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Community music in the United States: An overview of origins and evolution[1]

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore the contribution community music has made and can make to cultural education in the United States, both in its own right and in the context of education as a whole. The paper gives a bird's-eye view of the historical highlights of community music-making activity in various parts of the country, particularly outlining the types of activity prevalent within the southeast of the country. Finally, some thoughts are presented regarding the collaboration (or lack thereof) between formal music education in the schools and community music-making, concluding that community music and music education could benefit from closer cooperation.

KEYWORDS

history
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SOME GENERAL THOUGHTS ON SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE IN AMERICA

For the past several decades the United States has been undergoing social and political change of such far-reaching implications that perhaps 'revolution' to describe such changes is a more apt word. The very definition of what it means to be an American is being questioned, examined and revised. Since the 1960s

1 In most cases, the 'papers' presented in this issue of the *IJCM* were never conceived as finished research articles. Instead, many of the pieces present 'impressions' of community music

from the perspective of a practitioner, an educator or a policy-maker. For an explanation of the rationale behind this issue, please see the editorial.

the United States has gone through, and in fact is still in, a period of integration – not only black–white but male–female, North–South, rural–urban. In many respects this change has been remarkably successful, opening the doors of white male bastions to minorities and women. Interestingly enough, however, once the nation seemed to be headed towards a truly egalitarian society – one in which racial, ethnic and gender categories would be irrelevant – the very groups that had struggled for equality began to demonstrate uneasiness about being swallowed up in the predominant culture. They now seek to retain their separate cultural and gender identities – while (ideally) uniting on larger issues that affect the common good. The nation's concept of itself thus seems to be moving from 'melting pot' to 'compatible pockets of diversity'. For example, in the universities courses centred on the contributions of 'dead white males' are the target of vitriolic criticism, while degrees in black history, women's studies and ethnic folklore proliferate.

After three decades of civil rights legislation, neighbourhoods remain stubbornly segregated by race and socio-economic level; one can only conclude that, although Americans have for the most part learned to work together in harmony, they prefer to spend their leisure hours with people much like themselves. Churches schedule separate services in Spanish and Vietnamese. Many public schools, rejecting the idea of imposing English on children who speak another language at home, now provide bilingual instruction. Even among English speakers we have failed to impose a single 'standard' dialect: middle-class teachers resort to ghetto 'jive' in the classroom. We have come a long way from Webster's idea of a national unity so tightly established culturally that not only would we be taught the same 'American language' in the schools, but we would all adopt the same speech patterns.

The tension between unity and diversity has become a national issue, and the maintaining of a balance between the two is perceived as essential to the general welfare. As a means towards retaining cultural distinctions while forging a sense of national identity, community music has more potential than we ordinarily acknowledge. The United States has a long heritage of community music and music-making, which is perhaps stronger today than ever before. Community music can be at once a vehicle for cultural self-expression and an avenue for self-disclosure. The former serves diversity; the latter promotes unity, because it is a means of cultural education, which in turn fosters tolerance and mutual respect. As a form of cultural education, community music properly has a symbiotic link with the core of the US education system: the public schools.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the contribution community music has made and can make to cultural education in the United States, both in its own right and in the context of education as a whole. The paper will give a bird's-eye view of the historical highlights of community music/music-making activity in various parts of the country. Then it will outline the types of activity prevalent today, with some concentration on the Southeast by way of examples. Finally, some thoughts will be presented regarding the collaboration (or lack thereof) between formal music education in schools and community music-making.

HISTORICAL REVIEW OF COMMUNITY MUSIC IN AMERICA

Community music began with the pockets of immigrants who settled in various parts of the United States. In spite of the mobility of US society since World War

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II, these pockets can still be found in their original strongholds. If one knows where to look: Celtic on the eastern seaboard; African American in the South (spreading, after the Civil War, to the industrial cities of the North). A brief overview of the various waves of immigrants and the music they brought with them will reveal the pattern.

