

NOTES ON ARTFUL EDUCATION:
Orff Schulwerk in America

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Carl Orff's description of Orff as a wildflower, growing where conditions are ripe, is widely quoted in the world of Orff Schulwerk. It places our work outside of the "drawing board mentality" (Orff's words), an image that could be updated to the "pre-programmed software mentality" or the "business spreadsheet mentality" or all the various systems that seek to limit the variables and give us the (illusory) sensation that we are in charge. The wildflower image is potent not only because it takes us outdoors away from machines and office cubicles, but because the wildflower grows slightly outside of our human desire to control the world. It comes from the activity of our cousins, the bees, the birds, the wind and from our own good sense to walk through the open fields where seeds can find our socks and hitch a ride to their next flowering.

A look at the international spread of the Schulwerk would reveal one serendipitous event after another in which the right person in the right place at the right time caught the urge to get out and walk, often through the halls and surrounding fields of the Orff Institute, and then take the seeds back home to Japan or Taiwan or Greece or Finland or Spain or Argentina or any one of 40-plus countries where the Schulwerk has planted itself. Of course, there was a much greater conscious commitment and directed effort to propagate than merely taking off one's socks in a new place. But the curious fact remains that two people who studied equally hard in Salzburg and worked equally hard back in their home country did not always yield equal results. And part of this has to do with the ripeness of conditions, the field itself in which the seeds dropped.

The United States has been a particularly fertile field for the Schulwerk, boasting the largest organization worldwide and considerable success (relative to other countries) in entering mainstream public and private education. But the nature of the soil, the particular qualities of the field in which the wildflowers grow and prosper, naturally affects the color and shape of that flower. And sometimes one wonders whether the present variety has lost some of its beauty and fragrance.

These days, I often tell people in my workshops that the success of Orff Schulwerk in the United States is both a call for celebration and a cause for concern. We have succeeded in making a mark on music education nationwide because there already existed a function for music in the schools and a need for music specialists to teach it. But is the field of present-day American education fertile enough to receive Orff's radical ideas? When an Orff program enters a school, three things can happen:

- 1) The program will have to conform to the demands of the school —testing, reduced schedules, large numbers, small rooms etc. —and the very things that make our practice unique will be lost.
- 2) The program will be left alone to do its thing undisturbed, an anomaly in the greater system.
- 3) The program will become a model that will transform the entire school community. Others will come to us and ask: “How do you do that?”

I imagine we all can think of examples of each of the above.

If we further expand this notion of field and wildflower, we should ask, “What is the overall cultural climate in the United States? How does *this* affect Orff Schulwerk?” I believe we can say with conviction a few things about American culture:

- 1) We are a commerce-driven culture. If there is one thing that Americans are good at, it is business. We know how to mass-manufacture products, advertise them, sell them and shop for them.
- 2) We are doers. We are organized, efficient and know how to get things done.
- 3) We tend towards the material (see shopping above).

Having worked extensively in Europe and the U.S., I feel these differences profoundly. If I tell people here that I did an Orff workshop for 750 people at a conference, their response is “Cool! That’s incredible!” In Europe, they look at me in disgust and ask, “How can you call that an Orff workshop?” Europeans browse through the vast number of books that give teachers arrangements that teachers could (and should) do for themselves or with the children and wonder, “Why waste paper on the obvious?” They see the pre-fabricated music charts that a teacher could draw on the board or have the kids hand-write artistically and wonder, “Why?” In the U.S., people tell me

how they like this or that clinician's "stuff." In Europe, they speak about the ideas from the workshop or the particular ways in which the teacher released movement through the breath.

It seems inevitable that no matter how conscious we try to be, living in a consumer society means that material criteria and business language will creep into every corner of our lives. But Orff teachers are keepers of an artistic tradition. By nature we are impelled to speak from a poetic basis. If we plant our feet firmly on artistic soil, things might change. An inspiring example comes from the poet David Whyte who has been hired by corporations to lead workshops, because, as one honest executive put it, "we were entering a territory for which we had no language." This corporate executive wisely chose a poet to help his administrative team understand how to humanize their way of working. If corporate America can hire poets, there may be hope for us after all!

