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### MENC: Advancing Music Education

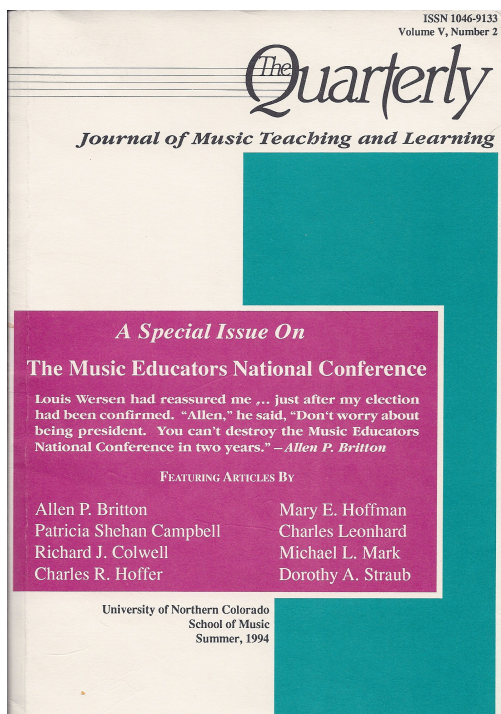
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*It is with pleasure that we inaugurate the reprint of the entire seven volumes of The Quarterly Journal of Music Teaching and Learning. The journal began in 1990 as The Quarterly. In 1992, with volume 3, the name changed to The Quarterly Journal of 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.*

# MENC: Advancing Music Education

**By Charles R. Hoffer**

*University of Florida*

Quite a few years ago, I saw a short subject before the main movie that featured a man who had built a wonderful machine consisting of lots of small wheels, wooden spools, and gears pulled by string and wire, all powered by a small electric motor. The machine covered the top of a large table, and when the power was turned on, its parts whirled away in a symphony of movement. What did the machine do? Absolutely nothing! It just bobbed, wiggled, and revolved its parts. In this case, the owner-builder didn't mind that it had no purpose, because he constructed it during his evenings for relaxation. Since seeing that movie short subject, I have thought about that machine many times as I sat through meetings of every organization with which I have been associated over the years.

Is the organization — be it church, university, or professional association — caught up in activities without a clear sense of purpose? Like the man's machine, is it just making a lot of motions? These are questions that every leader of an organization or association should ask himself or herself — frequently.

There seems to be a tendency among groups in contemporary America to devote more attention to maintaining an appearance of activity than to the actual substance of what they are about. Committees meet, reports are made, and minutes are kept, but the reasons for the organizations' existence seem to have faded from consciousness.

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Sometimes an association develops an action "plan," complete with target dates and an impressive taxonomical numbering scheme. Careful examination, however, reveals that too often this "plan" is for the development of additional plans! Occasionally a symposium or similar event is sponsored. People gather and talk impressively for a couple of days; then they go home, presumably feeling better (especially the major presenters, who pocketed a fee). But nothing has really changed! All the problems and conditions that existed before the event still remain, with no program for improvement in sight.

## **Roles of MENC**

What about the Music Educators National Conference (MENC)? As the professional association of school music teachers in the United States, what functions does it have? MENC and its federated units have several important roles. For one, they have an in-service function fulfilled through conferences and publications. Although these efforts are not the only source of professional growth for members of the profession, they are certainly significant.

A second role of MENC is to promote music education outside of the profession and thereby increase the public's awareness of music. These efforts include radio and television spots, brochures, interviews, news releases, and other promotional activities.

A third role of MENC is to serve as the "conscience of the profession." Someone or some organization needs to raise in articles and meetings the hard questions for the profession such as, "Are we doing the right things?" and "What impression do people gain about school music programs from what we present to the public?" This function could consume an entire article.

A fourth role of MENC and its units is to advance music education by

- promoting better conditions for music instruction;
- improving the quality of instructional recordings, books, and equipment;
- promoting the professional growth of music teachers;
- developing curricular materials;
- encouraging capable young people to become music teachers; and
- making it possible for more students to study music.

