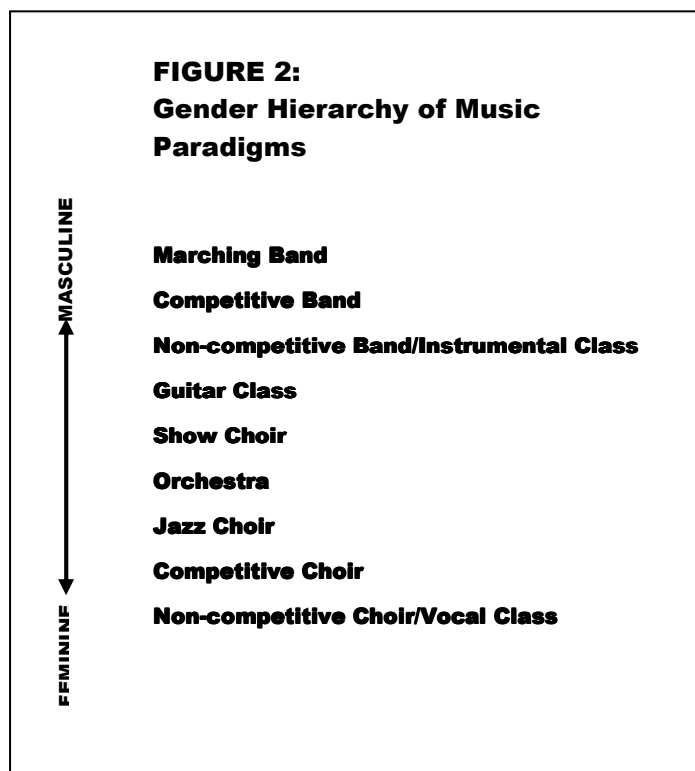**Students' expression of dislike for styles of music by gender**

Style	% of boys who disliked each style	% of girls who disliked each style
Jazz	32	20.6
Classical	52	36.3
Folk	71.4	53.4
Opera	76.9	59.5

Hargreaves et al (1995)

This is supported in the findings of Harrison (2003) in which one of his interviewees commented:

> Subject 15: …people heard that I sang opera and they immediately assumed that I was gay. Again, this wasn't a problem, but it goes to show how narrow minded our culture is in Australia that we can't accept "real men" to be artists.

In a recent international study investigating both style and delivery of music, Adler and Harrison (2004) found that vocal music rated poorly on males' perception of suitable activities. Furthermore, vocal class rated the most "feminine" of any musical activity.

FIGURE 2:
Gender Hierarchy of Music Paradigms

MASCULINE

Marching Band

Competitive Band

Non-competitive Band/Instrumental Class

Guitar Class

Show Choir

Orchestra

Jazz Choir

Competitive Choir

Non-competitive Choir/Vocal Class

FEMININE

(Adler and Harrison 2004)

Collins (2005, p. 23) also commented at length on the type of music that boys prefer, basing her findings on research by Sadker and Sadker, (1982) and Best, Williams, Cloud, Davis, Robertson, Edwards, Giles and Fowles (1977):

> … male preference for louder, rhythmically accented, less predictable music, mirrors their socially acceptable traits: robust, aggressive, disorderly, dominant, adventurous, excitable, active, assertive, and inventive. These traits are reinforced by society and the educational system. The preference for male role models and concern for peer approval may be indicative of the pressures placed upon males to be manly (in Trollinger, 1993, p. 34).

The literature discussed above highlights the issue of engagement in music and the specific issues facing boys in a sequential, vocal orientated paradigm that frequently includes folk-based or classical repertoire.

RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM

Rationale for the response

The response to this problem is based in recent literature and fieldwork currently being undertaken by the author. As part of a larger project, the author surveyed pre-service music (phase 1) and interviewed experienced music teachers (phase 2). The central purpose if the study was to ascertain subjects' perception in relation to identity of music teachers and core components of teacher education courses. The results reported here are preliminary conclusions with the complete findings to be published at completion of a third phase.

There is a clearly established need for change at macro and micro levels. Caution needs exercised in treating the symptoms at the micro level as some practices can lead to further embedding of popular masculine stereotypes. Getting the football team singing in the choir, for example, may only reinforce the tendency to consider one type of masculinity as being the only appropriate type. Change needs to be instituted concurrently at both levels. At the highest level of macro change, societal trends and attitudes towards music and specifically vocal music need to transform. In terms of policy, Pascoe et al (2005 p.128), reporting on the National Review of School Music Education, recommended that

> Every Australian student participates and engages in initial vocal music programs; and students with identified interest and talent in vocal music are provided with sustained vocal music programs.

