Toward Andragogy in Music:

EXAMINING THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND EMERGING PRACTICE IN THE INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC EDUCATION OF OLDER ADULTS

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The connections between music education and community are numerous. School ensembles provide entertainment and service for a myriad of local, national, and state organizations throughout the year, while community groups encompass anything from adult bands to semi-professional theater productions. Armed forces groups serve ceremonial functions, and provide publicity for the organizations that they represent. The list of musical activities in the United States is endless, yet there remains a perception of music education existing primarily within school walls. Is there a necessity for an expansion of this view to include a broader society? Should adults be included in any broadening of the music education mission? And if parameters are extended to encompass adult and senior adult populations, what is needed to create substantive and effective programs for them?

The senior adult population in the United States is growing at a tremendous rate. Demographic information suggests that persons over fifty comprise the most rapidly expanding segment of American society (Winzenreid 1999). Denise Smith, in her 1997 population profile report for the U.S. census, states that the growth rate of the elderly population (those who are sixty-five and older) far exceeded the growth of rest of the population as a whole. She speculates that the elderly population will more than double by the middle of the 21st century to seventy-nine million people, and will constitute approximately twenty percent of the total population. As the population ages, there is an increased call for services and educational opportunities, demanding an examination of the gap between the philosophies and practices in education environments.

Andragogy has been generally defined as the art and science of helping adults learn (Uszler 1990; Burley & Olseng 1987). Knowles (1980) popularized the term, differentiating between the teaching practices aimed at children and those designed for adults, and believing that different life stages demand separate and distinct approaches to
teaching and learning. Andragogy is not fixed or immutable, and it does not suggest specific teaching techniques or sequences. While some view it as an empirical descriptor of adult learning styles, others approach it as a conceptual framework from which teaching paradigms for adults may be derived (Brookfield 1986). From the latter perspective, andragogy provides a lens through which an examination of common educational assumptions, myths, practices, and perceptions may be conducted.

**Assumptions about Adult Learning**

While this paper specifically pertains to andragogy, music education, and senior adult populations, it is useful first to take a broader view of adult education. Stephen Brookfield (1986) alludes to several characteristics of learning attributed to adults that will serve as a basis for discussion.

1. **Experience:**

Adults accumulate a wealth of experiences as they age (Knowles 1980; Uszler 1990; Myers 1992). These experiences become a context and a foundation upon which new knowledge may be layered, and are an excellent potential resource for teaching and learning. Educators who work with adults should explore ways to tap into the knowledge that adults already possess (Brookfield 1986). With respect to music, Johnson (1996) writes that while physical mastery may be slow, adults often quickly grasp new concepts. Musical interpretation benefits from life experience (Ernst & Emmons 1992); Coffman and Levy (1997) believe that the subtleties of style and phrasing are quickly incorporated into older students’ playing, writing that seniors recognize good and bad sound qualities earlier in their training than younger students, and consequently make necessary adjustments to improve their own tones. In addition, learning is facilitated by the positive attitudes, perseverance, and intense work ethic that many older adults bring to the education environment.

2. **Self-Directedness:**

Self-directedness is an often-cited characteristic of adult learning (Knowles 1980; Uszler, “Andragogy,” 1990; Johnson 1996; Achilles 1992; Myers 1992). Brookfield (1986, 58) describes such learning as including not only the “external management of instructional events,” but also an autonomy in which an awareness of alternative possibilities is
nurtured. The self-directed nature of adult learning does not intimate that adults should be exempt from guidance; rather, it suggests that learners take more responsibility and have more accountability for their studies.

Brookfield (1986) cautions that the ability to be self-directed does not necessarily develop as people age, although it is a “proper purpose” for education (94). Johnson (1996) states that while adults tend to follow their own interests, they still appreciate guidance and parameters; therefore, there must be a balance between the freedom implied by self-direction and the structure inherent in traditional classroom models. Indeed, of their experiences in musical ensemble settings, Coffman and Levy (1997) write that adults prefer directors and instructors to make authoritarian decisions rather than seek consensus. Local context, therefore, determines the extent to which adults’ self-directed learning should prevail. The latitude that may be appropriate in a musical composition class may not be realistic in a performing ensemble. Likewise, novice musicians may require substantially more guidance than those with appreciable experience.