Much of this role involves educating people in leadership positions about the nature and value of music in school curricula and what is needed in terms of time and materials for an adequate program of music instruction.

Each of these roles is important, of course. However, the first two roles seem to receive the most attention. The third role is vital, although MENC officers do not become popular by raising such questions. The role of advancing music education is one that, over the years, has not been acted on as vigorously as it should have been. Unless it becomes a conscious and actively pursued goal of the association, music education will not progress much beyond its present condition. Indeed, without such efforts, it could recede.

Making MENC an effective force for the advancement of music education is no easy matter. But it is vital to do so. This goal was, I believe, one of the main themes of my tenure (1988-90) as MENC president. Repeatedly I pointed out that the purpose of MENC is not MENC — that is, MENC does not exist just to exist. Later this article mentions several programs to advance music education that were developed during those years.

### Obstacles Within the Profession

Unfortunately, at least four obstacles within the profession must be overcome if MENC's

role in advancing music education is to be achieved more effectively.

### The "Replay Syndrome"

This major obstacle refers to the tendency of groups to do this year what they did last year, which was a replay of what they did the year before that, and so on.<sup>1</sup> MENC and its state units hold conferences that vary little from one year to the next; even dates and locations of conferences seldom change. These conferences consist of traditional concerts, sessions, receptions, exhibits, and social events. Sometimes individuals (including an incumbent president) will call for new think-

ing and the divesting of old ways, but the event continues largely unchanged.

Many music education-related organizations conduct contest/festivals in which time-honored rules and procedures are improved only with the speed of a glacier. The publications of many state associations consist largely of columns that are predictable replays written by the presidents of the component groups. They thank those who helped with past events, announce upcoming events, and wish their constituents well in the coming school year or festival season. Thoughtful articles are rare.

### Inward-Looking Viewpoint

The replay syndrome complements a second obstacle to making MENC and other organizations more effective: an inward-looking viewpoint. This problem manifests itself when organizational matters consume more time and become more important than the problems and opportunities facing the profession. Sometimes the concern is over "turf," (like deciding which committee should have responsibility for an activity) and an excessive interest in the organization's constitution. One wonders if the attention given to constitutions is not in inverse relationship to

The desire to look good can be seen in the various MENC press releases. A strong positive "spin" is invariably given each story. "Everything is coming up roses," ... even if only "weeds" are sprouting at the time of writing.

the strength and vitality of the organization. Good organizations thrive regardless of their constitutions; poor ones limp along, no matter what their constitutions are like.<sup>2</sup>

### **Need To Look Good**

A third internal obstacle is the perceived need to make the association look good in the eyes of its members. At one time or another, every MENC president and executive director within my memory has been asked the time-honored question, “What has MENC done for me lately?” The question sends the officer into a prepared recital of benefits ranging from representing music education in Washington, DC, to providing professional publications and loan and life-insurance programs for members.

The desire to look good can be seen in the various MENC press releases. A strong positive “spin” is invariably given each story. “Everything is coming up roses,” according to these reports, even if only “weeds” are sprouting at the time of writing. Such a rosy outlook is an obstacle in that it deflects attention from the substantive issues facing the association and the profession. It is difficult to deal with troublesome situations if the members don’t know they exist. And problems have the annoying habit of hanging around until they are dealt with. A little candor can be the first step in correcting a situation.

The hard fact is, of course, that if MENC fails to convince its membership of its usefulness, it will suffer a loss of membership, with a concomitant loss of income and support to act in ways that really can make a difference for music education. Therefore, the effort to look good is somewhat understandable, because it affects what the organization will be able to accomplish. Much more than professional self-interest is at stake here.

