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CM in Memphis: Evolution of a Revolution

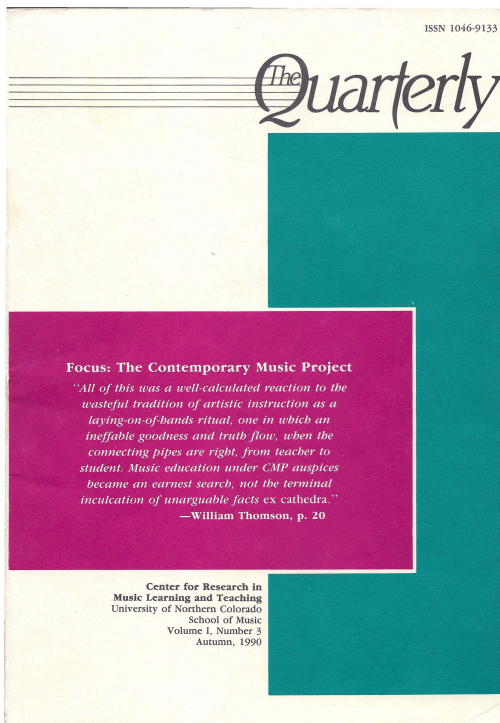
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It is with pleasure that we inaugurate the reprint of the entire seven volumes of The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning. The journal began in 1990 as The Quarterly. In 1992, with volume 3, the name changed to The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning and continued until 1997. The journal contained articles on issues that were timely when they appeared and are now important for their historical relevance. For many authors, it was their first major publication. Visions of Research in Music Education will publish facsimiles of each issue as it originally appeared. Each article will be a separate pdf file. Jason D. Vodicka has accepted my invitation to serve as guest editor for the reprint project and will compose a new editorial to introduce each volume. Chad Keilman is the production manager. I express deepest thanks to Richard Colwell for granting VRME permission to re-publish The Quarterly in online format. He has graciously prepared an introduction to the reprint series.

CM In Memphis: Evolution of a Revolution

By Don Bennett

Memphis, Tennessee

Looking back at my summer, 1971, excursion to the Bellingham Comprehensive Musicianship (CM) seminar brings recollections made humorous by the passing years. How with-it I felt, joining the cutting edge of curriculum renewal, joining the big guys from the big schools in the creation of propositions that would revolutionize the music core curriculum at Memphis State University! As with most exploits, time and trial led to modification and mellowing. This is the story of Memphis State's CM experiment as it evolved in experience.

“Yet our cause was just, we believed; reform was all we needed. Let's learn from our mistakes, we said, not abandon hope.”

Like many fast-growing universities in the 1960s, Memphis State, without really intending to, emulated conservatory models as it added faculty. The low-brass position turned into trombone and tuba positions. The double-reed slot became oboe and bassoon positions; school music became instrumental, vocal, and elementary positions. And what about music theory—were specialists in ear training and counterpoint added to the theory and composition faculty? The only instructional area staffed with less-prepared faculty was music appreciation! We were handed the theory text (Brye) and told with a smile, a pat, and four days notice, “Your load is one class short and we need another Theory I section—you won't have any trouble.”

We managed, one step ahead of the class, and learned how to impart and drill the basics. But we didn't have much professional sense about the discipline of

music theory. We were performers mostly, not theorists or composers, but I believe it was this very lack of a fixed mindset about theory that led the fast-talking, trombone-playing music education man, a quietly humorous oboist, an unconventional percussionist, and a real live clarinet-playing composer to prepare the way for our CM revolution. Each individual's personal musicianship reflected completely integrated experiences with ear training, melodic and harmonic constructs, and historical style practices as he performed, taught performance, and talked performance. We felt that teaching theory in the traditional manner was basically unmusical—ear skills divorced from performance, harmony construction divorced from all literature except chorales—you know the routine. (We seemed to overlook the fact that we had all learned in the nonintegrated manner we now found artificial.)

So we fussed, were restless, and grew increasingly interested in what we read and heard about CM projects. Fired by our Bellingham experience, Ray Lynch (the oboist) and I set to work with the rest of the committee and by the beginning of the 1972-73 academic year, we thought we were ready! Gone from the core were four semesters of ear training, four semesters of music theory, two semesters of introduction to music literature, two semesters of form and analysis, and one semester of orchestration—the entire guts of the music curriculum. In their place were four semesters of:

Comprehensive Musicianship

An integrated approach to musical problems involving extensive exploratory experiences in the processes of shaping sounds into logical designs in new and traditional styles to develop listening,

performing, compositional and descriptive skills and understanding; a brief survey of Western music; identification of common elements in folk and art music of various cultures.

The course descriptions for CM II, III, and IV were “continuation of” statements, except for an odd trailer on CM IV:

... with more emphasis on individual student interests and needs; concentrated work on identified personal musical deficiencies.

Deficiencies are normally identified and remediated at the beginning of a course of study, not at the end. Someone on the committee insisted that we guarantee to fix the mess we might have created after three semesters of CM. As things turned out, there was indeed some fixing required!

We had also bought into Manhattanville's spiral curriculum concept in the formation of the CM course, so each semester of Comprehensive Musicianship began at the beginning (chant) and was supposed to go to the end (avant-garde), each term at a higher level of sophistication. Sure enough, students' basic skill development suffered as we joyfully rambled (gambled?) through the course.

