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Response to Music Matters
Chapter 5: Musicians, Listeners, and Musical Values

...if we conceive music education as the systematic development of musicianship in balanced relation to progressive musical challenges, then music education programs will provide the optimum conditions for realizing the values and aims of music education. (P. 135)

As important as all of the preceding chapters have been, this one truly gets to the heart of music teaching. The presentation of the concept of enjoyment as being the balance of application of skill to appropriate challenge, resulting in progressive levels of success, is one that music teachers deal with every day. On a very practical level, the wisdom of this concept becomes truly complicated when taking into account the many different levels of competence we have in a classroom, from remedial beginner to advanced.

Here is an example: my sopranos have the easiest part (they sing melody most of the time) and all tend to possess more advanced music skills than the other singers. The altos tend to be less skilled as a group, and have difficulty with the aural coordination required to sing harmony against another part. The tenors and baritones, whose voices (for the most part) have just changed, have very little idea what will come out when they attempt to sing (neither do the rest of us). The low basses include some more advanced singers, but also some very young ones whose voices changed practically overnight, their bodies doubling in size to the amazement of everyone. They are essentially babies inside of huge bodies! Their range consists of five to six tones, into which a whole musical part gets compressed.

The most effective solution would be to separate the unsure singers from the more advanced, in order to build appropriate skills in each group and to keep them all challenged, but not bored or frustrated. Alas, given the problems of structuring a school so that the maximum number of students

can take music, the reality is that all levels are mixed together. The needs of each level are different, yet all need to be challenged appropriately. Given the advanced level of most sopranos, they get the least attention. My solution is to involve them as much as possible by simply humming their part while I work with another section. This keeps them somewhat focused while helping to give a more complete idea of the music. The balancing act of keeping all of the students actively engaged, not frustrated or bored, is an ongoing challenge for me.

Self-growth, self-knowledge, flow, and self-esteem do not result from setting and meeting trivial goals. (p. 133)

This has been a central thesis of my teaching and it warms my heart to see it in your book. The growth in self-confidence and self-esteem that I have seen in my students as a result of meeting the challenges presented in increasingly difficult music of great substance, even to the point of winning high honors as a result of their hard work, is, for me, an overwhelming testament to the validity of this statement. In the inner city, where students were less likely to have had any musical training before high school, (or to have come in contact with any music other than that of pop culture and of their churches), my students often found that their favorite song was a Schuetz motet, or a piece by Mendelssohn. This came as a surprise to them as well as to me! I have found that, in general, no choir likes music it does not know, but that, once they begin singing it with understanding, (that is, the application of musical skills to the challenge of learning the music was successful), the singers internalized the music and felt it belonged to them.