3. Life-Centered:

Knowles believes that older learners have an awareness of learning needs that are generated by real life tasks or problems and that they desire concrete, real life applications for new knowledge. Uszler (“Andragogy,” 1990) cites a similar assumption, writing that adults are motivated by their perceived needs. While this “performance-centered” position is validated in many educational endeavors, it ignores the possibility that some adults may be motivated to learn for the sake of learning. Brookfield (1986) cautions that it neglects the “reflective domain . . . that accounts for most significant personal learning” (98). Much of adults’ learning may be life-centered, but many adults are learning-oriented, activity-oriented (Uszler, “Andragogy,” 1990), or process-oriented (Achilles, “Meaning,” 1992) rather than goal-oriented, and do not necessarily need real world applications to justify or motivate their continuing formal and informal educations. Motivations for participation are therefore varied and must be considered in andragogical models in music education.

Motivations and Music Participation

Boswell (1992) lists participation, along with identity and partnership/intimacy, as three basic human needs, and Burley and Olseng (1987) state that meaningful leisure activities
are necessary for life satisfaction. According to Stebbins (in Gates 1991), the four classes of human activity (survival, work, play, and serious leisure) interact in cost-benefit relationships within each person, allowing individuals to prioritize their interests and activities. Interestingly, activities classified as serious leisure may exact high personal costs; sometimes even exceeding recognized benefits. Why might these activities seem necessary, what motivates adults to participate in them, and what role does continuing education play?

The P-A-P System

Stebbins (in Gates 1991) views participatory activities as social systems comprising professionals, amateurs, and public (P-A-P) that promote agreed sets of values regulating behaviors and setting standards of quality. Gates (1991) proffers that most musical ensembles are patterned on a P-A-P system, but that not all persons perceive personal benefits in such a model. Participation is therefore affected, as it is the intrinsic value that people place on an activity that lies at the core of personal motivation (Achilles, “Meaning,” 1992).

Gates (1991) identifies three classes of individuals with regard to musical activities. Participants, audience members, and those who find no value in music all differ in their perceptions and attitudes. Significant differences exist even among the class known as participants. Some of them view musical activity as a form of work (professionals, apprentices), and others approach their activities as serious leisure (amateurs). These two groups fit neatly into P-A-P systems; however, other groups are more subjectively motivated (hobbyists, recreationists, dabblers), and their interests may be anywhere on a continuum from serious leisure to passing interest. If these participants are asked to “buy into” a professional performance model of music education, the costs of participation may exceed the benefits (Gates 1991). Andragogical models should therefore include continuing accountability for all participants’ motivations, based upon each localized context.

Myths about Adult Music Learners and Their Needs

Musical activities have the potential to meet many of the needs and desires of senior populations, but programs must be properly designed for participants and their characteristics. Darrough and Boswell (1992, 25) write of several commonly held beliefs
in the music profession that propose older adults have no desire to learn or relearn musical skills, prefer passive activities and “sedate” music, are satisfied with mediocre performances when they do participate in music, are frail and lack the capacity for musical development. There has been movement, however, towards the development of arts and aging philosophies stressing older adults’ capacity to learn and be creative (Kellman 1986). In this vein, Myers (1992, 23) foresees that “aging will be conceived as a lifelong developmental process rather than a period of decline in later adulthood.” Movement toward andragogy must dispel myths about older adults and their learning.

1. No Desire

Demographic information does not support the proposition that adults and older adults lack a desire for musical activities. Daback (2001) extrapolated a random sample of 3,599 adults (age range of 18 to 94, median age 44.94) from the 1997 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts sponsored by the U.S. government and the National Endowment for the Arts. Descriptive statistics showed that approximately 23 percent of the respondents had participated in some form of instrumental activity. Burley (1987) cites demographic information to suggest that while demand for public school music instruction is decreasing, opportunity for adult instruction in increasing. In a society in which life expectancies are expected to lengthen, people continue to opt for early retirements, adults enjoy more free time, and technology often promotes increasingly impersonal relationships, the demand for such educational opportunities will grow (Clingman 1988).

2. Prefer Passive Activities and Sedate Music

Preferences in music and musical activities are largely influenced by life contexts, and are the result of life situations, subjective motivations, and perceived benefits. Gilbert and Beal (1982) used 279 survey responses from various geographical regions to determine that there were significant differences in musical preferences based on living setting (nursing home, retirement home, independent) and community size (rural, suburban, urban). Studies cited in Darrough and Boswell (1992) found that preferences are significantly different when related to levels of education (Darrough 1990; Lathom & Peterson 1982), previous musical experience (Lathom & Peterson 1982), gender, and musical group setting (Darrough 1990).
Seemingly conflicting data from musical preference studies may thus be attributable to differences in subjects’ life contexts. While Gilbert and Beal (1982) found that their respondents preferred passive musical experiences and participation activities, other studies have resulted in a different picture. In her 1977 dissertation, Gibbons (in Darrough & Boswell 1992) found that while her older adult subjects preferred the music of their young adult lives, she was unable to corroborate that they preferred sedative over stimulative music. Darrough, in his 1990 dissertation (in Darrough & Boswell 1992) writes that his study participants favored performing over listening activities, and Bowles (1991) found that her subjects favored courses that increased both music performance and music listening skills. Robertson (1996) found that a majority of participants in his study preferred active rehearsing to lecture classes, noting that slightly over half of his subjects had some past training in music.

