Lessons in Analytical Listening from the Reel World

By Gena R. Greher

On the surface, it may appear that corporate executives, music educators, and the icons of popular culture share little common ground, but the reality is quite the contrary. At the dawning of the twenty-first century, perhaps it is time to reflect on the skills we as a society value and how we as music educators are in a unique position to develop them. I have come to the field of education after spending the better part of the last twenty years in recording studios, film studios, and editing rooms as a music producer/music director in advertising. During that time, I experienced the irony of being among people in the communication business who very often were unable to communicate effectively with each other. Since listening is a crucial component of the act of communicating, I've often thought that everyone could benefit from the kind of training we musicians receive for developing analytical listening skills.

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The business world and the general music classroom have more in common than one might think.

Early musical training in performance ensembles provides opportunities for developing one's individual voice within the context of a group setting, and musicians become well versed in the art of teamwork. Employee empowerment and team building are now considered essential components for successful businesses. It is not too surprising that a prominent business school, Zicklin School of Business at Baruch College, used the Orpheus Ensemble, a conductor-less chamber orchestra, as a case study in developing models for corporate restructuring that are less top heavy and allow room for more employee input (*New York Times,* 10 November 1999). Based on these observations, it would seem that the business world and the general music classroom have more in common than one might think. There are lessons that each can learn from the other. The common ground that they share can lay the foundation for supporting the importance of the general music classroom in a school's curriculum.

The Listening Lesson

People who are good listeners are highly valued, yet most people aren't really listening when other people are talking. Ten people can walk out of a meeting in which one person has clearly laid out specific parameters, and there will be ten different interpretations of what was said. The development of analytical listening skills is a much needed real-world skill.

Musicians are trained to analyze and make judgments about what they hear in order to refine

their technique. This type of listening lesson fosters a greater understanding of what one is hearing. By creating and teaching strategies that students can use to engage in listening, general music educators help students to develop valuable real-world skills while fulfilling two of the National Standards for Music Education—Content Standard 6, "Listening to, analyzing, and describing music"; and Content Standard 7, "Evaluating music and music performances" (Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, 1994).

The Technology Lesson

There is tremendous pressure to incorporate technology into the curriculum. Another lesson learned from the business world is that multimedia technology can be seductive. It is very tempting to let the pyrotechnics of technology disguise a poorly thought-out idea or, worse yet, no idea at all. In reality, technology is simply another set of tools to help advance ideas. It is not a replacement for the idea itself. The most successful people are those who have the imagination and ability to put these tools to best use. However, just as in the pretechnology days, it is still the idea that matters most. When you strip away the pyrotechnics, what is the message?

Rather than teaching technology for its own sake, it might be more productive to use technology as a platform to support the development of ideas. Being able to make decisions, take calculated risks, think outside the box, be a team player, communicate ideas effectively, and take initiative are prized abilities, regardless of one's position within the corporate hierarchy. In addition to developing those qualities, Healy (1995), in an essay titled "Musical Brains for the World of Tomorrow," stresses the importance of visual and auditory listening skills for the students of tomorrow. Since we live in a mediacentric society, I firmly believe educators must acknowledge the media's existence and its influence on our young people. General music educators are in a prime position to provide an enticing and imaginative context for the development of visual and auditory acuity.

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The MTV Lesson

The next lesson, as Papert (1993) suggests in his latest book on technology and school reform, is for teachers to "look to the general culture as a source of ideas" (p. 132). Admittedly, one is not necessarily inclined to think of television as being particularly educational. To be sure, some wonderful innovative educational programs have been created by public television, the networks, various cable stations, and the entertainment conglomerates. For the most part, however, one is more apt to agree with Newton N. Minow's assessment in his May 9, 1961 speech addressing the National Association of Broadcasters, when he declared that television was a "vast wasteland" (1995, p. 3). Yet one cannot deny the profound influence that television has had in shaping our culture. MTV, for instance, has forever changed the pop music landscape. It is no longer enough to enjoy music for its own sake. We now receive prepackaged images that leave little to the imagination.