In all likelihood, music-making on the North American continent began some 50,000 years ago when groups of people we now call Native Americans, or American Indians, crossed the Bering Straits from Asia. However, the Native American influence on community music in this country's history has not been significant. From the moment the first European settlers arrived, conversion to European cultural norms was expected of the Indians, as it has been of other cultures since. An early account of Father Rale forming a robed choir of 40 Indians at Norridgewock, Maine, in 1693 seems fairly typical of the 'missionary attitude'. Native and European musics had so little in common that, in spite of Rale's efforts, they failed to assimilate (Nettl and Behague 1973) – in contrast to African American music, which drew on the common element of harmony characteristic of both African and European models. Therefore, this discussion of community music begins with the arrival of European settlers at Jamestown in 1601.

Religion played a central role in the music of the colonies. Many early settlers came to the 'New World' seeking freedom of religious expression: Pilgrims in Plymouth (1620), Puritans in Boston (1630), Mennonites in Philadelphia (1683) and German Pietists in Pennsylvania (1694). Examples of early musical activity include publication in 1640 of the *Bay Psalm Book* (which contained words but not music) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, by John Tufts in 1712 and the subsequent organization of singing schools (1717), which represented the first step towards a systematic form of music education. In 1744 Moravians who had settled in Pennsylvania organized a Collegium Musicum that performed Bach, Hayden and Mozart. These German immigrants also greatly enhanced the use of instrumental music in worship services through the addition of stringed instruments, flutes and French horns. A community orchestra was organized at Lititz, Pennsylvania, in 1765 to supplement the music of the church service.

Reports of concerts in Boston and Charleston in the early 1730s suggest that musical activity was spreading from its church-based beginnings. Although the desire for religious freedom drew many settlers to the New World, the opportunity for economic prosperity was the key factor for others. Undoubtedly, settlement such as Charleston, established for economic gain rather than religious freedom, provided a less restrictive environment in which secular music could develop. Early evidence of this is in the fiddler contests that were held in the South in the 1740s. Louisiana, while not one of the original colonies, also played a role in the development of secular music the New World, in large part due to the relocation of French-speaking Acadians from Canada to New Orleans in 1755. Through their influence this Catholic city became more tolerant of secular music and dancing, as demonstrated by a 1791 opera performance, and Sunday dancing and drumming on the levees by slaves; slaves were forbidden to play drums in the British colonies.

The development of a particularly American music begins to become apparent around the time of the War for Independence in 1776. Sacred music by American composers, published in tune books, was carried south from New England in the mid-1780s by Yankee musicians. These New England itinerant music masters helped to spread this uniquely American style of sacred music

to churches, meetings and singing schools throughout the fledgling country. In much the same way, militia bands, such as Josiah Flagg's, organized in Boston (1769), the Massachusetts Militia Band (1783) and the US Marine Band (1789), helped to spread secular music throughout the newly formed United States of America. The utilitarian function that the militia bands served during the military conflicts of the late 1700s and the secular concerts that they presented during that time represented the beginning of yet another facet of American musical activity.

Religious events at the turn of the century served once again as an impetus for growth in musical activity. In 1800, the revival movement that broke out in Kentucky helped to popularize another form of American music – revival songs. These songs, which borrowed secular folk tunes, were published in new hymnals in 1805, along with harmonized folk tunes, psalm tunes, fuguing tunes and anthems using four-shape notes. The application of the shape-note method to religious music in New England in 1800 created another branch of musical activity that was aided in 1844 by the publication of *The Southern Harp*, a book which adhered to the four-shape system instead of the seven-note 'do-re-mi' system.

The early nineteenth century also saw the foundations laid for many of the same types of community musical activities that the United States as a nation enjoys today. The founding of the Boston Phil-Harmonic Society, a community orchestra (1809); the Handel and Haydn Society, a community chorus in Boston (1815); the German Singing Society in Philadelphia, the glee club (1835); and the performance of the Aeolian Vocalist, a vocal quartet (1892), all figure prominently in the musical history of the United States. This era also saw the spread of music instruction from the community school into the curriculum of the Boston public schools (1837). Lowell Mason, who is considered by many to be the father of music education in the United States, was the first music teacher to be employed in that capacity.