In summary, although preferences in music styles and activities are not generalizable, they are identifiable within individual settings. Effectiveness of music teaching and learning in continuing education programs will be enhanced through considerations of these contexts and preferences (Gilbert & Beal 1982).

3. Satisfied With Mediocre Performances

Regardless of musical styles or participants’ achievement levels, learning must be based on “high-quality, musically satisfying experiences” (Myers 1992, 26). Effective musical objects and experiences will always be more highly regarded and motivational than defective ones (Gates 1991). It is important for educators involved in adult programs to set rigorous and appropriate standards while recognizing that any type of participant may display high levels of skill and musicianship. Therefore, while “making rapid progress or winning performance competitions will not be the criteria to use when working with the adult student” (Burley & Olseng 1987, 28), high musical standards should be the norm in adult programs.

4. Frail, Lack Capacity

In her doctoral dissertation (in Darrough & Boswell, 1992), Gibbons (1979) posits that older participants in music have the capacity for musical growth, that this capacity is lifelong, and that they are more likely to experience progress when perceived as
functioning individuals. Darrough (1992, 27) concurs, stating that “when adults are treated as functioning individuals, they make a commitment to musical development.” While teachers need to consider what adjustments may be needed to overcome potential learning difficulties, older adults usually compensate without extreme intervention and without drastic impact on achievement (Myers 1992; Coffman & Levy 1997).

Although the assumption that older people are incapable of high levels of music achievement and performance is false, the physical difficulties that many people experience as they age are very real; therefore, the physical abilities of senior adults must be an important consideration for educators. The most commonly reported physiological difficulties comprise impaired visual perception (Robertson 1996; Burley 1982), dental problems (Burley 1982), decreased accuracy of movements (Burley 1982; Coates 1984; Johnson 1996), and impaired hearing (Coates 1984). These problems may be addressed through fairly simple adaptations in the learning environment, including stand adjustment (Burley 1982; Coffman & Levy 1997), instrument choice (Burley 1982), literature selection (Coffman & Levy 1997; Johnson 1996), and the use of sound technology (Coffman & Levy 1997).

Older adults may also experience less overt problems in a music learning environment. These may range from the deterioration of short-term memories (Achilles 1992) to difficulty with musical concepts. More research is needed to compare adult students’ musical aptitudes with their achievement to determine if there are significant differences between the difficulties older and younger students experience in learning musical concepts. Coates (1984) believes that senior students sometimes have difficulty in mastering new materials. This may be partly attributable to interference caused by previous learning. The appreciable experience that people over sixty have contributes to a wide knowledge base from which to draw, but it may also lead to a certain amount of defensiveness due to reluctance to self-criticize (Achilles, “Andragogy,” 1992).

As we age, we are less inclined to be risk-takers. Experience tells us that risk may result in unpleasant consequences. This reluctance to be “wrong” often manifests itself as a disinclination to improvise and experiment in music (Achilles, “Making Music,” 1992). Uszler (1990, “Just for Myself,” 21) writes of adults who were “vehemently discouraged” from playing anything but notated music, which subsequently discouraged experimentation and creativity. Educators must be sensitive to students’ past experiences
in their approaches to teaching and learning, while recognizing that older adults are capable of high levels of achievement.

**Toward Andragogy**

These assumptions, myths, and motivations help us understand how and why adults learn, but there are still several essential questions that must be explored in order to create substantive and meaningful music education programs for adults. These include:

1. Why has music education in the United States been so narrowly defined as a function of primary/secondary schooling, and what barriers must be removed to expand that definition?
2. What resources are necessary to create methods and materials specifically aligned with principles of adult learning?
3. How can music teacher preparation programs incorporate theories of adult learning along with practical field experiences with older adult populations?

Although these are ongoing questions, potential directions for the music education profession may be extrapolated from the previous discussion.

