

Music Education North of the 49th Parallel

Dan Bartholomew-Poyser

For the past year I have been on an M. Phil course at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. It has been a challenging and fruitful year, an experience that has proved to be more than worth the cost of being an international student.

How did a Canadian, all the way from Calgary, Alberta end up studying in Manchester? Especially considering the number of great schools one can attend in Canada and in the States? The decision that I made to come to RNCM had much to do with location, but also, much to do with the way music pedagogy is approached in England.

It might be helpful to first explain the way music is taught in Albertan schools. Barring minor regional differences, the approach to music education taken in Alberta is roughly representative of music education throughout Canada, and can give one a good basic idea of the way things are done.

Music Education in Alberta, Canada

By the time they are twelve years old, all children, the willing and the unwilling, will have been exposed to some or other form of music education. This education is most often delivered through a Kodály approach, though Orff is also quite well represented, Dalcroze significantly less so. This first introduction to classroom music can be performed by a primary music specialist, but these are a rare breed. Quite often music in the primary classroom is added on as a module and taught by all variety of teacher whether musically inclined or not.

By seventh grade, things get more interesting. At this point in their education, the children are allowed to select options within their school programme. Some schools will have as many as ten different options ranging from music, to choir, to computers, to cosmetology, to building, to law and the like. If you are lucky enough to work at a school with a fine arts focus, you may find that most of the options have an artistic bent. Regardless of the variety of options offered, 90% of schools will have at least three fine arts options: drama, art and instrumental music or band.

Though this may seem an ideal situation, band pedagogy within the school timetable, there are factors that can challenge the survival of a band programme. If you are in a school where the administration does not see the value of music instruction, it is very easy to get timetabled out of a schedule, meaning, you can find yourself very low on the priority list when it comes to arranging class times, rooms, trips and, importantly, funding. If the head administrator in your school is not pro arts,

both you and your fledgling programme are sunk. As such, it is imperative for new teachers in Canada to be sure that their administrators are on their side. If this is not the case they have to make sure that the benefits of music and the quality of their programme are obvious to the administration and the parents. Challenges aside, this method of music instruction is obviously a great situation for the teacher who is serious and committed to the art. If you find a good school with supportive administration and parents, the sky is the limit.

Within the government curriculum there are many specific objectives detailing what students are to be taught from grade seven straight through to their final grade 12 year. Happily, there is still quite a lot of freedom within those guidelines allowing a teacher to be extremely creative in the way they meet those curriculum objectives. Repertoire is not prescribed by the government, although some band festivals do legislate the repertoire they want bands to perform. Interestingly, the canon of wind repertoire displays a remarkable level of crossover; I was surprised to hear bands in England programming many of the same pieces I had done with my own students. Many teachers take their bands on weekend band trips, complete with group instrumental lessons, and visiting guest conductor. In North America one teacher teaches all of the instruments (having taken the appropriate technique classes in university), so it is not unusual for teachers to hire university students once or twice a year to come to the school and give instrument specific group lessons. Towards the end of the school year a good number of teachers (if they have not collapsed from exhaustion) find the time to take one or more of their bands on a band tour to a neighbouring city or province. Music education being done the way it is, there are always plenty of people around who have played some sort of band instrument at some point in their lives. One would thus be inclined to think that the institutionalization of amateur music would lead to a large number of bands and small chamber ensembles flourishing all over the empty, yet beautiful, Canadian landscape. This is not generally the case. Though there are organisations that do encourage non-professional music making (and a few notable exceptions that do succeed at it quite famously), this sort of musicking does not have near the foothold within Canada that one sees here in England. To a foreigner, the number and variety of youth and adult music making organisations is both staggering and challenging. I have been impressed by the music services I have seen, and equally impressed with the commitment of the volunteers that help to make many of the youth

music ensembles function. It is definitely easier to sustain a culture of non-professional music making when the tradition for it already exists within a culture. Canada is still quite a young country (less than 150 years old), so it is ostensibly up to the current generation of teachers to continue building upon the foundation our teachers have so carefully established.

University Music

The Canadian approach to music education at the amateur level differs greatly from that found in Europe, and the approach to music education at the post-secondary level displays similar distinctions. One of the main reasons for my coming to England was to take part in a conducting programme where I would be offered a real variety of conducting experiences. In my current programme I have conducted, in addition to wind bands, orchestras, operatic ensembles and other ensembles; a reasonably fullish spectrum. Had I enrolled in a North American University, I would have been asked to pick a specific area (wind band, vocal or orchestral) in which to specialize. Degrees are offered according to this specialization, and usually a person will work almost exclusively in the one area of their choosing. For a person wanting to specialize in one specific area of music making, North American schools offer them the opportunity to research and study one area in significant detail. For those desiring a broader context for their conducting studies, the European approach is the way to go. They are very different worlds. It is simply a matter of knowing what you want to be qualified in. Having already received certification in wind conducting from the University of Calgary, I felt that it would be beneficial to gain experience working

with a variety of different types of ensembles and vocal groups. This inclination made Manchester a natural choice.

Which way to go?

There are plenty of opportunities on both sides of the Atlantic. Knowing where you want to study is a matter of knowing what your gifts are, what the holes are in your knowledge base, and having at least a fuzzy idea of where you want to end up. The different approaches to music making that are found on all levels suit different people. Ultimately, the most important factor in knowing where to go is knowing who you are and finding the school in the world and place in the world that fits you best.

Dan Bartholomew-Poyser was born in Montreal, Quebec, moved to Calgary Alberta at the age of five and has been a resident of Western Canada ever since. He began studies on tuba at the age of 12 and after studying with Mike Eastep, received his Bachelor of Music with Distinction in Performance from the University of Calgary in 1999. Since then he has gone on to receive his Bachelor of Education and a Diploma of Fine Arts in Wind Conducting in addition to various accreditations on cello, his second instrument. For the past four years he has been director of Bands at Glenmore Christian Academy, directing a programme of 160 music students. He is currently working towards an M Phil in conducting at the RNCM. In September he will return to Calgary where he will resume teaching, playing, freelancing and musical direction of the Players Chamber Orchestra. Dan has conducted and adjudicated in Canada, England and Germany working with wind bands and orchestras, young beginners, professional orchestras and all variety of players in between.

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