Furthermore, Pascoe et al (2005) suggested that State and Territory school systems provide vocal and choral tuition for all students that reflect the breadth of music in contemporary society and that the tertiary sector ensures that vocal and choral music is an integral part of pre-service training. At policy level, therefore, change can be effected.

Macro level change can also be brought about through well-worn adage "think global act local." Teachers, teacher educators and researchers each have a role to play in bringing this about in the classroom. Researchers may well provide valuable insights with strong methodological bases, but these are less valuable without an engagement in the problem and its solutions. Likewise, practitioners enacting strategies without being fully informed can be counter-productive. The development of policies that account for situational factors is crucial for individual environments and for application to similar situations.

Dunaway (1987) proposed that successful music programs were more likely to have a higher percentage of boys participating than were average programs. Harrison's (2003) findings were based on Griffiths' (1995, p. 18) processes for bringing about change in the gender order. Griffiths concluded that awareness-raising, involvement, policy development, strategies and review were required. Harrison (2003) pursued this with a number of strategies for managing gender-related issues in music. Specifically these include:

- ❑ Role models: teacher, community, industry and student
- ❑ Selection of repertoire
- ❑ Flexible scheduling of music and other activities
- ❑ Engagement and training of suitable personnel

- The use of a combination of single sex and co-educational activities

- Producing a high standard that commands the respect of the community

- Cautious use of sporting analogies for engagement and training of musicians

- A physiological approach to singing

- Strong direction from academic leaders

- A developmental program that starts boys young & keeps them singing and playing through puberty

More recently, Collins (2005) proposed a seven-element model to motivate boys. The seven features of Collins' model are

1. School Culture
2. Relationships
3. Peers
4. Parents
5. Role Models
6. Student Character
7. Teaching Strategies

In view of the work of Griffiths (1995) Collins (2005) and Harrison (2001, 2003) the following five suggestions are offered for beginning this process in relation to a sequentially based music program:

1. Support of music from school management, parents and policy makers
2. Application of motivational strategies used in other activities
3. Deployment of appropriate personnel including the recruitment of high profile peer and industry role models
4. A structured and physiologically-based approach to gradually incorporating vocal music as a legitimate part of a music program
5. Selection of appropriate repertoire

Support of music and use of strategies from other activities

Recent fieldwork encompassing interviews with experienced teachers (Harrison 2006), found that teachers attributed the success of their music programs to the support of parents and school administration:

> Jane: The parents are now so on side and so for anything that we want to do in our music program. We just get 100% support but I've had to work very, very hard to get that support.
>
> Gary: My advice would be when you've got something working really well, invite the principal in to see this is what we do…if there is a reasonable leadership team, it's valued and then you are supported and when you have the support of the leadership team it makes it a lot easier.

Harrison (2003, 2005) also found that the cautious use of strategies from other subject areas could assist in cresting a successful music program that engaged boys. Evidence of the strength of this tactic could be found in some of the remarks of staff who engaged in a combined tour with sportsmen and musicians:

> What was interesting was the obvious respect and appreciation that the boys had for each other's talents and expertise. This was revealed in the constant support extended by the rugby players and community workers to the musicians when performing and the reciprocal nature of that support…

In summarising the positive and mutual benefits of music and sport working together to bring about constructive progress, Harrison (2005) commented:

> … positive benefits can result from the two disciplines becoming truly complementary. This involved promotion of excellence, the development of teamwork, the sense of achievement and for music, it assisted in bringing the already high status in this school to a more elevated position through close association with sport.

Role models

The literature favours the use of role models to bring about change. It is not sufficient to state that role models are important. The specific attributes of role models has been the subject of considerable research. (Killian 1988, Adler 2001, Harrison 2001, 2003, Hall 2003, Wicks 2005). Wicks (2005), for example, supports the role model having a positive approach, being enthusiastic and maintaining self-belief while Harrison (2006) found that passion and flexibility were enormously important teacher

attributes, regardless of the content or method being employed. Ballantyne (2006) also noted that early-career music teachers' passion for music teaching seems to be related to their love of the subject area. In 21 sites visited in the National Review of School Music Education, the following music teacher attributes were observed to varying degrees (Pascoe 2005): dedication, passion, enthusiasm, warmth/rapport, vision, musical expertise, continuity, collegiality, mutual respect, trust, mentoring, professional development, community music, specialist staff, musical excellence, organisational skills and teaching partnerships.