One disabling factor was the faculty's tendency to ignore tasks that were personally difficult or boring; many of the students nearly drowned in our free-style musical swim. But there were also unexpected rewards from our democratization of musicianship because of the chances given to our more unorthodox students to excel on their own terms. I'll never forget the moving music Charlie Williams made in his pipe house—an 8' × 20' frame structure from which hundreds of homemade tubular chimes of varying materials hung. But Charlie's dilemma was our dilemma. Charlie had a good ear with which to tune his pipes, but no voice for matching pitches; he had a flair for expressive composition and performance but could not discriminate, in any discursive way, between the music of Beethoven and that of Debussy. He could notate uniquely for his pipes but could not get things going in the part-writing realm. Was Charlie a musician? Certainly.

But was Charlie a comprehensive musician who should pass CM I?

Charlie's case was an extreme example of our main evaluation problem. We tried to follow through with the pre-program belief that students didn't all have to acquire the same set of musical abilities. We believed that if students could demonstrate broad musical competencies through at least one focused area, that would be sufficient. After all, that's how many of us began. But we failed to develop the weighted performance-based evaluations that would show us, the student, other instructors, and the records office what quantity and quality of musicianship each student possessed. The traditional evaluation tools we used, in desperation, showed that Charlie shouldn't pass CM I.

The Charlies in our class weren't the only problem. We faculty had varying strengths as musicians, and in the absence of a fixed course of study our daily divergences resulted in quite a disparity of territory covered by the end of the term. The problem became critical in subsequent terms as divergent group A and divergent group B began a new term with instructor C.

Yet our cause was just, we believed; reform was all we needed. Let's learn from our mistakes, we said, not abandon hope. Despite this upbeat stuff, between 1974 and 1976 most of the original free-swinging CM faculty went full-time into their primary specialties. By 1976, the CM courses were taught mostly by well-grounded theory folks who had also been attracted to the CM proposition.

In the fall of 1976, a very different curriculum greeted the students. The four CM courses were now restructured into six courses with nearly the same amount of class time per course as the former ones (more time for drill and performance). The course descriptions for the first two semesters demonstrate the significant change in focus:

Comprehensive Musicianship

An integrated approach to the study of music in which the fundamentals of theory are applied in ear training, composition, and analysis of music literature.

CM I: Notation, intervals, scales, solmization, key signatures, triads,

and nonharmonic tones; introduction to orchestral instruments; to principles of melodic and rhythmic construction; to periods of music history with rudiments of style analysis.

CM II: Four-voice structures, fundamental harmony, diminished triads, seventh and altered chords; categories of nonchord tones; introduction to contrapuntal devices; ranges and transposition of instruments; survey of pre-eminent composers, genres, and stylistic characteristics of Western music.

Clearly, the new curriculum was a reaction to the vague, ill-defined areas of the 1972 program. Traditional fundamentals of theory and harmony were to be paramount, learned in a strict, progressive order through the six courses. Orchestration, style analysis, and music literature, however, were still being integrated with theory skills. Interestingly, a full survey of music literature was to take place in each of the first two semesters, and the final four terms featured detailed study of style periods in chronological order. CM had lost a little of its C (less performance, no non-Western sounds), but this 1976 core curriculum wasn't a bad compromise.

Things went better, but not well enough. Paraphrased faculty recollections:

"Deficiencies in ear training plagued the students; there was not enough drill time. Most students' minimal background in theory resulted in such primitive orchestration activities as to make them useless in developing this skill. We had a difficult time performing student exercises and examples from literature because of the inconsistent performance abilities of the students."

The strain became too severe. Another overhaul of the CM program in 1981 returned the music core nearly to its pre-1972 status. In place of the six CM courses were four theory courses, *five* aural courses, a separate orchestration course, and a separate advanced analysis class. The only remaining CM influence was the continued combining of music literature with musical construction and

analysis skills. Everything was now chronological, and the CM designation was gone. Two theory course descriptions:

Music Theory I: Basic notation, scales, intervals, triads, key signatures, analysis and exploration of technical material, and written exercises in historical areas of plainchant through late sixteenth century.

Music Theory II: Four-part structures, all seventh chords, chorale harmonization, figured bass realization; analysis and written exercises from historical areas of early seventeenth century through J. S. Bach.

The core program remains today in this 1981 form. Even though there is little integration of performance, orchestration, pop music, and world music with the development of theory, harmony, and style analysis, the faculty today still view the curriculum as being in the CM tradition. Again some paraphrased faculty comments:

"A lot of those early CM procedures just didn't work. Maybe that kind of CM is OK for well-grounded students with disciplined backgrounds, but our kids couldn't handle it. We have refined out what didn't work and kept what did. Our graduates today aren't confused; they are functionally literate musicians."

Did our CM revolution fail? As with any revolution, there was a lot of excitement; traditions were tossed aside and replaced with idealistic expectations.

The fact that our CM program has evolved rather than dissolved indicates that it did not fail. Through evolution, the core music plan eventually found the operational mix of separately trained musical skills with musical synthesis best suited to the needs and capabilities of students and staff. It was an active, thoughtful process that took place over those ten years, a process that resulted in a unique program perhaps fit only for us. And isn't that really the goal of curriculum reform? □