Before the Civil War began in 1860, touring artists such as Jenny Lind, Ole Bull, Remenyi, Camilla Urso and the Germania Orchestra provided the first glimpse of professional musicians to American citizens (1850s) as well as the impetus for orchestra development, and thereby increased the demand for professional teachers. The Philharmonic Symphony Society (1842), probably the oldest orchestra in continuous existence in the United States, enjoyed good fortune as a result of the ongoing activities in the music scene of this period.

After the Civil War (1866), composers, conductors, performers and teachers were coming to this country to find new ways and opportunities to use their musical gifts. The establishment of the Lake Chautauqua Assembly in 1874 represented a commitment to continuing education through learning for adults. The first community music schools, Hull House (1892) in Chicago and the Third Street Music School Settlement (1894) in New York, responded to the need for professional musical development.

Just before the Civil War, an organization was established to cultivate and promote the singing of German songs, the German language and German customs. The Northeastern Sangebund of America (1850) was the first of many ethnic-based organizations to develop in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These organizations, many of which continue to function today, included the Polish Singers Alliance of America (1889), Norwegian Singers Association of America (1891), the American Union of Swedish Singers (1892), the American Lithuanian Musicians Alliance (1911) and the Jewish Music Alliance (1925).

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Welsh miners who arrived to work the coalfields in Pennsylvania before the Civil War organized the first eisteddfod held in America, at Carbondale, Pennsylvania, in 1850. The competition aspect of this music contest seemed to act as a boon to the development of community choruses. Two notable mass-choir events occurred in Boston as the Peace Jubilees of 1869 and 1872; the1869 event reportedly had a chorus of 10,000 and an orchestra of 1000, and the 1872 event had twice that many participants! The 1883 opening of the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City provided another missing element of the European musical scene. Most of the immigrants who arrived during the years 1880–93 settled in the major port cities along the Atlantic coast. The bulk of them came from Poland, Russia and the Eastern European countries, and many stayed in New York City, especially on the Lower East Side.

John Philip Sousa became the director of his own band in 1892. His work, both as director and composer/arranger, is largely responsible for the rise of the band movement during the early twentieth century. Jim Europe, a black American, benefited from Sousa's work as he developed an army band in 1917, which assisted in bringing about the 'Big Band' movement. Big Band music continues to be an integral art of the musical life of many communities. The early twentieth century also saw the peak of popularity for barbershop harmony. It is doubtful that the founders of the Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barbershop Quartet Singing in America in 1938 would have envisioned the expansion that has taken place in their organization, which currently boasts of 40,000 members worldwide, or that of their companion organization, Sweet Adelines (1945), which has 30,000 members.

A similar type of organization that has become part of mainstream America is the Grand Ole Opry. The first broadcast of the Grand Ole Opry Barn Dance occurred in 1925 over radio station WSM in Nashville, Tennessee. This informal country music festival was dedicated to the preservation of old-fashioned rural music, especially southern music, and was heard by rural audiences of middle Tennessee. Since that time Grand Ole Opry broadcasts have introduced the newest in country music (such as the 1946 broadcast of Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys), preserved its country roots through established artists and contributed to the increasing popularity of country music.

Popular music has always been a staple of community music activity. The evolution of popular music in this country – from Stephen Foster, whom many consider to be the first pop composer, in the mid-1850s (Whitcomb 1972: 12) to today – is truly remarkable. While military conflicts, economic depression and prosperity greatly affected the make-up of the American population, the popularity of ragtime (1890–1977), jazz (1919–27), swing (1936–40) and rock (1950s to present) transcended all vicissitudes.

In the final analysis, the development of popular music in this country has followed a steady course towards the melding of two cultures, African and European. No one could have known back in 1619 what an impact the arrival of the first Africans to the colonies was to have on the musical life of the United States. Neither can we know what impact may be felt from assimilating refugees of the 1990s into our culture, or what effect they will have on American community in the future.

