General Music as a Cure for the High-Stakes Concert

Matthew D. Thibeault

Abstract

The author argues that concerts create pressures on the music curriculum similar to those high-stakes tests generate on the general curriculum. Three similarities are presented and discussed using the example of a concert the author organized: first, teaching to the test and the narrowing of curricular goals; second, evaluation by a single source of evidence; and, finally, absence of student voice and choice. A critical difference between concerts and high-stakes tests, however, is that music teachers design their concerts. The last half of the article presents ideas to take advantage of this difference in order to confront the commonly found pressures. The ideas focus learning around ensemble experiences through general music practices. Many of the examples take advantage of technology and multimedia to afford students opportunities to work with repertoire in new ways.

Keywords

high-stakes tests, concerts, curriculum, technology, music education

The kindergarten and first-grade students’ voices were joyously in tune as they enthusiastically sang and danced through a concert that included a Hebrew round, a Shaker hymn, a Spanish Puerto Rican carol, and an Orff arrangement. There were solos, selections featuring a single class, and others featuring all students, as well as dances, gestures, and the playing of percussion instruments. Parents even joined in for the final sing-along. Following the standing ovation, the music teacher received several bouquets of flowers, and the concert titled “Peace Around the World” was considered a success.

The next few days saw the arrival of nearly a dozen letters from parents and the school superintendent. All agreed the concert was a crowning educational achievement to be celebrated and a high point for the school’s music program. However, one person considered the concert to be a “low point” in these students’ music education. That person was me, and I was their music teacher.

Common sense holds that the quality of a music program is audible. Good concerts signify good music education programs, and vice versa. If we attend a concert by the San Francisco Symphony, our ears can tell they are world-class musicians, and our ears have the same power of discernment when listening to a local music program. There is certainly some truth to the notion that a performance reveals much about the musicians, but the links between concerts and education are often tenuous. Alternately, it may be the case that an unintended consequence of good concerts is the neglect of many music education goals, as concerts can easily crowd out the aims and goals for the class. Not only does a good concert not guarantee good music education, but also it may be a source of problems.

This article explores some often unexamined aspects of a performance-based curriculum from the standpoint of the general music practitioner. I begin by invoking high-stakes tests, which I argue have many of the same problems inherent in music programs that focus on concerts. I then discuss practices and projects that have emerged from partnerships with ensembles over the past few years at the University of Illinois. These partnerships aim to synthesize general music programs with ensemble programs and may serve as models for general practitioners and ensemble directors.

Are Concerts Music Education’s High-Stakes Tests?

The notion that a concert shares features with high-stakes tests on the surface may appear far fetched. When we think of high-stakes tests, most of us imagine students sitting at individual desks, hunched over their bubble-in

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sheet with a #2 pencil nervously clutched in hand and dreams of a top-tier college on the line. By contrast, concerts conjure images of celebration, unforgettable aesthetic moments, and the cooperation and harmony that make for transformative experiences.

Beneath surface differences, however, many similarities exist. I present three commonalities between concerts and high-stakes tests: first, teaching to the test and the narrowing of curricular goals; second, evaluation by a single source of evidence; and, finally, absence of student voice and choice. Not all concerts share these commonalities, but many do, and invoking high-stakes tests allows for a critical appraisal of some commonly overlooked problems. I freely admit that “Peace Around the World” had all four problems.

Each of the three aspects I present is problematic because it limits what is offered to students as a music education. Each one makes it less likely that students will have the kind of music education toward which the profession aspires, from the National Standards (MENC, 1994), to calls for a reconceptualization of the curriculum (Hanley & Montgomery, 2005; Regelski & Gates, 2009), to the series offering approaches to teach music through performance (Blocher, 1996).

