

## The Choral Rehearsal and the Singing Experience as a Conserving Activity

Malcolm V. Edwards

University of Calgary, AB, Canada

This paper addresses a topic that, in terms of my own reading and experience, rarely gets addressed in the professional musical journals. Having been a member of various professional associations and a reader of their many professional journals, rarely do I find an article that addresses the issue of the wider culture. Articles seem to fall into three broad categories. The first can be said to deal with the practicalities of music teaching; the second seems to be concerned with the historical minutiae of performance practice while the third addresses (usually in a cheerleading fashion) the new technologies. This paper attempts to step outside these categories and deals, in broad strokes, with aspects of the larger culture and its effects on our work and profession.

The title of this paper is freely adapted from the 1979 book by Neil Postman entitled *Teaching as a Conserving Activity*. Postman is a widely known cultural critic who teaches at City University in New York and who has, for the last thirty years or so, written a succession of books—all of which address the wide issues of childhood, schooling and learning in a high technology culture. In his 1979 book, I would argue that Postman is remarkably prescient and far-seeing when he puts the case that:

too much change, too fast, for too long has the effect of making social institutions useless and individuals perpetually unfit to live amid the conditions of their own culture. . . . It is enough to say that we have reached the point where the problem of conservation, not growth, must now be solved. We know very well how to change but we have lost the arts of preservation. Without at least a reminiscence of continuity and tradition, without a place to stand from which to observe change, without a counter argument to the overwhelming thesis of change, we can easily be swept away—in fact, are being swept away. To provide ourselves with such a perspective, we must rely on our education system. It is, after all, almost the only agency in our society which has no vested interest in change itself. . . . Schools are, in fact, always given a measure of responsibility to serve as a society's memory bank, even in quiet times. . . . However, in a culture of high volatility and casual regard for its past such a responsibility becomes the school's most essential service. The school stands as the only mass medium capable of putting forward the case for what is not happening in our culture. (p. 21)

If in 1979, Postman was describing the then present culture as being highly volatile and highly mediated, how then would he describe today? He might say that the characteristic feature of living in the current culture is that of being bombarded with product—in advertising campaigns, films, television shows, logos and trademarks, in restaurants, stores, elevators, sporting events, in books, magazines, e-mail messages, phone calls, pop songs and rock operas:

This volume of information and imagery produces a sense of deep restlessness or anxiety. . . . Many people have a pervasive feeling of being left behind. These 'advances' take on an

air of inevitability closely associated with the more general *fascism of speed* that appears to afflict every aspect of our cultural experience, from the delivery of information to the waging of war and the conducting of business. (Kingwell, 1999, p. 293)

One can argue that the school systems are not immune to this general fascism of speed. Traditionally, school was the place where children could develop outside the pace of commercial society. An ideal school might be described as a slow zone where the dominant message becomes "slow down — take it in — meditate — think about it." Unfortunately, this message is being phased out in the competency based/accountability movement where teachers become more like production workers. Their task becomes quality control, whether that's the making of sausages or the teaching of students. This becomes a gross misjudgement of the purpose of education, which is essentially a nurturing, growing soil-related activity, much closer to gardening than the making of sausages. To live today is, as Kingwell (1999) suggests, like trying to get a drink of water from a fire hose.

So if schools are one of the few institutions in our culture with the motivation or the capability of offering a balance to other forces, what should our schools do and what should they be? According to Postman (1979) they should be "subject-matter centered, symbol and word centered, reason centered, hierarchical, socializing, segmented and coherent" (p. 86). For those of us involved in music education, Postman's list of desired characteristics reads as curiously similar to the desired outcomes of any well-run music program.