THE PRESENT STATUS OF US COMMUNITY MUSIC

The status of community music in the United States is far too complicated to treat here except in the most general terms. This paper attempts to form

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a picture of the amount and types of community music activity taking place in the country. A questionnaire was developed to identify, in particular, ethnic activity and musics that are not necessarily part of the mainstream Western European tradition. The questionnaire also attempted to ascertain how common it was for these groups to have a conscious educational purpose – to carry on their heritage, for example – whether these meetings were more or less social entertainment. An example of the latter is the 'ballad swapping sessions' of the Athens Folk Society: ballads from everywhere are sung for fun, not with a conscious purpose of preserving musical materials of any particular culture. The questionnaire was sent to musicologists who were members of the College Music Society, because musicologists and particularly ethnomusicologists were assumed to be more aware of community music activity than are music educators. There turn rate was low – to make statistical claims – and many of the questionnaires that were returned carried notes: 'I can't fill this out; I simply do not know anything about this'; 'I would like to help; I think this is very interesting'; 'I am not involved in this type of music, although I know some is going on.' However, the returned questionnaires represented a good sampling from around the country – more from the New England states, bearing out the historical pattern. There were some people 'in the know' who contributed more than they were asked. However, it can be safely conjectured that college musicologists are not particularly knowledgeable about ethnic community music activity.

Although the survey instrument specified a definition of community music that fit the parameters of the study, there were several questions about definitions – all from the people who seemed interested and were knowledgeable about community music. For example, is community music defined by its objective: in professional versus non-professional terms, in terms of funding, in terms of commercial versus non-profit, in terms of its participants? Is 'community music separate from, for example, professional orchestras supported by taxpayers' monies'? What exactly do we mean by 'community bands', 'choruses' or 'orchestras'? One respondent wrote a letter, suggesting that perhaps there is also the need for clarification of 'music festivals', 'ethnic celebrations', 'folk festivals,' 'continuing education', 'recreational opportunities'. In summary, all of this is more complicated in the minds of some than it appears to be on the surface.

For the purpose of creating a general picture – without exact definitions – community music in the United States appears to fall into three general categories: that which exists to carry out specific educational objectives; that which has performance as its chief objective, but also has an education component; and finally, and probably most interesting, that which is carried on solely for cultural transmission and/or for social and entertainment purposes.

COMMUNITY MUSIC SCHOOLS

In the first category one finds the community music school, which 'offers musical instruction at a nominal cost, and which is non-profit, non-sectarian [. . .] This term is sometimes interchangeable with Music School Settlement' (Egan 1989). The first was started at Hull House in Chicago, Illinois, in 1883. (The Hull House School was not a true community music school, since it accepted only students who were talented enough to become professional musicians.) The second was the Third Street Music School Settlement, founded in 1894

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in New York City. Many such schools followed in Philadelphia, Boston, Cleveland, St. Louis, Buffalo and Wilmington, Delaware, as well as others in the New York City area. Each was concerned with offering excellent musical training at a reasonable cost for children and adults.

The community music schools, many of which were connected with settlement houses, are a unique success story. They have produced outstanding performers, many of whom have become teachers there. Students have gone on to colleges and conservatories for professional training in both performance and teaching. These schools still exist in a variety of forms today: some are connected with university programmes; some are independent; some are organized by ethnic groups. One of the more interesting examples of this last category is the Artistas y Músicos Latino Americanos (AMLA), which 'promotes the development, dissemination, and understanding of Latin music in Philadelphia and beyond' (http://www.amla.org). Founded by musicians in the Latin community in 1982, AMLA sponsors a vigorous artists-in-education program and a Latin School of the Performing Arts. The school offers afternoon and Saturday morning classes in guitar, drumset, voice, salsa dance, Latin percussion, piano, bass and music theory.

Community music schools have had a professional organization for a number of years: the National Guild for Community Arts Education, founded in 1937 as the National Guild of Community Schools of the Arts. The Guild 'supports and advances access to lifelong learning opportunities in the arts' (http://www.nationalguild.org/) by providing resources, advocacy, and leadership for its member schools.