“Peace Around the World” as a High-Stakes Test

“Peace Around the World” was meant to be a wonderful celebratory concert wrapping up my students’ first semester. From the beginning of the school year until early November the music program and curriculum were similar to many around the country: an active program that built on my undergraduate degree as well as certification and experiences in Orff-Schulwerk, Kodály, and Dalcroze Eurhythmics approaches and methodologies. Students learned many songs and games that were structured and sequenced to promote a deeper understanding of basic musical concepts and ideas. The curriculum was also rich in opportunities for play, and students looked forward to music class. I delighted in seeing the varied growth of my students, sometimes precocious and other times needing repetition and assistance to get an idea. The learning was rich and the journey pleasant.

With the approach of the mid-December concert, all richness and exploration went out the window. I reviewed the materials we had learned so far and pulled out a theme: peace. Of course, many other wonderful songs around that theme immediately came to mind as I imagined that first public encounter between my music program and the community. Soon, the list was long and the goal distant, and there was so much to accomplish in such a short time! Almost immediately, playful music making ceased in my classroom. Structure and sequence were replaced with constant drilling. Put simply, my classroom became a sweatshop as I simplistically rehearsed challenging songs over and over.

For example, I wanted my first grade students to sing “Dona Nobis Pacem” as a round in Latin. Usually when I presented a round, I taught the song in unison with lots of time to explore the text, talk about the meaning, and explore shapes or motives through movement. Only much later would I have the students sing in canon, and then usually with an approach that began with large groups before working toward independence and interdependence. There was no time for this now, though. I taught the song in unison and immediately started them singing as a round. It quickly became apparent this was simply too hard, so I decided to enlist the only two students who could sing in canon as conductors, standing in front of each group split on the stage. The students ended up performing a song in a way that sounded pleasing but without any understanding—I made them fake a round. Charles Leonhard (1999) would have diagnosed me as having caught the elitist virus.

An attitude that leads conductors to concentrate mainly on difficult music or music contests. This virus is present in too many departments and schools of music, and it contributes to the development of students who learn only to perform and rarely develop the broad understanding of music that constitutes music literacy. (p. 41)

The tune trumped the teaching as I compromised the quality music education I wanted to cultivate to promote a musical piece that was too challenging and introduced too quickly. I wanted us to look good on the high-stakes test of the students, the program, and myself. Without meaning to, I had fallen into three negative similarities between a high-stakes test and my curriculum.

Similarity 1: Teaching to the Test and Narrowing the Curriculum

There is widespread agreement that tests can function to limit what is taught and that this has a negative impact on student learning in the classroom (Giordano, 2005; Jones, Jones, & Hargrove, 2003; Kohn, 2000; Popham, 1999; Smith, 1991). Because tests cannot measure everything we believe important, teaching to the test leaves out much of value and often includes things that are trivial simply because they are easy to measure. In the words of Elliot Eisner (2002), “Not everything that matters can be measured, and not everything that is measured matters” (p. 178).

What does teaching to the concert look like, and what are its implications? Just as with teaching to the test, as
I began to prepare my concert focusing on those things that would be publicly exhibited. Although I would normally have students explore the meaning of lyrics, now I focused solely on their memorization. Although before I believed it to be critical for students to understand a musical culture, a composer, or a historical period in some way, the pressure of the concert ended these explorations. There wasn’t time to teach everything, so only those things that would end up on stage mattered.

Related to the idea of teaching to the test is the narrowing that can occur when concerts function like high-stakes tests. With my own concert approaching, I neglected or jettisoned activities that would normally have a place in the classroom. If it wouldn’t be on the stage, it wasn’t in the classroom. When teaching to the test, I focused only on the performance aspect of the pieces that I taught. The curriculum also narrowed by excluding whole kinds of activities.

This problem has been identified for decades, perhaps most famously in the MEJ article “Is the Curriculum the Score—or More?” (Mercer, 1972). The author found himself unable to continue an interview-based study about the curriculum because so many band directors viewed rehearsal techniques or the score as the curriculum.

Similarity 2: Evaluation by a Single Source of Evidence

As Deborah Meier (2000) writes, “Important decisions regarding kids and teachers should always be based on multiple sources of evidence that seem appropriate and credible to those most concerned” (p. 17). By contrast, when students take a high-stakes test, they put their brains on the line for a single moment that is inevitably used to draw pronouncements about past and future. The student’s daily life and achievements are summed up in a single moment, one that often does not resemble daily life and that is often viewed as an objective, unbiased measure despite much evidence to the contrary (McDermott & Hall, 2007).