Music in the schools is essentially about live music making and we sometimes forget that live music performed by a band, orchestra or choir is an increasingly rare phenomenon, in contrast to total music consumption. By this, I mean the totality of music available via mediated means (i.e., available via two wires and a loudspeaker). In 2000 Robert Everett-Green, music critic for *The Globe and Mail*, writes that:

The biggest thing that happened to music in the twentieth century was that it became an environment. Before radio and sound recording became common in the twenties, if you wanted music, you had to make it yourself or go to a place where others were making it. Now music is made everywhere, by almost no one. Machines supply us with stockpiled music, in our homes, at the mall, on the beach. Before recording, nobody realized how much empty space there was in the world, at work, at home, in the car and bus, in the exercise room at the neighbourhood bar and restaurant, waiting to be filled with music. (p. B6)

Live music making in a school then is a conservation exercise in itself where we as music educators are conservators, preserving group endeavours and group acoustic skills that are worthy of upholding in the midst of a fragmenting musical culture.

The live music making in our classrooms constitutes a second curriculum. The first curriculum begins at 3:30 when the classroom door closes. The media environment constitutes an exceptionally effective curriculum if we define the word "curriculum" as a specially constructed information system, whose purpose, in its totality, is to influence, teach, and train the mind and character of our youth. The media and the school are total learning systems.

Each has a special way of organizing time and space; their messages are encoded in special forms and move at different rates of speed; each has its special way of defining knowledge, its special assumption about the learning process and its own special requirements concerning how one must attend to what is happening. . . . Viewed in this way, television is not only a curriculum but constitutes the major educational enterprise now being undertaken in the United States. That is why I call it the first curriculum. School is the second. (Postman, 1979, p. 50)

Postman's first curriculum is the popular culture and that has such assaultive force that we can feel somewhat overwhelmed by its presence. For example, the music building in which I spend much of my time is an island surrounded by a sea of pulsating sound—and this is on a university campus. If we accept Allan Bloom's observation (1987) that "for the majority of high school/university students "rock music" is as unquestioned as the air they breathe" (p. 32), then this has implications for every student who decides to join a choir or an instrumental ensemble. Some of the implications relate very strongly to Postman's list of what schools should be in a highly volatile period:

1. The student will have to start attending to sounds rather than treating them as some kind of aural wallpaper, i.e. present but not really noticed.
2. The student is faced with the enormous task of making music using his own body rather than consuming it via a loudspeaker and two wires. Mediated music is amazingly easy to produce—basically a gentle touch of a button. Music made by a voice or a saxophone reed is produced by controlled physical effort.
3. Rather than the immediacy of a rock video, the student is faced with the sequential, left to right discursiveness of musical notation—a symbol system very much like the alphabet. There is little immediate gratification in the early stages—rather it appears as a mighty labour. However, if our student sticks with it, he will notice that there is a definite hierarchy of skills. Concepts, generalizations—reasoning itself—are hierarchical in nature. There is a structure to ideas about music. They are built one upon another, and you must be able to comprehend lower orders of concepts before proceeding to those of greater complexity. That is the whole basis of prerequisites in higher education. There are no prerequisites for the media. It presents its subject matter whole, without regard to age, sex, levels of maturity, or education. In the media curriculum, there is no such thing as "falling behind" because there is nothing to be retarded and nothing to be developed. This fact is one of the sources of its enormous capacity to satisfy because within the media curriculum there is no deferred gratification. In a music class one is constantly working with the concept of deferred gratification—the idea that one can choose to postpone lesser, immediate satisfactions in order to gain a more fulfilling ultimate goal.
4. Finally, our student will have to face the fact that not all learning can be "fun." The current trends in computers and educational software come shrink-wrapped with the magic mantra—"makes learning fun." Equating learning with fun says that if you

don't enjoy yourself, you're not learning. I disagree. Some learning isn't fun. It consists of work, discipline and responsibility—and the payoff is not some immediate adrenaline rush but a deep satisfaction arriving weeks, months or years later.