Currently, community music schools are also receiving attention and support from Harvard Project Co-Arts, a national study of educational effectiveness in arts centres for economically disadvantaged communities. The project is generously funded by the Nathan Cummings Foundation, the Alexander Julian Foundation for Aesthetic Understanding and Appreciation and the Andy Warhol Foundation of the Visual Arts. Its purposes include the development of an assessment tool through which the educational effectiveness of community art centres can be documented. This tool is intended to accommodate diverse manifestations of excellence and to serve diverse constituents. Importantly, it will allow centres to stage assessments for themselves over time and to count ongoing self-assessment as a useful aspect of daily practice. Funders will be able to consider the centres' own self-assessments when deciding where to allocate funds. The study encompasses three phases, all of which inform Co-Arts' knowledge of the field and ability to identify relevant means and dimensions for assessment:

> **Phase 1:** A nationwide outreach that reviews the general scene of community art centres through a systematic examination of printed materials (about 350),written questionnaires to centres and funders (about 200), and in-depth phone interviews (about 100).
> **Phase 2:** The production of more than two-dozen sketches and six detailed portraits of educational effectiveness in community arts centres that have been identified in the first phase. These sketches and portraits emerge from on-site observation and interview.
> **Phase 3**: The preparation of a state-of-the art report on educational effectiveness in community arts centres. This report will include (1) the results of the nationwide review of community arts centres; (2) the self-assessment tool; (3) a gallery walk through sketches of numerous and

varied exemplary centres; (4) the in-depth portraits of six exemplary community arts centres representing diverse manifestations of educational effectiveness; and (5) suggested applications of the evaluative frame to these six diverse centres, which will demonstrate its range and flexibility.

With a national database of nearly 500 centres, Project Co-Arts has become a clearinghouse for information about community arts centres, engaging community arts educators in the review of assessment tools. Phase II will help forge connections among centres all around the country.

COMMUNITY PERFORMANCE ORGANIZATIONS

The second category of community music consists of organized community activities dedicated predominantly to music-making, but many times with an educational component. To this category belong, from the very large to the very small, community orchestras, bands and choruses, which are extremely common in the United States. It is almost safe to assume (and the questionnaire bears this out) that these groups will be found in any community with a population over 60,000. They are most frequently organized through the impetus of one person, who either works single-handedly or approaches the city government or arts commission (if there is one). Most are also led or directed by the school or college teachers in that area and involve 'ready-made' musicians. It is the practice of many of them, but mostly the orchestras, to have an education/public relations component – perhaps because orchestras have the most difficult time attracting an audience. In less populated areas where there are no large towns, there are regional groups of this type, for example, the North Georgia Community Band; the Gwinnett County Singers; the Lanier (a region of Georgia) Orchestra. The responses received from the questionnaire indicate that, as expected, most communities establish bands and choruses before orchestras. Especially in the South, community music activities are often centred in church-sponsored groups, many of which have their own bands and orchestras as well as choirs. These groups may involve professional musicians as well as the church's own members. Churches of any size generally have a well-supported educational music programme for their members, particularly in the choral area.

ETHNIC/PRESERVATION GROUPS

The third category, community music activity carried on for the purpose of cultural transmission and/or social and entertainment purposes, is growing by leaps and bounds. Groups in this category, though they are difficult to generalize about, can be separated quite naturally into two subcategories: (1) those that present traditional musics (ethnic or folk) that have been passed down by word of mouth and are still to some extent part of the daily life of the region; and (2) those interested in reviving musics that are no longer a 'living' part of the regional culture, but are performed as a matter of interest or historical value.

The first subcategory brings to mind the folk music reservoir of the South, fashioned principally by the confluence of two mighty cultural streams, the British and the African. Examples of presentation in the South can be seen in the Sacred Harp (shape-notes) singers, the ring-shout tradition and African American gospel singing. In the Appalachian area, descendants of English and

Scotch-Irish settlers have preserved traditional British music and singing styles. Another example is the tradition of the German spiritual folk song, which is found especially in rural Pennsylvania and among the Amish of the Midwest. Scandinavians migrated to northern Michigan and Minnesota, where their music and folklore still flourish. In the southern Midwest and Louisiana, one can still find the folk songs of France. It is useless to look for such survivals in the cities, however; the early immigrants from Western Europe settled chiefly on farms and in small towns, and that is where their traditions are preserved.