But the climate in education is going in the opposite direction. More and more, schools are hiring business administrators who have never taught and are more concerned about fundraising than the children down the hall. The language of education is increasingly business-speak, with test scores as the new Gross National Product of Education, not to mention the actual encroachment of business and advertising in the schools themselves.

Of course, all ventures, from schools to churches to performing arts, have a business side that requires attention. But when it comes to schools, the welfare of the children and the health of the school community must guide the decision-making process. When it comes to arts education, the aesthetic power and integrity of the work guide the process. If we mindlessly judge all things from a business standpoint, we will lose the center of our calling. Since the business mindset is so rampant in our culture that it has become the very ground we walk on, we often fail to notice that there are other choices. Below is a handy chart to show the very different paradigms of business and art.

BUSINESS

- Success measured by numbers, i.e., more members= growth.
- Identify a market and play to it. If market wants Monday's lesson plans online, give it to them.
- Make everything *look* better, regardless of whether it is or not. We need more flash and glitz to attract attention in today's marketplace.
- Our product is for everyone. Anyone can eat a hamburger, turn on TV or buy an I-Pod.
- Corporate sponsorship will get us money (a la MENC Oscar Meyer Weiner contest).
- CEO makes decisions, based on market trends.
- Bigger, newer, faster, sexier, easier: the driving engines of success.

ART

- Success measured by quality, not quantity, i.e., members who rise to the difficult demands of any artistic practice.
- Make visible the fruit of one's discipline, with integrity and honesty. Those who need it will find it. As Thelonious Monk says: *"I say play your own way. Don't play what the public wants—you play what you want and let the public pick up what you are doing, even if it does take them 15-20 years."*
- Attention to aesthetics for its own sake, not to make anything more packageable.
- Artistic expression is not for everyone. Everyone is capable of it, but only some will have the talent, drive and need to express that will require them to make the sacrifices, enter the disciplines and pay the dues that art demands.
- Money is always welcome, but not by sponsors that demand too much in return and ask an artist to compromise his/her integrity.
- Decisions are made according to the demands of the art form.
- Intimate, connected to the old, slow; challenging some of the criteria of art.

As artists and educators, I believe that we should insist on artistic and pedagogical values to guide our decisions. They truly do march to a different drummer than business and thus, lead us to markedly different outcomes. Orff Schulwerk began as a radical alternative to a merely technical, dispirited and soul-less musical education. If it is to keep its cutting-edge sharpness, we must beware and be aware of it getting swallowed up in today's atmosphere of excessive testing, mechanical learning, factory-mode processing and downright harmful practices that hurt children. Even as we celebrate our successes in the number of Orff programs in schools, we must keep an eye to the *quality* of those programs and their ability to profoundly affirm the child's natural mode of learning and thus, transform the entire school. And this begins with an awareness of the different demands of business and artful education.

This classic joke says it all better than reasoned persuasion—keep it in mind the next time you hear the business chatter of efficiency and expediency creep into the staff meeting.

A managed care company president was given a ticket for a performance of Schubert's Unfinished Symphony. Since she was unable to go, she gave the ticket to one of her managed care reviewers. The next morning she asked him how he had enjoyed it. Instead of a few observations about the symphony in general, she was handed a formal memorandum that read as follows:

1. For a considerable period, the oboe players had nothing to do. Their number should be reduced, and their work spread over the whole orchestra, avoiding peaks of inactivity.

2. All 12 violins were playing identical notes. This seems an unneeded duplication, and the staff of this section should be cut. If a volume of sound is really required, this could be accomplished with the use of an amplifier.

3. Much effort was involved in playing the 16th notes. This appears to be an excessive refinement, and it is recommended that all notes be rounded up to

the nearest 8th note. If this were done it would be possible to use paraprofessionals instead of experienced musicians.

4. No useful purpose is served by repeating with horns the passage that has already been handled by the strings. If all such redundant passages were eliminated then the concert could be reduced from two hours to twenty minutes.

5. The symphony had two movements. If Mr. Schubert didn't achieve his musical goals by the end of the first movement, then he should have stopped there. The second movement is unnecessary and should be cut.

In light of the above, one can only conclude that had Mr. Schubert given attention to these matters, he probably would have had time to finish the symphony.

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