Are Higher Ed Institutions Really Doing What’s Best for Music Education? Part 2

In last month’s *SBO* article, I presented some data as well as observations and opinions about the negative impact on music education that was occurring because of higher ed institutions’ increasing emphasis on producing performance majors. In this article I will present some suggestions for curriculum reform to better prepare future music educators. Most of these suggestions come from highly respected music education professionals.

First, it’s important to acknowledge that the semester hours available to teach music ed majors is finite. If something is added, generally something must be subtracted. Second, it is a reality that a significant number of semester hours are dictated by state education departments. Therefore, the number of truly discretionary semester hours available to an institution are somewhat limited. However, that should not prevent us from examining if the courses, the content, and how they’re taught are truly aimed at producing the very best music educators possible.

In private discussions with many professors teaching music education students, one thing came up consistently. That in many institutions, the course content was what the faculty members felt comfortable teaching and was not necessarily what the students needed. The three areas most commonly cited as needing refocusing were music history, music theory, and ear training.

No one can doubt the value of a firm base of knowledge in music history. However, in my two music ed degrees, I had more class hours devoted to music prior to the classical era than to music of the classical era forward. Just how relevant to today’s music educators is music of the Ars Antiqua, Ars Nova, and Renaissance? Yet that is what many faculty members enjoy teaching so that’s what is taught. Recommendation #1: Replace current music history hours with 3-6 credits surveying music history. Any credit hour savings should go to study of current band, chorus, and orchestra literature, focusing on what the educators will use in their future jobs.

Obviously, any music educator must have a foundation in music theory. However, many graduates have spent countless hours realizing figured bass and memorizing the various “European” augmented sixths but can’t spell a Cm7(b5) chord. Recommendation #2: Completely revise music theory instruction to focus on functional skills to include more instruction in instrumentation, instrument/voice ranges, transpositions, improvisation, and modern chord usages.

The excellence of any musician is founded upon their ability to develop highly trained listening skills. How many hours did all of us suffer in a room with an instructor pounding intervals and chords on a keyboard? How often do you now use the skills you developed taking dictation? First, there are many online programs that can do this in a self-paced setting for students who need more help. Why shouldn’t classroom time be spent with everyone on their instrument working on error detection? In addition to the ear training, students would also have an opportunity to conduct and perform on secondary instruments. Why do we perpetuate an outmoded method of instruction with limited utility? If it’s because that’s the way it’s always been done, or because it’s easier for the instructor, then we owe our students better than that.

Instrumental and vocal methods classes are of course the meat of the music education curriculum. We owe it to our future teachers to insist that guitar methods are a requirement for everyone. We are training music educators, not just band, orchestra, and chorus directors and some fluency in popular music instruments and styles are indispensable. Keyboard instruction should also be revised to teach more relevant skills than hacking through a classical piece that will never be performed again. My college keyboard teacher was composer and master pianist Dr. Arthur Frackenpohl. At one lesson where I wasn’t prepared to play the assignment, I had lightly written in the chord symbols so I could play the melody and “comp” the accompaniment. Obviously, he wasn’t fooled but he said, “that’s not correct but it’s probably more relevant than what I’m teaching you.”

Finally, no one should graduate with any kind of music degree without a class in Music Business. A 3-credit survey course covering all aspects of the industry, to include intellectual property rights would be a huge help to every music educator.

The training of music education students is just too important for us not to evaluate the relevancy and effectiveness of every single hour in their curriculum. Are we teaching subjects and using methods because that’s what the faculty is comfortable with? Don’t the wonderful young men and women who come to us to be trained as music educators deserve better?

As a final aside, the February issue of *SBO* included an article entitled, “VSU Master of Arts in Teaching in Music Education” deserves our attention. It tells about Valdosta State University’s top to bottom examination of what their music ed graduates really needed to succeed and developed a rigorous five-year Bachelor/Master degree program in response. It’s time for all higher ed institutions teaching music ed to do this type of self-examination and innovation.