### **Leadership Turnover**

A fourth obstacle to improved effectiveness is the large and frequent turnover of officers. Each year, about half of the state leaders and National Executive Board (NEB) change. Only the three national officers (president-elect, president, and vice president) stay on the NEB for six-year terms. On a positive note, turnover allows for people with fresh ideas to become involved in leadership roles, and it prevents MENC from becoming the

province of a few leaders who stay on and on. The negative side is that much time and effort is lost in informing the new leaders and gaining their understanding of the ongoing programs.

In contrast to elected officers, the MENC headquarters staff members in Reston, VA, have no term limits. Each decade, the executive director works with ten different NEBs and five different presidents. When serving as executive director, it must be impossible to avoid the feeling that a program of a particular NEB or president will pass in a year or two. Fortunately, because of the integrity of the current executive director, Dr. John J. Mahlmann, no major problems have developed during his ten years with MENC regarding the carrying out of MENC programs.

The executive director has no tenure and serves at the pleasure of the NEB, which probably has the effect of encouraging his or her cooperation with the elected leadership. Nor is the executive director expected to make policy or speak for MENC; that is the responsibility of the elected leadership. In fact, MENC officers have traditionally been quite sensitive about maintaining their policy-making and spokesperson prerogatives.

### **Determining Priorities**

Even if the leaders in MENC are convinced that advancing music education is a major function of the association, two questions still must be answered:

1. What actions should be taken to advance music education?
2. How should those actions be implemented? To cite a currently popular phrase, “How do we get there from here?”

The first question seems easy enough. One need not look far for problems facing music education; usually they just appear — uninvited and unwanted. The harder part of that matter concerns determining which problems are the more important ones. The answer will vary from year to year, but the process for identifying problems and assigning priorities should remain basically the same. That process should consist of a deliberate effort by the MENC leadership, with input from the state units, to identify the major problems facing the profession. The participants in the process must distinguish be-

tween problems on which the profession can have only a tiny impact (economic conditions or substance abuse, for example) and problems that could be significantly affected by MENC's appropriate action.

This process of determining priorities should probably be undertaken every other year. Doing so every year would consume most of the association's time, and doing it every three or four years would allow too much time to pass. Suggested topics should be written in priority order by the various individuals and groups that engage in the process. A committee then should study all the suggestions and synthesize them into the five or six topics that are of most concern. The committee's recommendations should then be reviewed by the NEB or National Assembly (the national and divisional officers and the state presidents) for a final "fine tuning."

This priority-setting process was first tried in 1989. Called "Future Directions," it continued through the spring of 1990. Six areas were designated:

1. music in early-childhood education;
2. middle-school music programs;
3. music teacher education and recruitment;
4. informing others about music education in conjunction with the National Coalition for Music Education;
5. music programs and children "at risk;" and
6. the affirmation of the music education profession.

These topics and a list of suggested actions were adopted by the NEB in 1990 and money budgeted for various aspects of the programs.

### **Making Effective Improvements**

Several years have passed since "Future Directions" was first adopted, and the process is still operative in MENC as of this writing under the rubric of "Strategic Planning." What can be learned about implementation from the experiences with "Future Directions?" Here are some general suggestions:

**1. Involve the membership and state units of MENC as much as possible.** Including them in the selection of "Future Direction" topics is a good first step, but their involvement should not end there. A continuing working relationship must be maintained among the national, divisional, and state units, and, ideally, between these units

and their individual members. Everyone should attempt to "play the same tune" in that each becomes aware of and works on the same programs for advancing music education (although these certainly do not need to be the only programs to which a state association devotes its attention).

For example, the National Coalition for Music Education was a part of the "Future Directions" efforts in 1989. The coalition, which includes the National Association of Music Merchants and many other music-related organizations, works to build support for music in the schools. It calls for national efforts in terms of organizational leadership and publicity, state efforts in working with state boards and legislatures, and, probably most important of all, an active coalition in every school district. Each level has a vital role to play, one that cannot be carried out by another level.

