

Vernacular Musicianship: Moving Beyond Teenage Popular Music

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Manuscript accepted for publication in the book
Research Perspectives on the National Standards, E. Costa-Giomi & S. J. Morrison, Eds.
To be published by the National Association for Music Education

It has now been about 45 years since the Tanglewood Symposium, at which some of the best minds in the field gathered to consider improvements needed in music education. Within the group's summarizing declaration was the recommendation that school music repertoire expand to include "popular teenage music and avant-garde music, American folk music, and the music of other cultures" (Choate, 1968). In many ways, this advice is still timely. Although the greater landscape of music has changed tremendously over the last half century, there are places in the United States where school music remains much like it was in the 1960s.

The Tanglewood document's pairing of the terms *teenage* and *popular music* is interesting. It likely reflected the symposium participants' recognition that education is most effective when it establishes relevance to the learner. Unfortunately some music teachers can be rather utilitarian about this. They may consider the use of popular music as merely a motivational ploy for recruiting and retaining students in their elective music classes. Viewing their efforts almost like missionary work, they may seek to meet students where they are (i.e., liking popular music) before guiding them to better, more sophisticated repertoire to which they would not otherwise be exposed. It's debatable whether a "bait and switch" approach even works. Adolescents tend to readily distinguish between school music and "real music," and this disconnect is quite entrenched (Boal-Palheiros & Hargreaves, 2001; North, Hargreaves, & O'Neill, 2000).

Perhaps more interesting about the phrase "teenage popular music" is that many teenagers of the Tanglewood era are now grandparents! Surely they—and their adult children—continue to listen to popular music. This is likely true, even if we define popular music rather narrowly through styles like pop, rock, hip-hop, and country. This fact suggests that schools should incorporate popular music into the curriculum *not* just because it is important to teenage students, but because popular music is an integral part of the lives of all stakeholders in education: parents, teachers, administrators, community members.

Popular music comprises the *native* music of the people whom our schools serve. Certainly the classical-influenced repertoire of choirs, orchestras, and bands (even jazz bands) is unfamiliar to most students. This, however, does not necessarily bolster the curricular merit of one style of music over the other. In the vast majority of American secondary schools, native English speaking students are required to take English classes, and are also offered a chance to study foreign languages. Just because students arrive with some measure of fluency in English does not exempt them from additional study. Some critics of popular music have argued that schools should not waste time covering it because teenagers already are so familiar with it, at least more so than the teachers. On the other hand, just because most people in a community are English speakers does not mean that foreign language study is unimportant. Similarly, the promotion of popular music does not entail the devaluation of traditional school music offerings.

Also drawing from the language analogy, the term *vernacular music* is becoming increasingly preferred to *popular music*, although this chapter uses the terms interchangeably (O'Flynn, 2006). That which is vernacular is from one's "mother tongue" rather than imposed as a second language. The next section of this chapter will explore the ways that popular music is part of the native culture of most Westerners, including the young people who populate American schools. The section following this will describe some of the issues challenging the integration of vernacular music into music education. Finally, this chapter will conclude by outlining potential benefits of integration, and in effect offer points of focus for future efforts.