

# Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education

*The refereed journal of the*



Volume 10, No. 1  
August 2011

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Guest Editor

## **Electronic Article**

### **The Tale of One Children's Choir Educator within a Not-For-Profit Agency**

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ISSN 1545-4517

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## **The Tale of One Children's Choir Educator within a Not-For-Profit Agency**

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In the fall of 1997, I was hired to run a children's choir program within a not-for-profit agency in a large U.S. city. The agency's mission was to provide the necessary support and opportunities for children—mostly from low-income families—to become happy and healthy adults. A multitude of services were offered including Head Start and afterschool programs, children's choirs, dance, visual art and theatre classes, as well as medical and dental care. Services were provided in community centers and public schools within the many neighborhoods that comprise the city.

At the time, several not-for-profit agencies throughout the city offered similar services. One of the notable differences between this and other agencies was the funding provided for the visual and performing arts. Such funding practices were both in reaction and in contrast to the numerous but scattered arts programs in the public schools. While the board of education was making strides in finding, hiring and placing teachers, several public schools did not have any instruction in the arts. Also noteworthy was the great disparity between school programs. For example, in reaction to budget cuts, one school's parent organization raised funds to hire a music teacher and an art teacher, while another school, less than a mile away and without the same social capital, went without music or art classes entirely.

The agency responded by hiring several instructors to teach afterschool classes in dance, music, theatre and art at community centers. I was hired to both teach and lead the music program, consisting of several choirs. While each community center had its own choir, the main performing ensemble, the Concert Choir, drew children together from several community centers located around the city. Each Tuesday and Thursday, travel counselors would transport children to rehearse in a central location. Through regular music-making experiences, the goal of the Concert Choir was to expand the children's understanding of the varied cultural, ethnic, religious and social identities that comprise the city. Besides all of

these diverse identities, there were also considerable life experiences reflected in the choir. Some students were recent immigrants while others were products of several generations. There were students living with grandparents and students living with both parents. Some had several years of music education, and others had never sung at all. Ultimately, the agency hoped, as had I that students would find great benefit to learning music together and learning more about each other. This was both my and the agency's definition of an urban music education.

On the surface, this urban music education program appeared to be an inspired idea. Children would enjoy singing in choir and experience accomplishment as they worked toward a common group goal. Choir rehearsals would encourage student belonging and help in the development of their social skills. These qualities of enjoyment, accomplishment and affiliation with a peer group would contribute substantively to developing the overall agency mission.

Within a few years, a more specific mission for arts programs was developed and articulated by a newly formed arts committee comprised of several of the agency's board members. The document presented self-expression and promoting children's creativity as the central benefits of participation in the arts. Indeed, when the arts committee proposed adding these two elements to the existent mission of the choir program, board members and administrators unanimously agreed that these were important to children's experiences in the arts.

When it came to the day-to-day implementation of the mission, however, issues began to arise. While I happily found ways to support the children's growth, sharing these ideals seemed to become a growing challenge. I soon realized that the ideas of administrators and arts committee members were not being applied to the children's choir at all. In fact, the choir's role within the agency was not focused according to its mission. The choir served to broadcast the image of the agency, and this was accomplished by a regular dosage of public singing—on television and other venues. I was told, in no uncertain terms...the more publicity the choir gets, the better off for the agency.

This narrative is an attempt to examine the conflicting expectations and mission confusion of one children's choir director. I have chosen to use narrative not only to tell my own story and share impressions of the events that transpired, but also to dig further into understanding and resolving my experience. This is my process of meaning-making. Through

sharing my meaning-making process, I hope to encourage greater dialogue regarding unspoken roles and responsibilities of music programs, particularly where under-represented urban youth are at the center.

### **Unspoken but Felt Strongly: Not-For-Profit Ownership**

Many choirs are affiliated with organizations, either by holding residence in, sharing space with, or by simply attaching themselves to the name of a group. The children's choir I worked with was owned by the agency. Physical examples of ownership included being hired directly by the executive administration, being supported financially by the agency's operating budget, and holding all rehearsals and events at agency-owned locales. Even more importantly, however, were the unspoken understandings that contributed to the choir's ownership. The most crucial and evident of these was that I was to accept performance requests, particularly those viewed as beneficial to the overall image of the agency.

The ostensive use of the children's choir as a public relations vehicle began when the choir grew beyond one afterschool music class into a performing ensemble. I knew that the students would perform more frequently at certain times of the year—as is the case in all performance ensembles—whether they were housed in schools or other institutions. The difference here was that once administrators realized the children's choir could serve a practical purpose and aid the image of the agency, a departure from the mission of the choir was clearly felt, with a renewed focus on placing a child's face on the services offered. In board meetings, we discussed the benefits of arts instruction, as if the majority of what we did in the choir was focused on the music-making process. In practice, however, the attention the choir received from the administration was entirely performance related. I fielded frequent questions about performing in this venue or that, getting pictures with the honorary guest at a national fundraiser, and received training for what I would say if given a 30-second sound bite on television. While I knew that the public relations role was not the choir's only contribution to the agency, it was the source of the undivided attention of the upper administration.