There may be no doubt that many MTV music videos are visually stimulating, but how much do they contribute to the enhancement of a child's imagination? It's quite possible that they detract from a child's listening skills by shifting the emphasis from listening to music to watching it instead, which further polarizes the types of music that children hear. As Jacqueline H. Wiggins aptly states, "We need to allow children to develop as musicians in a setting that recognizes their own culture. 'School music' and 'real music' cannot be viewed by children as two separate entities in their lives" (Wiggins, 1995, p. 93).

I would probably take it a step further by stating that school activities should be closer to real-life activities. Because of its power to influence America's youth culture, I was drawn to the MTV concept as a means of bridging this perceived cultural divide. Paradoxically, it was the MTV concept that inspired and drove the project that I describe below.

The Getting-Them-Hooked Lesson

Imagine what it would be like if you were to tell your students your goals and objectives for the class: they are going to learn ana-

lytical listening skills, musical composition, songwriting, lyric writing, and performance practices, as well as group problem-solving. At the same time, they will be engaging in divergent thinking and developing their critical-thinking skills. Would their eyes light up, or would you slowly start to lose them to *the look*? This blank stare behind slightly squinted eyes and a slackened jaw not only instantly communicate how out of touch they think you are, but also indicate how much harder it's going to be to win them over. Now imagine what their reactions would be if you tell them that they are going to create their own music video. Recently, when I told a class of New York City public-school fifth graders that they were going to create a music video, I watched thirty pairs of eyes light up as if on cue. They were hooked!

Now that they were "hooked," what would be needed to bring their ideas to life? The options were endless. A professional music video production is a cooperative venture. Sometimes, when everyone's ideas are in sync, it is a smooth process. In actuality, that rarely happens. More often than not, people have opposing ideas and different styles of working, which create an environment that I will politely term chaotic. A student production mirrors the ups and downs of the professional production. Certainly, it will not guarantee a room full of students sitting quietly at their desks with their hands neatly folded. However, it can provide an assortment of learning opportunities for both students and teacher. After all, if one of our goals as teachers is to create lifelong learners, shouldn't we as teachers be open to learning as well?

A Lesson in Relevance

William H. Kilpatrick, one of the first proponents of project-based curricula, believed that the curriculum should be the experience, not the subject (as cited in Walker and Soltis, 1997). With that in mind, it can be seen that a music video production by its very nature is the perfect embodiment of the philosophies at the core of educational reform. In a project-based environment like a video production, the students learn more than isolated, random facts that may or may not mean anything to them in the future. They learn skills that they will need and use throughout their lives while enhancing their abilities to make connections across various subject areas.

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Concurrently, the students develop skills as instrumentalists, singers, composers, lyricists, researchers, artists, writers, choreographers, and producers. They learn to solve problems, both individually and in groups, in order to determine how they will present their information and what form it will take. At all times, they need to listen to each other. They become decision makers. They have to decide what information to include, who will find it, where they should look for it, what role or roles they each will have, and how to navigate through differences of opinion. Regardless of whether they must organize facts, people, or time, they will learn organization skills. Most importantly, they learn all of this in a setting that,as Jane M. Healy (1995) suggests for the general classroom, "is interesting, engaging, and relevant to their perceived needs or experiences" (p. 18).

A Lesson about Collaboration

In the business world there are "control freaks," who are compelled to micromanage every aspect of a project, and there are also "collaborators." The collaborators create an environment within their team for a healthy exchange of ideas and space in which the team can develop its own collective vision. Generally, working for "control freaks" is neither satisfying nor rewarding. Since it is important to allow the students the chance to set the parameters of the project, gain ownership of their ideas, and develop the motivation to see their ideas through to fruition, it is essential for the teacher to become a collaborator in their project. A teacher who is used to leading and expecting students to follow along may find it difficult to resist the urge to control a production.