**2. Develop programs and related materials that music teachers in the field can understand and believe in.** This suggestion may seem as obvious as the fact that the sun rises in the east, and therefore hardly worth stating. Obvious or not, it has often been the "Bermuda Triangle"<sup>3</sup> for most of the highly publicized and well-funded programs of the U.S. Department of Education and major foundations. Over the past 25 years, the educational "roadside" has become littered with abandoned "vehicles" in the form of programs that were intended to bring about major reforms in American education. Why? Because the schools either lacked the resources needed to make them successful, or the programs were neither understood nor supported by the teachers in the field — those who actually do the teaching.

A large superhighway called the "Beltway," (actually, I-495) surrounds the Washington, DC, area. Many people experienced with the Washington scene point out, half humorously and half seriously, that the United States looks different when viewed from inside the Beltway.<sup>4</sup> There seems to be much truth in this statement, for a sense of importance and power permeates the atmosphere within the Beltway. Many issues that burn brightly in Washington, however, barely cause a flicker out in the hinterlands.



For example, inside the Beltway the designation of the director of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) is followed closely, and much importance is attached to the final selection.<sup>5</sup> After all, the NEA speaks for the arts at the national level and decides which arts projects and artists will receive its limited funds. Ask most music teachers in the schools who heads the NEA, and they probably think first of the other NEA (the National Education Association). Odds are the teachers don't know or care who heads the National Endowment for the Arts because, from their perspective, it really makes little difference.

One of the characteristics of "inside the Beltway" thinking is a faith in grand national solutions to problems – the notion that if only this or that program were operative, the problem would be largely rectified. Furthermore, the people inside the Beltway and those they consult are very confident that they are the ones who possess superior insight regarding what those programs should be. The result of such thinking over the years has been a number of well-intentioned, well-publicized pronouncements and programs with the staying power and effectiveness of a comet blazing across the night sky, making a brief but glorious appearance. In the end, however, more abandoned vehicles have been added to the educational roadside.

How can a similar fate be avoided by MENC's efforts to advance music education? First, when developing programs of action — one hopes as a result of the expression of

## *Implementing MENC's Programs: Strategies and Suggestions*

1. Involve the membership and state units of MENC as much as possible. Everyone should attempt to "play the same tune" in that each becomes aware of and works on the same programs for advancing music education (although these certainly do not need to be the only programs to which a state association devotes its attention).

2. Develop programs and related materials that music teachers in the field can understand and believe in. First, the developer-leaders should think seriously and often about how their efforts will be viewed by music teachers. Second, both volunteers and a selected sample from the field should become involved in reviewing the developers' work at various stages. Third, when the responses from the field have been received, they must be considered seriously. Any thoughts that "we know what's best for them" need to be suppressed — permanently, if possible.

3. Include in the plan a means of providing for follow-through.

4. Include evaluation in the follow-up effort. Evaluating indicators is a pretty subjective undertaking, but all systematically gathered information is potentially useful. And some information on a topic is better than no information at all.

5. Build programs around ideas, not personalities. Changing direction every two years tends to make the leadership ineffective; some consistency and long-term effort is needed. Let's hope the profession has matured to the point where it considers the merits of ideas apart from the person or persons associated with those ideas.

needs by the music education profession — the developer-leaders should think seriously and often about how their efforts will be viewed by the music teachers in the class and rehearsal rooms across the United States.

"Will it play in Peoria?" may be a tired old question raised by entertainers, but it is still valid. Such thinking will affect:

- the nature of the tasks undertaken (these must have a clear relationship to what happens in music classes and rehearsals);
- the language in which materials are written (platitudes, hortatory statements, and jargon should be avoided as much as possible);
- the manner in which the program is presented to the membership (pronouncements "from on high" are almost never welcomed by the teachers in the field); and
- the length and format of related publications, which should be as short as possible, attractive, and easy to follow.