**The Profession**

Gates (1991) has suggested that a majority of music ensemble programs are based upon a social-musical system that promotes professional values and benefits through participation. While this approach is certainly necessary for the continuation of the musical art form, it essentially discourages potential participants who are either not comfortable with or are not interested in public performance.

The incorporation of instrumental performance ensembles in public school music programs grew as an extension and transformation of community and military groups in the early twentieth century. It may be argued that it was the value of ensembles as entertainment vehicles and the extra-musical benefits of these programs that secured their place in curricula that emphasized a “well-rounded” education (Daback 2000). Is it possible that as the number of community ensembles waned through the century, and the number of school ensembles grew, the concept of community music was replaced by music as a function of primary and secondary schools, and that music education narrowed its focus to largely professional models?
Education is often conceived as a means to an end rather than as a continual process. While diplomas, careers, and promotions are certainly desirable outcomes of education, and are indigenous to cost-benefit systems in education, they do not necessarily fulfill the needs of many people involved in continuing education (Nazareth 2000; Kellman 1986). With respect to music and learning, Myers (1992) writes that “music education has tended to assume that preparation for, rather than education through, adulthood will lead to a society that understands, appreciates, and values music and music learning” (24).

This perception has often led to the exclusion of adults from the mission of the music education profession (Burley & Olseng 1987). Mark (1996) suggests that expanding the profession’s paradigm to one that serves all of society and features partnerships between schools and communities may bridge the gap between philosophy and practice. A transformation of this nature will require music teachers accustomed to thinking in terms of a specialized audience with regard to age, talent, and inclination to see themselves against a broader societal backdrop (Uszler, “Andragogy,” 1990, 15).

Ways must be examined to reach the growing constituency of adults (Machover 1990). Efforts by independent music teachers, college and university programs, and community music schools should be encouraged, and the “widespread notion of adult education being a fringe activity, rather than one of central importance to a community” must be overcome (Taylor 1987, 32). To facilitate this change, Myers (1992) suggests that a “music learning society” may be a sounder concept than music education as it exists. An example of this conceptual transformation may be seen in the Eastman School of Music (Rochester, NY), where the suggestion has been made to rename the music education department as the Department of Music Teaching and Learning. This modification reflects the expansion of the department’s mission to include instruction from birth through adult education (Grunow 2002).

The paradigmatic shift to a music learning society implies that there should be openings “in the music education chain for people to access opportunities at various stages of life and at whatever level of skill” (Nazareth 2000, 12). To accomplish this, the perception that the only window to learn to play an instrument is in childhood must first be altered (Marciano 1990; Ernst & Emmons 1992; Winzenreid 1999), and entry points must be provided for all ages to conceptually align with the principles of lifelong learning and the music learning society model.
Research and Resources

The question remains of how to create education programs in music that meet the needs of adult learners. With respect to senior learners, Gibbons (1985, 51) suggests that “Programs designed for sequential skill building, which utilize preferred methods and materials, and which approach elderly persons as functioning individuals with capacities to learn, make musical development possible.” Brookfield (1986) believes that “adults learn best . . . when they have a sense of responsibility for what, why, and how they learn” (30). Therefore, programs must be designed based upon the context for which they are intended. It is only through researching participants and potential participants that planners will be able to create effective learning environments and courses. This approach to curricular design demands a flexibility that is often absent in schools. Objectives must be articulated, but tenacious adherence to specified learning outcomes can result in stagnation and learning interference (Brookfield 1986).

Kellmann (1986) suggests a multi-step development process for adult music programs. In the initial stage, investigation should be undertaken to identify the characteristics and interests of potential participants. The program should then be developed out of an emergent group profile, and the time and day chosen for the activity should reflect participants’ preferences. Finally, ongoing evaluation must be utilized to make adjustments to the curriculum.

Every adult has prior learning and experience that provides an idiosyncratic filter for new experiences and knowledge (Brookfield 1986; Bowles 1991). If the potential of this pre-existing knowledge is to be tapped as a curricular resource, inquiry is required. It is only through connecting with localized populations that music education may set appropriate goals and policies that benefit both participants and the larger society.

Adult music education demands teacher roles, goals, methods, and materials that differ from pedagogically oriented models (Burley & Olseng 1987). Programs that are not age-appropriate have the potential to both embarrass and discourage older learners (Coates 1984; Gibbons 1985); therefore, the “old wine in a new bottle” approach (Machover 1990, 28) will not meet the needs of adult learners. Rather, courses and instruction must be tailored to the needs, interests, preferences (Machover 1990; Robertson 1996; Gilbert & Beal 1982; Gibbons 1985), abilities, skills (Gilbert & Beal 1982; Coffman & Levy
1997), characteristics, and contexts (Coates 1984; Myers 1992) of specific populations. Localized research is the tool that will allow educators to amass this information.