Rather than lecturing to them about how one would write a song, explaining that creating a music video is not all fun, games, and glamour, and warning them that it is an extremely complex undertaking that involves a great deal of hard work and concentration, let

Creating a Music Video as a Class Project

Introduce the concept

• Have a discussion with your class about the purpose of a music video, why they think rock groups produce them, and which videos they think are effective and why.

• Divide the class into discussion groups to suggest the various roles students might have in the project and what they think they will need to know to prepare themselves.

• Ask the class to suggest possible names for their music video project group and possible topics or themes for their video.

Create a listening exercise in visual imagery

• Prepare a listening exercise for the class suggestive of visual imagery, choosing two or three short instrumental musical excerpts from different musical genres that evoke similar types of imagery or moods, e.g., a moving train, a hot desert, or outer space. Examples: Holst, *The Planets* ("Mercury" or "Mars); the opening title from the *Bladerunner* soundtrack; or the love theme from the *StarWars* soundtrack.

• Ask the students what they heard and make a list for each piece. Ask them to list the similarities and differences in the various excerpts.

Create a simple soundtrack

• Choose a two-minute clip from a movie that relates to the listening exercise and have the class view it without sound.

• Discuss what the mood is, what may be taking place, and what musical qualities could be used to convey what is happening visually.

• Divide the class into groups and have them create a soundtrack to accompany the film. Allow some rehearsal time. While students are performing their pieces to the playback of the video, aim a video camera at the TV and record it for later playback (the music and the video will be in sync on the videotape).

• Have the class view the tape you made and discuss their work.

Analyze existing music videos

• Select two or three age-appropriate music videos to view and analyze to stimulate thinking about musical styles, form, and mood. Two examples are the 'NSync "No Strings" video, which uses dancing and singing with lots of imagery and Michael Jackson's "Heal the World" video, which exemplifies video with a message.

• Have the students discuss the direction they would like their video to take, e.g., humorous or message oriented, verses with chorus or free form, rap, rock, ballad, or anthem.

Write lyrics

• Have a large-group discussion to generate lyric ideas and make a list (this could be based on any of the subjects they are studying in class).

• Divide the class into groups and have each group work with a different idea from the list to create a lyric.

• As a large group exercise, have the class combine the key points from the individual groups to create one composite lyric.

Write music

• Create groups combining singers with percussionists to generate musical ideas to work with the lyrics.

• Let the groups share their ideas and possibly mix and match to create a song everyone agrees on.

Have many rehearsal sessions

• Discuss the mode of dress for the video.

• Create posters and/or scenery.

• Discuss indoor or outdoor filming locations.

• Work on simple movements to go with the music.

Video tape and edit

• Although you will be videotaping most class sessions, designate a formal taping day with costumes, scenery, and the dance sequences. You may need to rearrange schedules to allow for a large block of time.

• Use one of two general approaches for editing:

—Low tech: Edit the tape using two video machines.

—High tech: Edit the video using multimedia computer, video-capture hardware, and either Adobe Premier or a HyperStudio presentation software.

them learn these lessons first hand. They will experience what it feels like to create something from nothing within a specific time frame in a group setting with multiple opinions popping up all over the place. Instead of having them perform someone else's ideas and music, they are the creators. Aaron Copland (1988) believed that "to listen intelligently, you must clearly understand not only your own role but also that of composer and interpreter and what each one contributes to the sum total of a musical experience" (p. 265). Placed in the roles of composers and interpreters, students have the opportunity to fine-tune their analytical listening skills.

It's the students' vision, not the teacher's, that should ultimately determine the end result. Rather than knowing the outcome of the project from the outset, everyone steps into that great unknown together with scarcely a clue as to where the project is going to end up.