This description parallels much of what happens in a concert. My students were judged by the community based on how they sounded at a single event, the concert. The limited perspective leads to two problems. First, in the test and the concert, problems come from the narrowness of the instrument as well as the problems arising from normal variations in the rhythms of life. At the concert, students having a bad day, or those who needed a few more minutes of rehearsal, or who were very shy, might have an embarrassing moment or negative experience. Unlike a high-stakes test, this might not follow the student in the same way or have the same kind of negative consequences. However, there is little doubt that many an embarrassing moment follows a performer and shades his or her experiences, confidence, and disposition toward music.

A second, unintended consequence of a single measure concerns the disposable nature of the learning. Today’s students routinely cram for tests and just as quickly forget what was learned (Pope, 2001). The same can happen at a concert. Certainly, the repertoire is often shelved after the concert, usually collected right at the concert. Continuing to perform a piece after the concert is beyond uncommon. These practices reveal an inherent problem: Tests intend to unobtrusively measure ongoing learning, but they often come to drive the process so that learning is tailored to the test as a moment in time to be reached and then abandoned.

Similarity 3: Absence of Student Voice and Choice

Another hallmark of high-stakes tests is the absence of voice and choice for students. The external and standardized nature most commonly found in high-stakes tests prohibits students and teachers from having much input with regard to how they will be measured.

Similarly, most students in music programs participate in the preparation of concerts where their own opinions and desires tend to play second fiddle to the director’s decisions. My own students had no say in the music we performed, which I rationalized by imagining that they weren’t in a position to know what repertoire could suitably be presented. I was even unwilling to let them choose among the volume of songs we had already learned in music class that year. As Patricia O’Toole (2005) notes, often those who sing in choir don’t have a voice in the learning.

By contrast, there is increasing recognition of the value and benefit behind pedagogy that honors student voice and choice. Such media-aware approaches as collegial pedagogy make room for the interests and desires of students (Chavez & Soep, 2005).

Despite my aspirations, “Peace Around the World” swallowed me whole, completely transforming my ideas and aspirations. I changed my teaching in a way that I did not immediately understand; only on reflection would I see how much I had sacrificed my more holistic approach. My own thinking at the time was that I went into concert mode, preparing in a way that felt natural given my own experiences in performing groups.

Toward a Curriculum Beyond the Score

To move beyond the trap of the high-stakes concert, we need not only good ideas but also a better understanding of the problem. Part of the problem is the existence of a false dichotomy that forces us to choose between bad options: make music with an ensemble or learn about
Music in a general music class, be an ensemble director or be a general music teacher, and so on. We need a way to move forward so that students and teachers can construct music education where music making and music learning go hand in hand.

John Dewey (1901/1976) confronted a similar bad choice when discussing the elementary school in his book *The Educational Situation*. Dewey first laid out the typical choice between traditional and progressive education. Instead of arguing for one over the other, Dewey characteristically argued for a larger vantage point from which both could be incorporated and where both sides, often seen as oppositional and in conflict, could instead reinforce each other. In his analysis, “The conflict, the confusion, the compromise, is not intrinsically between the older group of studies and the newer, but between the external conditions in which the former were realized, and the aims and standards represented by the newer” (p. 267). Applying this analysis to the present problem, the conflict and confusion that warped my curriculum around “Peace Around the World” was not an intrinsic conflict between performing and general music learning but between the concert conception and newer approaches to music education. What we need is a richer conception of the concert.

This analysis has the attraction of pointing a way forward that enlarges our definition of performance without abandoning those things considered at the core of the music education tradition. Instead of choosing between concerts and the classroom, we have an opportunity to enlarge the concert to include other kinds of learning. Although it will likely be the case that concerts will retain some similarity to high-stakes tests, they can be redesigned by the teacher or community to reflect the kinds of learning most valued.