Although adult music programs should be based largely upon participants’ and potential participants’ input, educators must also contribute to the content and form of instruction (Bowles 1991). Brookfield (1986) writes of the transactional nature of adult education, cautioning that curricula and methods should not be determined solely by either participants or educators. Programs designed from emergent research will differ significantly in various locales; however, there are certain concepts that constitute the foundation for all music teaching and learning both in content and systematic instruction.

Movement towards a music learning society will require an examination of what is taught with regard to skills and concepts. Fundamentally, technical instruction and practical performance skills are essential for instrumental music expression (Davidson, in Darrough & Boswell 1992; Ernst & Emmons 1992); however, it is the aural content of music that should comprise the basis of instructional materials for all ages (Myers 1986). Toward this end, learning activities should include singing, rhythmic movement, playing by ear, improvising, and composition (Myers 1992; Ernst & Emmons 1992; Winzenreid 1999). These activities should form the core of new published methods and materials that are designed specifically for adults (Winzenreid 1999).

It is only in relatively recent years that the skills-centered approach to music instruction has been brought into question. The music education profession has certainly addressed the issue of “teaching performance vs. teaching music,” perhaps most notably in the comprehensive musicianship movement of the 1960’s; however, there remains a disparity between what is theorized and what is taught. Boswell (1992) suggests the concept of adult learning centers as sites for active music participation that offer intergenerational ensembles of all types and sizes to fit flexible numbers of participants. Such programs would have the ability to meet the needs of all learners, regardless of whether they perceive music as work, serious leisure, or play. An expansion beyond school walls is needed, and adult needs must be discovered and valued in future music education programs.

**Teacher Education**
If music education is to embrace a more active role beyond primary and secondary education, teacher education programs must reflect a more inclusive mission that includes working with adult populations in acknowledgement of the developing needs of society (Burley 1987; McCullough in Darrough & Boswell 1992). The growing number of adult music programs in the United States provides ample opportunities for preservice teachers to observe and participate in andragogical environments. Colleges and universities need to blend such experiences into existing teacher training programs to prepare their students for careers beyond their undergraduate and graduate degrees. An integral part of this preparation is the espousing of principles of effective practice that facilitate adult learning.

Andragogy demands educator facilitation rather than transmission. Power relationships are much different between teacher and adult than between teacher and child (Uszler 1990). Many treatments that are appropriate for children are not appropriate for adults; therefore, explanations for goals, exercises, and materials must be rendered (Myers 1992), and negotiation rather than dictation becomes an essential element of instruction (Marciano 1990). Educators must be willing to give up authoritarian classroom control, serve as guides to participants, and view themselves as co-participants.

Myers (1992) promotes the facilitation of self-directed learning as a necessary modification of teaching education programs. While curricula and objectives must be outlined in instrumental music programs, didactic instruction is neither desirable nor effective in adult ensembles outside of the P-A-P system. Evaluation should also be generated primarily from participants rather than instructors (Coates 1984), for self-direction can not be advanced within a context of objectives and evaluative criteria determined solely by external sources.

**Final Thoughts**

In conclusion, andragogy in instrumental music is both desirable and necessary. Older adult populations are growing, capable, and are constantly seeking new experiences. The concept of a music learning society, with partnerships among schools, communities, and organizations, demands a new focus on music teaching and learning in adult settings. Localized contexts will determine the form and content of programs in andragogical models, and this in turn demands research at the local level.
Programs that are created for senior adults need to use participants’ life experiences and pre-existing knowledge as a foundation for teaching and learning. Preferences in music and musical activities need to be investigated to make connections with learners’ needs and perceptions. In addition, there should be an inherent flexibility in design to accommodate people with varied motivations for participation. The educational mission of any particular program must be driven by its participants’ preferences and motivations, and the practices of any single program must be informed by the adaptations that may be necessary due to participants’ characteristics and physical limitations.

Teachers need to be prepared to engage students on many different levels, facilitating self-direction, shifting from leader to co-participant, and engaging in praxis throughout the process. The teacher as researcher and facilitator, rather than the teacher as conductor and director, must become the dominant model in musical andragogy.

Regardless of the shape and structure of programs, rigor and appropriately high musical standards must be pursued. The art of music and its aural nature reside at the core of andragogy in music. While each local context demands separate andragogical paths, the broad mission of a music learning society is the promotion of comprehension in music with the understanding that all persons are capable of learning.

References


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