In our particular project, each week's lesson became a small, manageable facet of the larger production (see the Creating a Music Video as a Class Project sidebar for a description of the general steps for making a video). I helped them sequence the various phases of the production, advised and guided them through the process, and showed them ways to explore their options and possibilities in solving the various problems that inevitably arose. I posed many open-ended questions such as: "Where do you want to begin?" "What do you want to say?" "How are you going to portray your message?" "Do you want it to be serious and somber, or do you want to incorporate humor?"

While we always had the goal of the finished video to work towards, the individual classes were focused on the creative process, whether it was music, dance movements, lyric writing, or poster making. During some weeks, students created soundtracks to an existing film in order to experience what it felt like to create music to specific timings and to set moods.

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On several occasions, I had guest artists come in to talk about and demonstrate how a professional songwriter creates a lyric or how a dancer choreographs a song. At other times, students engaged in well thought-out, well-researched, impassioned debates about the environment, animal rights, and human rights. These discussions were held during the lyric-writing phase to help generate ideas for lyric content.

This open exchange gave them the opportunity to attach their feelings to what they were learning, which, according to Geoffrey Caine, (D'Arcangelo, 1998) is essential to developing meaning and is often overlooked in the educational process.

The Cooperative Learning Lesson

At the beginning of the project, the students were given many opportunities to view and analyze existing music videos in terms of their style, form, ideas, and effectiveness. In addition to the potential for musical-learning opportunities this project offered, there were interdisciplinary opportunities that allowed students to explore real-life issues in the form of writing, movement, art, and thematic ideas from their social studies curriculum. We had writing and discussion sessions to create lyrics.

At one point in the lyric-writing phase when everyone was staring blankly into the air, I collected six key phrases based on some ideas the students had previously discussed in our music class and with their classroom teacher. We put each phrase at the top of each of six poster sheets. Each of six groups of students then chose a phrase to develop into a lyric, and eventually they culled all of the lyric ideas into a composite final lyric.

There were discussion groups at every step of the way to evaluate where we were in the process and what we thought should be the next phase. These opportunities for students to express their ideas and reflect upon their small-group work allowed them to exercise their metacognitive thinking. After developing individual themes in small groups, the next step was to come together as a class and narrow their choices to one idea. That they eventually had to share their ideas with the other groups in order to create only one musical piece was a difficult concept for them to grasp. The hardest part for me was encouraging the group process without squelching individual voices, and we inevitably had many discussions about the importance of cooperation and teamwork.

The Empowerment Lesson

Because the process, not necessarily the product, was paramount, the students decided for themselves what role or roles they wanted to have in the video. There were no auditions for parts. If a student wanted to sing in the chorus, dance, play an instrument, or have a solo, he or she could make that choice. If a student was unsure of what role to take, he or she had an opportunity to try out various parts. Everyone eventually gravitated to a performance vehicle where he or she felt comfortable. In a few instances, students wanted only to be involved in taping and recording the video or creating the artwork instead of participating in the actual performance. Ultimately, these cumulative decisions determined the look and sound of the video.

After the second week, I realized that it would probably be a good idea to let the students videotape our learning, discussion, and rehearsal sessions as often as possible as a way of recording their progress and of helping them sense that a video was indeed in the process of being created in this classroom. This turned out to be a fortuitous move. On the day of our final taping session, one of the students was sick. Knowing how hard he had worked all semester, we edited in one of his previous performances, and he didn't miss out on being a part of the final production. These informal taping sessions also provided some candid sequences used in the final edit.

I constantly monitored the small-group work and evaluated the progress of the individual students within each group in order to guide the class through the various stages of creation. Would we create a story line for the video or let the visuals grow organically from the music? That remained to be seen.

Making sure that all of the students were involved was a big concern for me. In one case, a group in the corner appeared to be doing nothing. I eventually discovered that this group had in fact come up with an idea that formed the basis for the chorus of our video.