Second, both volunteers and a selected sample from the field should become involved in reviewing the developers' work at various stages. Asking for voluntary reactions from the field is useful, but generally the small number of persons who respond are atypical in terms of their professional interests and abilities. A representative sample of music teachers, say 50 to 100 people, should be selected and invited to examine and comment on material sent to them; perhaps those selected can be paid a token amount. Because many music teachers believe they are too busy to study lengthy and complex materials and offer written critiques of them, the materials could be divided up among the selected teachers so that each person sees only a reasonable amount of material. Then, the responses to a set of questions could be recorded verbally via cassette tapes or by telephone calls taped for later transcription. Studying a sample adds to the cost and effort, of course, but better some extra effort and expense than produce another abandoned vehicle!

Third, when the responses from the field have been received, they must be considered seriously by those developing the project or materials. Any thoughts that "we know what's best for them" need to be suppressed — permanently, if possible. Often the writers and leaders teach or have taught at the college level. Some of them haven't taught in the elementary or secondary schools for many years (and in some cases taught there for only a short time). Their memories of the

classroom may have grown dim. They tend to overlook the fact that it is easy to conjure up solutions to problems while sitting in one's campus office.<sup>6</sup>

**3. Include in the plan a means of providing for follow-through.** Often, a committee or board adopts a program, and everyone goes home, apparently assuming that the program will magically implement itself. Even valid and well-planned programs cannot do that! The elected leadership simply does not have the time to implement a program effectively. They have full-time jobs that occupy their attention. Therefore, implementation becomes the responsibility of the MENC headquarters staff.

Until the middle of 1992, no senior staff members at MENC headquarters were assigned a major share of his or her time to devote to such matters within the profession. Nor was there a senior staff member who had a significant amount of experience teaching music in the schools and, as a result, could understand clearly where music teachers "are coming from." A well-qualified staff person has now been employed to lead the follow-through efforts. To date, the results have been gratifying in terms of the relationships with the state units and of the increased effectiveness of the programs. This staff position clearly is required if MENC is to be effective in advancing music education.

**4. Include evaluation in the follow-up effort.** This suggestion is not easy to implement. Most of the areas selected for special action by MENC and its federated units are complex, and therefore they are not easily assessed. Consider, for example, the problems of music in the middle schools, one of the topics that emerged from the "Future Directions" effort in 1990. This topic is important because in many school districts, middle-school music programs are being squeezed into exploratory programs. These programs, sometimes referred to as "the wheel," allow students to dabble in music class for six or nine weeks — and that's it for grades six, seven, and eight. Also, in some schools the personnel of performing groups must all be in the same grade, instead of consisting of the best performers in the school. The middle school problems are aggravated by



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the fact that some music teachers still teach those groups as though they were high school performing groups.

When this set of problems was identified in 1990, the "Future Directions" project asked what actions could positively change the middle-school situation. First, an effort was needed to educate school administrators and board members about the requirements of a music program that provides students with a consistent, educationally valid experience — something that does not occur in one, six-week long "spoke" in the "wheel." Second, music teachers needed to develop a clearer vision of what is the best music instruction for middle-school students.

Therefore, articles were placed in journals read by middle-school principals and school board members. Contacts were made with appropriate professional associations so that music could more effectively communicate its case to them. In addition, special publications dealing with music in the middle schools were developed for music teachers, and sessions on appropriate topics were offered at the state, divisional, and biennial national conferences. An issue of the *Music Educators Journal* focused on music at the middle-school level. It is hoped that the state units carried out similar activities to advance music education at the middle-school level.

All this was fine, but did it make a difference? And how can anyone tell? Such efforts are not like winning an election or a football game. In that case, the objective is very clear. Suppose that after two years of the efforts just described, the situation shows no apparent improvement. Does that mean that the actions were not effective? Would the situation have gotten worse without these efforts? Is two years enough time for improvement to manifest itself? These questions are impossible to answer with much

confidence. Yet, they must be asked, and answers must be honestly sought. Otherwise, efforts may be wasted and progress retarded.