So what we can often do in a music rehearsal is to be everything that the wider culture is not. The group endeavour that is found in a choral or an instrumental ensemble is markedly different from the isolation of staring at a screen or listening in one's private "bubble space" of headphone. This is an important difference and one that should be articulated and championed at every opportunity. The visceral connection found in the live performance and among and between live performers is something, I believe, to be of profound and humanitarian value.

One of the ironies of modern life is that the more the media promise us connectedness, the more we're isolating ourselves by dropping into individual worlds of electronic stimulation—discmans, video games and computer chat rooms. This is especially so for adolescents simply because television and computers are now increasingly found in the adolescent's private space. The Internet has plenty going for it—but is it, socially and educationally speaking, a net positive or negative force? Whether the Net will ultimately build more connections than it severs is a question still very much up in the air. Early returns suggest it does diminish actual social participation and can harm personal relationships. In a study from Carnegie Mellon University, psychologists Robert Kraut and Vicki Lundmark (1998) concluded that greater use of the Internet was associated with small, but statistically significant declines in social involvement as measured by communication within the family and with increases in loneliness and depression. At a recent conference, the director of the Centre of Adolescence at Stanford University, Dr. William Damon reported that teenagers are spending up to four hours per day alone in their bedrooms, rather than interacting with family and peers. He goes on to state that many feel detached from the larger civil society and are unlikely to have a perception of their role in the community.

Television and computers are not some neutral media source. Watching electrons dance across a screen for most of your formative years with very few other contrary influences, will bring about a person who thinks differently and acts differently than someone reared on other influences. The chief effects will be found in desensitization, lack of empathy, little connection with societal structures and an overall sense of alienation—a true cosmic orphan. Schools, generally, have trouble counteracting the effects of these subversive outside influences. Students tend to play "the game of school" but there is little, if any, true educational involvement or intent.

I am not so naively innocent as to suggest that all that was missing in the experience of the young male gunmen of Littleton, Colorado was art, choral music and drama. To discuss the connection between musical preferences and ethical behaviour (or indeed murderous behaviour) is a particularly contentious area and one that lies outside the boundaries of this paper. However, I am making the assumption (an assumption that I hope is shared by the majority of readers) that works of art (e.g., a Beethoven symphony, a Mozart Mass) possess a capacity to make a favourable difference in the lives of persons—if the way is open for them to do so. Here I am speaking of not only natural talent and inclination but, more importantly, of the role of music education in clearing this pathway.

A secondary assumption is that this difference is significant and important not only in personal terms, but that it exercises an antidotal, conserving effect in the wider

society—antidotal and conserving in the sense of countering and opposing a sometime toxic aural environment. The majority of the population live and work amid an endless stream of commercial sound issuing from the electronic media. This ranges from the aggressive, assaultive force of some rock stations to the induced narcosis of “elevator music”—a strange genre of music, indeed—in that it is specifically structured not to be listened to.

The essential difference between music that is composed and distributed for solely commercial reasons and music that arises out of a genuine artistic impulse is that the former exerts power over us while the latter leaves us the stronger for having exposed ourselves to it. This is the very centre of my argument because it relates so closely to the musical enrichment of a minority of young lives and the musical impoverishment of the majority.

Musical education in its truest sense then is education for empowerment. Musical empowerment is fostered whenever a group connects with and transcends the skeleton of a black and white score, whenever the ensemble as a whole performs better than the sum total of its individual members or whenever a conductor is able, by whatever means, to push students past the limits of their own expectations. These are moments when we as music educators are music conservators, preserving and encouraging group endeavours and group performance skills. It is one of the essential points of this paper that these tasks become the more valuable in the school environment as they are gradually lost and become under-valued in the larger culture.

The culture that we now experience as mainstream culture is the culture of the computer age, where everything happens at light speed. This is the culture that is revered in the media, shown on the movie screen and absorbed by us all. It is a particularly aggressive culture in the sense that it tends to trample on and subsume others. Everything glitters in the moment, is encapsulated in the immediate, in what William Butler Yeats called the “glance.” Everything becomes a function of glances, as opposed to the gaze, which lingers. Yeats was worried, even in his time, that we were moving out of the culture of the gaze, where we linger on things that exist around us because they are inherently beautiful and valuable in themselves, into the culture of the glance, in which we only perceive instantly and then forget, as we move to the next glance.