This broader vision of a concert was something that naturally emerged in my teaching over the years that followed “Peace Around the World.” I began to have students occasionally conduct pieces and also began to include more student compositions. Instead of thinking about what pieces should be performed, I began to consider which aspects of the curriculum were most meaningful and then considered how these might be displayed. Some of the students’ written work could be included in the concert program, and other aspects of the curriculum could be displayed via the school Web page. Our concerts began to feature narrated demonstrations of classroom exercises and games, often inviting audience members to participate. In this way, the concert became an opportunity to showcase facets of the music program in ways that remained entertaining while allowing the class to prepare for the concert without disrupting the curriculum. If the concert were to remain a high-stakes test, it would have been reengineered to be one that authentically represented the kinds of achievements deemed valuable.

These hopes for integrating a richer curriculum with performances surrounding performances stayed with me as I moved into the university as a professor. For the past 3 years, the students in my undergraduate music education technology course have been working on ways to enrich ensemble experiences, using technology to develop experiences similar to those found in general music classes, hoping to address the situation outlined by Dewey, and using much of the project method outlined by his student William Kilpatrick (1918). Each semester, we select a musical work in the public domain, which allows us to create items and projects without having to seek permission from a copyright holder and to fully own what we create (Boyle, 2008). The works have included *Invincible Eagle* by Sousa, *Symphony No. 5 in E Minor* by Tchaikovsky, *Pictures at an Exhibition* by Mussorgsky, and *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* by Mozart.

Working in groups, students propose and then carry out a project that can be used by students and teachers to deepen and extend learning in a way that complements traditional performance preparation. The projects, units, and modules are then posted to Web sites devoted to each project, so that ensemble members and the general public can continue to use the materials.

Each of the following ideas could be used alone or in combination with others. All of them could be shared as part of a performance, through description in the program, through links to student work online, or in presentation to the audience via a digital projector. To simplify, I have grouped them into three categories: learning about the work, learning the work, and sharing the work.

**Learning About the Work**

The following projects afford opportunities to learn about a work being prepared for performance while giving students opportunities to create their own knowledge. Figure 1 gathers the variety of activities presented and depicts multiple opportunities for students, teachers, and the community to deepen experiences with works presented in concert.

**Give Students the Score**

One of the simplest and most profound projects is simply providing a digital copy of the score to each student. Because we work with music in the public domain, every student can have a copy of the parts and score. Normally, of course, the cost of purchasing multiple copies of the score prohibits this practice, but students take great pleasure in having a score for their own use and study. When
using notation software such as Sibelius or Finale, the score can also be output in multiple formats that might offer different learning opportunities: a pocket score, a score at pitch instead of transposed, a piano reduction, and so on. In my class, students each take a section of the larger work, assembling a major score from a jigsaw of individual efforts.

Create Visualizations of the Work

In addition to looking at the score, alternative visualizations of the work can afford compelling learning opportunities. In our course, we use software such as the Music Animation Machine or Logic to create piano roll scores via MIDI. These scores make many things visible that are difficult to see when using standard notation. Alternate visualizations such as an amplitude display or spectrograph of a recording also contain information that can allow a student to better understand the piece as a whole.

In our class, we create visualizations that can be printed out as a scroll and hung on a wall. They are also laminated so that students can mark (with dry erase markers) musical aspects they notice and understand directly on the scroll and so that those observations can be publicly shared.

Create an Audio Guide to the Work

Although a visualization allows students multiple ways to flexibly think about a piece, other students in my class have been interested in helping students to come to a canonic understanding or interpretation of the piece, such as sharing ideas regarding common understandings of form. As Alan Britton (1998) notes, “Remember, we don’t..."
teach a Beethoven sonata in order that our students learn what sonata form is. We teach something about sonata form in order that our students may more quickly come to know a Beethoven sonata” (p. 132).

One group of students learned about the march form and applied the traditional understanding of the strains and trios of Sousa’s Invincible Eagle. Using Audacity, they recorded a description of the form, edited together with samples of the music from our own synthesized recording. In the final audio guide they offered a seamless explanation of the form that takes the listener on a guided tour.