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Another involvement issue: How would I get the four students sitting on the fringes more involved? It soon became apparent who the natural leaders were, and it was just a matter of partnering them with students who were sitting on the fringe. Could group "A" teach group "B" the rhythmic pattern they came up with to accompany the chorus? What are we going to do with the verse that no one wants to learn? At each verse-learning session, the singers moaned and groaned—until the last minute, when it was turned into a rap. Once again, the importance of listening was underscored! In this case, it was my learning to listen to what the students were indirectly telling me that helped me to facilitate their involvement in the creative process.

The Alternative Assessment Lesson

Early on, it became apparent that this music-video class project was a perfect scenario for alternative assessment. I had, in effect, created a situation in which my instruction linked to assessment in such a way that the two were seamlessly intertwined. Rather than reading about songwriting techniques or the various phases of video production and then getting a unit test, the students were actually creating a song and producing a video, making value judgments, and evaluating and refining their ideas. They did this in much the same way that professional songwriters, performers, or producers would. At the end, they walked away from the project totally exhausted, but also with a tremendous amount of pride and a sense of accomplishment that one doesn't necessarily feel after having taken a test. I knew how I felt about the progress the individuals in the class were making. I was sure that I had learned as much from them as they had from me. By observing their actions and listening to their comments, I constantly made adjustments in my teaching and coaching and learned what aspects of my instruction I would keep or change in the future. The class worked very hard to put together a performance piece that turned out to be far more complex than anyone had anticipated. There was anecdotal and video evidence that they had grown musically and had gained from this experience.

However, since this entire project was centered on the students as creators, it was necessary to formally reflect on and evaluate their work. I created three different self-evaluation forms that were administered at the beginning of the project, the day of the formal tap-

ing session, and after the students viewed the finished video. The first evaluation was more like a survey so that I could get an idea of what their music backgrounds were, what kind of music and music videos they liked, and what part they wanted to have in the video. On the morning of our final taping, the students filled out the second self-evaluation form, one-third of which consisted of short answer questions and two-thirds of which were open-ended, reflective questions requiring essay responses. The second self-evaluation form asked them to evaluate their work and to give their impressions of what they had imagined creating a video would entail compared to actually creating one. Was the experience what they had expected or were there any surprises? They were asked to write their thoughts on the process of creating the music for the video, along with reporting on the group dynamics. The third evaluation survey, which followed the same format as the second self-evaluation, was filled out after they viewed the final video. They were asked to evaluate their individual roles, the overall group performance, how well they thought their ideas were communicated, how well their musical ideas were executed, and then make suggestions as to what they might do differently the next time.

From "Reel" World to "Real" World—Lessons Learned

As we approached our final taping day, students used any free time they had for rehearsing. They came in early and stayed late. There were no longer any students on the fringes. Students who had mastered their individual parts helped others who were still unsure. Underscoring one of Weinberger's (1998) points regarding the importance of music education, everyone was thoroughly involved, their brains exercised and actively engaged. They indeed became analytical listeners as they had proven many times during the taping session. In one instance, the dancers were able to tell the percussionists exactly how a slight change being made to the rhythm part was throwing them off. At that instant I knew I could just step back, because they were in control. My assumptions about this kind of project as a way to motivate a class and generate musical and nonmusical educational objectives proved to be right on target. I watched these students grow as musicians, thinkers, performers, and caring human beings. Just as Donald Pond (Wilson et al., 1978) noted in his observations of preschool children, this class had become a community as a result of their group music making. What I experienced and discovered during this semester-long project far exceeded my expectations, and I believe that for the most part the class felt the same way.

To the average observer, the benefits of general music classes appear less tangible than performance ensembles, where parents witness the fruits of their children's labor at the annual concerts. As if to underscore Fowler's (1996) position that the arts can extend one's awareness and comprehension, the music video project can provide discernible documentation of the many educational benefits taking place in the general music classroom. In fact, this kind of project may help principals, teachers, parents, and administrators reimagine what a contemporary general music classroom should look like and sound like, its contributing role in the school culture, and its implications beyond the school environment. It may even prompt them to rethink what our educational goals and objectives should be based on what skills we as a society value most.

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