I am very much struck by the fact that a music class (either choral or instrumental) has to work at the speed of sound (1080 feet per second) in contrast to the hyper-speed of electricity (186,000 miles per second). Earlier in this paper, I referred to the fascism of speed which seems to afflict every aspect of our cultural experience:

Its symptoms are common. Can I read all the articles that I want to or will I have to catch up with them one weekend? Can I see all the latest movies before they are squeezed off the screens by newcomers; or will I have to catch up with them on video? Can I read all the bestsellers; or will I have to rely on just reading the reviews? Can I get the new version of Netscape? Of Microsoft Word? Can I download it from the Web? How do I get on the Web? Why is my computer so slow? (Kingwell, 1999, p. 294)

Working at the speed of sound then is a continuation of a much earlier tradition—one that predates the imperative of the new technology and its demand for instantaneity. The sound of the unamplified human voice belongs to that same region of the sonic landscape as church bells and horses' hooves—a wonderful anachronism, a holdover from a previous time.

As each school district in the country races to plug every child into an Apple or an IBM computer, a state of technological euphoria exists. A certain giddiness sets in because we are convinced that the computer will solve it all. One colleague I know has mentioned that his children will be computer-literate whether they learn it in school or not. But he also worries whether they'll be able to read and write at a level that will enable them to find pleasure and delight in the printed word. In our time we are experiencing the rise of the image and the fall of the word and schools are very much complicit in this revolution.

Literacy cannot be taught with a computer, with the machine that is robbing students of their ability to conceptualize language. The PC is not an illuminated manuscript page. It is a radically different tool from a book and it shapes perception differently, creating a world of youthful ghostwriters who shimmer with no more substantiality than those glowing letters on the screen. (Sanders, 1995, p. 147)

The very skills taught by television are reinforced by educational software. Sit, watch and be entertained. More than anything else, computers teach children that the world is a pre-programmed place, a virtual universe where solving a problem means clicking on the right icon. (Stoll, 1999, p. 42)

I mentioned at the start of this paper that music professional journals seem to pay little attention to the cultural trends that should be of concern to music educators. However, an article by Geoffrey Boers in the March 1998 edition of *The Choral Journal* underlines and reinforces many of the points discussed earlier in this paper:

Today our choirs are filled with students whose life context consists to a great degree of vicarious experience—due in part to TV, media and contemporary societal norms. In a very real way, they have witnessed much more, seen more deaths, more disasters and more of everything than most of us currently in the collegiate teaching ranks ever had. Their experience however is second-hand. Our students' experience creates a "been there, done that" apathy towards anything but the most gripping emotionality. When they see so much in this distanced way, they become numb to the tragedy and emotionality that daily bombards them. It is difficult for us to impress students with anecdotes of Gesualdo's delicious twistedness or Bach's quest for grace—these stories cannot compete with TV's "Hard Copy" for drama and impact and cannot puncture their numbness. (p. 73)

In conclusion, I have tried to demonstrate in this paper that we are the inheritors of a music tradition that desperately needs to be conserved if only because its values, mores and practise stand in such proud opposition to current trends. If we are fighting a rearguard action, then so be it. The masterworks of Bach, Beethoven and Brahms whisper to us that not everything is disposable or "all relative". They make the claim that a deeper reality exists beyond the sardonically hip "Simpsons" or "Beavis and Butthead". They make the claim that to be illiterate in the musical arts is to be mute and deaf at a most fundamental level. Finally, the masterworks offer the young a chance to feel their humanity profoundly through the performance of challenging music. Of all the gifts the older can give the younger, the opportunity to find an authentic response in a live performance is among the greatest.

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