Interview Others About the Work

One of the great pleasures for my students is asking experienced musicians about the pieces they are learning. With the rise of powerful video editing software, along with inexpensive video cameras, it has become easy for students to gather the knowledge of others and bring this back for the benefit of the class.

With the Sousa project, students interviewed Dr. Joseph Manfredo, assistant professor of music education at the University of Illinois, collecting his views on topics such as what he wished all high school students knew about Sousa. Other students interviewed Scott Schwartz, director of the Sousa Archives and Center for American Music, for a much richer sense of the context, Sousa’s working habits, and other fascinating ideas. With the Mozart project, students interviewed string faculty, conductors, and other students about their relationship with the piece over time, their memories of important performances, and why they think this work has remained so important for so long. These were edited and shared with the class.

Learning the Work

Although all music educators likely agree that experiences with the work can be enhanced by learning more about the work, many of my students have been interested to explore richer ways to help students learn to perform the work and to encourage reflection while learning.
Create and Share Melody Books

Melody books were created for the Mozart and Tchaikovsky projects to make sure that the best melodies of each piece were available to every performer in the ensemble. For example, my students and I share the belief that every musician involved in playing Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony should have an opportunity to play the beautiful horn solo that opens the second movement.

To create a melody book, we cut and pasted all of the interesting melodies from our Sibelius file into a new music notation document, keeping track of each melody’s location and which instrument originally played it. We then used software to transpose the parts. When a melody was outside the playable range for a different instrument, the students had a conversation with players of that instrument to find out how they would modify the melody. The final melody books were converted to PDF, posted online, and then e-mailed to the performers and the ensemble.

Recording and Sharing Rehearsals

Just as giving students a copy of the score provides a sense of the big picture, recording a rehearsal allows students an opportunity to hear the music they are learning in a very different manner than during their music making in a rehearsal. These recordings, collected over months, provide performers an idea of how far they have come and how much they have learned.

For the Tchaikovsky project, we recorded rehearsals and then posted MP3 versions to be shared with the performers. Louis Bergonzi, the conductor of the University Philharmonia, gave his section leaders homework assignments to listen to the rehearsal and come up with comments for improvements each section could make.

Remixing the Rehearsal

For my own students, the opportunity to make new music by remixing the rehearsals we recorded was irresistible. To help structure the assignment, I pulled out several 1-second clips and gave them to students. Choosing only one of the fragments, each student created an original musique concrète piece using Audacity’s built-in audio manipulation effects. The resultant compositions were highly successful and deeply satisfying, with added pleasure in knowing that the new music directly derived from rehearsals of these classic works. These remixes allow students in an ensemble to create and collage as befits the genre of the remix, which is an increasingly important creative technique across all the arts (Lessig, 2008).

Using Video to Capture the Learning Experience

In addition to using video for interviews, students also captured and chronicled the learning in the technology class and in the ensembles. One student, taking a university course called Writing With Video, submitted a final project for that class that represented the learning experiences surrounding the performance of the Tchaikovsky symphony and our digital projects. He interviewed the horn player about getting to play the solo she had learned as an excerpt for years. He talked to the section leader and concert mistress for their viewpoints on playing the piece, and he also spoke with students in the technology class about their own work on the project. The resultant video was posted to YouTube and to the Tchaikovsky project Web site, and a link to this Web site was included in the program when the Philharmonia Orchestra performed the symphony.

Sharing the Work

It would be unfortunate if the enriching experiences that students enjoyed were not extended to the audience. The students in my technology class have employed many approaches to help ensembles share their work with audiences by enhancing their understanding and preserving the performance.

Create and Share Program Notes

For all the projects my class has pursued, we have made an effort to gather our own knowledge and the knowledge of others in the classic form of a program note to be shared digitally and in performance. This project allows students to venture into the world of digital information and our library to create an essay that helps the audience experience the piece.

I also require students to read exemplary authors of program notes and musical essays ranging from George Bernard Shaw to Michael Steinberg. Many orchestras routinely post their program notes during the concert season, so multiple examples from around the world are often easy to find. My students have also often elected to publish their own program note.