The singers in the choir were registered for the agency's daily afterschool programs which operated for three hours each afternoon. Their endless availability and flexibility also facilitated frequent promotional performances. Travel counselors, employed by the agency,

could shuttle singers about easily. When it came to performance requests, it appeared there was an unlimited budget to transport the choir to the locations needed.

Everyone was complicit, including me, in using the children for positive publicity. I knew quite well that consistent funding would be the main benefit to accepting the public relations mission. Furthermore, I rationalized, if I could balance public relations responsibilities with the daily musical learning, it would be a win-win situation. I soon realized, however, that a balance point did not exist between the choir's mission of enjoyment, accomplishment, and self-growth and the public relations mandate of the agency. I began to feel that the constant videotaping and photographing of the children identified, and perhaps named them, as children in need. This created a terminal case of mission confusion for me as the educator responsible for the group. I clung onto the stated and spoken mission as best I could, but the expectations and priorities were clearly not about the children's growth, but rather on placing a public face on the agency.

### **Mission Confusion**

At first, I attempted to work out my confusion by searching for children's choir models that might provide guidance. I found stellar examples of musicianship, choirs armed with polished recordings of national and international performances. The goal of musical artistry for these groups was admirable, but was unrealistic with what was transpiring in rehearsal, at the time. Yes, musical artistry was something that I strove for, but I knew we had a while to go before that goal was reached. I had difficulty finding other programs that mirrored our own and with whom I might find support or assistance.

In practice, the mission of enjoyment, accomplishment and belonging was unattainable for many students. While some consistently attended rehearsals, many discontinued participation within weeks or months. It was difficult to maintain a group of regular singers. Furthermore, the children's vast range of musical experiences made it difficult to find a balance point. While some appeared to find enjoyment and accomplishment in singing in the choir, as evidenced by their participation and interaction with other students, others appeared unaffected and even disinterested.

The weight of being the publicity vehicle for the agency also impacted the process and pedagogy of rehearsals. As our publicity events were scheduled at a frequency of one per month, they shaped and limited rehearsal time considerably. The choir was constantly

preparing for events. Song repertoire needed to be “light” in order for us to sing at a holiday window opening or a fundraising dinner. Our specialty became the ten-minute performance for an audience of potential donors. While these mini-concerts seemed like a small request, transporting forty children to varied locations in the city consumed a lot of time and energy.

With the demands of our frequent publicity performances, building a community of singers felt impossible. The children worked toward two concerts a year for families and friends of the choir program. But these grew to become isolated times where the children and I could focus on different—social and musically significant—songs and experiences. They worked directly with composers in singing new works and they wrote poetry to incorporate into their performances. We went on trips and shared rehearsals and performances with other children’s choirs. These were the only times when I felt our mission was being realized. But these experiences were few and far between, constantly challenged by the next publicity performance.

Again in search for models, I spoke with colleagues and choir director friends. Of course, I realized that the public relations piece was important to other choirs as well. At the holidays, everyone pulled together a program that would help fortify audiences and sell tickets to help pay the bills. The difference was we spent most our time preparing and performing for events throughout the year, while they spent time on educational elements and opportunities.

There was one tangible benefit to frequent performances, however. The children spent a lot of idle time together and that encouraged friendships. While on mass transit, or waiting to go on stage, I watched relationships develop between students from very different neighborhoods and across the urban spectrum. This time together—which grew to be significant—helped the group develop into a singing community.

However, even while I witnessed friendships develop, I felt an ethical obligation to put an end to the publicity-promoting practices, and to focus on the children who participated in the program. But I did not speak up. Feeling buried by expectations and uncomfortable voicing my concerns with supervisors, I endured the painful balancing act. Though I would not admit it to myself, I had accepted the role of the choir as a means to exploit the children who benefitted from the agency’s services. While at some level I knew I could reject the requests for these performances, I chose the safety of my position and did not challenge the status quo.

I told myself that the children enjoyed the benefits of being on television and performing in fancy locales. Yet I felt the bittersweetness of each performance. The children, on the other hand, seemed to view performance as a quick fix, a fast food meal, or a thirty-minute sitcom. Feelings of reward related to the performances were short-lived. They enjoyed performing for appreciative audiences, but it was often clear that they would rather be back at the community center, practicing other music or playing soccer during breaks.

Performing often and for so many different audiences gifted us all with several life lessons. One such lesson was that entertainers rarely mingle with hosts. When performing on a morning program, one anchorperson said on camera to the choir outside in the cold, “Come in and we’ll have hot cocoa together.” After being shepherded back to the green room, I witnessed the children’s faces change from smiles to confusion as they realized she never intended to greet them or have them in the studio for cocoa. While the children stood and sang, smiled and briefly enjoyed the applause, I felt they were being used. At the time, it was hard to know if they had felt that way, but I became extremely uncomfortable with how the children were being treated.