In an extensive (n=149) survey of pre-service teachers, Harrison (2006) found that flexibility, patience, sense of humour and enthusiasm ranked highly as qualities perceived as necessary for teachers to possess. In a related study, Harrison (2006) interviewed experienced music teachers, gleaning remarks in relation to important attributes with comments including:

> Janine: In a general sense, teachers need to have patience, good self-esteem, passion for what they are teaching, ability to work within a diverse staff and student body and good communication skills. Teachers need to have and demonstrate a strong belief in the value and importance of education. For the music teacher in particular, you need a love of what you teach, an ability to sell this subject area, and a desire to continue learning.

In this study role models were seen as having to "live" being a teacher and allowing the attributes to be apparent through this, rather than through learned behaviours. This was aptly summarised in this response:

> Glen: Integrity, sincerity, compassion – teaching is a lot about figuring out where students are coming from and what they need. Students learn much from what isn't taught, but simply modelled by their teachers. With the above qualities teachers should be able have a foundation on which to build respect. I'm also not at all confident that these can be "taught", but they can certainly be exemplified.

The concept of how to "teach" these qualities is a subject of ongoing research for this author. Clearly personal attributes are not sufficient and, in a Kodaly-based approach, skill level is also significant, as this response suggests:

> Julie: I would like to emphasise that these personal qualities are not sufficient, but I identify the other attributes as skills. These include: an extensive knowledge of the subject area, including the practical ability to demonstrate musically for students

A structured and physiologically-based approach

Dunaway (1987) and Harrison (2001) noted the need for a structured and physiologically based approach to singing. Specifically Wicks (2005) suggests a focus on the physical sensation of singing: knowing the anatomy and understanding the vocal demands of the repertoire. Respondents in Harrison's (2006) recent study also noted the need for such an approach:

> Jenny: I think you need to definitely know about voice and you need to know about the methodology stuff…how to teach stuff, no matter which particular philosophy you follow. Of course I have my beliefs and what I think works best but whichever way you certainly need to understand voice and a bit about vocal technique.

Repertoire Selection

Choice of repertoire is critical to the growth of any music program. In an approach that incorporates a core sequence of content, it is even more significant. Harris (2005) provides a sample of repertoire for the solo male changing voice and a checklist for suitability of such repertoire. The literature cited above (Green, 1996;Hargreaves, 1995; Adler and Harrison, 2004) suggests that boys could experience difficulty in engaging with classical or folk material. There are two salient points here:

1. If all the other factors (support from administration, appropriate role models etc) are in place, then repertoire is only a *part* of the solution.
2. The sequence is the key issue for the development of the child. The choice of repertoire should therefore serve the environment in which the learning is taking place and physical capabilities of the children.

In the fieldwork conducted by the author, there was support for the notion of varied approaches to repertoire:

> Jillian: I have a song collection that I can refer because there are some that are just so good for teaching that I keep going back to it, but if I get really sick of them, I just send an email to my respected colleagues and say "what do you do for this" and we swap ideas and…

> George: I've been fortunate in that what I've adapted is the repertoire more than anything else. I did pop, I did rock and adapted the stuff [concept] to suit that.

> Gerald: I can use the purest folk music repertoire to teach the elements and because there's a joy in singing and a joy in developing our skills, they [the students] love it. Also can I say that I guess I'm lucky that I'm a composer as

well so I write music for my classes all the time. I really want to make conscious the natural minor scale so here's a melody that I've written.

Gordon: Kodaly was quite specific about the strategy for teaching a certain element and American educators took it and really formalised it. I still believe that's a really good way to go but I'm not rigid because I will use what works and it may be quite different.

The problem of boys' engagement in singing is a reality in many schools. These five strategies are suggestions for a response. Strong support, motivational strategies from other activities, personnel, a structured, physiologically based approach and the use of appropriate repertoire need to be dynamically interactive in order to begin the process of addressing the problem.

TO THE FUTURE

The rhetoric above is useless without enactment of the strategies espoused. Adler and Harrison (2004), in putting forward a philosophy for engaging with gender issues in music education, champion an approach that is both philosophical and operational. Their term, *critical genderist thinking and action,* relies on practitioners taking the approaches outlined and enacting them. In general terms there are many educational environments where the engagement of all students is taking place, taking into account much of the literature and fieldwork outlined in this discussion. Boys (and girls) are better off as a result of these proactive strategies.

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