Remix the Score

All of my students remix a rehearsal in our musique concrète project, but some of the students also decide to share the work in a new way by creating something entirely new. These derivative works take the original melodic or harmonic material and use it to create a new work, as when Jerome Kern used Tchaikovsky’s horn solo to derive the jazz song “Moon Love.”
My students have produced a multitude of derivative works over the past 3 years. These range from creating a jazz lead sheet, to a cappella arrangements, to turning an orchestral score into a piece for piccolo and guitar. In every instance, interesting new musical material has arisen alongside a new understanding of the original material. These student creations, often short, can be shared before a performance or posted online for the audience to enjoy after the concert. They also often create space for informal, peer-directed learning and pedagogy (Green, 2002). Sometimes the compositions stray far from the source and other times resemble the fan fiction, similar to students who write new works using the characters from books such as the Harry Potter series (Jenkins, 2006).

### Hold a Digital Dress Rehearsal

Beginning last spring, my students reached out to preservice elementary classroom teachers at the University of Illinois, inviting them to attend a dress rehearsal where digital technology aimed to assist in the understanding of the piece. Starting with our *Pictures at an Exhibition* project, students were invited to the dress rehearsal and encouraged to bring their laptop. At the dress rehearsal, they had an opportunity to log in to a chat room, where the assistant conductor described the form as the work unfolded. All members of the audience could ask questions, make comments, or otherwise expand their thinking while listening.

In addition, a student created a PowerPoint presentation on each of the movements of “Pictures.” The slides presented the pictures for a given movement when known, presented program notes, and generally served to assist in the listening experience through visual media. The attendees were invited to return for the concert, where they could experience the concert again.

### Share the Performance

Because we worked with pieces that were in the public domain, we did not need to secure permission from anyone but the performers when deciding to post a performance (Althouse, 1997). Often, the ability to share a concert is hampered primarily by copyright rather than cost or technical difficulties (Lessig, 2004). Having cleared the copyright hurdle and with professional tools in the hands of students and teachers alike, the performance can live on through recordings made available to the performers, the public, other students, and anyone else who might benefit from or enjoy our musical offerings.

### Tomorrow’s Concerts

I have outlined ways that teachers and students can expand the concert conception and the kinds of learning that can accompany concert preparation. Using approaches that foster active and constructive learning about the work, learning to play the work, and sharing the work learned, a concert can display the rich kinds of learning called for in contemporary music education. These approaches might also play a role in practitioner responses to current criticisms of ensemble programs, including attention focused on problems with band programs (Allsup & Benedict, 2008), opening up more democratic approaches to music education (Woodford, 2005), and counterbalancing the sense the music education may be at a “tipping point” (Kratus, 2007).

The analogy I make between concerts and high-stakes tests brings attention to some of the common problems that result when students and teachers let performing get the best of them, potentially resulting in teaching to the concert, focusing the assessment too much on the single measure of the concert, and neglecting student voice and choice in the learning process. The local control that teachers can exercise over how a concert can look and sound gives much room for hope that a larger conception can be advanced.

My work and the work of my students heavily draw on technology, which should be seen as an opportunity and a positive development. Today’s students belong to the generation that often referred to as being born digital (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), and finding ways to connect contemporary means of creating and experiencing music and media with traditional approaches to performance can keep music learning relevant and exciting without compromising core values.

Tomorrow’s concerts can keep the best of yesterday’s concerts: the connection, the communion, the unique musical moment, and the community. But they can also make room for more: digital works that bring the classroom to the stage, sharing and displays of nonperformance learning, and new works created by students derived from rehearsals and the score. Not only can they showcase wonderful works through performance, but they can also open a window on the learning about the piece and share moments from along the way when performers took time to work with the piece in rich ways. It is a pleasure to be making music with young people at such a rich moment in our profession’s history.

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References


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Matthew D. Thibeault is an assistant professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he teaches courses in general music, music education technology, and research methods.