The existence of the choir was integral to the agency, however, not for what it offered and represented to the children involved, but for what they offered to its image. At one point, one highly articulate teenage singer said that when people saw her in performance with the choir, they made the assumption that her family had limited financial resources. Regardless of whether their assumptions were true or not, she felt exposed, named, as what she called a “charity case.” Once she confided in me, I knew that if one child felt this way, so might others.

Ironically, while I felt a growing ethical tension and thought the children felt exposed, administrators did not appear to express concern with the increasing and encroaching practice of presenting the children on stage as a broadcast of the agency’s image. They would compliment the children’s work, at times offer positive feedback, and present the next performance request. Though the stated mission of the agency was to work toward the benefit of this urban youth, it felt to me that administrators—working in offices far removed from the lives of these children—were unable to see the potentially detrimental elements of their actions. The responsibility, however, should not fall on administrators alone. Being at the early stage of my own career and wanting to do a “good job,” I did not give voice to my concerns. Rather, I entrusted my own ethical compass to those who had been doing not-for-

profit work for much longer than I had. I did nothing to stop those under my educational care from being publicly “outed” as children-in-need of the agency’s services. I did not consider the implications of what the children might be experiencing in the unfolding process of becoming the public face of this not-for-profit agency.

At the time, all I wanted to be was the choir director. I enjoyed the challenge of directing a large children’s choir program in an urban center. I actively combated the children’s negative publicity experiences by providing the best educational experience I could muster at the community center. They found success in singing in community with one another. Some experienced accomplishment when they conquered a different harmony part. I witnessed children building friendships and taking pride in belonging to the group. Nevertheless, the question of whether or not the choir program was, in the long-term, a positive experience for those involved remains.

### **Final Reflections**

The goal of this narrative is to share how conflicting expectations and priorities can create significant challenges and tensions between the educational commitment of performing ensembles and not-for-profit agencies. I have learned from my experiences to look not only at the mission of organizations, but to examine how practical aims, procedures and decisions may impact the children under their care. While I felt my commitment was first and foremost to the children in this choir program, when public performances appeared to misrepresent or expose these children, I did nothing. Only now, in hindsight, do I see how I failed to act and perhaps protect them from harm. Only now do I see how this possibility can be present in any educative enterprise.

It is important to consider how this narrative could have ended differently, or been woven into a greater tale of dialogue and reform. After all, the children’s choir program began with the best of intentions and a seemingly clear mission. Children would come together to learn more about themselves by participating in musical experiences. They would find joy and develop a stronger sense of who they were, having meaningful singing experiences to look back on. Could this choir have existed within this agency while simultaneously placing the children first, protecting and affirming their own development? Undoubtedly and unequivocally, yes. Performances without the required agency preamble would have focused on the children’s music-making. Recognizing the potential harm of using



the children repeatedly as agency images would have precluded us from accepting countless promotional engagements. Finally, raising my own voice, even if it represented a dissenting voice, would likely have made an impact. If I had spoken up, might agency administrators have listened, and together, we would have readjusted our course?

It seems that we can ask similar questions of our school music education programs. In conversations with teachers, I have witnessed the varied expression of doubt and uncertainty when feeling compelled to perform music that pleases an audience-base comprised of administrators, parents and community members. I have also observed teachers discussing the extraneous but necessary performances they must endure at an administrator's request. How much can we stray from what we feel is most important in order to maintain our funding, to protect our programs, or because we fear losing our own jobs? If the role of publicity through performance were of secondary importance, what potential might we reach? What territory could we claim for the music-making process? And how could we reaffirm the music-making process as an end, rather than the means to a polished performance?

I fully trust that not-for-profit agencies can impact music education in cities. They can serve as the conduit for excellent teachers and programs that draw students from divergent backgrounds and with different levels of opportunity, be they educational, social, or cultural. In light of the above story, however, it seems appropriate for music educators—in urban centers or elsewhere—to search for clear alignments between the unspoken and articulated goals. While finding philosophical and actionable consistence may be at times impossible, engaging in meaningful and impactful conversations can help us serve the children in our care—be they in urban contexts or not.

I began this narrative with the goal of encouraging dialogue regarding the roles and responsibilities of music programs that serve under-represented youth. Based on my own experience, I would like to offer potential directions for further consideration and discussion. First, I suggest that music teacher education programs incite discussion and reflection regarding the balance between public relations and learning within music programs. Second, I recommend that professional music education organizations develop special interest groups aimed at educating administrators, whether they be in schools or other institutions, regarding the music-making process and the varied roles of performance. Finally, I urge music education organizations to create a place for educators to voice their concerns, especially as

they relate to professional ethics and protected populations, such as children. Engaging in dialogue with others may allow us to more fully and mindfully consider the impact our decisions will have on the children in our care.

### **About the Author**

Elizabeth Parker is an Assistant Professor of General/Choral Music Education at the Schwob School of Music, Columbus State University in Georgia. Besides working for a large not-for-profit agency for eight years, Elizabeth also taught general and choral music in urban schools for seven years. She holds degrees from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Oberlin Conservatory. Elizabeth's research focuses on the adolescent choral experience.