The only way to examine such complex matters is to look for indicators of success. Are any schools increasing the amount of music required of all students? Have any schools increased the elective options for music? Have middle school principals made statements that seem more sensitive to the needs of music than they did before? Do middle school music teachers seem to be gaining a clearer idea of what they are trying to accomplish and how to go about accomplishing it? On what basis were those impressions formed? Evaluating indicators is a pretty subjective undertaking, but all systematically gathered information is potentially useful. And some information on a topic is better than no information at all.

**5. Build programs around ideas, not personalities.** For some reason, associating programs with particular individuals, especially MENC presidents, seems to have become a tradition. Perhaps that approach was satisfactory back when MENC was half its present size and its programs were largely confined to the *Music Educators Journal* and a few in-service conferences. Today, however, the organization is much larger and more comprehensive, and the problems it faces are more complex and intractable. For example, the need to develop support for music education precedes every president and NEB, and it will exist long after each has departed the scene. Changing direction in the activity every two years, in this and most other areas, tends to make the leadership ineffective; some consistency and long-term effort is needed. Let's hope the profession has matured to the point where it considers the merits of ideas apart from the person or persons associated with those ideas.

The MENC and the music education profession cannot afford to be like a machine engaged in purposeless, ineffective activities. Too much is at stake. Organized and intelligent programs of action are required if music education is to retain and, one hopes, improve its present status. The choice is clear: Work to advance music education, or allow it to languish and recede.


### Notes

1. The "replay syndrome" is by no means peculiar to MENC. It seems to afflict every professional association and organization.
2. The government of Great Britain has functioned successfully for hundreds of years with no written constitution at all.

3. Whether true or not, the "Bermuda Triangle" area of the Atlantic Ocean, east of Florida extending to Bermuda then to Puerto Rico, has a fabled reputation as a disaster area for ships and planes.

4. MENC headquarters is located several miles *outside* the Beltway!

5. Actress Jane Alexander was appointed director of the NEA in August, 1993.

6. The discrepancy between "best practice," as stated in the writings on music education and promulgated in music education methods courses and conferences, and what actually takes place in most school systems is a topic that merits much study. Either what is advocated as "best practice" really isn't in terms of being workable in most school situations, or it is not being presented in a way that is meaningful and understandable to most of the teachers in the field. 

## Preliminary Announcement and Call for Abstracts

### The Preparation of Tomorrow's Conductors V

The fifth biennial conference on The Preparation of Tomorrow's Conductors will be held in Buffalo, NY, February 16-18, 1995. The conference is designed for conductors and teachers of conducting. Abstracts are hereby solicited on the subject of current methodology of conducting teaching and on related subjects such as course content, development of communication skills, teaching to individual differences, computer-assisted instruction, and improvement of the student's ear. Presentations at the conference are limited to 25 minutes plus some time for questions.

The conference will consist of a small number of invited presentations in addition to those solicited here. Abstracts or outlines, not exceeding 250 words, of proposed talks or presentations should be sent by **November 15, 1994** to Dr. Harriet Simons, Department of Music, Baird Hall, University at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY 14260; phone (716) 645-2964; FAX (716) 645-3824.

## "Creativity, Composition, and Computers: Connections for the New Century"

The University of Arizona School of Music is sponsoring the fourth biennial Symposium on Research in General Music, to be held February 16-18, 1995. Scholars will address various aspects of the Symposium theme; they include Robert A. Cutietta, John Kratus, Rena Uptis, Peter Webster, and Yetta Goodman, a UA Regents Professor who is internationally recognized for her work with whole language pedagogy.

The refereed symposium will provide a setting in which recent research studies whose results have implications for general music instruction – in K-12 or collegiate settings, or in general music methods classes – can be communicated and discussed with other scholars. Breakout sessions will facilitate the continuing discussion of the themes raised in the invited addresses. Finally, one refereed session will feature the sharing of practice-based ideas. Complete information is available from Steven K. Hedden, Symposium Director, 111 Music Building, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721.