Immigrants who came to North America from Italy and Eastern Europe arrived after cities had developed into centres of industry. Thus their folk music, to the extent that it is preserved, is found in the urban milieu. In the twentieth century the cities also attracted waves of rural Americans, including descendants of earlier Western European immigrants as well as non-European minorities – Mexicans, Chinese, Japanese, and even some Native Americans. The tendency of these new city-dwellers to settle near people like themselves produced the characteristic quilt-like pattern of American cities, where neighbourhoods and 'villages within the city' served as focal points for ethnic groups. In these neighbourhoods the 'old country' traditions still flourish. One respondent to the survey verified this:

> There are literally hundreds of community-based, non-professional African-American gospel choirs and quartets in the New York City metropolitan area. These groups sing in their own churches and travel to others. Little if any money changes hands; they serve as important training grounds for singers and musicians. There are approximately 10 community-based West Indian steel pan ensembles in Brooklyn and Queens. They play for local parties, festivals, and the annual Labor Day West Indian Carnival celebration; there are a number of Irish step dance schools in Brooklyn and Queens where young people are taught traditional Irish country dancing. Often performances are accompanied by live fiddle music. A growing number of Puerto Rican, Hatitan, and West Indian groups have established folkloric troupes to perpetuate their music and dance traditions. Some of these groups now offer more organized classes for kids in various styles of Caribbean and African dance.

The second subcategory might be called, for lack of a better term, 'revival groups', those that preserve musics of historical interest, not necessarily those which live in the daily life of any community, but outside the standard repertoire. In this category are Confederate bands, barbershop singing, music-dramas created to preserve the history of a community and community musical heater.

And what of the relationship between the school and community music? As Michael Mark (1992: 8) points out, in the past it has 'varied from close cooperation to benign neglect'. Although community music and school music represent intertwining strands in the American cultural fabric, their roles are properly distinct:

> Today there is a rich variety of community music opportunities throughout the country. These opportunities continue to complement music opportunities in schools. In the best situations, school and community music leaders work together to maintain strong community musical life. There is a question, however, of the proper relationship between school

> and community music. Many communities offer people the opportunity to participate in the same kinds of ensembles that are available in the schools. This duplication of music activities is most often seen in the entertainment aspect of the music programme. Many, perhaps most, community organizations accept students as members. If students can participate in similar music entertainment in the community, then school music educators might take advantage of opportunities to give up some of their entertainment activities and concentrate more on the solid musical aspects of their programme.
>
> (Mark 1992: 10)

CONCLUSION

Community music is alive and well in the US community music groups flourish in great numbers and bewildering variety. In many communities, they are an important and much-needed source of cohesion, providing an environment in which people whose paths would never cross in the ordinary way can find common group in their shared interest in music.

The picture is not, however, entirely positive. In the United States, federal and state support for community arts organization is very limited. On the other hand, many groups manage to make music quite enthusiastically without spending very much money.

Community music and music education could definitely benefit from closer cooperation between the community and the school. Not only would this avoid unnecessary duplication of activities – which can overtax the community's resources, both financial and human – but it would also enrich the music of both school and community. The school can play a valuable role in educating citizens about their musical traditions, counterbalancing the prevailing tendency to regard music performance as best left to professional musicians. Community groups, in turn, can provide a valuable resource for music teachers in the task of cultural education. Who is better able to instil in children the notion of music as a lifelong pleasure than ordinary adults – the grownups next door, so to speak – who are enthusiastic participants in the musical life of the community. Finally, what better way than community music to meld – not melt – America's disparate raw ingredients into a cohesive yet diverse cultural medley?

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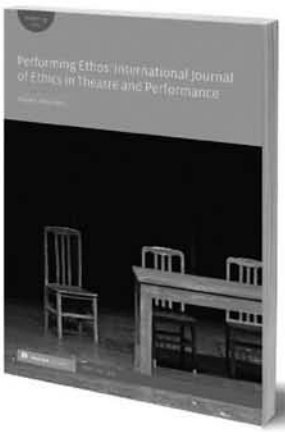
Performance Arts



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