

Electronics, Ethics, and Student Achievement:

Applying a Metric of Purpose and Principle to the Use of Performance Enhancing Technology

Instrumental music is a constantly developing performance medium. Creativity and innovation are highly valued components of this everchanging art form. Growth is vital to this work, from the development of new compositional techniques and trends to the use of unique and varied instrumentation, and from the incorporation of artistic elements with genesis in other mediums to our profession's ever growing and ever evolving understanding of technique for quality performance. It is no wonder, then, that the simultaneous tremendous change and growth in the field of electronics has entered the consciousness and practice of music and music education. This growth in the field of electronics has resulted in rapid changes to the use of tools to enhance performance, such as microphones, amplification systems, and tools for sound manipulation. As a result, a larger conversation has emerged from the growth of electronic technology's place in our field. We find ourselves in need of a bedrock set of principles by which such regulation will be developed, a metric by which we determine the ethical and purposeful use of technology in performance. That metric must be founded in our primary mission as music educators and in the fundamental values of student education, performance, and achievement. It serves as a barometer by which not only regulation and decision making in the world of electronic enhancement will be measured, but by which we can also evaluate and frame the next version of this conversation, as the next groundswell of change and innovation comes to our field.

Some directors of instrumental ensembles are becoming so extensively involved in the use of electronic amplification, pickups, and sound boards to enhance the sound of their performing groups that numerous state associations have been compelled to create extensive rules governing the use of electronics in competition and assessment. Examples include: Wind instruments can be amplified only for solo or small ensemble features. The use of pre-recorded music is prohibited. All equipment utilized in performance must be operated by eligible students. All electronically produced music including narration and sound effects shall be performed live, in real time, by eligible students. The list is extensive, complex, specific, wildly varied across associations and competitions, and is growing. And while such regulations are important and productive, individual associations generating rule after rule in an attempt to capture each new misuse or abuse of technological advantage can't quite catch up to the true essence of what lies before us: the imperative to reassert the central tenant of our work that keeps the music and the musical education of our students at the center of what we do, always.

While no one would suggest that ensemble directors should not seek to produce the best possible performances, that standard of best possible must always be predicated on what is possible given student education, skill level, and genuine achievement. As music educators, our goals include quality performance, but must always center around developing musically astute and adept musicians. Training the students to perform and interpret musical art and developing programs of integrity should always supersede pageantry and the hungry pursuit of scores and splash. The application of these tools can have a direct and dramatic impact on student learning. If, for example, a small number of students are mic'd and amplified through a sound system, while other students are instructed not to play or blended away technologically from the overall sound, are we indeed serving and educating all of our students? If a person in the stands with an iPad is

manipulating the character of a marching ensemble's sound in order to artificially create more resonance, are we indeed teaching our students proper tone production? When competent, experienced judges say repeatedly that they can no longer tell what is actual student performance and what is created artificially, how do we continue to defend our programs in terms of measurable educational standards or our systems of assessment and evaluation as accurate, unbiased, and based in the expertise of musical professionals? In a world where the value of arts education is always up for debate at a bureaucratic level, is it not essential that we demonstrate that our programs, at least, are actually providing an education and are being evaluated accordingly?

Several of our professional organizations recently sponsored a national survey dealing directly with this topic. Its findings were presented as part of a 2018 Midwest Clinic session. The survey found that a vast majority of band directors believe that student accomplishment is of paramount importance, and that certain types of electronic usage and sound enhancement do, in fact, distract from our primary mission- teaching a love for music through the performance of great music. The responding directors were also universally concerned that relying on such techniques can lead to unethical approaches to performance and teach students that actually accomplishing a thing (playing your part well) is less important than giving the impression that you did (pantomiming your way to winning by score). Interestingly, many survey responders who are involved with marching band programs in a design capacity held little or no concern relative to individual students' musical learning or ethics in our programs. It seems that some of this set of professionals hold the opinion that only the effectiveness of a presentation mattered in the end, regardless of how it was achieved. Perhaps since these professionals are contracted to design a look, an impression as we just mentioned, and not as career educators, our obligations to this principle fundamentally should, in fact, be different than theirs. It is not, perhaps, the responsibility of those we bring in to assist our programs in these capacities of look, feel, and aesthetic to defend the core of music education. It is, however, we assert, ours.

One notably accomplished band director highlighted the conflict in frustration, stating "After all these years of working so hard to teach good tuba players, if I chose to in my marching band, I would not have to worry about that...I could just synthesize the sound from the keyboard." It should be noted that the effort to artificially enhance the impression an ensemble makes, while soaring in marching band, is not limited to that sphere, but has crept into concert ensembles during adjudication or into theoretically "live" recordings submitted for selection committees and prestigious awards as well. The ethical slippery slope that comes with the use of sound manipulation to improve overall impression is clear, regardless of medium. If ensembles can be evaluated for awards, inclusion in programs, festival adjudication and assessments, and more while utilizing technology to blur over inadequacies, masquerade ensemble practice, or imbue student performances with professional sound in lieu of live performance, then the value added of our profession and programs comes directly into question.

We believe that it is our responsibility to use every single opportunity, be it in the concert hall or an outdoor arena, to ensure that students leave our classrooms as musically educated people who are able to rely on their own abilities to strive and accomplish, and who value the act of doing so. That in our classrooms and ensembles and at our evaluations, adjudications, and competitions they learn again and again the value of true musical achievement and appreciation, and see

modeled an ethical worldview based on hard work, precision, passion, effort, and justice. To do any less is to give administrators reason to question why we belong in the academic curriculum. The use of electronic enhancements in ways that present false impressions of what students are actually doing, contributing, and accomplishing in performance are neither ethically nor educationally sound. In some schools, marching band is purely extracurricular or taught outside the school day. Some may use this as a justification for employing questionable practices such as those discussed above. Thinking, if they contain them to an extracurricular component of the program, they should be in the clear. Without diving into the extremely faulty logic that ethics do not also have a place in extracurriculars, particularly as they pertain to competitive activity, there is still a more fundamental reason this reasoning fails. If we do not apply the same principles of music education to *all* of our band activities, why would a school administrator or community member not be tempted to consider us part of the athletic program, or consider staffing us in an after school only manner, or in general denigrate the practice and training of an art form to the level of pure entertainment and pastime? Any element that can lead those who do not yet understand the intrinsic value of music astray from seeing it as an art form and an educationally sound instructional field is a danger to music education as a whole.

It is the stance of this organization that teaching students to be ethical is worthwhile, and that it is our responsibility to consistently demonstrate those ethics in the way that we do our jobs. Competition and adjudication seem to motivate a blurring of those ethics for some, which is a waste of the fundamental educational opportunity that competition presents. Competition should be an instrument that both motivates participants and sharpens skills. Competition should not lead us to sacrifice those ethics or to sacrifice the work that leads to quality music education on the altar of awards and accolades. In areas that it does, it must be curtailed and returned to its fundamental purpose in our profession.

It is our belief that student musical achievement fundamentally matters, and that students should be held accountable for learning. Moreover, that those of us in the vocation of teaching should be held accountable for defending and protecting that learning. Students should be taught to enjoy the process and the pride that comes with accomplishing difficult musical tasks. They should have access to the invaluable lesson that pride and self-respect are earned through hard work on challenging tasks and pushing one's abilities to their limit until the limit itself changes as a result. And that they should experience the joy of performing quality music with others. Music as an art form and an educational medium have immense power in our world beyond musical achievement alone, but those additional impacts on the world are earned through remembering always to keep the main thing the main thing- to center our focus on the music, on the work, and on the students themselves.

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